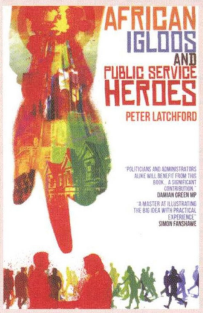

Timely reality check as igloo-building funds are frozen

Alison Thomas

Would you try to build an igloo in Africa? The UK public sector spends billions every year doing the equivalent, says Professor Peter Latchford.

If the sums of money involved weren't so eye-watering, and the missed opportunities so massive and sometimes tragic, this punchy, well-written book would be comic as it details the way in which public sector organisations busily go round in self-defeating circles, confuse activity with purpose, and split themselves into a collection of "ruggedly independent fiefdoms, barely on speaking terms, loath to cooperate".

Many of these criticisms have been made before. But Latchford brings some timely new insights at a time of shrinking budgets, setting out the waste of effort and resources caused by trotting out mantras about partnerships, targets, efficiency or outcomes without checking them against reality.

"If you want to get something done you need to look very hard at the way things are, and work with that," he says. "If you want people to go with you...pay close attention to what actually interests them, rather than what you think would be good for them."

And learning from private sector successes means learning the whole story – needing to satisfy the customer, rather than acting as "the worst kind of monopolistic megalith". The end result, he says, would revitalise the ethos of public service, release public sector enterprise and allow the citizen to take centre stage.

Latchford argues a compelling case. Here's wishing him the best of British luck in putting it into practice.

African Igloos and Public Service Heroes by Peter Latchford

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