

Quango state reconfigured rather than abolished

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Less than 10 per cent of quangos axed by the Coalition government have actually been totally abolished, new research shows.

A three-year study into government attempts to reduce the size of the state has revealed that despite the closure of some 200 non-governmental organisations, the functions of those bodies have "mostly" been transferred to new arm's length institutions.

The research, carried out at the University of Birmingham and the University of Sheffield, also found:

- New arm's length bodies are being created as others are being abolished
- Abolition mostly affects small-spending quangos and there are "ambiguities" about the extent of efficiency savings expected
- Reorganisation is often at the expense of transparency and accountability

The ESRC-funded report, Public Bodies Reform by the UK Government 2010-2013, provides a detailed account of the government's reform agenda. It acknowledges that the government has achieved "significant" and "far-reaching" reforms but adds that "at the same time it is important to acknowledge that the quango state has been reconfigured rather than abolished".

The report states: "This reform process has achieved much greater

impact than the efforts of previous governments in reducing the population of public bodies...

"However, in many cases the abolition of a public body has involved all or some of its functions transferring to a new arm's length body, into a government department, and in some cases to local government or the charitable, not-for-profits or business sectors."

Professor Chris Skelcher, professor of public governance at the University of Birmingham and lead author of the report, said: "The promise to abolish quangos is far more complex than many [commentators](#) and [politicians](#) recognise."

"Our research shows that far from being a wasteful irrelevance, many such bodies undertake tasks that are valuable for [government](#) and society. That is why most of their functions carry on, even though the body itself may have been abolished. It is easy to call for a bonfire of the quangos; it is much harder to scrap everything they do."

The report states that: "In only 80 (9%) of the non-departmental public bodies proposed for abolition are all the functions of that body to be abolished. In most cases where non-departmental public bodies are subject to abolition, their functions continue to be exercised in whole or in part by other organisations."

On efficiency savings, the report says: "There remain ambiguities about the extent of [efficiency savings](#) expected to be delivered by the Public Bodies Reform programme, with the Public Accounts Committee questioning the £2.6bn savings estimated by the Cabinet Office, on the basis that administrative reorganisation is unlikely to deliver this figure."

The study also found that "the extent to which ministerial accountability has been improved remains an open question."

Provided by University of Birmingham

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