2
The Healthcare Sector and the Modernising Agenda

The aim of this chapter are threefold: first, to provide contextual information about the UK National Health Service (NHS) including some history of change; second, to describe the policy changes that the participants are attempting to translate into practice; and third, to position this study with respect to the debates and critiques relating to the modernisation agenda.

I begin by briefly discussing the UK Government modernisation agenda and healthcare reform agenda (DoH 2000a) and I introduce the mental health (MH) National Service Framework (NSF) (DoH 1999) which is the main NSF that most of the study participants were concerned with. The participants in the study, mainly managers from a single PCT, discussed a whole range of other changes\(^1\) that they were attempting to implement in parallel with the NSF. I outline some of these other changes so that as they arise in the text the reader will have some basic background. I then outline the organisations involved in the implementation of the MH NSF, and the way in which the local implementation plan has been structured and resourced. The current and evolving structure of healthcare and local authority social services are also outlined in this chapter and in particular as they relate to mental health services. Following this context chapter I discuss my research approach and the methods I have chosen to answer the research questions.

2.1 UK government modernisation agenda

Following its election in 1997 the Labour government brought in a programme of radical changes to the public sector. The essence of the programme was a reshaping of the ways in which public services were conceptualised, designed and delivered, for instance through a
customer-driven model or in the case of the healthcare sector with a 'focus on creating a step change in the way services are commissioned by front line staff to reflect patient choices' (DoH 2005a: 1).

The heart of the programme is delivering better results, and more responsive and high-quality public services that match what people need. There is a focus on users rather than organisational structures and on applying new technology to make government simpler and more accessible. It covers not just the civil service but the whole five million people working in the public sector, with a new drive on working together to deliver outcomes.

In December 1999, Sir Richard Wilson presented to the prime minister a programme for modernising the Civil Service based on the work of groups within the Civil Service management committee. On the cabinet office website (HMG 1999b), the government claims that:

> The modernising government agenda builds on the administrative reforms of the UK over the last 15 years. But there are some crucial differences. There is a change in focus from a managerial agenda to the user's agenda. The programme mobilises the whole resources of the public sector to work together across organisational boundaries to deliver real results on the ground, not just interim activity. It is based on a continuing drive for efficiency and effectiveness, but in a pragmatic rather than dogmatic way.

It is significant that Tony Blair rather than the then Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, launched the NHS Plan (DoH 2000a). It signifies the importance that Blair placed on the healthcare sector to his government. The healthcare sector modernisation agenda contained in the plan was drawn up by the Department of Health following Labour’s election to government in 1997, and was published as *The NHS Plan* in 2000. This document set out the case for modernising the healthcare sector and outlined the areas where patients and the public could expect to see change and improvement at service level. The targets contained in the Plan were ambitious in comparison to anything which had gone before, and public expectation was correspondingly raised. A pressing task for the government, therefore, was to make the Plan a reality on the ground. A new healthcare service (DoH 1998a) and modernised social services (DoH 1998b) were part the programme of improvements to achieve the above. To this end the National Service Frameworks were produced and the next section explicates in general terms then focuses on the mental health NSF.