CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD
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NUDGE, NUDGE

Lunch with behavioural insights guru David Halpern

"REVOLTINGLY OFFENSIVE"

Government buildings of yesteryear

ADAPT AND SURVIVE

How resilient is the UK in the face of climate change?

GANG WARFARE

Elysia McCaffrey on the fight to end labour exploitation

Gemma Harper on biodiversity

The Greening Government Commitments

Why Net Zero policymaking needs to shape up

We're busy generating more British zero carbon electricity than anyone

Helping keep future energy costs down and cut UK carbon emissions to nothing

Trustpilot

UK Fuel Mix disclosure information, published by the Government Department DESNZ recognises electricity from wind, solar and nuclear fuel produces zero carbon dioxide emissions at the point of generation. For verification visit: www.edfenergy.com/zero-carbon

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On the cover
An exclusive illustration by Elise Vandeplancke

FROM THE EDITOR

In 2018, Jonathan Slater became the first perm sec to request a ministerial direction on the grounds of feasibility.

At the time, *CSW* wondered if the then-DfE permanent secretary might be starting a quiet revolution across Whitehall by helping to shift the political culture so that feasibility and delivery are considered earlier in the policymaking process.

Since then, just one direction has included feasibility among its grounds but Slater has once again got us thinking about accountability and decision making in government. Having begun his career in local government, Slater is more familiar with discussing his advice in the open than those who have only worked in the civil service.

And his recent intervention in the RAAC crisis – which saw hundreds of schools close days before a new term because of concerns about dangerous concrete – makes a good deal of sense in light of his personal experiences of accountability. There are, of course, questions about whether former officials should be taking open accountability into their own hands, as Dave Penman explores in his column for us *(p.17)*.

By choosing, in early September, to publicly share the historic advice his department gave ministers about school concrete, Slater also put the spotlight on how decisions are made in government, particularly during spending reviews. He said the education department had bid – and expected – to see a rise in the yearly target for addressing RAAC in schools at the 2021 Spending Review. Instead, the target was cut.

This gives some insight into the bruising process of spending review bidding, but what Slater could not explain was why this decision was taken – the trade-offs and political considerations that shaped the spending round. Nevertheless, he highlighted how the Treasury's role in setting departmental targets can cause challenges.

Ex-senior civil servant Simon Sharpe highlights a similar challenge in relation to climate change – another problem which requires near-term investment to tackle long term-damage *(p.44)*. Governments notoriously tilt towards the near term, and in the UK we are particularly bad at investing in longer-term and capital projects, as highlighted by comptroller and auditor general Gareth Davies, who wrote for *The Times* that the RAAC crisis reveals the government's "sticking-plaster" approach to capital investments.

It also highlights the importance of how risk is discussed. The crisis unfolded this summer not because schools or government suddenly became aware of the risks of RAAC, but rather because DfE changed the way it assessed those risks and, therefore, the guidance it issued to schools on the topic.

It's perfectly reasonable to change guidance when new information comes to light, but the shift did lead *CSW* to reflect on the way that risk is communicated to ministers, particularly when they face decisions which balance short and long-term factors.

Sharpe suggests that climate policy is suboptimal in part because civil servants assess the risk and advise on "likely scenarios", rather than giving threat-based advice which looks at worst-case scenarios, as is more common in fields like counter-terrorism. One wonders if threat-based advice on RAAC might have led ministers to think differently about the investment case for addressing it.

This is not to blame the problem of short-termist or bad decisions in government on poor civil service advice. In the end, of course, decisions lie with ministers.

To govern, as the adage has it, is to choose. But to govern is also to lead – to set out a vision of the future and take people with you to achieve it. Until we see stronger leadership from politicians, it's hard to see how any number of interventions from former perm secs and current auditors could change the political culture which sees underinvestment in the fabric of our public sphere as a reasonable price to pay for short-term savings and electoral survival. ■

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MOVERS & SHAKERS

Want to hone your dinner party gossip about who's in, who's out and who's shakin' it all about? Look no further than CSW's quarterly guide to all the key moves in government

If you would like to let us know about a move in your team, please email csw.editor@civilserviceworld.com

CULTURE CHANGE

Susannah Storey was appointed permanent secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport this summer. She returned to the department – where she was previously director for digital and media – from the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology, where she had been a DG since it was founded in February. She has previously held senior roles at the business, energy and Brexit departments.

FIRST SECOND

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appointed its first-ever second permanent secretary in July. **Nick Joicey**, formerly director general of the Cabinet Office economic and domestic secretariat, is also Defra's chief operating officer and oversees the department's strategy and science and analysis groups. The shakeup saw Defra COO Sarah Homer change roles to director general for portfolio delivery.

FAREWELL TO ALMS

Dr Helen Stephenson has announced her decision to step down as CEO of the Charity Commission at the end of her term in 2024.

Stephenson took up post in 2017 after a career in senior roles across the public and voluntary sector.

She has become the Commission's longest serving chief executive, and said she is "exceptionally proud" of her time at the regulator and will "look back with great satisfaction at the challenges we have overcome, the improvements we have delivered and the expert organisation the Commission is becoming."

She added: "It is, of course, with some sadness that I've decided to draw this chapter to a close next year, but I know the Commission is well placed to take the next steps in its long and proud history."

Recruitment for Stephenson's successor is now underway, with the sift and interviews due to be conducted by the end of the year.

NICS MOVE

Julie Harrison became perm sec of the Northern Ireland Office in September, moving from the top job at the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, which is part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. She replaced Madeleine Alessandri, who left the NIO in July to become chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee and head of the Joint Intelligence Unit.

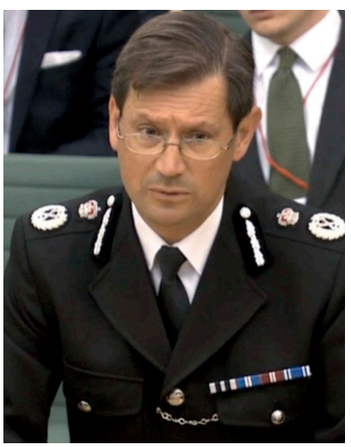
LOVE, ACTUARIALLY

Fiona Dunsire was named as the successor to outgoing government actuary Martin Clarke in August, making her the first woman to lead the Government Actuary's Department in its more than 100-year history. It is Dunsire's first role in government after a 35-year career in the private sector that included a stint as UK chief exec of pensions and investment consultancy Mercer.

TOUGH ON CRIME

The Serious Fraud Office recruited ex-Met Police assistant commissioner **Nick Ephgrave** as its new director.

A former chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council Criminal Justice Co-ordination Committee, Ephgrave took up his role in September, taking over from Lisa Osofsky, who had held the job for five years.



IN GOOD OFSTED

Sir Martyn Oliver was named as the government's pick to be the next chief inspector at Ofsted. Education secretary Gillian Keegan said Oliver had "demonstrated exemplary leadership and an unwavering commitment to driving up standards in areas of disadvantage" as chief exec of Outwood Grange Academies Trust, where 28 schools improved their Ofsted rating out of 35 inspected. Oliver, who was knighted in 2022 for improving the education of thousands of children, succeeds Amanda Spielman, who is stepping down after seven years.

HISTORIC APPOINTMENT

Conservative peer and provost of Oriel College, Oxford **Neil Mendoza** became chair of Historic England in September, having previously been a commissioner. He has also served as the government's commissioner for cultural recovery and renewal; Culture and Heritage Capital Board chair at DCMS; and as a non-exec director at the department, where he led the year-long Mendoza Review of Museums in England. He replaces Sir Laurie Magnus, who stayed on as chair after becoming the PM's independent adviser on ministers' interests last December.

ART NOUVEAU

Former Ministry of Justice and Cabinet Office permanent secretary **Sir Richard Heaton** was appointed as chair of the steering group for the Government Art Collection, which contains more than 14,700 artworks. The collection, which is part of DCMS, supplies art to government buildings and embassies across the world. Heaton's four-year post chairing the GAC advisory committee starts three years after he departed from government.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

HS2 Ltd chair – and former HMRC perm sec – **Sir Jon Thompson** has been named interim executive chairman from October while a new chief exec is appointed to replace Mark Thurston, who is moving on.

Mike McMahon is the new independent adjudicator heading up the Adjudicator's Office, which investigates complaints about HMRC and the Valuation Office Agency. He was head of office until September.

Rory Gribbell, a special adviser to education secretary Gillian Keegan, has been appointed as senior policy adviser on schools in DfE.

Rear Admiral Angus Essenhigh was appointed as national hydrographer and director of defence and data acquisition at the UK Hydrographic Office in July, while **Vanessa Blake** was named chief customer officer.

Amanda Calvert, **Graham Cooke** and **Michael Whitehouse** became interim co-chairs of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency from July.

Ele Brown was appointed as the UK's deputy chief veterinary officer for national, domestic and exotic diseases at Defra, and **Jorge Martin-Almagro** was appointed as the UK's deputy chief veterinary officer for international and trade affairs.

Alun Francis was selected as chair of the Social Mobility Commission in July after a period as interim chair.

Former government chief scientific adviser **Sir Patrick Vallance** was appointed as non-executive director at the Advanced Research and Invention Agency in June, having played an integral role in setting up Aria in his previous role.

Barry Lowen was appointed as British high commissioner to the Republic of Cameroon from July. **Martin Harris** was named HM ambassador to Ukraine from September, while **Colin Dick** was appointed as chargé d'affaires at the British Embassy in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from August.

Professor Brian Bell was reappointed as chair of the Migration Advisory Committee in June.

Anit Chandarana was appointed as interim director general of DfT's Rail Infrastructure Group from August.

Hedley Finn, Dawid Konotey-Ahulu, and **Michael Prescott** were appointed as independent members of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments from August.

Declan Collier has been reappointed chair of the Office of Rail and Road. He was previously CEO of London City Airport.

Prof David Gann was appointed as the inaugural chair of UK Industrial Fusion Solutions, part of the UK Atomic Energy Authority.

Dean Creamer, formerly director of the 2022 Commonwealth Games, has been appointed chief executive of Building Digital UK, an executive agency of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Sarah Goom was appointed as director-general of the Commercial with Trade and International Directorate within the Government Legal Department from September.

Oliver Christian has taken up the post of His Majesty's trade commissioner to the Middle East and Pakistan and His Majesty's consul general to Dubai from September 2023 while a campaign is conducted to fill the roles permanently.

Prior to joining the Department for Business and Trade Christian was head of the Prime Minister's Business Unit in Downing Street from 2019 to 2023. ■

GOING, GOING, GONG

The King's Birthday Honours mark the extraordinary contributions and service of people across the UK. Here, *CSW* meets some of the civil servants who were recognised in 2023

JAMES BRERETON

Former deputy director of transport security operations at DfT, and now in the Home Office, Brereton received an OBE for services to the state funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

What does being recognised in the Birthday Honours List mean to you?
It has been one of the proudest moments of my life. I am very proud of what my team and I achieved as part of the Operation London Bridge delivery, and to have been recognised in this formal way is a big life moment for me.

What was your role in the state funeral, and what did that involve?
I ran the Department for Transport crisis-management function, the Transport Security Operations Centre (TSOC). A big part of that role was leading the planning for Operation London Bridge over a three-year period and then running the department's operations centre in the days leading up to and on the day of the state funeral.

I was one of the DfT gold leaders working across the department and, importantly, with the transport sector to ensure we provided the best possible service, allowing people to travel safely and be part of this momentous occasion.

How did you end up in that role?
I spent three years as the head of TSOC, and it was a fantastic job. I had previously worked in Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Justice in various policy and delivery roles. I did a big chunk of time in the MoJ permanent secretary's office, which involved a fair amount of situation/crisis management, which I always enjoyed. I think I am naturally drawn to problem-solving-type roles, and crisis management is definitely that!

Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
A really tricky one, as this is my proudest moment by far. However, if I had to choose, it would be working on Cop26 in Glasgow and supporting the delivery of the transport plan. A huge number of VVIPs, VIPs and conference attendees arrived and left the country in a very short time (and from a range of locations). Delivering the transport operation, which meant that they arrived and left the conference on time, via their preferred mode of transport, was a big achievement. It was a strong example of collaboration across multiple teams and organisations to deliver a successful event.

What does it take to do your job well?
People often ask what key skills you need to work in crisis management, as it can seem like a bit of a "dark art". But in truth, it's the same skills you need to do any other senior leadership role, i.e. adaptability, strong communication and problem solving.

It is always important to stay calm and be that person who steps back to look at the wider picture. In crisis situations, people want to step in and help solve the issue. But if everyone jumps in and focusses on one aspect of it, sometimes you can miss something.

Tell us one thing we might not know about your job...
Before doing the TSOC role, I had not fully appreciated how critical the transport sector is to all major events or crisis situations. Whatever the situation, DfT is always around the table and has an important part to play. ■

FREYA GRIMWOOD

Grimwood, now a deputy director at the Serious Fraud Office, received an OBE for public service for her work as principal private secretary for the law officers in the Attorney General's Office

What does being recognised in the Birthday Honours List mean to you?
I never imagined my contribution would be recognised in this way, and I'm very honoured. My family and friends were thrilled. However, the private office is a joint effort, and I want everyone in my team and other colleagues from the AGO to know I wouldn't have received this recognition without them.
What did your role at AGO involve?
I led a joint private office for the attorney general and solicitor general, which was fascinating. Thanks to the unique role the law officers play, I had an overview of policy development across government, insight into sensitive national security matters, and a privileged view into Whitehall departments' most complex legal challenges.

The law officers have statutory responsibilities around reviewing criminal casework, and they oversee prosecuting departments, the Government Legal Department and the CPS Inspectorate. My role was to interface between ministers and the department to balance their responsibilities and make sure everything ran smoothly.
What makes a good PPS?
Patience, creativity, a great team, and a strong support network that will forgive you for all the times you end up working late or cancelling plans at the last minute.
And what does your role involve now?
As deputy director heading the SFO's strategy department, I'm focused on ensuring this unique organisation – which brings together investigators and prosecutors to fight complex economic crime – continues to deliver on its crucial mission. My department plays a pivotal role, as it integrates strategy, policy and communication.
Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
Throughout my career, I've been very fortunate to have worked on high-profile issues, from negotiating UN resolutions in the Middle East and operating in conflict zones like Somalia to trying to improve outcomes for victims of crime here in the UK. But my proudest moments have been when I've managed to help others succeed, either overcoming a problem, gaining a well-deserved promotion, or simply building confidence.
Tell us one thing we might not know about your new job...
The SFO was set up in the 1980s with a forward-thinking formula which brings together different professionals to tackle the highest levels of economic crime, which is now transnational and increasingly digital. It feels different from any other civil service organisation I've worked in. I'm excited to be part of its mission to fight complex fraud and bribery here and overseas. ■

MARTIN CLARKE

Government actuary Clarke – who leaves his role later this year – was named a Companion of the Order of the Bath for public service

What does being recognised in the Birthday Honours List mean to you?
It is an absolute thrill and sets a perfect seal on a job that has proved to be the most fulfilling experience of my career.
What does your role involve?
I provide professional and business leadership to the Government Actuary's Department, which creates actuarial solutions, including financial risk analysis, modelling and advice supporting the UK public sector and overseas. I also have certain statutory responsibilities in relation to pensions, national insurance and personal injury claims.
How did you end up in that role?
I have been an actuary for 40 years, mostly in the insurance industry. I left the private sector in 2006 to become an executive director of the fledgling Pension Protection Fund (a DWP arm's-length body), leading on investment, financial risk and actuarial. That became a stepping stone to becoming only the ninth government actuary in just over 100 years of the post.
Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
The proudest was also the most challenging – leading through Covid-19. In addition to the profound novelty of maintaining a professional service with 100% remote working on systems untested at that scale and keeping departmental cohesion at a time of great stress, mobilising analytic capability across government to work on Covid-19 tasks was a unique resource problem.

GAD actuaries rose to that challenge, volunteered as secondees to ground-breaking analytic initiatives and contributed to programmes to support markets in, for example, credit protection and event insurance that were facing unbearable risks. This all speaks volumes for the capability and versatility of our skillset.
What does it take to do your job well?
A broad understanding of the various domains where actuarial analysis is used, the ability to communicate well and the belief to inspire in others the confidence to express their own professional capabilities.
Tell us one thing we might not know about your job...
Each month, I certify that the "ERNIE" premium bond draw is random. Or rather that "I have no reason to believe the prizes are allocated to a sequence of bond numbers that are not random." ■

Welcome to the future

The Salesforce World Tour London was a celebration of the power of technology to transform the customer experience. With a focus on Artificial Intelligence, there was plenty to interest delegates from the public sector, as **Tim Gibson** reports

The future is Artificial Intelligence and that future is now. This statement was the clarion call delivered at the Salesforce World Tour London in June 2023. Nearly 14,000 delegates gathered to explore how the company's technology helps organisations enhance their customers' experience and smooth operation efficiencies. As you'd expect, the focus was firmly on the huge potential of AI.

"We have a decade's worth of experience in deploying AI for the benefit of our clients," explained Salesforce's CEO of UK and Ireland, Zahra Bahrololoumi, in her opening keynote. "In that time, we've delivered AI for CRM, published 227 AI research papers, and filed 300 AI-related patents as well as investing in large language models."

The message is simple: AI may seem like the next big thing, but it isn't new to Salesforce. The company is already deploying it across its offer and, as Bahrololoumi went on to say, "in the new cycle of innovation, we need to think AI-first."

Building trust

There is a challenge with such an approach. It has to do with the level of trust consumers feel towards what they perceive as emerging technology. Generative AI may have the power to transform the customer experience, but Salesforce's own research shows that 59 per cent of people don't trust companies with their data. "There is a 'trust gap,'" said Bahrololoumi. "Today is about closing that gap."

In a traditional big data model – one in which companies aggregate and analyse data in their CRM to enhance their understanding of customer needs and habits – data is stored in a particular location. That gives Salesforce's clients a sense of ownership and control over access.

But as Patrick Stokes explained, this contrasts with the way AI functions. The company's EVP for product and industries marketing explained that in an AI system, data is learned, not stored. There is no single location to store data, because large language models pull together several different ideas and concepts to think like a human.

To illustrate this, Stokes gave the example of an apple: "If I asked everyone in the room today what an apple is, you'd all be able to raise your hand and tell me. But if I asked you to point to the location in your brain where the data about an apple is stored, you wouldn't be able to do that – because you don't store data about an apple in one place. Your brain stores information about various properties of an apple and brings that together to correctly identify one."

AI works similarly, which begs a question about how to protect data when it is being used in such a multifaceted way. Stokes was quick to assert Salesforce's expertise in responding: "We have been solving problems like this for [more than] 20 years, helping enterprises use their data while also protecting it." He gave the examples of the move to shared data centres in 1999 and the use of predictive analytics in 2016, in which Salesforce has shown its ability to generate meaningful insight without blending customer data from multiple sources.

Not only do these examples evince Salesforce's expertise in protecting data while leveraging its power. They also speak of its track record of innovation. Through a worked example, Stokes showed what comes next: using context-rich prompts in generative AI to communicate in a personalised way with customers, while deploying Salesforce's "Einstein GPT Trust Layer" to mask or protect sensitive data. The result is a system that's easy for Salesforce's clients to use, unleashes the full power of generative AI, and results in an enhanced customer experience.

Public sector focus

While the power of AI is self-evident and will have been experienced first-hand by any of the 100 million reported users of Chat GPT since its launch in November 2022, the real force of Salesforce's offer lies in the secure access its platform provides to large volumes of customer data. Many of the presentations in the World Tour underscored that strength, and those aimed at delegates from the public sector circled around common themes.

The first was the power of AI to further transform service delivery – building on the progress already seen through digitisation and data analytics. Recognising the utility of its cloud-based CRM solutions for public sector organisations, Salesforce's message was straightforward: just think how much more can be achieved by using AI.

A further theme was the improvement in user experience, for both staff and citizens,

through adopting Salesforce's technology. This was illustrated by case studies from partners including regional police forces and Northern Trains – all of which revealed the power of cloud-based computing to transform the way the public interacts with service providers, and the quality of services themselves.

A session about the rollout of financial support to households as part of the Energy Support Schemes between December 2022 and February 2023 demonstrated another theme: that service delivery can happen at pace when customising standardised platforms rather than building from scratch.

What all the public sector sessions had in common was their capacity to exemplify the overarching messages of the World Tour London: Salesforce makes it easier for organisations to interact with the public; its technology enhances the quality of such interactions and makes them more meaningful; and it is already ahead of the game when it comes to AI.

These are messages those in the public sector are primed to hear, thanks in no small part to the strides made in data-driven service delivery over the last decade or more. With an AI-shaped future already a reality for the commercial sector, and the "trust gap" closing, it is only a matter of time before the government fully embraces its power. And with a partner like Salesforce, the rewards of doing so appear great – for officials and citizens alike.

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REMEMBERING

BOB KERSLAKE

Praised for his "ability to get things done" and hailed as a "true public servant", former head of the civil service **Lord Bob Kerslake** was a passionate advocate for social equality, localism... and jazz, writes **Suzannah Brecknell**

One Monday morning in autumn 2012, Richard Harries was rushing downstairs to the atrium in Eland House – then home to the communities department, where he was a deputy director. He had been called moments earlier – with no explanation – to meet his perm sec, Sir Bob Kerslake, and planning minister, Mark Prisk. When he got there, things became even stranger.

"Now, Richard," Kerslake said, "you need to help me here. The minister wants to open a pop-up shop in the department."

The idea was to show how easy it was to open pop-up shops, as part of work to regenerate local high streets. The problem was that opening such a shop in an office building is not actually easy at all. It requires, among other things, a change-of-use application submitted through the local planning system.

"He was the perfect exemplar of how skills developed in local government can work brilliantly at a national level" ***Tony Travers, LSE***

"The planning team in the department basically said there's no way you could do that, so it fell to my team – the innovation team – to do it," Harries recalls.

"This was about eight weeks before Christmas, and it had to open before Christmas. It was absolutely bonkers. It all had to be done properly but at speed, and any other permanent secretary might well have found a way to stop the minister from doing it."

But Sir Bob – later Lord – Kerslake was not like other permanent secretaries. He had not followed the PPE, Fast Stream, policy profession route to the top of government. He had, in fact, only been a civil servant for four years. Instead, he had trained as an accountant after studying mathematics at Warwick University and then became, in the words of his predecessor at the communities department, Sir Peter Housden: "a giant in municipal local government".

Kerslake began his career in the Greater London Council, working his way up through various roles to become chief executive of the London Borough of Hounslow in 1990, and then joining Sheffield City Council in 1997.

He joined a council saddled with debt and a city struggling economically. He oversaw major reforms in the council and helped to orchestrate injections of private sector funding – including privatising the city's previously loss-making tram system – that began a period of regeneration in the city.

In 2003, the *Guardian* named him as one of the most innovative public leaders of the time, describing how he had not only charted a new course for Sheffield but built strong links with the Treasury to lobby on behalf of it and other large cities.

In 2008, Kerslake left the council to become the first chief executive of the Homes

Mark Weeks

and Communities Agency, an agency of the communities department and predecessor to Homes England. Housden – who was at that point perm sec at the communities department – suggests that it was here, "at one remove from the processes of central government" that Kerslake was at his best.

"He got things done, anticipated need, was responsive, clear and open," Housden says. "Stakeholders loved the clear, authoritative stances he provided, and he created a real sense of momentum."

Although the "big change and big opportunities" presented by the association had tempted Kerslake away from Sheffield council, Kerslake kept a home in the city for the rest of his life, using it as a base from which to walk his dog in the Peak District, something he described as "one of the great joys" of life.

Another great joy was jazz music: fellow local government grandee Dame Stella Manzie recalls the time when Sheffield played host to one of the regular get-togethers between permanent secretaries and local authority chief executives. After the day's meetings, Kerslake ushered his fellow public servants to a local jazz club for late-night networking. It was, she said, "all above board, but illustrated his hinterland and love of his local beat".

It was at these annual get-togethers of local and central leaders that Kerslake built relationships – and his reputation – among the perm secs. Former cabinet secretary Lord Gus O'Donnell recalls the "insightful contributions" which Kerslake made at the meetings and wrote that the connections made over the years meant Kerslake was "warmly received into Whitehall".

The Whitehall Kerslake joined in late 2010 was one on the cusp of big changes. The coalition government had just published a spending review setting out budget and headcount cuts across all departments. As incoming perm sec at the then Department for Communities and Local Government, Kerslake told staff that DCLG, facing a 33% cut in its administrative budget, would aim to reduce headcount by 40% over two years.

His experience restructuring and reforming Sheffield council was much-needed, Harries says. "He brought a kind of realism to it, which meant that what were previously theoretical discussions became quite practical, quite quickly."

For senior civil servants, the restructuring at DCLG was even more extreme, »

with 50% of roles to go. "It was like flipping a coin, you know, and it was slightly terrifying," Harries recalls. "Bob was just really, really human about the whole process. He brought so much reassurance to the department. Colleagues knew that – in the nicest possible way – they weren't going to be screwed over by him in what was a really difficult process."

Kerslake's empathy and support for those he led has been a common theme among tributes written after his untimely death in July 2023. Rob Whiteman, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, recalled a time early in his career when Kerslake rejected him for a job he "wasn't quite ready for" but offered him careful advice about his best next steps and how to handle appointment panels.

"The interaction made a deep mark on me about his evident facets of integrity, wisdom and communication," Whiteman wrote, adding: "I just always wanted to stay in touch with him as a source of advice, guidance and friendship."

Harries describes the support Kerslake offered him when, having survived the process of reapplying for his own job, he was given a new role leading DCLG's innovation team. Innovation isn't always easy to achieve in the civil service, Harries says, but it was a priority for Kerslake and he offered personal support and reassurance through the challenges Harries faced.

At his best "when things go wrong and everyone's running around like headless chickens", Kerslake brought a "calm reassurance to everything", Harries recalls. "No problem was insurmountable. Everything could be done. And, by the way, we did open the pop-up shop."

When O'Donnell retired at the end of 2011, his roles of cabinet secretary and head of the civil service were split between Kerslake – who took the latter role on a part-time basis – and Jeremy Heywood, widely admired as the top civil servant of his generation but with little inclination to take on the operational elements of the job as head of the civil service.

The decision to split the roles in this way was widely questioned at the time – former cabinet secretary Lord Turnbull told MPs it was a "very messy solution" which "lacks a clear rationale".

Housden, who had moved to become permanent secretary of the Scottish Government, describes the HCS role as a "hospital pass, and impossible on a part-time basis".

"It showed how little the politicians of the day valued a cohesive and dynamic civil service. Rather, it reflected their low ambitions and deficiency model of public service and public servants," he says.

Despite this, he says, Kerslake "worked a tough brief at the centre of government", balancing pressure from Francis Maude and Maude's acolytes at the centre, with the need to support "those in the civil service who could actually effect change".

Housden also recalls the encouragement Kerslake offered him in the highly partisan atmosphere before Scotland's 2014 independence referendum. "One morning when there was a particularly objectionable headline about me in the Scottish edition of *The Telegraph*, he phoned to

offer support, which was valuable and much appreciated," Housden says.

"But in broad terms," Housden adds, "he was at sea with leading the civil service".

O'Donnell says Kerslake's HCS job "was always something of a poisoned chalice, as it is very hard for anyone who isn't cabinet secretary to get the attention of prime ministers on civil service issues. Despite this, he made a significant impact by using his experience in local government to help establish functional specialisms, which improved operational capability in the civil service."

Yet change did not happen as fast as ministers wanted, and without much authority among permanent secretaries – one observer *CSW* spoke to said that Kerslake was "not much rated" by them – Kerslake's position became untenable. Following a series of negative, anonymous press briefings thought to originate from ministers and their spads, he resigned as head of the civil service in 2014 and stepped down as DCLG perm sec in 2015.

Kerslake's public service continued. He was made a crossbench peer and became chair of the King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust – a post he would later resign in protest over "dire NHS funding" – as well as chair of the Peabody housing association. In this latter role, O'Donnell says, Kerslake's "pragmatism and ability to get things done was clear".

"His connections and vision enabled the organisation to keep delivering desperately needed social rented homes through various partnerships. In the last year of his life, Peabody delivered more new social rented homes than anyone else, which is a fitting legacy."

Kerslake was widely respected for his experience and wisdom. In July 2017, he led an inquiry into the Manchester Arena bombing. He also held a number of non-executive posts reflecting his passion for social equality and localism, such as chairing the UK2070 Commission, which focused on city and regional inequalities across the UK.

Alongside all of this, Kerslake worked with the Labour Party – first on a review of the Treasury, commissioned by then shadow chancellor John McDonnell in 2015, and later on a wide-ranging review of how the party worked, commissioned by Sir Keir Starmer. A former head of the civil service, taking on these party-political roles proved controversial – despite the fact, as O'Donnell says, that "he was a passionate believer in an impartial civil service and his own impartiality as a civil servant was never questioned".

For Harries, Kerslake's decision to work with Labour showed that Kerslake "had his own mind, frankly. And he would do what he thought was the right thing to do.

"The idea that when people leave the civil service, they somehow just disappear, is for the birds," Harries adds, noting that there are many ways to carry out public service once you've left government.

"He gave this country so much, and had much more to give"
Rob Whiteman, Cipfa

Kerslake was a great advocate of UK cities, and this is arguably where he made his greatest mark. O'Donnell points to his impact on the built environment of London, a legacy which "may outlast us all", while the changes he wrought in Sheffield "can't be underestimated", according to Professor Tony Travers of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Speaking to the *Local Government Chronicle*, Travers said Kerslake had helped the city to reinvent itself and have a "real hope that in the longer term it can see much higher levels of productivity and regenerate".

Travers added that Kerslake was the "perfect exemplar of how skills developed in local government can work brilliantly at a national level".

"He managed to do something which very few people manage to do, which is to work at borough level, at city-wide government level, at national government level, showing a remarkable degree of skill as an official," he said. "That tells you a great deal about his qualities."

Undoubtedly, Kerslake would have continued to impact the UK's public sphere in years to come – whether through continued campaigning about social housing and the importance of community building, as a voice for regional government or a key figure behind the scenes of a Labour administration if the next general election returns one.

As Cipfa president, Whiteman wrote in his tribute to Kerslake: "He gave this country and many of its communities so much, and had much more to give before his untimely passing. We needed him longer." ■

UNA O'BRIEN WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

CHANGES IN CAREER PATHWAY PLANNING HAVE ALTERED HOW THE CIVIL SERVICE WORKS. SO, HOW DO YOU MAKE THE BEST OF EXPERTISE IN THE AGE OF PROFESSIONS?

A noticeable shift in the civil service compared with a decade ago is the clear presence of "professions". Today, there's an expectation that everyone within the service will join and follow a professional path. Of the 28 professions listed on the civil service careers portal, operational delivery, project management and digital, data & technology are three which barely featured as distinct professions within government in 2010. Over the same timeframe, we've also seen sustained leadership adding strength to the more traditional and familiar professions such as policy, finance, economics and HR. This is a welcome if all too rarely celebrated development; it's good for the civil service, in terms of attracting talent, and positive for individual career planning and development.

Inevitably, change on this scale prompts questions about how to be effective in a more "professionalised" environment. There is surely strength in working to coherent, agreed standards, often underpinned by qualifications and continuing professional development. Being part of a network of others in the same profession adds a sense of confidence and a depth of specialist knowledge where the old "generalist" way of doing things was comparatively unreliable. But most of all, deploying this wider, stronger range of professional skills and perspectives should lead to better decision making and delivery.

However, the civil service isn't immune to risks we see in other highly professionalised workplaces, such as the issues I discovered during my experience in the NHS. A perceived hierarchy amongst professions can influence the way employees behave, showing overly deferential behaviour towards some professions and low regard for others. Where a fixed way of viewing the world takes hold within a profession, there are risks of "group think" dominating. Conflicting priorities and incentives can inhibit people in different professions from working together effectively. These are wide, systemic issues. At least now we have leaders in place for each of the professions in government whose role includes mitigating such risks.

If some of these opportunities and issues are emerging where you work, what can you do as an individual civil servant or as a team leader? For inspiration, I turned to a well-thumbed book on my shelves: *Collaborative Leadership* by David Archer and Alex Cameron. For years, they advised numerous contractors and different professionals on the major project to renew the London Underground. "Successful collaborative relationships," they wrote, "are built on a framework of three things: the right governance structures, efficient joint operations and collaborative behaviours". Channelling the spirit of their work with my own experience, here then are some initial prompts in support of greater collaboration:

Encourage mutual understanding and respect

How well do you and your team understand what the other professions within your department do, and how they could contribute to your challenges? Conversely, is there a need for your and your team's professional expertise to be more widely understood elsewhere in the department? If so, what could you do as a first step? How do you speak of other "professions"? How can you show regard for their perspectives, particularly in meetings?

Guard against professional 'ego'

Be mindful of the risk of overconfidence in professional expertise, both your own and that of others. Consider what it would take for you to feel more at ease saying amongst your peers, or in settings with other professionals, that you don't know or understand something. How can you respectfully engage in debate with strongly held professional opinions? Can you disagree agreeably?

"Being clear about roles and responsibilities helps to build trust"

Clarify about roles and accountabilities

Being clear about roles and responsibilities helps to build trust and avoid turf wars, and enables people to make progress with confidence about where they fit in. If you're working in a multi-professional team, it's never too late to ask questions such as: Who takes the role of an adviser? Who owns responsibility for resources and for delivery? Which members of the team are accountable for outcomes?

Hold on to shared values and purpose

The civil service values offer strong common ground for different professions working together within government. You're also likely to have a shared common purpose for a project or delivery goal. When things feel stuck between multiple perspectives, it can help to step back and talk about what's held in common.

At a time when expertise is both revered and disparaged in the wider world, perhaps the simplest strategy is to be open to being wrong, stay curious and keep learning. ■

Dame Una O'Brien is a leadership coach with the Praesta partnership and a former permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care

DAVE PENMAN SHOULD EX-PERM SECS INTERVENE?

IT TAKES A GREAT DEAL FOR A FORMER PERMANENT SECRETARY TO INTERVENE IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE. I BELIEVE JONATHAN SLATER'S COMMENTS ABOUT DANGEROUS CONCRETE IN SCHOOLS PUT HIM ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

They say the secret to comedy is timing. If so, Jonathan Slater, former permanent secretary at the Department for Education, has a career in standup ahead of him. His intervention on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, just as hundreds of schools and thousands of parents were waking up to the scale of the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) crisis, sent a shockwave through government.

Almost all ministers or prime ministers will have to deal with a crisis which they feel is not of their making – Truss and Kwarteng being the obvious exceptions. Bubbly concrete poured in the 1970s can hardly be blamed on a secretary of state appointed last October. How can a prime minister who only entered parliament in 2015 be held responsible? And the unfortunate timing of the advice to schools? That was because of the changing technical advice following a series of failures in the concrete. Again, not-me-guv was the tone.

Slater's intervention was to explain that his former department was well aware of the scale of the problem with RAAC, and that they had set out a bid to refurbish and replace schools. Their analysis showed this was a critical risk to life. Concrete blocks had already started falling from school roofs and there was no way to tell when, or if, another incident would happen. The only certainty was that these schools were not built to last and therefore, if not replaced, would fail at some point. Their initial bid was for 300 to 400 schools to be replaced each year, but the funding was only agreed by the Treasury for 100. Then, in the 2021 spending round, this was reduced to 50 a year. Enter Sunak, the then chancellor, stage right.

There is no doubt that Slater's intervention was a political bombshell. It highlighted the consequences of more than a decade of budget cuts by successive Conservative governments and placed the current prime minister squarely at the heart of those decisions.

Cue the howls of outrage that a former mandarin had dared to speak. It fed the narrative that has been brewing for some time: that the civil service is in open revolt. Activist civil servants bringing down Raab, opposing the Rwanda policy and, of course, seeing off Johnson. He, the argument goes, was undone by the intervention of Simon McDonald, former Foreign Office permanent secretary and then stitched up by Sue Gray who left to work for the Labour Party, thereby proving the point.

The Sun's leader column, which read like a Howler telegram from *Harry Potter*, also, of course, claimed this was more evidence of a Remainer plot.

For all the pearl-clutching from individuals and publications that routinely trash the civil service knowing it can't answer back, it does raise a legitimate question. Should former senior civil servants ever make a public intervention revealing details from their time in government?

These interventions are rare. Most ex-perm secs disappear into the ether. They are, by and large, as welcoming of publicity as a vampire is of the breaking dawn. I have tried and failed to persuade a number to intervene – not in the political crisis of the day, but to give balance to debates on issues like civil service reform. Some do, but it is rare. They all know what a difficult job it is, for ministers and civil servants. They know that to govern is to choose and that often there are a plethora of reasons why a decision was taken, or a mistake made. They don't want to make their successor's job more difficult.

The two most recent and significant interventions are those of Slater and McDonald. The latter's revelation that the then prime minister was warned about the then MP Chris Pincher's conduct, despite denying this, was instrumental in Johnson's downfall. It was, for many, the last straw. While Johnson loyalists will claim it was a partisan move, history, I think, will judge differently, as I would argue it will with Slater.

In McDonald's case, this was a crucial issue of the integrity of the prime minister, on which the former perm sec had a unique perspective. In Slater's case, he brought to the public's attention facts that were already largely in the public domain, but which he uniquely could bring clarity to. Both were over issues of significant public interest.

Slater, McDonald and every perm sec past and present will have hundreds of stories that could be used to undermine government or ministers. It is the same for every administration. That they do not share them, despite at times the extreme provocation from ministers who routinely trash their civil servants in the press, demonstrates that, in the main, the system works.

"There is no doubt that Slater's intervention was a political bombshell"

My guess is that future interventions of this nature will be similarly rare. It must be the case, though, that if we could find a way to more routinely tap into the unique experience of these public servants, without undermining the trust between ministers and officials that is necessary for government to work effectively, then we would all be better off for it. ■

Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union

minding your business

Following reports of a mental health crisis in the civil service, **Tim Gibson** explores the figures, and talks to experts from the public and private sectors about coping strategies for both individuals and the organisations that employ them

Is there a mental health crisis in the civil service? That was the claim made by Labour in April, citing a 38% uplift in mental health sick days among civil servants during the previous year.

Figures obtained by the party through a Freedom of Information request showed that civil servants took 771,433 sick days due to stress or mental health problems in 2022, compared to 558,125 in 2021. They also highlighted an upward trend over the past decade – with the worst-affected departments including the Ministry of Justice, Department for Work and Pensions, and Ministry of Defence.

Unions such as the FDA supported Labour's analysis. Speaking to *The Guardian*, FDA assistant general secretary Lucille Thirlby said: "Excessive workloads and working hours are long-running issues in the civil service and have a huge impact on people's mental health. The government should take this issue seriously and take concrete steps to better support staff."

The FDA's *Is hybrid working?* report, published in November 2022, brought some of the figures around workload into sharp relief. It found that 77% of respondents in the civil service worked at least some additional hours every week, while 26% delivered six or more extra unpaid hours a week. As many as 74% of those surveyed told the FDA that working excessive hours had adversely affected their wellbeing at least some of the time, noting burnout, poor sleep, weight gain and depression as symptoms associated with overwork.

"53% of all employees in the UK feel overworked, with 40% saying their workload has led to feelings of anxiety" Censuswide survey

A wider context

To put the FDA's data into perspective, consider a recent survey by Censuswide, commissioned by people analytics company Visier. This showed that 53% of all employees in the UK feel overworked, with 40% saying their workload has led to feelings of anxiety. Of those surveyed, 24% said they had reached their mental limit, citing issues such as the cost-of-living crisis and family responsibilities as exacerbating their condition.

Other data sources tell a similar story. According to *People Management*, the magazine for Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development members, Google searches for "burnout symptoms" increased by 248% between 2018 and 2022. More scientifically, information from the Health and Safety Executive shows that the number of workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety went up from 602,000 in 2018-19 to 822,000 in 2020-21 – an increase of 38%.

These figures establish a wider context, in which mental health issues are seen as a growing concern for all employers. The civil service may be experiencing a more acute version of it, but if there is a mental health crisis brewing, it is across society, not just in government.

Building pressures

That is certainly the view of many in both the public and private sectors, who believe a multiplicity of factors has contributed to the increase in mental-health-related concerns among the UK workforce.

"The pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, global political upheaval. No one has emerged unscathed," says Flavia Gapper, director of help, advice and services at the Charity for Civil Servants. "Everyone knows the stresses we all operate under. They're contributing to greater anxiety across our working population and beyond."

"Covid was a huge factor," adds Debbie Kleiner, a wellbeing coach who has written a course on mental health awareness for the Civil Service College. "We were all at sea, suddenly in different boats, and not sure how to respond. While we've slowly adjusted to a new normal, there's still a huge collective trauma from that period, and ongoing work to understand our new context of hybrid working."

This speaks of a specific challenge arising from our recent history: most employers, including many in the civil service, are now managing teams remotely rather than face to face. "This is a major issue," Kleiner says. "Face-to-face interactions are so important [for] managing staff mental health. Work from home offers »

"People who work for the state often deal with horrid stuff. From prison officers and teachers to senior officials or those in the security services, there are daily challenges that are often deeply unpleasant"
Rupert McNeil, former government chief people officer

many advantages, but it is not always the best thing for employee wellbeing unless augmented by regular in-person contact."

Further challenges provoked by hybrid working include social isolation and the potential for virtual communications to be misconstrued. To the former point, Kleiner says that many younger employees value the social interactions facilitated by attending their workplace – especially those who missed out during the Covid years.

To the latter point, Gapper says that virtual exchanges between colleagues are often transactional, with less of the chit-chat that characterises face-to-face meetings. Moreover, she says, "there is potential to get worked up about things – a badly worded email or perceived impatience from a co-worker, say – in a way you wouldn't if you could just go and talk it over".

A vulnerable workforce

For all the contextualisation, there are specific circumstances that affect mental wellbeing among the public sector workforce, as the government's former chief people officer Rupert McNeil explains.

"People who work for the state often deal with horrid stuff," he says. "To give just a handful of recent examples, the government workforce has dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic, the evacuation of Kabul, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"At every level, from prison officers and teachers to senior officials or those in the security services, there are daily challenges that are often deeply unpleasant."

Added to this, McNeil observes that the public-sector workforce is often driven by a sense of duty and, in some cases, idealism. "People join the civil service because they have a vocation to serve the country," he says. "That can make them more likely to become disillusioned if the reality of their role doesn't match their expectations."

Matt Dolman, a civil servant who has worked across several departments, as well as being a trained mental health first aider, makes a related observation. "The civil service is full of empathic people with high emotional intelligence, who want to do the right thing," he says. "Mental wellbeing is often high up on the agenda among our workforce."

McNeil's analysis is more specific to the current context: "Any gap between practised and espoused values is bad for staff morale, whatever the organisation. We've also had periods of political leadership that have, with exceptions, not always appeared to understand or respect the civil service and the work it does. That has an inevitable impact on staff mental wellbeing."

There is another factor at play, and it reflects what Gapper sees as a positive trend. "During the pandemic, we opened our lives to each other in new ways," she says. "We all showed vulnerability, and that led to us being more honest about mental wellbeing. Maybe the incidence of mental health difficulties hasn't increased, but our willingness to name them and report them has.

"The Charity for Civil Servants 2022 conference on the menopause is a great example of this. Until quite recently, it would have been hard to imagine a senior leader standing in front of staff and owning up to experiencing brain fog. But that's exactly what Angela MacDonald [deputy chief executive and second permanent secretary at HMRC] did. It was very powerful."

A positive culture

This example highlights one the most effective tools in supporting staff wellbeing: modelling positive behaviours and attitudes at every level of an organisation.

The civil service already has some great processes in place to enhance mental health. In 2021, permanent secretary Sarah Healey was appointed as the service's health and wellbeing champion. Further institutional support comes from mental health ambassadors and mental health first aiders, who use their training and skills to support colleagues in a variety of ways.

Dolman and Gapper also point to the networks that exist across the government workforce to support people experiencing specific issues, such as post-natal depression, bereavement, and child special education needs diagnoses. Then there are formal systems such as the Employee Assistance Programme, occupational health, and counselling, as well as additional support from the Charity for Civil Servants.

"Our offer is on top of the brilliant support available both informally and formally from the civil service," explains Gapper. "For example, we provide 24-7 resources, support for specific issues including debt management, and ongoing help even once someone leaves the government workforce."

Supporting the charity is itself a positive step towards mental wellbeing, according to Gapper. "We encourage teams to raise funds for our work, and that can foster a sense of engagement and community – all good for improving morale, creating connections, and enhancing self-worth."

Managing well

By far the most powerful tool in supporting staff wellbeing is effective people management. Kleiner points to the HSE's management standards as helpful in quality assuring a workplace's environment from a mental-health perspective.

"Every employer needs to invest in training for people at every level, but especially line managers, so they can fully support team members," she says. "Good managers look out for their people. Empathy can be trained into them even if they don't have it naturally."

Effective performance management also plays a part and the public sector may benefit from the practice of comparable commercial operators in this area. Take the experience of David Tucker, chief executive of Fusion Fostering and a former social worker, as a case in point. As well as offering enhanced rewards, flexibility around working patterns and a full package of wellbeing support – something he acknowledges is easier when running an SME rather than a large public sector operation – Tucker and his team are proactive in managing staff performance.

"In my time in the public sector, I noticed that performance issues were often allowed to fester," he says. "We try to bring them out into the open, then support staff in working through them. Prevention is always better than cure, and we've found this yields improved outcomes, especially in relation to mental wellbeing. By keeping our staff engaged and productive, there is also less knock-on effect on those who would otherwise have to cover workload for unwell colleagues."

Such an approach accords with McNeil's view of effective management, which he says should be clinical in decision making and compassionate in execution.

"We need workplaces that are performance-orientated but kind, to get the very best from the people who work in them."

That summarises both the opportunity and the challenge facing the civil service as an employer in the current context. It needs to be focused on delivery and do right by its people, creating the conditions in which the whole workforce can flourish. And it needs to work with the grain of a large bureaucracy in a time of considerable change.

"The harsh reality is that the civil service can't always be as agile and flexible as a private-sector employer, nor offer the same sort of financial reward," McNeil concludes. "But it can make sure it values its people, always treating them as ends rather than means. Get that right, and a lot of the other stuff will follow."

As strategies for improving staff wellbeing go, this seems like a good place to start: valuing people, training and supporting managers, and being mindful of the challenges facing the workforce. Crisis or no crisis, they're surely the hallmarks of the sort of working environment the civil service strives to be. ■

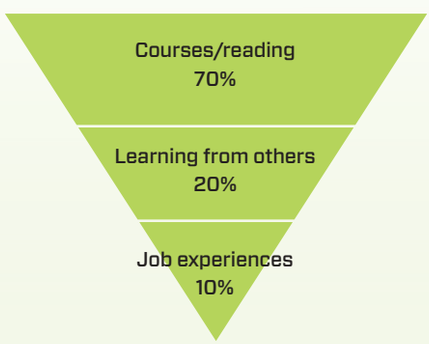
LEARNING CURVE

Concluding her two-part series on employee training methods, **Tina Seth** explains the online options for gaining new skills and knowledge

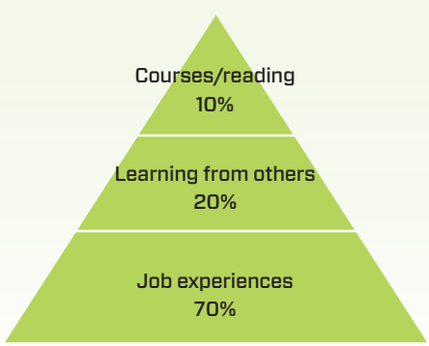
The virtual learning genie is out of the bottle. Even prior to the pandemic some online learning options were gaining traction, particularly compliance training. But lockdown restrictions necessitated an almost overnight move to all-digital, and fast-tracked a culture change that would otherwise have taken years to achieve.

The economic benefits to organisations are clear, with savings on travel and subsistence. And the ability to train people across geographic locations creates a far more inclusive culture. Nevertheless, this giant leap forward in virtual learning has brought with it challenges as well as opportunities. And, as with any type of learning or development, don't forget that what you do before and after the training is just as important when it comes to building skills *(see diagram)*. With that in mind, let's take a look at different types of digital training and how you can make the most of them.

HOW PEOPLE WRITE DEVELOPMENT PLANS



HOW PEOPLE ACTUALLY DEVELOP



Online workshop

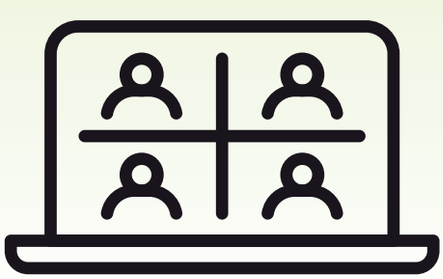
What is it? An almost like-for-like replacement for a one-day training course, with a virtual facilitator to cover a range of themes such as writing skills, management, communications, media handling, and so on. Effective courses include plenty of interaction and group exercises, as well as tailored material – much the same as an in-person course.

At its worst, the online workshop has transferred dull, PowerPoint-heavy presentations from the physical classroom to the virtual equivalent. They were tedious in person but at least you got biscuits. Without the biscuits, these sessions become a chance to switch off the video, mute your mic and catch up on your emails or online shopping.

When is it useful? Short, focused, interactive sessions that make use of breakout rooms have been pretty successful. A facilitator skilled at using interactive tools such as Slido (for live polling and Q&A sessions), Jamboard (a digital whiteboard) and Kahoot! (a game-based tool for polls and quizzes) can create a lively and engaging experience.

What are the drawbacks? When a learning event becomes "just another meeting", then we've lost something. People may struggle to maintain concentration. And it's tricky to build rapport with a screen filled with circled initials – which affects the connection that is a natural part of traditional classroom courses.

How to make the most of it Pre-work is key. By asking people to watch videos and look at slides before the virtual session, the facilitator can prompt discussion, manage group tasks and set up workplace activities and action plans to support learning transfer. Line managers will need to give time, space and permission to participate in pre-work activities and provide follow up opportunities to try out the new skills.



MOOC

What is it? The "massive open online course" was in vogue prior to the pandemic but seems to have dropped out of favour. It brings together a large group of people to access digital content and comment on their learning experience over a number of weeks, supported by a library of resources and insights. Usually, the content includes "talking head" videos and a collaborative platform to share comments and questions.

When is it useful? Probably best for longer-term learning programmes, such as developing commercial and contract management skills as a civil servant. Working to develop skills in a set order over a fixed period, using one set of resources, can feel reassuring. It's also easy to fit in around work and other commitments, and cuts out the hassle of trying to find the right content or worrying it may not cover all bases.

What are the drawbacks? Learning works most effectively when there is energy and motivation created in part through rapport with others on the course and the facilitator. A MOOC can be a little lonesome and distant. If it's your job to organise training for your team, it's worth tapping into people's learning styles to see whether a MOOC would suit. Do they like to learn in a reflective and ordered way, where the content has already been decided? Then this could be ideal.

How to make the most of it The key principles of learning still apply. Think about pre and post-MOOC activities that help you to embed the skills quickly. If the MOOC is about better contract management, to which commercial partnership will you apply the learning? What are your goals from the training and how will you know when you've got there?

If you or your team members prefer a more social learning experience, it's worth forming smaller groups with others on the course with similar learning goals or from the same sector. That way, you can discuss your challenges and get support on how to apply some of the learning from the course.

And you need to get out of your comfort zone. A MOOC can be a passive experience unless you set yourself some challenges – for example, if you've learnt a negotiation technique, apply it during your next meeting with a stakeholder or partner, and keep a record of the outcome to discuss with peers.

Microlearning

What is it? Short, easy-to-consume digital learning is gathering pace and popularity. In the same way many of us turn to YouTube for quick tutorials on everything from baking to DIY, microlearning can be applied to work. It can cover short hints and tips – for example, Dods Training designed micro sessions for local authority police and crime panels to support with questioning and scrutiny skills. Or it can be part of a longer, hybrid learning programme with pre- and post-work involving micro sessions.

Dods Training has a microlearning site for policymakers to introduce them to key concepts, and includes input from previous ministers to support with the briefing process. These can work on their own as a window into the world of policymaking, or as part of a longer course where attending a workshop on briefing ministers, for example, might include a video of ex-ministers' reflections followed by a group discussion with the course facilitator.

When is it useful? Microlearning is great for "just in time" learning – if you have a presentation to deliver next Tuesday, a course scheduled a few months down the line isn't going to cut it. A series of bite-size digital sessions would be far more helpful.

It's often easier to integrate learning into the workday, so microlearning particularly suits a busy schedule as you can stop and start digital content to suit you. And it's great as a refresher; if you've forgotten those four key negotiation techniques, you can

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remind yourself by accessing content just before an important meeting.

As a manager, microlearning works well if you are trying to encourage a more self-directed approach, giving people the independence to research and build their learning journey.

What are the drawbacks? Microlearning can lack depth; without a peer group to discuss and a facilitator to field questions, people could come away without solutions or a way forward for their particular issues.

Creating your own learning journey through micro sessions may be empowering but there's a risk the content won't cover all learning objectives in the same way a longer, more tailored, programme would, so learners would need to think about other options such as workshops, action learning sets, and communities of practice to supplement and develop basic skills development.

How to make the most of it Active participation is key. People need to think about what knowledge and skills they want to gain and how they will put that to the test afterwards. For example, if you're learning how to brief a minister, a video from an ex-minister will give some helpful insight into general requirements, but you'll need to follow up with a visit to your own minister's private office to understand specific needs. Similarly, a micro session on generic writing skills should be followed up with coaching to really improve those skills.

"Active participation is key – think about what knowledge and skills you want to gain and how you will put that to the test"

E-learning

What is it? Often associated with compulsory training courses that are either too general or too tedious, e-learning has acquired a reputation for being boring. However, recent advances in digital technology have led to a diversity of formats, providing stimulation through podcasts, films and realistic simulations.

When is it useful? In the new world of asynchronous learning, people can pick and choose the right time to engage with a course. This freedom to learn wherever and whenever makes e-learning really agile – sometimes all that's needed is a targeted five-minute boost to acquire an additional skill.

What are the drawbacks? Alone in front of a screen, people can feel isolated and the lack of interaction means it's not possible to ask questions or share with a community of other learners. As I said in part one of this series, people need to get out of their comfort zone to learn anything, and e-learning will need to be very sophisticated to create these simulations online.

I'm still not convinced this is the best platform for behavioural change. If someone has not bought into why they have to ask interview questions in a certain way or the need to adapt their leadership style, engaging with a facilitator or peers is the best way to debate options and change views. For example, I recall a facilitated training session with a civil service lawyer who said that SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) objectives couldn't apply to their role, only for the facilitator to demonstrate that they could, simply by asking the right questions – which shows the power of face-to-face interaction.

How to make the most of it E-learning can be very effective if the social and collaborative aspect of learning is integrated. For example, a group of people could engage in standard unconscious bias training, but they need somewhere to go with their questions and thoughts about how to apply this back at work. Some managers arrange a time for their teams to discuss the e-learning and what it means for their specific objectives – tailoring what is a generic course.

As I pointed out in my first article, pre and post-course work plays a huge part in the successful transfer of learning. As a line manager, you could delegate tasks that should demonstrate application of the new skills and knowledge, or set up a challenging scenario to test application.

Final thoughts

The old view that you haven't been trained or invested in unless you've had an in-person course is disappearing, as even the most change-resistant and technology-averse are embracing the flexibility and autonomy that virtual learning brings.

A word of caution: people need live interaction to begin shifting entrenched views; they need someone to challenge them. This used to be the facilitator's USP – will it now be AI's? ■

***Tina Seth is a former civil servant and business development manager at Dods Training, part of the Total Politics Group which also publishes* Civil Service World**

KEVIN ROWSWELL SURVIVING THE NEW NORMAL

CIVIL SERVANTS NEED A NEW APPROACH TO RESILIENCE IF WE WANT TO MAINTAIN VIABLE PUBLIC SERVICES

For many in the public sector the experience of being in a perpetual state of unprecedented flux, uncertainty, complexity and – most recently – ridicule are part of what we have come to know as "the new normal".

Public services could previously rely on established relationships, clear and respectful terms of engagement with all stakeholders and a reasonable sense of government direction and expectation. The new normal, with its untested disruption-adaptation approach, risks becoming a permanent state with long-term implications for the delivery of government business.

Simply navigating uncertainty and complexity, due in part to an unprecedented period of change in political leadership, priorities and expectations, is resource intensive and diverts effort from core functions. This reinforces a sense of being overwhelmed.

We may have no choice other than to work through this new normal. To do so successfully and safely, the impact on individuals at all levels of business needs to be addressed strategically and comprehensively. For civil servants, resilience – the ability to bounce back – is key.

Historically, resilience has been regarded in sociological terms as responses to personal events and circumstances. Developments in understanding and attention to resilience at an individual and team level within business operations are fairly recent.

We are used to the broader language of business resilience referring to the adaptability of operating and financial systems to anticipate and respond to external changes. However, it is relatively recently, through better understanding of mental health, wellbeing and work-life balance, that business resilience strategies have begun to more fully embrace the need for resilience at an individual level.

"Attention to resilience at an individual level is vital for the delivery of government business currently, and for the foreseeable future"

Attention to resilience at an individual level is vital for the delivery of government business currently and for the foreseeable future.

This is because, in sociological terms, resilience is something called upon to varying degrees intermittently throughout life. The delivery of government business in the current circumstances demands levels of resilient response on a continuous basis.

This requires a deeper and embedded approach in order to secure a continuingly resilient workforce capable of more than coping and more able to deliver government business.

There are three key strands to such an approach.

Corporate: commitment to developing individual resilience based on wellbeing methodologies combined with competence-development. This approach recognises a humanist perspective which places the person at the centre of focus and uses relationships to build confidence and skills. It is based on supported self-directed development within a culture of openness, encouragement and expectation.

Managerial: recognition that resilience has emotional levels of engagement that cannot be successfully mediated by technology but which require direct human interaction and proximity. This approach reflects persistent research demonstrating that mediated meetings, online learning and functional engagement contribute fewer than expected benefits in terms of identity, belonging and team cohesion. They can, in fact, consolidate feelings of isolation and detachment as well as mask evidence of need and support.

A successful approach to embedding resilience will not rely on the apparent ease of technology-mediated solutions but will develop a culture of active direct engagement through coaching, learning interventions and other events designed specifically to build resilience.

The third strand is the individual approach: work actively to develop your own and your colleagues' resilience through openness and direct engagement, avoiding comparative self-judgements and focusing on personal growth and development aspirations.

Focusing on the individual as the starting point signals a non-judgemental freedom to act to address personal resilience challenges and skills development. It also creates an expectation that as individual team members develop confidence and abilities, then a virtuous cycle of improvement at individual, team, operational unit, directorate and corporate-delivery levels will be demonstrated.

Overall, the notion of a new normal has inspired much innovation. However, it also continues to raise concerns about the viability and sustainability of current business and operating models.

Whatever the final state of play, we will only arrive in a safe place capable of delivering government business if we succeed in building and embedding resilience across all of our people. The need is there and, currently, so too is the opportunity. Who can say how long that opportunity may last. ■

Kevin Rowswell is a Dods Training associate and an independent advisor on professional development in government and public services

HOW TO WIN FIGHTS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Mehdi Hasan's latest book may not revolutionise the art of debating, but his clever hints and tips will go far in making you a more persuasive speaker, says **Nabeela Rasul**

- Win Every Argument: The Art of Debating, Persuading and Public Speaking
- Mehdi Hasan (2023)
- Pan Macmillan

Many of us will run a mile from an argument, but Mehdi Hasan, the experienced British American broadcaster and journalist, relishes disagreements. Hasan has written a best-selling practical guide on the art of persuading, debating and public speaking.

I came across Hasan through watching a debate held at the Oxford Union that later went viral. Since then, he has developed an impressive ability to hold powerful people to account. I was intrigued to see if Hasan had any new insights, especially in the current climate of political polarisation, where public opinion is polarised into digital echo chambers. Whether it's in a personal capacity, persuading a friend or family member, or at work convincing a colleague, permanent secretary or minister of a point of view, would this be the ultimate book to help win an argument?

We can often fear ourselves or recognise the fear of confronting others (or having a constructive disagreement), and sometimes the most robust conversations happen when there is a healthy level of disagreement. In his 1936 classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument – and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes." Hasan believes the opposite. His book works hard to outline how argument and debate, when done in good faith, can clarify issues for us, help us reach the truth, and resolve conflicts.

The book helpfully balances real-life examples with scholarly research, and is divided into four parts. The first section of the book is about the fundamentals, covering emotional appeal, evidence, use of humour, and the importance of listening. The second and middle section is focused on preparation, techniques, things to get you out of a hole, the zinger, the one-liner, the rule of three, and the booby trap. Hasan then covers confidence building, staying calm, doing your homework, brainstorming and researching.

Some insights will be well known to many, such as the example of the rule of three in Thomas Jefferson's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" triad. You may want to skip the look back at the history of public speaking, but there are also newer insights, which are fascinating. For instance, Hasan's exploration of the science behind rhetoric and storytelling.

Talking about the importance of repetition, Hasan refers to Princeton neuroscientist Professor Uri Hasson, who discovered brain-to-brain coupling, whereby when one person tells a story, and another is listening, the same regions of both brains are active in the same way at the same time. In other words, they sync up.

Other insights, such as the importance of preparation, are not new but a reminder that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

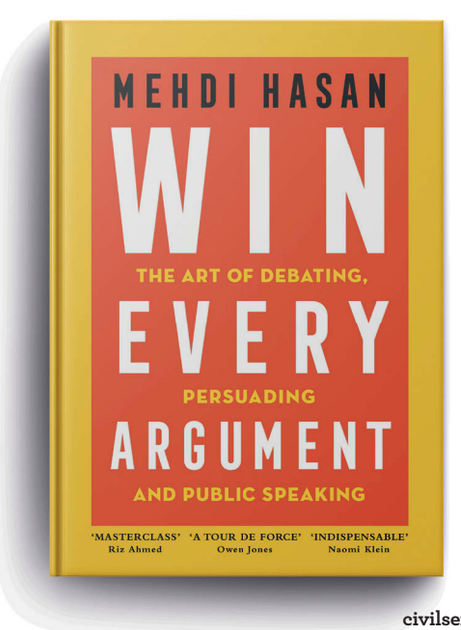
Hasan also offers some playbook debating tactics which are brought to life with worked examples. As a British American who has spent recent years in the United States, these tend to lean into stateside politics.

The American viewpoint may not appeal to everyone, but the book does get you thinking about the different ways to establish your point of view. Take the "gish-gallop" approach, where Hasan has developed a process for giving the facts and details at speed, while not letting his opposite obfuscate the truth with evasive answers. The audio version of the book also gives an opportunity to hear the speeches and debates discussed throughout.

How to listen and how to be heard is a lifelong journey; Hasan's book is a helpful contribution to the history of public speaking and if winning an argument does not appeal, perhaps it may just enable you to share convincing facts and stats in your next policy submission. ■

"The book works hard to outline how argument and debate, when done in good faith, can clarify issues"

Nabeela Rasul is a deputy chief of staff working at the Home Office. She is chair of the Civil Service Muslim Network



THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

This exploration of how you think, how others think and how to think better provides an accessible blueprint for workplace decision-making, says **Jessica Nightingale**

- How to Think Like a Philosopher: Essential Principles for Clearer Thinking
- Julian Baggini (2023)
- Granta

Civil servants of all professions and grades make and influence decisions. Each decision has an impact on those we work with and those we work for. Being able to think critically and well when providing advice or making a decision is vitally important.

Helpfully, *How to Think Like a Philosopher*, authored by academic Julian Baggini, gives the reader accessible tools and techniques, grounded in philosophical approaches, to think better. Baggini, with characteristic humour peppered throughout his book, calls his approach to thinking well: AC/DC. He implores the reader to attend to the world around them, to clarify arguments, to deconstruct assumptions and connect ideas to context. This book calls on the reader to treat thinking as a skill, something requiring active practise and exercise.

If you are thinking this doesn't sound like a casual beach read, you would likely be right. But as Baggini asserts, this is a good thing – thinking well is a serious business. Although the book initially feels quite daunting to read, Baggini does an excellent job of illustrating concepts with relatable explanations and storytelling, including examples as wide-ranging as the activities of his cat, to the philosophically-inspired TV show *The Good Place*. Baggini supports the overall accessibility of the book with a detailed glossary of key concepts and short, actionable how-to sections at the conclusion of each chapter.

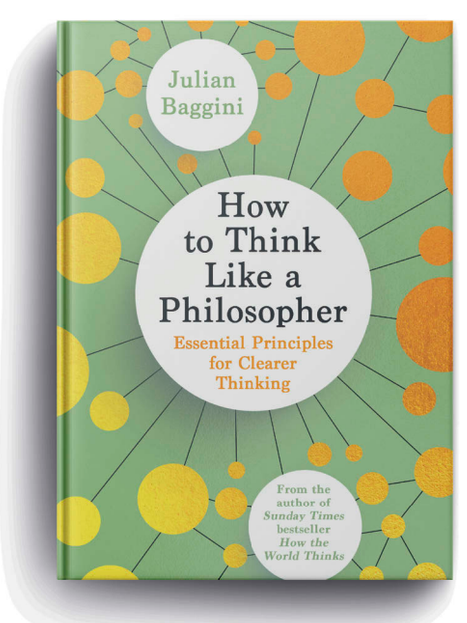
This book isn't a dry, static summary of what different philosophers have said at some point in history. Instead, Baggini shows the reader how to use these perspectives to develop skills in thinking critically, carefully and with evidence. An example of this is the recurring theme of empathy. Baggini emphasises that thinking needs to be grounded in context, informed by the testimony of others. Engaging with an open heart and mind in the experience of others leads to more informed contextualised arguments and decisions.

Paying close attention to the world around us, shows us how complex it is. Baggini reminds us that sometimes situations and decisions are complex, and our writing should reflect this complexity. Snappy summaries are risky as they are likely to uncritically engage assumptions and fail to demonstrate the evidence properly. In a civil service where writing concisely is prized, this is a good reminder that sometimes we might need to use more than a two-page summary to convey a situation or decision. Baggini then goes on to remind the reader to "be careful not to run before we can walk, when treading on unfamiliar ground". In a work context, where praise is given to those who can hit the ground running, Baggini emphasises the importance of engaging with evidence and context, even where that may mean a decision takes longer to make.

While I was impressed by the overall quality of Baggini's work, I felt there were two main drawbacks to the book. In the introduction, Baggini raises the concept of the "P factor". Akin to the "X factor", Baggini says it defies precise definition but can be thought of as a philosopher whose habits, character and actions cultivate the ability to think well. Given the early focus on the P factor, the reader supposes that it will be a recurring concept. However, it is only discussed a handful of times. If this is your first foray into reading philosophy, this concept feels clumsy and confusing as, without Baggini, how might you know if a philosopher has the P factor, and how do you interpret the ones who don't?

Secondly and more seriously, in discussing the "fallacy of the telling slip", where a poor or, indeed, abhorrent word choice may demonstrate a personal value, Baggini considers situations where someone has used an offensive term by accident as something that could be "deeply lodged in their brain", positing that this may be due to when they grew up. He then calls on the reader to be charitable – a slip of speech doesn't make someone a bad person. However, the principle of charity here shouldn't be with those who make "slips"; instead it should be with individuals who hear these "slips" and as a result, may feel that they don't belong in a setting or place. In a book that rightly emphasises the importance of engaging with empathy, this section feels like a noticeable gap.

However, as Baggini points out, very few things are wholly good or wholly bad. Most things, including this book, are more complex than that. Even with the drawbacks acknowledged, *How to Think Like a Philosopher* has a lot to recommend it for aspiring or current civil servants of any grade or profession. It will help you to consider how you think, how others think and how to think better. ■



Jessica Nightingale is a civil servant in the Department for Education. She is a member of the policy profession and works on children's social care reform

CIVIL SERVANTS ARE LOSING TRUST IN THE WIDER PUBLIC SECTOR — AND EACH OTHER

Survey reveals falling trust in the wider public sector among officials – while trust in private partners rises

Trust in the wider public sector has declined among civil servants, according to a survey carried out by *CSW*, with officials less likely to say they can find common goals with colleagues across the public sector than in 2022.

Officials were also less likely to describe public sector colleagues as honest and reliable, although they still perceive them as more honest than commercial partners and even other civil servants.

The second annual *CSW* trust survey polled civil servants across 15 departments and agencies about their experience working with seven types of organisations: local government; commercial partners; the voluntary and community sector; academia; the wider public service; non-departmental public bodies and executive agencies; and other government departments.

Civil servants were asked whether they find it easy to work with colleagues in each given sector; if they believe them to be open and honest; if they are able to find common ground and goals with them; if they share common values; and if the people in the sector are reliable.

Of more than 700 people surveyed, just under two-thirds (62%) said they deem partners in the wider public sector to be "open and honest". This compared favourably with commercial partners (seen as open and honest by 51% of respondents) and even other government departments fared better (60%). But it represents a large drop from the 2022 survey, in which 72% of respondents described the wider public sector as open and honest.

The survey also showed a large drop in the proportion of civil servants who

said colleagues in the wider public sector are reliable – from 71% in 2022 to 65% in 2023 – and those who said they shared common ground with those colleagues – from 81% in 2022 to 69% in 2023.

There was also a large drop – eight percentage points – in the proportion of respondents who said colleagues in local government are open and honest. This brought the sector into the second-last position in terms of perceived honesty, tied with government departments.

The voluntary and community sector was seen as the most honest (77%), followed by academia (69%), and NDPBS and agencies (65%).

Organisations in the wider public sector also dropped down CSW's overall trust rating – calculated by averaging out the percentage of survey respondents who agreed with five positive statements about the partner organisations they work with. The higher the score, the more likely it is that civil servants feel able to build strong partnerships with those organisations.

Public sector bodies had a trust score of 74% in 2022 – putting them at the top of the list. But in 2023 they fell to joint third place, with a trust ranking of 65%.

Overall trust in local government also dropped – from 69% to 63% – as did trust in other government departments – from 68% to 66%.

But despite showing that misaligned objectives can present a barrier to collaboration, the survey suggested that civil servants do think positively about other departments.

It asked respondents to indicate how strongly they agreed with statements such as "this department is open and collaborative" and "this department has a clear goal".

While the response rate to these questions was lower than the overall survey, the results showed a broad consistency and reflects largely positive perspectives from civil servants about other government departments.

"In every case, at least half the respondents said a lack of understanding around how organisations work impedes collaboration"

Commercial organisations remained the least trusted although their untrustworthy score has fallen by 5 points since 2022. The voluntary and community sector got the highest overall trust rating of 73%, closely followed by academia (66%) and other government departments (66%).

However, the VCS and academia are also the areas our survey respondents are least likely to work with – with just 16% saying they have partners in these sectors.

Only one in five respondents said they work with the wider public sector, and one in four work with local government.

By contrast, four in five respondents said they work with other government departments and just under half (47%) work with commercial partners.

CSW also asked civil servants to share the biggest barriers to collaboration with different partners.

In every case, at least half the respondents said a lack of understanding around how the different organisations work impedes collaboration. This was especially the case with local government – where nearly two-thirds named this as a barrier – and the wider public sector.

Another commonly cited stumbling block was different organisational or professional cultures. This was particularly apparent for NDPBs and agencies – 62% of respondents named this as a main barrier to working with agencies, compared to an average of 54% across all sectors.

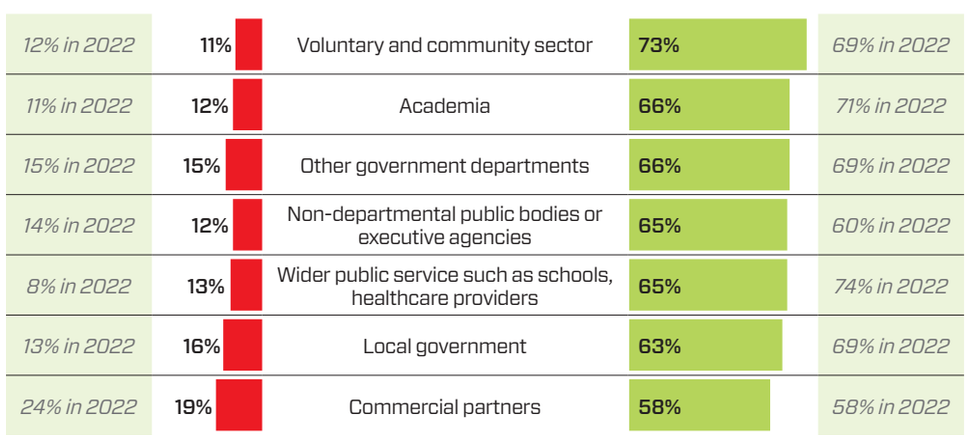
Respondents were most likely to cite misaligned objectives – or the perception of such – as a barrier when talking about other government departments, with 43% of respondents giving this as a main barrier. ■

You can see the full results of the CSW Trust survey at bit.ly/3RlRixl

2023 CSW TRUST SURVEY SCORES

Drivers of Trust	Government partner average	Commercial partners	Voluntary and community sector	Academia	Non-Departmental Public Bodies or Executive Agencies	Wider public service such as schools, healthcare providers	Other government departments	Local government
I find it easy to collaborate with colleagues in this sector on work objectives	65%	68%	69%	65%	63%	65%	62%	62%
Organisations in this sector are open and honest	63%	51%	77%	69%	65%	62%	60%	60%
Organisations in this sector share common values with me	62%	45%	70%	59%	62%	65%	68%	68%
The people I work with in this sector are reliable	65%	57%	72%	64%	66%	65%	65%	65%
We can find common ground and goals	73%	71%	78%	72%	71%	69%	75%	75%

Government partner trutworthiness (2023)



Green by example

The government has attempted to demonstrate the path to a greener future through its Greening Government Commitments. **Mark Rowe** explores progress towards meeting these targets

For the best part of a decade, the civil service has sought to set the national tone on sustainability with its in-house actions. Through a series of targets known as the Greening Government Commitments, 22 governmental departments and their arms-length bodies are aiming to reduce environmental impacts from water consumption, landfill waste and business flights and increase carbon-cutting measures across the civil estate, from offices to warehouses and prisons.

The GGCs are part of the government's 25-year plan to improve the environment and achieve net zero by 2050. This is something of a challenge: with more than 400,000 staff across the UK and producing almost 2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO_2) a year, the civil service's carbon footprint is similar to that of Sheffield's. NHS emissions alone are equivalent to 4% of England's total carbon footprint.

Targets running up to 2021 were set by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, the department which had overall responsibility for net zero, in negotiation with departments. But responsibility for the GGC framework, which includes overall and departmental targets, sits with Defra. Just to keep everyone on their toes, departmental performance league tables are published annually. The Office of Government Property runs the Cross-Government Sustainability Board, where GGC best practice is shared.

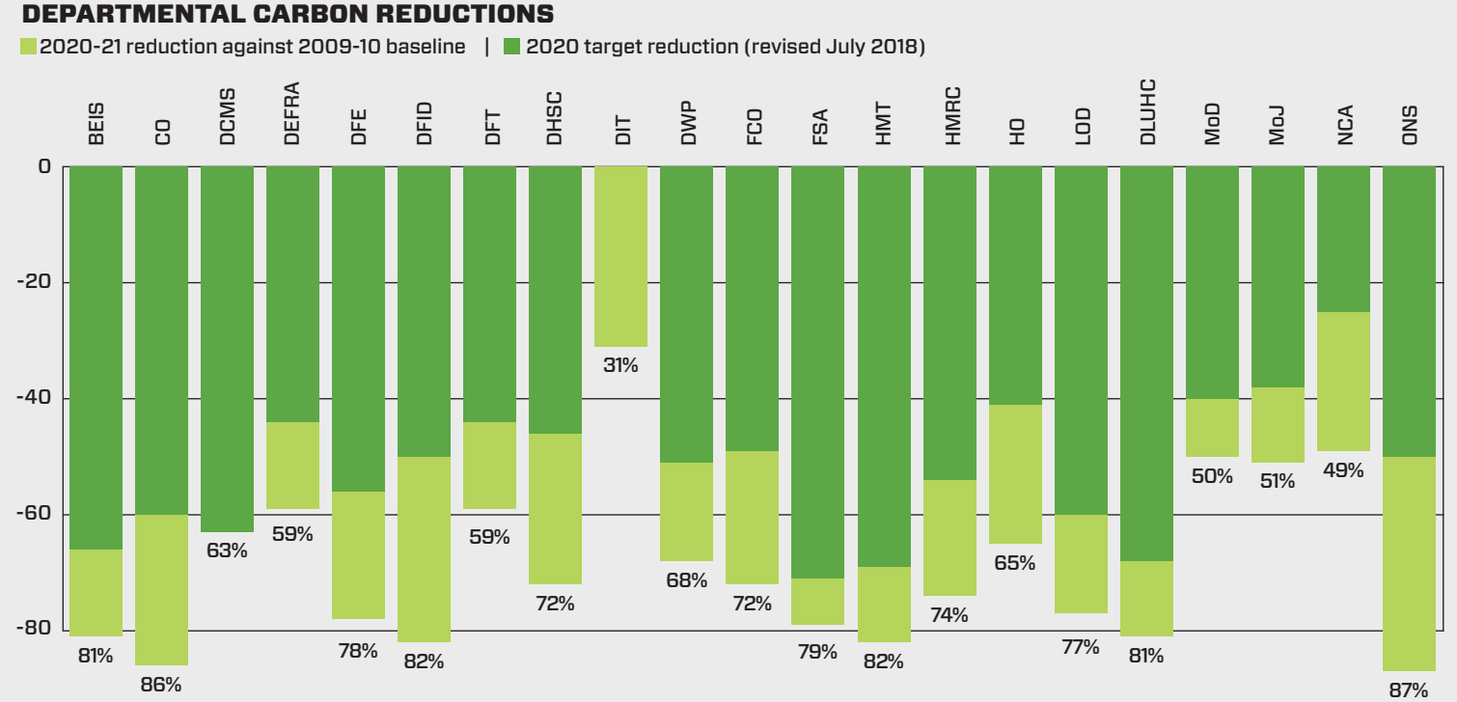
The most recent data, for 2020-21, were published this spring. Defra says figures are not wholly representative of government performance because Covid-19 involved re-purposing office space and redeploying staff.

However, it's worth noting that reporting compliance was far from universal before the pandemic. In 2018-19, only nine of 21 departments fully met all the emissions elements of the Treasury's mandatory sustainability reporting requirements. A spokesperson for the NAO, which monitors GGC performance, said that "while most central government bodies were measuring some of their emissions, full compliance with the emissions elements of HM Treasury's sustainability reporting requirements was low".

They added that even in 2022 there were "areas of central government that had not been granted exemptions by Defra [but] had not reported data for the GGCs." Three departments – Cabinet Office, DHSC and Department for Education - did not disclose any data in 2019-20 nor 20-21.

Defra says it is in the process of reviewing exemption records in order to close these reporting gaps and it maintains that, even allowing for fewer transport emissions as people worked from home for extended periods, GGC data are still meaningful (they confirmed that work from home data was not factored into the GGC report but could not say why this was the case).

DEPARTMENTAL CARBON REDUCTIONS



Defra was unable to specify when the 2021-22 data would be published, only that this would be "later this year". Philip Dunne, chair of Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee, says GGC reports should be published more speedily: "The two-year delay between the end of the reporting year and publication may indicate that compliance and reporting are not a high priority for government."

He suggested that establishing a board- or ministerial-level champion for the Commitments, with a remit to demand accountability and drive improvement, "might be the best incentive for improving performance".

In a 2022 review of GGCs, the NAO gave the process a mixed report card. While it praised what it called "a broadly stable framework", it observed that "the government's GGCs do not provide a complete picture of progress made by the public sector in reducing its emissions." It also identified "inconsistencies" in which bodies are and are not reporting within the GGC framework, and "patchy compliance" with the Treasury's reporting guidance.

A wider ranging challenge, the NAO concluded, is that while prisons are included (under the MOJ), GGCs "do not apply to public sector organisations beyond central government departments and their immediate partner organisations". Emissions from the wider public sector – for example, hospitals, schools and local authorities – are outside the scope of GGCs and there is no equivalent process in place.

"We recommend that government ensure that appropriate emissions data is reported from the whole public sector," said a spokesperson for the NAO, adding that co-ordination at the centre of government should be strengthened on measurement and reporting of emissions, "so that it ensures clear lines of accountability and responsibility to improve this process across the public sector".

Dunne says, however that any benefits of expanding the remit of GGCs were unclear. "There may well be merit in establishing expectations for sustainability in bodies not directly controlled by central government which are aligned with the Greening Government Commitments," he said, "but it is important to focus on the overall goal of improvements in sustainability rather than creating administrative burdens which might complicate progress."

The NAO report added that, while it was for government to decide the scope of particular commitments, "given that it has set decarbonisation goals for public sector as a whole, it should review the adequacy of wider measurement and reporting practices beyond the boundaries of GGC, to ensure that appropriate data is being collected to be able to track progress against these goals".

At the time of its 2022 review, the spokesperson added, the NAO found that the business department did not know whether the GGC targets would, in aggregate, deliver reductions consistent with a trajectory to achieve net zero by 2050. It also noted that BEIS had made little use of the emissions data reported by public bodies.

The NAO said that greening government reporting and other related accounts data were not being considered by any of the cross-government committees overseeing net zero. To address this, the NAO recommended that the department with responsibility for GCC targets – at that time BEIS – should work with other departments to "ensure that the shorter-term GGC targets are sufficiently aligned with the longer-term decarbonisation goals".

The current disconnect was also identified by Dunne. "It would be helpful to see a more explicit linkage between the GGCs and the Net Zero Strategy's objectives and goals," he said. "This comes back to issues of leadership and example-setting. The commitment to make all government vehicles emission-free by December 2027 is laudable: so why are ministers not telling the public that by that date the government fleet is expected to be 100% ULEVs, well before the 2030 deadline for ending sales of new petrol and diesel vehicles?"

Departments are now working towards new goals outlined in the 2021-2025 GGC Framework (published in December 2022), which recalibrated the baseline to 2017-18 and set out the overarching aim of "mitigating climate change and working towards net zero by 2050" (although when these goals were published BEIS said there was "no expectation" that individual organisations or departments should set themselves a net zero target).

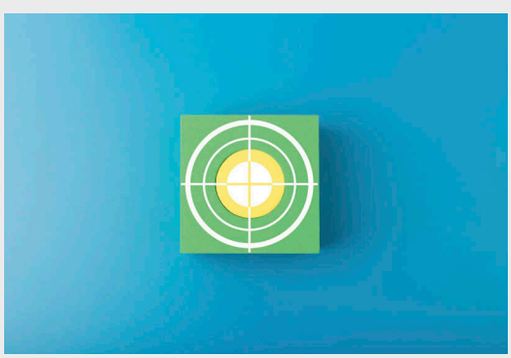
Outcomes include a requirement to reduce emissions from domestic business flights by at least 30% by 2025 from

TARGET PROGRESS

Headline achievements for 2020-21 include an overall 51% reduction in waste going to landfill compared to 19/20; and government reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 57% from the baseline year of 2009/10, exceeding a 43% reduction target. Collectively, GGCs saved an estimated £193m in 20-21. A Defra spokesperson acknowledged that it was "unclear whether all the reduction in emissions is wholly attributable to action [UK government departments have taken]. It is possible that Covid-19 restrictions also reduced building energy use".

The proportion of total emissions generated by each department in 20-21 remains similar to previous financial years. The Ministry of Defence (53.7%) and Ministry of Justice (20.8%) collectively accounted for most GHG emissions, followed by Department for Transport (5.8%) and Department for Work and Pensions (5.2%). The biggest volume reduction was achieved by the MoD, which used 700,000 tonnes of CO2 equivalent (CO2e) in 20-21 compared to 1.4m tonnes in 09/10.

Due to lockdowns, domestic flight use dropped significantly – by 96% – in 20-21 compared to the 09-10 baseline. Defra argues that, since this exceeded the 30% reduction target against 09-10, genuine reductions were made within departments.



Just three departments failed to reduce flights by at least 90%: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (70 %), the Law Officers' Department (81%) and the National Crime Agency (50%). The NCA accounted for 26% of all departmental business flights. A Defra spokesperson said this was explained by the NCA's "greater need for essential in-person working".

Departments collectively cut paper use by 80% against the baseline year, exceeding the 50% reduction target; all 19 of the departments that reported exceeded this 50% target. Before merging with the FCO, the Department for International Development had effectively achieved paperless status, recording a 100% reduction, having used 16,000 A4 equivalent reams of paper in 09-10.

The shift to cleaner vehicles in the government fleet, however, continues to hit bumps in the road. The target of 25% of the fleet to be ultra-low emissions vehicles (ULEVs) by 2022 – rising to 100% by 2027 – was comfortably missed, the collective 20-21 figure being 12.5% (up from 7.6% in 19-20). "We are unable to make predictions about whether the UK government will collectively meet the target," admitted a Defra spokesperson.

More positively, 18 out of 21 departments met the target of reducing waste to 10% against the 09-10 baseline and they collectively sent just 8% of waste to landfill. While seven departments sent no waste to landfill, the MoJ, Defra and DfT missed the target. Defra says 95% of its landfill waste comes from treated national park timber and old fencing for which no recycling option is available. The MoJ figures were affected by the closure of prison industry waste recycling facilities during the pandemic.

Water use targets are set internally by departments and collectively they reduced water consumption by 14% from a 2014-15 baseline. Reduction in water use has saved £10.4m compared to volumes used in 09-10. The MoJ was the only department that saw water consumption increase – by two percentage points from 2019-20). A Defra spokesperson attributed this to leaks arising from the prison water infrastructure "occasionally failing". The MoD and MoJ together account for 93.7% of government water consumption, with the MoD alone guzzling 66%.

Other reporting requirements included procurement and transparency in reporting steps towards climate change adaptation, biodiversity and the natural environment. These could charitably be said to be embryonic. In 20-21, only 11 out of 22 departments reported against the transparency commitment and just six of the 10 departments that reported had a written sustainable procurement policy in place. Again, Defra attributes this to some extent to the reprioritisation of staff during the pandemic. A Defra spokesperson said that permanent secretaries and chief executives were responsible for enforcing compliance but declined to confirm whether or not sanctions or penalties were imposed for failure to report or meet targets.

the new baseline; increase the proportion of waste recycled to at least 70%; and reduce water consumption by at least 8%. Targets are more granular, with a requirement to report distances travelled by international business flights.

More complex demands are being imposed, with new measures on biodiversity and climate adaptation. Departments are required to develop and deliver Nature Recovery Plans and integrate biodiversity considerations into all relevant service areas and functions, such as tree planting, woodland cover and pollinator-friendly habitat. They must conduct a Climate Change Risk Assessment across their estates and operations to identify areas that are most exposed – and then produce plans about how they will respond to these risks. For the first time departments must also reduce environmental impacts from ICT and digital services and deliver an annual ICT and digital footprint and best practice data for each department and their partner organisations.

"It is important to focus on the overall goal of improvements in sustainability rather than creating administrative burdens which might complicate progress" ***Philip Dunne, chair, Environmental Audit Committee***

Perhaps learning from experience of previous GGC targets and frameworks, where achievement sometimes appeared to depend on how enthusiastic or committed individuals within departments were, the framework says departments should establish clear lines of accountability for climate adaptation in estates and operations.

The new baselines and targets have been welcomed by Dunne. "The refreshed GGCs for 2021-25 represent a better alignment with the government's overall ambitions and statutory obligations," he said. "The strengthening of the GGC framework and the introduction of a specific natural recovery target is welcome – these ought in principle to be stretching, to ensure that the progress made has genuine impact."

However, Dunne fired a warning shot across all departments, saying that Covid-19 was no longer an excuse for feet dragging: "The initial test will come with the GGC report for 2021-22, which we certainly expect to see published well before April 2024." ■

Delivering record value for UK taxpayers

Crown Commercial Service has helped the public sector achieve record commercial benefits of £3.8 billion, as well as respond to new challenges. Chief executive **Simon Tse** shares the lessons from the past year

Crown Commercial Service (CCS) published our accounts for 2022/23 in July. Although the last 12 months finally brought us into the post-pandemic era, legacy challenges remain as we continue to readjust to how we live and work. We have, indeed, faced other trying times during this period, witnessing the continued conflict in Ukraine, the sad passing of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and the impact of price rises.

Throughout this time, public sector organisations have trusted CCS's commercial expertise to support their buying needs.

Wholesale energy cost increases are one of the major factors driving inflation, and costs to end users are continuing to see large increases. To help our customers manage their energy bills, we announced in March the award of our new and improved energy agreement, Supply of Energy 2. This agreement will become the biggest energy contract ever awarded in the public sector, expected to save central government and wider public sector organisations over £2 billion.

Once again, CCS has been entrusted with some incredibly high-profile humanitarian projects over the last 12 months, including arranging flights to Turkey from London for UK fire and rescue service colleagues, following the devastating earthquakes. And we've continued to assist our Home Office colleagues with their challenging crisis management requirements.

In September, our teams worked round the clock to help facilitate Operation London Bridge, the funeral plan for Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, including sourcing 20,000 blankets and 150 wheelchairs at short notice for mourners waiting to view the Queen lying in state. Throughout this period, CCS was on standby supporting the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Gold Command with a range of commercial solutions.

Maximising commercial benefits

CCS continues to help more public sector customers by delivering £3.8 billion in commercial benefits. This includes £11.4 million in savings for 26 customers on mobile and data aggregations services, such as voice calls, connectivity and applications.

At a time of squeezed budgets, the savings and better terms we can offer through our agreements are invaluable.

This year we awarded 26 new agreements and, as we keep evolving and maturing our product portfolio, we continue to see growth in spend. Over £31 billion of public sector spend was channelled through CCS agreements in 2022/23. This represents an increase of £3.39 billion on the 2021/22 total.

Thanks to the continued trust our customers place in us, we are now in a strong position to invest in programmes and projects to help further develop commercial capability across the public sector. For example, last year we announced our commitment to invest £12 million in the NHS to enable Atamis, a common procurement platform across the health service.

I'm delighted to say that within the first year of the programme, significant benefits and efficiencies have already been realised, with further still expected as the platform is more widely rolled out. This includes the North West London Procurement Services, which provides a single shared service for nine NHS partner organisations. The switch to the Atamis system has helped them to identify £34 million of potential savings.

We've also invested a further £2 million in partnership with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in providing a commercial capability training programme to the Local Government sector.

These investments are a source of great pride for me and my colleagues. They perfectly demonstrate the important work we've carried out to enhance our relationships with customers to deliver better value for taxpayers.

Social, environmental and economic benefits from every pound spent

Our priority must always be on helping the UK public sector save money, but we've also continued to take action to ensure our commercial agreements help drive policy through procurement.

We've continued to tackle modern slavery and enable social value and sustainability through our agreements. Most of our frameworks now require suppliers to report on non-financial metrics including modern slavery, carbon net zero, small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) and prompt payments. We're helping to level the playing field for SMEs by encouraging prompt payment practice.

We've also launched more Dynamic Purchasing Systems (DPS) including our new Facilities Management and Workplace Services DPS in February. And good progress continues to be seen with our efforts to enable SMEs to participate in our commercial agreements, with £2.59 billion (14.4%) of central government spend directly with 1,541 SMEs. This represents an increase of £340 million in spend compared to 2021/22.

Finally, we're continuing to help customers on their journey towards net zero. Over the last 12 months we've identified 36 commercial solutions in areas that can help accelerate the transition to net zero. In September, we

launched our new carbon net zero grants and funding page on our website, bringing all open CNZ grants and funding opportunities from across the government into one place.

Looking to the future

Once again, we've been able to demonstrate how CCS can assist customers to deliver on their priorities, achieving record commercial benefits for the public sector. But we won't stop here. As we look ahead to the new financial year, we're keenly aware of the challenges ahead of us.

The new Procurement Bill is currently making its way through Parliament. The new regulation will introduce significant changes to the way that public procurement is carried out in the UK, and we do not underestimate the impact that this will have on our operations.

Our Transforming Public Procurement project is working tirelessly to ensure that we're prepared for this. We're working closely in partnership with the Cabinet Office Procurement Policy team to ensure that we can provide guidance and support to our suppliers and customers ahead of the new regulations.

Procurement has a vital role to play in supporting and strengthening our country and our public sector. We have a clear vision for our future at CCS. Underpinning this vision is a strategy that puts public sector customers front and centre of everything we do. I'm confident that we're ready to face the challenges that 2023/24 may bring, and that we'll continue to bring power to our customer's procurement.

Crown Commercial Service

Scan the QR code to read our interactive digital brochure. You will find a full list of Crown Commercial Service commercial agreements and details of how to build policy considerations into your procurement

FORCE OF NATURE

In the battle against climate change and the biodiversity crisis, government-wide collaboration is a must. **Jonathan Owen** talks to **Dr Gemma Harper**, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee boss tasked with keeping UK public bodies on track for a sustainable, nature-first future

To say that Dr Gemma Harper has a tough job on her hands would be an understatement. As chief executive of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, she heads up a non-departmental public body with a vast remit.

The JNCC, which is sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the devolved governments, is effectively the brains behind the UK's approach to caring for the natural world, at home and abroad. As the UK's scientific authority on nature conservation and recovery, its remit extends to the UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies, as well as marine conservation.

Established under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, it also advises on the UK's implementation of international treaties relating to biodiversity, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity. The JNCC has a raft of statutory duties and responsibilities relating to nature conservation, environmental protection, planning and economic development on land and sea, and acts as the glue that unites the nature conservation bodies for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Harper, who has been its CEO since 2021, has had a lifelong passion for nature. "I was really curious, from an early age, about our relationship to other species and nature," she says. Her curiosity evolved into a quest to understand "humanity's place in the wider scheme of things" and "what the consequences of those beliefs and behaviours were". Harper, is all about the big picture. Given the magnitude of the JNCC's remit, it's probably just as well.

"I was really curious, from an early age, about our relationship to other species and nature"

The role is a big change for the »

The Netherlands
Harper observing the abundant wildlife at Biesbosch – a unique freshwater tidal wetland providing flood defence through nature recovery

scientist, who studied social psychology at the London School of Economics, and started her civil service career as a principal research officer in criminal justice at the Home Office. Harper then spent more than a decade at Defra, where she held roles such as chief social scientist before ending up as the department's deputy director for marine policy. During her tenure, she picked up an OBE for services to the marine environment.

Harper left Defra to take charge of the JNCC, an arm's-length organisation, where there is a degree of "autonomy and freedom". She plays down the seismic shift of switching from being an employee – albeit a senior one – to becoming the boss. "It feels like a natural transition and progression," she says. It's taken a long time for her to marry her personal passion for nature with her career but at JNCC, she has found her tribe.

Her passion burns bright – with a zeal that would put a Mormon missionary to shame – when talking about the need to tackle climate change, which she describes as "climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, which really is ecological collapse".

Nature underpins humanity, Harper explains. "The diversity, complexity and abundance of species, and the habitats they live in, produce the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, the water we drink and the materials we use."

She states: "Historically, we've looked at biodiversity as something completely separate to our economic, social and environmental development. And that failure has resulted in the UK being one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world."

Harper says a major shift is needed to change things for the better. "I strongly believe there is hope that we will have the ingenuity and creativity to solve these problems," she explains. "But they are going to require a whole-of-society approach to stop thinking of nature as something cute and fluffy, and nice to have 'over there'.

"We are part of nature, and our economic prosperity, our societal wellbeing and our survival depends on what nature does for us. We are depleting nature at an unprecedented rate. So, we won't tackle the climate crisis without tackling the biodiversity crisis, and vice versa. We need to encourage a better integrated understanding of why biodiversity matters." Harper is clear on the consequences of not facing these challenges: "We're not going to reach net zero without nature recovery."

Greater collaboration and the removal of barriers such as the rivalry and snobbery that persists within the scientific community are also needed.

"There are pretty significant differences in investment between the social and natural sciences globally and in the UK, and there is still a challenge to do truly interdisciplinary work because of that difference in investment and influence," Harper explains. In her opinion, different scientific disciplines need to work "much more closely together within government, but also through our research councils, through academia and through our institutions".

Collaboration is essential, she argues. "Technological solutions to the climate and nature crises are going to be necessary, but insufficient," she says. "We are going to need to transform societies, structures and cultures, in order to get

a much more integrated and balanced relationship with the rest of nature."

An "interdisciplinary approach to evidence" is needed, Harper says, where different scientific disciplines are "brought to bear on defining the problem as well as co-creating the solution".

JNCC has partnership working in its DNA: it is dependent on good working relationships with the myriad of individuals and agencies it works with. How does this work in practice? "It is about common purpose," Harper explains. The committee reaches out to potential partners who share a similar vision of a sustainable future in which nature thrives. The aim is to foster genuine partnerships, enabling both parties to deliver evidence and advice to decision-makers.

Harper admits that Brexit "undoubtedly" had an impact on the JNCC's overseas partnerships, but adds: "It hasn't had an impact on our ambition. We work very closely with partners across the EU, and across the world. In fact, we have just rejoined the European network of conservation agencies to make sure that we are continuing to share our knowledge, build our understanding and develop the evidence needed for nature recovery."

The JNCC has around 270 staff and approximately £25m in running costs. Given the sheer scale of what the committee is tasked with doing, does Harper feel she has the resources needed? "Our asset is the scientific knowledge delivered by our people and that is based on partnership working," she replies. "You could always be bigger, and you could always do more. But we've got to stay focused on our statutory mandate, our expert capability, and our mission to turn that science into action for nature recovery."

By the JNCC's own estimates, just £624m of UK public sector funding was allocated to biodiversity between 2020 and 2021 – amounting to 0.023% of UK GDP. Harper says that "if there was a fuller understanding of the importance of ecological systems, there would be more investment in them".

But investment alone is not enough. Currently, institutions and governance are siloed. Harper believes a transformation is needed to bring them together.

"We've undertaken huge social transformation in the past, and it's been successful," she says, citing the creation of the NHS as a case in point. "That was a principle-based structural investment in the health of the country. I think we need an equivalent principle-based structural investment in the health of the ecosystems that support humanity and all species."

For all her vision of how things could be, she works in a role where good news is in short supply. Recent months have seen a slew of reports about nature that make for grim reading. In January this year, the Office for Environmental Protection warned that the government's attempts to improve the natural environment in England have "fallen far short" of what is required and warned of a "chronic decline in species abundance". Of 23 environmental targets assessed by the OEP, none showed the government's progress was demonstrably on track.

A report released in March by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland showed that 53% of Britain and Ireland's native plant species have declined over the last 20 years. In May, the JNCC itself was the bearer of bad news, releasing new data that highlighted a sharp decline in "priority species". Its index used to measure population trends for species of "conservation concern" fell from 100 in 1970 to 37 in 2021. During this period, just 19% of species showed an increase, while 58% went into decline.

Mounting concern over the state of the environment, whether it be over sewage spillages and chemical contamination of rivers, or the tens of thousands of deaths attributed to polluted air each year, has prompted more than 80 charities to form a coalition demanding change. Led by Wildlife and Countryside Link, the coalition is calling on political parties to commit to an environmental rights bill that would provide a legal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Asked if things are getting better or worse, Harper responds: "We are not getting better. By any index, by any calculation, by any set of metrics, we are destroying natural systems and processes at an unprecedented rate.

"We are not getting better. By any index, by any calculation, by any set of metrics, we are destroying natural systems and processes at an unprecedented rate"

"Although there have been some successes with species and habitat protection, and in rethinking environmental policy in terms of sustainability, it still requires further integration, further mainstreaming across all policy areas."

While not criticising the government, she is clearly impatient with the pace of change. One of the single biggest pieces of work that the JNCC does is a recurring review of species in the UK every five years. The latest involved scientific assessments of more than 1,000 species, in a "phenomenal partnership effort" with national nature conservation bodies. The JNCC submitted the review to ministers more than a year ago, but the government has yet to publish its response, along with the JNCC's advice and recommendations.

"Is it frustrating that it's over a year later?" she remarks. "Well, yes. But an awful lot happens, as you know, in a year in politics. We continue to request updates on when government will formally respond."

Another important aspect of the JNCC's work is the biodiversity indicators it produces to provide the scientific version of a running commentary on how things are going. The indicators are "essential for assessing the state and change of nature across the UK", according to Harper. Right now, the indicators are being reviewed and revised in light of a global framework on biodiversity adopted by governments at last year's Convention on Biological Diversity. The new biodiversity indicators "take into account how we're going to define those targets", according to Harper, as well as outlining what data needs to be collected and analysed to assess if the targets have been met.

Civil servants who give advice to policymakers need to be clear where their caveats and red lines are, Harper says. "Government doesn't have to take advice in terms of its decision-making, but what it absolutely can't do is say that it has if it hasn't," she says. "Being clear about that is really important." She adds that those providing scientific advice should "recognise that evidence is just part of the information package that policymakers use to advise ministers". It's up to the recipients of that advice to make the final decisions.

Promoting the JNCC's agenda is easier said than done. In Harper's eyes, issues around nature and biodiversity are overshadowed by climate change and the net zero agenda and do not get enough attention in their own right. "It's partly a lack of understanding about the importance of ecological systems," she explains. "And it's also a lack of understanding of the time it's taken to evolve those systems and processes. But they are absolutely vital for all life on Earth." ■

LAST CHANCE TO CHANGE

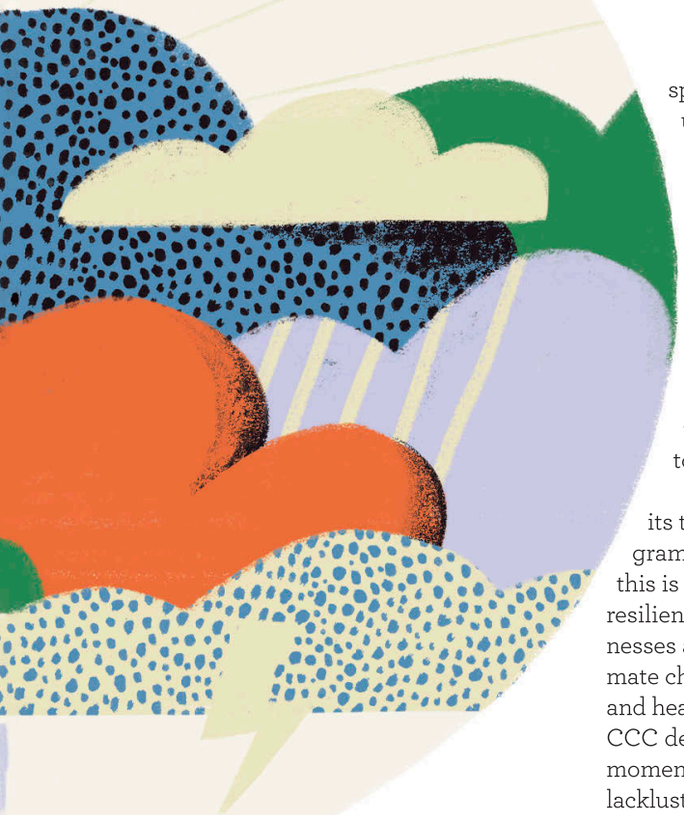
As climate change begins to intensify, the government has a lot to do to make our society more resilient to its consequences. **Tevye Markson** spoke to experts to find out what government is getting right and where it needs to improve. Illustration by Elise Vandeplancke

It's the year 2050, and it's hot. These sweltering, 40-degree days have become normal. Luckily, your home has state-of-the-art cooling and heating systems that keep the heat at bay. Neighbourhood adaptations, such as increased green space and innovative forest management, help tackle the heat, too. Heading out of the house won't be a problem, either, because the public transport network is equipped to manage the weather. Likewise, forecasts of dangerous tidal activity in the next fortnight aren't worrying you. Government preparations to protect the local coastline have put your mind at ease. Life, despite climate change, is good. There's just one problem. In the UK, such a climate-resilient future is currently far from becoming reality.

The UK government has committed to reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050 as part of an international effort to prevent global temperatures rising by more than 1.5°c. But climate change is already happening and will continue until the world gets to zero carbon emissions. Last year, some worrying records were set in the UK: the highest number of heat-related deaths, the country's warmest ever year and the first 40°c day. In 2023, while the country escaped the most severe weather, the extreme heat, wildfires, flash floods and droughts experienced across much of Europe have given us a glimpse of what the UK might expect in the coming decades as the planet continues to warm.

To be ready, the UK needs to be planning for three decades – at least – of continued climate change, according to Richard Millar, head of adaptation at the Climate Change Committee.

And yet the CCC, the government's independent adviser on climate change, warned in



spring that the UK was "strikingly unprepared" for climate change. As it stands, a future of climate-adapted homes and neighbourhoods remains a distant dream.

Mitigation and adaptation are the two recognised responses to climate change. One seeks to prevent it, the other to build resilience to prepare for – and recover from – its effects. Progress on adaptation in the UK is widely considered to be lagging behind mitigation.

In July, the government published its third National Adaptation Programme in 15 years. Known as NAP3, this is a strategic five-year plan to boost resilience and protect people, homes, businesses and our cultural heritage against climate change risks such as flooding, drought and heatwaves. Ahead of its release, the CCC described NAP3 as "a make-or-break moment to avoid a further five years of lacklustre planning". The committee called for an ambitious programme covering the full range of risks it has identified, and a clear vision for what being well-adapted means. It said the programme should also have a strong focus on delivery, and be a living programme that continues to evolve.

"Adaptation is about increasing the resilience of the whole national system... It can be difficult to talk about that in simple terms" – *Kathryn Brown, director of climate change and evidence at the Wildlife Trusts*

Millar sees NAP3's attempts to cover the full range of risks identified by the CCC in its own risk assessment as the plan's key success. It is something which didn't happen in the previous plans. Useful additions in the latest document include addressing international risks from climate change such as food security and getting more organisations to report on what they are doing to adapt to climate change.

But he fears the government's plans fall short "on most fronts", particularly on bringing new commitments forward. "I think it's fair to say that [in the current programme]... there are initiatives that are already under way or have already been announced by government over the last couple of years, and there's no significant new funding," he says. Millar worries the programme will not sufficiently prepare the UK for the risks of climate change without continuous evolution.

"I think there's an acknowledgement in the programme that it needs to grow and needs to evolve over the lifetime for it to deliver," he says. "For that to be more than just words on a piece of paper is absolutely key, because if it does just stay static, it will be a missed opportunity and one that we can't really afford."

If the UK has been producing these National Adaptation Programmes for 15 years, why is adaptation so far off track?

One reason is the complexity of climate adaptation and difficulty getting the public – and government – to understand what adaptation aims to achieve. For example, when tackling emissions reduction, government has a clear goal to focus on.

"We know that we're all thinking about how we get the country to net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and [hit] ambitious intermediate pathway points between now and then," says Millar. "There's obviously a lot of subtlety in exactly what you mean by net zero, but there's also a clarity of definition under the act.

"With adaptation, we don't have the ability to add all these things together across different sectors in a neat way like you can with greenhouse gas emissions, because the impacts are different. You might be thinking about how many people are dying because of heatwaves when thinking about health, but then you might think about disruption to the provision of power services from extreme weather events, or the number of people flooded."

Millar says there isn't a clear goal of what the government thinks is reasonable to try to achieve in the long term in most areas of adaptation. Therefore, what the UK needs to be doing now, and what scale of action is needed, is also unclear.

Professor Chris Hilson, director of the University of Reading Centre for Climate and Justice, puts it bluntly: "Mitigation is not easy but adaptation makes that look like a walk in the park."

The CCC has called for the government to learn from the success of net zero by setting targets for climate adaptation.

"Having this long-term emissions target for greenhouse gas emissions has served this quite powerful catalysing role," says Millar. "We think it would be valuable for government to put some markers in the sand."

He recognises that it's not simple to distil diverse aims into one goal, as was the case for greenhouse gases, but believes that nailing down several goals covering key areas of climate risk would be helpful.

The government can also look to »

the Environment Act 2021 – the first UK framework for environmental protection to mandate several targets – for inspiration.

"They face similar challenges," Millar says. "It's really hard to boil the environment down to just one metric and that's not what's been done there.

"There's been multiple targets set, trying to keep the number small but cover some of the key bits [and] set a destination of what we're trying to work towards.

"Hopefully that can help the conversation move on to: are we doing enough? What's the scale of action that's actually going to be consistent with getting there?"

But Millar thinks it will require political leadership to make these difficult calls on climate resilience targets.

Others in the field are less convinced about setting targets. "Adaptation is about increasing the resilience of the whole national system," says Kathryn Brown, director of climate change and evidence at The Wildlife Trusts and a former long-serving civil servant at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

"It can be quite difficult to talk about that in simple terms and to think about [the] cost benefit of hitting a target. You can't do that with adaptation like you can with net zero."

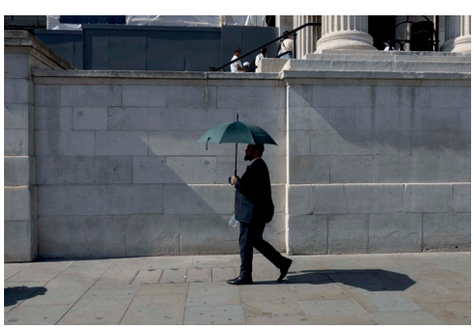
She adds that "adaptation is much more about systems thinking and interconnections between different sectors".

Hilson agrees: "It's really hard. You'd end up having hundreds of targets."

The complexity of adaptation also makes it difficult for officials to whet ministers' appetite.

Brown says Defra civil servants working on climate change understand climate risks and want to tackle them, but struggle to attract ministerial attention when competing with short-term political priorities. "Politically, adaptation is a hard issue," she says. "It's short-term costs for long-term gains. That's always difficult to deal with in political decision-making-cycles."

She points to the rolling crises of the past 15 years, which have pulled civil service resources away from longer-term planning,



"The impact you get from that is that you're not ready for the next crisis when it hits," she says. Brown estimates the UK will begin to feel the impact of climate change in a big way in the next five years. "We will be hit by things that we're not prepared for, even though the science has been very clear for decades that these things are likely to start happening more and more," she says.

Millar says climate mitigation suffers from the same issue. For a solution, he points to the success of the decarbonisation agenda which has achieved longer lasting political saliency.

"I don't think we're there yet really on the climate risk side," he adds.

"Thinking about the 40c heatwave last year, people saw some of the stresses it created to infrastructure, as well as the discomfort in being in their own homes. But then [the heatwave] passes and it's easy for it to become a background issue that doesn't seem like it affects people's lives on a day-to-day level."

Another way the climate change mitigation movement has won support in recent years has been through increased engagement with the public, using citizen assemblies. Brown says Defra has made a breakthrough in this area. The organisation's public dialogue exercise on climate change adaptation, published in July, gave an insight into how the public feels government should be acting on the issue. The exercise participants were shocked by the seriousness of current risks and felt government should have done more, sooner. Respondents were also emphatic that national government had primary responsibility for adapting England to climate change, and suggested adaptation needed cross-party agreement, or to be led by an independent body, to ensure that party politics and election cycles do not constrain decision-making.

"I think that public view [on adaptation], as we get more impacted by climate change, may start to swing quite dramatically over the next few years – it will be interesting to see what impact that has on government prioritisation," says Brown.

Increased climatic events will also have a role in pushing adaptation up the agenda. "We're starting to experience actual impacts of climate change in the present, rather than always thinking of it as a future threat," she says. "When I first started working on adaptation at Defra back in 2006, we thought about it in terms of policy and evidence as very much a future threat, and that feels very different now."

In her written introduction to NAP3, environment secretary Thérèse Coffey described the document as "a step change in our approach to managing the risks of climate change, moving us from planning to action". But the CCC views delivery as one of the weakest aspects of the government's programme.

Millar says there has been no significant additional funding for delivery. The lack of resource allocation is likely a consequence of how the government deals with uncertainty.

Brown says: "It's very hard to model and predict precisely how different impacts interact and how different systems interact in the country. You saw this with Covid. What we experienced was much worse [than the models predicted]. And I think the same is true with climate impacts and climate risk.

"Governments struggle with uncertainty

“The public view [on adaptation], as we get more impacted by climate change, may start to swing dramatically over the next few years” – *Kathryn Brown, director of climate change and evidence at the Wildlife Trusts*

because, as an adviser, I would always want them to be taking a precautionary approach, but ministers then find it very hard to argue for investment of resource into something that is uncertain but has a big impact if it materialises. I think [officials] do have a very good understanding of what the climate science is telling them and I think [they] do brief ministers very well on that. But the translation of that risk into action is still quite weak across most of government.”

Part of the issue is a lack of coordination across government. A report by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in October 2022 warned there is an “extreme weakness at the centre of government” on tackling climate change national security risks, while the CCC’s March report noted a lack of clear responsibilities and mechanisms for cross-government collaboration on climate adaptation.

Defra is the lead department on adaptation policy, but Brown says it has few policy levers for adaptation other than those in its own purview, like natural environment and agriculture.

“There’s always this process of Defra having to try and encourage other departments to do more on adaptation,” Brown says. “And I think for the team in Defra it’s a really big challenge to try and get that message across.”

Brown, who was an official at Defra for 10 years and worked on the Climate Change Committee for a further decade, suggests moving climate adaptation work to the Cabinet Office, given the issue is now a short-term threat. The Cabinet Office is already responsible for emergency planning, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and National Security Risk Assessment.

NAP3 does aim to improve cross-government work, with the creation of a Climate Resilience Board, which will work closely with existing cross-government climate governance, aligning climate adaptation to wider priorities on net zero and the environment. Despite being a potentially interesting development, Millar says this must be more than just a talking shop.

Instead, he believes further necessary funding can be unlocked by getting the Treasury to understand the fiscal risks of climate change. Then, adaptation action will be recognised as a prudent investment. The CCC has called for around £10bn more per year over the next decade.

Hilson cautions against moving climate resilience responsibility from Defra to the Cabinet Office. “The danger with the Cabinet Office is if you have a government that decides it’s not terribly climate change motivated, and there’s somebody in Cabinet Office that’s really of that persuasion, then that will kill the whole thing across all different departments,” he says.

He argues government should build more climate change adaptation and resilience requirements into legislative frameworks used by the civil service .

“There are some existing duties,” he says. “You’ll find quite often there’s a sustainable development duty built into a number of statutory frameworks. And yes, we’ve got the Climate Change Act 2008, which sets out a little bit about climate adaptation and the Secretary of State duties around that... but there’s not many adaptation duties and requirements to consider resilience in response to climate change.”

Hilson also sees an opportunity to better align the CCC’s work with Defra’s. “Something needs to be done to better align the dates of when the Climate Change Committee is reporting on adaptation,” he says. “It reported in March this year, and then you had the new government adaptation policy coming out in July. [Departments] may be able to take some of that on board, but it seems pretty unlikely that really they would have been able to make significant adjustments between March and July.”

But, for Millar, the important thing is to try to make adaptation work an integral part of officials’ daily jobs.

“If we can keep communicating why it’s essential for just doing their nominal jobs, that can hopefully help empower officials to incorporate it into their work more readily and more regularly.”

This will mean officials are working on climate adaptation when it’s needed,” Millar adds, “instead of just in these one-stop-shop moments where they’re being asked to provide actions for a new National Adaptation Programme but then might not think about it for another couple of years”.

A government spokesperson said NAP 3 “sets out a strategic five-year plan to boost resilience and protect our country against climate change risks such as flooding, drought and heatwaves”.

“To ensure our country is ready and able to handle the changing climate and all its challenges, we are working on clear ways to measure and deliver our ambitious plans successfully,” they added. “This includes more detailed indicators and outcome measures that will allow us to better assess delivery and monitor successful implementation.” ■

Climate change expert and former senior civil servant **Simon Sharpe** speaks to **Mark Rowe** about the role officials can play in tackling climate risks and driving progress towards Net Zero

LOOK SHARPE

Simon Sharpe is a former government policy adviser on energy and climate change and was deputy director of the government's Cop26 unit. In his recent book, *Five Times Faster*, he argues politicians are not solely to blame for tardy responses to climate change. Just as culpable are policymakers, advisers, economists, diplomats and scientists within government. They tend to be the only people who understand the granular detail so end up setting targets and signposting how to reach them. But, Sharpe argues, they often ask the wrong questions or fail to convey the gravity of climate change to their political masters. Our predicament, he says, is akin to a frog in a gently warming pot of water. The frog chooses to ignore the warming: in five minutes it's unlikely to boil to death but after 15 minutes it's cooked. What that frog needs, says Sharpe, is a chief scientific adviser to give it hard truths and practical policies.

Do UK politicians 'get' how serious climate change, and the threat to the UK, is?

We're entering a period of climate instability that human civilisation has never experienced. Half of our food is imported, so future food security is at risk from heat extremes, droughts, floods and rising sea levels that will affect crop-producing areas and pollinators. National security will be affected by how countries and communities respond to parts of the world becoming less habitable. Politicians are like other people: most believe climate change is serious but only a minority read and think about it enough to get a feel for just *how* serious.

Does the civil service analyse the risks in the right way?

The problem is that most information on climate change is produced and communicated as prediction, telling us what is most likely to happen, rather than as risk assessment, which would tell us the worst that could happen.

Few people in government are aware, for example, that the upper limit of sea-level rise against which London could protect itself has been estimated at 5m. A plausible worst-case scenario sees this reached by 2150; long-term, sea-level rise from 2°C global warming is likely to be around 10m. Few people are aware that, in the 2030s, millions of people are likely to encounter conditions of heat and humidity that exceed the body's limit of tolerance – even if you rest in the shade tipping water over yourself, you would still die of heat stress.

Can the civil service better convey climate change risks to politicians?

Risk assessment is done well in public policy areas such as counter-terrorism, nuclear proliferation, civil emergencies and public

health. We ought to do an equally thorough job of climate change risk assessment.

That requires the right institutional processes. Three elements are essential: fund research for risk assessment, identifying worst-case impacts; involve people with expertise in risk assessment in interpreting the findings (don't leave this entirely to scientists, who prefer to err on the side of understatement); summarise the findings in a short and holistic risk assessment that is communicated annually to the prime minister and the cabinet.

How does policymaking need to change to achieve Net Zero in time?

With the right ideas and institutions, we can make faster progress without needing greater political will or more money. To upgrade the electricity grid, we need more transmission lines to take clean power from where it is generated to where it is needed, and reforms to planning to make it faster and easier for new solar and wind farms to get connected. The traditional advice of economists is that carbon pricing is the most efficient policy for reducing emissions – but this is a mistake arising from thinking about the problem the wrong way. The transition from horses to cars was not made by taxing horse manure; the internet was not created by putting a tax on letter-writing. Investment in new technologies and their supporting infrastructure and systems is what matters most. We should focus on using targeted investment and regulation to create zero emission solutions, grow their market share, and reduce their costs. We are doing this quite well with renewable power and electric vehicles; we need to do the same in heating, industry, agriculture, shipping and aviation.

What role can the civil service play in this?

The civil service is great at writing strategies; the hard part is putting policies in place and implementing them. The civil service can improve the process of policymaking by changing its analytical tools. Cost-benefit analysis, as the Treasury's Green Book has recognised, is not appropriate in situations of structural change. Risk opportunity analysis, incorporating qualitative knowledge and systems thinking (done properly, with rigorous analysis) can be a better framework for comparing options.

How can the civil service facilitate the huge decommissioning strategy associated with Net Zero?

A low-carbon transition involves rapid innovation and structural change.

High-carbon assets like coal power plants can be decommissioned by their private sector owners. It's more of a challenge for government when infrastructure systems need to be decommissioned – when enough of heating and industry has been electrified, it will no longer make economic sense to operate the current gas grid. But the remaining users of gas will not want supplies suddenly cut-off. Scenario planning and modelling will help understand when this situation might arise and how to manage it.

How do you achieve cross-departmental coordination on climate change?

Coordination between departments is always difficult, but I don't believe it is the main structural problem facing UK policymaking for the low carbon transition. If there is political will to make policies, Cabinet Office can do the coordination job well enough.

The larger structural problem is the Treasury, which too often uses its disproportionate power over budgets to micromanage policy. The departments responsible for energy, industry, transport, and agriculture have greater expertise in those areas and it's a waste of public money when that expertise is not fully used and wrong policies get chosen. The Treasury could agree overall budgets with departments but then leave departments free to decide how to spend it.

What do you make of Labour's climate change plans?

Labour's commitment to spend significant amounts of money on the low carbon transition is probably helpful, because investment will certainly be needed – an upfront commitment could overcome some of the Treasury-related problems. I'd urge the next government not to overlook the power of regulation to reallocate private capital towards clean technologies quickly and efficiently. We see this in the car industry where regulation is pushing investment into electric vehicles, accelerating improvement and bringing down costs.

How could Labour's plans for GB Energy, a clean energy company, be implemented effectively?

I can't see the need for a publicly-owned electricity company, as the electricity market is already competitive and moving towards clean technologies as fast as regulatory structures allow. I see a potential advantage in government taking an equity stake in small companies developing new technologies that are critical to the transition, such as energy storage. This would help them get the finance they need, and successful investments would yield returns that could be re-invested. The government is the only actor that can legitimately invest in such areas while simultaneously using policy levers to grow the market. This is an underexploited opportunity.

In your book, *Five Times Faster*, you argue climate change policies are too broad and vague – can policymaking be more focused?

Climate change diplomacy has been focused on the whole of global emissions – this is like trying to negotiate for world peace or an end to poverty. To reach substantive agreements, diplomacy has to focus separately on each of the greenhouse gas-emitting sectors of the global economy. Instead of nearly 200 countries at the table, we just need a critical mass. Typically, ten countries account for around 75% of the global market in each sector.

How might sector-specific emissions cuts, rather than economy-wide ones, be achieved in practice?

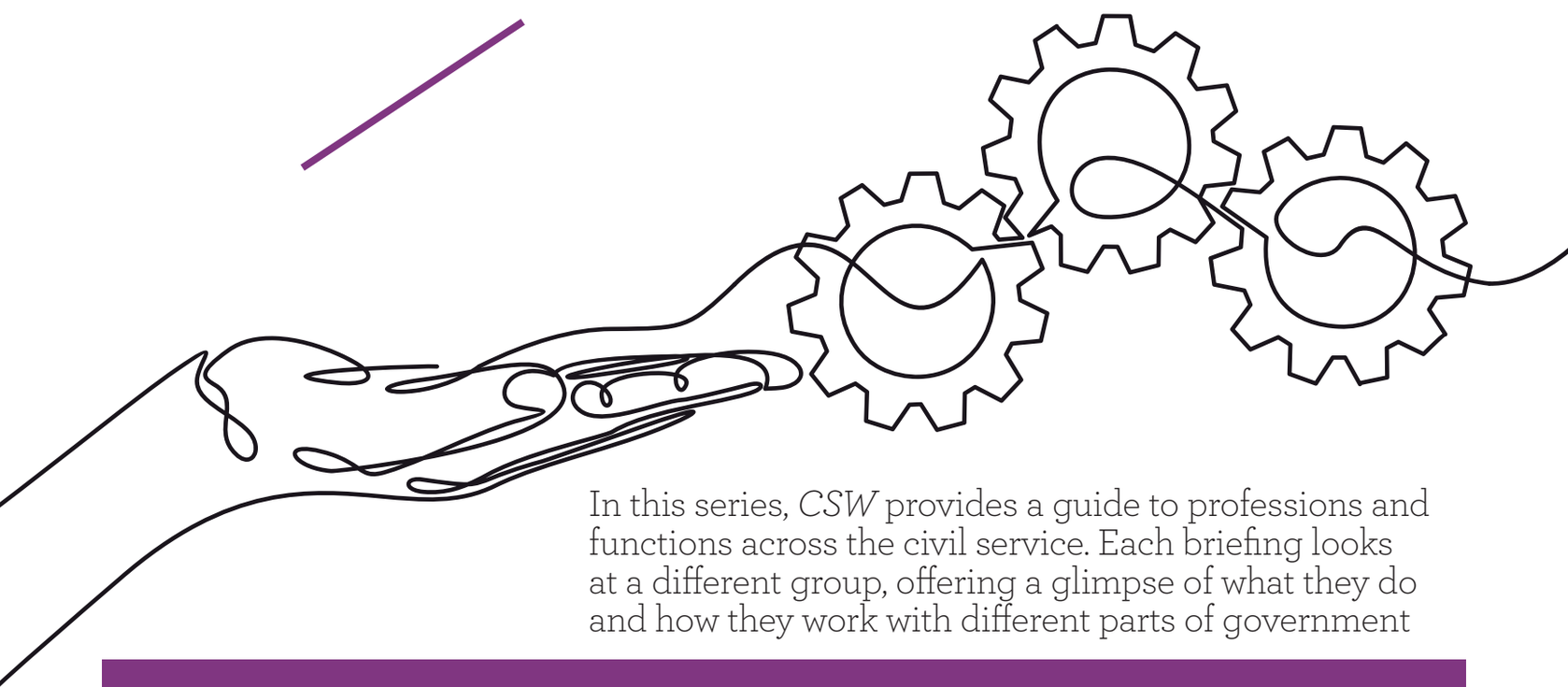
Let's take steel – a sector usually referred to as 'hard-to-decarbonise'. The first demonstration projects of near-zero emission steel production are only just being built, so if countries share learning from these projects, successful designs will be identified more quickly. If several large countries act together to use public procurement to create initial demand for near-zero emission steel, this will create a strong incentive for industry to invest in the new technology. And if some of these countries agree low-carbon standards, this will ensure that competition in the global market becomes a driver of the transition, instead of holding it back.

"Climate change diplomacy has been focused on the whole of global emissions – this is like trying to negotiate for world peace or an end to poverty"

Are you optimistic the UK can meet its obligations?

I believe we can meet our targets. Experience shows that when we put the right policies in place, progress is faster than we expect. But we are off-track, so the pace of policymaking has to increase. It's important to see ourselves in the global context. We can't meet the UK Net Zero target on our own and it would be pointless if we did. The only reason to decarbonise the UK economy is to influence and accelerate the decarbonisation of the global economy. ■

PROFESSIONS PRIMER



In this series, *CSW* provides a guide to professions and functions across the civil service. Each briefing looks at a different group, offering a glimpse of what they do and how they work with different parts of government

PROJECT DELIVERY

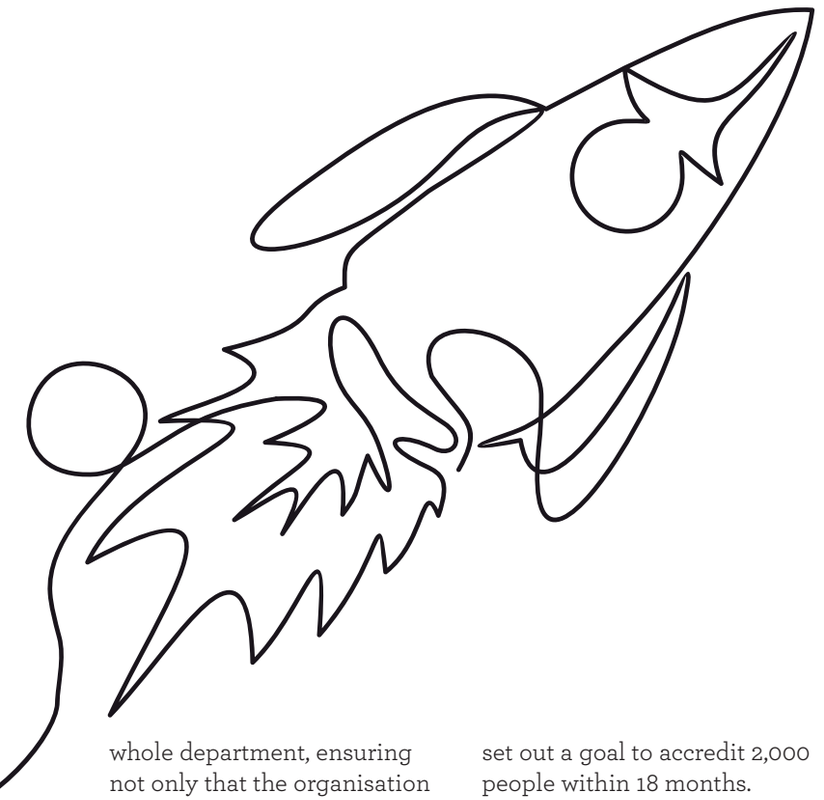
Who are they? Project delivery professionals support a huge variety of work across government, providing the structures and tools which take policies and services from plans to reality. The profession forms part of the wider project delivery function, which includes people from other professions – such as commercial, policy or digital – who are also needed to bring a project to life.

How many are there across government? Just under 16,000, although the number of people involved in delivering projects through the wider function is over 26,000.

What do they do? Karina Singh, director of function, profession & standards at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has overall responsibility for the project delivery profession, and describes the job of project delivery practitioners as "bringing together people and groups with a common outcome and using project delivery approaches and tools to create solutions to achieve that outcome".

Under that broad description, project delivery roles can range from a project support officer – tasked with co-ordinating the reporting to ensure information about a project is up to date – to a portfolio manager who, among other things, makes sure that resources are allocated effectively over a number of projects in one organisation.

One newly created role is that of chief project delivery officers (CPDOs) in the biggest departments. Singh explains that these people help to ensure that there is a voice at senior level to take a strategic view of projects across the



whole department, ensuring not only that the organisation has the right capability and capacity to deliver those projects but "pivoting the department to take advantage of the change" that projects will bring.

Together, these CPDOs form the Projects Council which sets an overall direction for the profession and addresses challenges across the system.

When was the profession founded? In 2012 shortly after the Major Projects Authority, the predecessor of the IPA, was established to oversee large and important projects across government.

What are the priorities for the profession? "The number one priority for me at the moment is building and recognising skills through accreditation," Singh says, referring to a newly launched scheme which allows officials to assess and accredit their skills at four different levels – Foundation, Practitioner, Senior Practitioner and Master Practitioner. The IPA's 2022-23 annual report said that 400 people had been accredited at the end of March 2023, and set out a goal to accredit 2,000 people within 18 months.

This process will make it easier for people to manage their careers, Singh says, but it also helps the function to understand the skills that exist in the civil service, making it easier to "get the right people to the right projects" and "create more fluidity across the system".

Her second priority is developing skills for the future. "We've articulated what a project delivery skillset is in today's world," Singh explains, "but we know that data, AI, and automation will have a huge impact on us. We need to articulate and work out what that means for our people and make sure that they've got the skills they need to harness that opportunity both for their projects and for their careers."

A final priority this year will be to simplify and consolidate the raft of existing guidance and good practice around project delivery into a new Teal Book – which Singh says will be a comprehensive guide for anyone who is delivering projects in the same way the Green Book is a guide for appraising projects and policies.

VIEW FROM THE TOP

KARINA SINGH
DIRECTOR OF FUNCTION, INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROJECTS AUTHORITY

Like many in the profession, Singh did not start her career in an explicit project delivery role. In fact, she joined the civil service as a summer job after university, working in the accounts office in HM Customs and Excise at Heathrow airport.

She then worked in a range of policy, operational, change management and corporate roles in HMRC, but says that for the first 15 years of her career she "wouldn't have described [herself] as a project delivery person at all".

"It's only the last 15 or so years that I've been full time in project delivery, and identified as a project delivery professional" she says, noting that although with hindsight she was delivering projects for almost all of her career, she only formally joined the profession when she realised all the tools and structures she was using to achieve her job came from project delivery.

Over the last 15 years, Singh worked on change delivery, leading transformation projects in HM Land Registry and Valuation Office Agency before becoming head of profession in the IPA last year. In her role as a change leader in those agencies she had worked closely with the three predecessors in this role and viewed it as "the most exciting role possible, because you're making a difference to so many people."

What does it take to be a good head of profession? "For me it's about being open minded and remaining curious and having lots of conversations with people, both within the departments as well as connecting with peers in the private sector, academics and around the world," she says, explaining that learning about changes in the sector is crucial.

She adds that it's important to be "ambitious for what we

can achieve as a profession – for the changes you can make at a system level and the difference that we can make and should be making to the way we are spending or investing and using taxpayer money to best effect so that we are creating the best possible outcome."

Which professions do they work most closely with? Although they work most closely with commercial, analytical and digital colleagues, project delivery professionals work across almost every part of government so they can – and do – work with civil servants from any and no profession.

Given this, the profession has made what Singh describes as "a very deliberate choice" to create training and resources which aren't just focused on its own members. "They are focused on anybody who's interested in or has a hand in project delivery," she says, "which is – when you look at government objectives around 'delivery, delivery, delivery' – everybody." »

What is a typical career path like? Many people do enter the profession directly through routes like the Project Delivery Fast Stream, which is the third most popular fast stream scheme (by applications) behind the generalist and diplomatic schemes, according to the IPA. However, Singh notes that there are just as many people who move into the profession mid-career.

"We're trying to get people to think differently; we're trying to convince people to do things differently"

"One of the great things about our profession is that you don't need to have decided at the age of 16 what A levels you are going to take because you want to be a project delivery professional," she says, explaining that moving into the profession from a different career background can be very valuable.

"We get people in at every stage, including at SCS level, who decide that they want to be part of the project delivery profession, which is absolutely great," she says. "We love that because our job is to bring people and issues together. So the more understanding you have of different ways of looking at problems, the better the project delivery person you will be."

Most likely to say? Alicia Wilson, a project manager in the Ministry of Justice (*see box, right*), shares two key phrases which her team uses a lot and which reflect how they work: robust challenge and delivery at pace. Singh adds that she often tells colleagues graduating from leadership programmes that they are "building the future of the UK – the infrastructure, services and capabilities we are creating will be used 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 years from now". She adds that: "As project leaders we have the responsibility to ensure we are unlocking the social value of this investment, and building to meet the diverse needs of our citizens."

How can you make their life easier? For Singh, the message is simple – get them involved in your project as soon as possible. "We know from lots and lots of academic research and lessons learned, that a project that has not been set up well will not deliver well," she says. "Involve us early so that we can help you create some of the disciplines and methodologies you need to set up for success."

If that isn't possible, she says, because of resource constraints or other challenges, then "upskill yourself". She points to resources like the Project Setup Kit and Project 101 which are available through the Government Project Delivery Hub.

How can they make your life easier? Put simply, they can help with any part of your job that involves change, or creating something new. "We can help give you some of the structures and the clarity needed, assemble your stakeholders, to help you deliver your aims," Singh says.

What does it take to be a good project delivery professional? Singh lists three strengths that are useful across any project delivery role. Stakeholder engagement is the most important, followed by resilience, since "by definition we are changing the way we do things, so we are going to be pushing against boundaries," she says.

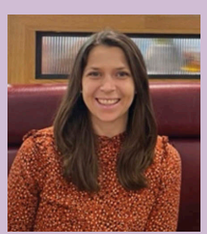
"We're trying to get people to think differently; we're trying to convince people to do things differently and you need to be quite resilient in yourself to make that happen."

Finally, she says, you need a strong ability to solve problems, and to "remain curious and open minded" so that you can try new solutions rather than giving up when a project faces a knock-back. ■

FRONTLINE VIEW

ALICIA WILSON
PROJECT MANAGER ASSIGNED TO RAPID DEPLOYMENT CELL PROJECT, MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

Alicia Wilson joined the Probation Service as a new graduate. After 12 years, she was looking for a new challenge. She wanted to stay working in the criminal justice system, and project delivery stood out because of its practical impact.



"The fact that there's a tangible output at the end of it is what attracted me to project delivery rather than policy or other areas of work," she tells *CSW*.

So, in 2022, she joined the MoJ's Project Delivery Function as a project manager assigned to work on increasing capacity in prisons. She is now working as a senior project manager on a temporary promotion within the same programme.

According to Wilson, a vital part of her job is stakeholder engagement – building, co-ordinating and managing relationships as well as pulling together perspectives and information from different interested parties. Alongside this she keeps an eye on progress towards the project's key milestones as well as managing risks as they emerge. There is also a wider job of reporting up to ministers on the progress and deliverability of the project.

Explaining how her two roles have differed, she says being a senior project manager is more strategic and will involve her in overarching conversations and reporting right up the governance chain. A project manager, on the other hand, "is more on the ground, if you like – going out to sites, meeting with property sponsors and mobilisation managers. They have a better understanding of the day-to-day delivery at each site".

Wilson's proudest moment since joining the MoJ has been the completion of work at the first prison site in her project. "We went from contract award to delivering on site in eight months, so it was a really streamlined process that we managed to get through and deliver, and it was a huge achievement," she says.

Her advice for others considering a move into project delivery part way through their careers is to be confident that their skills will be useful in a new role. "I really didn't think that I would be able to use any of my skill set from probation. Actually, it's all very transferable," she says.

The key skill you'll need, she adds, is good stakeholder management and an ability to build relationships. "People will always forgive you for not knowing the technicalities of something if you are approachable and reliable," she says. "So I think having that good stakeholder relationship is invaluable – it's the keystone, and everything else can be built on from there."

PSY MASTERS


Antonia Dietmann

Occupational psychologists aim to improve people's experience of work. *CSW* asked **Sonia Pawson**, head of the government's occupational psychology profession, and DWP chief psychologist **Antonia Dietmann** to explain more – including common misconceptions and how they fell in love with the profession


Sonia Pawson

Let's start with the basics – what is occupational psychology?
Occupational psychology is about work in all its forms. It is the science of how employees (both seeking and in work), teams and whole organisations behave. We use our empirical, theoretical and methodological expertise to improve the working experience for employees and the effectiveness and productivity of the organisation. It involves the application of scientific psychological knowledge in five areas: psychological assessment at work; learning, training and development; leadership, engagement and motivation; wellbeing at work; and work design, organisational change and development.

Being part of a regulated profession, we are both chartered – by the British Psychological Society (BPS) – and registered, with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Being a 'something' psychologist, like an occupational or clinical or forensic or coaching psychologist, is protected by law. This means only people with specific qualifications and who are regulated by the HCPC can use those titles.

The route to occupational psychologist registered status starts with a BPS-approved BSc Psychology and MSc Occupational Psychology. Then you can secure a job to start gathering work experience under the guidance of a supervisor to become a chartered psychologist. This is a doctoral-level qualification where you write a portfolio of work experience against »

those five areas of occupational psychology. After completing all that, we can apply for registration with the HCPC. The civil service champions and requires these high-level professional qualifications for our occupational psychology posts given the significant public impact of our work.

And what kind of work do occupational psychologists do in government?

The civil service is a significant employer of occupational psychologists. Through collective people interventions, they are playing a big role in creating safe, skilled and productive organisations and their impact is felt right across the civil service.

Lots of government departments have specific occupational psychology posts, so you need the qualifications we've mentioned. Then there are many other people in the profession who work in positions that don't require those qualifications but have found a natural home for their skills – in human resources, for instance, or social research. There are about 100 psychology posts with a further 150 colleagues across the wider profession in non-psychology roles. The largest groups of occupational psychologist posts are in the Department for Work and Pensions, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice, and College of Policing with quite a large group in the Cabinet Office and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. The work we do is so varied, which is one of the wonderful aspects of the profession.

You will find psychologists applying the science of psychology to strengthen delivery for ministers and the public, and developing the performance, motivation and wellbeing of our people. To give a flavour of the breadth of work, it includes: recruiting Fast Streamers, police officers, prison officers, and armed forces personnel; investigating air accidents; designing and evaluating training programmes to develop skills and knowledge; and analysing behavioural intentions of hostile states and agents.

To be more specific, what do your roles involve?

Antonia Dietmann: There are three parts to mine. First, I lead a small team that gives evidence-based, specialist occupational psychology input to make more effective public policy and operational implementation decisions. Secondly, I provide professional leadership for our cadre of psychologists who work in Jobcentre Plus delivering employment support for some of our most vulnerable customers. Then, as DWP head of profession, I represent our profession's interests internally and across government on issues such as pay, capability and grading.

Sonia Pawson: My current 'day job' as director of government skills involves providing strategic leadership and management to the central, multidisciplinary teams responsible for improving the knowledge, skills and networks of all civil servants. This includes leading the Government Campus, Curriculum, Fast Stream and Emerging Talent teams in delivering business and government reform objectives. I get to apply my expertise across the five areas of occupational psychology daily. As a member of the senior civil service and Government People Group executive, I advise on strategic projects. For example, I'm currently senior responsible officer for the 'recruiting with success profiles' training refresh. As head of the cross-government occupational psychology profession, I provide leadership on all cross-cutting matters including recruitment and retention, career pathways and professional practice standards.

Are there any common misunderstandings around occupational psychology?

We're often confused with occupational therapy or occupational health. These are different professions that are unconnected with psychology. People also often think all types of psychologists do therapy for mental health problems. Occupational psychologists don't deliver therapy, but will help people with a range of mental and physical health problems to start, stay and succeed in employment or training.

And how did you both come to be working in this field?

AD: I fell in love with the profession in a third-year module on work psychology at university and knew it was the career for me. My dad was also a social work/clinical psychologist starting out in family therapy and in later years lecturing in human resource management, which came to overlap with my interests in occupational psychology. After my MSc, I joined the Ministry of Defence as a higher psychologist conducting research projects to understand views of armed forces personnel, with the evidence informing military HR policy.

SP: My first degree was actually in criminology. Upon graduating I secured a role with the HM Prison Service as a psychological assistant. I got to experience first-hand the impact of applying the science of psychology to real-world problems in a range of different areas. It's fair to say it didn't take long for me to catch the psychology bug. My vision has long been to extend the reach and impact of occupational psychology in policy and decision-making.

Can you tell us about a time when you have seen occupational psychology make a real difference to a policy or outcomes in your work?

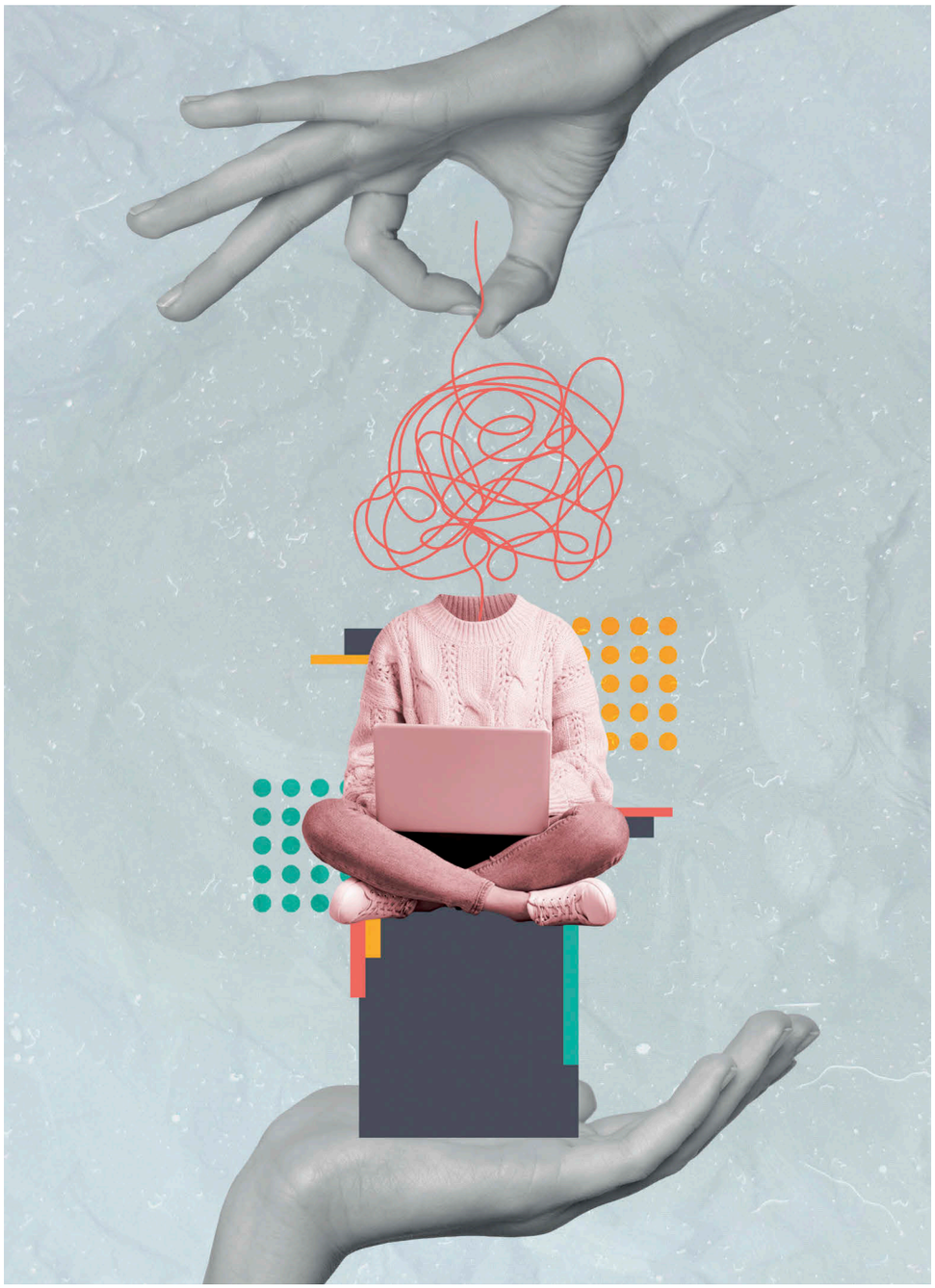
We see this every day through the rich and varied work across the civil service. Our occupational psychology colleagues ensure the right people are selected to lead our prisons, police forces and armed forces. They work with DWP customers who have complex health conditions to secure training or employment.

AD: In DWP I regularly hear about the meaningful difference colleagues are making to customers. For example, following the tailored support a customer had received from an occupational psychology colleague, they described themselves as being able to see a future for themselves again. Colleagues working within HR ensure that team leaders have the right skills to lead their team's delivery or that our civil service recruitment practices are fair, reliable and valid. Occupational psychologists have developed the suite of civil service tests and the success profile framework. Through our high-quality research we ensure employees in the civil service and armed forces have a voice in developing employment policies. An excellent example of this is the annual armed forces continuous attitude survey, which has been led by occupational psychology for the MoD for 30-plus years.

How has the profession changed since you began working in the civil service?

We have become more connected across the civil service, which is more efficient and has greatly enriched the professional community. We both remember fondly the MoD and HM Prison and Probation Service annual occupational psychology conference/groups. Now we are doing this increasingly on a civil service basis. In recent years we've embraced new technology to do this, for example with online conferences and learning events, and our

"One customer said they could see a future for themselves again following tailored support from an occupational psychology colleague"



community group on Knowledge Hub.

We come together to solve the collective challenges we face by discussing them at the civil service Occupational Psychology Profession Board, which was formed three years ago under the reinvigorated civil service head of profession role. Common challenges include our development, visibility, and recruitment. Given the societal impact of our work, we demand the high qualifications of chartered and registered status. This relies on the academic sector and other employers also promoting these standards, which have changed over the years and are presenting us with a recruitment pipeline challenge. We are starting to work with the BPS to address this. And most importantly over this time, we've seen new departments and agencies realise the benefits of employing occupational psychologists in dedicated and other posts.

What are your priorities for the profession in the next few years?

Our board has agreed five strategic priorities for 2023. The first is to increase the visibility of the profession by connecting with closely-aligned professions, such as HR and Government Science and Engineering. The second is to develop a clearly defined entry and progression standard. We have achieved this with our new skills and standards document, which will soon be on GOV.UK. Thirdly, we have committed to develop a career framework that aligns professional development with civil service frameworks and that can be used in conjunction with other career pathways. The fourth aim is to develop and promote a cross-government selection and testing policy. We are nearly ready to deliver this. Finally, we are delivering a series of learning and networking events and sharing best practice and have held three learning events and a conference so far this year, including launching five cross-civil service projects for our trainees.

How can people in other disciplines work most effectively with your profession?

The first step is to find us and involve us. We know we're a small profession so other professions might not know about us. Hence doing articles like this one. If your policy, initiative or project has anything to do with the experiences of people in work – from joining, performing, and exiting that work – then occupational psychology will have relevant evidence. Find one of us to talk to. However, we are a small profession without a central team and profession members within departments might be supporting other priorities. There's always more opportunity for occupational psychology support than people available. We're keen to support business areas make the case for dedicated occupational psychology posts so they can benefit from the expertise we offer.

"If your policy or project has anything to do with the experiences of people in work, then our profession will have relevant evidence"

What advice would you have for anyone in a related profession keen to learn more about your work?

We would be happy to invite any other heads of profession to one of our board meetings. Colleagues can read more about occupational psychology in general on the BPS website and our profession's page on GOV.UK will soon be updated. ■

Antonia Dietmann is the DWP's chief psychologist and head of profession for occupational psychology. Sonia Pawson is the Cabinet Office's director of government skills (interim), head of the Fast Stream and Emerging Talent teams, and head of the cross-government occupational psychology profession

The public sector is losing billions of pounds each year to fraud, but the fightback is on. **Jessica Bowie** looks at recent reforms and discovers what more can be done to stop the swindlers

SCAM DUNK

Fraud against the public sector runs the gamut from your freelancer boyfriend inflating the expenses on his self-assessment form, through to F1 tycoon Bernie Ecclestone failing to declare more than £400m held in a Singapore trust. In between, there are people claiming benefits they're not entitled to, off-licences selling booze on which no duty has been paid, and international crime groups smuggling cigarettes into the UK.

While such swindles are what could be termed 'well-established', fraud is also highly creative and never stands still. Within hours of government bringing out a new policy or product, fraudsters are often the first people in, testing the boundaries and looking for weaknesses.

Witness the novel types of fraud that sprang up during the Covid-19 pandemic: dodgy PPE contracts, bounce back loans claimed by companies who weren't even trading, furlough payments to non-existent employees, to name but a few.

Once money is lost to fraud it is very difficult to get back. Not only does fraud represent billions of pounds lost from the public purse – money that could be spent on vital services such as schools and hospitals – it can have reputational damage, too.

If people see the UK as being corrupt and simply standing by while fraudsters run amok, they start to lose faith in the integrity of public services generally. The reverse is also true: international research shows that the more the public trusts its tax administration, for example, the greater the percentage of tax that comes in correctly.

As services for citizens have moved online, so has fraud. Long gone are the days where those needing to verify their identity to claim benefits (for example) had to turn up at the benefit office in person and hand over a bundle of documents. Today they can defraud the UK public sector without even leaving the sofa – and that sofa can be anywhere in the world. With virtual private networks that make it appear you're in the UK, anyone with an internet connection can target our public sector. This ranges from individuals on the take, to organised crime gangs, all the way up to state aggressors.

It's a lot to contend with; and it's not as if government can choose its customers. While private sector organisations can be more selective, and by extension make their services more difficult for fraudsters, government is duty bound to deal with the public as a whole. Even if the will existed to categorically block all fraud against the public sector, it seems unlikely it could be done.

"There is no magic bullet," says Neil Green, deputy director for counter fraud and investigation at the Government Internal Audit Agency.

"To completely prevent fraud, the controls become so onerous that you're literally checking everything and it obstructs the purpose of the public spend you might be trying to administer. We *have* to take an element of risk and there is an element of trust built into any system. If you remove the trust, you're basically locking something down, and then it becomes too expensive to administer."

The holy grail, then, is to create processes that are simple for (ordinary, honest) citizens, but problematic for fraudsters. But that is easier said than done; in reality, a balance must be struck between security measures and ease of access.

And yet for those designing counter fraud measures, minimising faff for the citizen is the least of it. Without careful attention, anti-fraud work can end up being unfair and discriminatory with systems inadvertently targeting certain groups rather than the non-compliance.

Counter fraud professionals must be alive to the possibility that some sectors or industries might be dominated by certain communities or characteristics. If, to take one potential example, part-time work was one of your risk rules for distributing benefits, your systems might inadvertently flag up more women as being suspicious because women tend to make up more of the part-time workforce.

Big problems can also arise when systems rely solely on automation and don't incorporate an element of human review. Take the Australian government's Online Compliance Intervention programme, otherwise known as 'Robodebt'. Launched in 2016 and administered by Services Australia – a body whose duties broadly line up with those of the Department for Work and Pensions in the UK – the scheme used an automated tool to calculate overpayments and other money owed by benefit recipients.

But the method it used was flawed and, in the four years it was in operation, Robodebt issued nearly 500,000 incorrect debt notices. The Australian press was flooded with stories of people being pushed into hardship by unexpected and aggressive demands for large repayments.

The case led to what is believed to be the biggest class-action suit in Australian legal history, which the government settled in 2021 to the tune of AU$1.8bn (£1bn) in refunds, legal fees, cancelled debts and compensation.

A comparable scandal in the Netherlands that also came to a head in 2021 – and ultimately brought down the Dutch government – involved childcare benefits. In this instance, 26,000 parents and caregivers were wrongly accused of fraud, with many being forced to repay tens of thousands of euros.

People from ethnic minorities were disproportionately affected because one of the algorithm's risk factors was whether an applicant was of Dutch nationality. In the words of Amnesty International: "Racial profiling was baked into the design of the algorithmic system used to determine whether claims for childcare benefit were flagged as incorrect and potentially fraudulent."

"They're trying to find ways to take money literally on an hourly basis" ***Simon York, former head of HMRC's Fraud Investigation Service***

Many campaigners use such examples to call for an end to the opacity surrounding algorithms used by the public sector – including in the UK. The Public Law Project, a legal charity which lobbies for greater transparency in the use of algorithms by government, has raised concerns about fraud detection algorithms in the DWP, and says public bodies in this country have an approach of "secrecy by default".

But Simon York, who until recently was head of HM Revenue and Customs' Fraud Investigation Service, rejects this accusation. »

"We try to be as transparent as possible around the use of data, including sharing some of our risk rules with software providers who help people with their tax returns. We want people to get their tax returns right – we don't want to have to get in touch to ask people unnecessary questions," he tells *CSW*.

"But the tax system is a huge target for organised criminals – they're trying to find ways to take money out of it literally on an hourly basis. So we need to be really careful about what information we put into the public domain."

Rich Wentel, deputy director of data and intelligence at the Public Sector Fraud Authority, agrees. The PSFA was set up in 2022 in response to concerns over the level of fraud during the pandemic, and acts as a centre of expertise for the management of fraud against the public sector.

"The desire is there to be as transparent as is reasonably possible," he says. "We do open consultations; we publish various outcomes and so on. Where we can be transparent, we are. But there is a balance. If I were to tell you what our risk rules are for the work we're doing on the Covid loan schemes, I'm also telling you how to defraud them."

As for the Robodebt scandal, Wentel says there are two key lessons to draw from it. First, if you don't have the experts in the beginning to set the framework correctly, you will get rogue outcomes. Secondly, if you just believe what the computer says, you're then a hostage to fortune. While data analytics and algorithms can be useful tools in helping to identify fraud, they should be used to highlight anomalies, "never to give an absolute 'pay/no-pay' decision", he says.

"Data flags – or the reliance on data flags – should never be the be-all and end-all," he adds. "It's highlighting things that don't fit a pattern. And if you've done your risk rules correctly, then it will throw out a population of high-risk cases that need review. But that's the key thing: it needs review."

Comments from a DWP spokesperson to *CSW*'s sister title *PublicTechnology* support this approach. When contacted by *PT* for a recent article on algorithms and transparency, the department said: "DWP does not use artificial intelligence to replace human judgment to determine or deny a payment to a claimant. A final decision in these circumstances always involves a human agent."

Cautionary tale Australian PM Anthony Albanese (left) and minister for government services Bill Shorten address media questions about the Robodebt scandal

Malgorithm Sylvana Simons, leader of the Dutch political party BIJ1, demonstrates in support of victims of the childcare benefits scandal who were subjected to a racist anti-fraud algorithm

What more can government do to tackle fraud?

Before asking what still needs to be done, and there's no shortage of fodder there, it's worth briefly considering the reforms government has already made in recent years. The 2017 Digital Economy Act contains dedicated chapters on fraud and debt, and provides a gateway for greater data sharing across government – something the GIAA's Neil Green says has made "a genuine difference" in fraud detection. In 2018, government introduced a new counter fraud profession and function, and then there's the establishment of the PSFA last year.

It is also important to note that government is learning from its mistakes. In a major report on fraud released in March, the National Audit Office said the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had used its experience with the Bounce Back Loan Scheme to improve anti-fraud controls for the new

KEY FACTS

Source: NAO

£33.2bn – £58.8bn

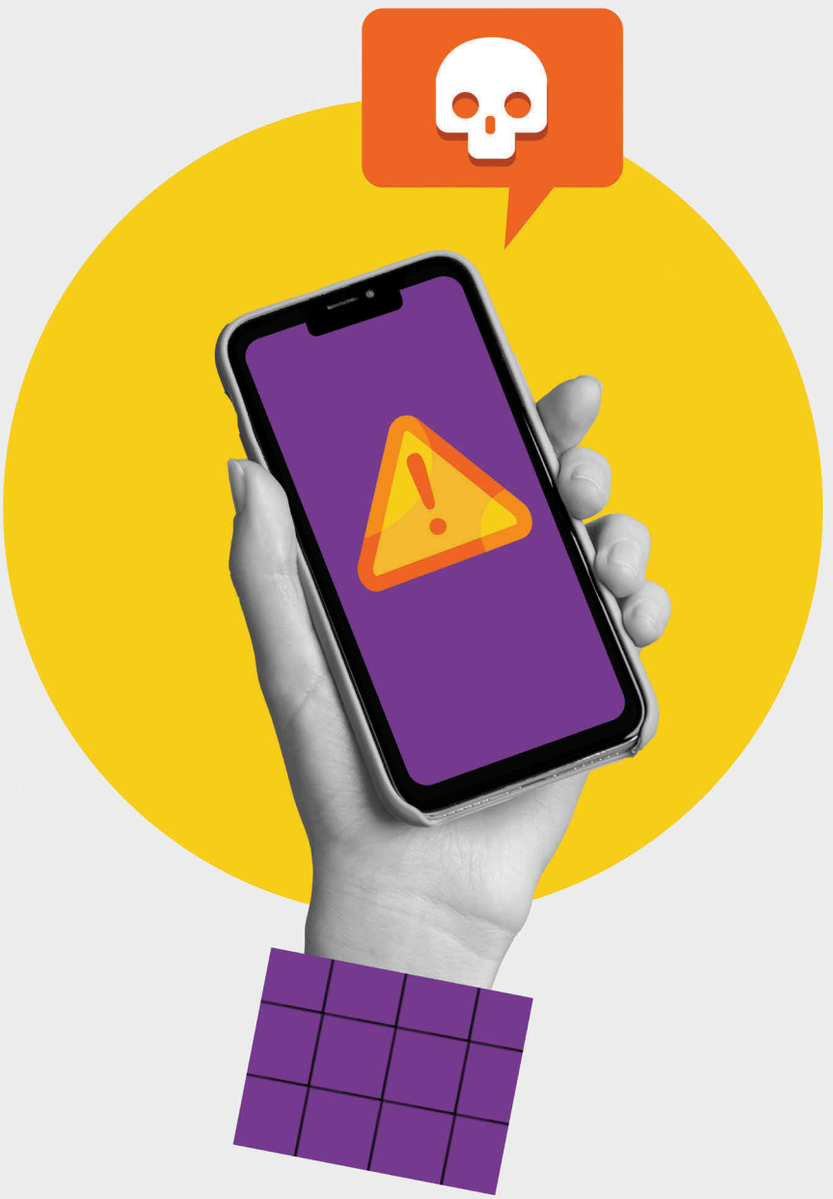
the PSFA's estimate of the extent of fraud and error across all of government in 2020-21

Two thirds

of central government expenditure is not subject to any direct fraud and error measurement

41%

the proportion of all recorded crime that is made up by fraud



cost-of-living-crisis energy schemes.

However, the same report still finds much room for improvement. The NAO is particularly keen for departments outside the DWP and HMRC to start taking fraud seriously. While those two organisations have thousands of staff in counter fraud roles, "most other departments" have only limited counter fraud capability and have not "undertaken robust assessments of the level or types of fraud and corruption affecting their business", the NAO says.

Many counter fraud staff who spoke to the watchdog said that managing fraud and corruption risks is rarely a priority for senior leaders in their organisations, mainly due to competing concerns, and that the discipline is not sufficiently embedded in operations.

When asked what their one wish would be in the fight against fraud, experts tend to say government needs to get better at both prevention and collaboration. It's a familiar cry for anyone thinking about other knotty societal problems such as crime or public health.

Greater fraud prevention, of course, would have to tread the line between access to services being too restrictive and too lenient. Better collaboration, meanwhile, is easier to implement. More collective work could be done, for instance, on the new ways of moving money around and storing assets – cryptocurrencies and alternative banking platforms – which have been a boon to fraudsters.

Wentel has another example: "Departments each have their own experiences – they've been attacked in different ways at different times," he says. "In the PSFA we are keen to build something across government so that when someone attacks HMRC we can make sure the same person doesn't attack anyone else."

And what of the role of the Public Sector Fraud Authority in the future fight against fraud? According to the NAO, its creation presents a real opportunity. However it warns that many central services and functions fail because they do not achieve buy-in from departments.

"PSFA will need to be influential across government if it is to achieve the required changes in culture, preventive approach and robust assessment of risks," the NAO says.

The last word – for now at least – goes to professor Mark Button, co-director of the Centre for Cybercrime and Economic Crime at Portsmouth University. Speaking in early 2022, Button called for the government's counter fraud profession to be "beefed up" so it could "share a network of highly skilled professionals that can tailor their response across government".

Eighteen months on, does he feel this has come to pass with the creation of the PSFA? *Hopefully*, seems to be the gist of his reply.

"I think the PSFA is an important step in building a stronger cross-government response to fraud," he tells *CSW* via email. "As with any initiative of this type, one always worries whether they have been given enough resources to achieve the ambitious plans they have. That will become clearer in time. But, ultimately, I think it has the foundations to make a significant impact on fraud." ■

"PSFA will need to be influential across government if it is to achieve the required changes" *NAO*

THE NEW WONKOCRACY

Political parties are gearing up for a general election next year and think tanks are busy trying to exert influence on their manifestos and beyond. With polls pointing to a Labour victory, **Chaminda Jayanetti** considers the organisations – some new, some familiar – which are helping to shape the policies of Keir Starmer and the shadow cabinet. Illustration by Tracy Worrall

When New Labour limbered up for its 1997 landslide, it came armed with an agenda that had clearly been shaped by Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), two think tanks with senior figures who later joined the incoming government. A decade later, Policy Exchange played a similar role for David Cameron's Conservatives.

Gordon the (think) tank engine Then-prime minister Gordon Brown making a speech for the IPPR

House of cards Then-home secretary Jacqui Smith makes a speech on identity cards at think tank Demos in 2008

Labour's shattering 2019 defeat meant the resourcing and staffing of left-leaning think tanks tightened for a while, under the assumption of another decade of Tory power. But with the party's electoral prospects transforming since then, progressive think tanks are scrambling to set out an agenda for a Labour government – arguably the most influential of them, Labour Together, having built itself up amid the ashes of election defeat.

Labour Together consolidated centrist support for Keir Starmer's leadership bid and has since rapidly evolved into an overtly political think tank, its non-charitable status allowing it to work explicitly with Labour.

Led by Josh Simons, who resigned as an adviser to Jeremy Corbyn in protest at his failure to tackle antisemitism, its team also includes data and polling expert Christabel Cooper as director of research, and speechwriter and strategist Josh Williams as deputy director. In a sign of its influence, shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves wrote a report for Labour Together in May setting out her agenda for economic security and a more activist state.

"When we're thinking about policy, we're doing it very much with 'what is the best policy that will also get Labour elected?'" Cooper says. Labour Together has identified two voter groups in England and Wales that the party needs to win – 'Workington Man', an economically statist, socially conservative 'red wall' archetype, and 'Stevenage Woman', who fits with the median voter on most issues. Scotland, where the often left-leaning SNP vote has fractured in recent months, was not covered.

"Whenever we make any policy recommendations, we are doing a bunch of polling first that says, 'is this going to fly with those target voter groups, or is this just a nice idea but it's not actually going to help Labour get elected?'" Cooper says.

Labour Together originates its own research topics and also takes cues from the Labour leadership. Economic security, planning reform, public preferences on devolved services, and strategies towards female voters are among its current focus points – Brexit, Cooper says, is not. Given its small core team, it brings in outside experts to work on specific projects.

"We're not going off and doing things that we don't think are going to be helpful to the leadership," she adds. "We want to be making a case for the politics that we think can win the next election."

If Labour Together – with its ruthless targeting – is a very political operation, the 35-year-old IPPR has a slower-burning influence, seeing its role as "shaping the climate of ideas around politics", in the words of its director of research and engagement Harry Quilter-Pinner.

As a charity, the IPPR is barred from being party political, and it builds relationships with politicians from across the spectrum. But its impact within Labour – assisted by its tendency to reflect the changing politics of Labour leaders over time – is long-standing. Its Commission on Social Justice, headed by a young David Miliband, helped shape New Labour's policies in the mid-90s.

"Whenever we make policy recommendations, we do a bunch of polling first to establish: 'Is this going to fly with target voter groups, or is it just a nice idea that's not actually going to help Labour get elected?'"
Christabel Cooper, Labour Together

Labour insiders confirm the IPPR's influence on the party's economic growth agenda, which bears the hallmarks of Bidenomics. Quilter-Pinner points to its Environmental Justice Commission, which recommended £30bn of annual green transition investment in July 2021 – two months before Reeves committed to spending £28bn a year.

"They might not have literally copied and pasted stuff, but they are definitely reflecting a current in the intellectual thought that IPPR, alongside other organisations in this space, have been shaping on the progressive wing of politics," he says.

Other than Quilter-Pinner, the think tank's key figures in relation to Labour include George Dibb, head of the IPPR's Centre for Economic Justice, Luke Murphy, associate director for the energy, climate, housing and infrastructure team – both of whom focus on the economy and environment – and Melanie Wilkes, associate director for work and the welfare state.

As a charity, the IPPR does not carry out work on commission from political parties.

"We meet with all of the political parties," says Quilter-Pinner, "and we get a sense of what they're interested in. This helps us understand where our work can have impact. To give you an example, we've noticed that both Keir Starmer and the government are making a big deal about public service reform. So we are ramping up our work as we know there is an opportunity to shape policy that would make a big difference in the lives of millions of people across the UK."

Then there's the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI). Unlike virtually every other think tank approached for this article, TBI refused to make anyone

available for interview – "we wouldn't talk publicly about who we're speaking to as it's important for the free-flow of ideas that those conversations remain private," in the words of its communications team.

That the TBI is centrist is obvious from its name. Its relationship with the Labour leadership was reflected by Keir Starmer giving a keynote speech in July at the institute's Future of Britain Conference. Its suggestion last year of a 70 per cent home-ownership target was – by correlation or causation – replicated by Starmer months later.

"Think tanks can be an incredibly useful resource, providing capacity to help work up detailed policy implementation" ***Shadow minister***

But its reputation is increasingly based on a tech-utopian zeal around economic growth and public service reform, which is eye-catching to some and eyeroll-worthy to others. Not all its recommendations tick these boxes, of course – the TBI's proposals for education focus on a broader curriculum and modern 'soft' skills – but artificial intelligence (AI) and similar innovations feature regularly in its output. Jeegar Kakkad, director of policy at the TBI's Future of Britain project, is combining that job with a part-time role as strategic policy adviser to Labour, where he is focusing on how technology and R&D can drive economic growth.

Other leading TBI figures include executive director of politics Ryan Wain and executive director of policy Sam Sharps. Wain, Kakkad and director of public services policy Kirsty Innes recently authored a TBI paper calling for the transformation of Britain's public services through digital identity – a single digital 'wallet' which would store people's personal data held by different parts of government, enabling more personalised public services and quicker information sharing.

Labour Together, IPPR and TBI are the main think tanks contributing to Labour's thinking, but they are not alone. The Resolution Foundation is currently focused on its sprawling two-year Economy 2030 Inquiry, which will culminate in an extensive report setting out a new economic strategy later this year. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) work on economic security, led by director of insight and policy Graeme Cooke, is reflected in Labour's recent rhetoric – though JRF chief economist Alfie Stirling is wary of overclaiming its influence on the party.

"Labour have not developed what economic security would mean beyond just a couple of quite narrow areas," Stirling says. "So when they've talked about economic security, they have tended to talk about industrial policy... particularly coming out of shadow Treasury. And they haven't expanded that to talk about how that interacts with social policy. Because a huge amount of people's economic resources are conditioned by all sorts of things beyond what you might think of as traditional industrial policy."

The main 'progressive' think tanks work in different ways. In terms of directly engaging with people affected by policy decisions, Labour Together, with its laser focus on helping the party win power, pays limited heed; it brings in policy experts who might have extensively researched the lived experience of others, or might not. But the IPPR and JRF, which are less tied to Labour and often try to shape policy over longer time frames, have both tried to broaden the range of people engaged in their research; the IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission used citizen juries to co-produce some of its recommendations.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE: WHAT'S THE PRESCRIPTION?

The daunting challenge of rescuing the NHS and adult care embodies the dilemma facing Labour.

So far the Tony Blair Institute has grabbed headlines with its tech-led NHS reform proposals, calling for widespread adoption of AI in the NHS, along with individual 'personal health accounts' via the NHS App and 'co-payment' options to allow patients to jump NHS queues – with the latter idea explicitly rejected by shadow health secretary Wes Streeting.

"[Blair] genuinely seems to think there's some magic button that can be pushed somewhere that is free and transforms the NHS, but anyone who knows the system knows that's not true," says former government adviser Sam Freedman. "But then if you look at what Streeting's proposed, it's pretty limited. He's not coming out with a great reform plan. They're just saying 'we're going to do reform'."

Other think tanks have also set out plans. The Institute for Public Policy Research notes that its proposals for a healthy life expectancy target, monitored by an independent body, and a salaried GP model have been adopted by Labour, along with the IPPR's rhetoric about a 'neighbourhood NHS'.

Perhaps the most significant intervention though has come from the Fabian Society, which was commissioned by Streeting and Unison to draw up a roadmap to a national adult care service.

"We had a choice of: do we come up with a small, thin package that might be immediately affordable, or say that – over time – billions of pounds extra will need to be spent," says Fabian Society general secretary Andrew Harrop. "And we chose the latter, because we didn't think you could credibly offer a whole system reform that wasn't honest about the scale of money that would be needed to do it."

Harrop says the wording on adult care that will go to Labour conference this autumn "will reflect thinking from this report".

But concern remains that Labour does not recognise the sheer amount of money required to both rescue and reform the NHS.

"If we're going to have a NHS that continues to be free at the point of use, and it's going to meet the demands [placed on it], then taxes are going to have to go up by a couple of percent of GDP," says economist Jonathan Portes. "And you don't get taxes up by a couple of percent of GDP by taxing non-doms."

"It's almost not at all about having any new policy ideas," adds Andy Cowper, editor of Health Policy Insight. "We actually know how to fix this stuff. We know how you fix a massive backlog crisis. We know how you fix a workforce crisis. You do a set of predictable things that have worked in the past – but they don't happen quickly. And they will happen even less quickly in an environment which is not going to be giving you 6% real terms cash growth year on year."

They also take varying approaches to the thorny issue of government spending. In its desire to avoid feeding Tory attack lines, Labour is steering clear of unfunded pledges and significant tax rises. Labour Together is following suit.

"It is absolutely the eternal dilemma at the moment," Cooper says. "We absolutely understand why Rachel Reeves' office is insistent on having fiscal rules. So nothing we would do would be 'oh I know, let's just spend X billion on this without thinking through what that would mean for the fiscal framework that Rachel has put in place'."

"It's hard for anybody to develop a policy agenda that involves spending no money and upsetting no people," warns Sam Freedman, who worked for Policy Exchange in the late 2000s before becoming an adviser in Michael Gove's Department for Education. "You're getting quite small ideas because of those constraints, and where you get bigger ideas, they're inevitably going to cost money, going to raise the risk of unpopularity, and so you don't get Labour engaging with them properly."

"Small ideas" are not necessarily unwelcome in Labour circles. "Think tanks can be an incredibly useful resource, providing capacity to help work up detailed policy implementation," one shadow minister says. "It's usually less about think tanks coming up with 'the big new idea' and more about 'how do we make this work?'"

Proposals requiring higher spending were known to vaporise upon contact with Pat McFadden, the veteran Blairite who was Reeves' deputy. Labour's caution is particularly affecting welfare spending plans, with the party sparking outrage by shelving its pledge to reverse the poverty-inducing two-child benefit limit.

But most observers expect Labour to both tax and spend more once in office due to loosened electoral constraints and the need to stop public services collapsing. That gives more leeway to think tanks whose proposals are geared towards longer time frames than the manifesto.

"There is a [Labour] fiscal position at the moment, but it's as much a pre-election political position as it is a genuine fiscal one," says the JRF's Stirling. "We try and move beyond just a particular political moment, or cycle, or Parliament, and think about the change that needs to happen over one to two years, yes, but also over three, four, five and 10. And so we do work quite hard not to internalise all those constraints."

Meanwhile, if the Conservatives lose the next election, their subsequent strategy is likely to be driven by which seats they lose – and whether they need to reclaim the red wall, the blue wall, or both. Either way, one think tank is in pole position to influence the next leadership: Onward.

"Onward have managed to position themselves right across the whole party quite cunningly," says Freedman, who points to the ideological breadth of their staff and trustees. "They've covered every base in the party – it's quite impressive. So I feel they're going to be important."

Freedman contrasts the fear and scrutiny that Labour oppositions work under with that facing the Tories. "In 2009, you still had a very constrained financial situation, but [the Conservatives] could get away with so much more. Our education proposals were obviously going to cost money. But we just sort of said they're not. And the press kind of just accepted that.

"Labour can't do that. So they constrain themselves so much more than we were, not because of the actual circumstances, but just because of the media environment in which they're operating." ■

REPORT IN A STORM

Here *CSW* rounds up the key reports and recommendations you might have missed from watchdogs and select committees in recent weeks

SHOW ME THE STRATEGY

Tilting horizons: The Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific

Who? Foreign Affairs Committee
When? August 2023
Key quote "The confidential, elusive China strategy is buried deep in Whitehall, kept hidden even from senior ministers across government. How can those implementing policy – and making laws – do so without an understanding of the overall strategy?"
In brief The government needs to develop a "coherent" cross-department approach to relations with China, the report warns. The committee said the unpublished China strategy is not even available to senior ministers in other government departments, nor more widely within government due to the security classification attached to it. The failure to outline clear foreign policy, "let alone a cross-government stance towards China", makes it difficult for the strategy to be complied with by both state and non-state actors, including civil servants, academics and buinesses the committee added.
Key recommendations
Government should:

- Publish a public, unclassified version of its China strategy
- Ensure that all relevant government ministers are briefed on the higher security classification version of the strategy
- Publish sector-specific guidance to support industries of critical national importance, national security, or data-intensive industries
- Work out which technologies, infrastructure and components the UK is most dependent on China for, and plan to mitigate dependencies. ■

PROPER PROCUREMENT

Competition in public procurement: Lessons learned

Who? National Audit Office
When? July 2023
Key quote "Departments often take an overly cautious approach to engagement and are not always clear on what they can do"
In brief The National Audit Office highlighted a litany of shortcomings with government procurement – including an inability on the part of the Cabinet Office to demonstrate how well competition is working. Government spent £259bn on the procurement of goods and services in 2021-22, according to the NAO. Around £100bn of this was awarded by major departments, with two-thirds subject to competition in some form. But the NAO said the government cannot show how well competition is currently working because the Cabinet Office does not take advantage of the data it collects to understand more and gain further benefits.
Of 235 large contracts recorded on the Find a Tender database between January 2021 and January 2023, 20% of those using open competition had received only one bid. The NAO said the Cabinet Office had not assessed the expected level of single bidders within government's major markets or analysed trends in numbers of bidders.
Key recommendations
Departments should:

- Design realistic requirements and use them to inform their sourcing approach
- Engage the market sufficiently, by consulting potential suppliers and providing information to the market in a way that does not favour particular suppliers. ■

PLACES FOR WORK

Planning for the future of the government's estates

Who? Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
When? July 2023
Key quote "We need greater transparency and accountability of what seems to be a haphazard approach to reforming the government's estates and its workforce." William Wragg, chair of PACAC
In brief The report on the Places for Growth programme to relocate 22,000 civil service jobs from the capital by 2030 suggested the Cabinet Office had exaggerated its achievements and failed to provide "key measurements" for its success. Despite being badged as part of levelling-up efforts, the Cabinet Office has not clearly set out the evidence base for the programme's claimed economic benefits. Although the programme is closely linked to the creation of new regional government hubs to replace older local offices, the Cabinet Office has not estimated the economic impact of closing those workplaces, which are often located in smaller towns. MPs also said that mixed messages from the government over flexible working for departmental officials and the magnitude of planned civil service job cuts were hampering the Government Property Agency's ability to plan for future office-space needs.
Key recommendations

- The Cabinet Office should provide a "definitive statement" of government policy on the flexibility civil servants should have around how often they must work in the office.
- It should also set out the size of headcount reductions the government is seeking to make. This should set out the timescale for the cuts and the impact they will have on departments' office-space requirement.
- The GPA should review the benefits of proceeding with hubs that are currently in the planning stage until it has "greater certainty" over departments' workforce plans. ■

The Government Hub building towering over the Canal House in Birmingham

FOODUNNIT

Food security governance structures under scrutiny

Who? Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
When? July 2023
Key quote "Surprisingly, the government does not appear to be taking this very basic matter anywhere near seriously enough." Efra Committee chair Sir Robert Goodwill
In brief The government's current approach to food security is "incoherent", MPs said in a wide-ranging report on food insecurity and healthy eating which warns the lack of affordable good-quality food for many people is fuelling an obesity crisis. While the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is designated as the lead for food policy, 15 other departments and agencies have a hand in different elements of development and delivery. The committee found successful cross-Whitehall coordination on food policy built during the Covid-19 pandemic had not been maintained and some departmental responsibilities have little logic to them. Conflicting views between departments and agencies were also a threat to coherent policy approaches, MPs said. They questioned the lack of a vision for how Defra will drive joined-up work within government to collectively drive progress.
Key recommendations

- The Cabinet Office should launch a comprehensive review of departmental responsibilities and structures related to food policy.
- Defra should publish a detailed response to all the recommendations in 2021's independent review of the National Food Strategy
- Defra should also develop a suite of key food-security indicators, ranging from farm inputs to retailer outputs, to monitor and ensure food security. ■

Produced in association with *CSW*'s sister title *PublicTechnology*

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SURPRISING SOURCES FOR SKILLS AND 10,000 PROBLEM PASSWORDS

▼

EIGHT THINGS WE LEARNED AT PT CYBER SECURITY CONFERENCE

More than 100 delegates gathered at *PublicTechnology*'s annual event to discuss how the public sector can address their biggest security priorities and challenges, and tackle threats head on

When *PublicTechnology*'s annual cyber security conference was first held in the middle of the last decade, the National Cyber Security Centre did not exist, the devastation of the WannaCry ransomware attack was still two years away, the UK had yet to make plans to put its EU membership to a public vote and the founders of OpenAI – the firm behind ChatGPT – were preparing to incorporate a new non-profit tech research entity.

For security professionals, clearly, a lot has changed since then.

For the 100-plus public sector representatives who gathered at our event in London – including cyber and digital experts, as well as representatives from policy and operational delivery – there was, clearly, a lot to discuss.

Presentations and interactive sessions during the day addressed issues including how to engage a large and dispersed workforce in security objectives and the growing need to secure supply chains, as well as the best ways to tackle key challenges such as access to skills and the ongoing prevalence of legacy tech.

Here are eight things we learned.

Red teams shine light on password problems

The Ministry of Justice has its own in-house offensive security unit – commonly referred to as a red team – that proactively looks for vulnerabilities and weaknesses before hackers find them.

During the conference's opening keynote, Amie Alekna, director of security and information at the MoJ, said the team "is certainly one of the first in a government department" and revealed its experts had performed an audit of Windows passwords across the department – and were able to crack 10,000 passwords in under two hours using less than £2,000 worth of computer hardware.

Security chiefs must tackle the toughest tasks

For red teamers and other security professionals, advising co-workers of the perils of using all-too-easily guessable

passwords and reminding them of their other security responsibilities may be mildly awkward for both parties. But, according to Alekna, cyber leaders should be prepared to engage in tricky conversations in order to address the biggest risks and those that may be most deeply rooted in an organisation's operations.

This is especially true when there is a remit to secure a technology estate – and some of the most sensitive data handled by government – that includes 1,000 separate IT systems, 75% of which are considered legacy.

Alongside the tech itself, MoJ security experts need to provide cyber protection for 80,000 prisoners and 30 separate public bodies, operating from 900 locations around the country and employing 85,000 people. Some of whom may occasionally be asked by their colleagues to address potentially damaging cyber vulnerabilities.

"Sometimes there is a need to call out risk and tackle hard, underlying issues – rather than cherry-pick the easy wins," Alekna said.

The importance of secure by design

The Central Digital and Data Office is currently working with experts across industries and government departments on defining key principles that government organisations can adopt to implement secure-by-design practices for developing services – which will be mandatory for departments to comply with.

The Cabinet Office-based digital unit will then develop new digital capability, guidance, assurance tools and best practices to support departments in the short and long term to ensure services are made with security embedded throughout the process.

DWP's drive to develop skills

The public sector's need for more cyber expertise – and from a wider range of sources – was a recurrent theme throughout the day.

Several speakers cited success stories of how their organisation had developed new talent, or hired budding security professionals from other industries.

One of the newest recruits to the cyber team at the Ministry of Justice – who joined via the civil service's Fast Stream programme for future government leaders – had previously been a midwife, according to security chief Amie Alekna.

One in four cyber specialists at the Department for Work and Pensions, meanwhile, first joined as an apprentice or via programmes to retrain people from other professions, revealed the DWP's head of digital security, John Keegan.

Safe network Delegates at the conference

Justice talks Amie Alekna shares an update

"Sometimes there is a need to call out risk and tackle hard, underlying issues – rather than cherry-pick the easy wins"
Amie Alekna, Ministry of Justice

IT and OT convergence could heighten risks

The increasing integration of information and operational technologies could cause a large increase in attack surfaces, according to Ricard Fuertes, head of information security operations at Transport for Greater Manchester. Fuertes said that, as OT systems become more digitised and connected, they become potential entry points for attackers.

"Organisations now need operational excellence, realism about security limitations, future-proofing, and sharing of resources with other public-sector organisations," he said.

Destroying government's legacy

A funding package of £2.6bn was provided in the last spending review to help address legacy issues across government. Alongside which, the Central Digital and Data Office announced last year that it was creating a risk framework to help assess the risks of departments' ageing technology systems. The document has enabled the CDDO to identify 153 key assets requiring remediation, conference delegates were told.

The plan is to roll out the framework more widely across the public sector this year to help more organisations identify potential issues.

Securing the supply chain is crucial

Numerous speakers picked out the rising spectre of supply-chain attacks as one of the biggest – and fastest-growing – threats to public sector organisations.

The risks are amplified in a world characterised by geopolitical precarity, where nation states are wont to use cyberattacks as an offensive tool against enemies.

Carla Baker, senior director of government affairs at Palo Alto Networks, said supply chain attacks have gained a lot of attention recently due to vulnerabilities in software supply chains, and that "attacks to suppliers can impact organisations of all sizes and from all sectors".

The National Cyber Security Centre first published a set of principles for supply chain security in 2018 and, earlier this year, the recently established Department for Science, Innovation and Technology provided resources specifically for local government with a dedicated guidance document "on how to incorporate cyber security considerations into [the] supply chain management lifecycle of their connected places, with a particular focus on the procurement stage".

The benefits of meeting threats at the edge

The well-worn idiom has it that prevention is better than cure. This ethos can be applied to organisations' cyber defences, according to DWP security chief John Keegan, who told conference attendees that his team strives to "protect assets as close to the edge" of departmental networks as possible – rather than just reinforce critical systems within the network.

"We have strived to turn detection controls into protection controls," he added. "If something is detected a step too late, what you should be doing is protecting it from actually happening in the first place." ■

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'TECHNOLOGISTS HAVE A DUTY TO EXPLAIN TECH – AND HAVE NOT ALWAYS DONE A GREAT JOB'

PublicTechnology editor **Sam Trendall** talks to government's recently appointed chief technology officer **David Knott** about tackling legacy IT, exploring generative AI, diversiyfing the cloud landscape – and his return to government after 35 years

For government's recently appointed chief technology officer David Knott, his new job is something of a homecoming. Over the course of a career that started in 1986, Knott has worked for a number of the world's biggest financial services providers, consultancies, and tech firms. But it all began in an office in his home town of Southend where, after completing his A-levels, he got a job writing code for mainframe computers operated by what was then known as HM Customs and Excise.

Returning to government after 35 years, Knott says that he was pleased to find the sleek east London headquarters of the Central Digital and Data Office are a significant upgrade on his previous civil service digs – in which much of the furniture appeared to be twice as old as him.

But, even after such a long time away, some things about working in government have not changed.

"The thing that is recognisable is the very strong sense of values: people do civil service jobs because they want to make a contribution, and they have a strong sense of the purpose and mission of what they're doing," he says. "I saw that when I was doing my job years and years ago – when I was a very small part of a cog in the Customs and Excise wheel, helping produce the tariffs that went out to ports. Decades later – in a very different role, at a different level – I still see people whose reason to be here is to align to those values, and deliver their particular mission or purpose. That's the same."

Knott's new posting in the civil service is a government-wide role at the head of a team of 40 people that sits within CDDO, the Cabinet Office unit created in 2021 – as a sister agency of the Government Digital Service – to take on leadership of the digital, data and technology function, as well as set cross-government strategy and standards and oversee their implementation.

The role of the CTO's team is to work from the centre to foster a collective approach to some of government's biggest technological challenges and priorities – including tackling legacy IT, implementing secure-by-design approaches,

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and getting the most out of emerging tech, such as artificial intelligence.

As well as leading his team, Knott will also chair the Chief Technology Officer Council, which convenes IT leaders from various departments and reflects the kind of cooperative approach he wants to pursue more broadly.

"The key thing here is that we're not going to try and do anything in isolation," he says. "Everything we do is in collaboration with my counterparts in departments and other organisations, where we'll strive to collaborate on figuring out what the right answer is, and then how to adopt that across government."

A lasting legacy

CDDO last year created a framework for assessing the risks of legacy IT systems in use across government and the guidelines have since been used to identify 153 key assets that are priorities for remedial work. Departments will be supported in tackling these ageing systems and reducing cyber vulnerabilities by a cross-government funding package of £2.6bn announced in the three-year spending review of 2021.

Addressing the prevalence of legacy tech is perhaps the most striking challenge facing the new government CTO. But it is not an unfamiliar one for someone whose career to date has been largely comprised of roles at major corporations.

"The number one thing I'll say is the problem is not unique," Knott says. "Most enterprises who've been operating technology for more than a decade or two have legacy – today's release is tomorrow's legacy. I don't think the legacy challenge within government is any more daunting than what I've seen in the private sector."

He adds: "There are multiple approaches to fixing legacy; one is the sticking-plaster approach, where you just bring things up to [date] and remediate immediate risk – which can be absolutely essential, but doesn't actually tend to change very much in terms of the quality of service being delivered to end users. A more transformational approach can combine both improvements in the quality of service and remediating risk from underlying infrastructure. I've been a big advocate for some time of the public cloud, and I think one of the attractions is it helps people address legacy infrastructure challenges."

Knott's comments were made a few days before the CDDO issued a revamped version of government's long-standing "Cloud First" policy.

The updated guidance represents the biggest overhaul of the guidelines in their 10-year existence, including the introduction of nine core "cloud principles". The central tenets of the policy have also been strengthened, with departments now instructed that they must "default to public cloud first, using other solutions only where this is not possible", and that those "who do not deploy in public cloud should ensure they can evidence the decision, business case and value for money behind their choice".

Additional encouragement to consider a variety of potential suppliers is also included, with public bodies advised that they "should always challenge themselves on the selection of a specific vendor... and government wants to be users of a range of vendors".

With the civil service cloud landscape having seemingly become increasingly dominated by Amazon Web Services in recent years, could a greater diversity of suppliers benefit government?

"My personal perspective – and I'm still figuring this out... but, in the finance sector, having a thoughtful multi-cloud strategy was pretty much standard across the industry," he says. "Partly for reasons of competition, but also reasons of resilience as well."

Knott adds that he and his team would give consideration to the question of "what's the right multi-cloud strategy for government".

This will include examination through "two lenses" – addressing both "what's the right diversity of supply and deployment for a department... [and] what's the right ecosystem across government".

With plenty of infrastructure yet to make the move to cloud, the government CTO indicates that there should be plenty of opportunity for a variety of players to work with departments.

"There's plenty for everybody in the stuff that's not claimed yet," he says. "And I think there's room for all the industry players to have some kind of meaningful role."

Knott adds that the progress of cloud migration in government compares favourably with other sectors characterised by large, complex organisations – including the financial services world in which he has spent much of his career.

Large departments have now »

1986 Year that Knott began his career as a computer programmer in the-then HM Customs and Excise

2013 Year of introduction of Cloud First guidance – which now instructs departments to use public cloud unless it is 'not possible'

40 Number of people in the government CTO's team

153 Number of legacy assets across government identified as priorities for remediation

10 Number of Secure by Design principles departments are encouraged to adopt

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First home The now-closed HM Customs and Excise office (which later became HMRC) where Knott used to work

typically moved 15% or more of their systems to a cloud environment, according to the tech leader.

"One of the things I have seen and have been impressed with in government is actually the pace of cloud adoption," he said. "But the general feeling is we could still go faster."

Complementing work to update computing infrastructure, the CTO's team also has a key role in the transformation of front-end citizen services by supporting the use of secure-by-design approaches, in which cyber resilience is embedded throughout the development process.

The CDDO recently published a set of 10 principles that embody such approaches, including maxims such as "design flexible architectures", "minimise the attack surface", and "build and embed continuous assurance".

The implementation of secure-by-design is currently in its early stages and will focus initially on new services, Knott says, but may be used for existing tools as this work develops.

"We are working with different departments to pilot the approach, and there will be a feedback loop of improving and iterating as we go forward. And, as that feedback loop progresses, one thing we will look at is: how do we retrospectively apply this? My instinct is that... if a department is making major changes to an existing system, then that's a good candidate for applying these standards. I think the thing we haven't addressed yet is how it could be fitted retrospectively to applications that might not have any major change coming."

In fulfilling his horizon-scanning remit for emerging technologies, it is perhaps unsurprising that Knott says his primary focus in the near-term is likely to be on generative AI – a category which includes the likes of large language models Google Bard and the ChatGPT platform from OpenAI.

The technology is also the subject of new guidelines for use by civil servants, released by the Cabinet Office shortly after *PublicTechnology* speaks to the government CTO.

The advice sets clear restrictions on using generative AI for any work that involves personal data or classified information, as well as instructing officials that using the technology "to write a paper regarding a change to an existing policy position... is not an appropriate use of publicly available tools such as ChatGPT or Google Bard".

But the guidance adds that "with appropriate care and consideration, generative AI can be helpful and assist with your work".

"We will be looking at all the usual questions about something as early in its maturity cycle as generative AI; what does it mean for us? How do we use it responsibly and effectively? Who do we partner with?"

"You are encouraged to be curious about these new technologies, expand your understanding of how they can be used and how they work, and use them within the parameters set out within this guidance," the document says. "For all new technologies, we must be both aware of risks, but alive to the opportunities they offer us."

Knott says that it is too early to speculate on potential specific use cases, but says his team "will be looking at all the usual questions about something as early in its maturity cycle as generative AI".

He adds that these include:"What does it mean for us? How do we use it responsibly and effectively? Where are there going to be actual practical use cases and benefits? Who do we partner with? What capabilities and skills do we need?"

Productive work

Asked what he would like to achieve during his first year in the job, Knott says that he wants to foster an iterative approach of "product-style thinking" for the guidance, standards and policies issued by CDDO to departments.

"Which means having all the things you'd associate with a product lifecycle, [such as] a really strong connection with the people who consume them; and a really strong feedback loop, and I would love those products to be valued and respected," he says. "Right now, I think a lot of the things we have published are good guidance for how civil servants should deploy and use technology. But bringing that together as a coherent product set is one thing I'd like to achieve over the next 12 months, alongside configuring the team so that we are doing everything that goes with being that kind of very internal customer-oriented, and citizen-oriented product organisation."

Knott adds: "I would also like that team to be seen as a place where people would like to be – whether they come from industry or come from other parts of government, and also a place where spending time in the team will be an accelerator to their career and give them experiences they couldn't get elsewhere."

The government tech chief's experiences may have led him back to where he started almost 40 years ago. But he concludes our conversation with an assertion that his energy and motivation remains undimmed.

"One of the things I want to bring to this role is enthusiasm and curiosity about technology," he says. "There are a lot of people out there who rely on technology that, as technologists, we have a duty to explain – and we have not necessarily done a great job in explaining it to date. Part of our job should be making this stuff firstly approachable and accessible. And then, if we can do that, maybe we can generate some of that excitement and curiosity that we as technologists feel." ■

Sam Trendall is editor of PublicTechnology

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DATA WITH DESTINY

Looking at data through the lens of human rights raises questions which officials must take time to consider, says **Mark O'Neill**

- We, the Data: Human rights in the Digital Age
- Wendy H. Wong (2023)
- The MIT Press

Data is a weird thing. It straddles the worlds of the real and the virtual, the personal and the communal. Public administration loves data; we capture vast amounts of it, yet that seems to be as much by force of habit as any conscious plan.

For example, in July 2023 we discovered that many UK police forces had been including a Facebook tracking tool on sensitive crime reporting pages. The tool had been left over from recruitment campaigns. The same issue had affected 20 NHS Trusts in May 2023.

Data seems to be automatically seen as an enabler. Yet in many cases nobody seems quite clear what it enables beyond increased profits for advertisers.

The Department for Education's Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) system which mashes up educational attainment with earnings data does not seem to have improved the financial stability of higher education in the UK, student loan repayment rates nor workforce productivity.

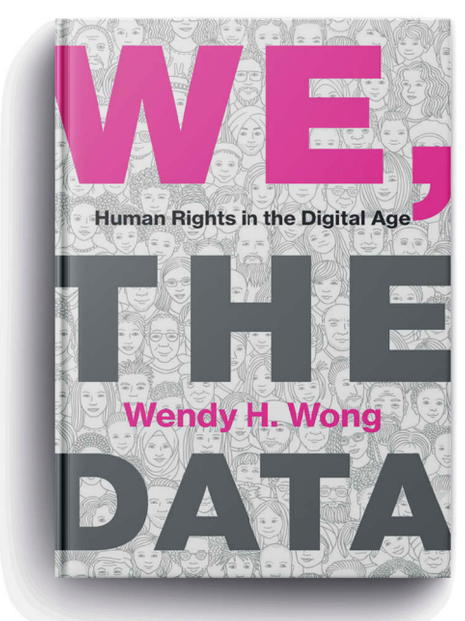
Wendy H. Wong argues in her fascinating book that we too often cede data leadership to big tech. The virtual lives of we citizens are controlled not by the democratically elected state but by a situational ad hoc coalition of tech hype, commercial interests and officials desperate for a quick win in a world where wicked problems make quick wins either impossible or lead to dystopian outcomes.

Wong centres human rights in the debate about data. In service delivery, we talk about user needs as the foundational driver of everything we do, but seldom have I heard anyone ever mention user rights. If rights are ever mentioned they are usually portrayed as a blocker or a pain, yet data protection regulation, imperfect as it is, is nothing more than a very basic attempt to give us, as the data subject, some simple user rights.

Wong makes a very strong case that we have allowed ourselves to become data objects and that unless we tackle that we are looking at a culture where we lose whatever few rights we have around our data and become subject to the whims of the machines. As ever, the human ability to fully describe a dystopian future and then work tirelessly to build it while grumbling is an amazing sight to behold.

Wong takes a practical approach to the importance of data rights through deep dives on key topics such as data ownership and facial recognition. The section on DNA tracing is particularly acute. As Wong points out, DNA is by its very nature both individual and collective. This then begs the question of what do we mean by "personal data"?

We are used to data being a thing collected through a process in which we participate. Back to Bethlehem for the census, fill in this form, papers please! But facial recognition, for example, is essentially environmental. We are barred from these environments unless we consent, but what are we consenting to?



Wong makes the important point that, without data literacy, it is impossible to ensure data rights. The use of highly obfuscated end-user licence agreements by many service providers shows they know their business models are predicated on user ignorance.

As the latest wave of artificial intelligence hype results in more and more ways to generate plausible nonsense, we risk data and myth becoming enmeshed in ways we cannot yet foresee. Princeton computer science professor Arvind Narayanan has shown that simply adding text visible only to bots to someone's online biography page can mean that 'fact' now becomes part of that person's personal data. It may be funny if the hidden text is, 'This person likes cake'; less so if the hidden text is, 'This person is a wanted criminal'.

As Wong rightly says, we have a history of organisations and people whose job it is to separate fact from fiction and support literacy efforts. We call them libraries, and librarians. This feels like a critical point for civil society. As Wong says: "data literacy empowers the individual and the collective". With technology-enabled fraud costing the UK more than £1bn a year, the return on investment from improving data literacy is clear.

This book is a thought-provoking work. I highly recommend it, both to policy people and my technical peers. Wong raises questions we had better ensure we have answers to. ■

Mark O'Neill is a former senior civil servant who worked across several departments and was one of the co-founders of the Government Digital Service

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GETTING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD

A year after the government launched its roadmap for digital reform, *CSW* convened leaders from across government to reflect on progress so far. **Suzannah Brecknell** reports. Illustration by Tom Russell

It's just over a year since the government published its roadmap for digital and data reform from 2022 to 2025. The plan, titled *Transforming for a Digital Future*, set out six missions which aim to improve service delivery and the day-to-day operation of government. To most observers of government digital reform, these missions – which include things like building digital skills, tackling legacy tech and improving key digital services – seem remarkably familiar. And that, according to Will Joss, head of strategy at the Cabinet Office's Central Digital and Data Office, is a feature rather than a bug.

'According to Joss, the missions are "about formalising and creating clear plans for lots of the things we've been talking about for the last few years – and to be honest, that's the point."

Speaking at a roundtable convened by *CSW* and Civica to discuss progress against the roadmap, Joss explained: "We spent a lot of time last year listening to what different colleagues across government were saying and then collectively shaping those missions around the biggest problems."

He added that the "roadmap wasn't designed to be easy – we very carefully and deliberately worked with departments to try and pitch the missions and commitments so that they were ambitious, but achievable."

So where did attendees see the most progress towards those missions, and where do the biggest challenges remain? As the discussion moved across different goals and themes of digital reform, one factor appeared as a crucial enabler for progress: building a better understanding of digital and data across the civil service.

Improving digital skills across government – both in the DDaT (Digital, Data, and Technology) function and more widely – is the fifth of the six roadmap missions. Joss noted that there has been strong progress in terms of building capability within the DDaT function. "We're seeing sustained growth of the DDaT function and the common DDaT pay framework has been adopted by all central departments," he said, adding: "That's helping departments to recruit and retain the skilled digital people that they need."

Tony Coyne, head of data science and data analysis in the Department for Business and Trade, highlighted the importance of the DDaT pay and capability frameworks in achieving the latter goal. These, he said, were "transformative" in helping the then-Department for International Trade reduce reliance on contractors and managed services. "Even with the capability frame, we still have particular problems in some roles," he said. "But if we hadn't adopted [it], we would be in a much worse position."

But participants also stressed the importance of digital education beyond the DDaT profession and noted what Mark Humphries described as a "gradual but relentless increase in data literacy" across government in recent years. Emma Hyland, head of data in the Home Office's Illegal Migration Operational Command Centre, explained how her department has implemented a "significant piece of work" rolling out a number of data-literacy training courses to support its digital reform plans.

This work includes mandatory online training for senior civil servants and virtual sessions made available for all staff during a "data and information week". Although attendance at the latter sessions was voluntary, Hyland said the take-up was bigger than any previous data week. "Brilliantly, the representation of attendees wasn't all from digital and data," she added. "There were a lot of operational [workers] and staff across all the grades, which was fantastic to see."

Hyland also explained that linking data issues to real-world issues helped to deepen understanding. She gave the example of tackling the ever-growing digital heap – collections of unorganised, unstructured digital documents and information – and how the training courses had quantified the carbon emissions of this in terms of return transatlantic flights. This resonated with people and encouraged them to do something about it.

She reflected that alongside this work on training – perhaps because of it – she has noticed that messages around the importance of data as a strategic asset are really starting to sink in across the organisation.

Improving data literacy can also "pave the way for wider transformational changes that are more cultural, and technology based", according to James Holliss, a customer solutions consultant at Civica. "Because if people understand [digital and data] better, they'll care about it more and that makes everything easier," he said.

The most obvious link is between improving data literacy and achieving mission three of the roadmap, which sets out an ambition to improve decision making in government by improving availability, quality and governance of key data assets as well as tackling at least half of the "high priority" data-quality issues across government.

One key challenge here is to both assess existing data quality and build a system which encourages everyone – not just data specialists – to help improve that quality. Tanya Otterson, business improvement manager for transformation at Northern Ireland agency InvestNI, noted that her team was struggling to incentivise account managers to capture accurate customer data – something the managers view as just admin, even while they complain about the quality of data in their systems. Might it be possible, she wondered, to assess data in the systems and link this to performance data of the account managers?

Something like this is already being done in the Home Office, Hyland responded. Working with consultants, her team has created a way to assess data in specific systems against "dimensions of

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completeness, timeliness, and conformity with data standards." She added, however, that while they can now give an assurance rating for data in those systems, the next challenge is what to do with that rating. "You can tell your business owners that their data is 20% accurate, but in the face of massive operational pressures and priorities, how do you then get that ownership?"

So the next steps for the Home Office, she says, will be considering how to remodel the information-asset owner structure so that "where somebody is responsible for data quality, they know what that means, they're being told where they have issues within their data quality, and they actually feel responsible for doing something about that."

Humphries added that Civica is trialling a similar approach with one client, where data quality metrics are mapped onto core data processes, enabling the organisation to say whether data being fed into those processes is fit – or not fit – for purpose. "That's really good for getting traction," he notes, as leaders realise that if data in a core process is not fit for purpose, they cannot trust the outcomes of that process.

However, Deirdre Heatley, a programme manager at the Police Service of Northern Ireland, cautioned that improving quality is not always a case of simply improving data ownership. In contexts like policing the complexities of data, collection must also be considered. "Generally, the members of the public we engage with actually don't want to engage with us. So collecting the data is a challenge in the first place," she noted.

Of the six roadmap missions, the one which has "got people most excited", according to Joss, is the first. Mission one aims to embed digital approaches and cross-functional teams across key government priorities and to move at least 50 of government's top 75 services to a "great" standard against a new, consistently applied service measure.

There has already been strong collaborative work from service teams across government to develop the new service measure, Joss said, while Humphries noted that the very concrete focus on key services has had a parallel impact on data-improvement work. "The customers we work with are saying 'if we're going to make improvements [in this service] we really need to improve our data quality'. And so, we've seen a sort of parallel interest working up in terms of data quality [around these services]."

But there is still much work to be done. CDDO's own assessment is that around 20% of the top services are great at the moment, Joss said, and roughly 25% are good. "There's obviously quite a lot [of services] that need to move up that spectrum to get where we want to. Many already do have transformation plans in place, but it's a really big task in the next couple of years to make sure the funding and prioritisation is there to do it."

As the group discussed the challenge of budget constraints and competing priorities across government, Hyland suggested that here, again, improved digital literacy could be helpful. Lack of investment can sometimes stem not just from limited budgets, she suggested, but from leaders not understanding the value of investing in digital and data. Raising overall digital literacy among decision makers could encourage them to understand that "an investment in data and tech upfront is going to lead to efficiencies and it will lead to unlocking some of those automation processes, which will lead to further efficiencies."

Meeting the goal of improving key services will link closely with several of the other missions, such as mission two, around the rollout of a government-wide sign-in system through OneLogin; and mission six, which aims to remove systemic barriers to digital transformation and create more product-centric and agile organisations in government.

"If people understand digital and data better, they'll care about it more and that makes everything easier"
James Holliss, Civica

To achieve this mission will require more than just effort and collaboration across the DDaT function, Joss said: "It's going to need sustained input and engagement from other functions, and from business leaders, to drive the kind of change we want to see to how we do things like funding and delivery."

Yet this system-wide change will be vital to more than just service improvement. Ros-Mari Mitova, chief of staff in the CDIO's office at the Ministry of Justice, said there is a fundamental challenge when it comes to attracting skilled people into the civil service, and digital reform can help address that. "The workforce will change immensely in the coming years, and we need to make sure that we're able to translate that into how we work," she said, adding that "at one point we're going to exhaust the amount of people that want to work in an organisation that relies on outdated monolith legacy technology".

Sally Wareham, assistant head digitalisation at Army HQ, also reflected on the importance of understanding what digital reform and new technology will mean for people across government in order to help adoption of new technologies and approaches.

Driving change across an organisation as large and complex as the Army requires her to constantly adapt her messaging and approach for different groups, she said. "The challenge is showing the 'So what?' for the users to adopt change. You will always get resistance to change – it's human nature – so you need to be able to target audiences differently."

"You can't do change or digital improvement to people," she added. "You have to get them to do it to themselves and make sure that they feel comfortable at each stage of that."

Although her focus is on rolling out small changes at first, Wareham described her longer-term vision as building an organisation that has a "baked-in digital culture" so that when a new generation of digitally confident leaders and officials emerge, they will be able to "pick it up and run with it".

Her vision chimed with a challenge from Mitova, as the group reflected on change beyond the end of the roadmap in 2025. "We need to evolve out of writing big strategies," she suggested. "While it's useful to have a digital strategy as a way to convene conversation and coordinate action, there's something unnatural about having large, modern organisations such as the civil service still relying on a separate digital strategy rather than simply having an ambitious strategy which has digital embedded into it." ■

Turn over for a visual representation of the themes covered in our roundtable. The event formed part of wider research on DDaT reform in government – you can see the results here: bit.ly/3RlRixl

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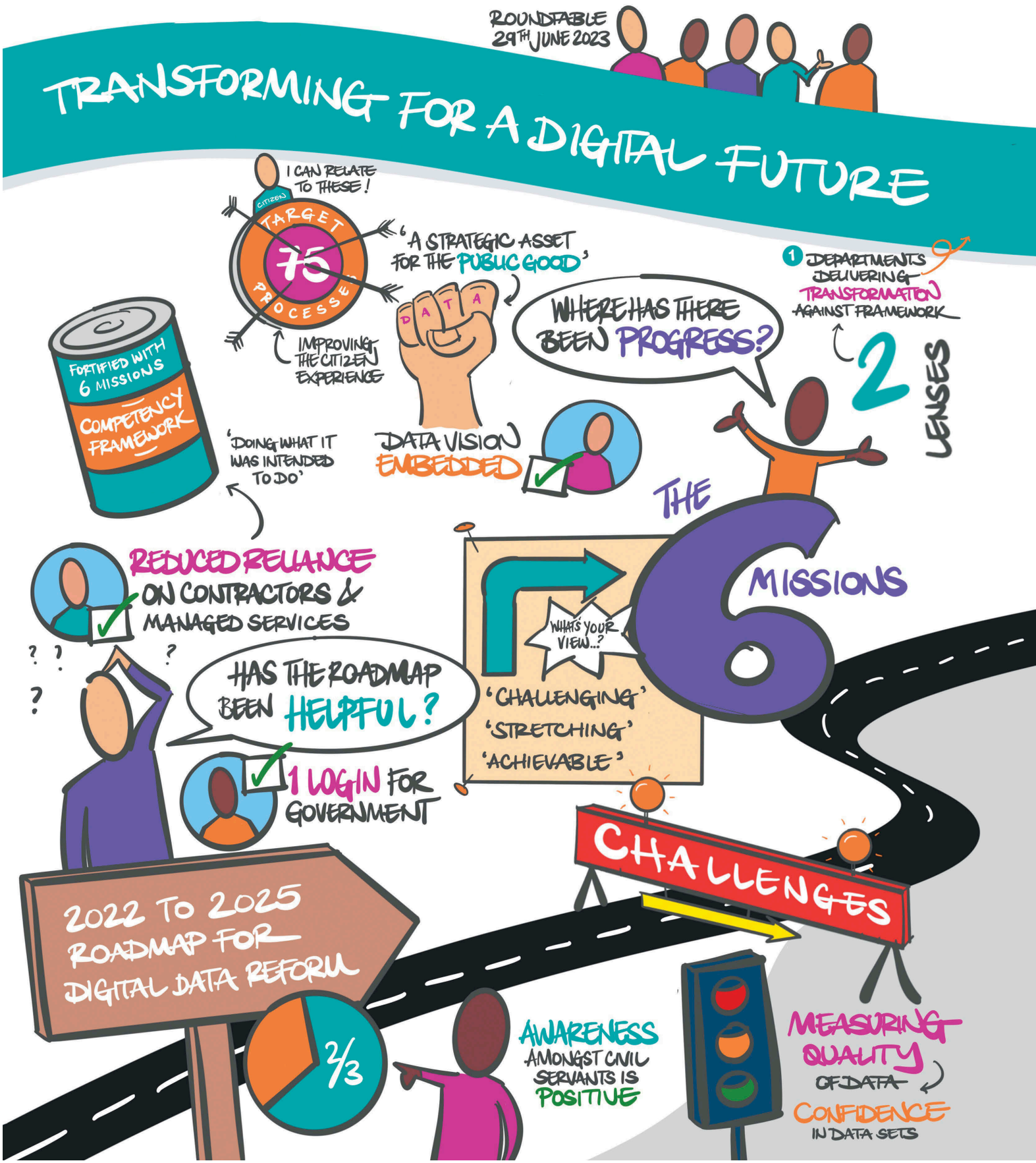

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This visual note records the themes discussed at our digital reform roundtable. See previous pages for a written report

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CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

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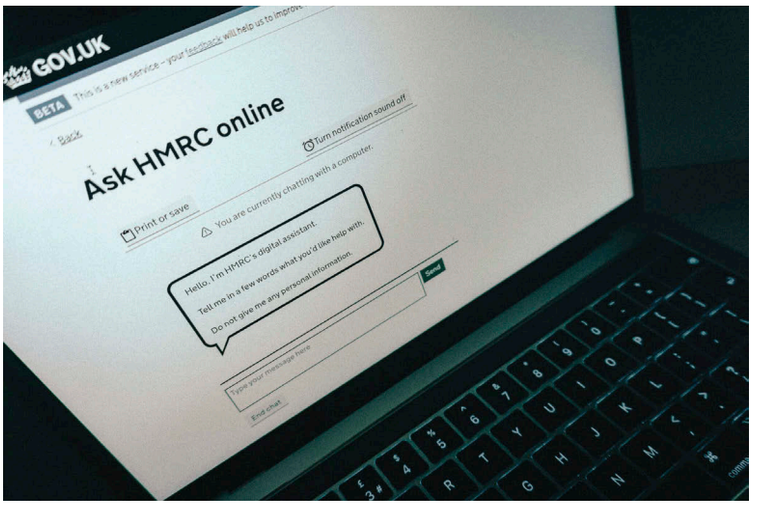
CUSTOM MADE



PublicTechnology talks to chief digital product officer **Sarah McMann**, who discusses the burgeoning use of chatbots and automated voice platforms, and plans to increase functionality of HMRC's highly rated app

Keeping customers happy is a perpetual challenge for any organisation.

The task is surely particularly tough if your customer base encompasses the majority of the population, and if their transactions require them to hand over large sums of money.

While people and businesses are unlikely to jump for joy every time they pay tax, HM Revenue and Customs – in alignment with a broader department-wide transformation – is trying to make the experience of doing so as painless as possible. Perhaps even pleasant.

To do so, the tax agency is striving to improve and increase adoption of its self-serve digital platforms, but also ramp up its use of sophisticated automation and analytics tools to better intuit and meet users' needs.

Sarah McMann is the department's chief digital product officer, a role in which she oversees the IT platforms that underpin all of HMRC's interactions with customers via the provision of tax services for businesses and individuals, as the well as the department's services in the areas of debt-management, benefits, and the work of the Valuation Office Agency.

"There [are] tens and tens of services and hundreds of products that sit under that," she says.

Upon joining the tax agency almost five years ago, McMann found that the various means through which citizens interacted with HMRC – including online services, telephony, post, and a dedicated mobile app – were fragmented. This negatively impacted both service users and the department.

"We tended to build something for web services, then rebuild on mobile app, and then have to rebuild the journeys in telephony," she says. "Customer experience wasn't great; if you were visiting the web but couldn't find the answer, you'd have to ring up and repeat your journey all over again."

McMann says that HMRC's array of service-delivery customer-support channels are now much more joined up than they were when she joined, but the department is currently only able to track user journeys retrospectively. Over the next six months or so, via the department's Customer Engagement Data and Reporting platform, it hopes to reach a point where it is able to "use data in real time... to then determine the treatments for the customer".

HMRC wants to enable users to complete interactions independently and digitally where possible, without requiring additional support. Common barriers to doing so identified by the department include difficulty for users in finding the info or service they are looking for online, as well as a lack of awareness of the existence of HMRC's digital services.

Analysis of data has also indicated that the process of authentication is a point at which many experience problems.

"If you're in PAYE, it might just be a life event that happens every two [to] three years that would require you to engage within HMRC. Authentication for those types of customers can be quite problematic," McMann says. "We are looking at how we can authenticate up or downstream... linking in with the case-management and the back-end systems allows us to do that."

App for it

In the early years of transformation led by the Government Digital Service, the Cabinet Office-based unit clearly advised departments to develop mobile-friendly web services, rather than dedicated apps which it said were "rarely justified".

This hardline stance has since softened significantly but, for much of the past 10 years, the tax department has been something of an outlier – having created its first mobile app in 2012, followed in 2016 by the launch of the first version of the core HMRC app as a front door for many of its digital services.

As of the end of 2022-23 , the app has 2.3 million users – representing an increase of 700,000

Produced in association with *CSW*'s sister title *PublicTechnology*

PT Public Technology.net

over the course of the year. The program also boasts ratings of 4.7 and 4.8 on the Google and Apple app stores respectively.

McMann adds that 97% of visitors to the app do not subsequently need to access another HMRC channel. She describes this as "an impressive stat, compared to what I have seen in the private sector".

Citizens can currently use the app to manage their details and contact preferences, make self-assessment payments or claim tax refunds, as well as accessing details of income, benefits, money owed, tax codes, National Insurance numbers, taxpayer references and – in a recently added feature – employment history.

While McMann acknowledges that not every service is suitable for delivery via the app, she says HMRC is continuing to add functionality and "tends to launch big features every couple of months".

"We're now systematically going through all of the services and intents for PAYE, self-assessment, National Insurance and Child Benefit," she says. "So, there will be multiple services over the next six to 12 months that will be launched in the income tax and the benefits space."

Across both its telephony and digital channels HMRC has sought to implement automated tools in recent years, including interactive voice response (IVR) tools to triage calls to customer helplines and text-based chatbots to assist online service users.

Conversational user interfaces are now used across 15 HMRC content areas, covering the specificities of 780 "customer intents" – meaning the service, advice or outcome sought by the individual contacting the department.

The use of virtual assistants in the online services through which HMRC delivered government's Covid support programmes, including the furlough and the Self-Employment Income Support Schemes, helped many users find what they were looking for when they would otherwise have resorted to phoning an HMRC helpline. This delivered the department an estimated £5m in cost-avoidance savings, McMann says.

She sees the chatbot-type systems acting as a "concierge" when a user first arrives at an HMRC website or online service.

"We knew trying to navigate and find relevant content was a massive pain point with customers," she said. "So, that's where we started: how do we use this capability to surface relevant information to a customer? We did that in earnest, proved its success and, in Covid, it was a critical component for digital services."

HMRC will also shortly undertake a pilot exercise – using Microsoft's Nuance technology – to explore the use of generative AI in its use of chatbots.

"We will look at how we can use that to better improve the customer experience by analysing the intents [to provide] better responses," McMann says.

In its contact centre, meanwhile, the tax agency has used automated IVR systems to help point users towards digital self-service options. The technology is designed to deduce callers' intent and, if a digital service is available, it offers to send an SMS message with a link to where it can be accessed online.

"While they're on the phone, they can click that URL and, if it is relevant, then they hang up," McMann says. "And then we track whether that customer contacted us within the next seven days – which is our measure of contact resolution."

Some 60% of those sent a text pointing them towards an online service terminate their call to HMRC and do not need to contact the department again for at least a week. Once again, McMann says that this success rate compares favourably with other organisations and sectors.

"When I've deployed this in private-sector organisations we've tended to start off in the 20-25% range and then gradually build it up once we understand how relevant the content was," she says. "So I think that 60% is a good foundation. But, obviously, we want to continue to improve on that as well – because we don't want 40% to have to call us back."

"I would like to be in a state where customers do not have to contact us, but can access information as and when they need it"

The tax agency's burgeoning use of automation and enabling users to access self-service tools are steps towards a future in which the ultimate goal is to have a "cognitive decision engine" working at the front line of customer service delivery.

Such capability would be supported by a repository that gathers data in real time and provides it to a customer relationship management-based system, which can then dictate how digital services interact with users.

Asked by *PublicTechnology* to set progress goals for the coming 12 months, McMann says that the overarching goal is to reach a point "where customers do not feel it's a hardship to contact HMRC" – if they even need to get in touch at all.

"I would like to be in a state where customers do not have to contact us, but can access information as and when they need it – because the information that we're providing or the services that we're offering allow customers to get their tax right – and [where] it's just a thing that happens rather than something that customers have to be concerned about." ■

KEY FACTS

£5m Amount saved by use of chatbots in Covid support services

60% Proportion of users sent an SMS deflection that did not need to contact HMRC for a week thereafter

4.8 HMRC app's rating on Apple app store

780 Number of 'customer intents' addressed by chatbots

Intelligent Virtual Assistants Can Transform Your Contact Centre

Contact centres have been a traditional front line of customer service for many years, where agents handled a variety of fulfilment activity, including queries arising from business operations. However, the growth of digital services over the last 20 years has been steadily changing the nature of contact centres, to the point they now tend to deal primarily with "failure demand" essentially where a customer has been unable or unwilling to engage with a process, obligation or need in the "digital" channel.

Many organisations are exploring ways to deal with this increasing demand, whilst coping with digital transformation benefits cases that reduce their resourcing. The most promising approach is obviously being able to deal with simple or common customer questions through automated systems. This has led us to intelligent virtual assistants (IVAs), AI powered software that can interact with customers through natural language, either by voice or text.

Using technology like this helps to understand customer intent, provide relevant information, and perform tasks based on user inputs. IVAs can also escalate complex or sensitive issues to human agents when needed, but crucially providing a chain of reason and next action recommendation based on the interaction so far.

IVAs are not the same as chatbots, which are rule-based systems that handle predefined scenarios and inputs. IVAs use advanced technologies such as natural language processing (NLP), machine learning (ML), and speech recognition to learn from customer interactions and provide more personalised and accurate responses, this is the key differentiation that bestows the term "AI Powered" on them.

However, it's important to think about the use of IVAs and associated technology as a continuum, in that the more they are used, by definition the more they are optimised and therefore the more they can grow into more sophisticated use cases. The key as ever is to start small and grow, perhaps through discrete areas of business that can be optionally directed from call queues.

This has the potential to lead to a broader "Autonomous Customer Service", which Gartner define as a type of customer service and support using AI and Automation to *"provide proactive, personalised, and predictive service experiences across multiple channels without human intervention"*. This builds on self-service and assisted service, but goes further with a more accessible, intelligent, and dynamic approach, integrating and then blurring the boundary between digital first services and the pathways to get support when issues arise, e.g.:

- **Customers expect fast,** convenient, and consistent multi-channel service. Meeting these expectations by providing 24/7, instant responses, and tailored outcomes

AI Powered Technology is Driving a Revolution in Customer Service

Speech and Sound Processing

Speech clarification, speaker identification, speech display order optimisation, environmental sound recognition.

Natural Language Processing

Document translation, semantic search, intelligent assistants, FAQ search, abstract, candidate selection, sentence classification, unique name extraction, location estimation.

Numeric Processing and Others

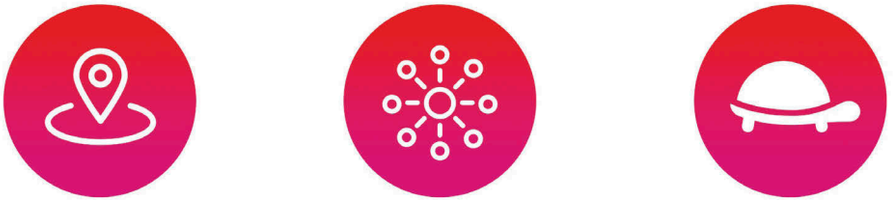
Predictive analysis, data abnormality detection, anomaly detection, failure prediction detection, time series data analysis, matching, and recommendations

Source: Fujitsu

is essential. Adopting IVA related technology can achieve this and reduce frustrations with long wait times, repetitive questions, and hand-offs to other agents.

- **Reducing headcount** in contact centres calls for greater agent productivity and performance. IVAs can handle a large volume of customer queries without compromising quality or accuracy, which frees up human time and resources to focus on more complex or high-value tasks requiring empathy.
- **Reducing operational** costs by enhancing agent onboarding, training, and retention through more intuitive and digestible access to knowledge, as well as reducing infrastructure and maintenance costs associated with workplace provisioning for human agents.

Barriers to AI projects: what companies say



51%

Data in silos Different locations, technologies, part of business

37%

Too many technologies and too much complexity

35%

Unable to access large sets of clean data quickly

Source: Fujitsu

However, don't be fooled into thinking about IVA as Single Component

For a start, its essential to think about this in a few dimensions and in that regard, Gartner categories are always useful. When it comes to AI/ML there is obviously a substantial list where those acronyms occur, but three categories stand out as particularly relevant:

- **Enterprise Conversational AI Platforms:** These are software platforms enabling the development and deployment of IVAs for various use cases across different channels.
- **Data Science and Machine Learning Platforms:** These are software platforms that provide data scientists and other users with tools and capabilities to build, deploy, and manage data and machine learning projects.
- **AI Developer Services:** These are cloud-based services that provide developers with access to AI capabilities such as computer vision, natural language processing, speech recognition, and generation.

The point is, for a large organisation, it's important to think about supporting IVAs from the widest cross section of the business. It's no good just adopting AI/ML/NLP/GenAI offerings that are part of narrow business applications, limited to specific areas. You need to think at an enterprise level, choosing solutions that can encompass the full organisation providing a wide portfolio of tools and software components to solve cross-cutting business challenges across multiple use cases, with access and inter-operability throughout the wider IT Landscape.

The choice of the right combination of AI/ML solutions to support IVAs and resolve complex problems remains an ongoing challenge, hampering successful application of AI in operational settings. However, products are emerging that provide enterprise scope and capabilities that map back across the range of Gartner categories above, e.g.:

- The ability to quickly generate and vary machine learning models to support rapid adoption into end-user context, including safe and economic trial and error approaches.
- Being able to execute workflow, customer and suspicious behaviour analysis, uncovering important causal relationships from large data sets to derive new insight into AI/ML Models.
- Ensuring reliability and ethical development and use of AI, by being able to present reasons for AI Judgements and adopt consequent learning back into AI/ML Models.
- Providing a means to verify conversational generative AI output, using large business data sets, in a safe and secure testing environment.

Conclusion

Intelligent virtual assistants are not just a trend or gimmick, they are a powerful tool that can transform contact centre operations and customer service outcomes. By adopting IVAs contact centres can better meet demand, enhance customer satisfaction, boost agent productivity and performance, and reduce operational costs.

However, choosing AI/ML products and the delivery models that support them solely grounded in Contact Centre use cases or in singular Contact Management Applications, fails to take advantage of data, process, and insight from the rest of the enterprise and conversely fails to turn contact demand into wider enterprise value.

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Source: Fujitsu Market Research

LUNCH WITH... DAVID HALPERN

Jess Bowie meets the psychologist and 'nudge' guru. Photography by John Russell

Who?

Professor David Halpern is a former senior civil servant and founding director of the Behavioural Insights Team. He was CEO of the BIT from its launch in 2010 until 2023, when he took up his current role as the team's president.

Between 2001 and 2007 Halpern was the chief analyst at the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and, from 2008-2010, was a founding director of the Institute for Government. He was also What Works national adviser from 2013-2022 – a role which saw him lead efforts to improve the use of evidence across the UK government.

Where

The Civil Service Club is in Great Scotland Yard, between Whitehall and Northumberland Avenue. It provides a restaurant for members and their guests in comfortable, friendly surroundings.

We discussed

Surprises moving from academia to government

I couldn't believe the lack of access to empirical sources. I would ask what literature colleagues were using and they didn't have access to any journals. A lot of departments still don't today. They would be writing a note to the prime minister to recommend what to do to reduce crime, say, but wouldn't have access to the best evidence, to the primaries. That was pretty shocking.

Where power is located

One of the most enduring lessons, which I still remind researchers about, is that everybody thinks someone else has got the power. It's striking in a place like Whitehall. There's a presumption of "if only I was the prime minister, I could finally get this done", but even prime ministers are exasperated about what they can't do. It's frustrating but also empowering; in a sense, [power] is not somewhere else. Anybody in the system – including the civil service – has power in some appropriately bound way. All you need to think is: "What is it I could do where I am now that could make a difference?"

The relationship between prime ministers' knowledge and their power

The longer you are prime minister, the more confident and knowledgeable you become in the post but, correspondingly, your power edges away. By 2005, 2006 and 2007, Blair was incredibly knowledgeable, and had been doing the role for a very long time. There were many areas where he knew as much as his policy advisers. But he had set a date for his departure and his power was ebbing away. It's a really important question: how can you accelerate that learning curve and bring it forward? You don't want to wait five or 10 years to get there.

Learning from predecessors

We did a big piece of work before the transition from Blair to Brown – on what worked and what you might want to refresh. It was this big reset moment and you don't get an opportunity like that very often. Well, the truth is that Gordon wasn't particularly interested [in our findings]. But the point is that you really should lean into learning from your predecessors. However you feel about them, you should still want to learn from them.

Working for governments of different parties

Transitions of administrations are extraordinarily exciting, and they don't happen very often. They bring in this energising force because new perspectives flow. But there are also very striking continuities. For example, as part of that work we did before the transition from Blair to Brown, we'd done an away day for the cabinet at Lancaster House about a whole range of issues and then, in the same room in 2010 with the new [Cameron-led] administration, we had another big conversation with ministers present talking about public service reform. It was a weird moment – in many ways it felt like a continuation of the same conversation.

Personal successes in government

Ah, but how would you know if something was successful? It's a dirty secret that we spend a trillion a year in Britain and we don't know what works. So I think my answer would be bringing in practices and helping institutions get better at answering that question: does it work? Was it successful?

A recent, clear expression of that is the Evaluation Task Force. We now have a big chunk of the British government that's serious about evaluating success. And of course there are the What Works centres, some of which are genuinely world-class. And all of this links to the Behavioural Insights Team, too: you could say the biggest thing we did with the BIT was act as a Trojan horse for bringing very hard empirical methods into the heart of government. I think that is really significant – and revolutionary in its own way.

Favourite nudge he's been involved with

That's like asking: "Who's your favourite child?" I would put the work we did with the Department for Work and Pensions in jobcentres near the top. Over the last 40 years, from the Nordic countries through the US and the UK, active welfare policy has all been premised on acting as a kind of policeman, asking unemployed people: "What jobs did you look at last week?" and making them prove they're looking for work. But along with JP Marks – now permanent secretary of the Scottish Government, but back then a grade five – we tested an alternative, training jobcentre advisers to ask people what they were going to do *next week* to look for work. We wanted to know if it got people back to work faster and it did – by a very significant amount.

We've since helped lots of other countries replicate that across Eastern Europe, and in Singapore and Australia. It's really robust and it's just a lovely intervention, because it gets people into work faster while saving taxpayers a very large sum. It's also a more human interaction – it puts the "adviser" back into "personal adviser" and, as a result, we noticed improvements in the work satisfaction of jobcentre staff, too.

What else he's proud of

An obvious one – which is different because it's a policy intervention – would be the sugar levy. That was a very long argument. We first proposed it, and worked with [late cabinet secretary and head of the civil service] Jeremy Heywood on it before the 2015 election. It was complicated and contro-

"Perm secs don't get to that level without being very smart, but they will also have gone through a long arc of a system that often squeezes out their original passion"

versial to get through, but we are now close to halving sugar in fizzy drinks, and the total market share in fizzy drinks has increased at the same time. It crossed the rubicon, because people were terrified of this kind of instrument, but we showed it could be effective.

Vaping

My team helped to reverse the government's position on vaping, to ensure it was available in the UK. I don't have regrets about the origins of the policy – it was a really good, forward-thinking policy. E-cigarettes have saved an estimated one million years of life in the UK and they are 95% better from a health perspective than smoking.

But because there wasn't tight enough regulation to ensure that they weren't available to kids, there has been a creeping undermining of the policy, and there is now doubt in people's minds, including many clinicians', that e-cigarettes are dangerous – or worse than smoking.

Vaping was always intended as a tool to help smokers quit, and what's happened since [with its uptake by young people] shows the importance of following through. Even if the starting policy is right, the detail matters and you have to keep working on it, and refining the regulations over time as the market evolves.

Bullseyes in urinals to help men aim and reduce "spillage"

Richard Thaler [one of the founding fathers of behavioural economics and co-author of the seminal 2008 book *Nudge*] always loved that one. It's never clear if it was actually subject to a proper controlled trial. If you ever bump into Richard you can ask: how did they *know*? What was the *exact measurement* of the spray? I never quite got a straight answer on that...

Knife throwing

I once said that I liked knife-throwing with my teenage sons and that quote has followed me »

around. I haven't done much recently, but we still have the knife-throwing board up in the garden. It's quite a zen thing to do, though my wife wants me to take it down. My sons are grown up now. One is just finishing his PhD on the origins of the genetic code, and the other has completed his masters, which is on lots of worthy things to make the world better. They probably think they're branching out from what I do, but we're all caught by our own origins to some extent, aren't we?

How he unwinds

Who doesn't love *Ted Lasso*? I feel like watching it makes me a better person. I do read a bit, although I leave fiction for holidays. At the moment, I'm reading *The Narrow Corridor* [by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson], which is a superb piece of work. I still find the field interesting. Joe Henrich's *The Weirdest People in the World* is another brilliant book. I definitely don't do yoga, though. I'm too impatient.

What makes a good minister

A clarity of purpose, combined with an open mind and use of evidence. One of those key flashbulb moments was when Nick Clegg was around and there was a disagreement between two departments about a particular policy issue, and Nick said, "So neither of you know what is going to work? Why don't we run one of those, what do you call it, randomised control trials?"

"If we're spending a trillion a year, we should be waking up at night thinking: 'Was that the best thing we could have done with that money?'"

What makes a good permanent secretary

Permanent secretaries are all incredibly impressive, and all very different. They don't get to that level without being very smart, but they will also have gone through a long arc of a system that often squeezes out their original passion and policy purpose. The ones who are great are those who have retained a sense of being able to do something for good. They're passionate and interested in trying to find the right answer, and using their power and responsibility to have an impact in the role. For those of us who worked with Jeremy Heywood, we knew he wasn't just extraordinary and a brilliant mind but was palpably passionate.

The risks of underusing behavioural insights

A danger for behaviour insights is getting boxed into quite a small space – namely that it's just about comms. "I'm writing this letter. Can you help make it a bit better?" Yes, we can, but applications for insights should expand into market design or fundamental policy design, too. If you've been boxed into helping with communications, that's a very narrow take on the discipline and its application. In the academic world, "nudge" has been interpreted quite narrowly. Well, if you define them narrowly, then they are narrow in their impact, but that's not what we do. We're interested in watching the factors that affect behaviour, including taxes, regulations and lots of other things. It's a real puzzle to work out what's effective – but it's part of the policy challenge in almost every domain.

Nudge sceptics

There are two seemingly paradoxical critiques of behavioural insights, particularly nudges. There's this libertarian perspective which sees them as messing in people's heads

in a nanny-state way. On the flipside, they're seen as a fig leaf, and a substitute for doing proper regulation or tax. They're either frighteningly powerful, or too weedy and weak. Can it be both those things?

Behavioural forces at the collective level

Choice enhancing language is often used at the individual level, but a lot of these behavioural forces are operating at the collective level. Why not ask the public what they want to do, not least because the key enforcers of policies are often the public themselves?

Take the canonical example of the chips versus the salad in a canteen. What happens if we show the public how the position of different dishes in a canteen affects what they choose to eat, and then ask them what they would prefer? Why not put evidence to the public and ask them what they want to do? The logic [of choice-enhancing language] should apply to the collective: can we not empower the public to make decisions after providing them with the evidence?

Frustration at the pace of change

The civil service isn't good enough at distinguishing and weighting the quality of evidence. During Covid, we would do a piece of work, we would run a trial, and we would test something with thousands of people. The results would be clear that they understood one option much better than the other option. And then a different choice would be made on the basis of a focus group where one person in the focus group didn't like it. Which should you weigh more?

There's that old saying in advertising that only 50% of it works, but you don't know which 50% it is. We don't even know that; we're not even close to that. Public service is full of people who came in because they wanted to have a positive impact, but they just don't know – they're blind – because of a lack of empiricism. We don't test systematically or look for variance in the system.

I sometimes find it hard to contain my frustration. We've got to be better at telling the difference between good and bad evidence. Then, we might go forward. I've always said that if you go from being so unempirical, and you then start doing it properly, imagine what's possible. It's like the unfinished enlightenment: you'll literally get to see where you're going. If we're spending a trillion a year, we should be waking up at night thinking: "Was that the best thing we could have done with that money?"

Avoiding the forces of inertia

There's a period between being naïve and being jaded when you're really useful. If you're at the point of dragging yourself through the shiny black door of No.10, you should get out of the way and let someone else go in. Public life at a senior level is a huge privilege. I was incredibly lucky to work with Jeremy Heywood. I remember talking to him often, wringing my hands and saying: "We had that discussion with the perm secs but none of them have done it, Jeremy!" And he'd say: "Yes, but we don't give up!"

Improving the civil service

An interesting question government could ask is: "What are we doing to improve our public servants?" Government is the institution that should improve other institutions. When the Institute for Government was built in Britain, we still had the National School of Government. The latter was shut down without a replacement. We can't expect our institutions to get better without supporting the people within them.

In 2007, I met a friend who ran the Civil Service College in Singapore. In a country less than a 10th of the UK's size, their civil service was put through more training than we offer. The head of the college worked part time between that and the PM's office. How are we helping *our* civil service sharpen and build their skills? At best, we have unfinished institutional arrangements to support upskilling. ■

IN THE CLUB

The Civil Service Club, celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, was established using funds originally raised to celebrate the wedding of then-Princess Elizabeth and Prince Phillip. It opened in 1953 to provide "social facilities in reach of all", with the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth as its patron.

The club continues to thrive, with more than 13,500 members for whom it provides a varied programme of activities including comedy and quiz nights. Members can also use facilities in the form of the Queen Elizabeth Dining Room, a convivial bar also serving food, meeting and conference rooms, and 26 ensuite bedrooms.

Membership is available from £50 a year and is open to all serving, former and retired members of the UK civil service, government agencies and NDPBs.

Find out more at: civilserviceclub.org.uk

Stat your service

An award-winning Department for Education team tells *CSW* how it transformed access to school attendance data, moving from termly to fortnightly publications in less than six months

Amid growing concerns about the impact of the Covid pandemic on school attendance, the Department for Education turned to data as a way to help it improve the situation.

Before the pandemic, the department had only published termly datasets, with a time lag of around six months, making it difficult to address any immediate issues and identify emerging patterns. During the pandemic, the government created the Educational Setting Status form, which schools used to provide information about attendance. DfE said this gave it valuable insights but also created a burden for schools. Last year the government decided to develop a new system of automated, twice-daily data collection and tasked a small team with speedily turning that data into an accessible, fortnightly picture of attendance across the country.

This meant the team needed to work on around 20 new data publications per year. This is on top of termly census absence figures, which are still being produced as only 85% of schools are signed up to the automated twice-daily stats collection system.

The school census stats team delivered this new way of working in less than six months in time for the start of the school year in September 2022. It has published fortnightly ever since, allowing policymakers to identify trends more easily and respond quickly to issues that arise.

In recognition of this achievement, and the quality of the publications, the team received the Royal Statistics Society's Campion Award for Excellence in Official Statistics.

Judges said the DfE project was an example of agile, useful data provision and an exemplar for others to follow. They also praised the team's proactive response and their efforts to ensure transparency.

CSW caught up with Sean Gibson, who heads up the school census stats team, and Gemma Selby, who leads on school attendance data, to find out how they did it, what the biggest challenges were and how it felt to win the award.

The team publishes a range of publications on topics such as pupil numbers, free school meals, special educational needs and exclusions.

When DfE began collecting the automated data on pupil attendance in spring 2022, it challenged the team to deliver fortnightly publications by the start of the upcoming school year. These publications would summarise attendance across the country and be published in a way that would be accessible and transparent for anyone reading it, which could include schools, local authorities, researchers and lots of other users.

The team received twice-daily updates on whether pupils in schools that had signed up were present or absent, and, if absent, the reason given. This meant millions of rows of data every day, initially representing around 4.5 million pupils and now around 6 million.

The volume of data was the key challenge, Gibson says. "In one day, one session, you couldn't open that in Excel for example," he explains.

"It was huge and we had a relatively fast turnaround time in terms of the data coming in and wanting to publish that and show what the picture was as soon as possible," he says.

"If something goes wrong with that volume of data – if the server times out or we lose connection or if we realise we need to change something – we're often dealing with quite long periods of time waiting for the data to run."

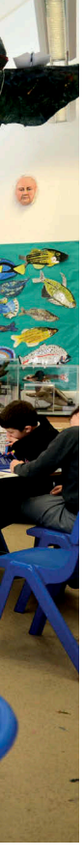
Gibson says the team had to think ahead and optimise their working to avoid losing a significant amount of time waiting for the data to be processed.

Selby led on the project but would work with team leader Gibson to come up with solutions on coding, designing the dashboard and quality assurance.

But the "double act", as Gibson describes himself and Selby, also had a lot of help from across DfE.

"We're the stats publishers, we're the ones that do the public-facing stats," he says. "[But] to get the data and in the shape that we could use it has been a heck of an effort across data colleagues. We've had data modellers, data architects, data engineers – data roles that I'm not sure we knew existed three or four years ago."

The team also had help from project managers and policy colleagues, Selby explains. "On the dashboard optimisation side, within our division we've got a really helpful stats development team that have produced loads of great templates to work from," she says. "They've been super helpful in making sure that we can retain stability and performance even when we've started getting up to a full year's worth of



data by different breakdowns," she says.

The publication team has remained a small, close-knit unit but Gibson says big increases in data staff across the department have made the jump up to fortnightly publications possible.

"There's been a huge undertaking within the department on the data side, much greater resource there," he says. "I think if it was coming down to just a couple of people trying to do this, we'd still be trying to deal with the first few extracts that came in, trying to understand how to model them and engineer them. The expertise that's gone into it is what has made it possible."

Selby adds: "We've had so much help across the department. The co-ordinated effort helped us get off to a really quick start, turning around figures in September when we needed to."

Campion Award judges praised the team's "proactive response to the need for better data on school attendance, and related safeguarding issues, which gained prominence during the coronavirus pandemic".

Selby says the team's longstanding experience publishing absence data based on the school census also helped.

"We already had a really well established methodology," she says. "So we stuck quite closely to that methodology which made trying to build all our code for the new publication quite easy."

Selby says building on what they knew had worked previously enabled the team to provide consistency in the presentation of their publications – contributing to what the award judges described as praiseworthy "efforts to ensure transparency so the findings could be communicated to a broad audience".

"Having already had the census absence publications, we've got a really good back series for that and have had some really good user feedback and users are familiar with all of that," she says.

"We've stuck to DfE templates and tried to retain consistency across other templates within our division and made sure that we're in-keeping with other products that are built across the wider department.

"Where we've had to deviate from what we've done previously in the census publication methodology, we've tried to be as clear as possible with that. And with it being a slightly new way of working, with this more timely data, there's been a couple of data quality issues that have arisen and [so we've been] keeping users abreast of that as we're finding it, making sure that it's clearly outlined in all our publication methodology."

But the team says the timeliness of the publications was the biggest achievement.

"Previously, you'd wait till the end of the term, then the next term the data would be collected and it would take us a couple of months to turn that data around and put it into a publication," Gibson says.

"Whereas now we'll be publishing data from a week and a half ago. I think that's the big win and probably what impressed [the judges] most is having a robust system that can do that quickly."

"It's intensive," he adds. "Sometimes it doesn't feel like you're getting a break at all. You publish it and then you're thinking about the next one straight away. It's a new way of working for us."

The judges also called the team "an exemplar for others to follow". What advice would they give to other officials working on similar projects?

"My advice would be to be flexible," says Gibson, explaining that quirks in the data that "previously you got away with" in a termly release are now more noticeable. "You end up seeing unusual things in the data and you have to react and be flexible around those things," he says.

"No two local authorities seem to have had the same term dates all year [as to] when they started, when they went off for Christmas, when there were inset days. Trying to deal with that in the publication and still display a representative figure means, by and large, we've got a methodology that we can follow, but we've needed to flex on that a little bit and to not get too hung up on what we've done before."

Selby adds: "One of the things that it's taught me, even though we've been working from an established methodology, is you can still think fresh about how you're doing things.

"With the new timeliness of the data, we've been able to interrogate things much more closely. We've been able to see patterns that we wouldn't have been able to see otherwise.

"We've been able to see stuff like pupils being on religious leave for Eid, whereas previously in the census data it would have been masked out. So you're able to get a lot better insight if you're able to follow what the data is showing you rather than following all of your previous methods."

Winning the Campion Award – which is named after Sir Harry Campion, the first director of the Central Statistical Office, the forerunner to the Office for National Statistics – "still hasn't quite sunk in", Selby says.

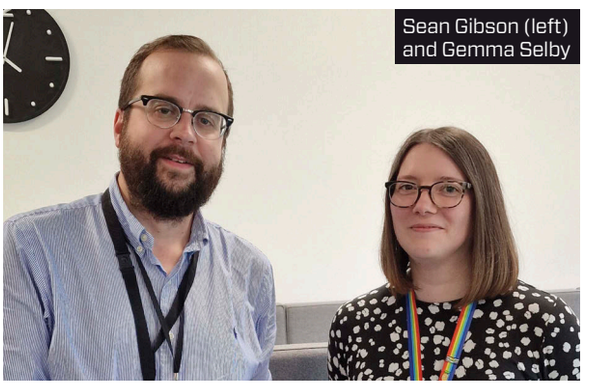
The project also won DfE the accolade of data transformation project of the year at the British Data Awards. But Gibson says the Campion Award "means the most" to his team as it is "more about the published stats and the transparency and getting the data out there, which is our big part of it".

"Hearing what other people had done at that awards was like, 'Oh my God, that's amazing'," he says. "And then you go and stand next to them on the stage with yours and it's like, 'Yeah, this is pretty cool'. You can start to celebrate it properly and acknowledge what we've done. Other stats colleagues who've popped up and said, 'It's a big deal' makes you realise [what you've achieved]."

Getting feedback from those who have used the publications has also been gratifying, Selby says. "A lot of people in the sector have said, 'This is unbelievable, we're able to look at our attendance'. You walk up to someone at the school gates and they can say, 'I've been looking at your tool recently, this is really cool'."

This is one of the best things about working at DfE, Gibson adds. "I've been in education for the last six years and I'm not planning on going anywhere else. It's a good department for seeing impact. You get to see a lot of what you're doing on the ground."

The problem-solving aspect of the job is also very rewarding, Selby says. "For people in my family who don't really understand what I do in terms of stats, I'll say I'm trying to solve a puzzle in French all day. That's how it feels to try and code things sometimes. But I find it incredibly satisfying when you actually get something that works and something that's successful. So building the dashboard was a hugely satisfying thing for me to do. Finding out that people like it has been the icing on the cake." ■



Sean Gibson (left) and Gemma Selby

"We've been able to see patterns that we wouldn't have seen otherwise" *Gemma Selby*

BREAKING CHAINS

Elysia McCaffrey's connection to the civil service started at a young age. Now leading the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, she talks to *CSW* about rooting out exploitation of workers, getting the GLAA to pass the Ronseal test, and the power of yoga

Elysia McCaffrey believes in destiny. As CEO of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, she leads the foremost investigative agency for labour exploitation. Her previous roles include interim director of the Government Equalities Office, and more recently she was at the Cabinet Office. An impressive career path – and one she believes she was always going to take.

"Both my parents were civil servants. They were in the Home Office and I even went to a Home Office play scheme as a child in the summer holidays," she says with a smile. "I think I was destined to end up in civil and public service in some way."

McCaffrey joined the civil service as an administrative assistant when she was 21 and got her first senior civil servant job at 29. Her advice to those starting their civil service career is to throw yourself in: "If you put your hand up, say yes, go for things and take every opportunity, you're going to learn something. There's a massive span of different jobs you can do here – I've been really blessed."

Even so, she says she never imagined she'd be running an arm's-length body, "but I love it; I love it so much". McCaffrey took the reins of the GLAA in July 2021. She describes her role as a privilege. "It sounds really trite, but to make a real difference in people's lives and to set the direction of an organisation... it's a really wonderful opportunity. It's fantastic," she tells *CSW*.

But alongside the highs come the inevitable lows. Exploitation and abuse of workers is widespread across the UK economy, with mistreatment ranging from human trafficking to forced labour and wage theft. She often loses sleep, she says, worrying about how best to protect vulnerable and exploited workers.

"The things that keep me up at night are worrying about what we don't know. Where is that vulnerable person we don't know about? What is this new pattern of behaviour we don't know about?"

"Our starting point is the protection of workers. How do we make sure they are safe and not at risk?"

The GLAA takes enforcement action when it finds evidence of modern slavery in England and Wales – an occurrence that is disturbingly common. Between January and March this year, 4,746 people were referred to the Home Office as potential victims of modern slavery – a rise of more than a quarter compared with the same period last year.

The victims, including children, work across many sectors, from agriculture and construction to garment manufacturing and food packing, and in places such as nail bars, car washes and in people's homes doing domestic work.

"We predominantly deal with people who are coming to the UK to work," McCaffrey says. "We should be looking after them. We should have high standards and be an attractive place for people to come. But some of the stories you hear, the things you see, are absolutely horrifying."

One such story sticks in her mind: "There was a case, probably one of our most prominent, where a chap had been held in a shed for 40 years." The victim was living in a six-foot wooden hut and forced to do manual work for as little as £10 per day. "That level of exploitation, the fact that it happens in this country in this day and age, really troubles me," McCaffrey says. »

GLAA investigators rescued the victim, then 58, after receiving a tip-off to a confidential helpline. The agency relies on reports received this way, as well as intelligence from its inspections and other government departments. It also runs a licensing scheme to regulate businesses in certain sectors, and it partners with the police and the National Crime Agency to target organised crime across the UK.

Plenty to be getting on with, but McCaffrey isn't about to stop there. As a senior civil servant, she is also trying to solve the eternal Whitehall conundrum – how to do more with less.

"We're doing a big piece of work at the moment where we look at our processes and say: can that be done more efficiently? Do we need to do that? Are we doing that because we've always done it that way? Or could we change that without introducing risk to the process?" McCaffrey says.

"Since I've been in post, I've been trying to introduce that as a mindset – don't just do things the way we've always done them; actively challenge the status quo and constantly look for efficiencies. They're always there to find."

The GLAA is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Home Office, so budgetary pressures loom large. Is there a point at which those pressures becomes damaging?

"Luckily, we're not at that point," McCaffrey says. "But if we face cuts next year, and the year after, and the year after – at what point do you have to say to your sponsor department: 'We just can't deliver the work'?"

Fortunately, thanks to her previous roles in policy, strategy and analysis across government, McCaffrey is used to juggling priorities. Top of her pile at the moment is the exploitation of workers in the care sector. "Exploiters find a business model that works for them, they then grow it," she says. "What we need to do in our response with other bodies, is make it a model that doesn't work for them and set that expectation that we will come and find you. If people report you to us, we do take it seriously and we are effective at investigating these things and at taking action."

Prevention, of course, is better than punishment, and McCaffrey is keen to cut off opportunities for labour abuse at the root. "We think about the victim, the person, making sure they're not vulnerable in the first place. Our starting point is the protection of workers," she says. "The UK needs people to come over. We want to see people doing these jobs that need to be done. How do we empower them to make sure they're safe and not at risk when they're here?"

One answer is education. "We worked in partnership with the Skills and Education Group, a non-profit organisation, to develop a qualification [that teaches people about] what they're entitled to, and how to speak up and ask for what they deserve," McCaffrey says, explaining this is part of the proactive approach she favours for the future of the GLAA. "There's the hard edge where we get custodial sentences for exploiters. But enabling people not to fall into that situation in the first place is where we'd prefer to spend our time."

It's clear McCaffrey sees the work as a team effort, citing the "grit and determination that we have in the organisation" as instrumental in keeping her going. "I've got a group of people who get things done, who don't stop until things are dealt with," she says proudly. The GLAA has a real camaraderie, she adds. "They're all united behind this vision of doing the right thing for vulnerable people. And that gives me heart."

McCaffrey is determined to maintain these standards, and keeps a close eye on the GLAA's recruitment practices. "What I want is that right mindset, that care and passion. You can teach somebody how to conduct an investigation, or how to decide whether or not somebody should have a licence. But that caring, that genuine interest in the human on the end of this – that's what I'm looking for. And I know my managers think that way as well."

So who is applying for GLAA roles? "In our investigatory teams, we've tended to hire former police officers because they've got that skill and a huge amount of experience, and they tend to come ready to go," McCaffrey says. "But across the wider organisation, we've tried to take people from different backgrounds to make sure we've got really good diversity of thought in the organisation."

Despite the healthy team dynamic, there's no escaping the fact she's dealing with a harrowing subject matter. It's something she admits she struggled with at first. "I used to allow myself to be quite consumed, but that's really bad for your health. So I forced myself to do something else." And that turned out to be yoga.

"It helps that my husband is a yoga teacher," she says, well aware that advice to practice any form of relaxation is very on trend. "People say 'oh, you should do yoga or that mindfulness' and it's all a bit buzzwordy. But actually, it works. We have to do something because otherwise, we just burn out. A lot of people in public service work long hours and are passionate. But the old adage of 'You can't pour from an empty cup' is right – you've got to look after yourself."

It's a lesson McCaffrey says she's learnt the hard way, and one she's determined to pass on to her staff. "We do lots of wellbeing activities" – her husband even came in to teach yoga to staff – "we've got mental health first aiders, and we really promote 'time to talk' sessions."

All of which is much needed, as the GLAA is a surprisingly small set-up. "We've got just under 120 people in the whole organisation, which, given the scale of the challenge, is quite tricky," she says. "We cover England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We have slightly different powers in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but we cover the whole gambit."

Resources are scarce but McCaffrey recognises that everyone across public service is competing for a limited pot. "We focus on what can we do now with what we've got. If we have the opportunity to bid for more, we will do, and we'll use it effectively."

For now, McCaffrey's main aims are to keep the plates spinning and get the GLAA noticed. "My day tends to be a mix of running the organisation – ensuring we're making decisions on licensing, and prioritising our resources in the best way to stop labour exploitation and modern slavery where we can," she says. "And then making sure we're known." Not something the GLAA can confidently claim at the moment, she concedes.

"We have a slightly complicated name, which doesn't necessarily pass the Ronseal test, so there's a lot I want to do on raising awareness of what we do and how we can help people," she says, describing her ambition to get the general perception of the GLAA to the point where it does exactly what it says on the tin. "I want people to know where they can come when they've got problems."

It's this chance to makes a difference in people's lives that first drew McCaffrey to the GLAA role. "That's what floats my boat. Knowing that some of the most vulnerable people who have nowhere to go... by getting it right, we can really help them and improve their outcomes. That's the biggest privilege." ■

“I’ve been trying to introduce that mindset – don’t do things the way we’ve always done them; actively challenge the status quo”

WONDERS AND BLUNDERS

government buildings of yesteryear

Forget break-out spaces and collaboration zones, many civil service offices of the past were ugly, impractical and unpleasant to work in. **Jim Dunton** explores the history of some of government's most notorious buildings – and pays homage to some of the pioneering ones too

We might not spend quite as much time working from them as we used to, but our offices have the power to shape us for better or worse. As a great philosopher once observed, working nine to five is "enough to drive you crazy if you let it".

The Cabinet Office is currently on a mission to reduce the size of the government's central London estate. The drive now incorporates the Places for Growth programme to relocate 22,000 roles from the capital to other parts of the country by the end of the decade.

As part of the process, more workplaces will be vacated and other "keeper" buildings will be refurbished to host new generations of staff.

It's easy to forget that there has always been change in Whitehall and beyond. Many who work in the Home Office's 2 Marsham Street headquarters – also home to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – will be unaware of the legendarily unpopular buildings it replaced.

Marsham Towers featured three 20-storey blocks linked by a podium. They were originally intended to be the base for three separate departments – education and science, housing, and local government. But the buildings eventually served primarily as the headquarters of the Department of the Environment from 1972 to 1995.

Commissioned in the 1960s at a time when opposition to high-rise development in the capital had yet to manifest itself, the completed building loomed oppressively in views of the Houses of Parliament and earned itself the nicknames "the three ugly sisters", "faulty towers" and "the triple toast rack".

Significant problems included regulating temperatures inside the highly glazed buildings to cope with summer sunshine and the chills of December and January – which left the offices "steaming hot during the summer, and freezing cold in the winter", according to a 2002 analysis by English Heritage.

Moving a single department into a building originally designed for three separate government entities subjected DoE staff to lengthy walks through the building's three miles of corridors and reliance on lifts. The towers also lacked toilets on every floor.

In December 1993, then environment secretary John Gummer – now Lord Deben – told *The Financial Times* his departmental headquarters was "staggeringly and revoltingly offensive". He added: "It is ugly, unsympathetic, unhygienic and unsafe … It's the most depressing place I've ever worked in."

Fellow former environment secretary Michael – now lord – Heseltine told *Construction News* in 2000 it was "ironic" that DoE officials used to pass judgment on the aesthetic merits of planning applications "while sitting in one of the capital's worst eyesores".

Overseeing architect Eric Bedford – who also designed the BT Tower – defended the offices as "a utilitarian building". "We never said what we were producing was an architectural object, there was no money there," he told *Building* magazine in 1992.

Emily Cole, author of the Historic England appraisal of Marsham Towers, said questions about why the blocks had ever been permitted were usually answered with the response that any building was seen as an improvement on the derelict gasworks that occupied the site before.

The current buildings at 2 Marsham Street were designed by Sir Terry Farrell, whose practice is also responsible for the MI6 building at Vauxhall. He said both structures proved "groundscrapers" could contain as much floorspace as towers on a given site – and be "much more efficient and effective in terms of containing a community". He added that dense low-rise buildings are also much more economic in energy use. Both make extensive use of atriums to give staff "light and views".

While the Home Office dodged the triple-pronged pain of Marsham Towers, it was unable to escape the clinches of brutalism. By the late 1970s it was based at the newly-constructed (and somewhat phallic) 50 Queen Anne's Gate building – now home to the Ministry of Justice and renamed 102 Petty France.

Designed by Fitzroy Robinson & Partners in conjunction with modernist architect Sir Basil Spence – responsible for the grade I-listed Coventry Cathedral – the 14-storey building also had its detractors. One silver lining, however, may have been that the fortress-like structure replaced an equally unpopular Victorian mansion block.

"It was awful in those days. It was like a prison and it had little cells off it" ***former justice secretary Jack Straw on the MoJ's Petty France HQ before it became open-plan***

Jack Straw, who served as New Labour's first home secretary from 1997 to 2001, »

London Old War Office

was unflinching in his criticism of the building and likened it to the former KGB headquarters in Moscow. "It was awful in those days," he told a BBC documentary in 2009. "We used to call it the Lubyanka. It was like a prison and it had little cells off it. There was a car park which was windswept and litter-strewn. In those days, you would go up in the ministerial lift – you had your own loo – and with a bit of luck you would never be contaminated by any other form of human life, except in a meeting, and then go down in the lift and leave."

"In the Old War Office, you were only entitled to carpet if you were a certain grade so if they changed the grade of who occupied the office, the carpet would be ripped up, which left a mess" ***former Government Property Agency chair Liz Peace***

Straw did not broach his delight at returning to the building when he was appointed lord chancellor and justice secretary in 2007. But by that point the block had been completely stripped out and refurbished with open-plan offices.

Lord St John of Fawsley – better known as Norman St John Stevas, Margaret Thatcher's first leader of the House of Commons – was more vitriolic over Spence's impact on the London skyline in a 2004 House of Lords debate. He said the architect's work on 50 St Anne's Gate, which overlooks St James's Park and Hyde Park Barracks in Knightsbridge gave Spence the rare distinction of having "ruined two parks".

One recently-vacated government office development of the modern era has received somewhat higher praise. In May, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport approved a proposal to list Michael Hopkins & Partners' Inland Revenue Centre at Castle Meadow, in Nottingham, at grade II.

HM Revenue and Customs has now relocated staff to its new Unity Square base in the city, but the listing decision is a glowing endorsement of the Castle Meadow scheme's credentials.

The campus is the result of a 1989 decision by the then Inland Revenue to relocate close to 2,000 roles out of London (sound familiar?), partly in response to the rising cost of office space. Local opposition to its original plans were focused on their impact on Nottingham Castle and led Inland Revenue to take the unusual step of running a design competition to find an alternative scheme.

Hopkins' winning proposals brought together six low-rise office buildings and a tent-roofed amenity building with a sports court and restaurants. Its successful listing recognises its status as a pioneering sustainable complex that was the first British project to receive maximum credits under the then newly-established BREEAM environmental assessment.

The Inland Revenue Centre featured triple-glazed windows and a range of measures to help regulate the internal temperature. The office buildings' glass-block stair towers formed part of the ventilation system, using solar gain to draw warm air upwards and expelling it around the edges of the fabric-covered roofs.

The University of Nottingham has now bought Castle Meadow and plans to transform it into a centre for final-year students and postgraduates. Its newly-acquired listed status will require the building's owners to be respectful of the campus' special characteristics. But it does not entirely protect the buildings from future demolition, if a strong enough case can be made.

Most denizens of the modern office occasionally long for a return to simpler times, when Microsoft Teams could not demand an immediate videoconference and a slew of important emails could not drop minutes

before the onset of a bank-holiday weekend. But days of yore were not without their challenges.

A Ministry of Defence publication from the early 2000s describes the Victorian-era War Office as having a reputation for poor facilities and sickly staff. It cites a newspaper report from the 1860s ranking the danger faced by staff "at about the same level as an Ashantee campaign".

Communications were also an issue. According to the MoD, 17% of staff working in the Pall Mall War Office were messengers tasked with maintaining the flow of information between what was a series of linked houses and outposts further afield.

By 1914 there was a new War Office on Whitehall – confusingly known today as the Old War Office – designed by William Young, Clyde Young and Sir John Taylor, and delivered at a cost of £1.2m. While the building's facilities may have been an improvement on Pall Mall, chaos was not banished. The MoD history describes the building's bustle as resembling "Liverpool Street Station on the evening of a rainless bank holiday".

At the time of the Great War, Boy Scouts were employed as additional messengers. One account describes efforts to track down a newly appointed colonel believed to be in the building as requiring three days and three different runners.

The war was also a time of friction between civil servants – or "frocks" – and "uniforms", with military personnel often suspecting their non-enlisted colleagues of treacherous intent.

London The Ministry of Justice

The Old War Office hosted secretaries of state from Kitchener of Khartoum to Winston Churchill and John Profumo, as well as being a stomping ground for TE Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia) and Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond.

It served as the Army's administrative HQ until the creation of the unified MoD in 1964, when much of its work moved over to the Main Building in Horse Guards Avenue. Nevertheless, the Old War Office remained in use for several more decades.

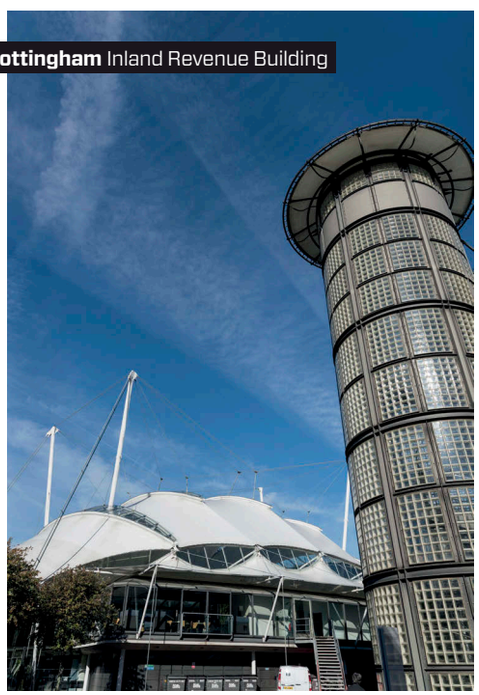
Former Government Property Agency chair Liz Peace worked in the building as a new recruit to the civil service in the 1970s. "It was like working in a garret. The roof leaked and water poured down the windows every time it rained," she told *CSW* in 2019. "You were only entitled to carpet if you were a certain grade so if they changed the grade of who occupied the office, the carpet would be ripped up, which left a mess."

Those days are long gone. In 2016 the grade II* building was bought on a 250-year lease by the Hinduja Group. In addition to the £350m acquisition price, the business has spent a further £1bn converting it into a luxury hotel and 85 exclusive apartments. The hotel – Raffles at the OWO – is due to open this year. Owners of the new apartments have already begun moving in.

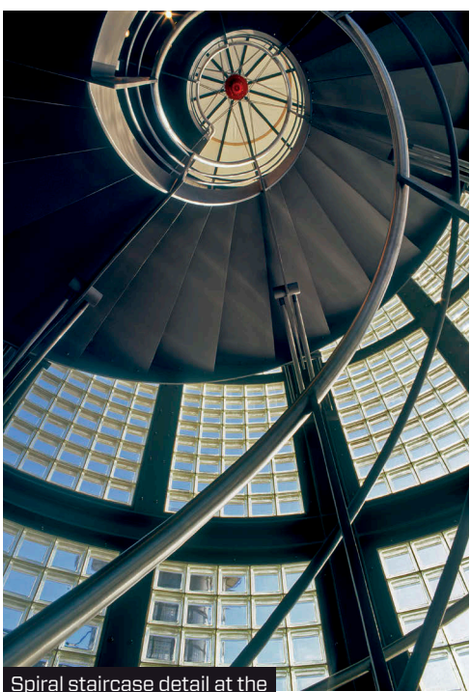
Officials fearful that a similar sell-off-and-redevelop fate awaits their cherished central-London base can take some comfort from recent comments made by GPA chief executive Stephen Boyd. He told MPs on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee that the government did not want to sell any more historic Whitehall offices.

Many of the high-profile disposals aimed at reducing the Whitehall Campus to no more than 20 "core buildings" to house 40,000 civil servants by 2030 have already taken place, but departments and ministers are still being decidedly coy about how the nine-to-five of the future will look. ■

Have you worked at any of the buildings listed above – or others that we should have included? Share your memories, good or bad, with jessica.bowie@civilserviceworld.com



Nottingham Inland Revenue Building



Spiral staircase detail at the New Inland Revenue Centre

Former press secretary **Shaun Jepson** shares his tips for success

There is no off-the-shelf script for telling your minister the live broadcast interview they just conducted was a bit of a car crash. The "How was that?" question normally comes after the first appearance of a gruelling round of early-morning TV and radio interviews.

You probably didn't get more than three hours sleep the night before. Your minister even less so. Critical, therefore, that your answer finds the sweet spot that blends positive reinforcement with a dollop of critical encouragement. It's a bit like walking a metaphorical tightrope. Whilst jet-lagged. It really could go either way.

You don't want to derail any remaining interviews by analysing the negatives like Gordon Ramsay would a below-par Beef Wellington but you also want to avoid complacency setting in by giving the impression they've knocked it out the ballpark.

"That was a bit bumpy" was a post-grilling favourite line of mine to deploy.

But ultimately I've found that being candid, concise and encouraging is king and so establishing with your boss the sort of relationship that allows you the space to give them two or three short and unvarnished pointers can go a long way towards improving the outcome for everyone.

Over the 10 years I've spent in government I've worked with dozens of ministers across multiple departments. So, by way of a short disclaimer, my observations and examples throughout this piece are not about any one person. But the principals that underpin success in this role are universal and hinge on your ability to gain the trust and confidence of those that will ultimately help you win. It is, of course, easier said than done. So here are some tips from my experiences to help.

First impressions are everything. I remember the first conversation I had with every politician I have press sec'd for. Your intro chat may end up being just 10 minutes. You must demonstrate in whatever time you have that you are an expert in your field and articulate how you can help them achieve their objectives. But above all else, listen to what they have to say. And respond to any points directly. What do they want to achieve? Ask around about them before you meet. Westminster is a small village. You should only be a phone call away from someone with useful intel.

Get your elbows out. You cannot influence decision-making or be of genuine use to your minister if you are not in the room at the key moments. If you sit at your desk waiting for an invite to meetings, you may as well pack up and go home. So spend time in the private office to build the relationships that help cement you as an integral part of the conversation.

Be available and responsive. Being a good press sec is more than a full-time job. I have taken calls from ministers and journalists whilst navigating my two young children through a soft play centre, and while at a school sports day as my daughter whipped past me in the 400m relay race. I've dealt with issues at 2am. A critical part of building trust with your minister is giving them the confidence that you are alive to the issues they care about and can deal with them effectively. They need to know that you have their back and are responsive. Anything less than that and you are a press secretary in name only.

Be honest and understanding. Recognise the right moment for the difficult conversations. Do not present comms problems to your boss without a plan for fixing them. Ministers will test your advice, it is their job to question everything. So believe in your plan and be prepared to explain why your proposal is the right one. They may disagree and direct a different course. They ultimately are the people that carry the risk. Don't take it personally.

At times, it can be a difficult job. It will inevitably put a strain on your personal life. But done right, being a press sec will be one of the most rewarding experiences of your career...

...and certainly safer than tightrope walking. ■

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