

# CSW

**CIVIL SERVICE WORLD** 



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**DATA FORCE**  
SENIOR FIGURES ON DIGITAL  
TRANSFORMATION IN DEFENCE

**CONCRETE PROGRESS**

## Sherin Aminossehe

**ON THE MOD'S  
INFRASTRUCTURE PLANS  
AND HER RETURN FROM  
THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

**WHAT SIMON  
SAID GOES  
THE WHITEHALL  
POWER OF DEPARTING  
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**A PROBLEM  
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ROUNDTABLE

# Planes, Tanks, Ships, and Smartphones

How defence integration can improve military capability

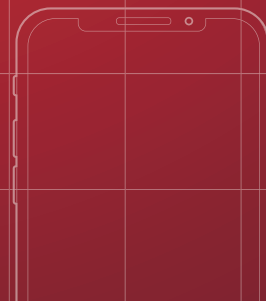
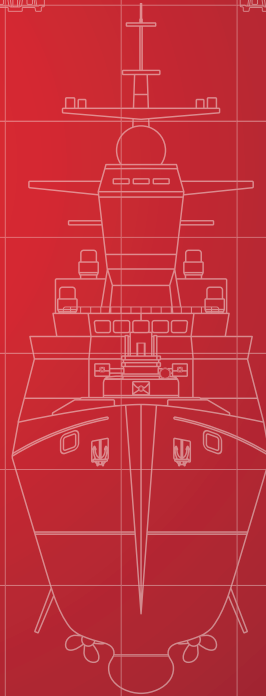
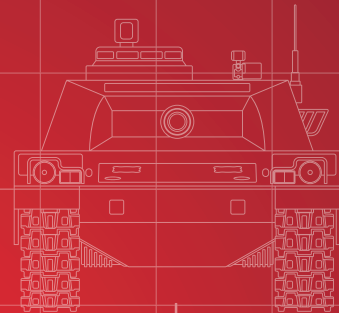
**Tuesday 15 June 2021  
from 12:00 - 13:30.**

Richard Johnstone, acting editor, CSW, is hosting a virtual roundtable with senior spokespeople from across the defence sector and our partners at Appian, to explore:

- How transformation can happen
- Can intelligent automation deliver critical support faster and more efficiently

Spaces are limited, to register your interest in attending please RSVP to:

**Bella Frimpong** at [roundtables@dodsgroup.com](mailto:roundtables@dodsgroup.com)



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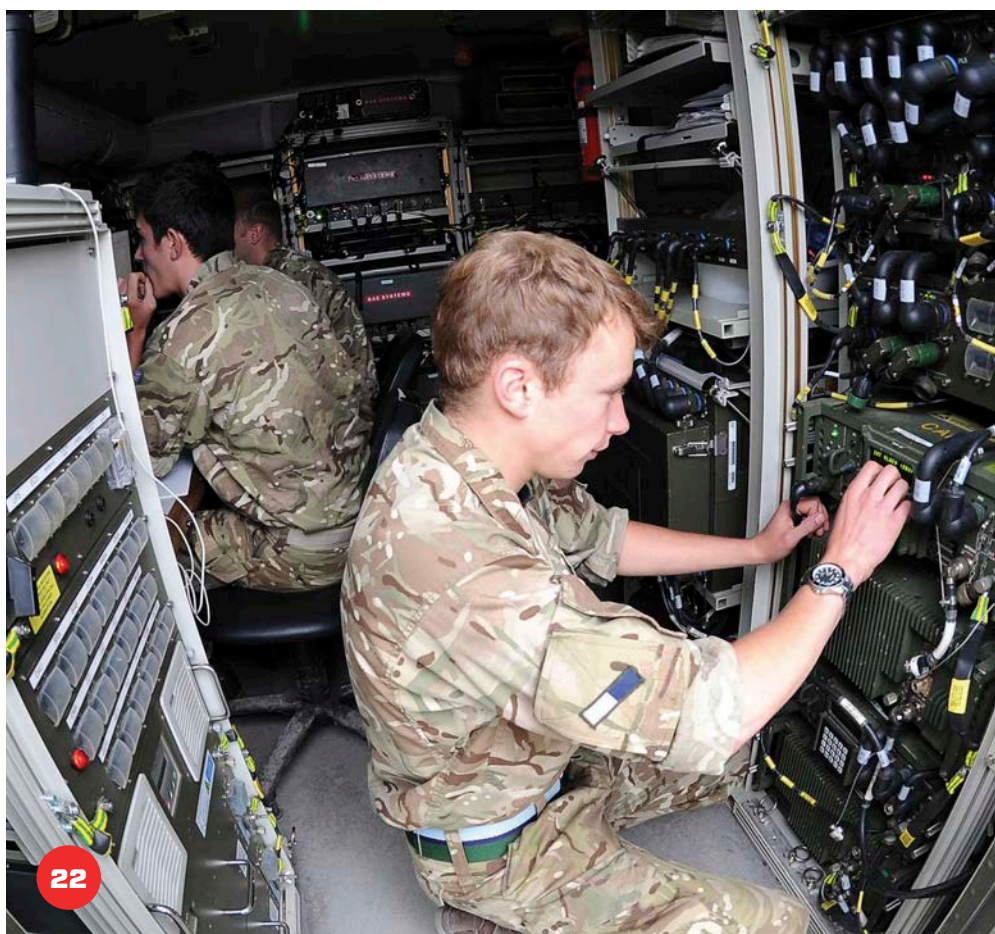
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# FROM THE EDITOR



There are those people who – perish the thought – don't read this fine title, and don't follow the ins and outs of the civil service. The people who can't name the cabinet secretary, or the BEIS perm sec, or the head of the Government Legal Department.

So at moments when top officials are thrust into the spotlight, a lot of people notice them for the first time.

Simon Case's late April appearance before the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee turned out to be one such moment. Though these clashes are always big news in the CSW bubble (used in its pre-2020 sense), they don't always crowbar their way into the six o'clock news.

This one, though, was different. Case arrived before MPs just as a host of inquiries into various dealings by the PM and his predecessors were getting under way, so he was asked about them. How was the decoration of the Downing Street flat paid for? How did Lex Greensill get so much access to government? Did the prime minister try to block a leak inquiry, lest

it reveal too much? The cab sec was asked them all, and though to my ear his answers seemed perfectly reasonable for a civil servant placed in a very invidious position, they didn't seem to please anyone. So much so that the new sadly-familiar briefing against civil servants found a new target in the still new-ish cab sec, who took the job in the most difficult circumstances imaginable and definitely isn't getting a belated honeymoon now, even as politicians seem to be having their popularity boosted by every vaccine dose.

What to make of it? Well, the first point is that, as former civil servant and sometime CSW contributor Martin Stanley pointed out, officials have to comply with the Osmotherly Rules, which say "civil servants who give evidence to select committees do so on behalf of their ministers and under their directions". So it is the prime minister who will have set the parameters of Case's evidence.

By extension, the debate moved onto Case's youth, with some claiming a more grizzled Whitehall veteran may have pushed harder to reveal

the who-knew-what-when details of the No.10 refurb.

There may be some truth to this. Case is, by his own admission, relatively inexperienced for the top role. He told MPs in a previous PACAC session (one of those that CSW was much more lonely in covering) that there were gaps in his CV, most notably that he has never led a department. But he insisted he had a track record of giving difficult advice to prime ministers, and told civil servants "they absolutely must keep speaking truth unto power fearlessly, in line with our values".

Without having been in the rooms at No.10, it is impossible to test whether Case has met his pledge, but over-analysing one select committee appearance is a poor proxy for it too. The cabinet secretary needs to retain

the trust of the prime minister, and would not do so by airing his dirty laundry, or criticising his furniture choices, in front of MPs. Indeed, the close working relationship of the PM and this cab sec – he had only been back in the civil service as the perm sec of 10 Downing Street for months before the cab sec role came up, and he had clearly impressed the PM enough to go for it – is one of the things that could repair the strained relationship between the prime minister and the civil service.

But, as with so many of the inquiries floating around government at the moment, it is the prime minister, not the cab sec, who is the primary decision-maker. It is at his door, whether styled by John Lewis or Lulu Lytle, that scrutiny should be placed. ■

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# INBOX

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## SECOND LOOK

*The news that the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, sent out a memo telling senior civil servants to report any second jobs, to ensure “transparency and full proper management” of outside interests, prompted some strong opinions.*

“It is almost unbelievable that this needs saying. Would any of us, as career civil servants, even think it would be appropriate for us to have second jobs at all – let alone one linked to our official duties? Beggars belief,” **Geoff Eales** wrote.

**Mark Ryan** added: “Barn doors and horses come to mind!”

**Mark De Buisseret** said civil servants should not be the only ones under scrutiny. “It’s a pity MPs are not stopped from having second jobs,” he said. “It’s not as if MPs are unpaid. Second jobs of any kind always seem to lead to trouble where MPs are concerned. If they were banned problems would go away.”

**Elizabeth Haggis** had the same thought: “Are MPs classed as civil servants?”

## MATCH FIT

*Readers were quite taken with the new civil service careers matchmaking service that launched this month, to tackle a “lack of confidence” among the public that puts them off applying for jobs.*

“Well done [project manager] Brian Stanislas and team. This is fab,” **@Kid-dRozanne** wrote on Twitter.

“Great initiative. The framework for applying can also be daunting to outsiders

(skills profiles, etc). There is a very specific way candidates need to present themselves; which can seem quite opaque to those from the private sector,” **Alexandrea Sufit** said.

**Mark Ryan** suggested there might be another reason people might not apply for jobs: “So it’s not the pay then!”

## TRUST ISSUES

*Readers were alarmed at reports that cabinet secretary Simon Case had not been told about the prime minister’s plans to set up a trust to bankroll the renovations of his Downing Street flat until media reports emerged in February.*

“I am at a loss to understand how this could have even been considered by the Charity Commission. There is little, if any, public benefit,” **Helga Edstrom** said.

But not everyone agreed. **Simon Hall** commented: “This subject is becoming rather boring in my view. Clearly the news of this ‘scandal’ didn’t reach Hartlepool! Could it be that it’s only of interest now to a rapidly diminishing number of people?”

## PAY UP

*Several readers reached the same conclusion after reading up on an Institute for Government report that found staff churn had led to a situation where government lawyers had better knowledge of policy than policy officers.*

“Pay more, simple,” **David Hamilton** suggested.

“Maybe pay the correct

wage for the work that’s done,” **Peter Galley** agreed.

The report also prompted this observation from **@es\_ska\_pade** on Twitter: “I suspect by the same logic that some assurance/enforcement officers may have the same level of knowledge.”

## SKILLING UP

*Readers also agreed with the findings of a second IfG report that warned the civil service’s “ad-hoc” approach to training isn’t working, and that without a clear strategy it will struggle to fill skills gaps and tackle future challenges.*

**Alison Schofield** asked: “Should we be surprised, given the cuts made to training and development budgets over the last ten years?”

**Mark De Buisseret** commented: “What doesn’t help is when grade is taken as more important than qualifications. I was one of two part-qualified accountants taken on as junior staff. Despite a shortage of accountants, because of our grade we both were passed over for possible help with accountancy training, despite being a much cheaper option than getting someone fresh in so we left... It’s a ridiculous situation.”

## OUTSOURCE OF CONTENTION

*Readers suggested pay was also a factor that led NHS Test and Trace to hire a £40,000-a-day digital consultancy team for a six-month contract after admitting it did “not have sufficient staff with the necessary skills and experience to create the team without external support”.*

“Civil service doesn’t pay enough to recruit or retain many people with the skills required,” **Mark Ryan** said. “Why join an organisation that hasn’t received a cost of living pay increase for more than a decade!”

**Paul Howarth** commented: “They probably couldn’t source civil servants with these skills because they don’t pay civil servants £1,115 per day, so these people work in the private sector instead.”

And **Paul Mason** added: “Until the civil service is given the budget to train, this will always be the case.”

Meanwhile, **Martin Clements** commented: “What a shocking waste of public funds!”

Not everyone felt the money was being used poorly, however.

“Behind the headline, ‘£1,115 per day for each of the 35 people’ is a decent going rate for highly skilled people, no?” asked **@Ben\_MegaUK** on Twitter. “I’m not one to defend reckless government spending (far from it!) but you have to expect to pay for skills within reason.”

**Alan Bradley** added: “These consultants can be dropped after 50 days with no ongoing cost. They seem worryingly good value.”

## STANDARD PRACTICE

*Another source of controversy was the prime minister’s decision, when he appointed Lord Geidt as the new independent adviser on ministerial standards, not to give him the authority to launch his own investigations despite calls to do so.*

“Bring back the standards board,” **Eleanor Greene** wrote. “Give it a transparency requirement and a clear mandate and democracy will benefit.” ■

## IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Home Office permanent secretary Matthew Rycroft and Race Action Programme Team head Hamid Motraghi discuss the department’s response to the Windrush scandal.

# GCS urged to 'rebuild trust' in comms reforms

As Downing Street scraps plans for White House-style televised press briefings, **Beckie Smith** reports on the state of play of wider government comms reforms



**Empty podium** Downing Street's new press briefing room will not now host daily updates

**T**he government has been urged to “rebuild trust” among communications staff after leaks and poorly-coordinated announcements about reforms to the Government Communication Service have left staff anxious for their jobs.

A project team within GCS is designing a “smaller, more unified” and more effective organisation by summer 2022, and is currently hammering out details of staffing and structures, according to documents seen by CSW.

The Reshaping GCS project began last summer, when it was reported that No.10 was planning to dramatically cut staff numbers and exert greater control over messaging.

Leaked plans included imposing a limit of 30 press officers per department and broadcasting White House-style televised press conferences.

But GCS has since distanced itself from the 30-staff figure, while Allegra Stratton, briefly Downing Street press secretary,

confirmed last month that plans for daily televised briefings had been scrapped despite £2.6m being spent on a briefing room.

The wider reform plan remains under development. The Reshaping GCS project team is currently working on the detailed design for the revamped organisation, including “roles, responsibilities, structures and headcount”, according to a presentation put together for staff last month.

It said the reforms will create a better culture, improved training and more career opportunities for staff; enable more sharing of best practices and resources; create career opportunities; and break down silos.

However, unions have warned confusion caused by the leaks and the way decisions were taken early on have unnerved staff and undermined the project.

Amy Leversidge, assistant general secretary of the FDA union, said comms staff are “very anxious about the ongoing uncertainty around the centralisation of government communications”.

She said officials who learned about proposed reforms in the press felt “decisions had already arbitrarily been made without any consultation”.

And Garry Graham, deputy general secretary of Prospect, said some announcements made before any apparent scoping work on what the existing landscape looked like made the plans seem uninformed.

“They announced the destination without having a clear view of what’s in place at the moment,” he said. It was not until after government sources had set out the planned 30-press officer limit last summer that GCS announced an audit of existing staff, for example.

Such pronouncements – as well as plans to line manage comms staff under a “single employer model”, which CSW understands have since been dropped – gave the reforms the appearance of a political power grab, Graham said.

In addition, GCS head Alex Aiken

confirmed in a staff memo last month that the service was “exploring the potential for voluntary exit schemes”. However, no information on timelines and eligibility have been released.

And in a letter to the project team last month, the PCS union said there should not be a centrally-determined exit scheme, saying the “authority” to run such schemes rests with individual departments or agencies, not “the GCS project team nor any other part of the civil service”.

While details on structural changes are still scarce, a memo to GCS staff from the project director last month confirmed a chief executive will be recruited to lead government communications. The creation of the director general-level role will “put communication on a par with other functions in the civil service”, it said.

It had been reported that Aiken will leave GCS this year, but a spokesperson said the reports are “untrue” and that Aiken “retains the full support of the prime

minister and the civil service leadership”.

The chief exec will be supported by two executive directors. “These roles provide more career progression and opportunities at the most senior levels of government,” the memo said.

GCS will meanwhile consider “competitive pay and reward” packages, more learning opportunities and a “progressive development structure”, according to the presentation on the reforms.

The reforms will help the public in three ways, according to the presentation: by enabling government comms to have an “even greater impact on some of the biggest issues affecting the UK today, both domestically and internationally”; telling a “clearer story” to the public, with messages aligned to the prime minister’s priority themes outlined in the “Build Back Better” growth plan; and saving money by making comms services smaller and more efficient and by reducing duplication of campaigns.

Leversidge said improved career and

training opportunities would be welcome, as well as moves to share best practice.

However, she said GCS must repair the “damage” caused early on. “Comms staff are the ones who have the experience, expertise and understanding of the complexities of government communications and they should be at the front and centre of the project... it is clear that the government needs to work a lot harder to make sure that comms staff are listened to and consulted with over the plans,” she said.

A Cabinet Office spokesperson said: “As part of wider civil service reform, Reshaping GCS is a transformation programme that will further strengthen and unify GCS, making it fit for the future and ensuring it meets the needs of government and taxpayers.

“GCS colleagues have been engaged in co-creating the future of the profession through workshops, and full consultation with staff will continue as this work progresses.” ■



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# ALEX THOMAS SKILLS AND SPILLS IN THE CIVIL SERVICE

**THE GOVERNMENT IS KEEN TO BOOST CIVIL SERVANTS' SKILLS AND, EVEN IN THE MIDST OF THE GREENSILL SCANDAL, WHITEHALL NEEDS TO THINK ABOUT BOTH INTERNAL TRAINING AND BRINGING IN EXTERNAL SKILLS. HERE ARE SOME IDEAS FOR REFORM**

**W**hen the prime minister arrived in Downing Street, his team put civil service reform near the top of their priority list. The PM's former adviser Dominic Cummings called for "weirdos and misfits with odd skills" to join the civil service to ensure "genuine cognitive diversity". Though at the same time, he issued a contradictory warning that he would "bin you within weeks if you don't fit".

Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove offered a more conventional critique of the lack of “basic skills required to serve government, and our citizens, well” in his 2020 Ditchley speech. He pointed to gaps in mathematics and statistics, procurement, science and engineering, and expertise in specific policy areas.

The government's view has been that enhancing the skills of the civil service is essential to deliver its other objectives. That is right. Identifying, attracting, developing and deploying the right civil service skills will be critical to the success of this government and its successors.

A new Institute for Government report on finding the right skills for the civil service looks at the progress made and what needs to happen next.

In the heat of the Greensill scandal it is easy to lose sight of the benefits that bringing in new skills can have, and of the progress the civil service has made. Reforms over the last decade have helped to create and develop the cross-government functions and professions that improve how government builds and deploys its specialist skills.

The first of our recommendations is that the civil service should have a strategy to set out the skills it wants to develop. That includes more data, digital, finance, and project and portfolio management capability. Without a clear, cross-civil service strategic plan, priorities will be ad hoc and skills development will remain patchy across departments (and functions).

The civil service also needs to be able to create, deploy and manage effective, multi-disciplinary teams that more formally bring together the expertise and skills of different profession-

als. These groups can be made up of people with different and complementary skill sets from inside and outside the civil service. In particular, the nature of the projects future governments will want and need to do – from net zero to infrastructure improvement – means that the civil service will need more expert project and portfolio managers to make up these teams.

Next, there is a common critique that the civil service needs more of one or another particular professional skill. That might mean more digital specialists, project managers or data analysts. That is fair enough, but the civil service already has thousands of experts in its ranks. More than half of civil servants are operational delivery specialists working with citizens on the front line of public services. The UK government is a large employer of scientists and engineers; data, digital and technology experts, commercial professionals; analysts; and project managers.

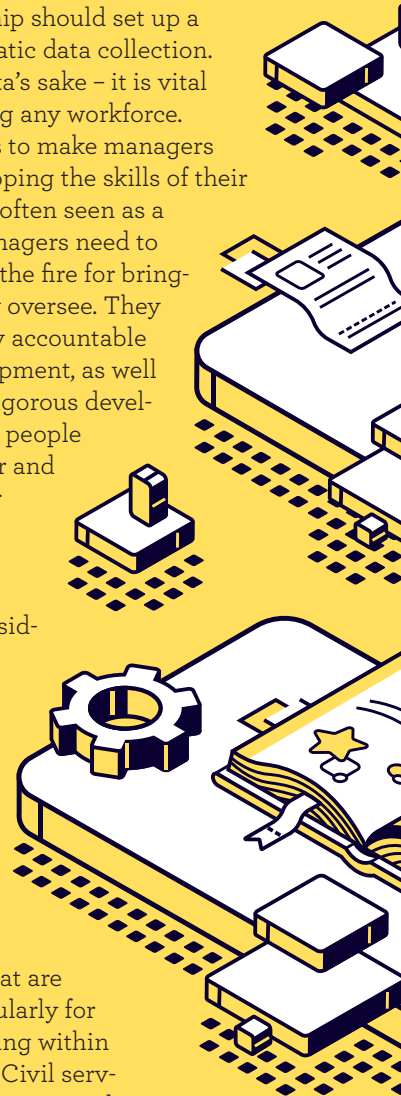
But the data collected on who has these skills, and to what level of competence, is inadequate. Consistent information is lacking and different data-collection systems across departments mean civil service leaders do not know enough about their workforce, the skills they have available, or how best to deploy them. Sorting that out should be a top priority. The civil service needs

to commit to collecting better data on skills, and its senior leadership should set up a programme of systematic data collection. This is not data for data's sake – it is vital to effectively managing any workforce.

The next priority is to make managers accountable for developing the skills of their teams. Training is too often seen as a “nice to have” and managers need to have their feet held to the fire for bringing on the people they oversee. They should be held directly accountable for their team’s development, as well as their own, and set rigorous development goals with the people they manage each year and report back on how far they have been met.

Opportunities for development are too rare for those civil servants who are not new starters or considered top talent. Self-development should be a fundamental part of every civil servant's job, to improve performance in their current role and to develop skills needed to progress. Funding should not be a barrier to taking up relevant opportunities to learn.

Building on ongoing efforts by the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit, a core group of training courses should be developed for skills that are important across the civil service, particularly for improving writing, numeracy, collaborating within and across teams, and core digital skills. Civil servants who work with ministers and parliament need

**Misfit magnet** Dominic Cummings

to learn from the experience of others, and policy officials need an understanding of economic and financial models.

The quality of training also needs more rigorous assessment and accreditation. The civil service should invest in evaluation and avoid long contracting cycles that are hard to adapt and improve.

It is a brave think tank that, during a lobbying furore, issues a call for continuing to build private-sector experience and expertise in the civil service. But the civil service

**“The civil service needs to be able to create, deploy and manage effective, multi-disciplinary teams that more formally bring together the expertise and skills of different professionals”**

still needs those skills. Stronger ethical oversight of transfers between the private and public sector is required, but that should not stop the circulation of skilled people.

That should sit alongside efforts to bring senior police, health, central and local government public servants together to develop their leadership, building on the model of the National Leadership Centre. The wider public sector has a lot to offer the civil service but tapping into this experience and insight can be hard.

Improving skills in the civil service is not something that will ever be finished. Like almost all organisations, the government workforce needs to refresh and redefine the skills it needs over time. That is the challenge for the current civil service leadership, no less than that when Lord Fulton issued his 1968 call for the civil service to “think out what new skills and kinds of men are needed, and how these men can be found, trained and deployed”. His language is outdated, but his insight remains true today. ■

*Alex Thomas is an Institute for Government programme director leading work on policymaking and the civil service*



# DAVE PENMAN STANDARDS IN PUBLIC STRIFE

**THE VARIOUS INQUIRIES DOGGING THE GOVERNMENT DO NOT SEEM TO HAVE AFFECTED THEM ELECTORALLY. UNFORTUNATELY, THAT SEEMS TO BE THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS TO THE PRIME MINISTER**

**I** *'m in the mood for dancin', romancin'  
Ooh I'm given' it all tonight  
I'm in the mood for chancin'  
I feel like dancin'  
Ooh so come on and hold me tight*

If you google Nolan, you're more likely to get this as an early result than the seven principles of public life. I think this is perhaps where our current prime minister has gone wrong. Chancin' and romancin' could be his Twitter handle, as they say, or etched on his gravestone for our older readers. I've never seen the PM dancin' though and, quite frankly, the prospect fills me with dread having seen his predecessor's efforts to ABBA.

As I write this on the morning after Super Thursday, I'm struck by two startling facts. Firstly, *I'm in the mood*

**"Are standards in government simply a bubble issue that this or any government can ride out without significant electoral impact?"**

for dancing, the 1979 hit for the Nolan Sisters, sold 673,850 copies in Japan. I post this without comment, as they say. Secondly, despite a month of headlines that have mired the prime minister in allegations of sleaze and misconduct, including lobbyists having privileged access to the cabinet, Tory donors being awarded PPE contracts and a financial scandal that is literally at his front door, the Conservatives under Johnson have just taken Hartlepool and are probably on course for an impressive set of mid-term results.

What does this tell us? At this moment in time, it may be that these issues do not really resonate electorally. When the #metoo scandal broke in Westminster, it was around the time of the usual opinion poll from Ipsos Mori that looks at trust in a range of occupations, called the Veracity Index. The pollsters decided to wait as they

were worried the results would be skewed by all the negative headlines. When they did conduct the poll, they discovered that trust in politicians was so low, it didn't really matter.

This is a government that famously wants to ignore the Westminster bubble and speak directly to voters. Are standards in government simply a bubble issue that this or any government can ride out without significant electoral impact? I don't have the answer to that and I suspect few do. What mattered in 1995, when the Committee on Standards in Public Life were set up, probably doesn't matter now in the same way to voters. Is this the lesson this government will take from Super Thursday? All good here, voters don't give a fig.

The issue, though, is that standards in public life, and particularly at the heart of government, do matter. It's not simply a moral question whether ministers grant preferential access to government to former colleagues working for private gain, whether being a friend of a minister gives you a better chance of winning a contract or, indeed, whether your conduct as a minister is held to the same standards that apply to the staff who serve you. It matters in the end because decisions ministers take, including spending our money, are meant to be in our interest alone. That, of course, is as true for the civil service as it is for ministers.

A government that is confident about its decisions and conduct should welcome transparency and independence of oversight.

Instead, over the last few months, information has had to be dragged from ministers by investigative journalists. The prime minister himself has danced on the head of a pin in his answers, trying to give the impression of being transparent whilst ensuring his partial responses won't come back to haunt him when facts eventually appear.

In the midst of this the prime minister had the chance, with the appointment of a new independent adviser on ministers' interests, to demonstrate that some of these lessons were being learnt. The Committee on Standards in Public Life had recommended that the adviser should have the power to launch investigations. Instead, the prime minister, who is the sole arbiter of final decisions on the ministerial code, also retained the power to decide whether an investigation is even launched in the first place.

The choice could not have been starker or come at a more opportune time for the PM. Had he wanted to rebuild trust among civil servants and the public, following the damage done by his ministerial code decision on the home secretary, that single reform would have helped immeasurably. Instead, he was chancin' that he'd get away with it electorally, because in the end, that's all that apparently matters. ■

**Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union. He tweets @FDAgensec**



# DOMINIC ABRAMS THE LESSONS FROM COVID ARE LOCAL

## CORONAVIRUS AND THE STALLED EUROPEAN SUPER LEAGUE SHOULD TEACH POLICYMAKERS THE SAME THING: THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN POLICY AND DELIVERY

**I**t is over a year since Covid-19 arrived on British shores and the pandemic's power to expose the vulnerabilities and strengths of our society remains undimmed. The crisis has laid bare longstanding inequalities between rich and poor, old and young, north and south, those in different types of employment, and various ethnic communities. It has revealed the extent of the state's resources and potential to protect the vulnerable and fix that which is broken. And it has provided a glimpse of exciting futures, such as one in which town centres play new roles, travel patterns are very different, education is provided in new ways, and remote-working technology unlocks employment and investment opportunities for previously neglected regions and people.

But the pandemic has also demonstrated the essential role that communities play in individual and collective wellbeing, as well as the deep attachments that many people feel to their local communities.

For proof of the latter, look no further than the ferocious backlash that followed recent attempts by six English football clubs to join a new breakaway European Super League. At the heart of people's rage was the sense that a tiny group of distant billionaires could have the audacity to exploit precious community assets, some of them over a hundred years old, ostensibly to expand their profit margins. In a rare display of solidarity, football fans across the UK and Europe joined forces to oppose this assault on their communities and forced the instigators to think again. With protests emerging from all directions, including the most senior politicians, we witnessed the force of shared common interests and values.

Amid this renewed focus on the value of communities, the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation have devised Understanding Communities, a timely collaboration to bring together and fund new research from policymakers, researchers and practitioners on the ground to identify practical means of

understanding and supporting local communities across the UK.

The research programme will shed light on what makes some local communities stronger, more equal, and more connected than others; why some communities are particularly vulnerable to crises; and how policymakers can use these insights to reinforce the strength of communities and improve social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The answers to these questions will be multifaceted. For instance, evidence shows that the presence of – and accessibility to – local volunteer, community and mutual-aid groups have been critical to the Covid-19 response, which hints at the potential advantages of building and sustaining this type of capacity in communities across the country. Meanwhile, history shows that local and community knowledge, including knowledge held within local government, is a vital resource in combating and recovering from epidemics.

Strongly related to understanding people's connection to communities is the question of where people are willing to place their trust. The UK entered the pandemic with already very low levels

of trust in central government and the media, but the evidence suggests these have declined even further. At the same time, however, we know that trust in local government has

**“In a rare display of solidarity, football fans across the UK and Europe joined forces to oppose this assault on their communities and forced the instigators to think again”**



**Booted out** Communities pushed back against Super League plans

been higher and steadier, which tells us that attending to the relationships between community members, local politicians, local policymakers and local decision makers could play a key role in improving community development and individual and community wellbeing.

The need to find ways to support community resilience that are based on sound evidence and principles, as well as being practical and feasible to implement, is particularly urgent given the perfect storm currently engulfing local councils' finance departments, and any further constraints on spending will inevitably compound inequalities. Economic 'levelling up' is certainly essential, but there is also much work to be

done to enable communities to make the most of what is available to them – to ensure they are equipped to recognise, share and use their economic resources to establish greater personal and collective strength for the whole community. Let's find out what makes a strong community – and then develop targeted measures to create more of them across the UK. ■

*Professor Dominic Abrams is a fellow of the Royal Academy, and a professor of social psychology and director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent*

# COLIN TALBOT & CAROLE TALBOT LEVELLING UP 2.0

**A PROMINENT MP HAS BEEN APPOINTED AS THE PRIME MINISTER'S ADVISER ON LEVELLING UP. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE NEXT STAGE OF THIS AGENDA?**

**M**ore than a year ago we asked in these pages: what is the government's 'levelling up' agenda? The answer was, in brief, no-one nearly knew. We pointed out that one Conservative MP was asking some interesting questions and suggesting ideas: his name? Neil O'Brien.

Scroll forward fifteen months and the *Financial Times* reports "Confusion over UK 'levelling-up' plan prompts Boris Johnson to hire new adviser".

And who has Boris Johnson just appointed to take charge of clarifying the 'levelling up' agenda? Yes, you guessed, it's Neil O'Brien MP.

This interesting on several levels.

First, it is an admission that no-one really has a clear idea of what 'levelling-up' means. According to the *FT*, 'it's a running joke amongst No.10 staff that "it's a slogan without a purpose" '.

Second, bringing in O'Brien is probably only possible now once Dominic Cummings and the 'Vote Leave' cabal have been defenestrated from No.10. O'Brien is an independent thinker and something of a policy wonk who would not have got a look in had Cummings still been in charge.

Third, and probably most importantly, will O'Brien's appointment signal a change of direction for 'levelling-up'?

Up until now, to the extent that 'levelling-up' has meant anything it's been about geographical, one might even say constituency, based initiatives.

The biggest symbolic announcements have been about moving bits of Whitehall to so-called 'red wall' areas.

The decision to move about a fifth of Treasury staff to Darlington to create an economic campus was one eye-catching announcement in Rishi Sunak's March 2021 Budget statement.

**"To the extent that 'levelling-up' has meant anything it's been about geographical, one might even say constituency, based initiatives"**

This followed on from the announcement in the previous month that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will open a Wolverhampton outpost that will see more than 500 departmental staff based in the West Midlands by 2025.

The only other big initiative that could be construed as part of the 'levelling-up' agenda has been the so-called Towns Fund. Announced in July 2019 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, with total funding of £3.6bn, this was allocated through a controversial bidding process. And of course it came nowhere near replacing what had been taken

away from these areas during the previous decade of austerity.

This is important because one of the points Neil O'Brien has made is that levelling-up should not just be about geographical areas, but it should also be about individuals.

In a Conservative Home blog post last February he argued that 'levelling-up' should also be about individuals – something that has been largely absent from what discussion there has been by government of what this agenda means.

But O'Brien also pointed out in his blog that government policies are often skewed against some areas. Our analysis of public spending per head across English regions confirms that this is true (although some of the inequality was reduced after 1997).

This raises big issues about public spending though. To 'level-up' all English regions to the same spending per head as in London would have cost about £72bn in 2017-18.



**Home from home** Treasury staff are set to move to a new economic campus in Darlington

And the sort of symbolic 'Whitehall moving North' to Wolverhampton and Darlington are likely to have very limited impact on the big picture of civil service distribution. Our historical analysis suggests the big movement out of London and the south east already happened in four decades from 1970 to 2010. There has been a slight reversal of this trend since 2010 (partly due to extra recruitment caused by Brexit) but there seems limited scope for big further migrations.

The really big issue, we would argue, which O'Brien failed to mention in his post last year, was any notion of levelling-up the distribution of power within England, and between London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

If anything, the recent initiatives like the Towns Fund have moved more power into Whitehall and Westminster as ministers get to 'pick favourites' for their largesse. There is certainly no hint of levelling-up the balance of power between Whitehall and town halls.

If Brexit, and especially the more recent emphasis on 'sovereignty', tells us anything it is that a sense of powerlessness was a key driver in the so-called 'left behind' areas.

Unless O'Brien's 'levelling-up' reboot addresses some of these issues, we'll be back here in another year asking 'what was that all about? ■

# MICHAEL BICHARD MAKING THE MOST OF NON-EXECES

**GIVING DEPARTMENTAL BOARDS A STRONGER ROLE WOULD HELP GOVERNMENT BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE, SAYS THE FORMER PERMANENT SECRETARY AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION**

**W**ith the BBC currently repeating *Yes, Minister*, it is tempting to speculate what Sir Humphrey's reaction to the idea of a board to run the department would have been. The curl of his lip at such an import from the base world of business would have been something to behold, I suspect.

You probably have to be very much a Whitehall watcher to know that government departments now have boards, like companies, charities and other organisations. They are chaired by secretaries of state and include other ministers, top officials and independent non-executives, usually with a business background. Their origins go back to the 1990s. The two crucial elements, however – that secretaries of state chair and that most non-executives are from business – were put in place by the coalition government after 2010.

When I say “like companies”, that is actually rather a stretch. Unlike boards in other sectors, departmental boards have no legal personality or defined powers and duties. But does the lack of formal status mean departmental boards are a flawed concept? The Commission for Smart Government, of which I am a member, along with current and former government non-executives, decided we should take a look. Our answer is that they have undoubtedly been doing useful work, but could do so much more. A few well-judged changes would allow them to take on a powerful and much more useful role in improving the planning and execution of the government's policy intentions.

As they stand, to varying extents, boards and the independent non-executives on them are making a positive difference. Independently-chaired audit committees work well, and outside formal processes, non-executives contribute their experience and insight, helping to address in particular the tendency of Whitehall discussions to be “non-operational”, as one non-executive put it.

However, the effectiveness of boards is limited by their exclusion from the formative stages of strategy and policy development, and the tendency of some ministers not to

take them seriously. As a result, both non-executives and ministers can feel frustrated. Our report makes five suggestions to strengthen ministers' ability to direct their departments by complementing their political insight with the varied professional insight of board members.

First, scrap the current guidance that excludes boards from discussing policy. While ministers are clearly the source and origin of policy, they can and do discuss it extensively with officials. So why keep policy – or more specifically, the best ways of translating policy intent into practical action – off board agendas, where non-executives could contribute their extensive experience of forming effective strategy and turning it into action?

Second, the government has rightly decided that departmental planning needs a fundamental shake-up, with new Outcome Delivery Plans. The management of departmental project portfolios also needs to be strengthened and boards should be given formal

authority for assuring the soundness of both.

Third, making the right appointments at the top of the organisation, and managing performance, is critical to business success anywhere. Non-executives already play some role on these fronts in

departments, but we suggest that needs to be strengthened and formalised.

Fourth, while the main elements of what boards do need to be the same across government, their precise ways of working should be tailored to individual departments. Departments vary significantly in size, budgets, and in the accountability and governance of operational functions. Above all, secretaries of state have their own bundle of experiences and preferences. Each board's ways of working should be discussed between the secretary of state, permanent secretary and lead non-executive, and properly documented.

Finally, the key elements of board effectiveness need to be defined in a one-to-two-page document and assessed as part of the Treasury and Cabinet Office's assessment of departments' systems and effectiveness.

Unlike so many attempted reforms in government, boards have survived and won acceptance for their usefulness, up to a point. Let's charge them up further, as a key supporting piece of infrastructure for modern, smart, government. ■

**“The effectiveness of boards is limited by their exclusion from the formative stages of strategy and policy development, and the tendency of some ministers not to take them seriously”**



Curled lip? Sir Humphrey Appleby

**Lord Michael Bichard is a crossbench peer in the House of Lords and until this year was chair of the National Audit Office. He was previously permanent secretary at the Department for Education and Employment and the first director of the Institute for Government**

# ANDY COWPER NHS ACT WON'T PAY SOCIAL CARE BILL



NEW  
REGULAR  
COLUMN

**IN HIS FIRST COLUMN FOR CSW, HEALTH POLICY EXPERT ANDY COWPER REVIEWS SIMON STEVENS'S WHITEHALL LEGACY, AND CONSIDERS THE CHANGES BEING WROUGHT BY THE NEW ROUND OF HEALTH REFORMS THE NHS BOSS AUTHORED**

**I**t's a pleasure to start a new regular column on health and care issues for CSW. Health policy is possibly the most high-profile area of government spending, and this isn't surprising – the NHS is the one public service that we can all imagine ourselves needing to use in the future.

This feels timely, too: the health bill in the Queen's Speech (the leaked text of which I published back in February) promises some major changes to how the NHS will operate. The biggest of these is that the health secretary will explicitly be "taking back control" of NHS England, with the ability to issue operational directions and intervene earlier in reconfiguration decisions.

There is A Lot Of Change coming in these sectors. This may not feel like reassuring news for a civil service that has only recently emerged from the threat of a "hard rain" from the PM's former chief adviser Dominic Cummings. A persistent drizzle of change may be the best we can hope for, but worse forecasts are not unrealistic.

The Department of Health and Social Care will clearly be affected, with the power balance between NHS England and every other body in the sector rebalanced back towards Victoria Street.

## **Towards social care reform (very, very slowly)**

Social care is rising up the reform agenda, albeit with a level of political hesitancy and timidity that makes DHSC feel more like the Department For Health But Social Care.

The prime minister's promise in his first speech in Downing Street to "fix social care once and for all" has not yet been transferred into legislation, with the Queen's Speech instead saying that proposals on social care reform "will be brought forward", although legislation is planned to allow the NHS to "innovate and embrace technology".

We hear that the PM has become attracted: this time, not to pole-dancing, grant-winning tech entrepreneur Jennifer Arcuri, but rather to the Dilnot Commission's 2011 proposals for social care reform.

A mere decade in the waiting. Nobody could accuse this government, nor its three predecessors, of rushing social care reform. The PM loves Latin quotes: "*festinare lente*" (more haste, less speed) must be its social care reform motto.

Senior hands will recall that former Conservative chancellor George Osborne raised Dilnot's suggested £35,000 "cap" level to £72,000 and deferred implementation until 2016, and then until 2020.

The Treasury is hitting back with the notion that the cap/floor arrangement, if set at around £100,000, will reward high-value house owner-occupiers in the south, while potentially taking the entire estate of less high-value house owner-occupiers in areas such as the "Red Wall" seats that gave the current government its commanding majority.

## **Enter the new health bill, exit Sir Simon Stevens**

The new health bill is about 95% written by the outgoing NHS England boss Sir Simon Stevens, who compiled a list of legislative requests for the government.

Stevens was in large part hired to take health off the government's agenda after the high-profile political disaster of the Andrew Lansley reforms that became the 2012 Health And Social Care Act. He achieved this largely by ignoring the market mechanisms of choice, competition and clinical commissioning, that the act enshrined in law.

Not only did he do that (largely unnoticed at the time), Stevens also twice won multi-year increases in NHS funding during the period of public sector austerity, in 2014 and 2019. His political acumen and understanding of the workings of Whitehall were central to those achievements.

Sir Simon began his career in NHS management. He moved into politics as a special adviser to Frank Dobson (New Labour's first health secretary); then to Dobson's successor Alan Milburn; and finally to Tony Blair in

Downing Street. Stevens was significantly influential on New Labour's health reforms and spending increases, and on the reintroduction of market mechanisms, the national tariff and the creation of semi-autonomous NHS foundation trusts.

## **The two Stevensisms**

The aim of New Labour's NHS market mechanisms was less ideological, and more about increasing NHS activity and capacity. This wasn't just about the funding increase, though that was huge: 6% real-terms year-on-year cash growth from 2000 to 2010.

Long waiting lists developed over the 1990s meant that average waits for some operations were 18 months or more when New Labour came to power. To achieve the party's promise of reducing this to 18 weeks, the NHS needed greatly-increased activity from providers. Tariff payments were designed to incentivise this.

Measurement of performance and waiting times was taken seriously by the PM's Delivery Unit, and the NHS Modernisation Agency was created to stop the sharing of best practice from being optional. Combined with a new publication of explicit performance "league tables" and some elements of patient choice, this



**Front and centre** Simon Stevens at the London y NHS Nightingale Hospital. The NHS chief exec has taken on an increasingly prominent role in health policy

amounted to Stevensism Mark One. It achieved many of its aims, as independent evaluation by the Kings Fund think tank showed.

Stevensism Mark Two was born into a very different public sector. Although he won the NHS slightly preferential financial treatment, the period from 2010 to 2019 was the slowest sustained period of financial growth in the NHS's history.

Returning in 2014 from running UnitedHealthcare in the US, having been invited to apply for the job by then-PM David Cameron, Sir Simon saw the writing on the wall: that the market mechanisms the 2012 Lansley reforms proposed turbocharging did not stand a chance of working. This was due to a lack of funding, capacity and, critically, workforce training.

A change of approach was needed. Sir Simon accordingly preached the virtue of greater cooperation and integration between the sectors of the NHS, and between the NHS and social care.

The aim for all NHS Trusts to acquire foundation status was dropped. The purchaser-provider split of "commissioning" was essentially redundant. Local "integrated care systems" were invented (with no statutory basis whatsoever). Planning of the NHS system was very definitely back: RIP the market.

By 2019, the outsourcing of health policymaking to Stevens was so complete that the government asked him to come up with proposals for legislation. He obliged. Integrated care systems were to become real by legislation. Com-

pulsory tendering of NHS contracts was to be dropped.

His seven years in charge have been remarkable. Stevens's political skills and peerless command of his brief, combined with strong media presentational ability, left him seemingly above the fray.

His tenure has not been without turbulence or criticism. The highly Stevens-centric control-freakery and focus of NHS England prompted accusations that he is not a team player. The lost Brexit referendum removed the Blairite-loving Cameron and Osborne, who valued him highly.

Sir Simon's unabashed use of the 2012 act's legal independence for NHS England also annoyed both current health secretary Matt Hancock and the prime minister, Boris Johnson, at various points. (Both had, of course, voted for it at every reading). Thus we can understand the new health bill's plans for the secretary of state to "take back control".

However, explicitly taking back control is not without risks, with the current NHS waiting list at its longest since records began. It will be, in the language of Jay and Lynn's classic comedy *Yes, Minister*, a "courageous" move for our current crop of ministers – at health, the Treasury and No.10 – explicitly to take away the "buck stops here" sign from the executive offices of NHS England. ■

**Andy Cowper is the editor of *Health Policy Insight***

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



# GOVERNMENT'S £300M AMAZON PACKAGE



Since a public sector-wide agreement with AWS was introduced six months ago, departments have signed deals worth hundreds of millions with the cloud firm. **Sam Trendall** reports

In 2013, the Cabinet Office introduced the “cloud first” policy, which mandates that, during procurement processes, all central government entities must “fully evaluate” the use of public cloud environments before looking at alternatives. Doing so was also “strongly recommended” for the rest of the public sector.

In the eight years since, the public sector has had a variable relationship with cloud computing and, two years ago, it was even announced that cloud first was set to be replaced with “more appropriate guidance” as it had “become apparent that one size does not fit all”.

The longstanding policy was ultimately kept on and, bit by bit, the collective move away from on-site infrastructure has continued.

Perhaps not quite “cloud

first”, but “cloud eventually” now seems well within reach.

The One Government Cloud Strategy, put in place last year, aims to provide further fuel for adoption. The strategy, which followed discussions between officials and a range of vendors, aims to foster a more joined-up approach to cloud across government.

As part of the plan, the Crown Commercial Service has signed memoranda of understanding with some of the biggest providers of cloud hosting and software – IBM, Oracle, HPE, Google, Microsoft and UKCloud – that will offer discounts and other benefits for all public sector bodies by, effectively, treating them as a single customer.

Last – but certainly not least – to sign an MoU was Amazon Web Services, which announced in November that it had agreed a three-year arrangement with CCS dubbed the One Government Value Agreement (OGVA).

In addition to the savings offered on the vendor’s services, AWS has

**“CCS anticipates commercial benefits well in excess of £50m over the next three years” *Crown Commercial Service***

Produced in association with CSW's sister title *Public Technology*



also committed to providing cloud computing training to 6,000 civil servants via a “digital skills fund”.

Chris Hayman, the firm's UK public sector director, says: “We are working with OGVA customers to build customised training programmes that are free of charge for staff and are designed to provide them with cloud expertise and skills including architecting in the cloud, developer and systems operations, security, big data and machine learning.”

In the meantime, those customers have been quick to start taking advantage of the cost savings provided by the agreement.

Since the introduction of the arrangement, AWS has been awarded new three-year contracts with the Home Office (£120m), the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (£2m), the Department for Work and Pensions (£57m), HM Revenue and Customs (£94m), HM Land Registry (£4.5m), the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (£6.74m), the Ministry of Justice (£23.9m), and Companies House (£5m).

In many cases, these replaced incumbent arrangements with months or years left to run; HMRC's deal superseded a contract signed with AWS as recently as September 2020 – two months before the OGVA was introduced.

The DWP was a launch partner of the public sector-wide commercial arrangement, entering into a new cloud-hosting contract with AWS on 1 December 2020. This replaced a deal that had been scheduled to run for another eight months.

“The contract is currently not delivering best value for money and DWP looked to find a replacement with improved discounts, which has been developed through Cabinet Office's OGVA,” the contract award notice says.

DWP, and the other major departments to have renegotiated their AWS deals, form the second of two tiers of the agreement which, according to AWS, is designed to enable “larger organisations already using the cloud... [to] maximise benefits from their existing cloud environment, with participants benefiting from a new pricing structure”.

The first tier, meanwhile, offers training and guidance to help organisations “at the beginning of their cloud journey”.



how this will be achieved.

Hayman says that, over the last decade, more than 150 firms on the G-Cloud framework have “used AWS to help them deliver their own services – worth more £1.3bn – to the government”. More than half of these were SMEs, he adds.

“The OGVA is designed to be ‘channel neutral’, in that customers are able to access its benefits whether they contract directly with AWS or via one of

the members of the AWS Partner Network, many of whom are SMEs,” Hayman says. “The choice of whether to contract directly with AWS or via a partner is for our customers to make – experience suggests that when a customer chooses to contract for AWS services via a partner, it's usually because the partner is bringing additional services or value that AWS doesn't offer; for example, undertaking bespoke software development work.”

In addition to the potential implications for SMEs, another frequently-voiced concern about the rise of AWS is that – with so many of the biggest departments signing major, long-term deals with the company – government is becoming standardised on the vendor's platform.

Asked about the implications of Amazon's large and ever-growing footprint, CCS tells CSW it remains committed to promoting choice for public sector customers, with the spokesperson saying that “it's important to note that there are a number of other cloud MoUs... all of [which were] an outcome of the One Government Cloud Strategy”.

“Contracting authorities have the power to decide who to contract with, and more than 5,000 suppliers were awarded places on G-Cloud 12, with 91% of them SMEs, offering a wide range of choice for potential customers,” they added.

“MoUs standardise pricing for the whole public sector, making sure that customers can get the best deal for their procurement decisions.”

With £300m and counting having been spent in less than six months, it would seem that many in government are happy enough with the deal they are getting. And, when the time comes for others to relet their IT contracts, the cloud may – finally – be the first place they visit. ■



Neither government nor AWS has put a figure on the level of discount available via the OGVA, but a CCS spokesperson told CSW that the improved terms would add up to tens of millions of pounds saved over the course of the deal's lifetime.

“Many existing customers have retested their contracts to check value for money and ended up awarding contracts that include OGVA benefits,” they said. “CCS anticipates commercial benefits well in excess of £50m over the next three years.”

The procurement agency added that, in light of the arrangements put in place with AWS and six of its cloud rivals, similar public-sector wide agreements with major suppliers may follow.

“We do anticipate more MoUs in the future as they deliver commercial benefits to the public sector which would not otherwise have been possible to quantify or achieve,” the spokesperson said.

#### Small change?

A stated aim of the OGVA is “helping more SMEs to take part in public sector contracts”.

Given that the £300m-plus of deals listed above were all signed directly with AWS, it may not be immediately obvious

**Sherin Aminossehe** is director of infrastructure and race champion at the Ministry of Defence. She tells **Beckie Smith** about the MoD estate, drawing in lockdown, and why returning to the private sector wasn't the epiphany she expected. Photo by Paul Heartfield



# THE HITCHHIKER'S HOMECOMING

**W**hen the first lockdown came, Sherin Aminossehe began to draw the places the pandemic prevented people from visiting. Having always drawn for herself, she made an offer to her Twitter following: “Name a place that you can’t go due to Covid-19 and if I can do it justice I’ll draw it for you.” She was touched and surprised when the requests came rolling in: The Royal Courts of Justice; the back streets of Essaouira in Morocco; East Street Market in Walworth.

Clearly, her message resonated. “Sometimes we don’t realise it’s the small things that are really special to us until we can’t have them anymore,” she says.

“I thought, I’ll put up a request and maybe two or three people – if I’m lucky – might want something. Within the first day I had 20 requests, and it kept on growing. So I continued drawing for about 134 days.” Soon, people were offering to make charitable donations to say thank you.

She decided to direct them to SSAFA, a charity that helps members of the armed forces, their families and veterans. The response to Aminossehe’s drawings has been so great that she has compiled them into a book, *Road Untravelled*, to be released this autumn in aid of the charity.

After drawing everyone else’s lockdown no-gos, CSW wonders which place Aminossehe misses most. “What I miss is less about place and more about feelings,” she says. “I’ll see a really busy, bustling scene in central London on TV where people are interacting normally, there’s no facemasks, people go into a restaurant without thinking there’s a national pandemic. I miss that normality and the buzz around it.”

The last year must have been challenging, then, for someone who is used to working in a busy office and travelling

around the country doing site visits.

But the Ministry of Defence’s director of infrastructure says it could have been “an awful lot worse”. Because her directorate is dispersed around the country, staff had some practice at working remotely, which helped. Aminossehe has had to balance her work with homeschooling her young son, and the days have become “a lot longer” – “but at least I didn’t start [this job] in lockdown,” she adds.

By the time lockdown came, Aminossehe was around six months into her current job overseeing the MoD’s infrastructure and estates programmes – a job she refers to as “lego with attitude”. August 2019 marked her return to the civil service after a stint in the private sector.

Just over a year earlier, she had left a job she “absolutely loved” as head of the Government Property Unit in the Cabinet Office. She had taken a high-flying job at a multinational construction, property and infrastructure company, where she wanted to spend more time on delivery after such a strategy-focused public-sector role.

Aminossehe had worked extensively in the private sector before, including as an urban designer and as vice-president of a global architecture firm. On leaving the Cabinet Office, she wrote an article headlined *A private sector hitchhiker’s guide to the civil service* for CSW – so she definitely hadn’t expected to be back so soon.

“I realised going back into the private sector – whilst the salary is lovely – I really missed a lot of the things to do with government and the civil service. You don’t realise the level of complexity and scale that you deal with on a daily basis until you go outside,” she says. She found working in government had completely changed her perspective.

“I was expecting going back to the private sector to be, I suppose, a bit more of

an epiphany – I expected decisions to be taken faster. But maybe it was my Cabinet Office conditioning that actually, you don’t realise how certain parts of government are really, really fast paced,” she says.

She hadn’t previously appreciated, for example, government’s ability to make decisions about “relatively large amounts of money relatively quickly”. “It might not feel like that at the time. But then when you go on to the private sector and you’re in your third investment appraisal committee about whether £2m needs to be spent...”

But the bigger issue was that – while she doesn’t deny a £1bn development is a “really, really big deal” – some of the work began to feel “quite two dimensional”.

“Because actually, all the other things that we take for granted in government – in terms of policy, links with socio-economics and how it impacts people on a much more profound basis, rather than how they just use their development and so on – is not really part of the day job, and it’s left to somebody else. And to a certain extent, for me, it became quite transactional.”

Complexity has always been important to Aminossehe, a trained architect who was drawn to the field because of the scale and intricacy of urban design. And, she says, “government is almost that ultimate complexity.”

“And it’s about the difference you make,” she adds. “You do make a difference to people’s lives by creating a better quality of public space and built environment, but it’s not really the same. And I really missed that.”

Something that stuck in her mind while she was away from government was her work on the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy shortly before she left in 2017.

She was working on Grenfell “almost 24/7” for about three months, attending Cobra meetings and briefings with then-prime minister Theresa May. She says that experience imprinted on her an understanding of how policies can impact people in a way civil servants can miss when they move between departments every couple of years.

“If you move from one technical area to another, you don’t always see some of the unintended consequences of things that have happened. And it’s ultimately where you see that as government, we have a responsibility to regulate and legislate and make sure the wider industries who use our standards are using them in the way that they are meant

“I realised going back into the private sector – whilst the salary is lovely – I really missed a lot of the things to do with government”

to. And you see that there need to be checks and balances across the system.”

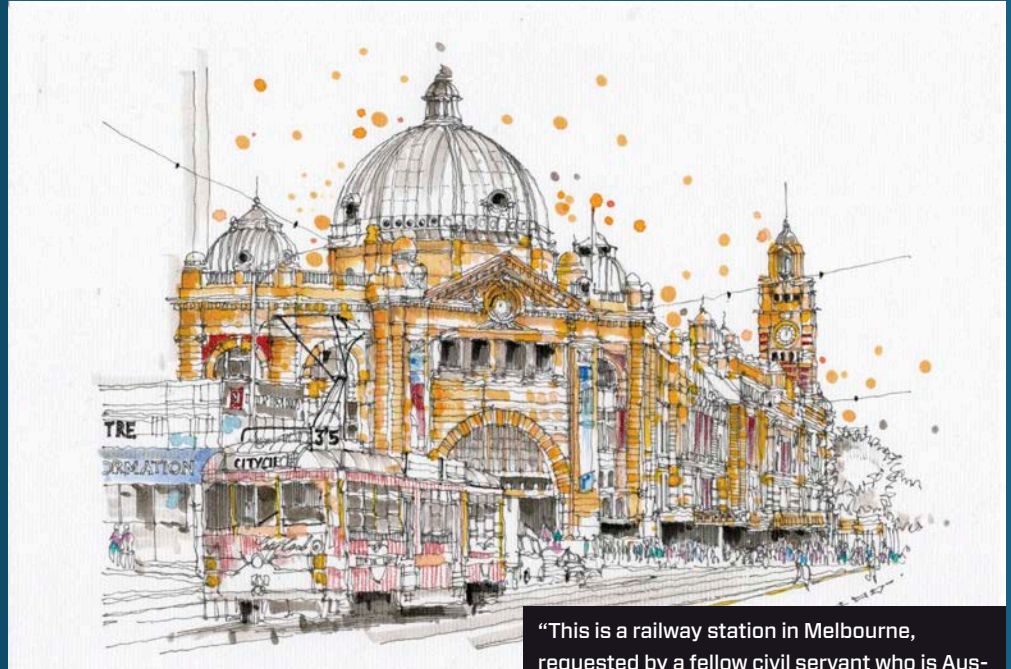
If Aminossehe's last job wasn't complex enough, that's not the case for this one. There is, she puts it simply, “an awful lot going on”.

For one, her directorate is finalising a new strategy for defence infrastructure that will consider, among other things, how to support progress towards government's net-zero goal. Then there's the defence estate optimisation programme, which aims to ensure the MoD has the right accommodation and training facilities. And the government's recent integrated review of foreign, development and defence policy set out the capabilities the MoD should have in future and created a “template” for the infrastructure to support those capabilities, Aminossehe says.

She points out that armed forces equipment and combat aircraft are only useful if they are surrounded by the right infrastructure. “I always say: concrete and infrastructure's sexy. You can have as many F-35bs as you want, but if you don't have a runway, they won't land anywhere.”

The department is also mindful of the link between the quality of infrastructure and buildings, and recruitment and retention of staff, she says – but it hasn't always had the financial backing of the Treasury it has needed. In 2016 – the year the estates programme kicked off – the National Audit Office said funding would be a “huge challenge”. It came after years of budget constraints had forced the MoD to take short-term cost-cutting measures at the expense of longer-term savings, the watchdog said at the time.

Aminossehe acknowledges the effect austerity had on estates across government. “Because our estate is really, really substantial, you see that impact a lot more. And also, because we own a lot of our estate...



“This is a railway station in Melbourne, requested by a fellow civil servant who is Australian. That place had been a really important part of his growing up because it's where he would usually meet friends when he was a teenager, go to places when he was older, and meet family as he grew up. He hadn't been able to go back to Melbourne for a bit of time and that was a symbol of his life in Australia.”

we are responsible for latency, et cetera. So it becomes much more pertinent.”

But Aminossehe says those days are behind the department, now it has greater financial backing from the Treasury. Ahead of last year's Spending Review, the MoD got a cash boost adding £24bn to its coffers for the next four years.

Aminossehe also says the MoD is getting a grip on the way it manages contracts with outsourcers – another area that has been criticised by the NAO and other watchdogs.

Unsurprisingly given her own experience working outside government, Aminossehe is a great advocate of drawing on the private sector where it's useful and effective to do so. “I very firmly believe that the private sector and public sector can have a good relationship, if they are open to actually understanding each other's needs,” she says.

But she says a drive by the department over the last few years to develop and retain specialist skills – as well as the govern-

ment's creation of the infrastructure and project delivery profession – has reduced its reliance on contractors. That drive has included building up commercial skills so the department can not only handle individual contracts better, but also “make sure that the procurement strategy is right”.

Aminossehe is also race champion for the MoD – an organisation that she admits does not have the most welcoming image to all communities, and is not especially racially diverse. Does she think the department has a long way to go to change that?

“MoD has a certain reputation in terms of what we do: people probably think about war; there are particular areas which we have engaged over the past couple of decades that would probably make certain groups or communities more hesitant in terms of joining defence,” she says. Understanding and overcoming those perceptions is not something that will change overnight.

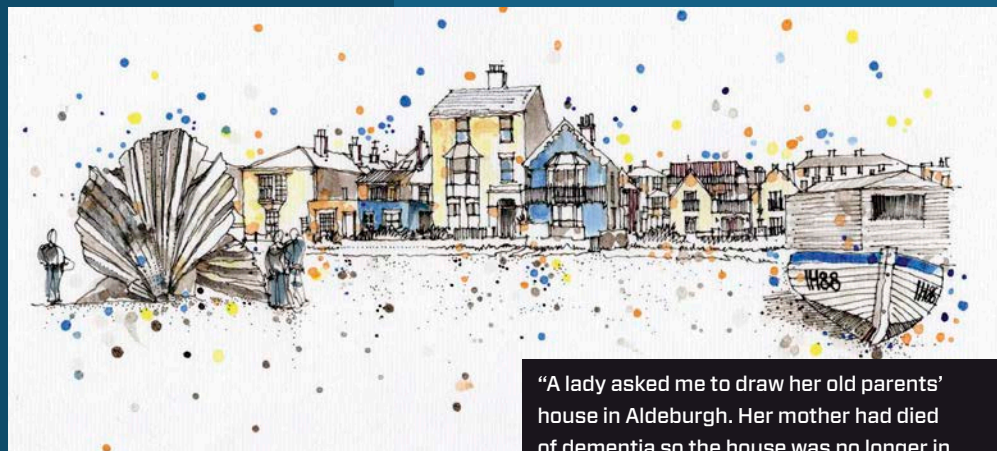
Part of what she wants to communicate is that the department is “not about dropping bombs on a country – it's about defence, it's about security, it's about making the United Kingdom a better place”. She hopes having more diverse role models in place will help to change those perceptions. The department meanwhile runs a range of outreach activities, including some in schools, to try and encourage a more diverse range of people to work there.

“Concrete and infrastructure's sexy. You can have as many F-35bs as you want, but if you don't have a runway, they won't land anywhere”

Aminossehe – who was born in Iran – recalls that a couple of her mentors even warned her off taking the director job, “saying ‘it’s full of white men of a certain age, you won’t like it, it’s really traditional and they always do things in a certain way’”. Did that factor into her decision to take it – that she would be one less “white man of a certain age” in a senior position? She bursts out laughing. “I’ve worked throughout the whole of my career in a male-dominated industry. As an architect, where I started, only about 12% of qualified architects were women. It’s marginally higher now, but not by much; in construction, the number of senior women is lower. And in property...”

She says while she has found the MoD welcoming, and her directorate is one of the more diverse ones, there is more to be done elsewhere in the department. But she says she has seen a “real willingness” from senior leaders – both civilian and military – to do that work, and to signal that discriminatory behaviour will not be tolerated.

“Personally, I’ve seen the culture change over the past year,” she adds. The Black Lives Matter movement, while it showed that “actually, we could be doing better” on diversity and inclusivity, was a catalyst for “a



“A lady asked me to draw her old parents’ house in Aldeburgh. Her mother had died of dementia so the house was no longer in the family. She used to always go to Aldborough on holidays, but because of lockdown, she wasn’t able to do so. And she felt a real disconnect with her parents and her family. So that was really, really special for her. And I found that very moving.”

number of really helpful conversations”.

Unfortunately, those conversations have not always gone smoothly. Last June, *The Times* reported that senior management had taken disciplinary action after “deeply offensive” comments were made on an all-staff Zoom call that addressed – among other things – the department’s zero-tolerance policy on discrimination.

Aminossehe was part of the call, along with then-permanent secretary Sir Stephen Lovegrove and General Sir Nick

Carter, chief of the defence staff. “It was basically talking about what we expect [from staff]. But also saying, ‘this is what it can be like, for people within defence, when things like the Black Lives Matter protests happen

and this is how people feel. And it’s important to be open when we talk about these sorts of matters.”

Then came an anonymous Q&A that included some questions Aminossehe describes as “not what we expect of people in defence, in any shape or form”. According to a stern memo sent by Lovegrove to staff after the call, they included comments “conflating ‘indigenous’ with white Britons [and] claims that any focus on diversity was at odds with fairness”.

Aminossehe says: “The issue about race which is, I think, always very worrying and upsetting and sad is: there are some people who feel that their positions might be threatened if we have a more diverse community. Or there’s

people who actually fundamentally don’t understand it, because their experience from where they are is quite limited.”

Like Lovegrove, Aminossehe says these comments are completely unacceptable. “But also, we firmly believe as a department that you don’t close down communications because of a limited number of voices who may not understand or have issues with certain things,” she adds.

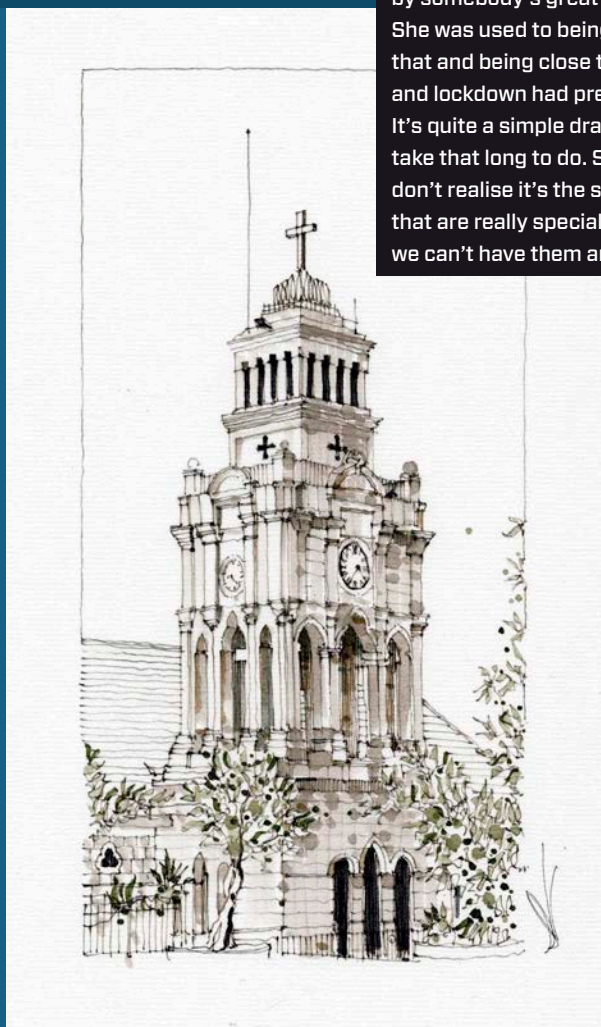
That leads her back to why she values her role as race champion. “The more you talk about it, the more you normalise [talking about] this kind of thing, some people will either decide that this isn’t the place for them and they will move on – or they’ll realise, ‘actually, I was wrong’... Only by continuing that dialogue and not shying away from it can you actually change those attitudes.”

Conversations about diversity certainly seem to be happening, with cabinet secretary Simon Case and civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm signalling that they want it to be a priority across government. Many who have gone before them have said the same – but Aminossehe says she does think there has been a change for the better in the last few years.

“Maybe I’m an eternal optimist, and you have to be as an architect for so long. Where I do feel that it’s been different to the time when I was previously in government, is I think there is real action behind the words. I don’t think it’s going to suddenly change tomorrow – it is something that needs dealing with sensitively, and there’s lots of things that need to be put into place before we start seeing real change.

“But it’s something that we have to build on and not just give up on because we think that we can’t make the world a better place tomorrow.” ■

“This is a church spire in a small village in Lebanon which was designed by somebody’s great grandfather. She was used to being able to see that and being close to her family and lockdown had prevented that. It’s quite a simple drawing, it didn’t take that long to do. Sometimes we don’t realise it’s the small things that are really special to us until we can’t have them anymore.”



# FIT FOR THE FUTURE

<h2>How Defence is embracing digital</h2>



Increasing digital skills in defence has been named among the government's top policy priorities. **Richard Johnstone** speaks to the team making it happen

Orders are the backbone of life in the armed forces. Taking and giving instructions defines priorities and hierarchy in the military perhaps more than any other sphere of life. So when a digital transformation programme in the Ministry of Defence aimed to move the department's IT and digital teams from being order-takers to rule-makers, it was a major shift in approach.

The transformation was spearheaded by the creation of the MoD's Defence Digital organisation, which in December 2019 brought together a number of previously disparate teams that worked on IT across both the department and the individual forces to create an organisation with around 2,400 personnel including military, civil servants and contractors.

Headed by the MoD's chief information officer, Charlie Forte,

Defence Digital is intended to coordinate requirements across the forces and the MoD through supplying IT to 200,000 users – including on global military operations – and integrating strategy, planning and performance management. It also leads on defensive cyber strategy and capability development, giving it a key role in protecting the UK from cyber attacks on a whole host of military infrastructure.

CSW spoke to three senior figures in Defence Digital: Christine Maxwell, director of cyber defence and risk; Major General Tom Copinger-Symes, director of strategy and military digitisation; and Caroline Bellamy, the chief data officer, to find out more about the creation of the organisation.

Maxwell immediately highlighted the importance of boosting digital's role in the defence hierarchy.

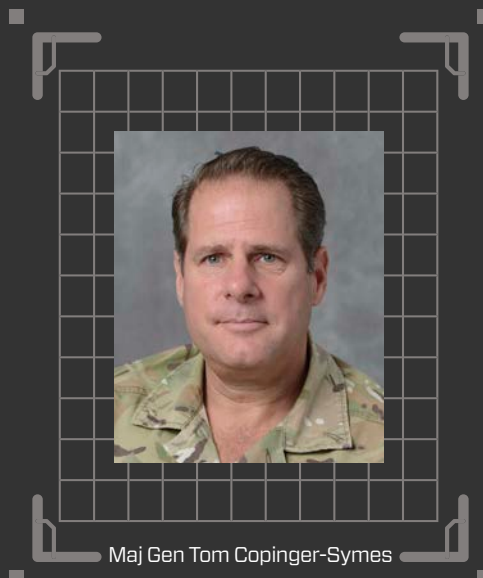
"Previously we were mainly a delivery organisation that took orders from other parts of defence in terms of programs and capabilities," Maxwell says. "Now Charlie has created something that looks like an IT leadership team that you can see in the private sector."

That allows the digital team to take on more of a cross-force leadership role, Maxwell says. "Now rather than being an order-taker, Defence Digital is instead looking at what IT could be in defence, and bringing all the right people into the roles to actually drive change out across the organisation."

Copinger-Symes agrees with Maxwell's order-taking versus rule-making distinction, and highlights the need to "build a more connected defence enterprise".

"So we still take orders, [meaning that] we still fulfil customer requirements, but we are starting to be able to lay down the rules of the road, so that there is some coherence to what the navy wants to do, or what the army wants to do, or what the corporate department wants to do," he says. "And then we work collaboratively with the rest of defence and build a more connected defence enterprise."

Bellamy says Defence Digital is now "a much more digitally orientated organisation" than its predecessor parts, with a



Maj Gen Tom Copinger-Symes

**"We've always thought we're so special, only 20% the same as others. If we can flip that round, we can move a lot faster"**

**Maj Gen Tom Copinger-Symes**

focus on "collaboration in the language of what outcome we're trying to achieve".

She adds: "From my perspective, coming in as a chief data officer, it's about making the data work for the organisation in a compliant, secure, digital way. That wasn't present and is now firmly embedded."

Such an approach is vital given the military's digital capabilities are in the spotlight now more than ever. Improving digital and data across security, defence, development and foreign policy is as a priority in the recently-published Integrated Review.

"This will need to be underpinned by investment in next-generation secure digital, data and technology platforms, skills and a strong focus on improving knowledge and information management practices," the review says. "We will focus on the responsible use of new data platforms, digital tools and participative processes to support policy-making and improve inclusivity and transparency."

However, developing a position where a digital function can set requirements and regulations across five military domains – air, land, sea, space and cyber – and within those well-established military structures, is not something that happens instantly. Copinger-Symes acknowledges that he and his colleagues "are still building" a presence across defence.

"I think we're still a challenger not an incumbent," he says. "I think with all digital, whether in business or in government, you've had decades of being very much a supporting role. The chief information officer would not be at the top of the hierarchy, but would report to the chief risk officer or the chief financial officer or whoever."

"But just like in business, you're suddenly seeing CIOs and other digital roles on the main board because [organisations] realise they need that advice and that leadership role, not just a supporting role."

I think we're absolutely on the same path."

This means Forte, the MoD's CIO, sits on the department's executive committee and leads part of UKStratCom, the MoD's strategic command. Add in the fact that Copinger-Symes, Maxwell and Bellamy's roles are all new and the magnitude of change becomes clearer.

"It's not always easy," Copinger-Symes says. "The rule-making is not always welcome, and, of course, it's not just laying down the law. It's working collaboratively with the rest of defence to work out the best way to deliver an impact."

This requires a mindset change across defence, he says, to realise that "defence is not unique in government", and that it can learn and share digital and technology development and insights with other parts of government.

"We've always thought we're so special, you know: that we're 80% special and only 20% the same [as others]," he says. "If we can flip that round and recognise we're probably 80% the same as many other government departments in the national security area, then maybe we get more credit for the 20% where we really need to be different. But if we can be more similar, then we can move a lot faster."

For example, he says the MoD's tendency to develop its own tech policies, rather than adopt cross-government ones, "slows us down".

"They make our lives more difficult, rather than helping us and that's got to be the wrong way to do it," he says of the policies. "So we want to be a little less special, because it will help us."

However, this remains a work in





**Action stations** Recruitment at Waterloo

progress, not only in the MoD's relationship with the rest of government, but also within service branches.

"I'm a very proud soldier and the army has a proud and ancient history, and we do things differently from the navy and air force," he says. "But if we can find that we share far more than what divides us, that makes us much stronger. And the same with our national security colleagues, the same with wider government.

"So I'm not going to pretend that it's all sweetness and light, and that we've all resolved every single difference."

The distinct approaches across forces developed, he says, because they previously offered a strategic advantage. "And many of them still do – there are many things not to throw away," Copinger-Symes says. "But equally, sometimes we just need to play nicer in the sandpit together, because that will give a strategic advantage in a different era."

One such area where collaboration has really taken hold is in Maxwell's brief of cyber defence and risk, where she says there is a recognition by the single forces that collaboration is now at a premium.

"They can see that to really address the cyber threat, we have to do things in a joined-up way. And we can't all be doing different things: we have to have a strategy, we have to work on the team priorities and take it forward."

She agrees with Copinger-Symes that the MoD's work needs to be "much more joined up across Whitehall", and gives her own work with the Government

Security Group in the Cabinet Office as an example of an area where MoD skills can be more widely applied. "It is about how can we, as a big department, actually help the wider society and strategy across UK government?" she says. "I think there's more we can do in that space and we're now set up so we can actually help."

Bellamy agrees that she has encountered "tremendous openness" to a more integrated approach. "The door's really open, I would say, so it's really welcome," she says.

And, like Maxwell, she feels that historic rivalries are being overcome by a recognition of the skills that are needed.

"I come in as neutral to our five forces, and data is agnostic to all of them," Bellamy says. "I can say that I'm not another tribe; I'm in an enabling capability that can leverage the strength of what each has to bring, and also work across them.

"The opportunity that we have through Defence Digital is that those standards and rules of the road come with adherence, but

they also come with huge opportunity, because then increasingly we're an integrated whole force and our roles are actually a key to help us unlock tremendous integration."

Maxwell says Defence Digital has "won that argument", while acknowledging she has "created a lot more work for colleagues in the single services, because I'm trying to drive coherence".

"It is creating some tension, sometimes good tensions and good debate that we can have about this being the right approach and how we are going to do it," she says. "Yes, it's hard sometimes but I think the ship has turned and we're driving forward."

Copinger-Symes describes dealing with these different bodies and roles across UK defence – and the integration with allies – as "probably the most complex socio-technical thing in Western Europe".

"The NHS is way bigger than us in number of people, but in terms of endpoint devices, both operational technology and weapons systems, we're dealing with an awesomely complex range of kit out there, at varying states of legacy," he says.

The key rationale, then, for Defence Digital is to allow the whole structure of defence to become more nimble through the use of technology, or for technology not to restrict quick responses.

"One of our big challenge is reducing some of the complication, and simplifying some of it," Copinger-Symes says.



Christine Maxwell



Caroline Bellamy

## "Transforming is different from running and operating, but you can't do the two things separately" Caroline Bellamy

### Data revolution

Across this broad range of activities, this means everything from deploying machine learning on cyber risk incidents in Maxwell's portfolio, to using data analytics tools to unlock insights in Bellamy's.

And it means the whole of the MoD and the wider forces prioritising digital and data in a way they have not done historically – and in a way that can help settle defence's technical debt.

"A lot of our data is locked up in legacy. We've got to free it to make those new things – AI or automation, autonomy, or robotics – exciting," Bellamy says.

Mention of these kinds of capabilities can quickly lead to ideas about the future of combat that were not so long ago the realm of science fiction, but Bellamy says this kind of change to military capacity must be conducted at the same time as improving current operations.

"Transforming is different from running and operating, but you can't do the two things separately," she says. "That's why it's really important in this organisation that we are part of a huge delivery vehicle of defence. The rules of the road and how we're going to do delivery and run and operate in cyber and digital services must be applied to the whole of defence. But we have got to focus on it, because no kidding anyone, we haven't focused on it. And we need to, because good data

just doesn't happen by happenstance."

Based on his service background, Copinger-Symes says part of the reason for this may have been that defence is so used to using intelligence in planning and operations that "we thought we understood how to use data".

"Speak to any commander in the army, navy, or air force, ask whether intelligence is really important, and they will say, 'yes, it's fundamental to decision making,'" he says.

"That was, on the one hand, a great strength. On the other hand, it was a great weakness, in that we saw data-informed decision making as just about intelligence."

Like so much else in Defence Digital's work, another mindset shift was needed. Operationally, the military viewed intelligence "as something

with a big red stamp on it that said 'secret' or 'top secret', and it had to be collected at huge pain or cost or danger," he says.

"Actually, data has exploded around us in the current world and an awful lot of it, if treated properly, can be very helpful to inform a whole bunch of decisions, way beyond what we used to call intelligence.

"So I think we thought we had data cracked in the form of intelligence, and we probably need to refresh not only how we create intelligence, but also look at a much greater spread of data types to help inform our decision making and then the other technological exploitations of data that will come with automation and robotics."

Bellamy sums up the motto for Defence Digital as it prepares to publish its strategy to drive forward its plans in detail.

"Our task where necessary is to break down some of those historic things in the way that defence works," she says. "But we're not driving the commonality we talk about for the sake of it, we're driving commonality because of the opportunity it presents. It drives advantage at many levels."

Copinger-Symes agrees. "We are ultimately doing it to do what everybody else is, which is to speed us up," he says. "It will allow us to deliver for the nation more quickly, precisely, affordably and sustainably in the future, and do that in spite of our scale, not be held back because of it." ■



# LESSONS FROM A DIGITAL CAREER

**John Fitzpatrick's** civil service career has gone from a Manchester benefits office to playing a key role in the MoD's digital transformation. He relives the journey with **Richard Johnstone**



igital and data is not just something with the potential to transform government services; it can also turbo-charge careers.

So, at least, goes the story of John Fitzpatrick. The Ministry of

Defence's director for digital engagement has held a number of senior digital posts in government, across departments including the Cabinet Office and the Department for Work and Pensions.

But his career started, in his own words, "writing giro's in a Manchester benefits centre as a college dropout", after he saw the post advertised in a jobcentre.

"I thought, 'This is going to get me some money for the time being while I figure out what I actually do with my life,' aged 19," he says. "It has been a bit of a journey, I suppose."

Only a couple of weeks later, what Fitzpatrick calls a "far more exciting job" in fraud investigation came up, and he was soon working in the sector that became "the anchor of my career".

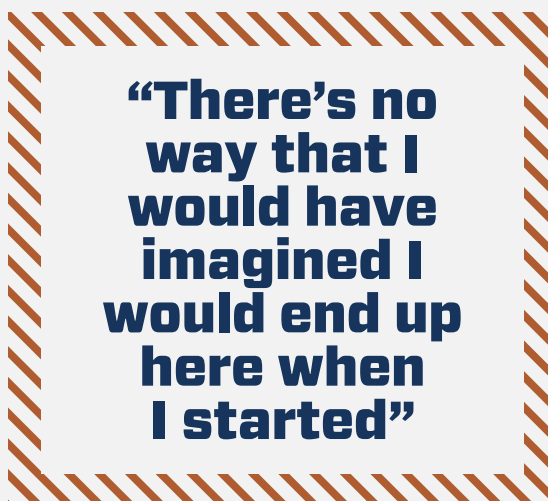
"In my early 20s, I realised I needed to step up a little bit and I went to study fraud management, which I did while I was working," he says. "That then enabled me to get some academic credentials, start to go after some promotions."

It was in this job that Fitzpatrick became interested in the impact data and technology could have on service delivery. While working in fraud investigations, he realised that "if we used data and technology differently, we could prevent a lot of fraud going through the door, rather than investigating it afterwards". This work led to a six-month loan to the National Fraud Authority to work on a report analysing



the total cost of fraud to inform action.

Fitzpatrick returned to DWP around 2010 and wrote its fraud strategy, in partnership with HM Revenue and Customs, which crystallised this use of technology. "That was really shifting things from detection into prevention," he says. "We'd seen that the level of



investment going into prevention was nowhere near comparable to that in the financial sector. We also looked at how much these investigations cost to do and the kind of outcomes that we're getting from them. We were spending quite a lot and not getting very much back, and then started to pivot that approach."

By this point, Fitzpatrick had begun to see the potential of digital, but it was a stint he spent as an inspector across the whole of the benefits system, reporting for both central and local government, that helped him realise that "organisations don't always have the capability to do better".

This led to the creation of an internal consultancy within the DWP to help provide these skills across the public sector, particularly with local authorities, around the administration of things

like housing benefit. "We moved from telling poor-performing organisations that they were poor performing, to trying and help them to improve," he says.

By this time, he was on a talent scheme within DWP, which led to a project to introduce data mining and matching across the department, then a job advising on its first strategy. The transition to a digital career was complete.

"That was a really fast appointment," he recalls. "It got advertised and they needed somebody within days, and because I was on the scheme, it opened up that opportunity. So I took it and I started work on the strategy." Kevin Cunnington, who would go on to lead the Government Digital Service, then joined the department from Vodafone to lead the transformation itself.

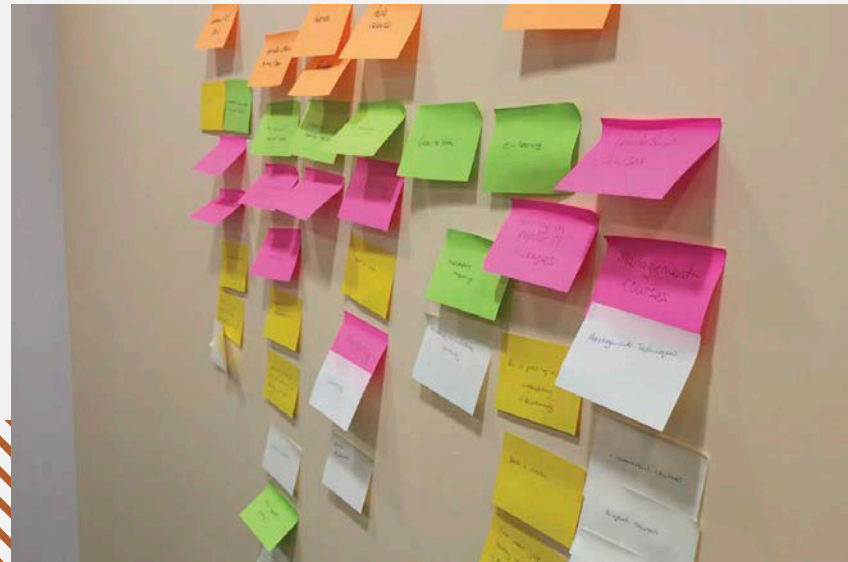
Reflecting on his career, Fitzpatrick says he was first "gripped by digital" when writing the fraud and error strategy. Then when Cunnington (now director general of the International Government Service, promoting the work of UK government services across the world) came in and developed the digital academy to boost skills across the government, Fitzpatrick helped to run it, finding out about a whole new range of fields.

Fitzpatrick explains: "Setting up the digital academy, I was learning about new capabilities and new roles that I had never previously heard of – user-centred design, user research, product ownership, delivery management."

"They were all new to me, but when I started to meet some of the people who were stood at the front of the academy, they've done the 'Blockbuster to Netflix' conversion, and you then start to see a completely different world."

However, around the same time, DWP was writing off around £500m in Universal Credit costs – a jarring contrast with the potential Fitzpatrick could see. "We'd had to write off quite a lot of money,"





because we'd not got it right first time on the technology side of UC," he adds.

This began to fuel some of Fitzpatrick's frustrations with government transformation, which would eventually culminate in a spell outside the public sector.

Digital in government needs to be funded in teams, he believes, not as projects "Those capabilities need to be embedded in the organisation, and matured in the same way that a policy team does," he says.

This opinion was crystallised when he became head of digital for Civil Service Learning, which he felt was hindered by technology and funding. "We were in an old platform that wasn't fit for purpose anymore. It needed modernising," he explains.

"We'd set out our ambition and we needed to re-platform the service. It needed a couple of million quid spending on it at the time and we just couldn't secure the money. I was in a situation where, like an old secondhand car, it was breaking down every day."

He became so frustrated that, even with the support of senior leaders includ-

ing then-cabinet secretary Sir Jeremy Heywood and civil service chief executive John Manzoni, he was unable to get the money needed to make the digital service a reality. "In the end we had to shut down a team, because the funding wasn't there. And that became a really painful place to be. So I decided to try and do something different for a while."

This "something different" was setting up a consultancy on digital projects. Despite being a risk, Fitzpatrick says it gave him new skills and enabled him to focus more on delivery. "I was still working around government as a contractor, rather than as a civil servant. But there was less organisational noise, which enabled me to be more creative, and to focus more on delivery. I didn't have the same expectation or level of commitment on the organisational elements that

you do as a permanent staff member."


One such project was setting up a digital studio at the Ministry of Justice, where Fitzpatrick said he had "an absolute blast".

"I was a fire starter – setting things up and getting them going," he says. "I like to get in at the start of things and shape them when they're complex and thorny, and a lot of stuff needs to be figured out."

Among the projects he worked on was a scheme to move prison records, previously stored in a data centre, into the cloud, which both improved the data and reduced costs by more than 95%.

Another service digitised payments made to help some vulnerable friends and relatives visit prisoners, which had previously been paid using giro's – an echo to Fitzpatrick's earlier career but which were now being phased out of the banking system.

Another project focused on improving



digital services for probation services.

“With my colleagues in Sheffield in MoJ, it felt like I’d really found my mojo there, it was almost like a start-up mentality,” Fitzpatrick recalls. “We’re delivering at a ridiculous pace, and the ingredients for success were empowerment, freedoms and flexibilities to be able to figure things out, and then focus the technology on business priorities.”

Setting up his own business matured him. “I’d been literally a career civil servant, so I’d got to the point where I thought a bit of time out would probably do me good. But I definitely didn’t think I was never going to come back or anything like that,” Fitzpatrick says.

“I was not frustrated to the point where I thought this is a bad place to work or anything – I’m always appreciative of the development and opportunities the civil service has provided to me. I’m nothing but grateful for the opportunities it’s given me throughout my career, and the basis from which it enabled me to leave and succeed outside of it.”

Fitzpatrick admits that he wanted to stay at the MoJ longer than he did, but such is the life of a contractor. “By definition, it’s a short term position”, he says.

But he learned from his MoJ experience what he wanted in his next move. “When you start to do your own due diligence for your next move, you’re looking at: where’s the ministerial commitment? Where’s the sustainable funding? Where’s the political priority that is going to back this and deliver in this climate, and where’s the board and the senior leadership team in terms of enabling it to happen?”

Fitzpatrick took on his digital engagement director role as part of the Defence Digital transformation scheme, where he has been “energised and driven by a great mission” – to improve services for those in the military. Those range from the technology needed for military missions to checking payslips and booking annual leave.

“The wonderful people who dedicate their lives to the military absolutely deserve the best services,” he says. “You add all of the ingredients

and it emotionally connects for me, in the same way that the justice system did, albeit in a different context altogether.”

He says MoD chief information officer Charlie Forte has made big strides in getting the department’s senior officials and politicians engaged in a plan to revamp the department’s digital capability. The departmental board hears from tech people every month to ensure they have “greater awareness and understanding and access to a different world really”, he notes.

**T**hey are not the only ones in a different world. The coronavirus pandemic has also thrust us, however unwillingly, into a situation unimaginable only months ago.

Fitzpatrick started his MoD role as the UK entered its first lockdown, in March 2020, and says the way the government has responded to the pandemic shows how much progress has been made in digital government.

“Look at where we were in 2014 with Universal Credit, for example,” he says. “That was being reported as a failed IT programme, but look at what DWP has just achieved in response to Covid – being able to absorb millions of extra claims, and a frictionless digital journey to get access to that benefit. And the same with HMRC and the furlough scheme.”

“They’ve delivered internal capability to respond to a crisis, and deliver services to users in a way that they just couldn’t have done five years ago. There’s a level of maturity and the ability to pivot and deliver things that couldn’t have been thought of. And there’s so many other things – like doctor’s appointments taking place over the internet – that have been transformed and the civil service and the public sector has been able to respond to brilliantly.”

He is confident that this progress will not be lost once we get to what we would previously have called normal. “I think the environment is different in government [now],” he says, highlighting a number of appointments in senior roles, including Joanna Davinson as executive director at the Central Digital and Data Office in the Cabinet Office, and Tom Read as chief executive of the Government Digital Service. “They’re fully aware

of the need to fund teams and the legacy issues and all the things that have raised their priorities for government to solve,” he says. “And they’re being led by some of the best people. I think the digital, data and technology profession is maturing now.”

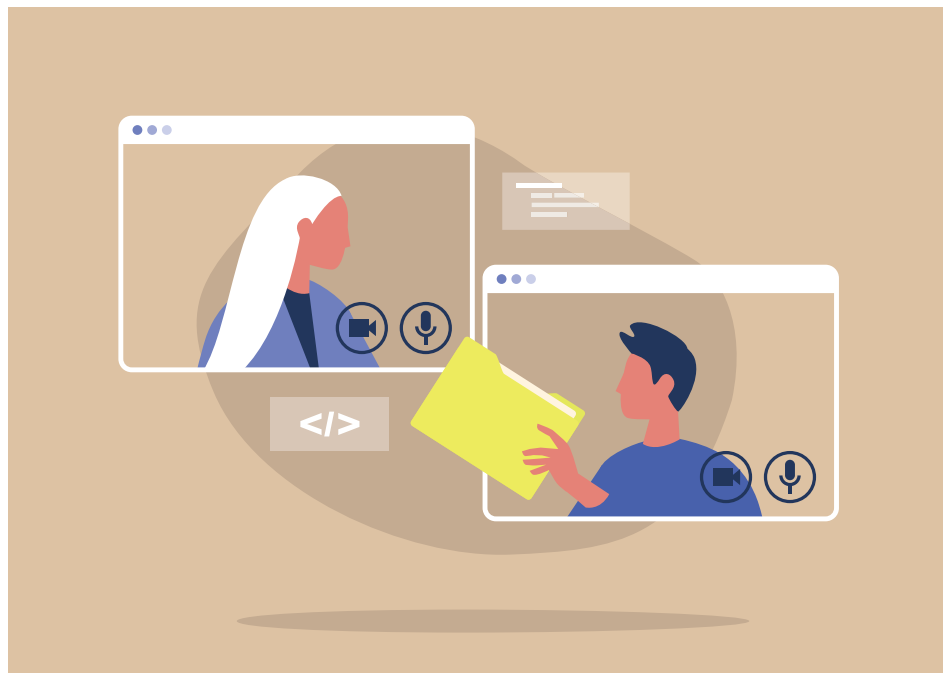
Defence, he acknowledges, “is less mature in digital delivery” than some other Whitehall departments, but Fitzpatrick is confident that with investment and commitment, “you’ll see rapid acceleration”.

And after a career that has been taken over by digital government, what advice would he give to someone entering DWP as he did as a school leaver? “I’d say be curious. You’ve heard the story; there’s no way that I would have imagined I would end up here when I started, but the civil service is a place that is absolutely full of opportunity.

“Grasping those opportunities, looking sideways at things that are interesting, and experimenting – on digital and your own personal development – are key. I think there’s always things that we can each learn.” ■



**“I was learning about new capabilities and roles that I had never previously heard of – user-centred design, user research, product ownership, delivery management”**



# JOB SHARE REFLECTIONS IN THE TIME OF COVID

Two former directors general – now leadership coaches – share their observations of job-share partnerships in demanding times

**H**ave you noticed the striking resilience of job-share partnerships over the last year? We have watched them balance demanding civil service roles with all the other stresses of lockdown, and keep their equilibrium to a remarkable extent.

When we asked partners what kept them resilient, they were very consistent in their answers. They talked about the relief of knowing they could hand over to a trusted partner at some point in the

**“More people would like to job share, if they felt the climate was receptive. This includes an increasing number of men”**

week, aware that it would be counter-productive to log on whilst their partner was in charge. They valued the flexibility that allowed them to manage their commitments outside of work. They felt nourished by the mutual support, and the advantage of having two brains and two sets of

networks to focus on a challenging issue.

Tessa Griffiths and Sarah Maclean share a director role at the Department for Education, implementing the rapid coronavirus testing programme for universities and schools. The pace and profile of the rollout was such that sharing the job brought built-in resilience and problem solving. It also meant they could split the necessary weekend cover between them and still spend time with their families. They say: “Job sharing has enabled us to share the challenges as well as the successes – we don’t think we would have made nearly as much progress without a job-share arrangement, which has now seen us through many demanding roles.”

Cora Govett and Harry Lund share a deputy director role at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, where they are responsible for a major piece of reform. They decided they would each cover the job full-time for two months, whilst the other person focused on family

needs. Gemma Diamond and Mark Roberts at Audit Scotland decided to flex their usual arrangements to spread work across the week, so that they each had blocks of time available for home schooling.

Fran Oram and Sophie Langdale, directors at DfE, talk of how when exhaustion hit, they were able to cover for each other. “We could [each] sense when our partner needed support or a break and we knew the support would be reciprocated. Together we were far stronger in keeping up resolve in relentless times than we would have been individually.”

Joanna West and Alex Hurst are directors at the Home Office who were asked to cover a short-term director general role. They highlight the value of the job share to the organisation, in terms of joint problem solving, mutual coaching, and getting non-stop energetic commitment from the partnership.

We have many more examples from across the civil service and beyond, at all levels and in all types of role.

Job sharing isn’t an option for everyone. The economics don’t always work, and some temperaments aren’t suited to sharing control. Our observation, though, is that more people would like to job share, if they felt the climate was receptive. This includes an increasing number of men.

The key advice to recruiting managers is to look for partners of equal ability and motivation who are committed to investing in making the relationship work, and can adapt to the changing needs of the role. The partnership may last for one job, or it may go on for many years: either way, job sharing has moved from being a novelty to a proven way of deploying leadership talent well. And we now know it can make a real difference to resilience.

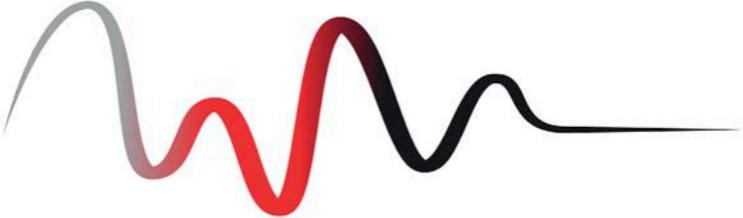
As another job-share partnership said to us: “The two of us are some of the calmest people around. That’s because we can download and talk things through in a non-judgemental space.” ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hilary Douglas and Peter Shaw are former directors general in the UK government who now coach senior leaders through Praesta Partners. They are co-authors of a number of Praesta Insight booklets, including *Job-sharing: a Model for the Future Workplace?* (2018), *The Resilient Leader* (2020) and *Leading for the Long Term* (2021). These can be downloaded from [www.praesta.co.uk](http://www.praesta.co.uk)



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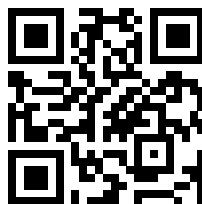


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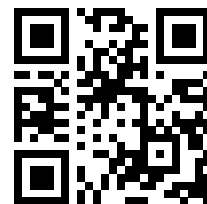
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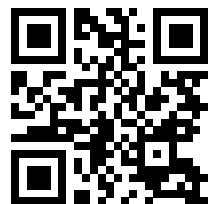
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