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CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

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Making the most of complaints

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Andy Cowper on the NHS cash plan

THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW

JENNY HARRIES

ON THE COVID RESPONSE AND FOUNDING UKHSA

Desk bound How Whitehall is managing the office return

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An exclusive photo of Dr Jenny Harries taken by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

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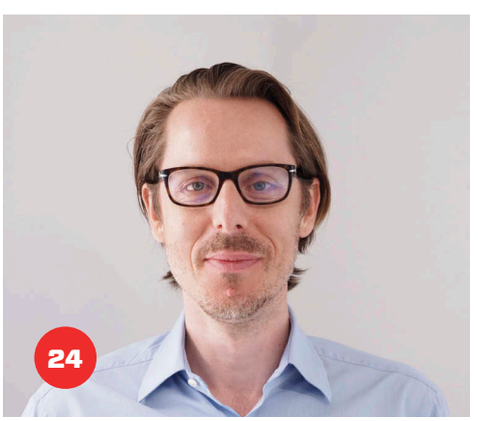
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FROM THE EDITOR

Reform is a word that I possibly use too much. It is easy journalese, appended to everything from the development of a new subsidy regime after Brexit to changes to the communications service in government.

These are significant policy shifts, but they are very different. Using the word reform for both smooths over the messy business of change itself.

A "reform" has an air of finality to it. A date is set, a switch is flicked, and the light of a new government initiative appears where there was darkness before.

This, I know, is not how it feels on the inside, where there may be months or years of painstaking wiring between the setting of a date and flicking that switch. Then, of course, there's the process of change which only begins when the policy light comes on.

But all too often the focus of the political class, and by extension the media, moves on. It then takes time to overcome political resistance to another rewiring, even if the light isn't quite as brilliant as you hoped.

And so to the government's plans for social care. The one-time work and pensions minister Frank Field has described the welfare state as a "never-ending reform", and the provision of care for an ageing population might well be the defining policy problem of our age.

But Boris Johnson thinks he might have cracked it. In the press release setting out plans – which has eight "reform"s in it, stat fans – the prime minister stresses the completeness of his approach, including a £36bn cash boost for health and care. "You can't fix the Covid backlogs without giving the NHS the money it needs. You can't fix the NHS without fixing social care, you can't fix social care without removing the fear of losing everything to pay for it, and you can't fix health and social care without long-term reform. The plan I am setting out today will fix all of these problems together," he said.

But, as Andy Cowper details in his column this month, the Build Back Better plan for health and social care is a bit short on actual planning.

The major change (I strain to avoid the R word) is to introduce a cap on an individual's lifetime care costs of £86,000, and this will undoubtedly be welcomed by many once it takes effect in October 2023.

There are a host of secondary decisions also needing consideration for this to be a lasting blueprint (thesaurus to the rescue). For one, the social care sector is not just a cash sink for many of its users. It also sucks the time and emotional energy of the vulnerable and their carers as they wait – and wait, and often wait some more – to be assessed for support. Then there is the quality of care which, although mostly good according to a pre-Covid evaluation by the Care Quality Commission, also has significant gaps in access, especially in mental health.

For these issues, the government promises an adult social care white paper, but as it stands the money won't yet follow these intentions. Most of the cash that goes to the care sector will be used to meet the cap, and to provide additional support for those with assets of less than £100,000, rather than address these challenges directly.

My point is not to bemoan positive changes, but rather to mark this as the point of departure, not arrival. We are much closer to health secretary Sajid Javid's description of "a vital first step in the reform of our broken care system", than the prime minister's one-plan-fixes-all ambition.

Even if Field is right, we're probably closer to the start of the never-ending reforms than the middle. ■

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REMOTE POSSIBILITY

Readers had no time for the opinions of an unnamed minister who said civil servants who work from home should get a pay cut to balance out savings on commuting costs.

"A pay cut in return for using our own utilities, power and other facilities? Yes of course, said no-one, ever," **Nick Townsend** said.

"My productivity has increased dramatically (the gits can check my stats to see that) since WFH," **Peter Galley** added. "Clueless buffoon whose alleged education is clearly severely lacking."

Nick Parker commented: "Civil servants have grafted over the last year whether at home or in the physical workplace to create the furlough system, advise on safe working, help people facing redundancies, deal with insolvencies, procure PPE and testing, etc. They deserve a 10% pay rise to make up for a decade of austerity, not pay cuts."

Peter Drummond added: "This government have absolutely no idea of the worth of this 'no. 1' civil service."

And **Norman Plumpton-walsh** said: "Remote working will save the government money."

GOOD CALL

There was a great deal of support from readers for the FDA union's call for Civil Service HR to introduce a formal pregnancy loss policy to better support officials who suffer a miscarriage.

"In full support of this – there is definitely more which can, and should be done. It shouldn't have to take someone to have to self-certify the first seven days and then be signed off for anything further when they experience loss and require/would like time off to physically and emotionally recover (sadly, I speak from personal experience)," **Alison Walker** said.

"Totally agree this kind of policy is long overdue. The trauma of miscarriage is very hard to deal with for both parents but especially for the mother," **Anthony McLoughlin** wrote.

"Fully support this, so long overdue," **Janet Costelloe** said. "This and also peri/menopause – both natural (although heartbreaking for miscarriage (personal experience also)) stages of a woman's cycle and women shouldn't feel embarrassed, alone and/or scared of how it could be perceived by others especially now that we're all expected to work later in our lives."

Martin Clements commented: "As a former civil servant I'd be disappointed if one of my line manager's didn't use their own discretion under the existing special leave policy available to most departments already."

TAKE THE LEAD

The news that leadership and management training will be overhauled to create consistency and ensure civil service leaders have "tangible skills" prompted a trip down memory lane.

"I was a civil servant for 42 years. I can't count how many iteratations of this I have seen... Best training I had was at the Civil Service College in Sunningdale. Alas, sold off," **Helga Edstrom** said. "Sunningdale had some amazing women only courses. I made some lasting friends from them. I was also asked to help design and deliver 'how to be a minister' courses and induction for new MP courses. Hysterical. But the food was always very good."

Peter Topping said the news was "interesting" and added: "In the programme leadership/SRO training world I'm hearing that the emphasis will be more on 'hard' skills like knowing what to do when a programme is burning through its cash and kicking the benefits can down the road."

It is not just civil servants who need tailored training, **Maxine Leyland** said. "When are the current cabinet and their ministers going to develop these skills?" she asked.

DEAR DIARY

Former policing minister Nick Hurd's warning to other politicians to "never underestimate" the importance of a diary manager proved a popular sentiment.

"I don't think there is a more underappreciated role than diary secretary," **Sam Harrison** said. "The skills shown by a good diary sec are easily as good as any other civil servant, and often better. It is a real shame it is not recognised as a profession. Well done Mr Hurd for saying this."

Glen Freeman observed: "I think this applies also to a whole collection of roles in both the civil service and in the commercial sector."

Heena M. shared her experience of working for the ex-minister: "I worked for Nick Hurd as his senior private secretary when he was at the Home Office. He used to have a canvas in his office that said 'What is the point of this meeting?' and as a team, we needed to be able to answer that question for every single meeting that went into the diary.

"He recognised the value of all, especially the junior members of the team and treated them with the highest respect and gratitude – absolutely brilliant man to work for."

Sue Hurley also applauded Hurd's sign, saying: "It reinforces the need to have a well structured agenda and a pre read in plenty of time before the meeting to allow your directors to prepare. Preparation is key and will inevitably cut down on unnecessary over run and allow your director's work schedule for the day to run smoothly and on time."

DOCTORS ORDERED

Readers were deeply sceptical of guidance published by the Department of Health and Social Care encouraging NHS bodies to refer to projects such as new clinical buildings on existing sites, new hospital wings and major refurbishments as "new hospitals".

"To satisfy the criteria of 'new hospital', surely it needs – most of all – to be a new hospital?" **George Reid** asked.

"Just opened a packet of paracetamol. Or 'a new hospital' as Sajid Javid would call it," **Tony Hall** quipped.

Alan Ramsey commented: "Further erosion of established facts, which are being redefined to suit the agenda and narrative that the government wishes to promote." ■

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

An exclusive interview with Ian Watmore, outgoing First Civil Service Commissioner

PLUS We examine progress on diversity and inclusion in the civil service

Departments take cautious approach on return to work

Ministries trail hybrid-working plans but fears remain about staff being pressured back to desks. By **Jim Dunton**

Civil service unions are upbeat about the prospects of keeping hybrid-working arrangements in place for the long term after ministers pointedly avoided a repeat of last autumn's aborted "return to the office" drive. But concerns remain about calls for staff to be present at their workplaces for at least part of the week as coronavirus infection rates increase and the winter flu season approaches.

Departments are being left to their own devices to determine how much time – if any – staff should spend at their regular workplaces after most coronavirus restrictions were eased in July. The stance is in stark contrast to September 2020, when plans to get 80% of civil servants back to their offices for at least part of the week were scrapped as the second wave of Covid-19 gathered pace.

Current job advertisements are giving a flavour of what departments believe the post-pandemic "new normal" will look like. Applicants for recent Treasury roles have been told that most staff at the department should expect to be in their offices for two-to-three days a week, on average.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ads say it is "exploring future ways of working with flexibility in mind" and the option of combining working at home with a working at a Defra group workplace will be offered "subject to business need". The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government says flexible-working opportunities "will be discussed with the vacancy manager on a case-by-case basis" with successful applicants.

The civil service's biggest union, PCS, said that while there was a sense that arguments about embedding hybrid working across the civil service had been won, there were immediate concerns about staff having to return to workplaces before they were comfortable doing so.

"The very firm position of all the unions is that there should be no compulsion," a PCS spokesperson said. "People have got lots of reasons about why they're reluctant to try going in, even if it's on a hybrid basis of one or two days a week."

Concerns include crowded public transport, rising levels of infection rates and a recognition – based on 18 months of remote working – that it is unnecessary to be in an office to work effectively.

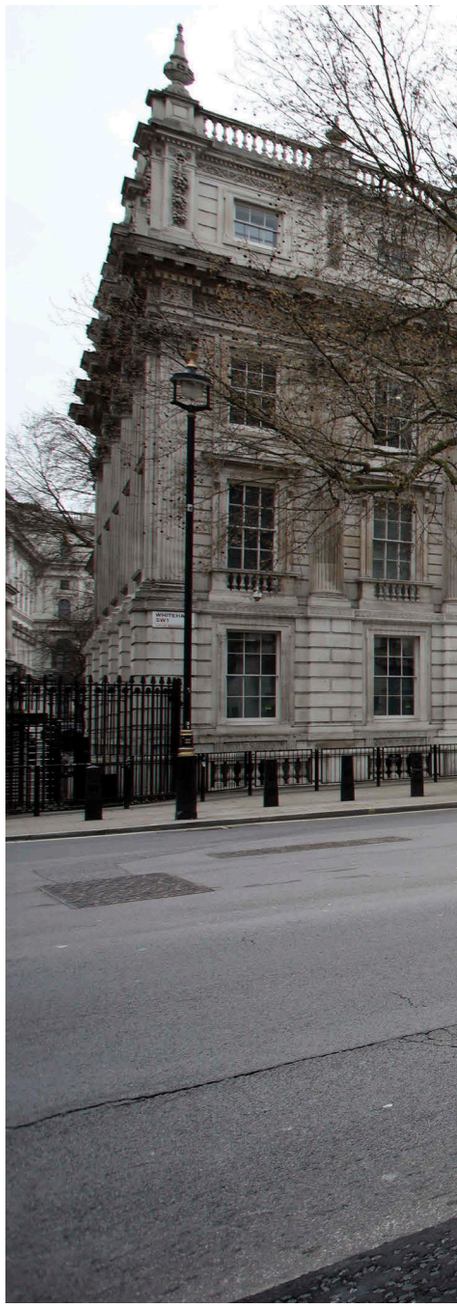
"Where the operational nature of the work requires it, people do have to go to a workplace to carry out their proper function," the PCS spokesperson said. "But it's clear that in the vast majority of cases, civil servants working from home is completely feasible and practical. And for the sake of avoiding risks and contact with others, that should continue."

The spokesperson said the approaching colder weather, coupled with questions over the long-term effectiveness of coronavirus vaccines, meant there would be a period of many months when it wasn't sensible to encourage people who could work from home back to their offices.

"We don't know what this winter is going to do, do we? We don't really have a clue at the moment," the spokesperson said. "So the idea of expecting people to make hard and fast commitments is entirely inappropriate."

Steven Littlewood, national officer at public sector leaders' union the FDA, said departments appeared to be taking a pragmatic approach.

"Apart from a bit of noise from some backbenchers and unnamed government ministers, we have not so far seen a repeat of the mistakes of last summer," he said. "Departments are adopting a cautious and gradual approach to the return to workplaces.



"The evidence we have seen on the levels of attendance in offices is in line with what we would expect from a gradual return."

Garry Graham, deputy general secretary at the Prospect union of public sector professionals, said most departments and agencies were "alert" to staff concerns, and were not imposing arbitrary targets for attendance.

"We have an opportunity to learn lessons and make work better for the future," he said. "Most members express a

Deserted An empty Whitehall during the first coronavius locksdown

desire for greater flexibility and for a blend of working from home and office or on site.

"Employers need to be acutely aware that they will be judged by staff and potential new staff as to how they approach and manage the coming months.

"Prospect is working hard with employers so we can build back a new normal with a focus on supporting staff and maximising the flexibilities available to them so we can focus on our common endeavour of delivering public services we can all be proud of."

Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove – who spearheaded 2020's scrapped return-to-work drive – conceded last month that flexible working would be "crucial" to making a success of the government's plans to move 22,000 civil service jobs out of the capital by the end of the decade.

He said the government would be drawing on the civil service's pandemic experience to shape thinking on "how best to adopt longer-term flexible working arrangements", but insisted that there were "clear productivity advantages to office working" in many cases.

"The evidence we have seen on the levels of attendance in offices is in line with what we would expect from a gradual return" ***Steven Littlewood, FDA***

CSW asked the Cabinet Office whether there was any official guidance on staff who have been working at home being required to attend their regular workplaces and whether individual departments had targets for the managed return of officials.

It did not respond directly to either point, or to questions about the process for determining a long-term policy on flexible working for the civil service.

However a government spokesperson said the civil service was continuing to follow the latest government guidance on remote working.

"By taking appropriate steps to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid, we are gradually increasing the numbers of staff in the workplace, while ensuring we retain the flexibility of home-based working where appropriate," the spokesperson said. ■

ALEX THOMAS COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

WHILE POOR COMMUNICATIONS CAN DAMAGE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AND A GOVERNMENT'S REPUTATION, GOOD COMMUNICATIONS CANNOT SALVAGE ONE WHOSE OVERALL APPROACH IS MUDDLED, INCONSISTENT OR DISHONEST

State of readiness Brexit ad campaign in October 2019

The Government Communication Service has a new leader. Simon Baugh, currently director of communications at the Home Office, will become GCS's first "chief executive", replacing Alex Aiken as the government's top comms civil servant.

In a paper for the Institute for Government, Lee Cain, Boris Johnson's director of communications from 2019 to 2020, offers Baugh some advice by setting out the reforms Cain wanted to introduce. Those include, but are not limited to, setting up the now famously dropped regular televised press briefings from an expensive Downing Street studio.

Cain argues that the pandemic, and failures in the government's response, exposed gaps in the authority and skill of GCS, the umbrella group of civil service press officers and communications advisers. He makes the case for greater coherence across the government's public messaging and overhauling "an analogue system" to be fit for a "digital age".

More coherence in government messaging is to be welcomed, as is a clearer role and remit for communications experts across government. But there is a danger for Baugh if he puts too much weight on command and control. Over-mighty central management risks politicising GCS, and government departments and agencies need their own teams to advise on communications and respond directly to media queries.

Cain notes the importance of trust in the government's messaging and accountability for ministers about what they say. But he could say more about the damage to government of a lack of honesty and transparency.

Trustworthiness is a prerequisite for good communication, undermined by successive governments that have bent and sometimes broken the truth. The Johnson administration has been particularly guilty. The Northern Ireland Office's claim that there would be no border in the Irish Sea after the end of the Brexit transition period was misleading – as empty shelves in Northern Irish supermarkets in early 2021 made all too plain. So was the government's £100m advertising campaign that maintained the fiction that the UK would be leaving the EU on 31 October 2019 – after parliament had passed a law to prevent it. It was actions like those that damaged the government's reputation for straight dealing.

Restoring public confidence is straightforward, if sometimes uncomfortable, for those giving the messages. Ministers are entitled to present their actions positively but must avoid overclaiming. They should show leadership by being honest and acting with integrity, and make it clear that they expect everyone working with them to do the same.

Many of the answers to improving communications are outside the remit of the GCS. However well managed, no government communications team can obscure poor policy decisions or indecisive leadership. As the pandemic has repeatedly demonstrated, ineffective government messaging is more often the result of confused policies or delayed decisions than bungled communication. Muddles over international travel rules and quarantine, different local and national restrictions or the various school and exam debacles were failures of policy, not communication. The government's Covid messaging improved from February 2021 because ministers worked out a plan for lifting restrictions, set it out clearly and then executed it.

To resolve confused communications, the government's real task is to make sure that policies are clear and thought through, and that senior ministers, special advisers and civil servants across government are involved in and well briefed on what has been decided, why, and what it means. If decision making runs well and relationships are strong, then mishaps will happen less often and be solved rapidly when they do.

There should also be a more prominent role for operational and internal comms. Good internal communication is essential to lead, direct and enthuse the more than 400,000 civil servants who work for the government, but this is less visible work, and internal or operational communications is not where Whitehall high-fliers build their reputations. So more needs to be done to recruit top quality people, enhance their status and build their skills.

"Simon Baugh should draw on lessons learned at the Home Office, which has overstepped the mark on the propriety of its communications several times"

Simon Baugh will need to consider all these points as he sets his priorities for GCS. He should draw on lessons learned at the Home Office – which has overstepped the mark on the propriety of its communications several times in recent years – to remind the prime minister of the importance to a government's reputation of clarity, consistency and honesty in decision making. ■

Alex Thomas is a programme director at the Institute for Government, leading the institute's work on policy making and the civil service

KAY HENDER LEE CAIN'S COMMS PLAN MIXES MESSAGES

THE FORMER NO.10 COMMUNICATIONS CHIEF HAS IDENTIFIED SOME OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS SERVICE, BUT HIS PROPOSED SOLUTIONS ARE CONTRADICTORY AND COULD MAKE THINGS WORSE

There are some interesting points to Lee Cain's Institute for Government guest paper on modernising government communications. Cain – or "Caino", as Dominic Cummings reportedly calls him – has eschewed his and Cummings's shouty stereotypes by putting together a thoughtful paper with a respected think tank. But look more carefully and the Caino of old is still there.

Cain's point about the need for a consistent message is a good one, but he ignores the key caveat that for it work, there needs to actually *be* a consistent message. The issue the current government has had is that the message from the top has been constantly changing, as Matt Lucas's Boris Johnson impression from last year testifies.

Cain's opinion on the need to keep up to date with the latest communication methods is also a fair one. There are always newer platforms and software that we need to master. Our mantra at the FDA (well, the one I force on the comms team) is that we need to be wherever our members get their news – from social media to print, via broadcast, across the political spectrum from *Left Foot Forward* to *GB News*. The same clearly applies to the government and how it wants to communicate with its citizens. But expertise is required to cover all of these options and it would be impossible for any comms team to do all of them in-house – particularly with the 75% staff cuts across government communications that have been suggested, which I'll come back to. Trusted, skilled freelancers should be seen as an asset, not a waste of money.

"Cain's paper is mainly written in terms of what will be done to government communications, without consideration for communicating with those involved"

Cain also focuses on external communications, to the public and media, but internal communications within an organisation can be just as important to ensure a consistent message. Cain's paper is mainly written in terms of what will be done to government communications, without consideration for communicating with those involved – about overarching plans for change, or updates within departments. I'd expect most members of the public to think that press work is the main load of a communications professional, but I expected a bit more from Caino.

I agree that, as Cain states, the public expects the government to speak with one voice on overarching issues. But this goes back to Michael Gove's opinion about experts – it's necessary to have comms professionals in each department who are aware of particular issues within their remit. Then when an "expert" spokesperson is needed for a media appearance – on transport, or the environment, or whatever else – they'll know which minister has their finger closest to that particular button. If this is all run centrally, it risks taking far too long to find out who is best placed to speak and is available. We've found the key to our message being reported is making sure it's succinct, quotable and importantly, that we're quick to respond. Control from a distance is never conducive to the latter.

Cain also accuses civil service leaders of attempting to "guard and prize their own fiefdoms", keeping "the media spoils of a policy announcement" and "viewing their own department's needs as more important than the government's". While in-fighting is never a good look, the danger with a centralised team is that the centre becomes the sole focus – lots of press releases on the work of the Cabinet Office and Treasury while the good work of DfT, DWP, Defra and many others is neglected. Thankfully, the Government Communication Service has now determined that departments will keep their own comms teams.

Cain's proposals feel like taking a guillotine to a daisy – slashing when a trim would likely have sufficed. Ultimately Lee Cain needs to decide whether he is actually looking to improve the way the government communicates, or whether Caino of old is just looking to blame and create chaos, without actually providing any long-term solutions. ■

Kay Hender is head of communications at the FDA union

COLIN TALBOT REMEMBERING 9/11

TWENTY YEARS ON, THE REVERBERATIONS OF THE 11 SEPTEMBER ATTACK STILL SHAPE THE WORLD. THE EXTENT OF THE THREAT IS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT PROCEEDED IT THAT DAY, AND MUST BE ANALYSED AS SUCH

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on 9/11?

I remember vividly. I was in South Africa at a conference Stellenbosch University, near Cape Town. During a break I'd gone into town to have look around. As I wandered through a small shopping mall my sister unexpectantly rang from the UK. My heart sank – I'd had an unexpected call telling me about the death of my brother some years before and I feared it was something similar.

It was indeed a tragedy – but on a much bigger scale. My sister asked if I'd seen what was happening. She said two planes had flown into the twin towers in New York. After a brief discussion I looked round for a TV. I found a group of people in a bar watching the live feed from New York in quiet shock.

It was really hard to take in. The pictures looked like a scene from a disaster movie – they couldn't be real, could they? Then there were horrific reports of people jumping from the upper floors.

And if that wasn't horrendous enough, as we stood watching the first tower came down.

I spent the next few days endlessly discussing what had happened, how it had happened and why. On the long flight back from Cape Town to London I started an article – "Tough on Terrorism, Tough on the Causes of Terrorism" – which was later published in the US public administration magazine *PA Times*.

My thoughts were partly shaped by having been in post-apartheid South Africa at the time of 9/11. Both the ANC that now ruled, and their apartheid predecessors, had at various times been called "terrorists". Yet they had compromised and miraculously achieved a peaceful transition to a multi-racial democracy.

But it seemed to me the forces behind the 9/11 attacks were nothing like the ANC, even though there were some similarities in the use of force.

I came to two conclusions.

First, I wrote at the time that we "must reflect on what exactly is the terrorist menace we are confronting. We need to distinguish here between two distinct types of terrorist activities and terrorist organisations".

Terrorist organisations of the previous few decades, like the IRA, ETA (the Basque Euskadi ta Askatasuna), the Irgun, Al Fatah, and even the ANC of South Africa, are or have been, terrorist organisations fighting for causes that democrats could legitimately support. Whether Irish unity; Basque independence; founding Israel or replacing it with Palestine – a case could be made for the aims, if not the means. No liberal, conservative or social democrat could possibly support the aims of Al-Qaeda.

Recently, Tony Blair has added what I think is an important point about the aims of groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS and others. Their ideology is so incompatible with ideas of human rights and liberal democratic values that it is legitimate to compare their threat with communism (and I would add, fascism).

The second difference was more subtle – it was about methods. All these organisations were prepared, like Al-Qaeda, to use illegitimate violence to achieve their aims. But the scope of their violence – although often breaking what would be regarded as the usual "rules of war" – was always in some ways limited.

Al-Qaeda, with it's global ambitions, saw no such limitations – it was clearly intent of inflicting the biggest possible atrocities it could find a way to enact. The destruction of the Twin Towers, the attack on the Pentagon and whatever the third target was for Flight 93 (which was brought down before reaching its target) showed the scale of Al-Qaeda's depravity. No other "terrorist" organisation in modern history had done anything like this (even though many of them could have).

"The pictures looked like a scene from a disaster movie – they couldn't be real, could they?"

I thought, and still think, these are important distinctions. First, because the aims of many "terrorist" groups are at least semi-legitimate there is scope for negotiation and possible peace settlements – as in South Africa or Northern Ireland. Second, because the terrorist methods (and global ambitions) of Islamist fundamentalist groups make them such a huge threat.

This defines the nature of the struggle. It is existential – this Islamist fundamentalist movement will never peacefully co-exist with liberal democracy (or even secular autocracy). And they will constantly seek new ways to inflict further atrocities like 9/11.

This may not be a "forever war" but it could well go on for generations. The struggle between liberal democracy and communism has already lasted for four generations and there is no sign of it being over yet. The modern struggle with fundamentalist Islam is barely a single generation old, possibly two if you include the Iranian revolution. We may have a long way to go yet. ■

Colin Talbot is emeritus professor of government at the University of Manchester and a research associate at the University of Cambridge

MICHAEL BICHARD TIME TO END THE GREAT DIVIDE

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN DIFFERENT KINDS OF PUBLIC SERVANTS IS BAD FOR GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS. IT IS TIME TO REMOVE IT, SAYS FORMER WHITEHALL PERM SEC LORD MICHAEL BICHARD

Thirty years ago, I moved from being a chief executive in local government to run one of the government's largest agencies. At the time, such a move was unheard of and many of my new civil service colleagues assumed that I would in due course recross the great divide. Some were disappointed that I chose to stay! Years before, when I began my career in local government, it was equally unusual to switch between county boroughs, county councils and districts. Each had their own culture and when I joined a county council from a county borough, I experienced what it must be like to be a scholarship boy at a public school.

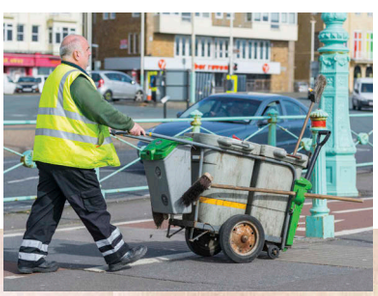
"Many will be quick to point to evidence which shows that the wall between the civil service and local government is not as impenetrable as it once was. But it does still exist"

So, why do these anecdotes matter and why has the Commission for Smart Government suggested that we should once and for all banish these bureaucratic divides by creating just one unified public service? First of all, because these artificial boundaries work to the disadvantage of citizens by reinforcing the fragmented nature of our public services. They make it less likely that services will be "joined up" in ways that make sense to real people with real life problems that don't easily fit the rigid bureaucratic boxes we create. The boundaries mean that providers do not see themselves as part of a common purpose and consequently services are less accessible, more siloed and even, on occasions, in competition. Real people want quality services defined by their needs, not by the providers' convenience and outdated structures.

Many will be quick to point to evidence which shows that the wall between the civil service and local government is not as impenetrable as it once was. But it does still exist and is one of the reasons why the centre is reluctant to devolve power and responsibilities to localities. During the pandemic we have seen too many examples of the centre failing to trust local providers. Data has not been shared; services have been over-centralised and local knowledge has been ignored in part, at least, because officials do not see themselves as part of a common enterprise. And sadly, on this occasion, lives have been lost as a consequence. A unified public service would create the sense of common purpose you need in a crisis and make it more likely that information and power was shared if that benefits the citizen.

A unified service would also help ensure that specialist knowledge was easily shared; that the diversity of experience which exists in different parts of the sector was used to enhance creativity and innovation and that there was common training available to all public service workers. Finally, it would reduce the likelihood of blame being shifted or borders being defended in ways which use up scarce resources and energy and leave the public in despair. The change will take time but it is already long overdue. Let's just get on with it! ■

Lord Bichard KCB is a crossbench peer in the House of Lords and until 2021 was chair of the National Audit Office. He was formerly permanent secretary at the Department for Education and the first director of the Institute for Government. Before moving to the Department for Education, Bichard was chief executive of Brent Council and Gloucestershire County Council, then chief executive of the Benefits Agency



Michael Bichard (second from right) addressing civil servants in 1997 as Department for Education and Employment perm sec with the incoming Labour ministerial team. From left to right: Andrew Smith, Baroness Blackstone, Estelle Morris, Kim Howells, Stephens Byers, Alan Howarth, Michael Bichard, David Blunkett

ANDY COWPER WILL THE LEVY RUN DRY?

THE GOVERNMENT'S TAX HIKE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE WIL PROVIDE EXTRA FUNDING, BUT DOES IT GO FAR ENOUGH?

In a dramatic set of announcements, foreshadowed by a predictable War Of the Briefings between the PM and the chancellor, we learned in September's "back-to-school" week about the government's plans for NHS and social care funding.

This was not before time. *CSW* readers who've been paying attention (and that's all of you, right?) will remember the PM's promises in his speech outside Downing Street on taking office in July 2019 that "my job is to make sure you don't have to wait three weeks to see your GP, and we start work this week with 20 new hospital upgrades, and ensuring that money for the NHS really does get to the front line".

He went on: "My job is to protect you or your parents or grandparents from the fear of having to sell your home to pay for the costs of care, and so I am announcing now – on the steps of Downing Street – that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve."

"It seems that the NHS didn't get what it wanted in funding terms, and so the Treasury and No.10 didn't get delivery guarantees"

So, what's happened? On Monday 6 September, health secretary Sajid Javid told parliament about the NHS's budget increase for the second half of this financial year to help address Covid pressures (which are very much ongoing, and rising as the end of holidays/back to school/work effects kick in).

He announced an additional £5.4bn for the NHS for the remainder of the current financial year. This breaks down into:

- £2.8bn for Covid-19 costs including infection control measures;
- £600m for day-to-day costs;
- £478m for enhanced hospital discharge; and
- £1.5bn for elective recovery, including £500m capital funding.

Towards a health and social care levy

On Tuesday 7 September, the prime minister announced a 1.25% increase in employers' and employees' National Insurance contributions and on share income dividends – branded a health and social care levy.

Starting in April 2022, the 1.25% increase in both employers' and employees' national insurance contributions and the 1.25% increase in share dividend tax will total an extra £12bn of taxes raised each financial year: £36bn over the three remaining financial years of this parliament. This health and social care levy will in time appear on payslips as a distinct payment from income tax and NI contributions.

An individual's lifetime social care contributions are set to be capped at £86,000 – more than double the £35,000 Dilnot proposed in 2011 (as a mid-point figure across his suggested range of £25,000-£50,000) from 2023.

Comedy fans will have appreciated the PM's and ministers' repeated assertions that this new levy will be "legally ringfenced" to prevent it being siphoned off by future governments. Lawyer and writer David Allan Green is very good on why this is utter nonsense.

Is this money enough?

No. It is not enough for real delivery of improvement, in either sector.

It's a start in the right direction for the NHS, but let's keep it in perspective. The NHS had the lowest period of financial growth in its history between 2010 and 2019: as a direct result of this, even before Covid-19 hit, NHS waiting lists had expanded enormously.

One consequence of that 2010-19 funding squeeze was the regular transfer of NHS money allocated for capital and maintenance budgets into day-to-day spending. This led to an enormous backlog of estates and maintenance spending. In 2019-20, this backlog was £9bn: a 40% increase from the 2018-19 figure of £6.4bn.

Back in the real world, the REAL Centre of the Health Foundation issued a report assessing the actual NHS financial support required. It'll have made the Treasury choke on their coffee to see the £17bn figure over the remainder of this parliament.

The report says this sum will be required "to clear the backlog of people waiting for routine elective care, return to 18 weeks, and treat millions of 'missing' patients who were expected to receive care during the pandemic but did not. In all, this would allow an additional 2.2 million extra patients to be seen a year.

"The overall funding the NHS may need could yet be significantly higher than this as the REAL Centre's modelling does not include the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on NHS productivity, and the additional investment that may be needed in primary and community services to support the recovery."

The proposal for the health and social care levy to largely fund clearing the NHS backlog for the coming three financial years (thereafter reverting to social care at a level to be decided by the Treasury) is at best unproven and improbable.

One of the main reasons for this is that the NHS waiting list is still growing because of Covid-19 demand pressures and extra infection control measures having reduced "regular" NHS capacity to below its pre-pandemic level.

Another main reason is that patients who may need treatment but delayed seeking it due to the pandemic are still not coming forward in the expected numbers. Some, of course, have died from Covid-19 and will therefore not need further healthcare (or indeed social care).

The government's plans both delay the arrival of extra funding for social care and obscure the question of a durable and post-Covid financial settlement for the NHS.

These financial plans keep social care firmly as the poor relation. Of the £36bn raised in the first three years, only £5.4bn is for social care. Of that £5.4bn, £2.5bn funds the new £86,000 lifetime cap on individuals' contributions to the costs of their care, leaving just £2.9bn over three years for reform.

What about reform?

It's essential to realise that what has been announced this week is a plan for tax-raising and funding. The document may be called *Build Back Better: Our Plan For Health And Social Care*, but there is no significant mention of actual plans for reform in either sector.

As a "plan" goes, there's strikingly little actual planning on offer, beyond a few broad commitments: one of which is for the NHS to create a new delivery plan. Cart before horse?

Of the few new commitments, one concerning the NHS is striking: "the NHS in England can aim to deliver around 30% more elective activity by 2024-25 than it was before the pandemic".

Nothing in the document remotely resembles a plan to reduce the NHS backlog. It is instead an aspiration-fest, articulated with words such as "can aim to", "should" and "could" (where "will", "shall and "must" would be more reassuring).

It seems that the NHS didn't get what it wanted in funding terms, and so the Treasury and No.10 didn't get delivery guarantees. Score one to NHS England's new chief executive Amanda Pritchard.

Other than in warm words of rhetoric, there's nothing substantial on how the quality of current social care provision will be raised; nor on how pay and conditions for that sector's staff will be improved.

Nor does it address the fact that half of social care is for working-age adults: for these people, the proposals offer very little.

This social care reform is very much about doing what the PM promised: to prevent people having to sell their homes to pay for the costs of their social care. As such, it will disproportionately benefit the estates of wealthy older people.

This is a significant tax raise that falls largely on working age people's incomes: its main aim in the short-to-medium term is to help families with significant housing assets that they want to pass on to their heirs. Time will tell whether the electorate are going to notice this. ■

***Andy Cowper is the editor of* Health Policy Insight*, and writes regularly on health policy and politics for* The Guardian, Tortoise, *the* BMJ *and* The Spectator**

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

Dr Jenny Harries became chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency in April, after being an integral part of the government's response to Covid-19 as deputy chief medical officer. She shares the experience with **Beckie Smith**. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

When Jenny Harries became England's deputy chief medical officer in 2019, she expected it to be less dramatic than her previous jobs. As deputy medical director of Public Health England, she had worked on the government's response to the West African Ebola outbreak, Zika and the Novichok poisonings in Salisbury. Her new role was to focus on tobacco control, health promotion and physical activity.

"I did say to somebody, just be-

fore I moved into the role, 'Well, you can have too much excitement on this health protection stuff. I think perhaps I'm going to do something on a wider public health basis,'" she recalls.

She was soon at the centre of the response to Covid-19, alongside chief medical officer Chris Whitty and deputy Jonathan Van Tam – becoming instantly recognisable as she sought to inform the nation about the pandemic's development. "When I came into the Department of Health, I knew some people, but I wasn't part of the system. And as soon as I appeared on the No.10 platform for one media briefing, everybody knew me. No longer was I a stranger anywhere in the nation," she says. "And people just welcomed me. In many ways, it's been personally and professionally really valuable. I just feel very privileged."

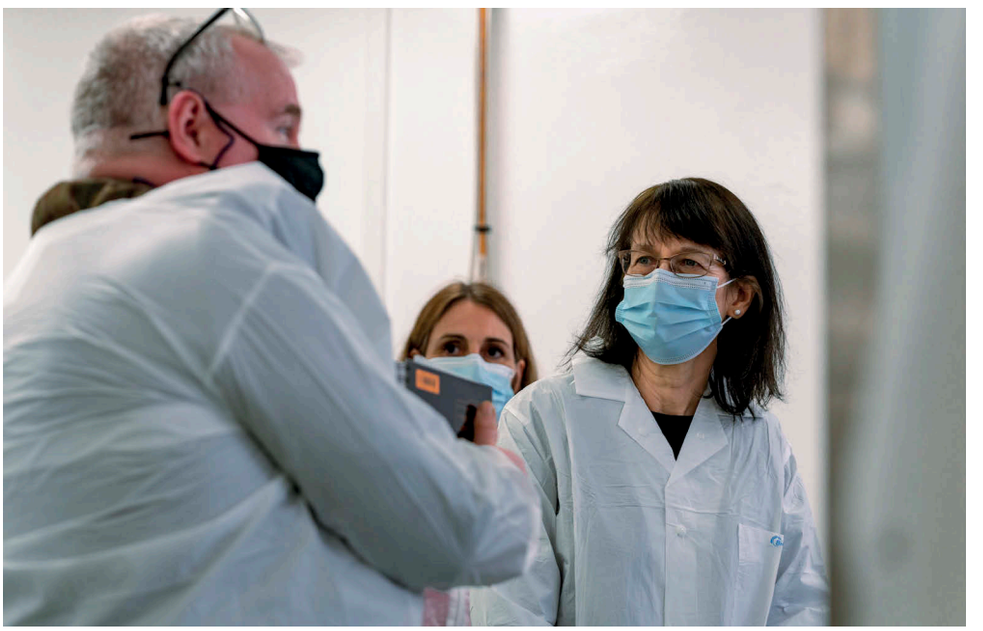
She notes that with her experience as a former public health director, Whitty's expertise in infectious diseases and Van Tam's in emerging viruses and immunisation, "if you'd planned to put a senior professional team together, you probably couldn't have done much better".

Her experience in that role was so profound that she has since decided to leave that expert unit for the UK Health Security Agency – formed in April out of Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace – where she is continuing to tackle the threat of coronavirus.

Reflecting on her time as DCMO, Harries says: "It wasn't always smooth. And it's been very tiring. But it has really reinforced to me something about the civil service." Joining the civil service quite late in her career, she "found it a really exciting place to be, you have very bright people... just moving mountains at national and local level to get things done."

CSW asks if it was ever difficult to advise ministers on the Covid response but never to get the final say about how best to protect the public. "Life can be frustrating in general at times and I'm a born optimist, so I tend not to let that bother me," she says. "What bothers me is if I haven't done my job properly. I don't mind if somebody else makes a different decision if I've communicated the risk or the opportunity as well as I can, based on evidence and good science."

Being a director of public health was good training for that, she says, describing local authorities as a "microcosm" of the national system. "When I moved into the deputy chief medical officer role, one of my old director of public health colleagues said 'you're going to the dark side', as if I couldn't hold my own professional opinion and draw a line. I personally have



never had to step over my line... there will always be different views. And that's good. I'd rather live in a democracy and have my voice heard and for somebody to make a decision that may not be quite the one I would have made. One of the privileges of the job is to sit around the very top tables and provide that input – and almost invariably, it is accepted and acknowledged and acted upon. I haven't felt through the pandemic that that has been problematic."

Nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight, is there anything Harries wishes had been done differently – even in those areas that have attracted the most intense criticism, such as care homes and the seemingly haphazard approach to enforcing lockdown measures?

Harries says next year's public inquiry will answer those questions. "I think people have made their very best endeavours, using the information that they had at the time," she adds. "We now know of growing evidence about this particular virus, for example, about the importance of aerosol transmission, or the proportion of cases which are asymptomatic – these are quite critical. But they weren't evident at the start."

In bringing together PHE and NHS Test and Trace – and with it the Joint Biosecurity Centre – under UKHSA, Harries has the challenge of marrying two organisations with "extremely different cultures and different skill sets", she says.

"We have Public Health England, who have very specialised individuals in health protection, based on science – and quite a small organisation comparatively, in pandemic terms," she says. PHE brings with it expertise in immunisation, vaccination, virology and rare infectious diseases and genomics, among many other things.

"Then there is test and trace, which has been set up very rapidly to deliver on a single topic – on Covid... so we have one [organisation] which principally started and framed in the public sector with civil servants; the other one, of necessity, bringing in a large number of individuals with different skill sets which the civil service doesn't tend to have."

She says when she became chief exec, she spent time on the test and trace side to familiarise herself with all of its components. "I realised that you needed a dictionary to translate between the two systems. 'End-to-end customer services' would be an entirely appropriate thing to say in test and trace. And it has a 'required business direction' to its 'product delivery'. If you're sitting in public health, talking about 'customers' can be quite a challenging concept, because for public health physicians and professionals, the population is their patient, effectively, and you wouldn't normally talk to your patient as a customer."

With the new agency expected to be fully up and running and staffed by October, Harries is integrating the two on an incredibly tight timeline – the transition schedule, which includes formal consultations, leaves just four days spare if everything goes to plan. "So it's very challenging – a very tight timescale, different cultures, different languages, but it's all on track."

While the organisation's initial emphasis is on getting through the pandemic, Harries says its long-term focus will be much broader. UKHSA will use the same skills needed to respond to Covid, on a smaller scale, to respond to the "10,000 or so other health protection incidents that go on each year".

"So I think we will go back gradually to what you might call bread-and-butter health protection, but with different modes and models to be able to step up really quickly with better and clearer connections to key partners," she says. Those partners will include NHS bodies, business and local authorities – who were angered early in the pandemic by poor data sharing and communication about the pandemic response.

Getting "the right level of national regional and local engagement" is important, Harries says. Her own CV includes stints as a director of public health in both Wales and England, and she says she often puts herself back in those shoes: "What would this look like? What would I want central government to do? How would I want all of the different parts of the civil service to work to help me tackle the problem for my population?"

"Before the pandemic, I don't think people quite understood how an infectious disease could cause such turmoil in communities and in the economics of the nation and the globe. But now it is very evident to them"

An important facet of what Harries calls "bread-and-butter health protection" is addressing inequalities. She has appointed a director of inequalities to challenge the executive team to look at all of its data to ensure its decisions consider their impact on potentially disadvantaged groups.

"People tend to think it doesn't fit with health protection and health security anymore – that bit goes to health promotion," she says. "For me, it is actually a critical component."

UKHSA's work will also include addressing the threat of antimicrobial resistance – which has led to the development of multi-drug-resistant diseases like TB – and the global One Health agenda, which links up policy, legislation and research to address challenges such as food safety and zoonotic diseases that spread between animals and humans.

Through tackling these threats, UKHSA will form part of the UK's critical security infrastructure. "I think people understand that now," Harries says. "Before the pandemic, I don't think people quite understood how an infectious disease could cause such turmoil in communities and in the economics of the nation and the globe. But now it is very evident to them."

The pandemic transformed people's attitudes towards infectious diseases in several ways, she says. "Nowadays, it's not unexpected if a test swab kit pops through your letterbox – you put it back in the post box and you have a message come up on your mobile phone. That sort of skill set was not part of PHE before, and yet it potentially has huge opportunities for other infectious diseases – particularly flu, for example."

Does that mean the UK could one day have a test and trace operation for flu outbreaks? She says there is certainly an opportunity to build on existing surveillance systems that instruct the health service to start using antivirals each year when flu cases rise.

"What we have learned through the pandemic is a very different way to do that – potentially helping keep patients away from primary care if they don't need to be there," Harries says. "[It could even have] positive impacts on reducing the use of antibiotics when we don't need them because people understand what the infection is that they have and how to manage it."

She points out that there have been many smaller-scale operations to track and control outbreaks of diseases that have appeared in the UK, such as monkeypox and MERS. "We haven't had large outbreaks [of those diseases] because they've had a good amount of health protection control. But I think what we've got now is a different mindset as well as a different potential opportunity in terms of infrastructure," she says. "And there is a lot of work currently considering how we can »

best utilise the testing capacity that we have in different ways to get better outcomes and more focused interventions."

A remit letter sent to Harries by innovation minister Lord Bethell in July, setting out the new agency's priorities, said it must "continue and further develop surveillance and modelling capabilities and research-led, evidence-gathering activities to inform action at national and local level". It is also expected to use "world-class data and analytical techniques" to underpin its work on disease prevention and response.

The Joint Biosecurity Centre, which was set up last year, is the "beating data heart of the new organisation", Harries says. "There are very few sources of data which actually can't be useful," she says, adding that the new organisation gives health officials the opportunity to "think differently and really broadly". Part of that means moving towards more open data – working closely with academia and making research public.

Harries adds that the UKHSA will "absolutely" continue using partnerships to enhance its work. Last year, for example, the JBC worked with The Alan Turing Institute and the Royal Statistical Society, and drew on mobile phone data from a telecoms company tracking footfall and social distancing at shopping hotspots.

Harries admits that people are wary of how their data is being used, and trust is "quite difficult to establish". She says people have welcomed the visibility of government's top scientists and public health professionals – among them Whitty, herself and chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance – during the pandemic, and the health security agency aims to "continue those conversations with the public, and try and maintain a trusted relationship".

The organisation must also be mindful about which data it collects, to ensure it gets a "true picture" of what's going on, Harries adds. If people can't access websites to report tests results in a disease outbreak, for example, there is a risk they will be overlooked.

But the public's perception of an organisation is not only affected by how it acts. When Hancock scrapped PHE last year, the public health body appeared to make a convenient scapegoat for the coronavirus response's failings. Does Harries have any concerns that similar criticism could undermine UKHSA's authority? She replies by saying the prime minister himself provided the remit for the new organisation, showing the "level of support behind it".

"I don't think that needs debate," she says, adding that the agency is already a "key component of discussions" with government departments about policy and other decisions. She adds that the public has recognised "just how much critical work has been done by Public Health England through the pandemic". On test and trace, vaccine effectiveness and genomics, "there are huge areas where Public Health England expertise has been included".

"And that is recognised by many other government departments, whether it be the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether it be the Department for Education – right across government... I think there is a strong recognition of skill sets which are in very short supply. And one of the critical components when we build a new organisation is to strengthen those and create very strong succession planning, so that the country has a cadre of specialists going forward."

Her comments echo those of civil service leaders who have stressed the need to bolster skills internally and decrease the need for external consultants.

UKHSA can expect to come under scrutiny in this area – in January, the National Audit Office described NHS Test and Trace as "heavily reliant" on consultants, and its then-head Dido Harding said it had around 900 Deloitte consultants earning at least £1,000.

Harries says her agency is "not looking to be reliant on consultants in any shape or form where it doesn't need to be", and has a plan to "very rapidly ramp down" its use of consulting firms. "Most colleagues across the civil service would recognise that there is a time and place for using consultants in most parts of the public sector, but that's not how you normally run your organisation," she says.

"It should be that you should pass through the doors of the health security agency to earn your stripes to work wherever you are"

But she notes that Harding was building "very, very rapidly – literally on a day-by-day basis – a huge startup organisation from scratch". She adds: "There are a number of things which we have learned from this that will be good for the civil service to think through. One is about the speed of onboarding individuals... I think that's important for preparedness for emergency response going forward. We do it well, but at this scale it's quite challenging."

Meanwhile, UKHSA must work to address particular skills gaps in data science and data infrastructure, she says. That means not just recruiting talented experts in their fields, but training them up: "It should be, in my mind, that you should pass through the doors of the health security agency in the UK to earn your stripes to work wherever you are... that might be in data science, virology, communications, public and health protection issues or health behaviours." Harries also wants to beef up areas of health protection expertise where she says the UK has "fairly minimal capacity at the moment": entomology, including mosquito-borne disease; climate change; chemical response; radiation; nuclear response. She says while health-protection bodies have some capacity to respond to those threats, "they've been the poor cousin, almost, to infectious disease".

Perhaps the colleague who Harries once told she could have too much excitement in a public health job might wonder what convinced her to take on such a huge challenge.

Again, she insists working on the pandemic response was a "privilege". And there's no doubt her career has prepared her for some of the crises she will face. Asked what it's like to be suddenly faced with the news that a rare disease has broken out in the UK, Harries admits there are some that "fill you with a degree of horror".

"One of the interesting ones was monkeypox. We had the first cases a few years ago, we'd never had it in the UK before so it meant that we didn't have any guidance." Experts were called and it was a "learning curve, right across government, across some of our health protection teams as well".

"I think that the most challenging one was Novichok. It's one which I think none of us would have anticipated happening in a small market town in the south of England – and with such significant consequences for the individuals involved, and the communities. Also because it required extremely close working with colleagues from security forces, which is another good reason why the health security agency will be part of that structure as we go forward."

CSW wonders if being a physician has given her practice at remaining calm in fraught circumstances. She laughs. "I always look calm. I don't necessarily feel that way. I'm just as human underneath. And I think one of the issues for managing incidents or responding is knowing your own resilience levels – I've had quite a lot of practice on that." ■

ANY COMPLAINTS

Public complaints are a vital part of government accountability, and offer valuable insights for improving services. But reform is needed to make the most of them, says former senior civil servant **William Goodhind**

When we speak of government accountability, most thoughts turn to the efficacy and legality of political leadership on issues like the economy, public health and foreign policy. However, accountability also lies much lower down the food chain – with the professional conduct of civil servants and other government employees. This is where a much beleaguered mechanism comes to the fore: complaints.

Complaints are the most readily available and direct form of public engage-

ment with government. They can concern standards of service, staff behaviour and any action or inaction that affects an individual or group. Only one area is expressly off limits: policy. A complaint is not about how government should be run, but an appraisal of governance in practice.

Like the black box in aircraft, complaints help us to understand what happened, where things went wrong, and how to avoid a repeat scenario. This process is integral to continuous organisational learning.

Yet despite its value as a stakeholder feedback loop, the UK's complaints system is mired in policy and procedural ambiguity.

For a start, public messaging is systemically vague. A quick scan of departmental web pages reveals an array of approaches and terminology. There are marked variations between the number of stages in a complaints process, response timescales and the degree of explanatory guidance given.

Worse still, linguistic side-stepping avoids explaining how complaints are actually assessed – they are "dealt with", "responded to", "answered" and, on rare occasions of seeming officialdom, "investigated". But these statements are skin deep – the absence of supporting detail is glaring.

Interpretation is left wide open for the nuts and bolts of case handling, resolution and follow-on actions. Public understanding of, and trust in, complaints mechanisms suffers as a result. It is hardly surprising, then, that so many complaints end up on the desk of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

The PHSO is a publicly-funded, independent body that arbitrates on cases free of charge. For complainants, the road to ombudsman consideration is a long one. Only after exhausting a multi-stage complaint process and securing the backing of a member of parliament will access finally be granted. Even then, there is no guarantee that a complaint will be investigated.

The PHSO is a complainant's last hope, and, for most, figures suggest it is a forlorn one. In the 2020-21 reporting year, only 2% of the 23,124 complaints screened by the PHSO were admitted for detailed investigation. The vast majority of referrals (81%) were discounted within just seven days of receipt during the PHSO's "initial check" stage.

The most common cause for rejection? Not being "ready" – a wonderfully bland way of saying that eligibility criteria, in some form or another, was not met. Or, put differently, in 2020-21, the PHSO deemed that 18,689 complaints were submitted erroneously.

Unfortunately, this is a recurring theme.

Over the last five years, the PHSO has rejected around 150,000 complaints, or an average of 79% of those screened annually. This begs the question: why do so many complainants get it so wrong?

The high number of PHSO referrals, and the equally high attrition rate, is a symptom of entrenched ambiguity. It boils down to a lack of consistency, clarity and ownership. Let's discuss how to address each of these issues in turn.

Consistency

Across the board, guidance and terminology should be standardised in public complaints web pages. There needs to be an agreed baseline for the description of procedural steps and the scope of available remedies. Moreover, reference to the PHSO's principles of good complaint handling, as a central guiding document, should be included by default. Collectively, this common framework ensures that members of the public are appropriately channelled from the outset. This consistent signposting, in turn, supports the next area of reform: the methodology behind complaint assessment.

Clarity

Clarity is desperately needed on how complaints are judged. The answer is simple – link the process to existing policy. Personnel management in government bodies is intrinsically process and definition driven. Recruitment and promotion in the civil service, for example, is bound to success profiles, going so far as to describe in detail the embodiment of each professional competency. Likewise, conduct is governed by the civil service code, which provides direction on what is and isn't a demonstration of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.

It is Kafkaesque that prescriptive policies on performance and conduct exist, but their mention is entirely absent in the handling of public complaints. This needs to change. Aligning internal and external-facing procedures allows a more robust means of conceptually diagnosing the substance of concerns. The outcome is a more transparent and logical process. For this to work, though, harder decisions need to be made earlier.

Ownership

Consistency and clarity are important, but ownership is everything. Public trust is undermined if responses dance around the crux of a complaint, effectively relinquishing responsibility and passing the buck in the PHSO's direction.

True ownership is an unequivocal, comprehensive answer that draws a line in the sand on what is and isn't conceded. A responding party should explicitly acknowledge, in their assessment, whether there have been performance failings or breaches of a code of conduct. A structured response against each professional competence and behavioural value leaves no room for doubt. A similar, listed response to available remedies provides essential closure and a stronger, auditable footing.

The benefits of this approach are obvious. Frank and unambiguous answers not only support earlier dispute resolution, but fast-tracks learning actions and strengthens oversight.

The time for reform is now. Consistency, clarity and meaningful ownership will reap dividends for all involved, the PHSO included. A more effective and agile government awaits. ■

> **"Complaints help us to understand what happened, where things went wrong, and how to avoid a repeat scenario"**

William Goodhind is a former Cabinet Office civil servant and a graduate of the Master of Public Administration programme at the University of York

STEPS TO SUCCESS

A few months after joining the civil service as a summer job, **Karina Singh** was taking on her first leadership role. Now leading transformation at HM Land Registry, she talks to *CSW* about the importance of testing and trusting yourself as you carve out your own leadership style

At the Women into Leadership conference later this month, you'll be speaking about the need to challenge traditional leadership paths and behaviours. Tell us a bit about your own leadership path – what was your first 'leadership role'?

Karina Singh: I started working in the civil service in 1990. It was intended as a summer job while I worked out what I wanted to do with my life. I was in the accounts office in HM Customs and Excise at Heathrow airport. My job was to take cash and cheque deposits, so that people could clear their goods through customs. Within a few months of my arriving my team leader left to go on to another job and I was given the opportunity to manage and lead the team of five. I have been managing teams ever since.

What have you learnt about leadership since that first early experience?

KS: I've had two big learning points. At first, I thought that as a leader you needed to know all the answers. Now I realise that's not the case. The team around you has most of the answers and expertise. Your job as the leader is to bring the diverse points of view together and shape them, so that you can get to the right answer together. A lot of the time as leaders we are making judgement calls in tricky situations on the best way forward. Listening to a range of views and asking the right questions is key. This lesson has been emphasised over the past 18 months, as we have been through unprecedented times.

The second big learning point for me is that you can't be somebody else. You can learn from people, you can observe what you want to be or what you want don't want to be, but you can't pretend to be somebody else. It took me quite a long time to be comfortable and find my own leadership style.

It takes quite a lot of confidence to be able to get to that point.

KS: Yes, absolutely and I think you have to build that confidence quite deliberately. Everyone has a different starting point in life and in their career, so confidence levels can vary hugely.

And do you have advice about how to build that confidence?

KS: With the benefit of hindsight – and enough of it – I have realised I used to be self-limiting. We can probably all fall into the trap sometimes of being very bad at judging risk and assuming doom and gloom. I used to think "I can't do that because all these things could go wrong" and not think about the rewards from doing something. Even if things don't go to plan, you will have learnt from it and take better decisions in future.

Every opportunity that you put yourself up for, every experience you have, every different team you work with, will leave you a changed person. The more you do, the more you test your capabilities, the more confident you will be, and the more resilience and strength you will find within yourself.

So, I'd say don't wait for other people to give you the opportunity: find the opportunity. Try lots of different things, find out what you are good at, remind yourself of that and build your confidence in that way.

You've worked in quite a wide variety of roles – policy, operational, change delivery. We often talk about differences between departments, but have you observed different cultures of leadership in different professions across the civil service?

KS: Yes I have, partly because the nature of work has changed since I first started, but partly because as a civil service we've come to recognise the value of varied technical skills from different professions.

For me leadership skills can be broadly bucketed into four areas. You have to listen and engage; you need clarity of vision; you need to be able to negotiate and influence; and you need

to work with and through others.

Different professions use the different skills differently. In policy roles, you need to do more negotiating and influencing, in operational roles you may have to put more emphasis on listening and engaging and setting a clear vision. The skill set is the same, but the degree to which you use them varies in different roles.

Speaking about transformation generally, I've seen you use the phrase about eating an elephant one bite at a time. Do you think we need a similar approach to challenging leadership perceptions? Should we be slow and steady, or push for revolution?

KS: You need both at different times. That's why we need people with different leadership styles and we need people to know what their leadership style is so they can work to their strengths and at pace in stressful situations.

That's another thing I've learnt over time, actually. I always used to be working to my weakest areas because the feedback we receive is often: 'Here's a development area, go away and plug it'. Part of building confidence and developing your leadership style is working out what your strengths are and working to them. For me, for example, it's about delivering big challenging things with a team.

Some areas or jobs might need a more revolutionary style which is fine. We need both and that's why, although the range of things we do across the civil service is really exciting, you need to recognise where your skills and interests lie as you move across different roles.

"The more you do, the more you test yourself, the more resilience you will find within yourself"

Climb high Guests at the Women Into Leadership conference

Do you think the Covid response and changing work patterns in the last 18 months have changed perceptions around leadership?

KS: I think public perceptions of what the civil service does do and can't do have changed, people are slightly more appreciative now about the range of things that we get involved with.

Looking to our teams, I think what we need to do as leaders hasn't changed fundamentally but the tools we use and the way we act have had to change. The thing I'm finding most challenging at the moment is how we listen and engage if unable to go out and meet people. If you don't have those accidental conversations, those sitting at the edge of the desk conversations, you lose the ability to pick up nuggets of information which help you be a better leader and make better decisions, so I'm having to be much more thoughtful about how I interact with people.

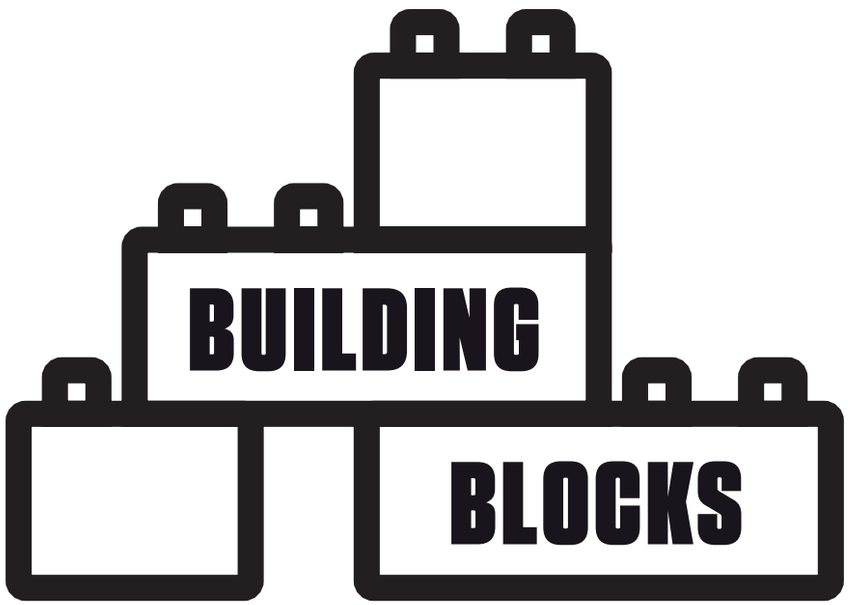
Our hybrid working approach at HM Land Registry is all about collaboration and connecting – rather than specifying a particular number of days we want people to attend an office we've held open discussions and asked people to make choices based on the activities they are involved in and where they need to be to conduct their work efficiently. For example, some people may be in an office every day, some a handful of days a month - and the patterns are likely to evolve and change over time.

Finally, what do you see as the value of events like Women into Leadership, what do you hope that attendees (and speakers?) will gain from taking part?

KS: I think two things. Firstly: at the moment we don't often get opportunities to bump into people, to meet people and network. We don't get a chance to see and learn from how others behave, how they have carved out their career, overcome challenges and defined success. So that opportunity to meet people and hear others' stories is really valuable, even if it's virtually.

Secondly it's really useful – particularly at the moment when we are all sitting at our kitchen tables hopping from meeting to meeting – to take time out and reflect on your own career. Covid has shown us how easy it is for longer term plans to be overturned in an instant. Opportunities arise and get taken away overnight. The more we have thought about what we want, in advance, the easier it will be to take the right decisions at speed. It's not about having a detailed plan, but having a strategy, so that we can take the right opportunities when we see them. It's not all about promotion but may be about having fulfilling work or a better work/life balance – whatever choice that you want to make next. ■

The annual Women into Leadership conferences are key events for anyone interested in seeing leadership opportunities for women enhanced. The London 2021 conference will take place on 29 September, face-to-face and online. It will offer inspirational advice and hands-on coaching to explore how female leaders, at any grade, within the Civil Service and wider public sector, can enhance their skills to become the leader they aspire to be. Register for th event here: https://bit.ly/3tDWYoA



As the National Infrastructure Commission begins work on its next assessment of the UK's future needs, chief executive **James Heath** talks to **Richard Johnstone** about taking a long-term perspective, the impact of Covid, and monitoring government commitments

As befits the chief executive of the National Infrastructure Commission, James Heath uses a transport analogy to describe the feeling of being named the head of the agency in the middle of a pandemic.

"It's been really challenging to come into new organisation as chief executive and run it over Zoom," he says. "If starting a new job is getting from nought to 70 miles per hour, then I probably got to about 50 miles per hour at about the same speed as you would under normal conditions, but getting to 70 miles per hour is impossible for me without meeting people in real life."

Heath joined the commission in May 2020, in the depths of the UK's first coronavirus lockdown, and says it has been difficult to do without the face-to-face contact we once took for granted.

"You build relationships and social capital face-to-face with people, and then you spend it online. But you've got to have it to begin with," he says.

The result is that the commission is now developing a hybrid working model, with a mix of working from home and the office, in an effort to keep »

“OUR ROLE IS TO SEE CHALLENGES COMING, AND ADVISE GOVERNMENT ON HOW TO PLAN RATIONALLY TO DEAL WITH THEM”

the benefits and flexibility of remote working as well as building those relationships.

"I think the key point is that we just don't know the answers to how these type of hybrid models will work," he adds. "So it's really important for me that we trial these new models, and we test them to see what works and what doesn't before we settle on the longer term pattern."

This encapsulates a challenge that is faced by many government departments as they move away from the emergency pandemic response – and it also neatly summarises the issue faced by the NIC as it begins to scope out the work of the next National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA). Just how will the country emerge from the pandemic and what does it mean for infrastructure?

The assessment is due for publication in autumn 2023, and the scoping work has begun, with a baseline assessment giving what Heath describes as a "where we are today picture of infrastructure", to be published later this autumn.

The commission covers a range of sectors and areas when looking at the UK's infrastructure needs – energy, transport, water and wastewater (drainage and sewerage), waste, flood risk management and digital communications. In each, it will be looking at performance, quality, cost, investment and resilience.

"We'll do a baseline assessment, then we'll look at what we see as the big drivers of future infrastructure demand and supply, which is where we'll get into Covid, and the extent to which the changes we've seen around transport use and [visits to] city centres will be permanent or temporary," Heath says. "That will be where we will paint some scenarios for future infrastructure."

However, at the moment, Heath says that "we just don't know what the long term consequences are going to be", which is why the assessment process is important.

"There's significant uncertainty, but you can't just down tools and stop thinking. You've got to try and design policy in an adaptive way where you keep your options open, and you move forward in stages, trying to understand where the data is going. Because you're not designing infrastructure policy for the next year, we're designing infrastructure policy for the next 20, 30, 40, 50, 100 years."

Heath adds that the pandemic has made work in two particular policy areas – the move towards net zero, and the aim to level up the country – all the more important.

Holding the government to account for the pledges they have made in these key policy areas is part of what Heath describes as the commission's three key functions. The first two functions, he says, are setting the long-term agenda on infrastructure investment, and providing an independent perspective to the debate.

"The third is definitely to monitor government progress so that when government say they are going to do things in the infrastructure space, and when they accept one of our recommendations, we actually hold them to account on delivery."

Reaching the government's target to hit net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and prime minister Boris Johnson's pledge to level up the country and better spread economic opportunity are two areas where the commission will be closely monitoring progress towards delivery.

"On net zero, we've seen some quite ambitious goals from government in terms of renewable energy, electrical vehicle charging and ending sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030," Heath says.

"But the big challenge now is to turn those policy goals into delivery plans with clear milestones. That is the zone for challenge that we are focusing on: how you turn the aspirations into reality."

Likewise on the prominent pledges to level up the country, Heath says the NIC has already "quite directly challenged government" on the policy prescriptions that likely flow from that. The commission called for greater devolution to city leaders in both its first National Infrastructure Assessment and subsequent annual monitoring reports.

"If you want to solve some of these big questions about changing economic geography and levelling up, then there must be more significant devolution of power, responsibility and funding within England – to mayoral authorities and to local authorities," he says. "That's where the information and understanding lies about how to fix some of these problems. That's something we will continue to push the government on."

Defining what levelling up means – and the policy prescriptions that follow – is one of the tasks for the commission in the

next national infrastructure assessment.

"Properly defining what this means is clearly a challenge," he says. "I think there is a danger that if you have a fairly vague concept, that can confuse policy and prevent us from knowing what a good outcome looks like."

A key step to making recommendations will be determining "'the right geographic dimension" for levelling up, he says.

"Is this about urban challenges, and the fact that the productivity rates of our big cities are below the UK average and significantly behind London? Or is the big issue about the balance between towns and cities, or between urban and rural?

"I think you've got to be clear about the problem. Is it [just] about productivity and growth? Or is the problem about productivity and growth, but also about the quality of life and wellbeing questions. I think it is probably about making places more productive and more liveable, not just economics.

"And then you've got to think about what is infrastructure's role in sorting out some of these problems. And I think infrastructure is necessary, but it's not sufficient. As influential as infrastructure will be skills policy and education policy. We've got to think about infrastructure in that context, rather than seeing it as a silver bullet."

Heath describes the role of chief executive of the commission as a three-headed challenge – leading the standing secretariat of the commission; acting as the chief adviser to the eight-strong commission, chaired by Sir John Armitt; and promoting its work in various policy debates.

Before joining the NIC Heath was director of digital infrastructure at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and he says he was attracted by the idea of "more time and space to think about how you solve problems with a slightly longer-term perspective".

However, he says adjusting from the more reactive world of day-to-day implementation in the civil service was "actually quite difficult".

"For the first few months here, [I was] sort of chasing the latest policy debate in Whitehall and working out how could the commission help, where actually our role is to take a longer-term perspective," he says. "It took me at least three or four months to decompress and take a slightly different perspective."

"YOU'RE NOT DESIGNING INFRASTRUCTURE POLICY FOR THE NEXT YEAR, WE'RE DESIGNING INFRASTRUCTURE POLICY FOR THE NEXT 20, 30, 40, 50 YEARS"

The commission is technically an executive agency of the Treasury, but Heath says "we are very independent in the work we do".

This will be demonstrated by the process around the second NIA. This engagement will include working with Whitehall, because "we want to understand what the thinking is on transport and energy and water in different government departments", but the assessment itself will be the commission's own.

"We decide what areas we're going to look at and we decide what our recommendations are," he says. "I think government departments absolutely recognise our separate role. In my first year here, I've seen that respect for independence."

The first NIA was published in July 2018, providing for the first time evidence based and forward thinking independent advice on infrastructure strategy. Speaking at the time, Armitt said that it was "not some unaffordable wish-list of projects" but instead set "a clear direction for how to meet the country's future infrastructure needs and [made] a realistic assessment of what can and should be delivered within the stated aim of ministers for steady and continued investment over the coming years".

The government provided an in-depth response to the recommendations in November last year, publishing the first ever National Infrastructure Strategy and creating the UK Infrastructure Bank to finance projects.

Heath says the commission was "pleased to see that a significant number of our recommendations from the first National Infrastructure Assessment were endorsed by government".

He adds: "Some of the big ideas flowed from the work we'd done. One example is the setting up of the UK Infrastructure Bank, which was based on our recommendation. The decision to bring forward the date for phasing out petrol cars and vans to 2030 was informed by our thinking, as was placing a bigger strategic bet on hydrogen. Pushing renewable energy hard was also based on our thinking – though obviously, on that last one, not just our thinking, but we made a significant contribution."

Overall, he says there's "quite an alignment between government and the commission in the key policy areas", but reiterates the "significant further work to be done in turning policy aspiration into action".

Given his previous role, how does he think the commission is viewed in government and how did he engage with it at DCMS?

"We took seriously what the commission said in the strategy published on fibre [broadband], which was six months before the government strategy on fibre, and there's a lot of commonality," he says. "We would take note if the commission was either privately or publicly expressing concern about the delivery of that strategy."

The commission also carries out ad hoc work for government, with recent studies covering infrastructure in towns and technology that could remove carbon dioxide from the air.

This indicates the scale and the breadth of the projects that the commission is involved in, and its important role in the UK policy debate.

"We have the ability to take the time to think about how you solve problems with a slightly longer-term perspective," says Heath.

"Our role is to see challenges coming, and advise government on how to plan rationally to deal with them. That's a different mindset to firefighting and solving lots of short-term challenges, which is inevitably part of the job in government." ■

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WILL GOVERNMENT RECONSIDER DIGITAL-ONLY STATUS FOR EU NATIONALS?

Having steadfastly opposed issuing physical documents to recipients of EU settled status, the Home Office recently met with campaigners to listen to new proposals. **Sam Trendall** finds out more

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As of the beginning of July – and for the first time in decades – EU citizens in the UK can no longer demonstrate their right to live and work here simply by producing their passport. Instead, they need to prove they have obtained settled, or pre-settled status.

The system through which they do this has sparked concern among many observers. One parliamentary committee warned that the digital system – which does not provide any form of physical documentation – has "clear parallels... with the Windrush scandal". Another Westminster committee claimed that the government is not "learning the lessons from Windrush".

Throughout Brexit negotiations, representatives from Brussels also expressed worries about the lack of documentary proof available to those granted status, as did campaign and advocacy groups – chief among them the3million, which seeks to represent EU citizens in the UK.

During discussions about whether EU nationals in the UK should receive hard-copy evidence of their immigration status, there has typically only ever been one dissenting voice: the government itself. In the face of more than two years of criticism and concern, the Home Office has held firm in its insistence on using a digital-only system.

In July 2019, after a flurry of critical select-committee reports, it said: "Any physical document may be lost or stolen or become out of date very quickly. In addition, there are circumstances in which an individual's status document can be controlled by another person... moving to a digital status is a step forward in tackling those who seek to control others."

In January last year, following public calls for physical evidence from the European parliament's Brexit co-ordinator Guy Verhofstadt – who said the lack of lack of documentation was one of the major "anxieties" of EU citizens in the UK – the Home Office was similarly unmoved. "There is no change to our digital approach," the department said.

Eighteen months on, and with the deadline for applications to the settlement scheme having passed on 30 June, that approach remains unchanged. But the calls to reconsider have not died down.

The most recent parliamentary report examining the programme, from the House of Lords European Affairs Committee, aired some longstanding concerns. Peers warned that a lack of awareness about the scheme and the barriers posed by an application process that centred on an app may have resulted in many elderly and vulnerable "slipping through the cracks". The committee also expressed alarm that, as of March 2021, only 2% of status applications had been submitted by over-65s.

And, even for those who have successfully applied for status, the report said that the lack of a physical document means that "EU citizens in the UK may face discrimination in securing employment and rental tenancies".

"We have had hundreds of reports of people missing out on a mortgage application because the bank just couldn't get on with this system."
Monique Hawkins, the3million

"The UK government has welcomed the EU's decision to issue a physical document to all UK citizens in Europe – while resisting calls to do the same for EU citizens in the UK," it added. "[The committee] demands the government explain why it holds these contradictory positions."

For its part, the3million – which gave evidence to the committee – has continued lobbying for a change of policy. The organisation's #ProofEqualityNow campaign encourages people to write to their MP and implore the government to issue EU citizens with hard-copy status documents.

The campaign group has also put together detailed proposals for issuing the physical documents. The plan is built on secure QR codes – an existing technology that the group claims could thus be deployed easily and at low cost. Codes, which could be issued both digitally and on documents or cards, would contain encrypted details of the status-holder – including their photo.

The system would hinge on the use of public and private keys. A private key would allow the Home Office to, effectively, include a digital signature that could not be replicated by anyone outside the department.

Secure QR codes cannot be decrypted using a generic smartphone scanner app. Instead they need the applicable public key, which the Home Office could issue via an app which the3million has proposed could be downloaded solely from the department's website, or from a clearly labelled Home Office account on an app store.

Monique Hawkins, policy and research officer at the campaign group, told *CSW's* sister publication *PublicTechnology*: "When the card is scanned, you would see two bits of information: one is that is that is definitely generated by the Home Office; and two, the [user's] original information [encrypted] inside the code – name, address, photograph. You can then see that it matches what is on the rest of the card; if I steal a QR code from someone else and use it to manufacture a card... as soon as someone scans the code, they will know."

The plan shares key similarities with the NHS Covid Pass system of vaccine certification, which provides NHS App users with a digital secure QR code to that can be displayed on their phone – but also offers the option of downloading a printable PDF file. Those without access to connected devices can also request a paper copy to be sent to them.

'Assessing feasibility'

Since the3million launched its letter-writing campaign, a number of MPs have taken up the issue via parliamentary questions. In response to one such question, immigration minister Kevin Foster said in June: "We continue to welcome feedback »

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on how we can improve our services. Home Office officials are planning to meet with the 3million group to discuss the feasibility of their suggested approach."

Shortly after the minister's comments, a meeting did take place, during which the3million had the chance to talk to civil servants and outline its proposals. *PublicTechnology* asked the Home Office whether it was actively considering the proposals, and what might happen next. Could the department be set to finally soften its stance on status documents?

A spokesperson told us: "As would be expected, we regularly engage with stakeholders to consider their suggestions and assess their feasibility. Any proposal to change digital status must ensure that users' data is secure and verifiable, that images can be included and that checking organisations such as employers and landlords have confidence in the data."

The3million suggests that this assessment ought to be informed by the principles for digital identity developed by the government itself, via a strategy board run by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

In proposals published a year ago, the board identified six tenets for "guiding policy development" in the field of digital identity: privacy; transparency; inclusivity; interoperability; proportionality; and good governance.

"We feel that our proposal meets those but, moreover, we feel that the Home Office's digital system does not meet them at all," Hawkins says.

New borders

The proposed system would not just benefit EU citizens – but also the government, and the many organisations that are now required to check individuals' immigration status, the3million believes. This includes landlords, employers, banks, the NHS, government bodies, such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and local authorities. In the future, airlines will also be obliged to check the immigration status of EU nationals in transit to the UK – as they have long been required to for passengers from countries beyond Europe.

The current system for demonstrating settled status requires the status-holder to enter their passport number and date of birth via a GOV.UK platform, after which they will receive a text message or email containing a share code – which can then be provided to the organisation performing the status check.

Hawkins says that the3million's proposal would greatly reduce the administrative burden on organisations that, in many cases, do not yet fully understand how to fulfil their new obligations as, effectively, immigration watchdogs. Some do not even know they need to do so, she adds.

"It is the UK's border control, delegated inwards," she says. "What they have to do at the moment with this digital code – and many are unaware that they have to do this – is ask the EU citizens for a share code, go to a website, put in that share code and a date of birth, and then look at the output and save it. What they would have to do instead [in our proposals] is obtain an app and, thereafter, they would simply scan [a code] and the app could generate a copy for them to save in the same way. It would be less onerous for them."

Under the existing system, there is a log of every time an EU citizen obtains a share code and when that share code is checked. It is not clear whether this information is kept in perpetuity or deleted within a certain timeframe but, Hawkins says, it allows for authorities "to build up an ever-growing audit trail of an immigrant" – in a way that British citizens are not subject to.

What is more, EU nationals are facing discrimination as a result of the current system, the3million believes. Last year, the organisation launched a tool through which people could report problems or difficulties they have encountered as a result of the digital status system.

"We have had hundreds of reports of, [for example], people missing out on a mortgage application because the bank just couldn't get on with this system, and wanted something physical and didn't really believe that a code would do the trick," Hawkins says. "Employers and landlords get into trouble if they employ or let to someone they are not supposed to. And, if you go to the government's website for guidance it says in bold letters, highlighted: 'you will be liable to fines and penalties if you employ someone that you are not allowed to'. And then somewhere further down it says: 'but you mustn't discriminate'."

She adds: "The tilt is all towards not getting this wrong – because the fines are huge and there is even the potential for criminal penalties. Whereas there isn't the same pressure to not discriminate...

6.02 million
Applications to the EU Settlement Scheme

770
Approximate number of letters sent to MPs in support of the3million's #ProofEqualityNow campaign

69p
Cost per minute of calling the UKVI Resolution Centre before charges were revoked

30 June
Deadline by which applicants needed to apply

2%
Proportion of applications, as of March 2021, that were from over-65s

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there are lots and lots of what we call micro-instances, that would be hard to prove and to fight against; how do you prove you lost a job because of this?"

A big bang

While some guidance has been published for employers and landlords, there is no specific advice for banks and other organisations, and Hawkins says the Home Office is not adequately supporting businesses and public agencies in meeting their new responsibilities.

The government has made it clear that it is on the path to a "digital by default" immigration system, and has pledged to, ultimately, eliminate all physical status documents. But the3million takes issue with the suggestion that this is being done in a sufficiently phased manner.

"Up to 30 June, an EU passport was enough to prove your rights; from 1 July, the only thing you had was the digital status," Hawkins says. "The Home Office say: 'we are rolling this out gradually' – and, for them, gradually is doing these six million people first and, in a few years' time, all the rest of. But that is very unfair for the individual, for whom it is not gradual at all – it is completely big bang, in a society that is not prepared for it."

The government often references Australia as an exemplar for moving to a wholly digital immigration system. "But they took 12 years to do so, and they allowed physical back-up for almost all of that time," Hawkins says. "They also did it in phases; for a long, long time people could still optionally request physical back-up, and then they had a few years where people could request it – but had to pay for it, to try and disincentivise people from doing so. Then, eventually, they turned it off. But, by then, the whole of society – employers, landlords, everything – had got used to the fact that this digital system existed."

Status update

The need to get used to such a system will, of course, be felt most keenly by EU citizens themselves. For those who might struggle to do so – because of a lack of digital literacy, or access to devices – the Home Office claims there are "numerous safeguards" in place to ensure they are not disadvantaged, and can view and prove their status when needed.

Unsettled Protestors from the3million gather in Trafalgar Square in October 2019

The department pointed to a UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) Resolution Centre as among the key resources provided to support those who are "less digitally capable" in navigating the system. The centre provides telephone and email support for those seeking help with proving their status.

The helpline initially charged people 69p per minute for calls, on top of a £5 pre-authorisation charge that callers are asked to make via a credit or debit card. These charges, which the Home Office attributed to a technical error, have now been removed.

But, according to the3million, the centre – which government's online guidance claims should operate from 8am to 8pm on weekdays, and 9.30am to 4.30pm on weekends – is only taking calls from 9am to 4.45pm during the week, and not at all on Saturdays or Sundays.

What is more, operatives are reportedly turning away calls concerning settled status queries.

"When we telephoned the UKVI helpline during opening hours, the member of staff we spoke to told us that the UKVI helpline cannot help with any EUSS related issues, and that we would need to hang up and call the EU Settlement Resolution Centre helpline instead," said Hawkins in a recent letter to immigration minister Foster. "Our call to the UKVI helpline took 37 minutes before being connected to a member of staff – who was then not even able to assist with viewing and proving digital status."

Some EU nationals who applied during the early stages of the scheme have also reported recent problems accessing their status, with attempts to do so prompting an error message informing them their status cannot be found. It is understood that the government is aware of the problem, and believes it to affect no more than several hundred people. Others have reported sporadic issues with finding the service is "temporarily unavailable".

The3million believes such examples rebut the government's oft-cited argument that, unlike a physical document, a digital status is always accessible, and cannot be lost or damaged.

Regardless of how the Home Office proceeds, this argument, and its counter, will no doubt be heard many more times in the weeks and months ahead."We will keep on with political pressure. If that doesn't work, we may need to look again at litigation," Hawkins says. "We are certainly not giving up." ■

LIFE

BOOKS_FILMS_THEATRE_TV_
PLACES_MUSIC_HISTORY_FOOD
THINGS TO DO OUTSIDE THE OFFICE

BOOK

To his universal credit?

A fascinating account of modern British government, **Lord Freud's** book is a reminder of how much experienced ministers can achieve, says **Lord Willetts**

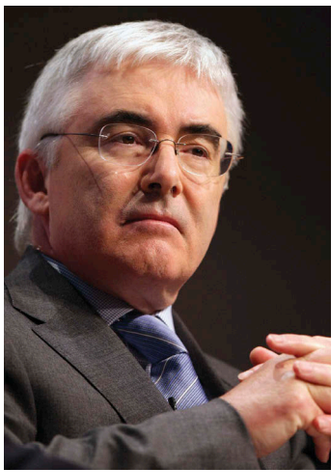
- **Clashing Agendas: Inside the Welfare Trap**
- **by David Freud**
- **Published by Nine Elms Books**

There is a small select group of ministers who stay long enough in a department to make a real difference in a key area of policy – Steve Webb in pensions or Nick Gibb in schools for example. David Freud belongs to that select group. Chris Mullin has created an amusing but pessimistic narrative around the frustrations and powerlessness of the junior minister as dogsbody. This book is an important reminder of how much can be achieved, as it tracks his long engagement with Universal Credit, from its first formulation when he was an adviser to Conservatives in opposition, to its successful operation during the Covid crisis. His extraordinary score when he stood down of 3,331 spoken contributions in the Lords as minister for welfare reform is testament to his political longevity.

"I would have welcomed more analysis of what the Treasury was after and why"

His book is a fascinating account of modern British government. His worst moment was when he blundered into then the media spotlight with a misinterpreted remark about the "worth" of disabled people, and he conveys what it was like briefly to be at the eye of the storm. His frustrations with the Government Digital Service will strike a chord with many ministers who had to deal with it. And there are criticisms of counter-productive grandstanding by the PAC and the NAO, which ought to be taken to heart.

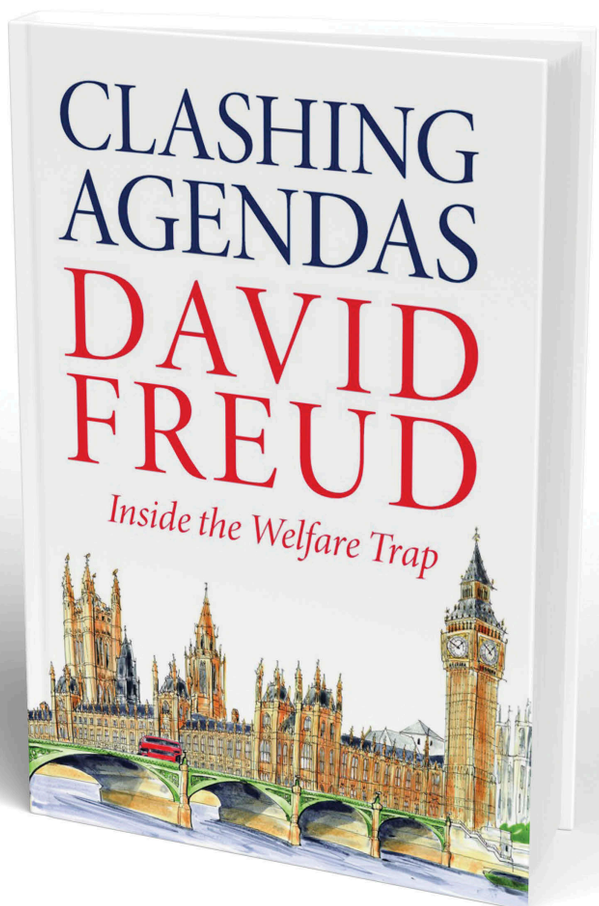
The civil servants he worked with get proper recognition. Sometimes they fail but there are others who display real competence and energy. The key factor for them as for ministers is having long enough in the job to build up real understanding of the issues. During my four plus years as minister for universities and science I was shocked at how rapidly my special adviser and I became the institutional memory, as everybody moved on.



The Treasury looms over everything, of course, with continuous negotiations on welfare cuts which only come to an end when IDS resigns and the government's position becomes that there will be no further welfare savings. I would have welcomed more analysis of what the Treasury was after and why. Some of it was a particular hostility to working age benefits, which has ended up tilting the welfare state towards pensioners. But there was more to it than that. The designers of Universal Credit liked straight lines. They wanted a long straight tapering of benefits at a rate of 55%. That costs money, as benefit spreads higher up the income scale. Squeezing a high rate of withdrawal into a narrow part of the income scale is not as silly as the advocates of UC believed, given the subsequent strong jobs performance.

The final chapter looks forward to the key social policy issues which need to be tackled now UC has bedded in. It is rather similar to the list that existed before UC. We still need to tackle underlying issues which have long dogged the welfare state. With his hard-won wisdom, David Freud might be turned to again. ■

Lord Willetts is a Conservative peer and president of the Resolution Foundation



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