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CIVIL **SERVICE** WORLD 



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EQUALITY WARRIOR

Sam des Forges
reflects on her
first year as
director of diversity
and inclusion
at the MoD

BONDING EXERCISE

NS&I head
Ian Ackerley
on balancing
stakeholder needs
and transforming
the organisation



EXCLUSIVE

RUPERT MCNEIL

Interview with
the outgoing
government chief
people officer

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less sceptical than peers
in other sectors?

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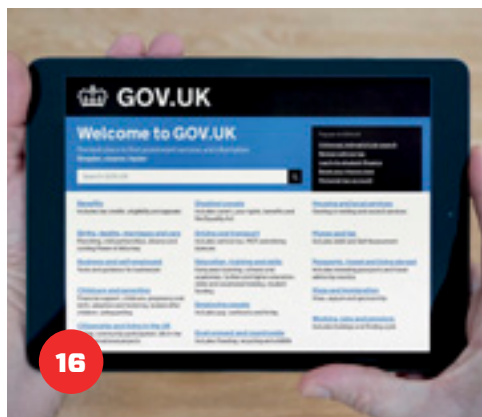
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FROM THE EDITOR



With all due respect to Elton John, sorry is quite an easy word to say. We hear it an awful lot from politicians nowadays. What we don't often hear – and what makes a true apology hard – is a politician taking responsibility for the actions which require an apology. Or, still harder, enacting change which would prevent further apologies in the future.

The difference between apologies and accountability was evident in recent sessions of the Grenfell Inquiry.

As he reflected on his own role in the 2017 tragedy which killed 72 people and exposed widespread failings in the construction industry's understanding of building regulations, senior official Brian Martin became visibly emotional.

Martin clearly regrets those missed opportunities deeply, and has thought about what must change to avoid another tragedy, saying he could see “a number of occasions where I could have potentially prevented this happening.”

Yet while he took responsibility for his own decisions,

he added that successive governments' approaches to regulation “had an impact on the way we worked, the resources that we had available, and perhaps the mindset that we'd adopted as a team”.

The following week, Martin's former boss Eric Pickles appeared at the inquiry. Aside from worrying about how long the session would last, and calling victims the “nameless 96” – wrongly on both counts – he also washed his hands of responsibility, saying that even if he had reacted differently at certain points, the “mindset” of officials was such that things would still have ended up as they did.

Pickles didn't seem to notice that he helped create that mindset. And while acknowledging his accountability for key decisions in theory, he suggested that officials were not properly advising him: “I have to say, as a matter of fact, there was no indication from anyone that there was a problem, and that I think is critical.”

Building regulation officials were “living in an isolation bubble” he added, and if he had known that they were struggling

with their workload, he would have “addressed it in a kind way rather than a scolding way”.

It's hard to reconcile this image of a supportive leader with the minister known for his derisive attitude towards civil servants. Even if Pickles was “kind”, the context of huge spending cuts and a strong de-regulatory drive mean it is not surprising – though still worrying – that officials either did not spot potential problems or did not feel able to discuss them with ministers.

The inquiry will set out its findings on the failures which led to Grenfell in due course. But these findings will only make a difference if individuals are prepared to accept responsibility and the need for change. Politicians – and some senior officials – must acknowledge their role in systems which are failing. If they don't, the result is not only a failure to

address problems or improve outcomes, but ever-diminishing trust in government.

A few days after Pickles's appearance, the inquiry heard from Karim Mussilhy, who lost his uncle in the fire and is now a leading member of campaign group Grenfell United. “Five years later these crooks, these criminals – the government and local authorities – they've not learned their lessons,” he said, adding that he had lost faith in “almost everything”.

“The government's duty is to protect us, but only last week a Lord was here, calling our families nameless, getting the numbers mixed up,” he said. Mussilhy believes that failures to protect his family were not mistakes but the result of a system which benefits those in power: “We suffer and they prosper. The system isn't broken, it was built this way specifically.” ■

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INBOX

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PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

New guidance, seen by CSW, telling departments that they should expect 5% of their staff to be marked as underperforming in this year's performance reviews proved unpopular.

"Oh dear. That's a backward step," **John Hatton** said.

"Plus ça change," noted **Mark Bingham**.

"Why is this target still around?

Used to be on civil servants below SCS and was scrapped," **Martyn T** wrote.

Colin Taylor offered an explanation:

"The cold, dead hand of the Treasury; the one government department which has not had to undergo the 'efficiency savings' and reorganisations that it has inflicted on other departments."

"Utterly ridiculous. This will take it back to how well you get on with your manager, and we all know how that can go," **Sarah Browne** said. "Forced distribution does nothing for wellbeing, morale, or honest and transparent managers. Feels like another nail in the coffin on how to make already tired and overworked civil servants feel even more undervalued and unappreciated."

"This is where data and analytics get it wrong," **Mark Sweeny** commented. "Pre-determining the distribution curve before the data has been looked at in detail and in the context of delivery I would strongly suggest is not helpful. We move back into the era of lies, lies and statistics. We're better than this?!? I mean who decided it was 5%? That in itself creates a skewed distribution curve."

COLD COMFORT

Many of our readers agreed with Prospect deputy general secretary Garry Graham's assessment that the average 2% pay rise on the horizon for most civil servants would be "cold comfort" – especially with an energy price hike forecast and inflation at a more than 30-year high.

"All too often the focus in the public sector is on reducing administration/overhead costs to the detriment,

often the very, very severe detriment, of the outcome in cost and performance terms," **Peter Stuttard** said.

"There is no understanding of the 2nd or 3rd order consequences and I think an independent pay review body is needed to unravel and address the piecemeal remedies currently in place," **Joann Robertson** added.

Colin Taylor said: "Not to mention that paying far less than market rates, particularly now the 'pension' has been degraded, along with the continued denigration of civil servants by politicians and the mainstream media, means that the very best candidates end up working for the private sector."

REAL PIECE OF WORK

There was much to consider in a recent paper from former DfE permanent secretary Jonathan Slater, which questioned why the civil service policy machine is "so often divorced from the realities of delivery and the experiences of those who are supposed to benefit from it".

"I completely agree with this. Leaving Whitehall and coming to local government has convinced me that it should be essential for all senior civil servants designing and implementing policy to spend at least a year in local gov," **Deborah Brooks** said.

"Totally agree. There was so much I learnt during my time in the civil service, after leaving local gov, but I was also surprised at how much the CS needed to learn too," **Tunde Olayinka** said.

"Not just local government but an operational role, expanding some knowledge of the business they profess to write policy for would be a great help!" **Martin Clements** added.

Paul Wylie shared his experience: "Friends thought I was mad to leave Home Office HQ for five years leading immigration enforcement operations. But I honestly think it made me a better policy officer. I know what the front line actually needs and it's not lengthy white papers. Substantial periods leading operations should receive as much kudos as running strategy reviews."

Dr Gisela Mann suggested there may be a "relatively easy fix" for the problems Slater has identified: "Increase the socio economic diversity of senior civil serv-

ants. Then you will have the necessary perspectives in place to ensure that the policy machine is not divorced from the realities of those who are supposed to benefit from it. To do this, stop confusing polish for talent in recruitment, and make SCS recruitment university blind."

GO FIGURE

Fast Stream head Sonia Pawson's prediction that civil servants will soon be unable to progress to senior roles without key digital and data skills prompted some discussion.

"I'll believe it when I see it. There's still half the SCS who are not quite there in grasping how sharepoint works," **Tahmid Chowdhury** quipped.

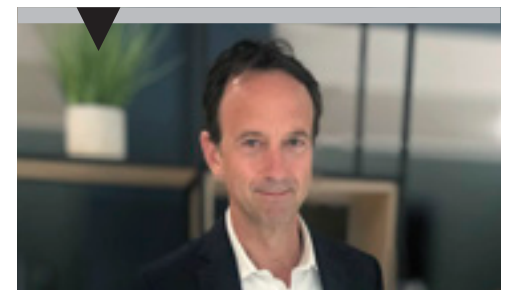
"Not everything is about digital and data. It should be more about rounded understanding of policy issues, and being able to devise and implement the same, effectively," wrote **Norman Lee P**.

But **Ali Arif** countered: "Digital and data are part of the whole. Can't have rounded understanding of policy without solid data. I don't think the above is advocating for those skills to take primacy over all else."

TRASH TALK

Readers didn't take too kindly to the news that the Department for Health and Social Care has awarded contracts worth £35m to two waste companies to dispose of unused pandemic PPE.

"Criminal waste from a government that just can't squander taxpayers' money fast enough. If a civil servant was so cavalier, (s)he would, rightly, be for the high jump," **Colin Taylor** said. ■



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Civil service COO Alex Chisholm shares his perspective on how government reform is progressing, along with some in-depth insights from SROs Jonathan Mills, Jaee Samant and Joanna Davinson

'Idiocy': Call to mark 5% of SCS underperforming slammed

Unions call return to guided distribution a "retrograde step". **Beckie Smith** reports

Unions have slammed "retrograde" new guidance that they say will arbitrarily designate 5% of senior civil servants as underperforming.

Civil Service HR has told managers they are expected to rate 5% of their SCS staff in the lowest of four new performance bands this year.

Senior civil servants will be ranked in four categories, depending on whether they are deemed to be "exceeding", "high performing", "achieving" or to have "partially met" their targets.

The Civil Service HR document – published two years after ministers dropped another controversial guided distribution system – stresses that departments must "properly identify those who are not performing at the expected standard".

"As such, we have made it clear... that departments would expect to see around 5% of their overall SCS rated as 'partially met' at the end of year assessment process," the guidance, seen by CSW, says.

The four new categories replace the previous system, which ranked SCS members as "top", "achieving" or "low".

As in previous years, "performance differentiation is expected to take the shape of a curve" with most senior officials falling into the "achieving" category, the guidance says.

Senior civil servants will fall into the

Being assigned to the "partially met" group should be a trigger for "intensive support, training and coaching".

As in the past, departments will be required to report to the Cabinet Office what proportion and number of SCS they have ranked in each category, as well as any staff under formal poor performance measures or who display poor performance in consecutive years.

Garry Graham, deputy general secretary of Prospect, which represents public sector professionals, said the changes "make absolutely no sense and will do only harm".



"There appears to be no empirical basis for expecting 5% of staff to be underperforming. If you get your recruitment and promotion procedures right, then no or very few staff should be underperforming," he said.

"I have no problem with issues of poor and under-performance being addressed appropriately. It should surely be a common aspiration, however, that through effective training, development, support and selection, the numbers will be minimal.

"To set an arbitrary target is idiocy and offers a perverse incentive to actively recruit and promote less competent people in order to meet it."

Lucille Thirlby, assistant general secretary for the senior officials' union the FDA, said the updated guidance "can only be seen as a retrograde and unnecessary step".

"It is hard to comprehend why any organisation would arbitrarily decide that 5% of its staff must be underperforming," she said.

The comments echo objections to an earlier guided distribution approach in 2012 that encouraged managers to mark 10% of their staff as performing poorly, 25% as performing well and the remaining 65% as middling.

When the so-called "forced distribution" system was dropped in 2019, the FDA said it was a "very positive but long overdue start" to reform. However, a long-awaited overhaul of performance management that was being considered at the time is still yet to be implemented.

In 2018, the Cabinet Office said it was "exploring options for reforming the SCS performance-management system" alongside options for pay reform. It proposed splitting SCS pay rates into three groupings, to reward high-performing officials and encourage people to stay in their jobs longer.

Thirlby said it was "very disappointing that all of the Cabinet Office's work to change and improve the performance-management system will now not be realised for yet another year".

She said the FDA had requested an urgent meeting with the Cabinet Office to discuss the new guidance and delays to reforms.

A Cabinet Office spokesperson said: "We have made a number of minor changes to reflect the ambitions outlined in the Declaration on Government Reform.

"Our intention is to build on this with the implementation of a new performance framework that departments can use to ensure performance management processes have sufficient rigour." ■

"It is hard to comprehend why any organisation would arbitrarily decide 5% of its staff must be underperforming" Lucille Thirlby

"partially met" cohort when they are judged to have delivered "some but not all of what they agreed to deliver in their performance objectives, as a result of factors either within or outside of their control".

They will also "not have demonstrated all the behaviours required for the successful delivery of their objectives".

Ground-Mogg Day: Civil servants 'must return to offices'

Jacob Rees-Mogg urges ministers to send a "clear message" to staff about hybrid working. By **Beckie Smith**

Civil servants must make a "rapid return" to the office following the ending of Covid restrictions in England, Jacob Rees-Mogg has said.

In a letter on 13 April, the government efficiency minister urged secretaries of state to "accelerate the return of civil servants to office buildings", saying an average of 44% civil servants were working from their department's offices on any given day.

This number must increase "to realise the benefits of face-to-face, collaborative working and the wider benefits for the economy", Rees-Mogg wrote.

"To deliver this, the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Steve Barclay, and I, urge you to issue a clear message to civil servants in your department to ensure a rapid return to the office."

The Department for Education has the lowest proportion of staff working from the office, at 25%, according to a table of figures attached to the letter showing average daily attendance in the first week of April. The Department for Work and Pensions, at 27%, and the Foreign Office, at 31%.

By contrast, 73% of Department for International Trade and 72% of Department for Health and Social Care civil servants were in the office.

A Cabinet Office spokesperson declined to comment on the figures, which were labelled as being from Civil Service HR, saying they were not intended for publication.

Rees-Mogg said ministers must now "review any guidance within your departments



Office politics JRM says more civil servants should return

that sets an expectation of the minimum number of days in the office per week".

Government departments have each issued their own guidance setting out how much time staff are expected to come into the office. Some have told officials to spend 40% of their time in the office – equivalent to two days a week.

It is common for departments not to have space for all of their employees to work in the office at once, and many had some hybrid working arrangements in place before the pandemic.

Unions have objected to Rees-Mogg's comments, with FDA general secretary Dave Penman saying they demonstrated the minister was

"less interested in productivity or delivery than in spending time counting civil servants in and out of buildings".

Rees-Mogg said he would visit departments with lower rates of attendance to "ensure we are making efficient use of the central London estate".

He noted that any changes to hybrid working must comply with legal obligations including equality and discrimination considerations and workers' statutory rights to request flexible working arrangements.

A government spokeswoman said: "Ministers have been clear that departments should make maximum use of office space and progress is being monitored."

'Simply unacceptable'

Rees-Mogg is one of several high-profile MPs who have called for an end to working from home.

Sir Graham Brady, chair of the 1922 Committee of Conservative MPs, said it was "time for the managers of the civil service to get a grip and do their jobs" by forcing staff to return to the office in greater numbers.

"It is simply unacceptable for so many of our public servants to continue sitting at home," he wrote in an op-ed for the *Daily Mail*.

Brady said problems with the Foreign Office's handling of the evacuation from Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul last summer was proof of the damage working from home could do.

And he said hybrid working was to blame for lorry licence backlogs at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency – which had a mass Covid outbreak in 2020, leading

"It is undeniable that for most people, working in the office is far more efficient" Graham Brady

to a strike over unsafe working conditions.

"Of course, not all jobs need to be done in the office – a trend that was developing even before Covid struck. But it is undeniable that for most people, working in the office – with all the interactions and contacts that brings – is far more efficient," he wrote.

"Working from your garden shed or spare room is simply harder. Productivity is reduced. Tasks take longer and work is often delivered when it suits the employee – not when the customer needs it," he added. ■



LEFT FOR THE FUTURE

Like painting the Forth Bridge, civil service reform is a never-ending process. But that doesn't mean we can't stop now and again to take stock of progress and consider what priorities lie ahead. **Jim Dunton** reports on a webinar looking back on reform over the last ten years

Ten years ago public services reform and dealing with the aftereffects of the global financial crisis were major areas of focus for David Cameron's coalition government. Then events repeated their nasty habit of getting in the way, most notably in the form of Brexit and Covid-19.

CSW recently brought together a panel of experts to offer lessons from what has turned out to be a tumultuous decade. Among them were former head of the civil service Lord Bob Kerslake, his successor Sir John Manzoni – who served as civil service chief executive and Cabinet Office permanent secretary until April 2020, and Emran Mian, director general for decentralisation and growth at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Joining them were Charlotte Pickles, director of public service focused think tank Reform and Ed Roddis, public sector research director at consultancy Deloitte. The panel drew on 10 years of Deloitte and Reform's *State of the State* report that provides an annual commentary on government and public services.

Back in 2012, implementing the most drastic scaling back of the civil service headcount in living memory was a major agenda item for Kerslake. However, cuts to numbers driven by then-Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude were effectively reversed by the demands of responding to the EU referendum result and then the coronavirus pandemic.

Kerslake, who was perm sec at the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2012, said the headcount reductions were “quite a painful process for most of the civil service”, with a near one-in-five shrinkage across government. Some departments saw numbers fall by a third.

He said that the positive lessons he took from the process included being “very honest about the scale of change and not trying to hide it from staff”;

introducing processes that have pace but also give staff clarity on where they stand; and being “demonstrably fair”.

Kerslake's words may be useful for recently appointed Cabinet Office minister for government efficiency Jacob Rees-Mogg, who wants to see post-2015 increases in civil service headcount reversed, which would lead to a reduction of more than 65,000.

But Kerslake questioned whether the current government has a proper understanding of what the correct size and shape of the civil service should be.

“I'm not sure that we got to the right number in the post-austerity period,” he said. “We were down to just over 380,000. That was the lowest number since the Second World War.

“When we've seen growth in recent years it's been for very specific reasons. Those rises came for a reason and the question is: ‘Has that reason gone away?’ And I'm not sure it has.”

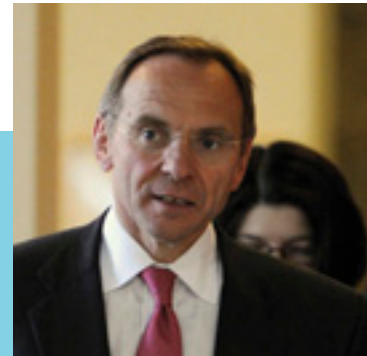
Manzoni, who is now chair of both power firm SSE and Ministry of Defence arm's-length body the Atomic Weapons Establishment, said he firmly believed in the potential for headcount reductions to drive efficiency and boost effectiveness.

But he warned such tactics would only be successful where organisations already had the capability to deliver what was required of them, otherwise they would “simply make the situation worse”.

Manzoni said government still lacked systematic delivery capability – “what it takes to get stuff done” – and didn't have the capacity to roll out the ideas contained within the grand, but well-considered, policy documents routinely produced by departments, such as the levelling up white paper and the net-zero 10-point plan.

“The real question is what does it take to deliver what's in those documents, not how good the documents are,” he said.

“[It's] where we fall down time and time again, and it's because it takes sys-



“The real question is what does it take to deliver what's in those documents, not how good the documents are – that's where we fall down time and time again”
Sir John Manzoni,
former civil service chief executive



temic delivery capability: it's the human and organisational capability that is focused on delivering the outcome."

Manzoni said the civil service needed more people at the top with both public and private sector experience, and that he regretted not putting more structures in place to make that happen.

He also urged ministers to prioritise a realistic number of issues during any term – suggesting five "big" priorities as potentially achievable.

"We saw it in the Olympic Delivery Authority, we saw it in Brexit, we saw it in Covid," Manzoni said. "When the government aligns around a priority, it can work at lightning speed with enormous effect. But until it does, it doesn't work nearly at all. No organisation can have 550 priorities."

On the topic of driving public sector change, both Manzoni and Reform director Pickles made the point that major events – like Brexit and Covid – routinely push plans onto the back burner.

Pickles said that while lots of changes had been made over the past decade that put the UK in a better position, her answer to the exam question "Has the UK done public sector reform?" would be "not really".

She said the nation's major-event responses had been delivered at a cost to business-as-normal services and long-term planning, when all areas were in need of attention. Pickles argued that as the nation faced increased challenges in the coming years, including heightened global tensions, cyber warfare, extreme weather events and demographic shifts, the pressures experienced during the past decade should be seen as "normal".

"The greatest challenge in my mind that is facing both the country, the state and those



Emran Mian

who work in the public sector is how on earth we carve out the time and the space to do the genuine long-term thinking. And do we have the right people, the right talent, and the right skills and the right capabilities to do that in government?" she asked.

"From where I'm sitting right now I'm not particularly positive on that. And yet unless we solve those huge issues, we will continue to be firefighting, and being buffeted by all those massive challenges that we can see coming down the line."



"Last year our survey showed that just three in 10 of the public were saying we should have higher levels of public spending"
Ed Roddis, Deloitte



Bob Kerslake

different bits of the public sector are less visible in a crisis, and they're less visible on a screen when that's the way you're interacting," he said.

"We've realised that not all of your key decision makers need to be in the same room in London. And it's perfectly fine if some of your decision makers are elsewhere in the country. And, indeed, that will be better because we'll know more and we'll have greater insight across the UK."

Mian said there was "really good evidence" that departments are holding on to some of the organisational lessons from the pandemic. He cited data architecture as an area where key people were now being deployed to other government priorities.

Deloitte's Roddis is responsible for putting together the consultancy's annual *State of the State* report – which brings together data on citizens' attitudes to government and insight from public sector leaders, including permanent secretaries and other senior civil servants.

He said the demands of austerity, Brexit and the pandemic had been "a staggering series of disruptions", but ones which had also seen leaders report spikes in innovation and surges of change.

Perhaps most tellingly for civil service resourcing and reform, however, is a significant shift in attitudes to public spending on services.

"During the austerity years, six in 10 of the public consistently said we should have higher levels of public spending, even if that meant higher levels of tax," Roddis said.

"Last year our survey showed that has changed substantially. Just three in 10 of the public were saying we should have higher levels of public spending."

How such a shift back to lower spending on public services would be compatible with the arrival of extreme, unforeseen events which, as Pickles pointed out, should now be regarded as the new normal – along with all the usual wicked problems that the UK government has to tackle – remains to be seen. ■

Deloitte and Reform's latest *State of the State* report is online: www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/public-sector/articles/the-state-of-the-state.html

GRANT DALTON QUANGO UNCHAINED

DESPITE PLANS FOR NEW BODIES TO SUPPORT THE ENERGY TRANSITION AND LEVELLING UP, GOVERNMENT'S INSTINCT IS STILL TO WAGE WAR ON QUANGOS. A CHANGE OF RHETORIC IS NEEDED

Politicians often have a problem with “quangos” in opposition, but less so in government. Margaret Thatcher threatened to “cull the quangos” on the election trail and then used the creation of executive agencies – a type of public body – for her New Public Management reforms. Tony Blair promised public bodies would meet the “dustbin of history”, but his government created new organisations to run its flagship programmes and address public concerns when things went wrong.

The gap between rhetoric and reality when it comes to public bodies continues today. While few politicians or members of the public like the idea of the “quango state”, in practice politicians find public bodies a useful tool. What better than an expert and single-minded body to deliver your priorities?

The government has proposed two new public bodies recently to deal with two of the biggest issues facing the country. This week, energy minister Kwasi Kwarteng proposed the creation of the Future System Operator (FSO) in response to the current energy crisis, while the levelling up white paper in February included plans for a new body to help with local authority data collection and analysis.

While the choice of public bodies to deliver these specific functions can be debated on their merits, it does contrast with some other ministers’ recent pronouncements. The minister now in charge of public bodies, Jacob Rees-Mogg, mused in a *Times* interview in February whether many such bodies were really “doing something that anybody needs to do” and asked “if it’s not necessary, why is it there?” Just a few weeks later chancellor Rishi Sunak announced a new efficiency drive across government, including a plan for at least

“Government risks an incoherent approach, creating public bodies with one hand while abolishing them with another”

£800m in cuts to public body expenditure. The Treasury hopes this money will be found in efficiency savings from reducing public bodies’ reliance on consultants, encouraging digitisation and extending the use of shared services and buildings. But cuts will be difficult to achieve given the consolidation that has already taken place across the public bodies landscape.

Sponsor departments are already required to conduct a “tailored review” of each of their public bodies every five years,

to “provide a robust challenge to and assurance on the continuing need for individual organisations”. But reviews are too often treated as a tick-box exercise by departments and bodies, and barely half of bodies have been reviewed within the government’s five-year target. In response to criticism from the National Audit Office, the Cabinet Office has promised to reinvigorate the review process, widening the scope of reviews to include departmental sponsor teams themselves and bringing in more external challenge. This ambition is welcome – and offers a concrete mechanism for change if Rees-Mogg and Sunak really want to “trim the fat” from public bodies.

Beyond this, while achieving cost savings may be one legitimate priority, ministers should be clear-sighted about the choices available to them in their approach to public bodies. If Rees-Mogg has indeed identified functions or bodies that he deems unnecessary, the government should reform or abolish them, seeking parliamentary approval where appro-



BEIS secretary Kwarteng has suggested a new public body even as Jacob Rees-Mogg has questioned their worth

priate. But the government should also lay out a clear vision of when public bodies are and are not the appropriate model for delivering services. If this work is not done strategically, government risks an incoherent approach, creating public bodies with one hand while abolishing them with another.

The Cabinet Office has said it intends to issue a new public bodies strategy that will enable a more joined-up approach to public bodies reform and cost savings. But Brexit and the pandemic have so far distracted ministers from setting out a government vision for public bodies, while ministerial turnover in the Cabinet Office, which has had three different ministers responsible for public bodies already in 2022, has not helped. Ministers should now get on with publishing the strategy and use it as an opportunity to define what they want from public bodies as a major delivery mechanism for government – not as a target for quango-busting rhetoric. ■

Grant Dalton is a researcher at the Institute for Government

GARRY GRAHAM COLD COMFORT

AFTER PROMISES OF WAGE GROWTH, THE PAY REMIT GUIDANCE FALLS AT THE FIRST HURDLE. TIME TO STOP LEAVING CIVIL SERVANTS OUT IN THE COLD

Those covered by this year's remit guidance, with the range set at 2-3%, will see it as a kick in the teeth. Employers covered by the guidance will look on it as clear evidence that the Cabinet Office and ministers do not live in the real world. For all civil servants, it will provide literally cold comfort. We already had examples during the pandemic of managers having to tell staff that it is acceptable for them to wear bobble hats and winter coats whilst dialling in for Zoom meetings because they couldn't afford to heat their accommodation. That was before the energy price hike forecast and inflation reached a more than 30-year high.

Many had hoped, after the "pay pause" was lifted and the Spending Review announcements, with proud boasts of real-terms increases across departments, that more than a decade of pay austerity was coming to an end. We and other unions pressed for urgent discussions with the Cabinet Office as to what the lifting of the "pay pause" would mean in real terms.

This was against the backdrop of a recognition both by the Cabinet Office and individual employers that pay systems are broken. For over a decade, pay in real terms has continued to fall and increasingly lagged behind not only the private sector but also other areas of the public sector. This is not just the view of the unions but also we know, because of our legal challenge to previous guidance, the view of the Cabinet Office.

While the pay of civil servants has been kept down, the pay of MPs, governed by an independent pay review body, has increased by 28%. Over several years, MPs got more than twice the percentage increases of the staff who serve and support them. Staff who are unable to claim for the heating of their houses when they need to work from home and do not have the ability to

"I have never known a business make decisions in the arbitrary and, frankly, stupid way I see in the civil service"

received progression increases and had recently received an across-the-board increase when the "pay pause" was lifted. How can someone in a position of authority be so removed from the people delivering their programme that they get this so wrong?

How do we break out of this bind? A first step would be agreeing to the setting up of an independent pay review body for those covered by the remit guidance. If the principle is

undertake lucrative second jobs, unlike some MPs.

I recently met with a government minister who genuinely believed all staff

good enough for MPs, why not the staff who work for them?

Let's have a sensible conversation about pay. No one comes into public service and expects to receive film-star salaries, but they do have a reasonable expectation that their living standards do not reduce over an economic cycle and for more than a decade.

Let's get some transparency as well. The government has made repeated statements that "public sector pay growth over the next three years should retain broad parity with the private sector", but this year's remit guidance falls at the first hurdle in living up to that commitment.

Let's also agree what we want pay systems to do and support. Ministers talk in glowing terms about the private sector. I have negotiated pay in the private sector for decades. I am not suggesting it is easy, but I have never known a business to make decisions in the arbitrary and, frankly, stupid



way I see from officials and ministers in the civil service.

This is not just about the pay of our members; it is about developing pay and reward strategies that add value to organisations enabling them to deliver on their goals. A pay system should help our members to build their careers and contribute to helping defend, protect, support and enhance the lives of those living in the UK and beyond. Instead, employers and unions are faced with labyrinthine guidance where the Cabinet Office seeks to second guess employers who allegedly have "delegated" authority in a Kafkaesque process where the concern is that the "computer says no" at every turn. As one frustrated organisational leader said to me recently, "there is not a problem I have that the Cabinet Office cannot make worse".

It is time for an independent pay review body. It is time to stop pay in the civil service being a political football. It is time to ensure that our civil servants are rewarded fairly for their work and to support the knowledge, skills and experience the civil service needs. ■

Garry Graham is deputy general secretary of Prospect

DAVE PENMAN STUCK IN AN IDEOLOGICAL GROOVE

THE GHOST OF FRANCIS MAUDE AND HIS MORALE-SAPPING RHETORIC CONTINUES TO HAUNT THE GOVERNMENT

In many ways, Simon Clarke's speech to the Institute of Economic Affairs felt like a breath of fresh air. After two long years of Covid, it felt like very old school politics from the chief secretary to the Treasury. Much of it could, and indeed has, been said before – © Francis Maude, who really should add copyright infringement to his ever-increasing portfolio of consultancies.

It's what you normally get from spending ministers, the usual rhetoric of "how, not how much", as if civil servants only look to spend money, regardless of how wisely. There was, of course, a "bonfire of the quangos" that I'm calling bingo on. Honestly, I think even Frankie boy stole that one from Gordon Brown. What gets me is every government announces these things as if it was someone else who created the arm's-length bodies in the first place. Is Clarke actually having a surreptitious dig at Maude for his poor ALB pyrotechnics?

"Brexit may not fill the headlines like it used to, but that doesn't mean that tens of thousands of civil servants aren't still working on it"

It was, however, the first insight into some of the longer-term thinking of this government when it comes to the civil service and its budgets and headcount. With money tight post pandemic and a chancellor announcing tax cuts two years in advance, departmental budgets are clearly going to be the gift that keeps on giving – © George Osborne.

Clarke is a serious politician, so it was disappointing to hear him echo the Minister for Sunny Uplands rhetoric about the number of civil service jobs that have been created since 2016. This was, as you may recall, not a point when suddenly departments were awash with money. Instead, in the middle of an almost unprecendented period of austerity, Brexit happened.

As the government negotiated its exit from the EU, reality bit. Not only was the preparation for the negotiation and the full impact of Brexit costly in terms of resource, but the significant additional responsibilities that now fell to the civil service inevitably resulted in extra staffing. Some of this was temporary but much of

it was permanent. Departments like Defra, HM Revenue and Customs and the Home Office have seen a huge increase in demand. As the government ponders triggering Article 16 over the Northern Ireland protocol, Brexit may not fill the headlines like it used to but that doesn't mean it's gone away, nor that tens of thousands of civil servants aren't working on it.

It was also interesting to hear Clarke talk about the pandemic's impact on the civil service. Being a minister in this government, he couldn't help himself from having a dig while feeling obligated to say something nice, saying it showed "the best and worst of the civil service". Eleven million workers supported through furlough, a sixfold increase in Universal Credit claims and supporting the NHS and local authorities to cope with a once in a century pandemic was apparently cancelled out by some parts of Whitehall being resistant to change.

With Brexit still a thing and backlogs across public services as a result of Covid, Clarke was short on detail for how those extra demands would be met. "Streamlining", "freeing up resources for the frontline" or "digital by default" – © Frankie goes to Singapore – are just soundbites. If, in reality, you're just saying departments will get less and have to live with it, at least be honest.

His speech also laid bare the hypocrisy of this government. He lauded the move of 22,000 civil servants out of London under Places for Growth, which was predicated on the very idea that ministers and civil servants didn't need to be in the same building to work effectively. How does that fit in with the cabinet's fixation on where civil servants sit when they're talking to their colleagues on Teams? A government that was serious about efficiency would be celebrating the innovative new working arrangements and exploiting the benefits of a smaller civil service estate for the taxpayer, but instead we have a cabinet hell-bent on micromanaging how many days individual civil servants sit in an office.

And finally, as we recover from the pandemic, enter a new Cold War and cope with a cost of living crisis, the government's priority is to reopen old wounds on cutting redundancy pay. Never mind they reformed it in 2010, saying it was a once in a generation reform – © Frankie M again. Never mind they tried again in 2016 but it was judged to be unlawful. Never mind they've been pretending to consult about changes for four years and we haven't even met to discuss it for three.

These reforms are not about efficiency or effective government. They are based on ideological obsession, which at best views civil servants with suspicion and resentment, and at worst views them as pawns to score a cheap headline.

I think I preferred Frankie the first time around. ■

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union



GILLIAN HYDE & MARK POWELL HEALTHY SCEPTICISM

WITH A NEW SURVEY SHOWING THAT PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERS ARE MORE OPEN TO RISK TAKING THAN PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT, GILLIAN HYDE AND MARK POWELL DISCUSS FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN BEING CHALLENGING AND RECEPTIVE TO NEW IDEAS

As evidenced by onetime Labour chancellor Hugh Dalton's famous remark "you're just a lot of congenital snag-hunters", the civil service has long held a reputation of being the wary parent to the excitable minister. But does this stereotype still hold true? Dalton's quote comes from the 1940s. Are public sector leaders still more sceptical than the rest of the population?

Despite Dalton's remark – intended negatively – the stereotypical view of the public sector leader being overly cynical is, to many, a positive trait and may help improve decision making quality.

As Sir Martin Donnelly – permanent secretary of the business department at the time – told the Institute for Government in 2014: "If ministers are never challenged, they are unlikely to be getting the best advice." Sceptical personalities can offer insight into people and politics, and having someone around who is inclined to notice potential pitfalls in a particular policy provides a helpful balance

to those over-promising under the scrutiny of the public eye.

But how true is Dalton's comment when it comes to contemporary public sector leadership? And how does the prevalence of "snag-hunters" in the civil service compare with the population as a whole?

Data collected using the Hogan Development Survey psychometric tool contrasted personality data from nearly 5,000 public sector leaders (between 2017 and 2020) to a "UK norm" group of working adults across various sectors. The results provide an interesting challenge to this typecast: the public sector leader was, in fact, 74% less likely to be overly sceptical in comparison to the UK norm.

While there are positives to this finding, such as leaders being more trusting and less fault-finding, it is worth asking whether a leader can be too low in scepticism. If very low in

scepticism, the individual may be perceived as being naïve, or perhaps not examining others' true intentions carefully enough. It's also possible that their trusting behaviour may leave them open to being exploited. This pattern of behaviour can have a gradual, cumulative effect on a leader's reputation, with low scepticism negatively impacting their decision making.

Scepticism and decision making

The government's 2021 reform plan set out the ambition for civil servants to be "creative and imaginative in problem solving and policy formulation" as well as "rigorous in welcoming evaluation and scrutiny". If one reads this in conjunction with an National Audit Office report from a few years earlier – which highlights how civil servants are responsible for an increasingly complex range of projects – there's clearly a delicate balance needed between scepticism of change and openness to change. Those disposed towards an elevated level of cynicism, particularly in higher-risk workplace decision making, may overplay this characteristic when under a lot of stress and pressure and become overly critical and mistrustful in their leadership style. This, in turn, may damage the

team environment, potentially limiting creativity and imagination in problem solving as team members become wary of contributing. On the other hand, those who are too open and trusting in their leadership style don't challenge or question enough, running the risk of missing potential issues, or of overlooking problems. Indeed, David Snowden's decision-making framework *Cynefin* points to leaders oversimplifying contexts and being susceptible to entrained thinking and com-

placency – resulting in potential catastrophic failure because the actual context is far more complex than they believe or perceive.

How can we support low scepticism as a strength, and manage any risk associated with this style within any industry?

To build on the strengths associated with low scepticism, individuals should be encouraged to remain open to seeing the positive in people, listening to others and establishing relationships based on trust.

To manage the risk, they need to check their natural tendency to assume the best of everyone and everything and start questioning more, probing more, looking below the surface, and imagining other possibilities from those presented to them. Snowden puts it well, suggesting "a leader must listen to the experts while simultaneously welcoming novel thoughts and solutions from others", or, in other words, they need to demonstrate a level of healthy scepticism. ■

Gillian Hyde is a business psychology consultant and Mark Powell is a leadership and talent consultant



ANDY COWPER SIFTING FACT FROM FICTIONAL ECONOMICS



THE CHANCELLOR MAY HAVE PLANS FOR FANTASTIC SAVINGS BUT REALITY OF LIFE IN THE NHS IS TOUGH – AND GETTING TOUGHER

You can always tell when things are getting crunchy in the NHS: people start telling the truth about fictional financial plans. Many CSW readers may have noted the chancellor's media-announced plan to cut £4.75bn from the NHS budget for the coming financial year in the name of "efficiency savings". (You may also know that the NHS has an underlying annual deficit running at about £5bn, as Sally Gainsbury's work for the Nuffield Trust has shown.)

The government subsequently got round to actually issuing the relevant press release. I commend it to you warmly: it is a classic of the "heroic optimism untethered to reality" genre.

It states: "as part of the renewed drive, the chancellor said the NHS efficiency commitment will double to 2.2% a year – freeing up £4.75bn to fund NHS priority areas over the next three years.

"These savings will be made through a range of programmes including the digitisation of diagnostic and front-line services, which has been shown to reduce cost per admission by up to 13%, improving the efficiency of surgical hubs and developing digital tools to cut time spend by NHS staff on admin tasks."

This is impressive for three reasons.

- Cutting £4.75bn from the NHS budget in the financial year that began just under two weeks later is unlikely to be well planned. Also, this hypothesis that NHS cuts mean more money for the NHS... really?
- Only a few surgical hubs yet exist. More are planned, but not yet actually there, in the real world.
- Digitisation costs before it saves, as the Wachter Review *inter alia* stated.

Economic reality with Mackey

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust chief exec and NHS England's national director of elective recovery Sir Jim Mackey is noted for his forthrightness, and his statements at the *Health Service Journal* Provider Summit that the proposed financial savings for trusts "probably aren't really possible" was a welcome assertion of reality in the fantasy-prone world of finances.

The Treasury Munchkins will hate him for this, which won't bother Sir Jim at all. *Health Service Journal* also reported that NHS England's orders to achieve financial balance are getting push-back from much of the system.

How are things in NHS reality?

There's no escaping the fact that things are in A Really Massive Mess just now. Indeed, they have been so for some months.

The Health Select Committee's new report on cancer services is an unsettling read. "Despite the efforts of NHS England to protect services and encourage patients to come forward, 36,000 fewer people in England and 45,000 fewer in the UK began cancer treatment during the pandemic compared to previous years," it said.

"Neither earlier diagnosis nor additional prompt cancer treatment will be possible without addressing gaps in the cancer workforce and we found little evidence of a serious effort to do this. While our independent expert panel acknowledged the short-term progress made, rating progress against 2021 workforce targets as 'good', they rated the appropriateness of these targets as 'inadequate' because they are insufficient to address ongoing workforce shortages.

"On the basis of evidence supplied by the government and the NHS, we do not believe the NHS is on track to meet the 75% early diagnosis ambition set by the government. Our independent expert panel has also rated the government's progress against this target as 'inadequate'."

We have had confirmation that since 2015, the number of GPs has fallen every year, and the acute care sector is also feeling the pain. *HSJ* reported that average ambulance waits in one region have reached two hours for heart attack and stroke patients. The *Guardian* reported major issues with surging emergency demand in Yorkshire this week, but in truth, it's almost everywhere now.

"There's no escaping the fact that things are in A Really Massive Mess just now"

Covid-19: like the poor, still with us

The one remaining reliable national survey by the ONS shows that one in 13 people have Covid-19, according to its latest data. The level of people in hospital with Covid (over 20,000) is having obvious effects on efforts to start addressing the backlog.

Covid has really not gone.

NHS Confed's boss Matthew Taylor continued his outspoken streak, warning that "the brutal reality for staff and patients is that this Easter in the NHS is as bad as any winter. But instead of the understanding and support NHS staff received during 2020 and 2021, we have a government that seems to want to wash its hands of responsibility for what is occurring in plain sight in local services up and down the country.

"No.10 has seemingly abandoned any interest in Covid whatsoever. The Treasury has taken bites out of the already very tight NHS budget, while soaring inflation means the NHS settlement is now worth less. It is now unclear that anyone in the centre of government feels the unfolding NHS crisis is their responsibility

"NHS leaders and their teams feel abandoned by the government, and they deserve better" ■



Andy Cowper is the editor of Health Policy Insight

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A LIVE ONE

Attendees at PublicTechnology's recent events, PT Live and the Cyber Security Summit, were given an insight into the future of government services – and how to protect them. **Tevye Markson** and **Sam Trendall** report

“The best digital nations in the world have adapted,” Government Digital Service chief executive Tom Read told attendees at the PublicTechnology Live annual conference last month. “Singapore, Denmark, Estonia, South Korea – they have pivoted and put things mobile first and they have made them hyperpersonalised for people.”

The GDS boss, who gave the event's opening keynote presentation, acknowledged that the UK is no longer among this leading group of digital countries.

Thanks in large part to work led by GDS in the early years of its existence, the UK was, for a while, considered the world's leading digital government, in rankings published biennially by the UN. In the last two publications of the global report – in 2018 and 2020 – the country's position slipped to fourth, and then seventh.

Having recently celebrated its 10th birthday, government's flagship digital agency enters its second decade with plans to once again lead the way in delivering the next stage of transformation, Read told the audience in London – who were this year joined by attendees

of another of PublicTechnology's annual events, the Cyber Security Summit, which was held simultaneously.

But there is, by Read's own admission, “an awful lot to do”.

“For every good service that we have, we have a service that doesn't actually work on a mobile and hasn't been touched in 15 years – for good reasons – or a service that is really good on the front end, but you still need to go and find a printer and post it in,” he said. “Or [there are some] services that are not really written in English – they are written in lawyer... [and] are almost im-

penetrable for users. Or there are services that ask you to send in information that the government already has on you, because it's too difficult for us to ask another depart-

ment for that information. That's putting an extra burden on the system and the users.”

Read added: “Other services are really easy to use but then you've got to wait weeks or months for the service to come through. We need to work out how we use the data, the information we have across government to make that better. We can't just fix the front end.”

He picked out several core objectives for GDS in the next few years, including making it easier for people to find the information or services they were looking for, simplifying the process of proving your identity, and helping departments transform services to become digital by default.

Improving identity-verification processes could be a “Trojan horse for hyperpersonalisation”, Read said. Government is already making “steps in the right direction” to personalise services to the specific needs of individuals, he added. But there are 20% of people who have no form of identity, such as a passport or driving licence, and the “hard bit” will be making digital work for them.

A key objective of the ongoing One Login project is to create a platform that serves all users as equitably as possible, including those whose identity it may be more complicated for the government to verify, due to a lack of documentation or financial records

Appy days

One Login, which is due to enter the public testing phase imminently, represents surely the biggest revamp of government's online

operations since GOV.UK was first launched in 2012. The project aims to deliver a unified sign-in system for all services delivered across departments. Alongside which, for the first time, a GOV.UK app will provide citizens with a single platform from which they can access a comprehensive range of hundreds of services provid-

ed by scores of different agencies.

Read said the government needs to provide more of its own apps – which represents a reversal of the policy ex-

“For every good service that we have, we have one that doesn't actually work on a mobile and hasn't been touched in 15 years, or a service that is really good on the front end, but you still need to go and find a printer and post it in”
Tom Read, GDS

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plicitly set out by former leaders of GDS during its early years.

While such an approach was “absolutely right in 2014”, it is “not necessarily the case now”, he said.

The new system was inspired by the work of the Ukrainian government, according to the GDS leader.

Read described meeting Mykhailo Fedorov, digital transformation minister of Ukraine, last July, as an important moment in highlighting how user habits have changed and what the UK government needs to do to adapt.

The minister came over to the UK to share what he was doing to make Ukraine “the most digital nation on earth”, Read said.

“It started very formally, with his advisors and people giving a background and then, suddenly, he just wanted to show us; he got his phone out of his pocket and he got us all crowded around – includ-

ing the ministers – and he showed on his phone how he had his ID and passport and his driver’s licence and he could get

instant access to this list of services, because they already knew who he was. They had his identity and you could instantly click and access services. After the meeting, our minister at the time, Julia Lopez, ran

up to me and said: “That’s what I want for digital government – when can you do it?”

“That’s kind of like the North Star for digital transformation in government: how can you make it so seamless that you don’t need to think, you just use the data government already has? Because we know so much about you already. It’s much harder than it sounds.”

In 2016, 35% of GOV.UK use came from mobile devices – a figure which had risen to 65% in 2021.



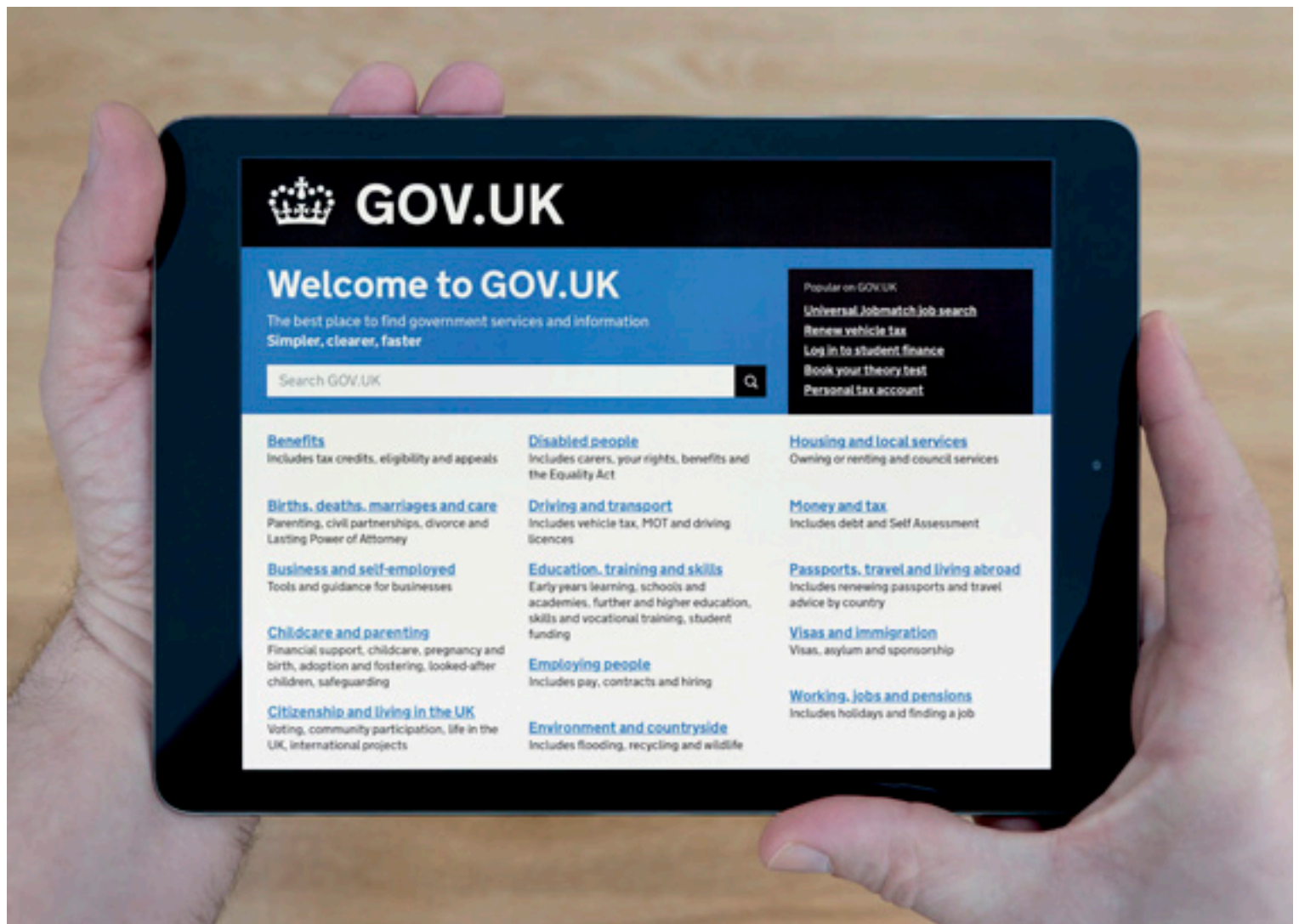
“But, more importantly, for people on low incomes, 90% of them use a mobile phone and, if you look at the type of phone they are using, very few of them are using the latest iPhone: they are usually using a multiple-years-out-of-date Android phone. That’s how users are using internet services now,” Read said.

“This was minister Fedorov’s point: have everything on your phone, because that’s where people are,” he added.

Building skills

As data and digital platforms become ever-more important in supporting the work of government, senior officials will need to develop technical skills, according to Sonia Pawson, head of the Civil Service Fast Stream graduate recruitment programme.

“What we realise is that, in time, you won’t be able to progress to be a senior civil servant without experience and expertise, for example, in using big data for policy or »



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operational purposes, or in leading a digital project," she told PublicTechnology Live.

Pawson, whose role sits within the Cabinet Office and who also serves as head of emerging talent and occupational psychology, said that she "recognises the need to build digital and data capability" in the civil service and do so "in a different way".

Describing the plans to do so, which are part of the Curriculum and Campus for Government Skills, she said: "In a big organisation, there can often be a lack of clarity, precision and accessibility, and any of you who have worked in the civil service will know, it's been tricky to access the right learning at the right time," she said. "And, so, what we're doing with the campus at the moment is shaping the demand and supply across the civil service so that we can develop training based on the critical skill gaps that we have collectively identified."

The Fast Stream is the civil service's central graduate recruitment scheme and is designed to identify and develop potential future leaders.

The most recent set of government data shows that, in the 2021 intake, 100 successful applicants – out of a total of 1,072 – joined the programme's specialised digital, data and technology track. This made the DDaT profession the second-most popular specialism, behind only project management, which recruited 103 fast streamers.

Some 404 people joined the generalist scheme, which aims to provide graduate recruits with "the opportunity to undertake a wide variety of roles to establish your strengths and leadership potential".

As part of a wider overhaul of public sector leadership and management training, a new Leadership College for Government opens this month.

The new college was announced in the levelling up white paper, published in February, which set out how the college will be the "centrepiece" of management skills development reform and will "equip public and civil service leaders with the skills, knowledge and networks to solve today's most complex problems".

Protect and serve

The audience at the Cyber Security Summit received insight into how government intends to address an even more complex problem: cyber threats.

Giving the opening address, Cabinet Office minister and paymaster

general Michael Ellis outlined the intent behind the recently published Government Cyber Security Strategy, and the plans for its implementation



over the coming months and years.

The 84-page policy document sets out an ambition for the public sector's "critical functions to be significantly hardened to cyber-attack by 2025".

By the end of this decade, the plan is for all public bodies to be "resilient to known vulnerabilities and attack methods".

"To keep everyone safe online... the public sector must lead by example," Ellis said. "If we are to continue to prevent public services coming under pressure, and protect them from the harmful consequences when they do, we need to act. Our core public sector functions – from the delivery of public services to the operation of national security apparatus – must be more resilient than ever before to cyber-attack."

One of the key strands of the strategy will be to develop and put in place a public sector-wide framework to ensure services, products and platforms are designed with security in mind. This will "ensure that appropriate and proportionate cybersecurity

"In time you won't be able to progress to be a senior civil servant without experience and expertise in using big data for policy or operational purposes, or in leading a digital project"
Sonia Pawson, head of Fast Stream

measures are embedded within the technology that we all use", the minister said.

"This world-leading framework will allow all of us to take advantage of industry innovation by enhancing our ability to test, to pilot and to deploy commercial tools, services and capabilities," he added. "This will be supported by robust measures to mitigate risk, including domestic regulation and international collaboration on standards."

Government will also be asked to comply with new assurance measures, based on the processes set out in the Cyber Assessment Framework of the National Cyber Security Centre.

Called 'GovAssure', the regime will ask all government entities

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to undergo independent assessment of their cyber resilience.

"This will create a single lens through which we can understand cyber risk across government and enable government departments to accurately assess their level of cyber assurance and highlight priority areas for improvement," Ellis said. "GovAssure will also help us to take a strategic view of government vulnerability – to help inform a strategic roadmap to truly defend as one."

Cybersecurity becomes even more important given government's intention to "embrace the development of connected place technology" – such as sensors and

digitally enabled public infrastructure.

"When properly secured, smart-city approaches have the opportunity to transform the interaction between government and citizen," Ellis said. "Connected places provide tangible benefits to society, managing traffic, reducing pollution – and saving money and resources. We should take this opportunity to better serve our communities. But we must do this in a way that is mindful of risk – the interconnectivity that allows places to function more

efficiently also creates cyber vulnerabilities, and the potential for cyber-attacks."

Government intends to boost the

NCSC's existing Connected Places Cyber Security Principles guidelines. It will also "strengthen the capability of local authorities and organisations such as ports, universities and hospitals to buy and use connected places technology securely," Ellis told conference attendees.



Michael Ellis

Underpinning the rollout of the strategy will be a new Government Cyber Coordination Centre. The entity is a joint venture between the Government Security Group, the Central Digital and Data Office and the NCSC.

The minister claimed that the centre will "transform how we use cybersecurity data – by facilitating threat and vulnerability management at scale, and fostering partnerships across the public sector" and the country at large.

It will also lead government's response to successful attacks.

"I am proud to say that when UK public services have suffered attacks, the government has acted fast to support getting key services back up and running, and also to manage any risks to stolen data," Ellis said. "However, we should – inevitably – expect challenges."

He added: "Where we cannot prevent them, we will rapidly identify, investigate and coordinate our response to cyberthreats, where criminals find weaknesses in our defences, we will learn and build them back stronger."

To help combat the current threat from Russia, the NCSC is being supported by a newly created Government Information Cell, which has brought together about 35 staff from the Home Office, Cabinet Office, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The remit of the cell is to counteract the Kremlin's narratives about the invasion of Ukraine.

"The NCSC has been liaising regularly with major social-media platforms to monitor and share information," Ellis said. "Their work also aids our Government Information Cell, bringing together counter-disinformation expertise to identify and tackle Russian information aggression targeted at the UK." ■

Seventh

UK's position in UN rankings of digital governments

65%

Proportion of GOV.UK traffic in 2021 that came from mobile devices

100

Number of Fast Stream participants that joined the specialised DDaT track in the most recent intake

2030

Date by which all public sector bodies must be resilient to all known cyber vulnerabilities and attack methods



MAN OF THE PEOPLE

In his final interview as civil service chief people officer, **Rupert McNeil** talks to **Jess Bowie** and **Suzannah Brecknell** about his proudest achievements, and the reasons for his departure. Photography by Baldo Sciacca

Rupert McNeil doesn't mind a crisis. Or, in his words, he "doesn't have a particular aversion to them". The times he's been most stressed out during his years in government have, indeed, been "inversely correlated to crises". This is why, when asked to recall his worst day as a civil servant, he cites an episode so frustrating that it had him walking around St James's »

Park muttering “I’m too old for this sh*t.”

He won’t reveal details – except that he’d just come out of “a meeting with a number of people”.

“That was a moment, and I got over it,” he says. “I have an excellent coach and I think he was a bit surprised. It all got resolved, but, you know, there are moments like that in any job.”

McNeil’s mood as he sits down for a virtual interview with CSW a few weeks before leaving Whitehall couldn’t be more different. He waxes lyrical, philosophical and even zoological about the civil service, peppering his answers with quotes from everyone from Immanuel Kant to cyberpunk author William Gibson. (The zoological metaphor takes the form of a man-of-war jellyfish: the civil service is not “a single enterprise” but “multiple organisms that come together into one big organism”.)

It’s clear that what has energised him most during his seven years in government has been having the opportunity to influence those many organisms, moving them along the arc of change and enabling them to respond to crises with much greater cooperation than would have been possible a decade or so ago. It is this – rather than meetings fraught with small-p politics – which has made his time as civil service chief people officer “the best job he’s ever done”.

If that’s the case, why leave? Or, as Mrs Merton might have put it, what first attracted McNeil back into a highly lucrative role in the private sector?

He laughs, but goes on to explain that the main reason he’s off is because he “absolutely believes in term limits”.

“I think that any job is like an S curve: you have your biggest impact in the middle. And then if you’re doing your job right, your team should be carrying on the momentum. And you need to give space to people. I mean, I also gave my wife the impression that I’d do this job for three years. And then EU exit came along, Covid came along...”

His next venture will be 3XO, which

stands for Optimal Organisational Outcomes. It is, according to its shiny new website, an advisory firm dedicated to supporting boards and their executive teams to design and deliver their people strategies. McNeil is one of the co-founders. Being at the helm of this kind of outfit is something he has been wanting to do for 10 years, he says.

McNeil was government’s inaugural CPO. Does he think the role has been a success so far?

“I hope it’s been a success. I think functional leadership jobs have been a success,

conditions for future improvements.

When reflecting on the work of the HR function, for example, he skims through a series of complex reforms to civil service pensions, the creation of a central recruiting resource and most recently a consulting hub, before summarising: “I think we’ve been reasonably effective at incubating things and moving them on to the next place.”

It’s here he uses the man-of-war jellyfish analogy, explaining that it is the job of functional leaders to spread good practice across the whole civil service and ensure



2019 McNeil gives evidence on the use of non-disclosure agreements in discrimination cases to the Women and Equalities Committee

let’s put it in that way. If you look at the past decade, you’ve got two-and-a-bit periods. You’ve got the period from the coalition government in 2010-2015 where you have Francis Maude coming in, setting up the functions and asking some of the questions like “Why do we do things so differently in government? Why can’t we do things as well as the best parts of the private sector?” McNeil then launches into a rather technical explanation of how functional leaders have influenced the S-curve of civil service effectiveness, which has sped up with the onset of Brexit and Covid.

Although he seems more comfortable using the first person plural when asked about reforms he’s spearheaded – perhaps out of modesty, perhaps due to his self-confessed preference for working in teams – when McNeil does mention things he is “proud to be associated with”, he usually frames the work as setting a foundation or creating the

its component organisations can work well together. It is in moments of crisis that the value of this work is shown, he says, pointing to the collapse of outsourcing giant Carillion as a “signature moment where you could see things had demonstrably changed” thanks to the commercial function. For the HR function, he picks the response to Brexit, when his team was able to rapidly stand up an “emergency resourcing hub” to broker arrangements which moved people between departments as needed. “That was a huge change in the system, and actually we got even better at it with the Covid response,” he says.

“There was a moment in the canteen, it must have been about February 2020, with [chief medical officer] Chris Whitty and [DHSC perm sec] –Chris Wormald, who said: ‘This thing’s coming from China, we’re going to need to set up a team...’ Two hundred people in two weeks, and we just got that under way.”

While McNeil often talks about the wider functional agenda, he does see a specific role for HR as more than just another “enabler” which lets organisations achieve their aims. Since it works with people, rather than money or technology, HR has “a particular character, influencing culture and serving, to some extent, as the machinery of organisational conscience”. This includes the responsibility of helping staff to learn and develop, and he cites setting up the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit as “a huge and really important change”. But HR is also “the heart of diversity and inclusion”, he says.

“How do you build a civil service that represents citizens across the UK and then, when it gets the best people from all those areas, ensure they’re working really effectively together?” he asks. He goes on to describe the civil service’s new D&I strategy – released a few weeks ago – as “hugely important, because it brought together people who might be thought to have quite different views”, from ministers down to staff networks. It was created, he says, “in a very collaborative way, without compromising, without diluting” and “hasn’t shied away from tricky issues – broadening the definition of what we mean by diversity.”

That said, the strategy does seem to avoid certain words that are usually associated with equality, diversity and inclusion. The document contains no mention of sex or gender, nor of the words “race” or “racial”. It uses “minority ethnic” just once and “disability” twice. The decision to broaden diversity beyond these traditional categories reflects, McNeil says, “thinking about this topic, which is that people have multiple identities. You need to recognise that and it’s not that we are focusing on one particular group, it’s that all groups matter”.

This broadening means civil service leaders can also address issues around socio-economic and regional diversity – neither of which fall under traditional “protected characteristics” of the Equality Act but which the civil service “should be really interested in”. McNeil is also keen to stress a focus on neurodiversity, an issue he has become much more aware of during his time in government.

“To take a very basic example – not a neurotypical one – but large chunks of the male population are red-green colourblind, and yet we still produce RAG ratings, where we don’t put R, A and G in circles. That’s an example of not thinking about what the world is actually like.”

Yet issues around race, sex and disability remain important, and the strategy provides the civil service with both a lens to consider

those challenges and tools to address them, he says. “You’ve got to look at all the data and ask: where are the problem areas?”

He notes that the SCS, particularly the top grades, are still “predominantly white, with disability not as visible as you would expect. So I think you’ve got to keep being very proactive and vocal about those areas,” McNeil says. He praises staff networks’ “constructive impatience” about why certain groups are still not supported.

Yet while the data is showing (slow) progress in areas such as gender diversity, one trend in civil service HR is not so positive. According to an update on the Declaration of Government Reform, the proportion of appointments to the SCS from external applicants has halved over the past decade (from 42% in 2010-11 to 20% in 2019-20), despite repeated attempts to encourage greater movement between sectors.

McNeil, himself an example of a successful cross-sector move, is optimistic that this trend will soon reverse. He points to the first cross-government policy recruitment campaign, which was conducted in response to Brexit and Covid in 2020.

“Around 65% of the successful applicants for those roles were external,” he says. “You wouldn’t necessarily think that was the case but it shows that [external applicants can succeed] even in jobs that you might traditionally think were more about having knowledge of government.”

He draws two points from this experience. First is the need to be careful in drafting job requirements. “You need to define what you want to recruit, articulate it well, and don’t put non-essential criteria in there. So don’t say ‘must have worked with ministers’ when ‘should have experience working with senior stakeholders’ is what you actually mean.”

Secondly, the government needs to be better at communicating the “value proposition” it offers to external applicants. “You’re never going to join any public sector organisation anywhere in the world for the money. You can always earn more somewhere else.”

“[Government] needs to pay enough

to be in the game, but you have many other factors like the purpose, the interest, and increasingly – this is where it links to the GCSU and to the functions – the opportunity to learn.”

While the civil service can never rival the private sector on pay, there is still scope to improve a system which does not properly reward progression or help to drive workforce plans. A pay system which is – according to unions, pay bodies and government alike – in serious need of an overhaul. Reform is on the way, in the shape of a capability-based approach which will determine pay for senior officials using performance assessment frameworks focused on professional skills and leadership. Pay bands will correspond to levels within these frameworks, and the changes are set to be introduced over the next two financial years.

Although it will be McNeil’s successor who oversees it, he says he is “incredibly proud” of the work done so far to enable this. “We actually have a proposition that everyone wants to deliver. We’re doing pilots at the moment. We’re looking to do the rollout

of the method of assessment, among other things, in the course of 2022-23, and first payments [under the new system] to be in the 23-24 year.”

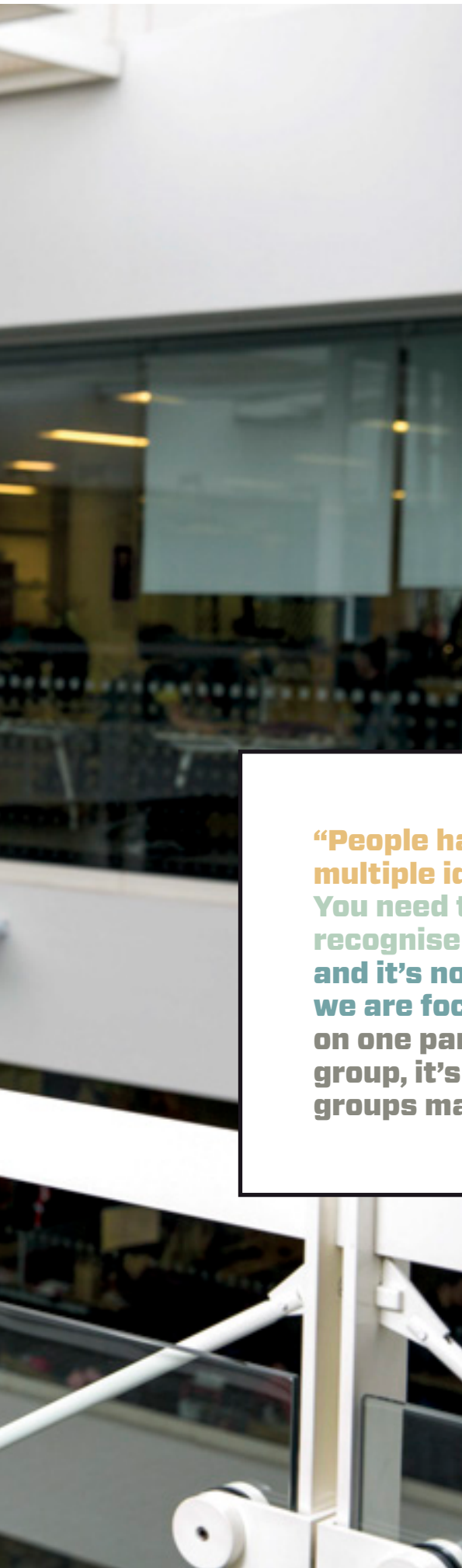
Money to fund the reforms has been agreed with the Treasury and detailed in spending review settlements, and producing the

evidence to reach this point has “taken about four or five years,” he says. The important thing now will be to be “really rigorous about how we assess capability,” he adds, but overall this is a “huge, once in a generation opportunity that has to be taken”.

Despite the positive work from the HR teams, this is a government that has at times almost been at war with the civil service – from the defenestration of perm secs and briefings against them, to vicious quotes in the press from ministers’ anonymous allies about “complacent” civil servants refusing to leave their sofas and return to the office. All of which is terrible for staff morale. »

“Any job is like an S curve: you have your biggest impact in the middle. And then if you’re doing your job right, your team should be carrying on the momentum”





“People have multiple identities. You need to recognise that and it’s not that we are focusing on one particular group, it’s that all groups matter”

What can civil service leaders like McNeil do about it?

The question is hard for any official to answer, and McNeil is so diplomatic that one would have to read very hard between the lines for any hint that the current state of affairs is less than ideal.

“There are lots of different components there, so let’s try and break them out,” he begins. “Let’s start with the fact that we’re in a unique environment, with ministers who are members of parliament and are ultimately accountable to their constituents. I’ve actually got a huge amount of sympathy for how hard that job is.”

He goes on to say that he would separate out *why* people are critical. Sometimes it’s because they’re frustrated by the lack of pace or outcomes. “By the way, I’m talking generically – shareholders... clients... maybe ministers are in the same category. You’ve got to listen to what they’re saying, to what they actually want, and then ask: how do you deliver it, and how do you explain what the constraints are, and are there ways of delivering it in a different way? And the best civil servants, like the best consultants, like the best executives, know how to say, ‘Well, you want this, but actually there might be a

better way to get what you want.”

He maintains that government has “more agency than we probably realise” in its ability to respond. The civil service has set up a much more rapid response to media stories, he says, and it is really important for individuals to know that the system is backing them when they’re

attacked in the media, even if they can’t do much about it.

“Because we can’t control the tweets. And I’ve experienced this personally where I really felt: ‘That’s frustrating.’ But the system backed me, and, you know, it responded to that silly tweet. And that’s fine. I feel like I’m being looked after.”

The civil service has also become better at preventing journalists from printing lies about named individuals, he says. “In one of those cases, I was able to go back [to the reporter] and say, ‘Well that’s absolutely not true, so do you really want to

print that?’ So I think we’ve become more proactive. Because civil servants do not have the right of reply that others have.”

Attacks don’t always focus on individuals; some seem to question the very existence and value of the civil service. Take, for example, the interview given by Jacob Rees-Mogg in February. The newly-appointed minister for government efficiency questioned whether the current civil service headcount is “providing value” for the taxpayer, and told *The Times* he wanted to cut 65,000 jobs – around one in seven civil servants at the latest count. “Do we make [people’s lives] better by employing large numbers of civil servants? The answer is probably no because the British public helps pay for them. And so you’ve got to get it under control,” he mused.

Does McNeil think these are helpful interventions? “Well, headcount is a function of activity,” the CPO begins in response. “What work actually needs to be done? One of the things which I’m finishing off at the moment is some work with the Government Consulting Hub, functions and departments on operating models, and on what the FTE implications of those operating models are.

“There are so many routes to this. So let’s take corporate services, HR being one of them. Have we de-duplicated? Do things need to be in the centre or in the department? Are there things which one department can do for other departments?”

All of this, he suggests, is the right way to decide on headcounts, along with fundamental questions like: “What are our resources, and what activity do we need to perform?” But there is another element to consider in workplace planning, too: the fact that new jobs and roles are emerging all the time, jobs “that we can’t even imagine will be created”.

McNeil is clearly a man who loves to think about the future, and how we get there. Another piece of important work he cites in this area is the Places for Growth programme, which seeks to relocate civil service roles out of London. He describes this scheme as a “big, game-changing thing”, but he also hopes that, in time, it will go a lot further. His vision for 2040 is for the civil service to be spread over hundreds of locations across the UK.

“I’m in the HMRC hub in Canary Wharf as we speak, but wouldn’t it be great if actually I was sitting above a magistrate’s court, next to local authority and health service employees and others, and then I have my sandwiches with them? And so public servants would be doing our work in a really integrated way. Micro hubs – that’s what I would love to see.” ■

A CHALLENGING LEGACY

Collaboration will be key to delivering digital transformation, says **Roz Barrance**, head of business development for the UK civil division of Leidos

What are the biggest issues caused by legacy systems currently running?

Many older systems contain workarounds and temporary solutions that can add significant layers of complexity to operations. Years of changing legislation and policy requirements have built up the complexity of these systems, which is why it is so difficult to move away from them.

There is a wider view that legacy systems pose a challenge in allowing organisations/government to move forward with digital transformation. These systems were often developed when people, processes and technology were different. We need to understand that, and not allow it to become a constraint.

There's no doubt that some systems struggle to keep pace with required changes, becoming less fit for purpose and customer expectation — something my colleagues call 'fossilisation'. Processes need to be agile, and change to demand the underlying technology can hinder that requirement.

Legacy systems can hold us back from realising the opportunities that new technologies offer in transforming public services for the digital citizens of today and tomorrow. The benefits of digital transformation come from reimagining the user experience and business processes in an information-rich and dynamically changing world.

What are the first steps to modernise legacy systems?

One of the key success factors lies in aligning business transformation with IT and any associated data transformation. We look at threads – business processes from end to end – then minimise cross-coupling between those processes. For each thread we look at the business, digital and data transformations, allowing us to reimagine business processes in a digital world and address technology challenges in parallel.

This approach was recognised by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee. Its report, published in December last year, said: "Departments have failed to understand the difference between improving what currently exists and real digital transformation, meaning that they have missed opportunities to move to modern, efficient ways of working."

The committee recommended the introduction of a structured way to decide whether changes represent incremental improvements to existing systems or transformation redesign. Building on this, I was pleased to see avoiding and remediating legacy IT as a cross-cutting priority in the very recently released DDAT playbook with a supporting guidance note, building on commitments made last year in the Declaration on Government Reform.

How should organisations involve their staff?

As an example, Leidos runs the £6.7bn, 13 year Ministry of Defence Logistics Commodities and Services Transformation programme. The key to its complex initial transformation was to recognise the reality of both the heritage and the modern world to ensure the

digital and business transformation took place hand in hand.

We use an 'operationally led, digitally enabled' approach to avoid issues we've seen in other programmes where the front-end gets re-engineered and looks great, but the legacy systems at the back end aren't delivering the overall transformation needed.

The only way you are ever going to do this is by collaborating with both technical and frontline staff, including those working on today's systems,

"People and their skills are needed to run the business while being critical in delivering change"

and those designing what tomorrow's will look like. People and their skills are needed to run the business while being critical in delivering change. They understand the existing data, how environments exist and how they are connected, and the business rules and processes that sit behind that.

What can be done to help organisations undertake digital transformation?

The government is taking steps to deliver new digital training for civil servants. We're investing in this through the Leidos TechX Academy, developed in collaboration with our engineering communities, talent and business development teams. It provides a custom set of content to upskill our engineers in line with our mission and strategy, and more importantly, that of our customers. It covers data, cloud, systems engineering, cyber and software.

The benefits are a more engaged workforce





that is ready to collaborate with our customers to deliver solutions to complex challenges. We plan to share TechX Academy with our customers.

Data migration is often a significant element of this kind of project. How can organisations do this well?

In complex environments, change isn't going to happen overnight. There are likely to be multiple phases, meaning data management will be crucial to ensure traceability, understanding of inputs, dependencies and outputs. Data is not an IT issue, it is everyone's issue.

As you say, data migration is often a significant element of this kind of project, but you can take significant steps in the interim and unleash value from data where it is. Moving it doesn't always need to be the first step. A key benefit of digital transformation is better data use, through improved data analytics and business intelligence. If data being imported is not fit for purpose this will quickly reduce your ROI.

Strong data governance between IT and the business will be vital, recognising where you are coming from, where you are going to and, crucially, all the stages in between.

Legacy systems tend to keep live until a more modern version is ready to take over. How can organisations best cope with running both?

Process automation can help to reduce the overhead of that period and improve data management activities, such as by minimising human error and increasing velocity. Many organisations have these challenges, so sharing knowledge of how you cope with these periods can help.

The Public Accounts Committee picked up on how digital programmes often fail to set up a single programme office to support the programme director in aligning all aspects of work throughout the programme. Having that end-to-end view is key, and some of these programmes can run over several years, making consistency critical to their success.

Can organisations avoid having to undergo major projects of this kind through ongoing work?

To an extent yes. Change can be delivered iteratively – and we are getting better at doing that. But it's important to learn lessons from what has been done, and wherever possible try to avoid creating the legacy systems of the future.

It's also important to reflect on the impact of the pandemic and the level of disruption to public sector services. There have been real shifts towards digitisation and moving operations to cloud environments.


These are not easy challenges to address and there are reasons why these systems remain in operation. Collaboration will be key to delivering system modernisation and digital transformation, between the public and private sector, larger organisations and SMEs, citizens and their digital identities, and silos of data. It's about bringing things together to realise the benefits for all of us. ■





POWER TO THE PEOPLE

In the final part of our series exploring the Declaration on Government Reform, CSW assesses progress against actions designed – according to the document – to ensure there are the “best people leading and working in government to deliver better outcomes for citizens”.



IMPLEMENT PLANS TO MOVE 22,000 ROLES OUT OF LONDON BY 2030, INCLUDING 50% OF SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT ROLES, CONFIRMING AT LEAST FIVE MAJOR DEPARTMENTAL RELOCATIONS THIS YEAR.



REINVIGORATE THE INTER-CHANGE SCHEME FOR CIVIL SERVANTS BETWEEN THE UK GOVERNMENT AND THE SCOT-TISH GOVERNMENT, WELSH GOVERNMENT AND NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE.

According to a letter sent from Cabinet Office minister Steve Barclay to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in February, over 2,000 roles have already been moved outside of London, and more than 15,700 are committed for relocation by 2030.

The letter also confirmed that 15 central government departments and public bodies have announced their relocation plans, but Barclay added that “there is clearly more to do, and I will be working closely with colleagues across government to reinforce the need to relocate policy and senior decision making roles as part of this process, as we implement the single largest effort to decentralise government out of Whitehall in our history”.

Work to improve the exchange of knowledge and skills between UK and devolved governments was already underway when the DGR was published.

In March 2021, then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove announced plans to offer more Fast Stream places in the devolved administrations and territorial offices, create a new long-term loans scheme enabling 60 people to spend up to two years working on priority areas in a different administration, and to double the number of people taking part in the UK Government Interchange Programme, which offers officials a chance to shadow counterparts in a different administration.

However, the letter to PACAC in February 2022 indicated that not all of these plans are fully up and running yet, saying: “There is further work required to identify where loans and secondments could be most impactful and to operationalise the approach.”

ESTABLISH NEW, APPROPRIATELY AND CONSISTENTLY MANAGED ENTRY ROUTES FOR PROFESSIONALS FROM OUTSIDE GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING FOR TIME-LIMITED PERIODS TO BE ATTACHED TO SPECIFIC PROJECTS OR TASKS.

WORK WITH THE CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION TO REVIEW HOW IT CAN ENCOURAGE ENTRANTS WITH SPECIFIC, HIGH DEMAND SKILLS, PARTICULARLY SCIENTISTS AND ENGINEERS.

DEVELOP A PIPELINE OF SECONDMENTS FROM THE CIVIL SERVICE INTO MAJOR ORGANISATIONS WITHIN THE UK AND INTERNATIONALLY, INCLUDING OTHER GOVERNMENTS, LED BY PROFESSIONS AND DEPARTMENTS, WITH SUPPORT FROM NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS, AS A CORE PART OF TALENT DEVELOPMENT.



These three actions combine to form what government leaders are calling “the porosity agenda”. The aim, broadly, is to attract people to the civil service from a wider range of backgrounds, and it is, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC, “inextricably linked to realising the benefits of Places for Growth”.

Barclay also asserts that work on this agenda “must go further,” stating that the proportion of appointments to the SCS from external applicants has halved over the past decade (from 42% in 2010-11 to 20% in 2019-20).

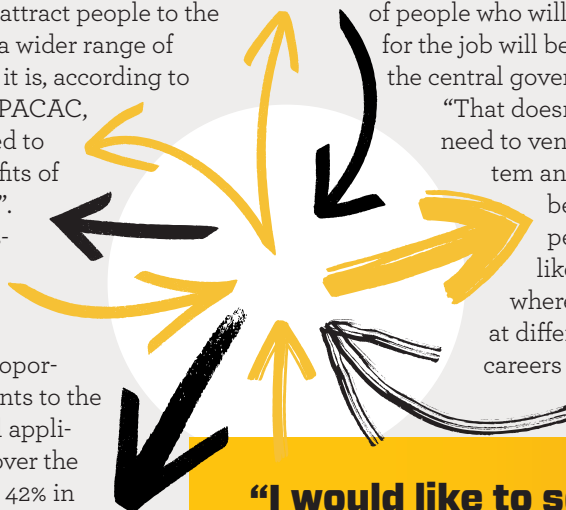
“I have asked my officials to revise the civil service recruitment framework to help address this,” Barclay told MPs.

Speaking to CSW this month, chief people officer

Rupert McNeil said he was optimistic about the agenda thanks to recent recruitment drives which saw large numbers of successful external applicants (see p.36). He added that the agenda is not “an end in itself”.

“It’s actually about outcomes for citizens on the ground. To improve outcomes, who are the best people to do the job? Actually, if the system is really working, the majority of people who will be best qualified for the job will be people from within the central government sector.

“That doesn’t mean you don’t need to ventilate your system and bring people in because no system is perfect, but I would like to see a time where people come in at different points in their careers for a period and then move out.”



“I would like to see a time where people come in at different points in their careers and then move out”
Rupert McNeil



ESTABLISH A NEW CURRICULUM AND TRAINING CAMPUS FOR GOVERNMENT, WITH A NEW DIGITAL WAY TO ACCESS LEARNING, A MANDATORY INDUCTION PACKAGE, AND A DATA MASTERCLASS FOR THE SCS.

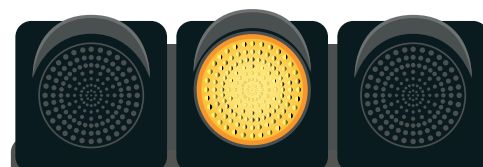
The Government Skills and Curriculum Unit launched in January 2021, delivering on a promise by then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove to create a “properly resourced campus for training people in government”. The Cabinet Office said the updated curriculum would replace the existing training on offer and would have a “renewed emphasis” on technical and analytical skills.

A January 2021 curriculum document set out plans for a new induction package, including resources for new starters “to



break down some of the mystique around the civil service and its more arcane ways, and to kickstart new colleagues in their roles”. All new entrants below SCS grades should benefit from the new-style induction by 2022, the document said.

An SCS data masterclass delivered by the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit underwent a successful pilot in spring 2021 and is now available as an online course.



IMPLEMENT CONSISTENT NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHALLENGE OF DEPARTMENTAL PERFORMANCE, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE GOVERNMENT’S LEAD NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR.

This project is “on track to deliver a framework which allows non-executive directors to challenge the performance of departments in a consistent way,” according to the letter sent to PACAC in February.





REFRESH THE CURRENT APPRENTICESHIPS STRATEGY, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON QUALITY AND RELEVANCE RATHER THAN NUMERICAL TARGETS, INCLUDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION APPRENTICESHIP.

Government first published an apprenticeships strategy in 2017, setting out how it would meet its commitment to deliver 30,000 apprenticeships by 2020. In April 2021 a new strategy was published, confirming that this goal had been achieved by March 2021, and

urging departments to take an “apprenticeships first” approach to recruitment over the coming year to ensure they hit a target of recruiting apprentices equivalent to 2.3% of their workforce. The document also said the government was “revising its approach” to apprentices, to focus on quality and rigour rather than just “a numerical target”. This strategy ran from 2021-22, and was positioned as short-term document, responding to the specific context of post-Covid recovery and the ongoing work of civil service reform.

Work on an updated strategy is still ongoing, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC, with publication expected “in the coming months”.



SET EXPECTED ASSIGNMENT DURATIONS ON APPOINTMENT FOR ALL SCS POSTS, TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE ROLE.

The aim of this action is to tackle high levels of churn in the senior civil service, an issue which has been associated with poor outcomes in various projects and policy areas. Guidance and implementation plans on this topic were expected to be put in place by March 2022, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC. However, government evidence submitted to the Senior Salaries Review Body in April suggested that work was still ongoing, stating: “We are working through

the policy detail and implications of setting expected assignment durations and will provide an update to the SSRB in due course.”

The evidence also provided detail on how the mechanism will work, saying it would apply to newly advertised roles, and “will not constitute a contractual change, but will instead be driven by a change in culture and organisational and vacancy holder and applicant expectations.”

The expected duration of each post would be dependent on the project timelines or delivery

requirements associated with that role, and would also take into account personal circumstances, the evidence states.

Government also says that it is developing new plans for “milestone-based rewards” which will help to “incentivise individuals to remain in post for the duration of their expected tenure on a particular project,” since officials will not need to move posts to secure a pay rise. This system is “several years away”, according to the government evidence, but is expected to operate on a similar basis to pivotal role allowances which were set up in 2013 to address the same issue.

Government says it plans to test the viability of this proposal in “a few departments” before providing more details to the SSRB next year.

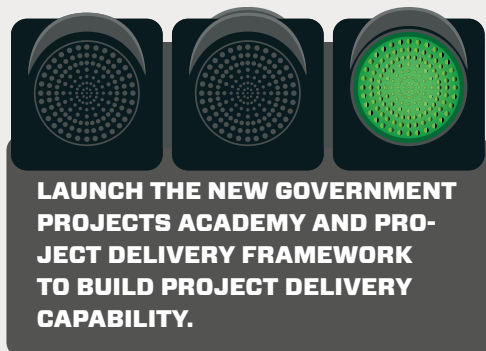
“It’s unusual that I might know something about what I was about to take charge of, but I did, and that was extremely helpful”
Jacob Rees-Mogg
on his ministerial training



PUT IN PLACE A TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR MINISTERS, INCLUDING PROJECT AND COMMERCIAL SKILLS.

A series of ministerial masterclasses has now launched, with sessions including a science masterclass with government’s chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance, and a data masterclass with national statistician Sir Ian Diamond. Cabinet Office minister Jacob Rees-Mogg, speaking at the recent launch of a Digital,

Data and Technology Playbook, described the training he received before starting his new role as “essential”. Rees-Mogg was appointed minister for government efficiency in February, and just before taking on the role he received training on how government procurement works from “people organising government procurement,” he said, adding light-heartedly: “So I had a head start when I got appointed – it’s unusual that I might know something about what I was about to take charge of, but there we go... I did, and that was extremely helpful.”



LAUNCH THE NEW GOVERNMENT PROJECTS ACADEMY AND PROJECT DELIVERY FRAMEWORK TO BUILD PROJECT DELIVERY CAPABILITY.

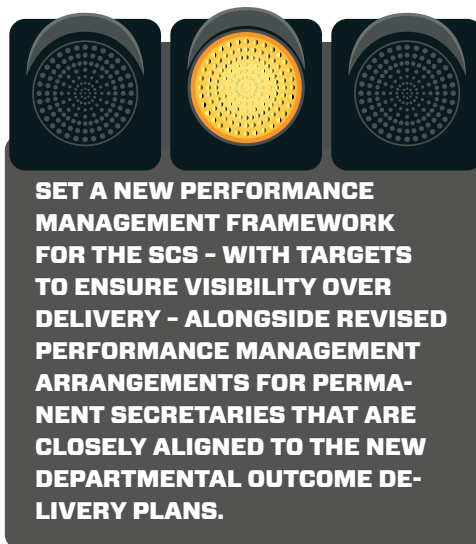
Both the Project Delivery Framework and Government Projects Academy had been launched before the DGR was agreed – the former has existed since 2018, when the project delivery function first published a set of capability standards. The most recent update to these standards was published in July 2021, at the same time as the DGR.

The Government Projects Academy is a “faculty” of the wider Government Campus, and according to the Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s most recent annual report the Academy provides “a single, virtual hub to set professional standards, accreditation and training for project delivery professionals working across government to ensure we are building the expert skills and leadership needed to deliver major projects successfully”.



PUBLISH A DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION STRATEGY TO BETTER PROMOTE FAIRNESS AND PERFORMANCE.

Government’s new Diversity and Inclusion Strategy was published in February 2022, setting out its objectives as enabling a civil service which “understands and draws from the communities it serves, meaning that it draws talent from a range of communities and locations”; is “visible to everyone” – engaging communities to showcase what the civil service offers; is flexible to support “innovation, performance and engagement”; and “welcomes talent from wherever it comes – attracting the best talent from all backgrounds”.



SET A NEW PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR THE SCS - WITH TARGETS TO ENSURE VISIBILITY OVER DELIVERY - ALONGSIDE REVISED PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR PERMANENT SECRETARIES THAT ARE CLOSELY ALIGNED TO THE NEW DEPARTMENTAL OUTCOME DELIVERY PLANS.

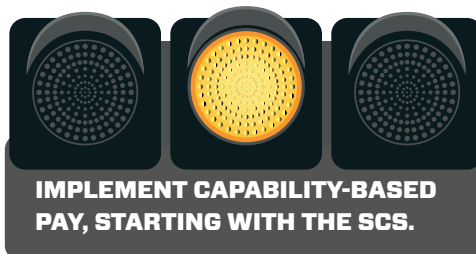
Barclay’s letter to PACAC stated in February that a new performance management process which links to departmental Outcome Delivery Plans is now in place for permanent secretaries “and equivalent measures soon to be implemented across the rest of the SCS.” However, evidence submitted to the Senior Salaries



Review Body states that full implementation of the framework has been delayed until the 2023-24 financial year. “This is to allow us additional time to work through our proposals with ministers to ensure they fulfil the ambitions set out in the Declaration on Government Reform. It will also provide departments with sufficient implementation time to ensure the new framework is properly rolled out,” the evidence says.

Certain changes are being introduced which move towards the new framework, for example adding the four performance rankings – exceeding, high performing, achieving and partially met – into which senior civil servants will be

sorted, to existing review documents. Civil Service HR has also reintroduced guided distribution, telling managers they should expect to see 5% of their SCS rated as having “partially met” their targets.



IMPLEMENT CAPABILITY-BASED PAY, STARTING WITH THE SCS.

Plans to implement a new system which rewards senior civil servants for developing skills and experience in post, rather than requiring people to move jobs for pay rises, were delayed in 2021 due to funding and economic uncertainty. But after the agreement of a multi-year spending review which included funds for the new system, pilots looking at pay bands SCS1 and SCS2 began in six organisations. Evaluation of these pilots is due to be ready by August 2022, and a full business case will then be developed and agreed with ministers. The new system is

expected to be rolled out across SCS1 and SCS2 pay bands in the 2022-23 financial year, with first payments being made in 2023-24. Agreement to extend and develop a framework for SCS3 is also in place, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC.

The Department for Work and Pensions is meanwhile exploring options for a capability-based pay system of its own that it hopes could make it a more attractive employer and help it develop a “more flexible, multi-skilled workforce”. In March, the department engaged a management consultancy to come up with proposals for a system that would use “reward as a lever to achieve workforce shift”, in preparation for a pilot study. ■

FORGING HER OWN PATH

The MoD's first ever diversity and inclusion director talks to **Tevye Markson** about holding departmental chiefs to account and fixing simple problems



Samantha des Forges – the Ministry of Defence’s first ever diversity and inclusion director – is no stranger to feeling like an outsider.

“Earlier in my career – I am a gay woman – I didn’t feel comfortable being out. I think I heard pieces of banter. I didn’t feel that it was necessarily a safe space for me to be myself.

“And I recall how tiring and exhausting that could be in terms of hiding myself and keeping slightly distant from colleagues and I wasn’t putting 100% of my effort into my job.

“It wasn’t until I started seeing senior role models, people creating safe spaces and being allies, that I felt I could be myself and then my career moved really positively because I could give all my time and focus to that.

“That has always been a really personal motivation in this space, that I know what it feels like to feel like an outsider and I know how much more of an impact I can give to an organisation when I’m able to be myself.”

Des Forges first encountered a role model that gave her the confidence to come out as gay while at EY, where she worked for 15 years before joining Network Rail in 2013 and then the MoD in 2016.

“Probably three or four years into my career, I recall a senior woman who

was a partner and who was visibly a gay woman and she was talking quite openly about the fact that she was gay. And she really embraced being a role model.

"Sometimes, particularly when you become more senior, you can be a little bit nervous about being a role model or perhaps you don't want to be a role model because it can have a bit of a burden associated with it. But I always recall that person just doing a couple of articles in a magazine and on the intranet of the organisation, and just explicitly being themselves, nothing more than that.

"Ultimately in some ways it changed my life because it gave me the confidence that it's okay to be a gay woman in this organisation.

"And therefore, I always had that in the back of my mind that – she may never know who I am – but what she did for me, I want to make sure I can do for others. Being that role model is something that might not always be comfortable but, particularly for folks who are in a leadership role and part of an underrepresented group, it's a real moral obligation for us."

Des Forges says taking on the D&I role within MoD was a "challenge and opportunity" she couldn't turn down and a good fit for her background and interests.

She has worked in the areas of ethics and counter corruption for most of her career and says she has been involved in diversity and inclusion throughout, including previously being a gender and LGBT+ champion at the MoD.

After working in defence for several years, she could see that the department "was doing fantastic things but could be even better".

"Defence has really gone through a period of reflection over the last few years, where we've recognised that we haven't always delivered in terms of diversity and inclusion in the way we needed to, and a number of reports, be it the [Defence Committee] review of women in the armed forces or the Wigston review into unacceptable behaviours, have just reiterated that."

Yet despite progress, she says: "The reality is we have some way to go in terms of diversity and, historically, we didn't always hear diverse voices at the very top of decision making in defence. I am really passionate about making sure that we make the very best decisions for the nation. We therefore really need to have that diversity of thought, that diversity of challenge. So I was really attracted to the idea of helping to amplify those voices.

This, she says, has been a key theme of the directorate's work in its first year

DES FORGES ON... TAKING HER PRIVATE SECTOR EXPERIENCE INTO THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Having worked at EY for 15 years before she joined the civil service, des Forges brought bundles of private sector experience into the Ministry of Defence.

"It really helped me and I think there's real value in moving between the civil service and private sector. There's a lot I've learned coming into the civil service, but equally a lot I've managed to bring from the private sector.

"While I was working in consultancy, I worked across a whole range of industries, which just gave me that breadth of understanding of how lots of different organisations address different policies, and different approaches. And I think that was really helpful.

"But also I think there's something really interesting about that continued focus on the service that we're delivering in the defence of the nation and that sort of ethos in private sector that really drives you in a very different way.

"I think one thing that is sometimes a challenge is pace. In the private sector, things

sometimes feel like they work to a faster pace, but also I've reflected over the years that the changes that we're delivering in government are so significant that we need to absolutely make sure that what we are doing is really well thought out.

"And actually we are working at huge pace, but it might not necessarily seem like it from the outside. So I think there's just different perceptions."

Des Forges is also using her private sector experience to help ensure improvement does not stagnate.

One thing she has brought in is something she says was drilled into her in business: having a feedback loop and focus on continuous improvement.

Delivering the D&I programme over the next six months and then getting a feedback loop going to continuously improve upon that is when "folk across defence start to feel the difference", she says.

"If we just sit back and go, right, we've put those changes through and we fold our arms, 'job done', then we're going to find ourselves in a similar situation in five or 10 years' time."

– "making sure that those voices are being heard and not just heard, but really listened to and driving change".

After repeated instances of inappropriate and allegedly unlawful behaviour by serving members of the UK armed forces, then-defence secretary Gavin Williamson commissioned an urgent report in April 2019. The Wigston report, published three months later, found an unacceptable level of inappropriate behaviour such as bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination, and a "sub-optimal" system for dealing with it. It also described a "white, middle-aged pack mentality" in the MoD.

Des Forges says this is "not something she experiences very much in defence" nowadays, but colleagues "can feel challenges and feel isolated and that their difference isn't always recognised".

"And I think the work that we are doing is actually helping people recognise the positivity of that difference," she says.

"To take another area, for example: neurodiversity. I think there's been a real awakening in defence to understand the value of neurodiversity, particularly in terms of where we are working in the grey zone or we're working in cyber and data analysis and actually recognising the real strength that neurodiverse colleagues bring to defence in that space."

Did the Wigston review shock her?



"Historically, we didn't always hear diverse voices at the very top of decision making in defence, and I am passionate about making sure that we make the very best decisions for the nation"

“We’ve now designed and are rolling out appropriately fitted combat uniform and body armour for our women so they can wear it comfortably, so they’re better protected and so that they can find their weapons more effectively”

Des Forges says she was more aware of the challenges than most, having provided support to Sir Mike Wigston in preparing his independent review and from conversations with colleagues in defence in her previous gender and LGBT+ champion roles.

“I had an understanding from talking to networks and folks across defence that there were some challenges,” she says.

“The scale of some of the challenges absolutely quite rightly shocked a lot of people in defence. There are undoubtedly some really difficult and harrowing stories, and defence is genuinely grateful [to those who came forward] and is listening and starting take action. And I think we will see a lot more in the next six months or so of that action happening.”

One thing that did surprise her when reading the Wigston report was the simplicity of some of the things that defence wasn’t getting right, such as the fact women in the armed forces were wearing body armour that was designed for men’s bodies.

“I looked at that and just thought: how have we got that wrong? We’ve now designed and are rolling out appropriately fitted combat uniform and body armour for our women so they can wear it com-

fortably, they’re better protected and they can find their weapons more effectively.”

A second report into the MoD published in July 2021 – the Defence Committee’s *Women in the Armed Forces* review – found women are not being protected by the MoD or helped to reach their full potential. It also highlighted serious problems with the military’s handling of sexual assault and harassment, which sometimes exacerbates trauma for victims.

Des Forges says her team has done a lot of work transforming the service complaint system and the service justice system, and the changes will come into effect soon.

“That’s going to start changing the experience of complainants and victims or survivors of crime,” she says.

There is a lot more to fix, she adds, but she says a lot of the work done so far will begin to have an impact in the next six months.

Asked if she has seen or experienced first hand some of the behaviours mentioned in both reports, des Forges says: “When I first joined defence, I did find some slightly more old-fashioned views in place, and it did feel like I’d stepped back a little bit.



“But I would genuinely say that I’ve seen a real change just in the time I have been in the organisation, and that change wasn’t happening fast enough, but I think over the last 12 months in particular it’s really accelerated.

“That doesn’t mean that we don’t still have work to do. But I think that recognition of not just the change we need but the pace of change has really landed.”

But even a change of pace does not mean things will turn around overnight.

“One of the key pieces in Mike Wigston’s summing up was he said that if we are going to deliver culture change, it needs 10 years of continuous sustained effort. There is no silver bullet to change the culture and to move us, from a cultural perspective, to a world class organisation but we’re definitely on the journey.”

When she joined the department almost six years ago from Network Rail, she talked to colleagues in other parts of the government, some of whom asked: “Why are you joining defence?”

“And I said, well, I like a challenge, I’m sure it’ll be really interesting.”

The department has been accused of being stuck in the 1950s and not being representative of the nation but des Forges is proud to work at the MoD and says things have changed.

“I have never worked with such inspiring people doing such fantastic things as I have in defence. I’ve never worked in an organisation of such complexity but that is delivering such positive difference to the nation and overseas.

“I think a lot of those myths, and those concerns that people might have are pretty outdated now, and it’s exciting to be part of that change.”

Part of this change has been a significant increase in the last 12 months of defence staff – both civilian and military – “standing up and talking about diversity and inclusion in a way that they might not have been as comfortable doing previously”, and willing to be an ally and challenge historic ways of thinking, des Forges says.

“We still have some way to go but there’s a tangible difference. I regularly talk to colleagues from our diversity inclusion networks. A lot of them are starting to reflect that, while we’ve still got a way to go, things are feeling different.

“Looking at statistics and data is really important, but it’s also about hearing our people’s voices and saying: ‘Are the changes we’re making starting to make an actual difference?’ And that has started to come through.”

Des Forges is the first ever direc-

tor of D&I at the MoD. She says diversity and inclusion was seen as “genuinely important” before the directorate was set up but defence didn’t “recognise the scale of effort that was needed to bring us to the right place”.

“Before we set up the directorate, I think what we had was a lot of pockets of folks doing really good stuff, but they were a little bit isolated or at the risk of [working in] silos.”

The directorate brought a top-level focus, with governance and a programmatic approach, she says.

“We’re holding people to account for the first time and saying these are the changes you need to deliver.”

The D&I directorate has also helped to amplify the voice of staff and challenge those at the top of defence, des Forges says.

“We engage with the networks – we hear the actual experience of folks on an everyday basis who say to us, ‘I can’t shoot properly because my body armour is wrong’, or ‘I’m experiencing unacceptable behaviours’, or I don’t feel I’ve been fairly dealt with’.

The D&I directorate then builds on that feedback, improving systems but also challenging the status quo.

“We play quite a strong challenge function, not only in terms of holding to account, but also sometimes sitting in the room with senior leaders and saying, ‘do you know what, this isn’t good enough – we need to do more, and faster’. And I think what we have seen is a real move to grip this now and we’re seeing a lot more work being driven by the services themselves.”

Des Forges’ goal is for defence to become a world leading organisation for diversity and inclusion.

“That is what will make us the best Army, the best RAF, the best Navy and the best civil service,” she says.

“I absolutely think we can get there. When we give defence a challenge, time and time again it steps up to it. So I have no doubt that we will achieve that.”

And ultimately, she wants to be able to lay down her metaphorical sword and shield. “I think a true test of our success is that ultimately the D&I directorate won’t be needed anymore, because it will be embedded in everything that we do. So actually, our job is to do ourselves out of a job.” ■



Lingo bingo

The universal language of the boardroom pays dividends to those who can decode it. Whitehall and Industry Group chief executive **Simon Ancona** offers a crash course

The purpose of the Whitehall and Industry Group is to encourage and facilitate better cooperation, understanding and learning across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. There is a misconception that these three entities speak a different language. They don't. Let me explain.

There are only four themes any organisation talks about, and there are only three fundamental topics within

each of those. The challenge is merely identifying what is being discussed and understanding, consequently, what is not being discussed (often a more interesting discovery and a great way of impressing colleagues in meetings). Let me talk you through it and you can try it for yourself.

The four themes, or pillars, are: strategy, risk, priorities and people; taking each in turn.

Strategy is the often quoted “ends”, “ways” and “means”. Or, to put it another



way, the application of resource in such a way as to achieve a desired outcome or goal. So, for instance, a conversation about a fundamental change in aims immediately begs questions over the required means and modifications to the plan to deliver the new outcome.

Risk considers the questions “what now?”, “what next?” and “what if?” Risk is both the threat posed or opportunity presented by possible events. We are all used to treating risk through mitigations and the like, but the time element is often ignored. So too is the strength of likelihood set against the analysis (not just data) available. Therefore a conversation about a “what if?” possibility that crowds out a “what next?” analysis is obviously worthy of a question. For instance, perhaps a debate about setting aside “means” to mitigate a possible business threat in three years’ time would seem out of place if the prospect of rising interest rates were not being discussed.

Priorities can also be viewed as labelling issues “fudge”, “fight for” or “forget”. Where can we compromise? Where are the red lines? And what can we stop doing? Often a difficult decision but ultimately nearly always necessary to square the “ends, ways and means” circle.

People covers “task”, “team” and “individual”, to borrow John Adair’s timeless Venn diagram of action centred leadership. It’s about the nature of the task, the

forging of the team, and the individual’s requirements. Often this centres on the expertise required, but also has everything to do with leadership and development. This theme has a close relationship with “means”, “what next?”, and “ways” as well as – often and sadly – “fudge”.

“The challenge is merely identifying what is being discussed and understanding what is not being discussed – often a more interesting discovery and a great way of impressing colleagues”

So there is the common ground and vocabulary for one organisation to understand and communicate with another. It allows us to deal with even the most bewildering corporate or departmental verbiage such as: “The ‘forward first’ strategy will seek to capitalise on the inherent strengths of the organisation, while allowing the sort of agility we need to react to the future environment, it will generate the capacity required to concentrate on the essential elements of our unique outputs as well as maintain activity essential to our purpose.”

Faced with such statements, we can unpick the essential elements of changed ways (if there are no more “means” then

what is being “fudged” or “forgotten” – or have the “ends” been changed too?). Other useful areas include a sense of doubling down on “fight for” elements as well as a clear signal about which elements will need to be “forgotten” and implications for “teams” to deliver agility.

Next time you are in a meeting, try playing boardroom bingo. Draw a table with our four themes down one side and the three related topics in the rows next to each. Listen hard and circle which combinations are being talked about.

What will leap out at you is the areas not being discussed. In no time at all, you can impress your colleagues and annoy the chair with questions like, “do we have the additional means to form the teams necessary for this, if we plan no compromise around our approach to delivery?”.

Alternatively, come to a WIG event and try out your new language skills with another sector. You’ll be fluent in no time! ■

Whitehall and Industry Group is an independent non-lobbying charity that looks to boost learning and collaboration between industry, government and the not-for-profit sector

THE FOUR KEY COMPONENTS	STRATEGY The setting of goals and applying resources to reach them	ENDS What’s the ultimate goal?	WAYS How do you plan to get there?	MEANS What resources do you require to succeed?
	RISK (THREATS OR OPPORTUNITIES) Understanding the threats and the opportunities	WHAT NOW? What’s the current state of play?	WHAT NEXT? What do you know is going to happen which may present threats or opportunities?	WHAT IF? What might happen externally or in your organisation?
	PRIORITISATION	FUDGE What can you compromise on?	FIGHT FOR What are your red lines? What’s essential for success?	FORGET What can be scrapped or should you stop doing?
	PEOPLE The single most important factor - those around you	TASK What are you asking of the organisation?	TEAM What do you need to build/forgo?	INDIVIDUAL How are you retaining, engaging and inspiring your people?

THE PEOPLE'S BANKER

Ian Ackerley is chief executive of NS&I, Britain's venerable state-owned savings bank. He talks to **Jonathan Owen** about Covid turbulence, select committee grillings and transforming his organisation into a slick, 21st century operation. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

It's fair to say that Ian Ackerley's experience of life as a senior civil servant has been a voyage of discovery – and not always in a good way.

As chief executive of National Savings and Investments, his journey has been filled with ups and downs, largely due to the conflict at the heart of the UK's only government-owned savings bank.

That's because NS&I has three different groups to please in a relationship where delivering for one group often comes at the expense of another.

One of NS&I's purposes is to raise money for the government – but if this is done too well then it can have an adverse effect on the wider financial market, which is disadvantaged by not having the government backing that NS&I enjoys.

It is also tasked with delivering for its customers.

But while raising interest rates is welcomed by its savers, it's not such good news for the general taxpayer – as it means that there's less money being made by the Treasury.

As with anything financial, the detail gets pretty complicated pretty

quickly, but speaking from NS&I's head office in Pimlico, London, Ackerley summarises it as a “balancing act”.

He explains: “It is a trade-off. The taxpayer pays the interest, the customers receive it; what we do will impact our competitors in the market so there is always that trade-off.”

Ackerley did not plan to become a financial plate spinner. As a young boy, photography was his passion. Life got in the way, with Ackerley pursuing a career in management consulting and financial services – working for the likes of Virgin Money, Sun Life International, and Barclays Bank – before moving to the public sector in 2017 when he joined NS&I.

Originally known as the Post Office Savings Bank, it was founded in 1861. It's best known today for Premium Bonds – which account for almost half of the £200bn in savings held by its 25 million customers. A non-ministerial

department, NS&I is an executive agency of the chancellor of the exchequer.

As with many public sector organisations, the past couple of years have seen NS&I face huge challenges, with problems ranging from inadequate levels of customer service to complaints that it has been taking a disproportionate share of the savings market.

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020

prompted the Treasury to turn to NS&I to raise an unprecedented amount of money by increasing the amount being deposited by savers.

“At the start of the Covid crisis our target for 2020-21 was going

to be about £6bn. In the end we delivered £38bn in the first six months and that was our way of trying to help with the fact that the government was facing significantly increased expenditure,” Ackerley says. “If you think about it, that £38bn is just about what the government spent on the furlough scheme during its first six

“At the start of the Covid crisis our target for 2020-21 was going to be about £6bn. In the end we delivered £38bn in the first six months”





months, so it was a really material amount of money, and more than we'd raised in the preceding three years put together."

NS&I rose to the task, capitalising on a wider growth in savings that hadn't been seen "in decades". But it came at a cost. The sheer scale at which people were depositing money, combined with a lack of capacity due to the effects of the pandemic, compromised customer services.

When NS&I slashed its rates and also

reduced the chances of winning a premium bonds prize in September 2020, it prompted many people to try to get their money out in search of a better return.

Thousands of complaints were made about the time that call centre staff were taking to answer calls – with some savers having to wait 20 minutes to speak to someone. Ackerley was subsequently hauled before the Treasury Select Committee, in a gruelling encounter in which

he told committee chair Mel Stride he was "genuinely sorry" for the inconvenience to people affected by customer service that had "fallen well below [his organisation's] normally high standard". For his part, Stride warned: "The damage that may have been done to NS&I's reputation over the last few months is worrying." He suggested that NS&I would "need to work hard to win back customers".

But Ackerley is a man for whom the



phrase “glass half full” could have been invented, with a knack for turning a negative into a positive. He prefers to summarise past problems as “a challenging period”, explained by a record volume of business combined with reduced capacity due to Covid-19. Things are now back on a more stable footing. “I think inevitably when you get the sort of negative coverage that we received during that time it’s going to have some negative impact on the brand,” he adds. “But I’m really pleased to say that our customer satisfaction now is pretty much at where we were pre-Covid.” He adds: “I think we are on a rising and improving curve at the moment.”

The NS&I chief executive is upbeat about the grilling he received from the Treasury Select Committee. Having to appear before MPs is “one of those things you’re very aware of when you accept the job.” He says: “Obviously one would always much rather get lots of praise, but I think that’s human nature. And, by and large, I think the questions at these events to be fair. It was good to get the opportunity, frankly, to be able to go on the record, to be able to explain a little bit more about what had actually happened and what we were going to do to fix it.”

For all the well-publicised problems, the actual transition to remote working was straightforward. “We were well prepared, I’m delighted to say. A little over 18 months beforehand we had refurbished our main office building in London and in the process of doing that we made a strategic decision to switch away from desktop technology to laptop technology. During the refurb we also didn’t have enough capacity for everyone to be in the office so we sent half the people to work from home.” Remote working “went extraordinarily smoothly” and was “a really straightforward transition because we had the tech and the experience.”

Talk turns, inevitably, to the Partygate scandal that has engulfed Whitehall. Ackerley does not think this has affected civil servants’ morale, arguing that the state of mind of the vast majority of officials is “impacted by things usually much closer to them”. So, were any parties held at NS&I’s offices? “That didn’t happen in NS&I,” he says. “Not least because during that period we were all working from home – only in exceptional circumstances were there people in [the office] during most of the time when I think those incidents happened.”

Partygate to one side, Ackerley is measured when asked if he feels more like a civil servant now that he’s been in the job for five years. “I don’t know, but I certainly

think I know a little bit more than I knew before, or at least I’m aware a bit more of the things that I don’t know,” he says. As for the future savings market, Ackerley is concerned that the cost-of-living crisis will see a “squeeze” on incomes that could reduce the number of people able to save. Amid the economic uncertainty, NS&I has taken its first steps into the world of green investment. Its first ever green savings bonds were launched with fanfare last October, but the miserly interest rate of 0.65% was significantly lower than other green savings products on the market. In a move that could indicate an initial lack of interest in the bonds, NS&I decided to double the rate to 1.3% when it issued more earlier this year.

Ackerley will not divulge the take up of the new bonds. “I’m not going to share numbers today because we release those in the annual reporting cycle, but suffice it to say that what was important for us was that we learnt about the market, about the relative attractiveness of our product and our brand in that segment and it’s more than fulfilled that.” He hints that the numbers will not make for good reading, stressing that it had been an opportunity for both the Treasury and NS&I “to learn about the green savings market and it’s really fulfilled that for us so we’ve learnt a lot through the release of the first tranche”.

The jury is out on any future plans for green investment products. “There is clearly an opportunity to continue with a green proposition – quite when that will be, what scale it will be, is something that we are in discussions with Treasury about,” he says.

Ackerley is keen to highlight another positive development – the £2bn Rainbow programme that will see NS&I transformed into a 21st century organisation. It aims to replace ageing technology and old processes. The Rainbow programme is a series of contracts that are being tendered in what represents a big shift away from the large, single outsourcing contract that has seen Atos handle the NS&I’s operational services since 2014. Future plans include having a mobile banking app and a fully functional transactional website. Ackerley sums it up as being “about a fundamental transformation of our operating model.” He adds: “It means that we will be responsible for integrating the provision of services by those players, which brings more skills and experience back into the civil service, which again creates some re-

ally exciting opportunities for people who want to be involved in that sort of thing.”

Across the wider civil service, he sees some “really positive stuff” being done around diversity and inclusion. There’s also “a lot of energy going into getting the civil service to work better across departments”. He recognises that the need for greater collaboration is nothing new, which begs the question of how you actually achieve it. “There’s a lot to be said for getting a good mechanism in place, and having as many people as possible motivated and driving towards it. There’s been a real focus that I can see about trying to get mobilisation across the civil service, across all levels, to really drive towards a more inclusive civil service and one that works much better together.”

The pandemic showed what could be achieved by different departments working together, he adds. “The latest crisis in Ukraine has provided another opportunity to learn and also to leverage the lessons that were learned from Covid.” There are

no quick and easy fixes, according to Ackerley. “It’s lots of different things that are needed; there is no magic bullet for making this work. Having worked in very large corporates for most of my career, they faced very similar challenges to the government.

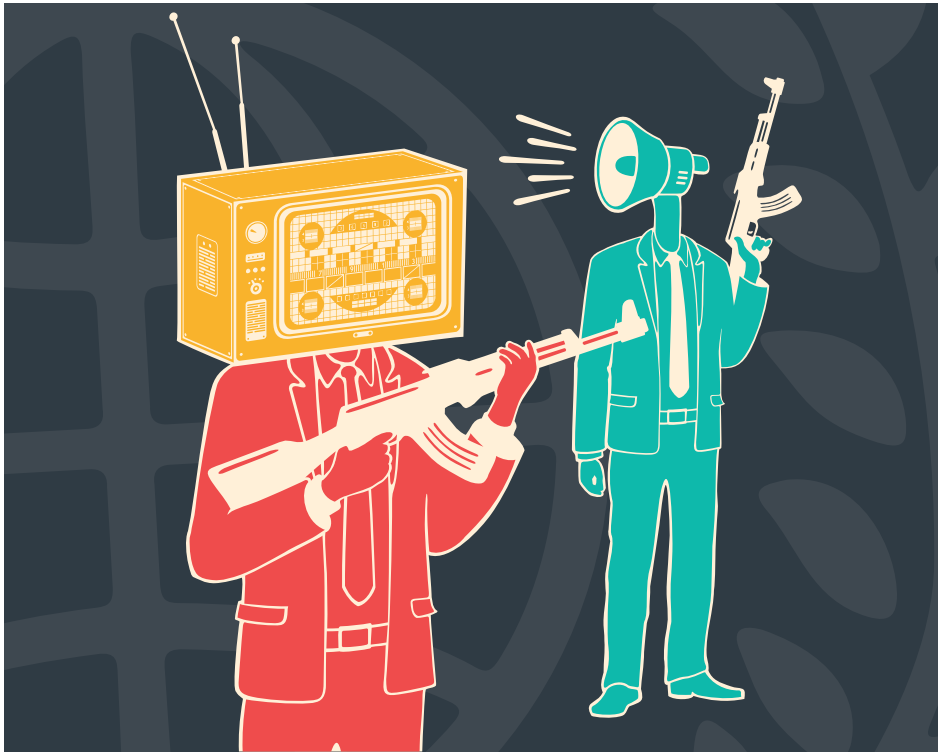
The bigger organisations

get, typically the more difficult it is to get them to work well together.”

Having mutual trust and understanding are key, he argues. In the case of NS&I, the Treasury has a couple of representatives on the board of this executive agency. However, the real insight the Treasury gets is from the “multiple relationships” where “members of my team and our organisation are talking to the Treasury every day”. Ackerley also meets with Treasury permanent secretary Sir Tom Scholar every Monday – another example of the two-way communication between the organisations.

His five years as a civil servant have been “an amazing period” and it’s been a “great privilege to see the inside of the Treasury, a little bit more of how government and Whitehall works”, he says. Asked if he’s in it for the long term, Ackerley laughs and says: “It’s obviously not my decision in the end because I have to be reappointed by the Treasury, but I’ve certainly enjoyed the five years that I’ve had. It’s been, as I say, challenging at times. There’s been some real highs, there have been some lows, but I do really enjoy the role.” ■

“Obviously one would always much rather get lots of praise, but I think that’s human nature”



DARK ARTS FOR DARK TIMES

Conflict in Ukraine reminds us that truth is often the first casualty of war. **Andrew Southam** offers a brief history of government propaganda campaigns

“War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength” are contradictions of misinformation written outside the Ministry of Truth in 1984, George Orwell’s imagined future world of manipulation. Seventy-four years later in the real world, Russia takes every opportunity to misdirect over Ukraine.

British governments have themselves struggled to maintain balance in previous propaganda campaigns, notably with their first world war Ministry of Information and later a cold war “information” unit.

In the dark months of 1914, German disinformation raced ahead with a propaganda agency whose “White Book” portrayed the country as a victim of Serbian terrorism and Russian aggression.

Chancellor Lloyd George asked Charles Masterman, a Liberal politician with literary leanings, to respond. Masterman created Britain’s War Propaganda Bureau that year, seeking advice from 25 writing celebrities, all sworn to secrecy. This group read like an undergraduate reading list, from Victorian novelist Thomas Hardy to HG Wells. Fifty-three writers subsequently signed the 1915 author’s declaration proclaiming German crimes. Many worked for Wel-

lington House, analysing material and penning documents, among them Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and historians Lewis Namier and Arnold Toynbee.

Wellington House produced some 1,200 wartime pamphlets, as well as films like *Britain Prepared* and the *Battle of the Somme*.

Only two trusted photographers were allowed at the front. Anyone else taking photos was liable for execution by firing squad. Painters involved in the efforts included portraitist John Lavery and surrealist Paul Nash.

Unsavory efforts included activity to shift neutral US opinion by mint-

“The propaganda unit also campaigned against the IRA and promoted British entry into the European Economic Community”

ing medals to commemorate passenger liner RMS Lusitania’s loss in May 1915.

Home Office and Foreign Office propaganda units also sprang up; and the War Office managed information on the front through MI7B.

Daily Chronicle editor Ronald Donald designed a new government

propaganda structure when he was asked to review the arrangements.

Donald proposed a single operation with one chief. In February 1917, Buchan became director of the new Department of Information, with politician Sir Edward Carson taking over the renamed Ministry of Information in September.

Press barons also participated. *Daily Express* magnate Lord Beaverbrook became minister of information, with Lord Northcliffe, owner of the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, responsible for enemy propaganda and Donald for neutral nations.

The ministry was dissolved in 1918 but revived between 1939 and 1945 to fight the Nazi threat.

When cold war Soviet propaganda needed countering, Labour’s foreign secretary Ernest Bevin started the blandly-named Information Research Department in 1948.

IRD influenced media like the BBC and Reuters, published some 100 titles and used agents of influence such as Bertrand Russell and Robert Conquest.

This new propaganda unit became the largest Foreign Office department, with international activities from Egypt to Indonesia.

Orwell’s 1984 was promoted with Chinese, Burmese and Arabic translations. Anxious to pierce the Soviet mirage, Orwell passed IRD 38 names who he thought were “crypto-communists, fellow-travellers or inclined that way and should not be trusted”. Among them were Labour MP Tom Driberg and actor Michael Redgrave, who later featured in the original 1984 film.

James Callaghan allegedly used IRD to tarnish the reputation of prominent hard-left trade union leaders as home secretary.

The propaganda unit also campaigned against the IRA and promoted British entry into the European Economic Community for prime minister Edward Heath.

By the mid-1970s, Labour circles worried journalists were close to an exposé and fretted about the right-wing cre-

dentials of some IRD staff.

Foreign secretary David Owen closed IRD in 1977 to save money against the background of détente. The *Guardian* revealed the unit’s existence months later.

Britain’s Ministry of Information and IRD arguably played important roles contesting false narratives, but avoiding the contradictions of Orwell’s Ministry of Truth required constant vigilance. ■

Andrew Southam is a freelance history correspondent and writer



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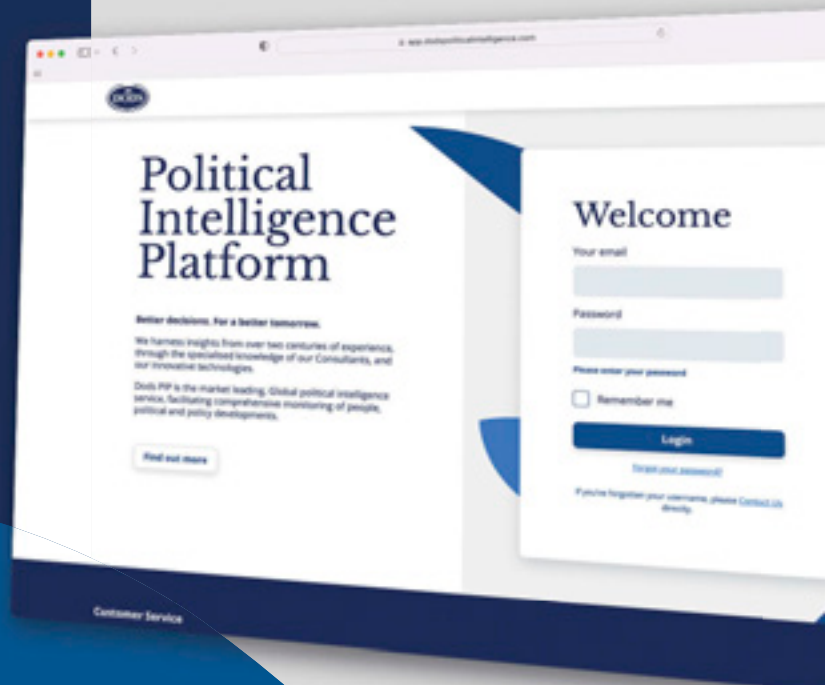
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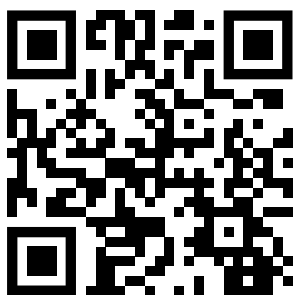
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