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HUGHES BROADCAST
Civil service reform DG Janet Hughes shares her priorities for the role

TREASURY MAP
A tour of HMT buildings through the years

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS
CAN GOVERNMENT BREAK THE LINK BETWEEN BACKGROUND AND SUCCESS?

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TURNING TABLES
Select committee chairs in the hot seat

CSW

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FROM THE EDITOR

When was the last time you felt the "weird whoosh of terror and relief that comes from real, heartfelt boldness"?

This is what we asked civil service reform DG Janet Hughes in her first interview in the job (*p.18*). Never shy about plundering our own archives, our question was a reference to something Hughes herself wrote for *CSW* nearly a decade ago while at the Government Digital Service. Back then, Hughes said she was at her best under those conditions. Today, she tells us that the "whoosh" came when applying for her current job after years as director of a high-profile programme at Defra.

I've felt that tempestuous mix of feelings several times in the three months since I took over editing *CSW*'s print issue after seven years spent mostly on the newsdesk.

Naturally, I've spent that time thinking about what it takes to do this job well – and naturally, I've been gleaning wisdom from the interviewees in this issue who have shared what it takes to do *their* jobs well.

Empathy and a willingness to listen is a big theme, and Tessa Jones shares some solid advice in Directors' Cut *(p.8)*: "It's amazing what you can achieve if you don't mind who gets the credit."

But the standout line for me comes from Hughes, who says her role requires "the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference".

These words were a helpful reminder when – just as we were making final edits to this edition – Angela Rayner resigned as housing secretary and deputy prime minister, sparking a cabinet reshuffle that included new work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden scooping up the skills brief from the education department. This came on top of a "reset" earlier in the week that saw the Missions Delivery Unit move from the Cabinet Office to a newly created delivery unit in No.10.

The shift in focus away from five flagship missions towards three top priorities (growth, borders and the NHS) – and the uncertainty about what that means for the missions – was unsettling news. Not least because we have spent the last three months trying to learn as much as we can about the (somewhat clunkily named) breaking down barriers to opportunity mission: the focus of this issue.

As I write this, the dust is still settling on Keir Starmer's No.10 shakeup, but I can say one thing with relative certainty: work to reduce barriers to opportunity will continue in some form, no matter the policy guise it comes under.

And it is important work, as I was reminded when speaking to Paulette Hamilton, acting chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, about its inquiry looking at children's first 1,000 days of life *(p.40)*. She told me she saw very little of health professionals during her own pregnancy and felt no one was listening to her because she hadn't hit crisis point. Hamilton's story shows how easy it is for people to slip through the net, and she told me how much she would have welcomed the support offered by the family hubs that are being rolled out through the Best Start programme *(p.36)*.

Perhaps the move away from the five missions will itself be an opportunity. After all, as Hamilton said, the missions have not always been easy for the general public – or, indeed, the sectors they affect most – to understand.

The IfG's Heloise Dunlop gave a similar warning, when talking about the Community Mission Challenge, that the missions appear to have been treated "more like targets rather than this 'new way of working'" *(p.26)*. And in what may have been a sign that change has been on the way for a while, Dunlop noted that in recent months, there seems to have been "very little about missions coming from central Whitehall departments".

So perhaps a shakeup is no bad thing; for now, I will leave you with the horrible cliché that only time will tell.

In the meantime, like Hughes, I'll be striving to make "deliberate, careful and ideally wise choices" in the months and years to come as I keep our quarterly magazine at the heart of what *CSW* is all about: helping you do the best in your jobs, whatever change lies ahead. ■

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PPA

JESS BOWIE & SUZANNAH BRECKNELL A NEW CHAPTER

Tell me there's been a reshuffle without telling me... the email from a private office at 10pm on a Friday? The weary Saturday-evening sigh from a senior official who spent all day briefing a new minister on their first policy decisions?

As prime minister Keir Starmer reacted to the resignation of his deputy prime minister with a wholesale rejig of his cabinet, the civil service, as ever, cranked into gear and pivoted to embrace the new normal.

The reshuffle came less than a week after Starmer had reset his top team in No.10, announcing the government was moving into "phase 2" of its term and would now be focusing on "delivery, delivery, delivery". Details of what this means remain high-level – there's a new No.10 Delivery Unit that seems to have subsumed the Cabinet Office's Mission Delivery Unit. There's also a new role for Darren Jones who, as chief secretary to the prime minister, will "work collaboratively across UK government to drive forward progress in key policy areas," according to No.10.

The No.10 reset has been broadly welcomed by observers such as the Institute for Government. And, along with other appointments into No.10, it does indeed look like the PM now has a robust support system around him.

But the double-whammy of restructures in one week led us to reflect on the words of former permanent secretary Moira Wallace. "Delivery can never thrive," she tells us on p.30, "without great strategy behind it."

"We are eternal optimists, and have faith that these latest resets herald the sunny uplands where policy and delivery join hands and work seamlessly together (although perhaps best not to quote us on that...)"

The first job of Jones and the new No.10 should be to support and empower the teams working on strategy and policies that the delivery unit will ultimately be helping to deliver. It's no good making policy without a delivery perspective, but there is also no point in building delivery skills and systems if you're working from flawed or ill-thought-through policies. The lessons of the winter fuel allowance and aborted welfare reform were about mismanaged politics, but also about rushed policymaking without the rigour of testing and consultation in advance of announcements. Both politicians and officials play their part in good policymaking, and each side needs different skills to do it well. Among the changes we would therefore hope to see in phase 2 of this government is a stronger focus on reforming, equipping and rewarding the civil service to work more effectively on policy, implementation – and all the other things that make up the complex work of modern government.

Yet we can't escape the importance of strong political leadership. Fourteen months into the government's term, Starmer has reset his No.10 team twice, carried out a major reshuffle and shifted the government's narrative focus from five missions to six milestones to, most recently, three priorities. It doesn't scream "great strategy", and now a host of new ministers will be seeking to make their mark on new policy areas, suggesting shifts of focus or tone if not entire U-turns in the months ahead.

Thankfully, we – like civil servants themselves – are eternal optimists, and have faith that these latest resets will not only mark a turning point for stability but also herald the sunny uplands where policy and delivery join hands and work seamlessly together to improve real-world outcomes for citizens. (Although perhaps best not to quote us on that...)

While things are changing in government, you may also have noticed a reshuffle evident on these pages. After many years at the helm of this magazine – don't ask how many precisely, the job-share maths makes it too tricky to calculate – it feels both strange and exciting to write this column from a new perspective. Being able to call ourselves "editor" of *CSW* has been a privilege: to interview so many dedicated civil servants in such a wide variety of roles, to report on developments vital to our readers' professional lives and to have the chance to reflect on the evolving nature of government have all made for hugely rewarding work.

That said, this isn't a farewell. We are not disappearing from *CSW* – far from it. We are delighted to be stepping into the role of editor-in-chief. What does that mean in practice? It means we will still be journalists – popping up in these pages each quarter to interview senior officials and share reflections on the civil service. But it also means we'll be spending more time out and about: building relationships, listening to what matters to you, and ensuring *CSW* continues to be a space where civil servants can see their world reflected and challenged.

Our new role also means passing on the day-to-day running of the magazine itself. And we couldn't be happier to hand the editor's chair to our colleague Beckie, whom many of you will already know as deputy editor of *CSW*, and from her excellent reporting and features-writing over the years. She is thoughtful, rigorous and a very safe pair of hands. We know she will bring fresh energy and ideas, while keeping the magazine as indispensable as ever.

To complete the reshuffle, our senior reporter Tevye is stepping up to take on the online editor role, bringing his tenacious approach, his eye for the civil service angle and flair for puns to all things digital.

Meanwhile, our new focus as editors-in-chief will include developing some of the things we've started building beyond the page. Earlier this year, the two of us relaunched the *CSW* podcast, and it has been a real pleasure speaking to such inspiring public servants for its 10 (and counting) episodes.

Nine months ago, we also put on the first *CSW* Collaboration Conference. The event brought together more than 120 officials from across central government departments, along with other parts of the public sector, to build the networks and skills needed to support better partnership working on some of the nation's trickiest challenges. We're continuing to develop that and other events, along with projects like our celebration of Trailblazing Women in the Civil Service (keep an eye on your inbox for more details).

Our commitment in this new role is to stay close to our readers, to ensure *CSW* always stays relevant, and to help our brand remain a trusted platform for debate, challenge and collaboration.

Thank you for reading, for engaging and for sharing your insights with us for all these years. We look forward to carrying that conversation on into this new chapter. ■

MOVERS & SHAKERS

Who's in, who's out, and who's shaking it all about? Make sure you're in the know with *CSW*'s quarterly guide to all the key moves in government

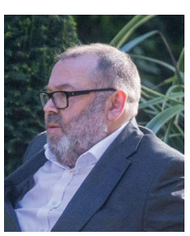
If you would like to let us know about a move in your team, please email editorial@civilserviceworld.com

UPPER CASE

Simon Case, the former cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, has joined the House of Lords as a crossbench peer.

Case, who left the civil service in December due to ill health, has been appointed to the upper house alongside two other former senior officials: **Sir Tim Barrow**, who was recently the UK national security adviser, and ex-Treasury second perm sec **Dame Sharon White**.

DEFENCE DEPARTURE



Ministry of Defence permanent secretary **David Williams** will leave the civil service this autumn.

Williams joined the MoD as perm sec in April 2021, having previously been second permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care, where he also acted as DG of finance and group operations. Prior to this, he also held senior finance roles at the MoD.

His departure follows the completion of the Defence Review in June and the creation of a new leadership "quad" earlier this year.

IT'S JO TIME

Following Dame Bernadette Kelly's retirement in June, the Department for Transport has appointed interim perm sec **Jo Shanmugalingam** to the role permanently. Shanmugalingam has been second perm sec at DfT since May 2023. She said she was "honoured" to be taking on the role at the department, which she said had a "huge part to play at this critical time in driving economic growth".

MIAN MACHINE

Emran Mian has stepped up to become perm sec at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology following Sarah Munby's exit. The former fast streamer began his civil service career more than 20 years ago and held senior roles at the Department for Education and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities before moving to DSIT in 2023. He served as DSIT's director general for digital technologies and telecoms for two years. Then-technology secretary Peter Kyle said Mian would be "an outstanding permanent secretary" for DSIT with "exceptional experience and vision".

BETTER CALL PAUL

Paul Kissack, group chief executive at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has been appointed as perm sec at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He succeeds Dame Tamara Finkelstein as Defra's top civil servant.

Kissack has held a range of senior roles in government. Most recently, he served as DG for strategy and change at Defra from September 2019 to July 2020.

TOP JOB FOR TIERNEY

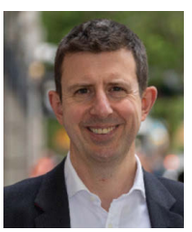
Darren Tierney has joined the Office for National Statistics as its perm sec, a new standalone position separated from the national statistician role. Tierney, who was DG of the Cabinet Office's Propriety and Constitution Group, has been appointed for a two-year fixed term. Both roles were previously held by Sir Ian Diamond, who stood down in May due to ill health. Splitting the jobs was a recommendation made in a recent review by former Department for Work and Pensions perm sec Sir Robert Devereux.

The next national statistician was yet to be named at the time *CSW* went to press.

Sir Robert Chote, meanwhile, will leave his position as chair of the UK Statistics Authority – which oversees the ONS – at the end of September to become president of Trinity College, Oxford.

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Department for Education perm sec **Dame Susan Acland-Hood** and Department for Business and Trade perm sec **Gareth Davies** have been named as co-heads of the policy profession. They succeed Finkelstein, who left the civil service in June.



Acland-Hood said Finkelstein "brought her characteristic insight, passion and creativity to the leadership of the policy profession, challenging us to go beyond generalism and to step up to the challenges of the future".

"Gareth and I, as joint heads, take up the mantle determined to build on the great work she and many others have done," she added.

COMMS KING

The prime minister has appointed **David Dinsmore**, the chief operating officer at News UK and former editor of *The Sun*, as government director of communications. Dinsmore will lead the Government Communication Service, the professional body that oversees comms activity across government.

Dinsmore will take up the newly created position in November and will be based in the Cabinet Office. The perm sec-level role has been created to "transform how the government communicates with the public and reform the Government Communication Service's output across all departments and agencies", the Cabinet Office said.

STANDARDS BEARER

Doug Chalmers will become chair of the new Ethics and Integrity Commission. The Committee on Standards in Public Life chair will take on the role in October, when CSPL transitions into the new commission.

The change is part of a standards shakeup that will see the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments abolished in October, with its functions split between the Civil Service Commission and the PM's independent adviser on ministerial standards. Interim Acoba chair Isabel Doverty will remain in the role until its function ends on 13 October.

HOMES IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Amy Rees has joined Homes England as chief executive. The ex-HM Prison and Probation Service boss moved to the housing delivery agency, which is overseen by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, on 8 September.

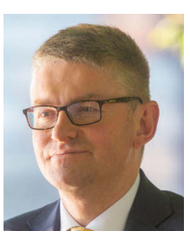
She succeeded Eamonn Boylan, who had been interim chief exec since January following Peter Denton's retirement.

Then-housing secretary Angela Rayner called Rees's appointment a "momentous step" for Homes England that would see her leading efforts to "turn the tide on the housing crisis".

JOINING THE SCOTS

Fiona Mettam has taken over as director of the Scotland Office, moving from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, where she was director for energy development. She has replaced Anna Macmillan, who had been interim director since April, following Laurence Rockey's departure to become chief exec of East Lothian Council.

OFF-WAT



David Black has stepped down as chief exec at Ofwat. His resignation comes after the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced that the non-ministerial department would be abolished and transferred into a new integrated water regulator. Ofwat said Black – who had led the regulator since April 2021 – had decided the time was "right for him to pursue new opportunities". Black said he had been "privileged to be able to lead Ofwat over the last four years, during which time we have achieved a huge amount together as a team for customers".

NEW DEVELOPMENT

Neil Wigan has left his role as British high commissioner to Kenya to become director general for strategy and delivery at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, a newly created position.

Wigan's previous positions include ambassador to the State of Israel and director for Africa at the FCO. He also worked in the Cabinet Office earlier in his career as deputy director, Middle East and wider world.

ROBOT WHISPERER

The prime minister has picked **Jade Leung**, chief technology officer at the AI Security Institute, as his new AI adviser. She replaces Matt Clifford, who departed at the end of July for personal reasons. Leung, who is a former executive at OpenAI – the firm behind ChatGPT – will split her time between No.10 and the AI Security Institute.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

The UK Health Security Agency has appointed **Prof Susan Hopkins,** currently the chief medical officer at the agency, as its new chief executive. She takes over in September from Dyfed Alsop, who has been acting chief exec for the last few months. Dame Jenny Harries led UKHSA from its creation in 2021 until her departure earlier this summer.

Steve Bates has joined the Office for Life Sciences as executive chair. Bates had been chief exec of the BioIndustry Association since 2012. The OLS, which is jointly sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, will now also report to the business secretary to "strengthen links" between the life sciences sector and government.

Andy King has been picked as the next chief executive of Companies House. King, who is currently chief operating officer at the MoD's Defence Business Services organisation, takes up his new role in September. He succeeds Louise Smyth, who has led Companies House for the past eight years.

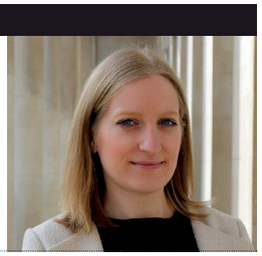
MI6 has appointed its first female chief. **Blaise Metreweli**, the 18th chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, has been promoted from her role as director general for technology and innovation. She succeeds Sir Richard Moore, who is leaving the service in the autumn. Commonly referred to as "C", the chief is the only publicly named member of the organisation.

Metreweli said she was "proud and honoured" to be asked to lead the service. ■

DIRECTORS' CUT

Directors do some of the most interesting and challenging work in government. Here we meet three of them and hear what it takes to do their jobs

TESSA JONES



Director, agri-food chain, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

What does your job involve?
I job-share with Charlotte Baker and together we lead on food strategy, policy and delivery. This covers everything from net zero to organics certification; seasonal workers' visas to agri-tech in the industrial strategy; food price inflation; and sheep carcass classification.

To do your job well you need...
To know what you're trying to achieve. Which is different from what everyone is telling you to do! You also need to right-size the role to the time you have, which is why I am lucky enough to job-share rather than work part time.

First job in government?
I started my career as a crown servant rather than a civil servant, working at the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. I answered the phone to the public and replied to letters and emails to triage complaints about government and the NHS. It was a great place to start my career as it brought home to me the impact that government has on millions of lives every day, and the effects on individuals when things go wrong.

Proudest achievement to date?
In my first government job in DfT, and then again this year at Defra, I've had the privilege of being involved in honouring war veterans for their contribution. In 2007, we hosted a reception at No.10 for the Women's Air Transport Auxiliary, and medals were awarded by then-prime minister Gordon Brown. And this year, our food team at Defra organised a commemorative plaque and badges for members of the Women's Land Army. Neither were my achievements at all, but being able to recognise this amazing service certainly made me very proud.

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
This actually happened when I wasn't at work, which is what made it bizarre. My (brand new) husband and I started our honeymoon by taking the sleeper train to Penzance. We were just settling into the restaurant car when over my G&T, I saw a familiar face coming towards me that I couldn't quite place. Until I realised that it was my minister...

If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...
An interior designer; a columnist for a Sunday paper; or running a cheese shop or café.

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
"It's amazing what you can achieve if you don't mind who gets the credit." I take that to mean collaboration over competition, problem solving over posturing!

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
There is still much more to do on how we support people's careers when they have children. I think that many women – and other carers – feel there is still a trade-off between looking after dependents and progressing their careers, and I'd like to see richer and more open conversations about that. ■

EDWARD BARKER

Director, natural environment, trees and landscapes, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

What does your job involve?
I'm responsible for national biodiversity, trees and forestry, access to nature, protected landscapes, peat and soil policy. I'm also senior sponsor for five arm's-length bodies.

To do your job well you need...
A clear understanding of what ministers hope to achieve, some space to be creative and a brilliant team.

First job in government?
I helped to establish the nascent "public understanding of science" sector, before it was fashionable or even widely respected. I learned so much in that role, both about being a civil servant and about the wonder of science!

Proudest achievement to date?
Creating over 50,000 acres of woodland since we launched the Nature for Climate Fund, and putting the UK at the heart of the EU-US trade negotiations pre-Brexit. Quite different, but I'm very proud of both.

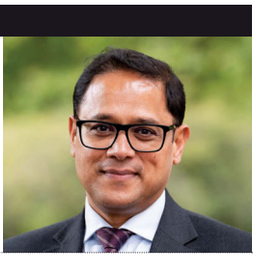
Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Being applauded by a select committee at the end of my evidence session (a nice surprise, sadly not repeated since); the security arrangements before meeting a controversial statesperson; shuttling a minister's shirts around the globe; being taken for a pub lunch in St Albans by 1980s TV presenter Johnny Ball.

If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...
I used to want to be a lawyer – specifically a barrister – and before that, an architect. I also really enjoyed working as an adviser to an energy company on its acquisition strategy. But I think a civil service career offers a variety and satisfaction that is hard to beat.

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
Always ask yourself: could I explain this decision convincingly in public?

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
I would love us to get more comfortable with taking more risk, when the benefit is worth it. ■

SAURABH BHANDARI



Director, property delivery and transformation, Office of Government Property

What does your job involve?
My job is to lead programmes that unlock the full value of government property – social, economic and environmental. That includes modernising our estate; working towards our sustainability ambitions; improving asset performance; and integrating placemaking principles into our national property strategy. It's about making the government estate work for the public, not just as physical infrastructure but as an enabler of better services and stronger communities.

To do your job well, you need...
An inspiring vision, curiosity and the patience to navigate complexity. There's no single lever to pull. We work across multiple departments, local authorities, markets and regulations, so influencing, alignment and tenacity matter. But most important is remembering why we do it: creating a built environment that improves lives and leaves a lasting, sustainable impact.

First job in government?
I've worked across the public and private sectors, including large-scale regeneration and infrastructure development. My entry point was through programme leadership into the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (now NISTA), where I was the executive director leading the New Hospital Programme's delivery of construction projects, orchestrating the development of the Hospital 2.0 system.

Proudest achievement to date?
There are too many to be partial to one. Being able to collect the voices from the ground up, solve issues and develop them to become government policy or spending review settlements has got to be the greatest privilege. Ultimately, it's being able to inspire my teams to champion the transformation of our public services when I am not in the room.

The most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Almost being arrested for accidentally trying to take AirPods into a high-security prison.

If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...
I would likely be involved in an urban renewal project or working with a social enterprise.

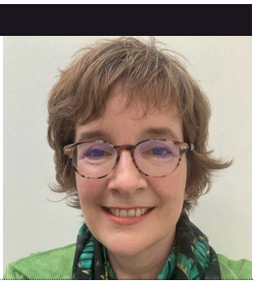
What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
To change something, you have to change it twice. Once in reality, and once in perception.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
The complexity of challenges that the civil service solves deserves a magic factory. I'd celebrate the great work they do more publicly and more often. ■

GOING, GOING, GONG

The King's Birthday Honours mark the extraordinary contributions and service of people across the UK. Here, *CSW* meets a selection of the civil servants who were recognised in 2025

RUTH MARSHALL



Marshall, head of futures capability at the Government Office for Science, received an MBE for services to evidence-based policymaking and innovation

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Birthday Honours list?
Slightly embarrassed but very flattered! I have loved both roles that inspired this award. It's great to see both the contribution of robust, well-utilised evidence and the positive impact of trying out more innovative approaches being recognised in government.

What does your role involve?
I'm the head of futures capability in GO-Science. A fabulous job title! I develop and deliver training, tools and wider awareness-raising about what futures can offer people in government, the wider public sector and beyond – working with brilliant colleagues and partner organisations to make it happen.

And how does your work further evidence-based policymaking and innovation?
Futures work combines the two. It draws upon robust data sources to identify trends and emerging changes. It then uses creativity and imagination to explore what that might mean for the world around us, and how government might respond – to be agile and flexible in that response. The tools we use help people test the resilience of policies, strategies and delivery plans and hopefully come up with solutions that work better for longer.

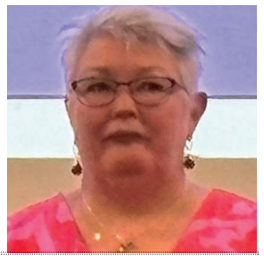
How did you end up in your role?
Most of my civil service career has been in ministerial departments, primarily DHSC and MHCLG. Whilst in DHSC I did an MSc in health policy that made me want to work more on the role of evidence in policy. I attended an excellent "evidence safari" workshop that GO-Science ran, loved it, and applied for a role there shortly afterwards. That role involved publishing Foresight reports that apply futures approaches and a long-range perspective to cross-cutting government challenges. My current role helps others to learn how to do that themselves.

Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
Designing and launching our online futures training, which received a government science and engineering profession award and helped us reach thousands more civil servants. Designing online training is not my comfort zone but I had expert help from Government Skills and it was great fun – I even had my own film crew!

What does it take to do your job well?
Enthusiasm and tenacity. Both roles involve persuading busy people to look up from their daily pressures and challenge themselves about how they could work differently. That can be hard – tackling today's priorities is difficult enough and not everyone welcomes "helpful" new ideas. But futures can help you make a longer-lasting impact, so it's worth giving them a try.

Tell us one thing we might not know about your job...
There are almost certainly people who use futures in your organisation, although they might call it something else. Try your strategy team, your operational researchers, your analysts, your corporate planners. ■

MEL COOPER

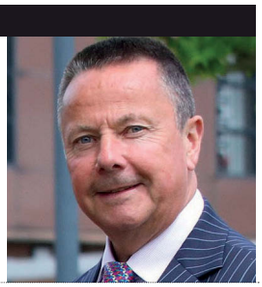


Cooper received an OBE for services to the armed forces in Kent, recognising her work as an armed forces champion at DWP and her commitment to military charities

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Birthday Honours list?
It was mind-blowing to be honoured in this way. I was on leave when the letter arrived, and I re-read it multiple times in case it was a scam. I love being a DWP armed forces champion as I can support and honour what our armed forces do for us while I am at work, on top of the fundraising I do in my spare time. I'm blessed that someone took the time to nominate me.
What does your role involve?
I am one of the DWP armed forces champions covering Kent. This enables me to support not only our veterans, but also those currently serving in the military and their families to navigate the complex world of benefits, work and support that is available to them.

Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
I am proud of being able to highlight some of the issues faced by our veterans to my colleagues, as well as signposting to the support networks that are available to them.
My work also complements the voluntary work I do: collecting for the Poppy Appeal and completing challenges such as the Be Military Fit Challenge, the 25km London Bridges Challenge and the Great Tommy Sleep Out.
What does it take to do your job well?
Empathy; the ability to listen; being honest even if you are delivering bad news; tenacity to not give up even if there are obstacles in the way; and my spidey sense that enables me to pick up what they are too proud to say.
Tell us one thing we might not know about your job
My role is extremely varied. One day I can be singing with the Chelsea Pensioners, the next meeting veterans in prison and the next hobnobbing at No.10 Downing Street to celebrate Armed Forces Week with the minister of veterans' affairs. ■

RICHARD TAYLOR



Taylor, governor in charge at Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison in the Northern Ireland Prison Service, received an OBE for public service

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Birthday Honours list?
It is very humbling and of course a great honour to receive this recognition as part of His Majesty's Birthday Honours. This recognition, while deeply personal, is in truth a testament to the collective dedication, unwavering commitment and extraordinary resilience of every single member of the Hydebank Wood team, past and present. My role as governor in charge of Hydebank Wood affords me the opportunity and privilege to work with an exceptional group of people who genuinely care about what they do and seek to make a difference every day.
How did you end up in your role?
I joined the NI Prison Service in 1988 as a prison officer and have covered multiple roles. Initially, I worked at Hydebank Wood in 2001 as training manager and returned again in 2013, taking on the role of deputy governor, then governor. In 2018, I moved to HMP Magilligan as governor and then returned to Hydebank Wood as governor in 2021.

Justice minister Naomi Long described Hydebank Wood College as a "model of excellence" last year – what's behind its success?
The success is a direct result of the passion and enthusiasm of our staff and the excellent collaborative working with our partner agencies and voluntary sector colleagues. The level of innovative thinking, coupled with the determination to "make it work" has created an environment that reflects a "changing minds, changing lives" ethos that underpins all that we do.
Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
Being invited to a ceremony to observe my late father (who was terminally ill), a career prison officer, being presented with the first NI Prison Service medal.
What does it take to do your job well?
To dedicate yourself to the tasks; involve and communicate well with your team; be solution focused; and accept that in an operational environment, plans are always going to change. To recognise and appreciate the efforts of your team and the work they do.
Tell us one thing we might not know about your job...
That being sent to prison can be the catalyst for change for many who are committed into our care and with the right support and direction, success can be achieved over many levels. ■

JOLENE COOK

DESNZ's head of international climate science, Dr Cook received an OBE for services to international climate science

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Honours list?
It was a huge surprise, and it is especially meaningful to be recognised alongside other climate scientists. To me, it signals the enormous importance placed on science in the fight against climate change. I feel incredibly proud that my international work, and that of my brilliant team, have been recognised.

What does your role involve?
I lead the international climate science work at DESNZ within a wider climate science team, which provides advice on the latest science and its implications. I represent the UK on the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and in my work engaging counterparts worldwide to steer the work of the IPCC. I also work with research communities in the UK and overseas to support their involvement. My team and I also ensure science informs global action in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and I lead on science-related matters for the UK in the negotiations, including the high-profile Cop meetings each year.

How did you end up in that role?
After a brief stint in finance, I pursued a PhD and research in climate change. I knew an academic career wasn't for me, so when a science adviser role in then-DECC became available, I jumped at the chance. Unusually, I've progressed in my career through different specialist roles within various incarnations of the same team, with a couple of years in Brussels as a seconded national expert to the European Commission. It's an immense privilege to represent the UK internationally and show our leadership on climate action.

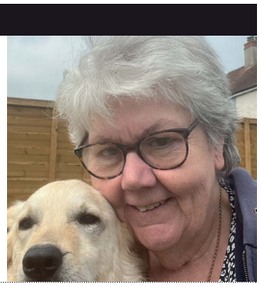
What's it been like working with international counterparts in this role?
It's one of my favourite parts of the job. If we're to be successful in tackling climate change, it's imperative the science is robust and globally representative. Working with others forces us to challenge our own perspectives and biases, to develop a better understanding of local contexts and sensitivities, and to appreciate diverse priorities and ways evidence is used around the world.

Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
My fight to include the word "unequivocal" in the first key message of the IPCC's 2021 report on the physical basis of climate change – just one word, but it says everything about the scientific consensus on the human influence on global warming, and it's used in speeches and headlines worldwide.

What does it take to do your job well?
Connecting with people on a personal level across cultures and languages to understand different perspectives and priorities; the ability to talk about science in an accessible way; and my incredible team.

Tell us one thing we might not know about your job...
Before an IPCC report is released, the 195 member countries spend about a week huddled in a room approving its 20 to 30-page summary sentence by sentence. With the scientific authors in the room, we work all day – and often all night! – to make sure the summary is true to the underlying science, and relevant for policymakers, but not prescriptive. ■

VANESSA BARDEN



DWP quality assurer Barden was awarded an MBE for her outstanding commitment to animal welfare and fundraising efforts for dog rescue charities

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Birthday Honours list?
I feel very proud and taken aback that someone would nominate me. It is truly humbling to have been recognised for my efforts and passion for helping dog rescue charities. Seeing these dogs grow in confidence and enjoy life, where they are loved and cared for, inspires me to carry on with fundraising.

Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
As a work coach in Hastings Jobcentre Plus, I worked with 18-25-year-olds. Some of them didn't have any understanding of what it was like to work and earn their own wages. Many had no work experience and some had very little self worth. I arranged work placements for them with local employers, some of which resulted in job offers. Some years later, I still see some of them working in the shops where they had a placement and I feel very proud that I played a small part in changing their lives and futures for the better.

What does it take to do your job well?
Being empathetic plays a large part of my current role as a quality assurer on the national Work Capability Assessment Quality Assurance Team. Having been a decision maker, I understand the pressures colleagues can feel expecting to reach aspirations and, at the same time, deliver a quality service to our claimants.

Tell us one thing we might not know about your job
As an assurance team, we are able to identify issues where maybe decision makers have not been aware of certain aspects of their role. On these occasions, we can offer them support and pass feedback to senior managers to hopefully arrange further upskilling. ■

ROSE MOORE

DWP advanced customer support senior leader Moore was awarded an OBE for services to vulnerable people

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Birthday Honours list?
I still can't believe it; I'm still in shock. I feel honoured as so many colleagues are deserving, we all do a great job every day. To be nominated and chosen for the award is beyond belief and beyond anything I could have ever dreamt of. I feel very privileged to be an advanced customer support senior leader and have never taken this for granted. I love my role, the impact I have and the difference we can make.

What does your role involve?
I work across west London covering all benefits lines, working with people across various teams to identify service improvements and building capability. I represent the department at key safeguarding forums including multi-agency risk assessment conferences, and safeguarding adults boards.

Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
My proudest moment was securing the role as west London's advanced customer support senior leader (ACSSL) and building a team who really make a difference and will go the extra mile to support customers.

What does it take to do your job well?
You need great communication skills, empathy, resilience, good listening skills, a love for external partnership working, and most importantly, the ability not to judge. The ACSSL is the voice of the customer, whilst also the eyes and ears protecting DWP's reputation.

Tell us one thing we might not know about your job
ACSSLs support all benefit lines, from state pension to income support. If a customer is vulnerable and all business as usual has been exhausted, it is very likely advanced customer support will be involved in advising/supporting the product lines. One other thing: the abbreviation "ACSSL" is seldom communicated correctly or in the right order – maybe it's time for a change. ■

ALICE HURRELL

Hurrell, chief people officer at DESNZ, was awarded a CBE for public service

What does it mean to you to be recognised in the Birthday Honours list?
It was a wonderful surprise. I'm absolutely delighted and humbled. I've worked in the civil service for 30 years, in a number of different roles, departments and agencies. I started my civil service career as a casual admin assistant without having been to university, so I am particularly proud of this achievement. I am the first person in my family (and amongst all of my friends and community) to receive an honour. I hope this inspires others!

What does your role involve?
I'm the most senior person in the department dealing with all aspects of people, working closely with permanent secretaries as part of the executive committee. I lead the HR function to ensure we have the right skills and capabilities, as well as happy, engaged employees and great line managers, and the right organisational structures and ways of working. No two days are the same and it's a great role, dealing with fantastic people and enabling them to succeed.

How did you end up in that role?
Having worked in operations, finance and project management, I started my career in HR and realised I really loved it and was lucky to be sponsored to complete a postgraduate diploma in HR management. I have covered the whole range of HR disciplines at different grades and worked my way up to director in 2018. I was delighted to become the chief people officer for DESNZ following the machinery of government change in 2023, having been the CPO in BEIS.

What's the most rewarding part of your role?
Enabling the department to deliver outcomes. But at a more granular level, I really love talent management and supporting talented people at all levels to develop and plan their career.

"I enjoy approaching things with kindness and a sense of humour, which always helps"

Apart from receiving this honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?
There have been so many. I was extremely proud of how my team dealt with the Covid crisis in BEIS and helping to set up the Vaccines Taskforce. More recently, enabling DESNZ to get the biggest increase in people survey scores in government – demonstrating our focus and commitment to an engaged and happy workforce.

What does it take to do your job well?
Being able to empower people, spot talent and opportunities, and be resilient during difficult times. I really enjoy working as a team and approaching things with kindness and a sense of humour, which always helps!

Tell us one thing we might not know about your job...
My job also requires a good level of financial acumen, as we work closely with colleagues in finance and strategy on our strategic workforce and resourcing plans. ■

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Former Cabinet Office minister Pat McFadden has said failure to tackle poor performers is "one of the biggest barriers" civil servants face. But what do senior officials think of how performance management is handled? Words by **Beckie Smith**

Ministers have told departments to "go further" to ensure they are managing their senior officials well – shortly after research by *Civil Service World* and think tank Re:State showed officials aren't convinced the civil service takes performance management seriously.

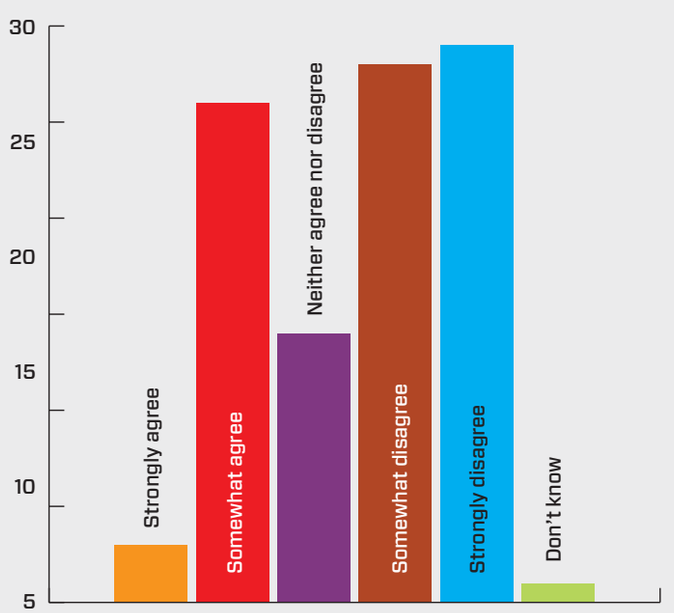
In August, the Cabinet Office released figures from a cross-government audit that found only seven reported cases of senior officials being on performance-development plans.

It said changes to the performance-management regime unveiled in February had "supported an increase" in the number of senior officials being rated as having partially met their performance targets, from 3% in 2023-24 to 4% last year. The SCS performance framework introduced new minimum standards and an annual "cross-government consistency check".

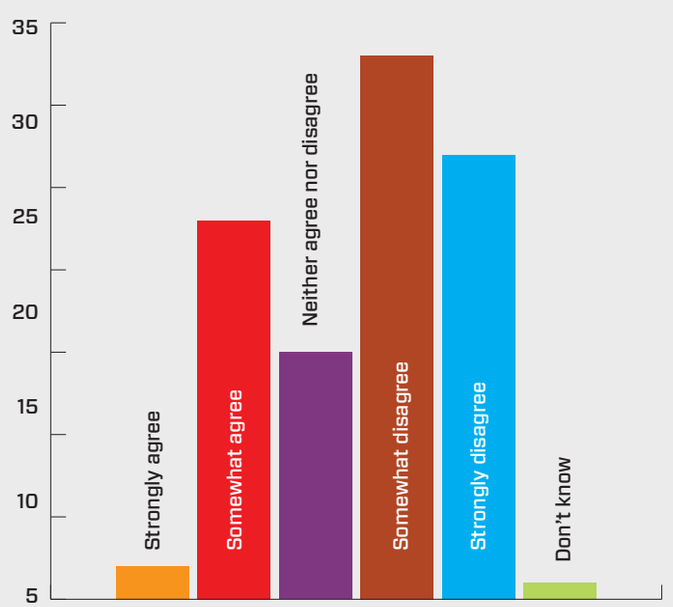
But the Cabinet Office said departments "have been told to go further, to ensure the civil service is delivering for working people". In a statement, then-Cabinet Office minister Pat McFadden said the civil service needs to be "firing on all cylinders" to deliver the government's priorities, and that the failure to tackle poor performance is "one of the biggest barriers" civil servants say they face.

He cited figures from the last Civil Service People Survey, in which 31% of officials who were planning to leave within a year said they were doing so

THE CIVIL SERVICE TAKES TALENT AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SERIOUSLY



TALENTED PEOPLE RISE TO THE TOP OF THE CIVIL SERVICE



because of poor leadership, and 27% did not select either "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement: "I think that my performance is evaluated fairly."

CSW and Re:State's research bears McFadden's claim out. Of the 1,265 officials who took part in our Alternative People Survey, nearly four out of five disagreed with the statement: "The civil service in general manages poor performance well."

Less than a third – 29% – said they believe the civil service takes talent and performance management seriously; and more than half – 55% – agreed with the statement: "I am aware of disciplinary issues where action should have been taken but has not."

The Alternative People Survey aims to answer questions the People Survey does not. It asks 24 questions on themes including talent and performance management; departmental performance; procurement; and technology and artificial intelligence.

We also included a free-text question: "Would you like to confidentially share any other views or experiences of the civil service or your department?" Poor performance was one of the most frequent topics raised in response, along with a lack of pay progression and recruitment issues. One respondent said where they work, there is "effectively no performance management system to speak of, beyond triggering escalatory action for egregious behaviour". Another said removing the 10% of lowest-performing staff in their organisation would "mean we'd be more efficient and get more work done".

Someone else said they believe managers are "too scared or unwilling to have difficult conversations, meaning poor performance is always overlooked".

The responses are "not a surprise, but that doesn't make it any less frustrating", according to Joe Hill, policy director at Re:State and a former civil servant. "It's an open secret in the civil service that you can't get rid of repeat poor performers," he said.

We asked civil servants whether they believe managers are incentivised to move poor performers to another role or department, rather than manage them. A quarter of them strongly agreed with the statement and a third somewhat agreed.

The results echo a phenomenon in the US school system known as the "dance of the lemons", Hill said – in which "poor performers get passed around by schools because it's easier than firing them".

"In extreme cases in the civil service, it can be in your interest as a manager to actually see poor performers get promoted, if that's what gets them out of your hair," he added.

"I have never seen talented colleagues so demoralised"

Nevertheless, the majority of respondents – 63% – said they agreed, fully or in part, that they have a good line manager and feel supported by them to make progress.

Our questions also revealed mixed feelings about HR functions. Nearly half (47%) said they understand the role the HR function plays in their department, while just over a third (35%) did not.

The written responses to this question also revealed concerns about corporate HR functions – with one official saying: "We could make massive efficiency savings if we had a fundamentally different approach to HR. Our pay systems and structures are not designed in a way that motivates or rewards high performance and it is incredibly difficult to address poor performance."

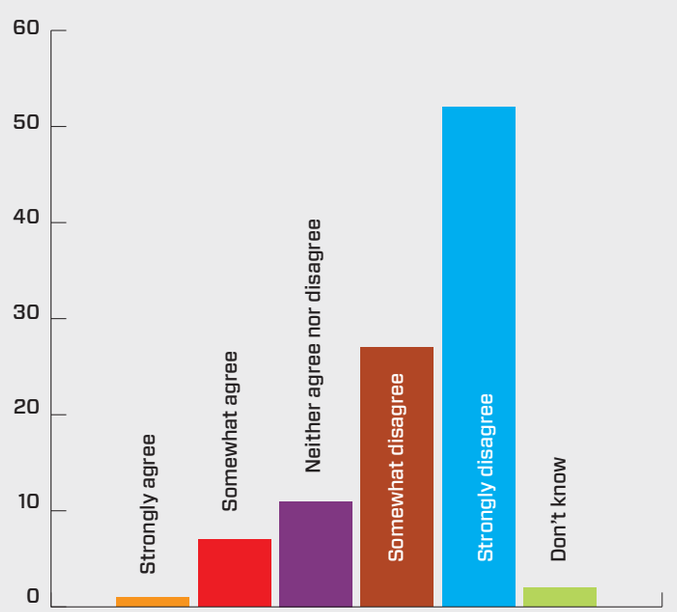
"The lack of consistent HR support is hampering effectively managing people out of the door," another said, pointing to the "long-winded" process they described as open to exploitation by underperforming officials who "know how to play the game".

Opportunities for progression

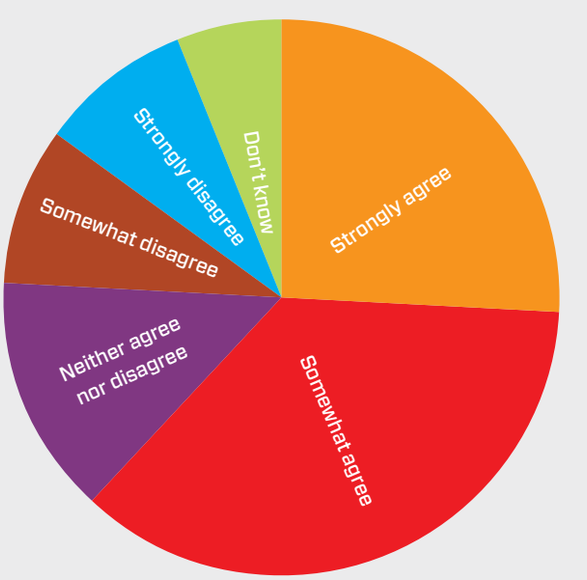
The survey also revealed widespread dissatisfaction with opportunities for progression. Three out of five respondents disagreed with the statement that "talented people rise to the top of the civil service" and only around one in three (37%) agreed that "there are opportunities to progress which makes a future career in the civil service an exciting prospect".

The results were even more stark when officials were asked about their feelings on pay – with just a fifth agreeing that "the pay bands in my department appropriately reflect differences in responsibilities and workload". Two-thirds disagreed. »

THE CIVIL SERVICE IN GENERAL MANAGES POOR PERFORMANCE WELL



MANAGERS ARE INCENTIVISED TO MOVE POOR PERFORMERS TO ANOTHER ROLE OR DEPARTMENT, RATHER THAN MANAGE THEM



Responding to the free-text question, one official wrote: "The civil service creates some of its own problems by not grasping the fact that the only way to get a pay rise these days is to bounce around jobs." Another said: "Strong performers are stuck with little promotion opportunities and no rewards, pay or otherwise, for excelling."

Another said: "I have never seen talented colleagues so demoralised."

Carrots and sticks

Another respondent summed up the findings on performance and talent management by saying there are "not enough sticks for poor performers and not enough carrots for high performers". Re:State has said it is "vital that this action is bold and taken swiftly" to address this absence of carrots and sticks.

Asked what this should look like, Hill said the civil service "should reconsider its strategy on the workforce reductions it's making right now". Voluntary exit schemes are under way in several departments in an effort to reduce the civil service headcount – but Hill said such schemes are "the worst way to encourage a high-performing workforce".

"The people with the most incentive to take a payout and leave are people who are confident they can get another job easily, ie your best people," he said. "Repeat poor performers know that anywhere else they'd be sacked, so they're not going to leave. Over time, that's a recipe for disaster. Rounds of performance-based decisions to manage people out the organisation, and compulsory redundancy schemes, would be a much better place to start." ■

MORE VIEWS FROM THE ALTERNATIVE PEOPLE SURVEY...

...on performance management

"Line management is the single biggest issue, managers are too scared or unwilling to have difficult conversations, meaning poor performance is always overlooked."

"Poor performance is not dealt with promptly and often nothing is dealt with. Many people in my department have been promoted way beyond their capability."

"People seem unsackable, with people on year-long performance plans still not considered 'signed off' or just left to it and given a slap on the wrist when they are randomly spot checked [on their decisions]."

...on HR

"The lack of consistent HR support is hampering effectively managing people out of the door. The process is so long-winded and the taxpayer is left paying the bill for people who should be dismissed promptly yet know how to play the game."

"HR are risk averse and unhelpful, [giving] inconsistent advice, too removed from the reality of leading and managing people at scale... Provide HR processes which enable us to have consistency and fairness but which are simple and straightforward to use to support people, including applying penalties/dismissal for poor performance."

...on opportunities for progression

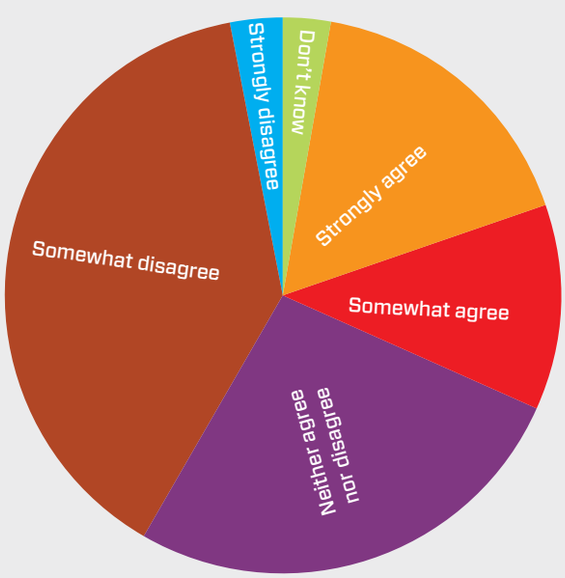
"Unrecognised good performance [is] becoming increasingly problematic for keeping up motivation and keeping talent."

"I genuinely believe the civil service can still be a great place to work, however the lack of pay progression and opportunities for advancement mean that people end up department-hopping to get on."

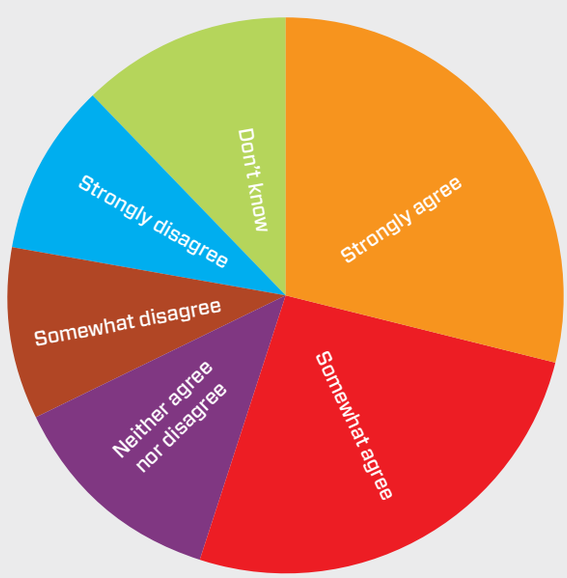
"There are limited rewards for exceptional delivery and minimal consequences for poor performance at all levels of seniority."

"Promotion prospects are currently dire, and pay is not great."

THE PAY BANDS IN MY DEPARTMENT APPROPRIATELY REFLECT DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSIBILITIES AND WORKLOAD



I AM AWARE OF DISCIPLINARY ISSUES WHERE ACTION SHOULD HAVE BEEN TAKEN BUT HAS NOT



DAVE PENMAN STAND AND DELIVER

WHAT BEGAN AS A WEEK FOCUSED ON DELIVERY ENDED WITH A MAJOR CABINET RESHUFFLE. BUT MINISTERS NEED TIME TO GET UP TO SPEED AND FOR EVERY NEW APPOINTMENT, THERE IS A PRICE TO PAY ON DELIVERY

Delivery, Delivery, Delivery *(caps author's own)*. This seems to be the focus right now in government, and understandably so. A year, a budget and a spending review in, it's time to stop planning and start delivering. I'm guessing this is the essence of where we are politically. Coming into government after 14 years in opposition would normally give you a bit of time to blame the now-opposition for the mess we're in and frame a narrative of taking time to fix things.

I remember my old man, whose politics were not of the mainstream, saying in 1997 that Blair should be honest and say at the beginning that it's going to take a decade to deliver New Labour's agenda. I heard similar in the runup to last year's election from a number of those who've been in government. Except, of course, it's not that simple. Events happen, voters' frustrations cannot be put on hold and there's an upstart party who are making the political weather.

"If it's difficult making a decision relating to one department, it becomes even more difficult with cross-cutting 'missions'"

Initially, the big news on delivery came a bit out of the blue in the form of a new cabinet role being created: chief secretary to the prime minister. It's a made-up job, so essentially, it can be whatever the prime minister wants it to be. Enforcer, cajoler, conciliator, communicator, all of the above. Creating a new cabinet role that was solely focused on delivery seemed, at least, a bit different.

Political authority and focus is always an issue in delivery. Ask any civil servant working closely with ministers and they'll tell you their war stories of politicians refusing to make a crucial decision, even when that decision is critical to their own political objectives and career. The demands on ministers are enormous – even when it seems to be in their own self interest. A hundred different considerations can impact on what, to those focused on their own narrow issue, would seem to be a simple matter of A or B.

Also, some of them might just be less good at making decisions.

If it's difficult making a decision relating to one particular department clearly in that particular minister's gift, it becomes even more difficult with cross-cutting "missions". Would the new chief secretary to the prime minister take over responsibility for missions and now be casting the PM's vote on plan A or B, to help the government stay focused on delivery?

However, Darren Jones was without departmental responsibilities for all of five days, so we'll never know if having the time to focus solely on delivery – or what it takes to "get sh*t done", as the management consultants love to say – would have been the solution.

Governing is tough and complex. Getting sh*t done is easier to say than to do. This government has not had the usual advantages of previous ones – time and someone to blame. Reform UK can come up with their simple, uncosted solutions to complex policy issues without the need to explain or any attachment to the responsibility for the mess in the first place. They can jump from one issue to another, offering solutions to whatever that day's events have thrown up – from both left and right of the political spectrum.

Delivering is one challenge. Communicating is another. Communicating complex solutions to complex problems is a challenge and it would be fair to say that, up until now, this government has been less good at that. That's all the more difficult in a populist world of politics where the normal rules of evidence and fact don't apply.

Governments need to be re-elected, they need to pay attention to and respond to the polls and political weather, but they also need to get sh*t done. The week started with a focus on delivery and ended with a significant reshuffle, including many in the junior ministerial roles where the hard work of government is delivered. We even lost our own two ministers for the civil service. It is, of course, a matter for the prime minister – but for every change of minister, forced or unforced, there will be a price to pay on delivery.

Ministers need time to get up to speed, understand all those nuances and policy briefs and be ready to make those all-important decisions. They may also have their own ideas or want options considered that their predecessors didn't. A government in a hurry just pressed the pause button across a range of significant policy areas. If delivery is the key, stability is one of the best ways to deliver it. ■

Made up Chief secretary to the PM (and now also CDL) Darren Jones

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union

HAVE I GOT HUGHES FOR YOU

Janet Hughes moved to the Cabinet Office in June to become director general for civil service reform and efficiency after five years as director of Defra's Future Farming and Countryside Programme. She tells **Beckie Smith** about her priorities for the coming months, how she is bringing the spirit of One Team Gov to her new role, and why being a leader isn't about becoming great at everything

Did you always see yourself working for the civil service? If not, what did you want to do?
No – like a lot of us, I didn't set out to become a civil servant, but I'm very glad I found my way here. I worked as a typist and secretary all the way through my degree and got experience in a range of different organisations. That's what introduced me to the public sector as somewhere I could contribute to something that might make a difference to people. A helpful careers adviser suggested I have a look at the Houses of Parliament after I graduated, so I gave it a go and managed to land a job as an assistant clerk in the House of Commons; it was a brilliant experience and the start of 28 years in and around the public sector since then.

What drew you to this role?
I love the civil service and public sector; I'm proud to be part of it and I want us all to succeed and make a difference together. At our best, we can be brilliant, but I know from my own experience that it's often much harder than it should be to work together, make things better and get important and complex things done. So the chance to lead the work to make it easier to do that is really exciting to me.

Has anything surprised you so far?
I wouldn't say surprised, but I'm massively impressed by the huge amount of work that's already being done across departments to transform the way things work, our policies and services. When you're working in a department, you don't have a detailed or comprehensive view of what others are doing across government and it can be hard to find people who have already solved the problem you're facing. One of the things I'd like to do is make it easier to share these sorts of things much more actively across our teams and organisations so we can more rapidly learn, scale and apply great ideas together.

What are the biggest priorities you're going to be working on in the coming months?
It's all about enabling better and faster delivery across the whole system so we can collectively deliver the Plan for Change as part of a productive and agile state. That requires a combination of working to improve the way the overall system works, and working with departments to unblock and progress the important things that need to happen now.

There's a lot of work happening on both of those fronts, but my two biggest areas of focus right now are: 1. helping to improve the operating environment and the way we make decisions across departments, Cabinet Office, HM Treasury, DSIT and the functions to make it easier for people to work together, try out different ideas, go faster and make things better; and 2. making it easier for leaders and teams to connect and learn from each other across their different organisations, including through our programme of test, learn and grow pilots.

"We're all at our best and can do incredible things when we're prepared and able to be bold"

You took a "test-and-learn" approach in your last role at Defra. What were the benefits of that? And how has that shaped your approach to this role?
When you're trying to bring about significant change in any complex system, it's impossible to know up front exactly what's going to work, how the various risks are going to pan out or how the context is going to change. Test-and-learn approaches are about recognising these uncertainties and building in ways to learn and iterate along the way, rather than setting too many things in stone too early.

It can be hard to do this well and I've certainly learned a lot from my experiences in previous roles and organisations. There are two particular lessons I'd highlight. Firstly, I think we have to learn to focus much more on the outcome and how things are actually working for the users, rather than becoming too fixated on a specific solution. Secondly, I think a lot of the challenges in policy and delivery can be traced back to implicit, untested assumptions that turn out not to be quite right, so I think it's really important to be explicit about what assumptions are being made and build in ways of testing and evolving them as we go.

In 2023, you told *CSW* your Defra role required "the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference". Does that apply to this role too?
Yes, definitely – I think anyone trying to lead and enable any kind of complex change would do well to recite the serenity prayer now and again! You can't possibly achieve everything you'd like everywhere, for everyone, all at once; you have to choose how and where to focus your effort. So it's all about trying to be deliberate, careful and ideally wise about those choices so you can have the best chance of making progress.

What else do you need to do your job well?
I think the biggest thing I need is to listen, engage and show curiosity and respect for all the organisations and people we're working with, so we can work through all the changes we need to make positively and productively together. That's the only way we're going to be able to understand what really needs to change and the best way to go about it.

You spent four years at GDS, including as programme director of the flagship Verify identity assurance scheme. What do you think are the best changes »

to government to have come out of that digital transformation work?
A lot of the work we all did then laid the foundations for what followed, and I'm really proud and grateful to have been part of it. It was an exciting, energising time to work on digital in government, I absolutely loved the people and teams I got to work with and I learned a huge amount very quickly.

I think the biggest shift was the work across GDS and departments to build digital teams, capabilities and ways of working after a long period where outsourcing had become the norm and digital skills had become very scarce. It's amazing how far the profession has come and how much has been achieved so far in what feels like a very short period since then, and I can't wait to see how things develop with the new digital centre, One Login and the wider digital and AI roadmap.

In 2016, while at GDS, writing for *CSW*, you asked what it would mean if boldness were an explicit civil service value. Is that still an important value for you?
Absolutely, we're all at our best and can do incredible things when we're prepared and able to be bold. I'm still on the same mission to help everyone feel safe, free and encouraged to be bold in facing up to the real issues and challenges in front of them.

Back then, you wrote: "I know I am at my best when I can feel the weird whoosh of terror and relief that comes from real, heartfelt boldness." Can you tell us about a time you've felt that as a civil servant?
Yes, I felt it when I was applying for this role, as I think many people do when they're applying for a big job they really want!

You've also been involved in One Team Gov – a movement that aimed to improve government by getting departments and professions to work more effectively together. How will you be bringing the spirit of One Team Gov to this role?
Fully – a lot of the work we're doing is about making it much easier to bring different disciplines, teams and organisations together to solve problems and make things better.

We're also going to be embodying the collaborative, open and positive spirit of One Team Gov in the work we do. We're looking to work openly and collaboratively with civil service and public sector colleagues and experts and practitioners from wider communities so we can design, test and deliver changes together and make sure we tackle the real root issues and make things work better for everyone.

"You can't possibly achieve everything you'd like everywhere, for everyone, all at once; you have to choose where to focus your effort"

What's the best piece of advice you've been given as a civil servant?
Being a leader isn't about becoming great at everything, it's about working out what your unique style and strengths are and how to bring that to the table in a useful way as part of a wider team.

What's been the hardest day of your civil service career?
I'm generally pretty positive and enjoy the challenge of finding the opportunities in any given situation, however difficult, but it's always hard when things don't work out how you'd hoped in whatever way.

I think part of leadership is working out how you're going to look after your resilience and your team's resilience when things are hard. For me, that's about keeping focused on making things better day by day in whatever way you can, and doing the best you can to learn and improve all the time.

...and the most *Yes, Minister*/*Thick of It* moment of your career?
I couldn't possibly comment.

What achievement are you proudest of?
I don't think there's a single thing I'd pick out. I'm really proud to be part of the public sector, working with people whose jobs are all about making things better for the public in one way or another. I love feeling part of a shared community and endeavour in that way.

You describe yourself as an "allotmenteer, reader, over-enthusiast". What are you currently growing, reading, and over-enthusing about?
I've recently moved house from London to Staffordshire so I'm starting all over again with the growing, having left the allotment I looked after and loved in London for 18 years. So far I've got some tomatoes and cucumbers on the go in my greenhouse and I've got the all-important compost bins up and running. I'm very excited about that and looking forward to sowing seeds for the autumn and winter. Aside from that, I'm currently spending a lot of time over-enthusing about the sky here in Staffordshire, which I love and which is about ten times bigger than the sky in south London, I reckon (or at least it feels that way!)

I've just read *Abundance* by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, which is a fascinating read if you're interested in how to make the public sector work better. I'm currently reading *Compost* by Charles Dowding: one of my favourite writers on veg growing, writing about one of my favourite subjects, so I can't really go wrong with that! ■

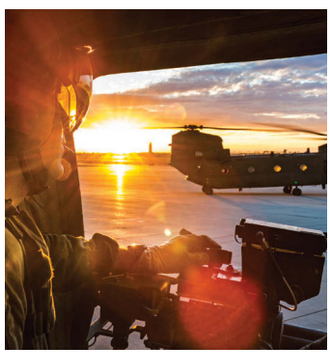
Small but mighty: Priming SMEs for success in defence

With government launching measures to provide small and medium enterprises with better access to the defence supply chain, Lindsey Hartley, director at AtkinsRéalis, discusses how primes can create more opportunities for SMEs to play their part in national security

Lindsey Hartley
Director
AtkinsRéalis

When SA Group first considered pursuing larger defence contracts in 2018, they were hesitant. Like many SMEs, the Wiltshire-based business management and technical consultancy was concerned about resource-intensive bidding processes, lengthy qualification requirements, and widely acknowledged procurement issues. But today, the employee-owned company has tripled in size, with support to the Aurora Engineering Partnership (delivered by QinetiQ, AtkinsRéalis, and BMT) peaking, one year, at over 50% of their annual turnover.

The transformation wasn't just about size. Aurora enabled SA Group to diversify beyond its project management roots into software development, cyber security, and technical architecture. As William Machin, head of sales and marketing at SA Group, noted, "It became a critical entry point, allowing us to see programmes we didn't know existed or how to access." SA Group's experience illustrates what's possible when defence procurement genuinely adapts to the commercial realities of SMEs, creating jobs and driving growth.



The scale of the challenge

Almost 70% of defence spending goes to regions outside London and the South East, yet only 4% of this spend goes to SMEs. To tackle this, the government will increase the Ministry of Defence (MoD) spending with SMEs by £2.5bn by May 2028, a 50% increase against 2023/24, as well as establish an SME support centre. It's a win-win: the MoD gets the more specialist expertise, innovation and agility SMEs can offer, while small companies will grow their expertise and business.

But inherently complex and resource-intense bidding processes, lengthy vetting, security clearances and classification requirements can create uncertainty for start-ups investors, and prescriptive contracts can stifle SME innovation and iteration.The government's initiatives and procurement reform are welcome, but defence must truly evolve its relationship with SMEs, and defence primes are crucial to success.

Primary support

Defence primes, working on major programmes and delivery partnerships, are key conduits for SMEs. Aurora is one such partnership: the MoD benefits from the combined heft of QinetiQ, AtkinsRéalis, and BMT, and a 230-strong provider network including small, niche businesses.

Aurora has evolved over the years to accommodate specialists, but we know there is always more to do. Feedback indicated that we were not always providing sufficiently clear project requirements or timely responses to proposals. We have since revised our procedures and processes, improved transparency in evaluation criteria, reset expectations on how we interact and improved access to customer insights. SA Group notes competitions are overall better run, especially with transparency on scoring and feedback – elements that help SMEs learn and improve their bids.

We have driven innovative defence solutions by facilitating SME idea presentations to key MoD decision-makers, and we continue to develop the provider network to meet current and future defence skills and capabilities, including funding support for apprenticeships and military veterans transitioning into civilian jobs.

Building relationships

Building these positive relationships with SMEs is key for defence organisations seeking to work closely with smaller businesses. A relationship-led rather than transactional approach helps build understanding of each organisation's capabilities and strengths.

This is particularly important in engaging with non-traditional defence SMEs. With the rapid advances of technology, innovative solutions are becoming increasingly important in the battlespace. By working with SMEs to assess and develop novel ideas, defence organisations can help the MoD understand where these technologies can be applied.

The government's new SME initiatives are welcome and likely to have a positive effect across defence. Defence primes need to invest now, or risk being left behind. Identifying what sovereign capabilities will be needed and what long-term investments will be made will allow smaller organisations the certainty to plan.

As SA Group's experience demonstrates, when frameworks are designed with genuine transparency and support, SMEs don't just participate – they thrive and contribute capabilities that defence genuinely needs. The question isn't whether SMEs can contribute to defence; it's whether defence is ready to embrace the changes needed to make that contribution meaningful.

Scan to read the full article including SA Group's advice on improving SME participation in defence

AtkinsRéalis

BREAKING THE MOULD

The Department for Education's **Tony Foot** is the senior responsible owner for the breaking down barriers to opportunity mission. He tells *CSW* what it felt like to take on the role, how the mission is working, and what he does to switch off

How did you end up in this role?
I have been strategy director general since March 2023, leading on strategy and delivery across DfE. Susan Acland-Hood, our permanent secretary, asked me to take on the senior responsible owner role for the opportunity mission as the new government came in. We wanted to make sure the mission was central to strategy and delivery from the outset.

This is a new way of working and a really ambitious mission. What was the split between "exciting" and "daunting" when you first took on the role?
Almost all of my career has been about working to improve children and young people's life chances. So it was very exciting, and a real privilege, to be asked to lead a mission that is all about breaking the link between children and young people's backgrounds and their future success. But I'll be honest that there was an element of being daunted too, and it felt – and continues to feel – like a big responsibility.

How have your background and previous roles informed the way you're approaching this job?
I am definitely drawing on time I spent leading the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit team on education and skills in the late 2000s. The missions have to turn vision and ambition into real-world delivery – into actual change in the system and in children and young people's lives – and I learned a lot about that with PMDU. I've also held a range of senior finance, funding and delivery roles in the Treasury, DfE and its agencies. That experience is informing how I am trying to work with partners in a challenging fiscal environment in which it is all the more important to ensure that every pound counts.

What do you see as the key elements of a mission-based approach? And how do you see those elements helping to tackle this longstanding challenge in a new way?
Mission working is about ambition, delivery, innovation and partnership. I think it starts with an ambitious goal and a strong, evidence-led understanding of the problem we are trying to solve. It means a relentless focus on delivery – translating vision into real change in children and young people's lives – and doing things differently by testing and learning as we go. And it must involve enabling and mobilising a broad coalition of partners. Not easy, but powerful!

What were your first priorities when you started the job? And now?
There were two key things at the outset. First, we spent time confirming the vision for the mission with the secretary of state and her advisers – both what the government wanted to achieve and how. The other early priority was really understanding the evidence base – bringing together the picture on what drives outcomes for children and young people across education, health, housing, child poverty and many other areas. That evidence base was then really important in confirming the first

priority for the mission: our Plan for Change goal to get a record level of children to a good level of development by age five. All the evidence points to the critical importance of those early years and addressing gaps before they become entrenched. As we move into year two, our focus is very much on delivery – for example, rolling out the family hubs programme, improving pupil attendance and reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training. We are also looking to take the next steps on mission ways of working, including expanding early work on test and learn.

Who are the key organisations in your mission plan?
Breaking down barriers to opportunity is a challenge for the whole of society, and many key organisations are involved. Within government, we are working particularly closely with:

- the Department for Work and Pensions on the Child Poverty Taskforce and on young people not in education or training
- the Department of Health and Social Care on ensuring all children get the best start in life and that we have clear plans for supporting pupils with mental health needs and SEND
- the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on keeping children safe and making sure local skills needs are being met
- the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on helping children and young people thrive
- HM Treasury on priorities for the skills system and childcare expansion – which feed into both the opportunity and growth missions.

Beyond government, the mission depends on a wide range of providers – from early years settings to local authorities to schools and further education colleges. We have also had invaluable input from third sector organisations and business – and will be looking to build these links further in year two.

How are you monitoring progress?
The prime minister holds regular stocktakes on the mission, which are forensic and really help with maximising progress. We also use the Opportunity Mission Board – chaired by the secretary of state – and have built the mission into core DfE governance. Underpinning all of it is the mission dashboard – bringing together performance data in one place as a single version of the truth. It's so important that everyone, from officials to ministers, is working from the same data when we are reviewing progress.

How are you working with devolved and local governments?
Although the majority of direct delivery is in England, we're working closely with the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to share best practice. At a local and regional level, local authority leaders and mayors are part of the governance for the mission. We are also working closely with individual areas in a test-and-learn way – for example, Sheffield is a particular centre for the opportunity mission. Its policy campus has been selected to lead work on the opportunity mission as part of the community mission challenge pilot programme *(see p.26)*, and we continue to collaborate with the authority and other local partners on Best Start family hubs *(see p.36)*.

"We need to start with the ambition for the missions and work backwards, rather than starting in departmental silos"

And how are you working with the centre and the Mission Delivery Unit?
The Mission Delivery Unit has been a great partner from the start. They lead the PM stocktake process and they've also helped us shape the mission plan, assess performance and work through some of the tougher delivery challenges. It's collaborative and high trust – but with the space to disagree and to properly challenge. That really matters as we try to do hard things together.

Do you meet with/get support from other mission leads?
Yes, absolutely. We meet regularly – both on substance and for emotional support! It's been especially useful as we've hit the one-year mark to look back together at what's worked and where the biggest challenges have been. We've had staff secondments between mission teams, and I am keen to do more of this. We also recently had a great joint session with colleagues from the energy mission to share best practice, swap ideas and learn from each other's approaches. That kind of cross-mission working really helps us stay aligned and build on what's working across the government.

What are some of the best examples of cross-government working you've seen while working on this mission?
There are lots. We've got further to go, but there is no doubt that mission working is increasingly galvanising good cross-government collaboration. I would particularly highlight the Child Poverty Taskforce – jointly chaired by the secretaries of state for education and for work and pensions. That has been supported by a joint unit of officials helping to align across government on increasing incomes, reducing essential costs, and building financial resilience and better local support. Joint work with MHCLG on children's social care has also been very effective, and the skills agenda is a strong partnership across a wide range of departments.

What do you think are the biggest barriers to cross-government working?
It takes time and energy but is so important for delivery. We need to start with the ambition for the missions and work backwards, rather than starting in departmental silos.

How do you unwind outside of work? Have you taken any unexpected opportunities recently?
I am enjoying running at the moment – building up to a (slow...) half marathon in October. My unexpected opportunity would have to be taking my 13-year-old daughter and a friend to Thorpe Park recently. Turns out it's quite easy to switch off from work when you are riding a terrifying rollercoaster. ■

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

"I started my civil service career in the Treasury in 2000 and did a range of jobs before joining the education spending team in 2005. Pretty quickly, I knew I had found my mission – and have worked on education strategy, funding and delivery ever since. My first deputy director role was leading the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit team on education and skills – which was a great combination of working with front-line professionals, consultants and civil servants. I then led the Treasury education and culture spending team for the 2010 and 2013 Spending Reviews, covering DfE, DCMS and the Olympics. Joining DfE, I moved into an operational role working with academies in the south of England, before then leading on school funding, data and analysis. I finished a qualification as a CIMA accountant in 2020 and was DfE's strategic finance director for two and a half years before moving into my current role in 2023."

Younger generations inclined to consider a career in defence, research from Serco finds

Rising global tensions, unpredictability and the collapse of the post Second World War consensus — has the international chessboard truly been 'tipped over'[1]?

Doug Umbers
Managing Director, Defence
Serco UK

With increased commitments to defence spending, the national conversation around defence has reached a fever pitch. This has called for a 'whole-of-society approach' by former NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, who led the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), alongside Dr Fiona Hill CMG and General Sir Richard Barron[2].

More than half (average 53%) of Gen Z (ages 16-28) and Millennials (ages 29-44) say that the current geopolitical climate is making them more inclined to consider a career in national defence. These figures are even higher (62%) among young adults aged between 25 and 34.

That said, the SDR highlights the Ministry of Defence's "longstanding recruitment and retention crisis"[3]. Whilst concerns around workforce shortages in the public sector are nothing new, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer commits the largest increase to defence spending since the end of the Cold War.

Maintaining an army that is fit-for-purpose has been an increasing challenge in the backdrop of declining public engagement. Data from 2022 suggests half of Britons under 40 say there are no circumstances in which they would be willing to go to war[4]. Yet, our recent data suggests a shift in attitudes as people, especially younger generations, are becoming more inclined to consider a career in national defence because of rising geopolitical tensions, not in spite of it.

This was one of the key findings from an independent, population-representative survey commissioned by Serco to uncover the public perception of the defence enterprise – which encompasses the network of organisations, industries and activities involved in a nation's defence and security – and outlook on careers in the sector, amidst an ongoing shift in the UK workforce.

Geopolitical turmoil: a surprising recruitment tactic?

Our research found that 53% of Gen Z (ages 16-28) and Millennials (ages 29-44) say that the current geopolitical climate is making them more inclined to consider a career in national defence. These figures are even higher (62%) among young adults aged between 25 and 34.

By contrast, only a third (33%) of Gen X (ages 45-60), and 27% of Baby Boomers (ages 61-79) say they feel the same way. Whilst Baby Boomers are less likely to be seeking new career opportunities, this figure remains noteworthy.

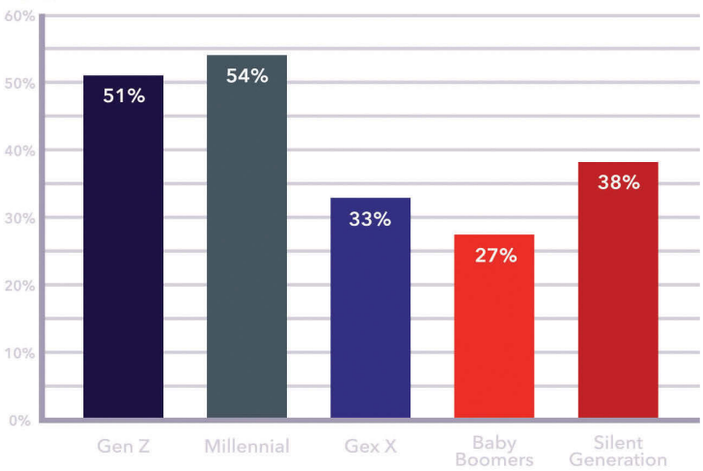
53%

of Gen Z & Millennials are more inclined to consider a career in national defence due to geopolitical turmoil

→ **Rises to 62%**
of 25-34 year olds

Inclination to pursue a career in defence

By generation



Behind the numbers

When asked to elaborate on their answers, respondents spoke of patriotism, duty, contribution and fulfilment: "[geopolitical tensions] foster a stronger sense of duty and a desire to protect one's country."

It's clear there broadly exists a strong appetite for the military when considered alongside its geopolitical context. But this doesn't go far enough to explain why there's such a crisis in recruitment, and what the military can do to better engage with potential recruits.

The pursuit of purpose and principles

Whilst Gen Z values purpose-led work more than any other age group, the defence enterprise need to better position its alignment to what Gen Z wants if we're to plug our recruitment gap.

At 78%, closely followed by Millennials at 75%, Gen Z respondents said that an organisations' purpose and mission statement is important when searching for a job role.

Similarly high numbers (76%) of both groups would leave a job if they found the organisation no longer reflected their principles and beliefs. When Baby Boomers (ages 61-79) were asked the same question, only 50% felt the same.

When respondents were asked directly whether 'The defence enterprise offers opportunities for meaningful and purpose-driven work', two-thirds of all age groups (66%) agreed with the statement. Among Gen Z and Millennials, both agree the defence enterprise offers meaningful and purpose-driven work. These starkly contrast to just 38% of Baby Boomers.

Over three quarters (77%)

of Gen Z say an employer's purpose and mission are important when choosing a job

→ **77%** say they have left or would leave a role that no longer reflected their principles and beliefs

Nevertheless, only 36% of students believe that the defence enterprise offers valuable opportunities for them. Given this, it's evident that there's an opportunity for the defence enterprise to offer meaningful work. But the results are a clear signal that effective early engagement has a long way to go.

The bottom line

Our research findings are extremely encouraging. Young people are ready to experience what the defence enterprise can offer them, driven by the geopolitical climate and what matters to them in a job – a sense of purpose. It's now up to the defence enterprise to capitalise on this opportunity and fundamentally address our retention and recruitment crisis.

To find out more about 'The Human Factor' research, including how you could get involved in shaping the next phase, scan the QR code

serco

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Community spirit

Ministers have announced plans for a new grassroots approach to policymaking for the opportunity mission – focused on South Yorkshire but aiming to influence the whole nation. **Jim Dunton** finds out more

Getting civil service policy professionals "away from their desks" and onto the front line of service delivery has been a recurring theme in government announcements in recent months.

The "Community Mission Challenge", launched in June by then-Cabinet Office minister Georgia Gould, is just one example. The challenge involves three government campuses – Darlington, Leeds and Sheffield – each being allocated one of prime minister Keir Starmer's "missions" to work on, in conjunction with nearby local authorities and academics.

Darlington will be focused on the growth mission, Leeds on health and Sheffield on "breaking down barriers to opportunity". Each of the topics matches the thematic strengths of the respective campus.

The plan is for civil servants based in each area to work with frontline local authority staff and academics to "solve some of the key issues facing their local areas". According to the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for coordinating cross-government work on the missions agenda, the locally developed solutions will be assessed for potential expansion or adaptation – possibly across the whole nation.

Gould said the new approach represents the start of a process to "rewire the state from the ground up" through a civil service that is "connected to the British people, backing their ideas and working alongside communities". To chime with the focus on the opportunity mission in this issue, *CSW* decided to look at work on the Community Mission Challenge in South Yorkshire.

At the time of writing – some two months after the Community Mission Challenge announcement – scoping work is still under way for the precise challenges that the project will explore. However, a concerted effort to get to grips with the forces at play in one specific area with high levels of NEETs – young people not in education, employment or training – is part of the plan.

Whatever the specifics turn out to be, improving outcomes for young people will be fundamental. The government's own milestones for delivery of the opportunity mission list a significant hike in the proportion of five-year-olds who reach a "good level of development" in their Early Years Foundation Stage assessment as a measure of progress.

The target is for 75% of five-year-olds to get to the "good" level – based on development across areas like language; literacy; maths; and personal, social and emotional development – by 2028. According to 10 Downing Street, the current proportion is 67.7%, and hitting the target could see an extra 45,000 children a year meet the development goals.

Longer-term ambitions include reducing school absence rates, improving attainment at the end of secondary education, and making sure there is a route to meaningful work for all young people.

The Sheffield Policy Campus, which was launched two years ago, has more than 1,000 policy professionals spread across three sites in the city – and a strong Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions presence, making it well placed for the opportunity mission.

Sheffield and the wider South Yorkshire sub-region's selection as a "testbed" – another recent Cabinet Office buzzword – for the opportunity mission received an overwhelmingly positive reaction from the four local authorities in the area. They will work in partnership with South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority on the Community Mission Challenge.

Sheffield City Council chief executive Kate Josephs is a former Cabinet Office director general, who was responsible for the Covid Taskforce before her move to local government at the beginning of 2021. She views making the sub-region the "home" of the opportunity mission as a "very strength-based and natural decision".

"It's really hard from Whitehall to connect policy intent to the messy reality of how delivery happens on the ground" *Kate Josephs, Sheffield City Council*

"The policy campus has been in place for a couple of years now and – perhaps a little different to things like the Darlington Economic Campus – some of what it is


2 St Paul's Place, DfE's base in Sheffield

doing is bringing together an existing very strong civil service presence in the city," she says. "Not just 5,000 or 6,000 civil servants but a very large concentration of policy civil servants. Certainly the largest outside of Whitehall.

"In terms of the team leaders and policy teams, it's lots and lots of colleagues in DWP and DfE working on skills and early years and SEND, and on employment programmes. We've got the MoJ, we've got the Home Office. There's sort of a natural alignment of the kind of people and the work they're doing for the opportunity mission."

Josephs says that while the "reflex action" has traditionally been for policy to be made in Whitehall, the current environment feels like a new era of "co-production" in which local areas have agency in policymaking.

"In all the years I've worked in central government, the biggest problem the policy profession has had – as a former member of the policy profession – is total disconnection of delivery and implementation," she says. "It's not a personal criticism of civil servants. I've spent years in the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. It's really hard from Whitehall to connect policy intent to the messy reality of how delivery and implementation happens on the ground."

She adds: "The potential for me from the policy campus work and the mission is that policymakers and civil servants gather a way of really understanding how policy can be implemented in a place they understand and know because they live there.

"It also means that we are the front line of a lot of the consequences of, and the delivery of, lots of policy... we are able to feed in and have some agency and influence in policy, not in a lobbying way but as part of a – and this is my dream, I guess – part of a system that works together."

There is some precedent for the Community Mission Challenge in other projects undertaken in the sub-region and further afield.

One is Sheffield's work so far on the government's £100m Test, Learn and Grow Programme, which is focused on improving uptake at Best Start family hubs. The hubs are a "one-stop shop" for families with children aged up to 19, or up to 25 in the case of young people and adults with special educational needs and disabilities. The centres build on the legacy of the Sure Start programme introduced in the late 1990s, funding for which was slashed by the 2010 coalition government. Labour has set a target of creating up to 1,000 Best Start family hubs across the country by 2028 *(see our feature on Best Start, p.36)*.

The second wave of Test, Learn and Grow pilots will see neighbouring Barnsley Council work with civil servants to explore the wider application of artificial intelligence in service delivery. Barnsley's previous Pathways to Work Commission, which looked into ways to reduce economic inactivity and get more people into work, now forms the basis of the South Yorkshire-wide Pathways to Work "trailblazer", which is sponsored by DWP.

Barnsley Council's chief executive is Sarah Norman, a former director of children's and adult social services at Wolverhampton City Council. Before that, she was a regional director at the Commission for Social Care Inspection, which was a non-departmental public body of the Department of Health.

She says that while there have been »

previous examples of central and local government collaborating on policy, based on good practice in frontline services, "they were more the exception than the rule".

She cites Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards – introduced under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 – as an example of rushed policy introduced without proper discussion, testing and exploration with local government. On the other side of the coin, Norman says New Labour's rollout of Sure Start children's centres for the families of under-fives in disadvantaged areas is one of the rarer positive examples.

"The way that Sure Start was developed did involve real engagement with councils on the ground," she says. "There was real involvement in working out what worked in practice and testing things and it was a very effective scheme."

For its Test, Learn and Grow Programme pilot, Barnsley is keen to explore how AI capability can be developed to provide more predictive tools for safeguarding and prevention, and wants to work with the Sheffield Policy Campus, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the AI Incubator on the project.

"Central government are trying to ask the same questions in relation to AI," she says. "We all need to understand what the real capability of AI might be for us, beyond routine business-admin tasks."

Norman says one of the benefits of the Test, Learn and Grow pilots and the Community Mission Challenge work will be allowing councils to draw in professional expertise from central government that it would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

"In terms of AI, it's having a more rapid, deeper understanding of the potential that AI has got in a practical sense than I think we'd be able to do on our own," she says. "And identifying where local government needs central government to help us to realise its full potential."


Kate Josephs, Sheffield City Council CEO

She points to the use of big-data sources that could help to identify children in the local authority area who are most at risk, or ways that those with the lowest healthy life expectancy can be targeted for life-changing intervention work.

"Part of that involves data sharing; big data that the local authority doesn't hold," she says. "That's part of what we're trying to do. That obviously then has big ramifications for the opportunity mission in terms of how we solve some of the bigger problems that we've got in South Yorkshire."

Norman says efforts to overcome at least some of the barriers to data sharing across the public sector will be important. She points to Pathways to Work as a "great example" of areas where fundamental data-sharing issues need to be resolved.

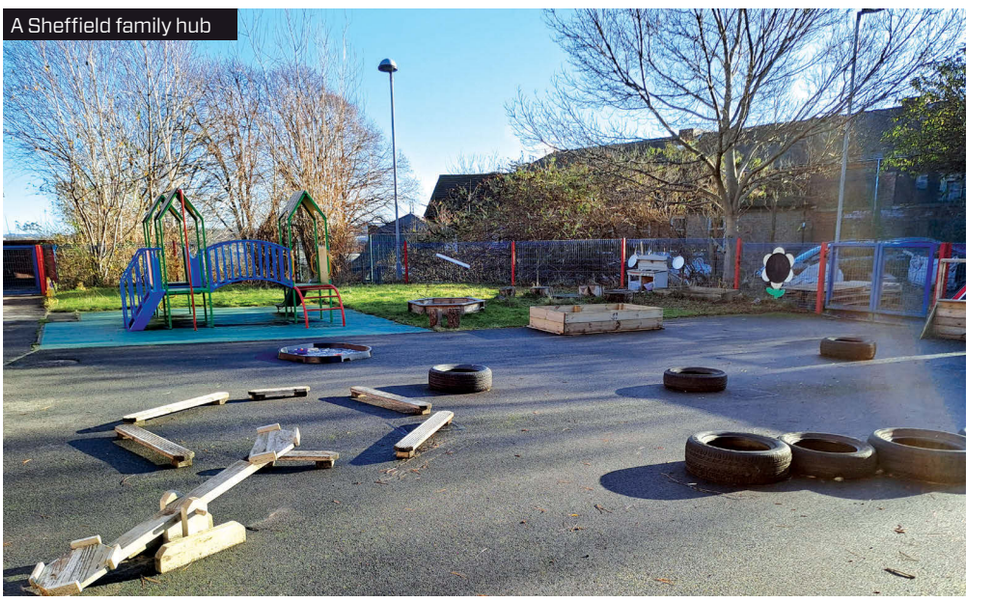
"DWP knows who's economically inactive. We're trying to reach them with a service," she says. "Can we have that information? So far, no. If we can identify how we solve some of those data-sharing problems, it could have wider ramifications for all sorts of uses."

She says her hope is for a better understanding between local and central government on the requirements for success in overcoming mutually agreed challenges.

Josephs says the biggest impact for Sheffield's Test, Learn and Grow work on family hubs was having access to central government behavioural scientists, data analysts and policy designers. They became part of a multidisciplinary team that worked hand-in-glove with frontline staff to test and learn together.

"The benefit to the policy colleagues of being alongside the people actually delivering services to real people was enormous, because they start to see live how this is impacting," she says. "For our teams, it's very challenging work. But they were totally energised by having people coming in and saying: 'How about doing this?' and showing them how in a matter of weeks, they could actually see and demonstrate and measure impact in a way that sometimes, when you're working in really complex communities, it's not always easy to see."

One of the goals of Sheffield's Test, Learn and Grow pilot for family hubs was to test routes to connect more families into services. Josephs says the team was able to show a "pretty impactful" increase in parents attending drop-in play workshops who signed up for the more intensive Making it REAL programme, aimed at supporting children's literacy


A Sheffield family hub

and development. The pilot used play-session demonstrations and testimonials delivered by WhatsApp voice notes in a range of languages to increase understanding of Making it REAL.

Josephs says the multidisciplinary team for that project was around a dozen people. But she is clear that the staffing requirements and timescales will vary depending on the particular challenge.

"This is about what's the right thing for the problem at hand," she says. "That might be, in some cases, a sort of short, sharp six-week project working together. In other cases, it might be an ongoing commitment to partnership on a long-term problem.

"I think the point is that there is the permission and the energy now to explore new ways of working between central, regional and local government."

The NEETs project being scoped is expected to focus on a defined area that has a particular challenge with young people not in education, employment or training. "It's about bringing together all of the partners in the place – colleagues at colleges, businesses, schools – to try to really understand what is driving this, what can we do differently, and to create the case for policy change," Josephs says.

The Institute for Government is highly supportive of the spirit behind the Test, Learn and Grow and Community Mission Challenge initiatives, although it is sceptical about aspects of the government's commitment to delivery of the five missions.

One of the think tank's queries following the Community Mission Challenge announcement was whether there would be extra resources for the policy campuses taking part. The Cabinet Office told *CSW* that the work will be paid for out of the £100m allocated for the Test, Learn and Grow Programme, although the two projects are theoretically separate.

Heloise Dunlop, a researcher at the IfG, says a range of pilots to test principles as part of the policymaking process is a "really positive" move that is key to identifying the need for specific local flexibilities. She agrees with Barnsley Council's Norman that New Labour's Sure Start programme is an example of great practice.

"There seems to be very little about missions coming from central Whitehall departments"
Heloise Dunlop, IfG

"Central government only had the instruction that you have this budget and you have these five core services that you've got to provide," she says of Sure Start. "Local authorities took the lead and engaged with parents and put them on boards to work out how it could work effectively. It did scale up really successfully."

However, Dunlop says there is a "kind of disconnect" between the language of ministers in relation to missions and the reality of day-to-day government.

"As we saw in the Spending Review, there seems to be very little about missions coming from central Whitehall departments," she says. "And missions appear to be being treated more like targets rather than this 'new way of working'."

Dunlop says there is at least the potential for initiatives from the Community Mission Challenge and Test, Learn and Grow Programme to end up being one-stop experiments – rather than the basis for developing new principles on which better policy is made.

Josephs is adamant that the point of the initiatives is to create ways of working that are different, and says there is already a strong culture of sharing good practice between South Yorkshire's councils and beyond.

That said, she acknowledges that the relationship between central, regional and local government has a tendency to be "transactional", with all players lobbying for their own agendas – as might be expected of competing political organisations. She views the current opportunities as a way to break out of that pattern of behaviour.

"When you think about the most complex challenges that we're seeking to address in our society, my honest view is that we will only get to the right answers if we are working more like a team in public service than separate entities that transact with one another," she says. "My hope is that through the policy campus you create that sense of a team.

"We're working to get ahead on specific challenges and we're rooting that in our place and we're ensuring that places and local government have a voice, but we're doing it in a way that's also curious and respectful about how we can help central government make policy better." ■


Sheffield Town Hall

Only young once

Team sport Tony Blair launching a joined-up youth inclusion scheme in 2002

With the government putting its focus on delivery and aiming to break the link between a young person's start in life and the opportunities they have, **Suzannah Brecknell** speaks to former permanent secretary **Moira Wallace** about the work she led to tackle entrenched social problems under the last Labour government – and the lessons for driving change today

This autumn will see the publication of a raft of strategies and roadmaps, as the government shifts into what prime minister Keir Starmer has characterised as "phase two" of its administration, "where we focus on delivery, delivery, delivery and start to show what a difference a Labour government really makes".

Among these publications will be documents that provide more clarity about the opportunity mission and how it will link into other policy spheres, including youth policy. A schools white paper is the key document expected to give more information on how government aims to deliver on its commitment to "give every child – from early years to leaving school – the best start in life", while a child poverty strategy will support the mission's wider aim to break the link between young people's background and their future success. Finally, a youth strategy, including perspectives from 20,000 young people who took part in a nationwide listening exercise, will set out how government intends to better coordinate youth services and policy at a local, regional and national level to support this effort.

While this breadth of work is to be applauded, it also throws up questions around how these interventions might be channelled into a coherent programme of support. Among those urging the government to be ambitious in joining up its policies for young people is former civil servant Moira Wallace, a veteran of the last Labour government's wide-ranging programme of social policy innovation.

The Social Exclusion Unit

In 1997, Wallace, with more than a decade of experience in the Treasury and No.10 behind her, was appointed head of the newly established Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). Set up by the prime minister, the unit was launched with 12 full-time and four part-time staff. The numbers would grow over the next few years, but it remained a small team, based in the Cabinet Office.

"Social exclusion" was not a household term, but the government described it as "a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown".

Approaching policy in a joined-up and cross-departmental way was the key instruction for Wallace and her team. The prime minister and the No.10 Policy Unit had identified the fact that government often struggled to prevent and respond to problems because it did not recognise the complexity of their causes.

The SEU was freed from other day-to-day responsibilities and given tightly focused issues to look at. In its first three years, it tackled, in turn: school absence and exclusion; rough sleeping; teenage pregnancy; young people not in education, employment or training (NEET); as well as beginning a long-term project to develop a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. Its remit was to get to grips with the issues behind individual social problems, identify good and bad practice, then propose solutions and implementation plans.

The unit was set up to be multi-disciplinary, staffed by secondees from different government departments alongside local government officials and experts from charities and frontline organisations.

Wallace remembers this as a hugely productive mix, and one that helped the unit form wide connections across government and outside. Ministers encouraged the SEU to work in an outward-looking way – what Wallace called the "go and look" method – and the unit's reports were built on what they learned from visits up and down the country, as well as discussions with academic experts, frontline practitioners and, crucially, people with lived experience of the issues being investigated.

The cross-government wiring

For the first few years of its existence, the SEU reported directly to the prime minister – a decision that aimed to emphasise the importance of the initiative. But collaboration with other departments was vital to ensure that its reports were accepted and implemented: they had to be agreed by cabinet, just like any policy announcement.

Wallace says that departments were "much more supportive than the sceptics predicted". It helped that for each topic, the unit was linked with "champion ministers" in key departments: Hilary Armstrong was ministerial champion for rough sleeping and neighbourhood renewal, for example, while Tessa Jowell was ministerial champion for the work on teenage pregnancy. These connections helped align the efforts of the unit with the big departments.

Senior officials were, in the main, also very supportive. Wallace says she thinks most recognised that "if they were a willing partner to others when asked for help, they were more likely to get cooperation when the roles were reversed".

"It felt different from any job I'd done before, and changed the way I did every job afterwards"

Nonetheless, Wallace recalls that the unit's findings were sometimes challenging for departments: "The unit was given the time and space to look at how policy and services were working for the most vulnerable. Sadly, sometimes the only honest answer was: 'Really badly'. It was our job to push for policies that would actually work."

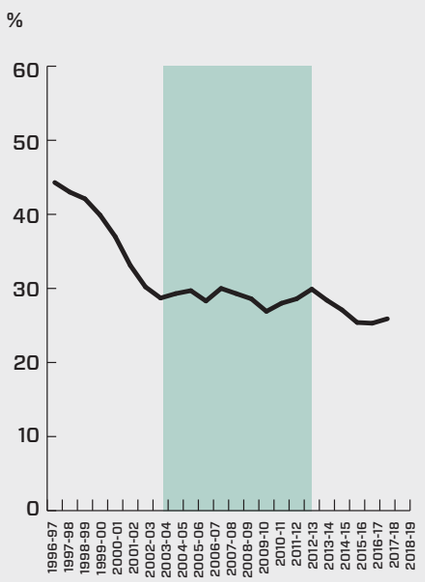
Designing for delivery

SEU reports were always a mix of strong, evidence-based analysis and detailed implementation plans. Some people felt the implementation plans were too detailed – or "fussy" – Wallace recalls, but as she looks back now, she says this level of detail was key to implementation. "Many of the issues we were asked to look into had arisen because no one was in charge of making the system work properly, or because people with complex problems were being ignored or shunted from one agency to »

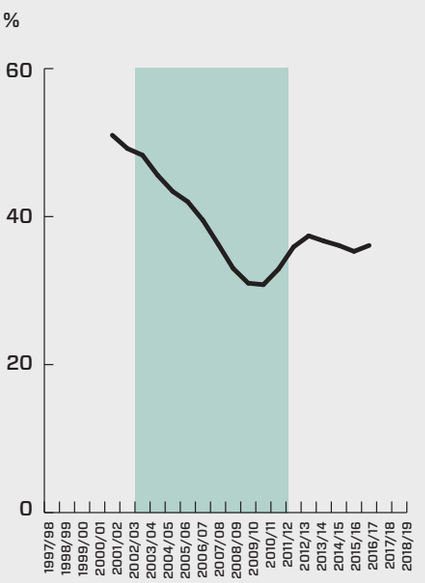
LONG-TERM TRENDS IN ADOLESCENT OUTCOMES, 1997 TO 2019

Source: Analysis of Official Statistics, taken from Moira Wallace's 2023 paper *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage: Policy and outcomes for young people under Labour, the Coalition and the Conservatives*

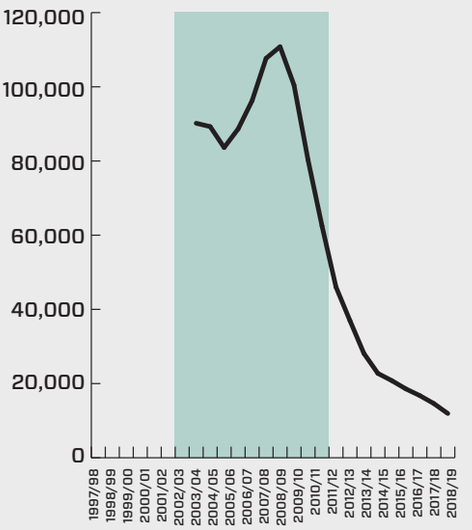
Absolute poverty: 11-18 (below 60% of 2010/11 median in constant prices, AHC)



Proportion not attaining Level 2 by age 16

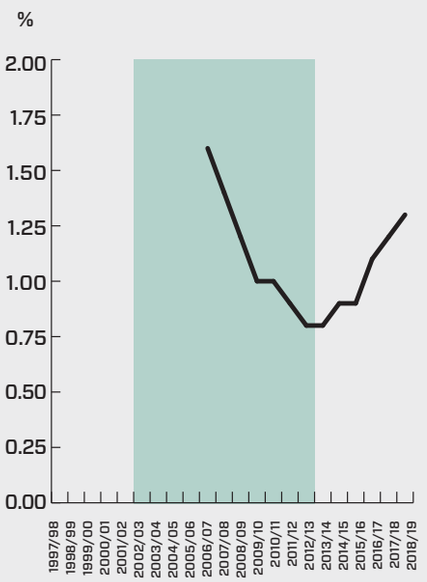


10-17-year-olds entering the criminal justice system (England & Wales)

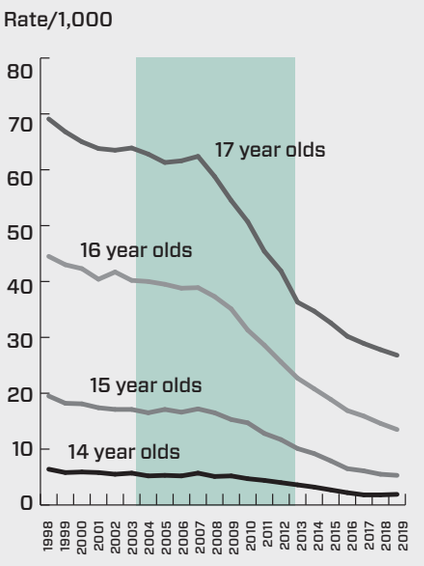


Permanent exclusion rate in state-funded secondary schools

Secondary pupils missing over 50% of schooling



Teenage conceptions by age of mother



another. If you didn't redesign the system to work better, this would keep happening."

After analysing the cost and causes of a problem, the SEU would identify what change was needed to fix it, often at a very local level, and then trace this back to national government to develop policies and systems to effect change.

This led to the creation of local, regional and national mechanisms that aimed to deliver policy outcomes. "Very often," Wallace recalls, "the issues that we were asked to look at were explicable in terms of: difficult problems meet inadequate services." Her team's work sought to create the conditions in which services would be better able to prevent and address those problems.

Implementation of the unit's reports was always passed back to the main line departments. In some cases, the work would be taken on by an existing team; in others, the unit recommended that a new dedicated team should be created to take policy forward. For example, the Teenage Pregnancy Unit was created following the SEU's 1999 report; and the Rough Sleepers

Unit – Louise Casey's first role in government – was also established in 1999 to follow through the SEU's recommendations on street homelessness.

Champion change
Tony Blair and John Prescott meet frontline workers delivering the SEU's reports in 2001

Joining up Whitehall

There was always the risk, of course, that departments would quietly shelve the unit's reports when they got the chance. But close work with the Treasury had ensured that the reports' targets were embedded in spending reviews and the Public Service Agreement framework: delivering on social exclusion metrics thus became part of the accountability framework for government departments. And the Treasury itself was a major contributor to tackling social exclusion, through Gordon Brown's championing of action to reduce child poverty.

Looking back, Wallace recalls how the Social Exclusion Unit's work blended with that of many other departments to form a concerted approach to preventing child and youth disadvantage. Cross-cutting prevention programmes such as Sure Start, Connexions and the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy were trailblazers for joined-up local delivery, for example. Youth offending teams and drug action teams were also making a real impact on some of the key drivers of youth offending. A cross-cutting review of "youth at risk" in the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review even made extra funding conditional on more coordination in Whitehall. Machinery of government changes brought more youth policy issues into DfE, and the 2003 Every Child Matters green paper established key outcomes that should guide government policy.

"Working together closely makes even more sense when money is tight"

Even though Wallace left the social exclusion unit in 2002, her interest in social policy and joining up continued. After a director general role leading work on joining up the criminal justice departments, she became DG of crime and policing at the Home Office. Then, in 2008, she was appointed as a permanent secretary and given the task of bringing together staff from the business department and Defra to create the first Department of Energy and Climate Change.

After stepping down as perm sec in 2012, Wallace spent five years as provost of Oriel College, Oxford. There, too, she put her interest in social policy to good use, chairing the university's admissions committee and spearheading the effort to attract applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Returning to social policy

But out of all the jobs she's ever done, it's clear that Wallace regards running the SEU as the most special. "It felt completely different from any job I'd done before, and what I learned there changed the way I did every job afterwards," she says.

So it's no surprise that she has now returned to the field of social policy as a researcher and writer.

In 2018, Wallace joined the London School of Economics' Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion as a visiting professor of practice. She set herself the task of looking at what happened to the generation of young people in whom the last Labour government invested so much attention and resource, as well as looking at how policy and outcomes had changed under the coalition and Conservative governments. She relished the opportunity to see how different initiatives had developed and performed, and as a self-confessed "data person", dug deep into the official statistics.

The results she uncovered were noteworthy. In a 2023 paper, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage*, Wallace found some striking improvements in youth outcomes had occurred. Across a range of youth issues that were both "very expensive and very damaging for the individuals", with a concerted effort by central and local government, there had been significant improvements *(see fig.1)*. Many different youth outcomes improved in parallel over the same time period, starting early in the last Labour government, and continuing into the early years of the coalition. For example, across a range of secondary school attainment indicators, the decade up to 2012 saw improvement and narrowing disadvantage gaps. Wallace's report describes how secondary school absence levels fell by 40%, permanent exclusion rates halved, and an extra fifth of the teenage population remained in full-time education after 16.

These improvements went much wider than education. Data on adolescent drinking in England over this period shows a significant fall in alcohol use from around 2003 to 2014. The proportion of 15-year-olds who had ever taken drugs halved between 2003 and 2014. And as is well known, between 1998 and 2019, the teenage conception rate for under-18s fell by 66%, with a sharp acceleration in the rate of reduction after 2007.

The improvements were seen not just in national averages but also reductions in inequalities – pupils eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs narrowed the attainment gap with other pupils; while Black Caribbean pupils, previously over-represented in both school exclusions and among those not achieving Level 2 by age 16, saw some of the biggest improvements. White pupils were the group most likely to have consumed alcohol in the last week in 2003, but this group saw the biggest reduction by 2014. »

Making his mark
Gordon Brown at the launch of an anti-knife crime campaign

Between 2012 and 2014, however, the picture began to change. Many of the indicators began to stall and in some cases, reverse. And some inequalities began to widen again.

The reasons for the stalling of progress are complicated to unpick. Wallace thinks it likely that austerity played a part, but thinks some of these subjects suffered from a lack of attention as well as a lack of money. "The resources and attention given to youth disadvantage increased very sharply under the Labour government," she says. "Then they decreased again very sharply after 2010. Labour's approach was characterised by national initiatives intended to deliver specified outcome targets. After 2010, national government set no targets and left local areas and institutions to decide their priorities and manage the consequences."

"You'll be much more likely to design a good target if you are looking at a range of indicators of how your policy is going"

School absence

Wallace explored one aspect of this broad story in more detail in an Institute for Government report on school absence earlier this year. The paper details the policy and implementation work that saw school absence fall for more than a decade from 2000-01.

The report draws out several key lessons from that work. Government should ensure it fully understands the costs associated with and the root causes of the problem it is tackling. It should ensure that the most vulnerable children and young people are thought about in the design of universal policies and services. That would mean putting absence at the heart of school policy and supporting the front line by sharing good practice.

As absence is a joined-up problem, Wallace says government should focus on ensuring connections and collaboration with key partners across the public sector and beyond, and then on developing strong local partnerships to drive change. To "jump-start" this change, the report suggests funding whole-system pilots in local areas.

Finally, the paper advocates an outcomes-focused strategy with clear targets, supported by close monitoring of progress so that officials "watch the data like a hawk, evolve and adapt".

Lessons for today

Wallace reiterates the importance of targets for the government's wider ambitions and its mission-based approach. She thinks missions will fail without clear targets. Some of the problems the government is facing today show "what happens when the focus on outcomes drifts away": progress can stagnate or deteriorate because no one has a target to sustain it.

Wallace is aware, of course, of the controversy that can accompany targets in government, and acknowledges the problems that can be caused by badly designed objectives or too many trivial targets.

She adds that one way to ensure targets are clear and well-designed is to adopt a more holistic approach to data about how public services are performing, and look behind the average to probe variations between areas and groups. "I don't think government makes remotely enough use of the data it's got," she says. "You'll be much more likely to design a good target, and spot if it's being gamed, if you are looking at a range of indicators of how your policy is going. And, of course, understanding the data is key to delivery, whether or not you have targets."

Wallace's IfG paper also sets out other reflections for mission-based government. She thinks the government needs to "remember that its move back to an outcome-based approach to public services is an enormous change" and ministers should "ensure that the system is developing and rewarding the delivery skills they require".

And the government should remember the importance of strategy. "Delivery can never thrive without great strategy behind it," Wallace says, adding that "coherence is a core principle in effective strategy design. For ministers, this means that delivery of any government priority is much more likely if other government policies point in the same direction. Conflicting policies, on the other hand, are a recipe for failure."

But she writes that this sort of coherence should not be assumed as automatic, even if the need for it is evident. As she puts it: "The lesson of history is that departments tend not to self-organise." It took a few years before the last Labour government developed coherent structures and objectives for their childhood and youth policies, but rebuilding those mechanisms should be addressed "without delay" since it would improve delivery and reduce cost.

Alongside this call for urgent action, Wallace acknowledges that the public spending environment is a key difference between the turn of the century and now. But she doesn't think that weakens the case for joining up: "Working closely together makes even more sense when money is tight."

Her overarching message is one of encouragement. The trajectory of change in the early 2000s, she says, shows that with a clear focus and coordinated effort, "government can do remarkable things". ■

***For more, read Wallace's IfG paper,* Reducing school absence: Innovation lessons from the last Labour government**

From CNI projects to CNI platforms: the foundations of a truly digital state

The UK government is moving beyond one-off digital projects, investing in shared platforms, interoperable data, and cross-department collaboration to create lasting foundations for efficient, citizen-focused public services

Over the past decade, the UK government's digital transformation has been driven by ambitious projects that modernised services, improved citizen experiences, and created efficiencies. However, these efforts often lose momentum when projects end, leaving valuable lessons and technologies siloed within departments.

The next step is not just delivering one-off nationally important digital projects but creating sustainable digital foundations. This requires investment in platforms, reusable data infrastructures, and shared service components that can be integrated, scaled, and reused across government.

From isolated solutions to shared foundations

Projects typically focus on immediate outcomes – such as launching a service or meeting efficiency targets – but this can encourage short-term, bespoke solutions. A platform approach, by contrast, emphasises reusability and cross-departmental benefits. It asks: How do we promote conscious learning from other similar approaches and always exploring cross departmental re-use as part of benefits delivery? Can this identity tool serve multiple services? Could payments infrastructure support both HMRC and DVLA? Can datasets be standardised for wider insights?

This shift is already visible. **GOV.UK Pay** allows dozens of services across government to process payments without building separate systems. **GOV.UK Notify** provides a shared way to send messages. Both cut costs, speed up delivery, and give citizens a consistent experience.

Long-term value through reusability

Reusable platforms provide value far beyond their first deployment. Once a robust system like GOV.UK Pay exists, every new service benefits from reduced development effort, improved resilience, and consistent standards.

The rollout of **GOV.UK One Login** exemplifies this scaled approach. Instead of multiple log-in systems, a single identity platform will serve all departments. Citizens will access services through one secure account, reducing duplication and simplifying their experience.

Data as infrastructure

Platforms also extend to data. Today, vital information is fragmented across departments, hindering a complete view of citizen interactions or complex policy challenges.

Treating data as infrastructure means establishing common standards, interoperability, and secure mechanisms for responsible sharing. The **Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO)** is leading efforts in this area. Shared data infrastructures will enable better collaboration and evidence-based policymaking, while safeguarding privacy and security.

Collaboration as the critical enabler

A platform approach demands collaboration across boundaries. Departments must co-invest, co-design, and co-govern shared infrastructure to scale and serve across departments. This requires new partnerships, funding models, and a cultural shift – from ownership of bespoke systems to stewardship of shared platforms.

The Cabinet Office plays a central role by setting vision, creating frameworks, and ensuring interoperability. Yet success also depends on leadership across all levels: digital teams, policymakers, and operational managers working with industry to resist siloed solutions and promote reusability.

Building the foundations of a digital state

The transition from projects to platforms is more than technical – it is a mindset shift. Digital services must be seen as part of a larger, interconnected system designed to endure and adapt over decades.

The challenge ahead is clear: how will departments such as DWP, HMRC, Home Office, and NHS harness collective expertise to collaborate on upcoming changes like the Fraud and Error Bill?

The opportunity is to ensure today's progress becomes the common platform for tomorrow's government – a foundation for a truly digital state.

How Mastek supports the platform strategy

Mastek helps government departments move from one-off projects to sustainable platforms. Its teams modernise legacy systems, migrate services to the cloud, and design interconnected, reusable components aligned with open standards.

Mastek has implemented strategies to engineer critical shared caseworking services on scalable cloud foundations – ensuring solutions are reusable, extendable, and future-ready. By combining technical expertise with service design, Mastek helps departments transform projects into lasting digital foundations.

Ritujit Sikand
Senior Vice-President for Public Sector at Mastek

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SURE THING

As the government launches its *Best Start in Life* strategy, **Susan Allott** asks the experts if comparisons to Sure Start are valid, and whether Best Start might equal the success of its predecessor

Is Sure Start coming back? It seems it would be welcome, if it were. Since Labour returned to power last year, with early years support a key promise in its manifesto, there have been calls for the relaunch of New Labour's flagship early years programme, which saw "one-stop-shop" children's centres set up in every region of England, bringing services for under-five-year-olds under one roof. By 2010 there were 3,290 children's centres, with 83% of four-year-olds having local access to Sure Start provision.

Pensions minister Torsten Bell has referred to subsequent closures of Sure Start centres as "criminal", while former prime minister Gordon Brown has called for the return of the programme as part of a "rescue plan" for children born under austerity. Hilary Armstrong, Labour peer and chair of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, has said the commission's polling found the Sure Start brand is recognised by 62% of the public, and that 72% would welcome its return.

Appeals for the programme to be reinstated have coincided with the children who were born in the Sure Start era reaching adulthood. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has been able to demonstrate, in a study published last year, that the programme had far-reaching benefits for those children, their families and wider society.

The IFS evaluation found a causal relationship between children who had access to a Sure Start centre and a 0.9 percentage point increase in the probability of obtaining five A*-C grades at GCSE. Children with access to Sure Start were 0.7 percentage points less likely to require a Special Educational Needs support plan at age 16, and were at least 10% less likely to be hospitalised for external causes during their early and primary school years. There was also suggestive evidence that Sure Start reduced the likelihood of criminal convictions and custodial sentences.

And these societal benefits appear to have been cost negative in the long run: the IFS estimates that for every £1 of up-front spending, Sure Start generated £2.05 in benefits.

No wonder the launch this summer of a new early years strategy, *Giving every child the best start in life* – to be jointly delivered by the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care – was met with excitement. In July, Polly Toynbee wrote in *The Guardian* that education secretary Bridget Phillipson was "finally bringing back Sure Start to England – the most successful achievement of the last Labour government – now rebranded as Best Start family hubs".

The comparison is also there in the strategy itself. It pledges to "take the best of Sure Start" when developing Best Start family hubs, which are to be established in every local authority in England, using the "one-stop-shop" model. The family hubs, "like Sure Start, will be designed with local communities", the strategy says.

Taking the best from Sure Start would seem a logical decision, given the IFS findings. As Estelle Morris, education secretary under New Labour from 2001 to 2002, put it: "Why would anyone want to waste time and resources constantly reinventing the wheel when there is good, strong evidence about what works?"

"The lion's share of spending in the early years system is directed at growth, not the opportunity mission" *Nehal Davison, IfG*

But is the comparison a valid one? And if Best Start is essentially a rebranded Sure Start, can we dare to hope that Best Start could deliver similar outcomes to its predecessor?

Sarah Cattan led on the evaluation of Sure Start for the IFS and is also director of the Fairer Start mission at the innovation agency Nesta, which aims to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. She is hesitant to draw too strong a comparison between the two programmes. She doubts it would even be possible to bring back Sure Start in its original form, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, she says: "We know about the impacts that Sure Start had on children and families from the IFS evaluation and the government-commissioned evaluations that were conducted while the programme was in place. But we're still far from knowing exactly what the centres were doing and for whom." Although Sure Start staff did keep data on who attended centres and which services they used, this data was not collated or retained. Sure Start is therefore "a little bit of a black box in the sense of knowing exactly why it was so effective".

Secondly, she points out: "Families live differently now in 2025 than they did in the early 2000s. Mothers are more likely to work than they were back then, and that also means children are spending more time in childcare or early education from a younger age." We also need to take into account the huge changes in the way we interact with technology, Cattan says, and consider the best way of reaching out to families and ensuring that they make use of services.

A third significant difference between the Sure Start era and today is that "we have 25 more years of scientific research and evidence", Cattan says. There is much more evidence now about how to manage children's emotions and behaviours, or how to promote language development through play, for example. "We've got to take into account what we've learned about what programmes are effective. Evidence-based programmes weren't necessarily a central feature of Sure Start."

This knowledge, coupled with progress in the collection of data on outcomes for families, should allow the Best Start service both to "target services to families better, but also to be able to monitor and more continuously evaluate what the programme is doing, better than we were able to 25 years ago", Cattan says.

There is potential, then, for Best Start to offer a more tailored and evidence-based »

service, benefiting from the lessons learned from Sure Start and from advances in technology. Could Best Start prove even more effective than its predecessor?

Nehal Davison, programme director for policymaking at the Institute for Government, thinks it's important to manage expectations. She describes the ambition of Best Start as "similar-ish" to that of Sure Start. But she notes that Sure Start was "much tighter in scope", focusing very much on children's first five years. Best Start, meanwhile, will provide services for young people up to age 19 – up to 25 for those with SEN – an offer that was introduced under the Sunak government and is to be retained. Alongside this, Best Start promises to improve maternity care, strengthen health visiting services, increase access to vaccinations and reduce tooth decay in children.

"Best Start is more ambitious in terms of the expanded age range, supporting children as they grow and transition to adulthood," Davison says. "But [Best Start] family hubs are just not backed by the same level of investment that made Sure Start possible and incredibly successful.

"Best Start really does aim to do something much broader, but on a much leaner budget. And prior to 2010," she adds, "budgets were generous, but also ringfenced."

This point is reinforced by Christine Farquharson, associate director at the IFS, in the institute's response to the *Best Start in Life* strategy: "Spending on integrated early years services today will be less than a third as high as peak spending on Sure Start. And family hubs are meant to serve children up to age 19, not just age four."

Cattan shares this concern about money: "I do worry that this is going to be a big impediment to realising the benefits of this kind of approach," she says. "We're talking about a much smaller funding envelope from central government. We know that local authorities are spending some of their own budgets on early years services, but that also means funding is a lot more vulnerable than when it was ringfenced."

Clearly Best Start is launching into a far less favourable fiscal situation to that of the Sure Start era. As Cattan points out, "the welfare state was just expanding alongside Sure Start, and I don't think we're going to see that today. So that is another difference that I think is going to be quite a challenge".

But the fiscal situation alone does not explain the smaller funding envelope for Best Start in comparison to Sure Start. As Davison points out, government has chosen to prioritise investment in free childcare provision for working parents – meaning that 80% of pre-school childcare in England will be state-funded from September 2025 – over its funding of early years programmes.

Funding for the latest extension of the free childcare rollout – according to IFS figures – could reach £5bn a year by 2028-29. This alone is ten times the £500m for Best Start. Davison sees this as a "major challenge" to its long-term success: "The lion's share of spending in the early years system is directed at growth, not the opportunity mission," she says. "And we know that childcare entitlements actually do little to alleviate inequalities. They could in fact worsen them." Private providers are likely to focus on the parents who can afford to pay more, she explains, "which may squeeze out spaces for disadvantaged children".

Flagship policy By 2010, there were 3,290 Sure Start centres across the country

Linked to this is another difference between current early years policy and that of the early 2000s. "When Sure Start started, it had a very strong focus on the 20% most deprived areas of England," Cattan says – new centres in more affluent areas opened later, with the original programme target doubling by 2004. "It was really a programme for poor areas and then it changed over time."

Best Start, by contrast, aims to have a family hub in each local authority from the outset. "I don't think we're seeing such a strong focus on disadvantage from Best Start," Cattan says. "The evidence from our evaluation would suggest that it's children in disadvantaged areas who tended to benefit the most." She is concerned that the ambition to have "at least one hub everywhere" could be a problem, unless there's sharp targeting within areas.

Like Davison, Cattan thinks the broader scope of Best Start could be problematic, partly because it lacks clarity of purpose. "This is a programme for age zero to 19, which also wants to be really focused on early years," Cattan says. "What do people do with this?"

She also fears that "in some cases, it is going to dilute the resources that would be available for zero to five. So I'd say, if you don't have a lot of money, let's just try to do one thing really, really well. And this means making very difficult choices."

Despite these concerns and reservations, there is a lot to celebrate.

"Honestly, I think the government deserves a lot of praise," Cattan says. "First, we have an early years strategy. It has not happened in ages, and the early years sector has been craving some intention-setting and direction from the centre, so I think the strategy is really starting to provide that."

"What I think is really ambitious and innovative," Davison says, "is the fact that the strategy, for the first time, recognises that government needs to actively steward the childcare market for outcomes and, crucially, steward it for quality and access, not just expansion."

Davison makes the point that rather than asking whether Best Start is comparable to Sure Start, we should see it as building on the groundwork that its predecessor put in place. "It does build on Sure Start," she says. "It does connect the dots between health, education and other services to provide a clearer offer to families. And there's also a much-needed recognition that so much happens before children start school."

"If you don't have a lot of money, let's just try to do one thing really, really well" *Sarah Cattan, IFS*

What's more, says Davison, this strategy is an example of government working holistically – something that the IfG frequently calls for. "I think DfE does deserve credit for not just focusing on the levers it controls, but also matching the commitments made in the 10-year health plan around improving maternity care and bolstering health visiting," she says.

Cattan, meanwhile, is happy that government has set itself "an ambitious target", which she hopes will motivate and organise those responsible for delivery. "Whether you like the 'good level of

development' target or not – and we can debate that – there is now a clear metric that everybody can rally around," she says.

Davison has views on the "good level of development" target that Cattan is referring to: the goal driving the opportunities mission, which aims for 75% of children to be school-ready when starting reception as they turn five. Local areas are asked to develop local Best Start plans to steer them towards achieving this goal by 2028. "The question is whether local authorities have that capability," Davison says, referring to the market-shaping role around childcare provision, where she believes more support is needed.

"I think local areas probably know how to deliver more transactional services like waste collections," she says. "But in more complex areas like childhood development, where you're trying to hit multiple goals around affordability as well as quality and tackling inequality – that does require much more sophisticated market-shaping skills."

Davison also questions how the data feeding into the target will be monitored. "While central government might think the good level of development measure is a reliable and objective marker of success, we know that it's only a subjective, teacher-assessed 'best guess' indicator of a child's development," she says. "And because there is no external moderation, there's a real risk that it could be gamed by schools. Headline targets could be met, while leaving underlying inequalities or issues untouched."

There is a lack of detail around implementation at this point, Cattan says, which presents a challenge: "One of the things that wasn't super-clear in the strategy is whether this is a three-year strategy, or a 10-year strategy. But there's definitely a sense that this is more long-term thinking than anything we've seen for years in this space," she says. "The devil will be in some of the details."

Can we hope, given the challenges but also the ambition and innovation in this strategy, that Best Start might achieve comparable outcomes to Sure Start?

"There is a lot of potential," says Cattan. "But a lot of whether or not the Best Start programme will have an impact is around how it's actually going to play out on the ground, and what difference it's going to make to what's currently happening. That's what will determine whether outcomes are shifting or not as a result."

The risk, Cattan says, lies in the school-readiness target asking for measurable progress by 2028, which is only three years away. "In an environment where there isn't a lot of money, where the time horizon is fairly short, and where the delivery questions are intrinsically difficult, there's also a risk that not a lot of big change actually occurs," she says.

She suggests that in such a challenging context, it's vital to keep very focused: "Decisive leadership will be essential to drive behaviours, like a North Star."

Davison also picks out the challenge around time: "The programme needs to survive a short parliamentary cycle, and it needs cross-party consensus," she says.

"I think it's worth remembering that Sure Start went through many iterations over the years as ministers changed," Davison continues. "We only know now, many years down the line, that it was effective. So this is just the start of re-building that more integrated family services approach.

"And the only way it's going to deliver better outcomes is if the foundations are sustained. The local relationships and infrastructure need to endure well beyond the next three years, well beyond the 2028 milestone. If they do, then I think it's got a chance of delivering some of the same outcomes that Sure Start did."

The biggest risk, for Davison, is that priorities change and momentum is lost. "We've just got to keep building," she says. ■

FIRST *things* FIRST

Parliament's Health and Social Care Committee is examining how government is delivering on its promise to set children up for success in their first 1,000 days of life. Committee chair **Paulette Hamilton** tells **Beckie Smith** what the MPs have learned so far

The first 1,000 days of a child's life are widely agreed to be pivotal in influencing their long-term health, success and well-being. But children in the UK now have some of the worst outcomes in Europe across a number of key metrics, acting Health and Social Care Committee chair Paulette Hamilton tells *CSW*, "with a fifth of children aged five classified as overweight or obese and childhood vaccination rates falling below the World Health Organization's recommended levels".

"And we had a 250% increase in the prevalence of life-limiting and life-threatening conditions in children and young people from 2001 until 2018 – and it was still getting worse," she adds.

These are some of the statistics the committee had in mind when it launched its inquiry into the subject in March.

The committee last tackled this theme in 2019, finding significant variation in the provision of support during children's first three years. The report from the 2019 inquiry called for a "long-term, cross-government strategy for the first 1,000 days of life, setting demanding goals to »

Kate Noble Photography. © House of Commons London

“The problem is you have the left thumb doing a job, and it struggles sometimes to join with the left finger doing a similar job”

reduce adverse childhood experiences, improve school readiness and reduce infant mortality and child poverty".

Fast forward to 2025 and there is now a cross-government mission focused on breaking down barriers to opportunity and a commitment to "set every child up for the best start in life". But have things improved for children since 2019?

Two big themes have emerged so far in the inquiry, The first 1,000 days: A renewed focus, echoing the findings of the previous one. The first, "and I know you're not going to be surprised," says Hamilton, is funding. The witnesses the committee saw before recess were in agreement "that the resources going into family hubs, daycare, any type of position for children were just very hit or miss, depending on where you were in the country", she says.

The second major theme is workforce constraints – with shortages in fields including health visiting, speech and language therapy, educational psychology and paediatrics, leading to long waits and preventing early referrals. The NHS long-term workforce plan, published in 2023, said local services were reporting more than 112,000 vacancies.

"Everybody was saying the same thing," Hamilton says of the witnesses so far. "We need to invest in training, we need to invest in recruiting people, we need to invest in retaining our staff... and career progression for early years professionals through dedicated workforce initiatives."

The committee has held three evidence sessions so far. Experts from healthcare, think tanks and local government have contributed, as well as Sir Michael Marmot, who led a 2010 review of health inequalities in England, and Dame Andrea Leadsom, a former health minister who led the Early Years Healthy Development Review that led to the family hubs programme.

All of this has given the committee "lots to draw from" in its upcoming evidence session with public health minister Ashley Dalton, scheduled for after the parliamentary summer recess, Hamilton says.

Field trip Committee members visit a family hub in Blackpool as part of their inquiry

There are two new elements for the committee to examine this time round. The first is Integrated Care Systems – partnerships between NHS bodies, local authorities and other partners that replaced clinical commissioning groups in England in 2022. The second is a programme, set up in 2021, to establish family hubs across the country to act as "one-stop shops" for parents seeking support in areas such as breastfeeding, housing issues and children's early development and language. The government now has a goal of setting up 1,000 of these hubs by the end of 2028 under its Best Start programme (*see p.36*).

"I like the mission approach. The only thing is, I'm not sure people understand it"

Hamilton is keen to press Dalton on her plans for family hubs, given "we're not 100% sure that they totally work in the format that they're in".

In particular, she says, she wants to explore witnesses' concerns about short-term funding for the hubs: "We knew that we needed to bring the health visitors, midwives, GP outreach, domestic abuse [services] and food banks all together. We knew this 'one-stop-shop' [model]... would be a benefit, but the problem that it suffered was it didn't have enough funding, they had capacity constraints, and also the budget seemed to come from everywhere."

The committee has also received written evidence from a broad range of organisations. One such submission from the United Nations children's aid agency UNICEF noted that investment in family hubs and children's centres has fallen by 77% since 2010. "Short-term, fragmented national funding undermines the ability of services to plan and deliver quality care," it said.

The NHS Confederation meanwhile identified funding – "including how ICSs want to see longer-term, better-aligned funding cycles across Whitehall departments to enable partnership working locally" – as one major barrier to Integrated Care Systems achieving their aim of "promoting and enhancing collaboration among sectors in local communities which are helping to support children in their first 1,000 days of life". Other barriers included capital issues, particularly in primary care infrastructure; digital capacity gaps; and 50% cuts to the running costs of ICSs announced earlier this year.

"Additionally, the increasing focus on delivery within the acute sector of the NHS means there is a risk more long-term ambitions, such as improving the first 1,000 days of life to drive improved health outcomes, are not something systems are able to prioritise," added the membership body, which represents organisations that commission and provide NHS services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

One statistic that particularly struck

Hamilton came from Dr Christine Farquharson, associate director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, who gave evidence in June. She told the committee that funding for Sure Start stood at a little over £2bn a year in today's prices at its peak in 2010. "Whereas for family hubs, even if you take the maximalist approach of counting everything that local authorities are doing, and potentially double-counting some spend, you are looking at something less than £600m a year," Farquharson said. "So there is a massive difference in the scale of resource going into these services right now."

Alongside funding and workforce woes, what other themes have emerged in the inquiry so far? Hamilton points to technology and new ways of working – "AI is massive, and I think we have got to start thinking in more innovative ways" – and working with partners. Government, both local and national, can seem "quite remote" and inaccessible to external organisations, she notes.

Then there is joined-up working within government. For obvious reasons, the committee is focusing its efforts on the NHS and the Department for Health and Social Care, but Hamilton says it will be looking for answers from the Department for Education too.

"Where government joins things up, the success rates are far higher. The problem is you have the left thumb doing a job, and it struggles sometimes to join with the left finger doing a similar job. But they just need to come together," she says.

Hamilton hopes the committee's inquiry will lead to a more joined-up approach to supporting families and that "the government will take on board, from the recommendations that we give, that a more joined-up approach will be far better for outcomes for children".

Setting children up for success during "the first 1,001 days of life" is one of four key areas of focus for the government's opportunity mission. The goal encompasses integrated maternity, baby and family support services and early years education and childcare. Does Hamilton believe the mission-led approach will be effective?

"That is a really good question, and I am not sure I can answer that," she says. "I do like the mission approach. The only thing is, I'm not sure people understand it. I'm not sure if it will join up this sector unless we really start to do some education so that people understand the mission."

As part of their research for the inquiry the MPs visited Blackpool this summer, where they spoke to professionals at a family hub about their goals, funding and how they work with different communities.

Hamilton says she was struck by the importance of midwives, who keep close contact with mothers throughout pregnancy, and health visitors, who continue home visits until the child is three or four years old. She compares it to services in her own constituency of Birmingham Erdington, a deprived and predominantly working-class area, where she says "you barely see a midwife because the shortages are so bad". And where many new parents are being asked to come into clinics, rather than having home visits, "so midwives and health visitors are not seeing the home environment, if anything's going wrong, if Mum is coping".

In Blackpool, Hamilton says, "I liked the fact that they really tracked the mothers and they were able to absolutely see what was going on in a family. Whereas I think that in areas like Birmingham, we seem to be losing that a little bit. You're lucky if you get health visitors coming to see you more than once."

The Blackpool hub also operates a drop-in service that Hamilton says she'd love to see in her constituency. "You could go as often or as little as you wanted... you could get advice and feel it was open to you, and the professionals were at hand to support if needed," she says.

"And the provision was well resourced. Mums didn't have to travel that far to get to the resource and it was accessible to all... you saw couples in there with their little babs and they were there playing, and if they had any difficult questions, they could ask."

This service could be especially valuable for people who are transient in the community, Hamilton says, as she has seen in her own constituency. "They're not tracked very much. And I felt as long as they were in Blackpool, they were being tracked, so someone was keeping an eye on them," she says.

"It's not just about the big technical things, because most authorities will tell you what they're doing, but it's how they keep an eye on people," she adds.

She thinks back to her own experience of being pregnant. "I'm a black woman, I was a single mum. [Healthcare workers] don't know what's going on in the household, they don't know how I'm coping with the pregnancy. I go to the hospital once, I feel no one is listening to any of my stories or what have you unless I hit crisis point. In Erdington, we haven't got a single hub. So at the end of the day, there was nowhere for me to go to ask questions as a first-time mum."

Even now as an MP, it can be difficult to know where to direct constituents who are in dire need of help. Hamilton explains how she used her contacts in the community recently to help a mother of four who contacted her office saying she had no way to feed her children – directing her to a food bank and sourcing secondhand school uniforms. But there was no central resource or hub to send her to for further support.

For Hamilton, this underscores the importance of the committee's inquiry and the work it is examining. "It is so important that we become our brother's keeper," she says.

"So we do need the finances, we need the support mechanisms. We need the services working together and we need the resource of proper, organised hubs. And I do believe it can work." ■

Question time Hamilton asks a question on behalf of the Health and Social Care Committee on the launch of the NHS 10-year plan in July

SKILL LIFE

Running time Increased flexibility will help – among others – production assistants in the creative industries

Skills England chair **Phil Smith** on how the new body is working with partners to support the growth and opportunity missions

We're living through exciting times for skills training in this country and it was really positive to see that responsibility for skills will now sit within the Department for Work and Pensions under a new secretary of state, Pat McFadden. This brings together employment support and skills development under one department.

It was also welcome news that Jacqui Smith will stay on as skills minister, working across DWP and the Department for Education – strengthening Skills England's ability to work across government.

Ensuring the system fills key skills gaps and supports many more people who need it most into rewarding careers is a top priority. The prime minister has stressed it will be vital to the success of the missions to support economic growth and break down barriers to opportunity. Skills England's driving ethos is "better skills for better jobs" and our vision is to build our nation's world-class skills, supporting the two missions.

We have made a good start.

The government is rebalancing the apprenticeships programme back towards young people beginning their careers. As a first step, Skills England developed foundation apprenticeships, which became available in August, for priority areas including construction, engineering and manufacturing, health and social care, and digital.

These are a great option for young people who might otherwise have struggled to gain access to apprenticeships, training them up with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for a given job, plus employability skills supporting transition from education to work. Backed by a £2,000 employer incentive, they will open up opportunities for tens of thousands of young people to earn while they learn.

Another barrier was an unnecessarily complex apprenticeship assessment system. In February, new principles were published to support more flexible delivery so assessment can happen at the right time, ensure apprentices are assessed on what matters most to employers, and remove duplication. Every apprenticeship must still meet the required off-the-job training hours, be subject to Ofsted inspection and include rigorous assessment. Skills England is engaging with employers and providers to rewrite existing assessment plans.

Employers' calls for more flexibility have been heard. The old 12-month minimum duration prevented some employers and learners from accessing apprenticeships, so it was reduced to eight months. Skills England has updated apprenticeships accordingly, following engagement with employers.

Many employers, including smaller businesses, complained the old apprenticeship levy was too restrictive because apprenticeships don't always suit their training needs. This is being addressed through a more flexible Growth and Skills Levy. Skills England is advising government and engaging with employers, training providers, unions and other partners to ensure the broader skills offer delivers value for money, supports business needs and helps kickstart growth.

Skills England works closely with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, which I'm a member of. We're supporting departments responsible for priority sectors on comprehensive skills packages: the first, for construction, was announced in March and the second, for defence, in September.

I'm part of the cross-government Labour Market Evidence Group, which supports the aim of rebalancing the labour market away from an over-reliance on international recruitment and towards domestic workers.

Having a national body working with local leaders will help meet local skills needs while ensuring alignment with national priorities. We will work closely with strategic authorities and employer representative bodies and I am looking forward to meeting with the metro mayors regularly. Collaboration with devolved governments will further help to spread best practice across the four nations.

Skills England's work is data driven. We have already published three major reports that analysed current and future skills needs and engagement by sector with apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

The most recent found jobs in areas such as digital, adult social care, construction and engineering will experience some of the biggest increases in demand. Over a quarter of a million people enter priority occupations from the skills system each year. We need to make sure they learn the right skills.

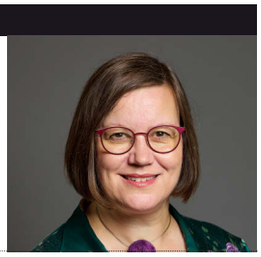
As chair of this fantastic new organisation, I've witnessed the transformative potential within our nation's workforce. Yet I've also seen how skills shortages and a fragmented training system are holding back both individual opportunity and businesses from investing in training, filling skills gaps and putting themselves in the best position to succeed. I'm proud of what we've achieved in a short space of time with refocusing the system and we're determined to make it simpler to understand and engage with.

We're building an open culture that will help to improve our engagement, build trust and make Skills England an inspirational place to work. Every foundation apprenticeship we create, every barrier we remove and every partnership we forge represents lives changed, economic growth and careers unlocked, and businesses empowered to succeed. ■

SELECT FEW

Select committees play a critical role in holding departments to account. Here, committee chairs tell us what they've been up to and what it takes to play their role well

TREASURY COMMITTEE



Chaired by Meg Hillier, Labour MP for Hackney South and Shoreditch

Current inquiries Spending Review 2025; National Wealth Fund; work of HM Treasury; AI in financial services; lifetime ISA; acceptance of cash

What makes a good select committee chair?
Having had the privilege of experiencing multiple select committees, including almost a decade chairing them, I'd like to think I've got a decent grip on how to lead an effective committee. A good chair recognises and draws on the strengths of their colleagues to shape its work. I see it as being a bit similar to conducting an orchestra. My members are incredibly effective at scrutinising complex policy. They include lawyers, journalists and even two former Treasury ministers. It's up to me to ensure we take full advantage.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
The real-time impact. My time on other committees was spent looking retrospectively, whereas now we see announcements made ahead of our hearings. Similarly, I am very alert to the market sensitivity of our work. We aren't just scrutinising in the abstract. Our work can have real implications. I feel the weight of that responsibility, particularly when we have people like the governor of the Bank of England in front of us, as what they say – and sometimes what they don't – has the power to move markets. Understanding how to navigate that has been vital to the success of our work.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?
My committee has a profound responsibility to scrutinise some of the most consequential public institutions in Britain. The Bank of England, the Financial Conduct Authority and Treasury officials who appear before us don't just understand this; I can tell they genuinely agree that parliament should scrutinise these issues. And that's a brilliant situation for us to be in. That's not to say it's always so straightforward, though. In a recent report, we had to highlight an unfortunate exception at the Financial Ombudsman Service. I am hopeful, though, that this was an anomalous situation which won't repeat itself.

I've also been pleased with the engagement we've had from the private sector. We've held public sessions with CEOs at banks, building societies and insurers, which I think is really important.

How responsive has your chosen department been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
It's no secret that the Treasury is under intense pressure. Difficult decisions have had to be made as it faces the incredible challenge of managing the public purse. Despite this pressure, we have seen most Treasury ministers, including the chancellor twice. That's not bad going.

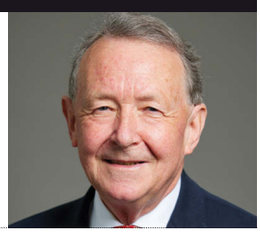
We've also had some real wins, including the Bank of England's commitment to monitor cash acceptance following our report on the issue. The government's willingness to publish further details on the Office for Value for Money in light of concerns we raised was also a positive sign. I certainly expect our productive and honest relationship to continue.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?

I've watched with interest as the Treasury pursues growth in the finance sector. I'll be keeping an eye on what this could mean for consumer protection and deregulation. Following our work on cash acceptance, I am also eagerly anticipating the financial inclusion strategy. We are keen to see how the Treasury plans to ensure that modernising our economy considers the whole country, including the most vulnerable.

We will be delving into the motor finance situation and the National Wealth Fund remains squarely on my radar. Our work examining how AI is being used in the financial services sector will also continue. I'll be paying particular attention to the sector's plans to safeguard consumers as AI use widens. ■

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS



Chaired by Crossbench peer Lord Alton

Current inquiries Human rights and the regulation of AI; proposal for a draft Human Rights Act 1998 (remedial) order 2025; human rights of children in the social care system in England; crime and policing bill; border security, asylum and immigration bill; transnational repression in the UK; forced labour in UK supply chains

What makes a good select committee chair?
They need to listen and lead. For a select committee to work effectively, all its members must be included in setting its direction, questioning witnesses and deliberating its conclusions. But the chair also needs to ensure that they are working together effectively, delivering a targeted programme of work that enables a range of topics to be scrutinised in a timely fashion.

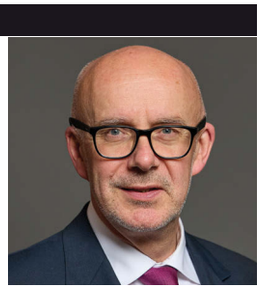
What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
My biggest surprise was to have been elected chair of the JCHR. It is unusual for a member of the House of Lords to be elected chair of the committee, but perhaps the members were looking for continuity in completing important work begun in the last parliament on issues such as accountability for Daesh crimes and exploitation of labour through modern-day slavery.

How easy have you found it to call witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found them during hearings?
The JCHR scrutinises issues right across government. This can be a challenge because thematic inquiries require us to engage with departments where we haven't built up an existing relationship and we then have to start afresh when we move on to a new inquiry. We greatly value and continue to have regular sessions with senior ministers responsible for human rights and the law. These are beneficial to understanding the government's programme and in holding them to account.

How responsive has the government been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
It is still early days, but the government responded promptly to our first report of this parliament and we hope this continues as we go forward.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
We will be pushing departments to respond to the recommendations in our recent big reports on modern slavery in supply chains and transnational repression. Before the summer recess, we launched two new inquiries and will begin taking evidence on them this autumn. One examines how well the human rights of children are protected in the care system. We will also look at the impact that AI may have on human rights, the risks and opportunities it provides, and whether the current legislative framework is adequate to oversee it. We will also continue our important work reviewing government legislation to ensure that new laws are compatible with human rights. ■

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY



Chaired by Matt Western, Labour MP for Warwick and Leamington

Current inquiries The national security strategy; undersea cables

What makes a good select committee chair?
Few issues are as important as a government's ability to keep its citizens safe. Given a remit as critical as that, chairs of committees like mine need to have no fear in standing up for their members. If I think the government is getting something wrong, I'll tell the minister – even those I count as friends.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
The global security landscape is being reshaped before our eyes. The changing posture of the

Roger Harris Photography © House of Commons London

United States, huge increases in defence spending across Europe, and ongoing efforts of hostile states to destabilise our economy and society: the challenges we face are huge and identifying the right decisions on these issues is becoming increasingly complex. I think we're helping to illuminate the choices available to the government, alongside the implications and trade-offs.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen departmental witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?
Coordinating security across government departments is an immense challenge, and there will always be occasional back and forth about arrangements. But I find ministers typically want to help rather than obfuscate, and our evidence sessions are highly engaging.

How responsive has the government been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
My committee meets less regularly than others, so we're still working on our first report. But I'm confident that the government will engage properly with it.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
We'll soon be publishing our report into undersea cables, after ministers gave evidence to us before the summer.

After that, we are focusing on evidence sessions for our inquiry into the new national security strategy – a huge cross-government undertaking that requires detailed scrutiny. ■

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Chaired by Toby Perkins, Labour MP for Chesterfield and Staveley

Current inquiries Addressing the risks from perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS); airport expansion and climate and nature targets; governing the marine environment; flood resilience in England; the UK and the Antarctic environment; environmental stability and housing growth; the role of natural capital in the green economy

What makes a good select committee chair?
Committee chairs might be sat centre-stage in the committee room, but a big part of our job is to bring all of our colleagues into the action. The Environmental Audit Committee has MPs from almost every party in parliament, so it's important that all perspectives are heard. A good chair will ensure opinions they disagree with are still heard and opinions they agree with are still robustly challenged.

But the vast majority of a chair's work is done away from the TV cameras – meeting experts, building knowledge, reading representations and reports and deciding who and what the committee should look at.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
There is a huge range of things that the EAC can look at, so prioritising issues to explore and making sure that we produce reports that are meaningful and impactful but also reflect the committee's view is a tough task.

Also, attempting to ask 16 politicians to keep their contributions short so that we get plenty of time to hear from witnesses, and preventing witnesses from going beyond the question they have been asked, can challenge any chair. We want evidence sessions to be thorough and informative without being overly long.

As someone who has had relatively limited select committee experience before this parliament, I have been surprised at quite how enthusiastically our select committees are supported. In a parliament with a large majority in particular, many organisations recognise the crucial role select committees have in holding government to account.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen departmental witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?
The EAC has a broad remit, so it's inevitable that the policy issues we look at will cut across different departments. Already we have had ministerial witnesses from the departments for energy security and net zero; environment, food and rural affairs; transport; housing, communities and local government; and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

We have found some businesses less enthusiastic to talk to us. Select committees' reputation for probing and exposing sometimes makes firms reticent about appearing. Most witnesses have provided insightful and thoughtful contributions.

In the main, the quality has been very high. Ministers have generally been well prepared and briefed. Some have been put under pressure and struggled a little. But I know they all relish and fear select committee appearances and many have, at least in retrospect, enjoyed it.

How responsive has the government been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
In some cases, extremely responsive. On 5 June, we published a report recommending the government ban bottom trawling in 41 marine-protected areas. Four days later, ministers announced they would do exactly that. Naturally, not every recommendation gets that kind of reception, but less than a week from recommendation to adoption is something to aim for.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
The committee will be publishing reports for its inquiries into airport expansion; housebuilding and environmental targets; and flood resilience in England throughout the autumn. These are all really important and complex problems, and I'm looking forward to sharing what we've learned.

We've also recently begun evidence sessions for our inquiry into the regulation of PFAS. I know this is an issue many people are very concerned about, so I hope our inquiry will add some useful insights to the debate. After that, your readers will have to stay tuned. ■

REPORT IN A STORM

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

PENSIONED OFF

Investigation into the administration of the Civil Service Pension Scheme

Who? National Audit Office

When? June 2025

Key quote "MyCSP's contact centre performance has been below expected levels for at least the last two years, but this has not resulted in any contractual penalties."

In brief The Cabinet Office has struggled to hold Civil Service Pension Scheme administrator MyCSP to account when its performance has fallen below agreed levels, according to the NAO.

The watchdog said the Cabinet Office recognised that MyCSP's contract did not always provide "sufficient commercial levers" and that it had been unable to incentivise improvements through the contract.

MyCSP has a target of answering at least 80% of customer calls within 30 seconds – but answered barely more than half that proportion promptly enough over the past two years. In November 2024, MyCSP was said to be taking an average of 24 minutes to answer calls.

However, the NAO acknowledged that MyCSP had reported meeting at least 87% of its "key service levels" between August 2017 and January 2025.

MyCSP has been hit with penalties twice over the past 13 years. In 2022, the Cabinet Office applied a penalty of £19,355 for failure to deliver timely payments of retirement lump sums. The department is also seeking a payment of £228,538 for MyCSP's failure last year to provide timely retirement quotes and first pension payments to scheme members over a period of several months.

MyCSP is due to be replaced as CSPS administrator by Capita in December, following a contract award in 2023.

Key recommendations

- NAO head Gareth Davies said the Cabinet Office must "reflect on the lessons learnt from MyCSP's administration of the [CSPS] scheme, ensuring key performance indicators are monitored and enforced, and that important service improvements are introduced by Capita"
- Public Accounts Committee chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown said the Cabinet Office must view the switch to Capita as an "important opportunity" to "improve the experience of current and future users" ■

VAWG INADEQUACY

Tackling violence against women and girls: funding

Who? Home Affairs Committee

When? July 2025

Key quote "The repeated inability of the Home Office to meet the coordination commitments in previous VAWG strategies has eroded trust in the Home Office's competence to deliver a coordinated response to tackle VAWG. It is essential for the Home Office to rebuild this trust."

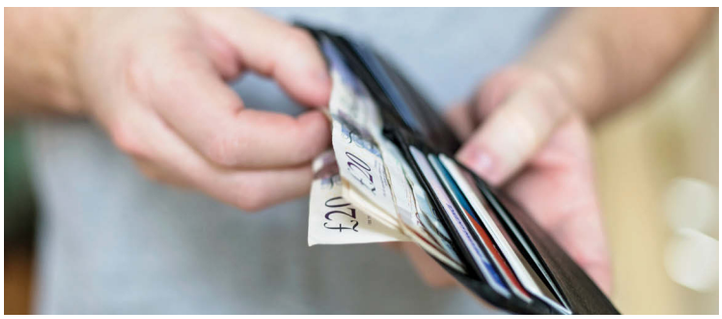
In brief The Home Affairs Committee said it is "unconvinced" that the Home Office has the "capacity or imagination" to deliver on the safer streets mission target to reduce violence against women and girls by 50% over a decade.

The MPs said significant improvement is needed in cross-department coordination, while funding "remains fragmented and poorly aligned with evidence of what works".

They said the Home Office had admitted it had not yet coordinated funding to reduce VAWG across government. The committee said the result was "a duplication of services, gaps in funding and inconsistent access for victims and survivors".

Key recommendations

- Central and local government spending to tackle VAWG should be mapped to reduce duplication and gaps in services
- There needs to be a standardised definition of VAWG across government, police and the third sector to enable consistent measurement and ensure funding has the most impact
- The Home Office should establish a cross-government audit to identify which data on VAWG is necessary to collect for evaluation purposes. The findings should be used to establish more consistent reporting metrics across government, to both reduce the burden to funding applicants and ensure that these metrics are better linked to the effectiveness of the funded services
- Funding for services to tackle VAWG needs to be made available on a longer-term basis, and money for investment in primary prevention should be ringfenced in future spending reviews ■



LOSING CHARGE

Financial management of fees and charges

Who? National Audit Office

When? June 2025

Key quote "None of the services we looked at recovered costs consistently, and the charges for the services may not accurately reflect the costs. HM Treasury does not provide enough oversight, challenge and guidance on how to manage charged services effectively."

In brief Government bodies entitled to charge the public for the services they provide are losing out on hundreds of millions of pounds a year because of a failure to match costs with fees.

The NAO identified £340m in under-recovered costs in 2023-24 alone. It examined seven service areas, which together accounted for about a third of the total for central government's charged-for services when measured by revenue.

HM Passport Office was responsible for £223m of the shortfall, despite a 25% increase in fees in recent years. HM Courts and Tribunals Service saw a shortfall of £105m between family-court fees and the costs those fees were supposed to cover.

The slow pace at which fee changes were enacted was a problem, the NAO said. Fee changes took an average of 63 weeks to implement, "delaying cost recovery and creating financial uncertainty".

Further stumbling blocks included the frequent use of estimated data – which may not reflect the true cost of providing services – to set fees and a lack of incentives for fee-charging departments to make efficiencies.

Key recommendations

- Accounting officers should proactively monitor whether charged services are recovering costs, and act where they persistently deliver unplanned surpluses or deficits, or fail to comply with the principles of *Managing Public Money*
- HMT should extend guidance in chapter six of *Managing Public Money* to include a template to standardise the process of proposing or amending fees and charges
- HMT should also identify incentives and levers to encourage greater efficiencies or quality improvements, especially where there may be opportunities to transform customer service or invest to save ■ »

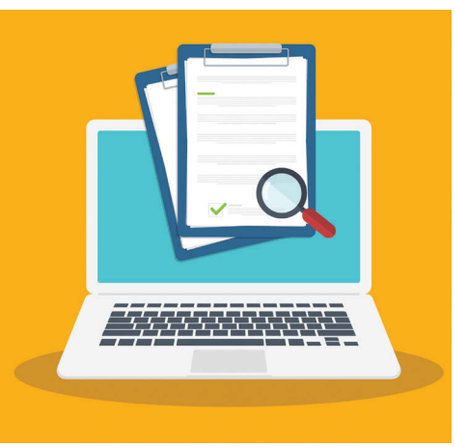
FRAUD FOCUS

Using data analytics to tackle fraud and error

Who? National Audit Office

When? July 2025

Key quote "There is a clear mismatch between the scale of the problem of fraud and error and the lack of concrete plans to implement better data analytics."



In brief Departments and agencies must embark on a concerted drive to employ data analytics to cut down on the public sector's estimated £55bn-£81bn annual fraud-and-error losses, the NAO said.

According to the watchdog, many parts of government are exploring the use of technology to combat fraud, but savings so far have been "modest". It said the Government Digital Service has projected that annual savings of £6bn are possible, but there is "no clear plan" for realising the potential.

The NAO said most tools used by government bodies are designed to detect fraud and error rather than prevent incorrect transactions before payment. Just two of 14 case studies of anti-fraud data analytics it looked at were preventative; eleven were "detective"; and one had elements of both.

The watchdog said "preventative" tools could be more cost effective as when they are successful, public bodies avoid "costly, time-consuming and often unsuccessful processes" to get their money back.

It identified 10 challenges the government needs to overcome if it is to generate more fraud-and-error savings through data analytics.

They include: better cross-government leadership; making the investment case for data analytics; boosting data-sharing between departments; and ensuring that the best use is made of existing central counter-fraud initiatives.

Key recommendations

- The Public Sector Fraud Authority, which reports to the Cabinet Office and Treasury, should set out a plan for how it will support public bodies across government to make the best use of data analytics to tackle fraud and error
- PSFA and the Government Digital Service should publish a playbook on how public bodies can develop the right blend of digital skills and fraud-and-error subject-matter expertise
- PSFA and HMT should develop a mechanism that allows public bodies to pool some of the costs, resources and savings associated with fraud-and-error data analytics. One solution could be for PSFA to manage a portfolio of seed funding for projects across government that sees savings shared between the public body involved and the seed fund ■

COACHING SUCCESS

Jobcentres

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? July 2025

Key quote "Given the pressures on public spending and the poor health and wellbeing outcomes for those left out of work, ineffective support for people seeking jobs is not something the country can afford."

In brief MPs expressed concern that the Department for Work and Pensions had a shortfall of 2,100 work coaches in the first six months of 2024-25, representing 10.9% of total requirements.

They said more than half of jobcentres have reduced the support they provide to job seekers to deal with the shortage – for example, by having shorter meetings with benefits claimants or seeing them less frequently.

The committee was not convinced by DWP's "seemingly complacent assurances" that the reduction of support has had minimal impact on service users.

The report said jobcentres' performance had declined in the past two years, with the proportion of Universal Credit claimants with the lowest earnings who move into work each month dropping from 9.7% in 2021-22 to 8.2% in 2023-24.

The MPs said that while DWP aims to provide a nationally consistent service, outcomes for claimants vary depending on where they live.

They said the "challenging background" for work coaches and jobcentres comes as DWP is about to implement major changes to employment support that are likely to increase demand for services.

Key recommendations

- DWP should develop a workforce plan within 12 months that should include details of the steps the department will take to ensure it has enough work coaches to provide face-to-face support to people who need it
- Over the next six months, DWP should work with other departments to publish a roadmap for achieving the government's long-term ambition of an 80% employment rate and set out jobcentres' specific contribution to this ambition ■

The changing face of illicit trade in the UK

Former Met DCI, Will O'Reily, has spent 12 years combatting illicit trade in the UK as an external consultant and undercover operator. Working with Philip Morris Limited, he explains the changing face of illicit trade as organised crime groups as organised crime groups tighten their grip on the trade

Will O'Reily
Former Scotland Yard DCI &
freelance Illicit Trade Investigator

While the proportion of UK smokers decreases year-on-year[1], the most recent KPMG Report on Illicit Cigarette Consumption in Europe – commissioned by Philip Morris International[2] – shows that UK illicit cigarette consumption, as the percentage of overall cigarette consumption, has accelerated by almost 50% from 2020 to 2024[3]. More than one in four cigarettes consumed in the UK in 2024 was illicit[4], and as a direct result of the illicit trade, the total lost tax revenue reached just under £3.2 billion[5].

As a consultant on illicit trade, I have seen the black market evolve from a small-scale market into a sophisticated network orchestrated by organised crime groups at an industrial scale.

What are the emerging trends in illicit trade that government officials should be aware of?

There has been a significant rise in the availability of illicit cigarettes and vapes. We used to see contraband cigarettes smuggled from lower-cost European countries. But, during covid, with international travel paused, organised crime stepped in to fill the gap – producing low-cost counterfeit cigarettes that flooded the market. Recently, we have seen illicit cigarettes priced as low as £2.50, as sellers lower their prices to compete in the oversupplied market.

Concerning illegal vapes, we are seeing a rise in tank size. On our undercover test purchase visits, we have seen tank sizes of 15ml – significantly more than the 2ml legal tank size limit – often with flavours and packaging designed to attract children.

How is the face of the illicit trade changing?

The illicit market used to be supplied by small-time smugglers; a 'man in a white van' would drive around, suppling shops with small amounts of smuggled products. Now, there has been a worrying surge in the presence of organise crime groups taking control of the illicit market with a sophisticated supply chain at an industrial scale.

Trading Standards and HMRC are busy trying to stamp out this trade, but the threat of seizures fuels increasingly inventive ways that sellers find to avoid detection. We have seen sellers enhance their concealment methods, with hidden compartments behind meat counters, or nearby storage facilities disconnected from stores to protect illicit stock.

On our undercover visits, we have found that stores have the same variants of counterfeit products, which indicates a large-scale supply that is being sold by organise crime groups. More recently, we are noting the increase of vertical integration in the illicit trade; producers are selling these products to consumers via shops solely set up to sell illicit products. This means they are controlling most, if not all, of the product's life cycle to keep costs low and secure the highest profit.

How does illicit trade impact the UK public?

Illicit nicotine is a low-risk, high-reward trade. When a pack of illicit cigarettes cost 20p to make, and retails for £4-£7, the profit margin reward significantly outweighs the risk of a small fine. One container load of illicit tobacco/nicotine products can net up to £2 million of profit for organised crime groups. This lucrative trade funds more serious crimes, such as the supply of firearms, drugs and even human trafficking.

We do regular test purchase visits across the country. This is not a localised issue; nor is it confined to deprived communities alone. The worsening issue of illicit trade in the UK serves as a reminder that we cannot afford to be complacent.

PHILIP MORRIS LIMITED

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3. Ibid, 2020 (17.1%) versus 2025 (25.6%) (25.7/17.1) – 1 = 49.71%
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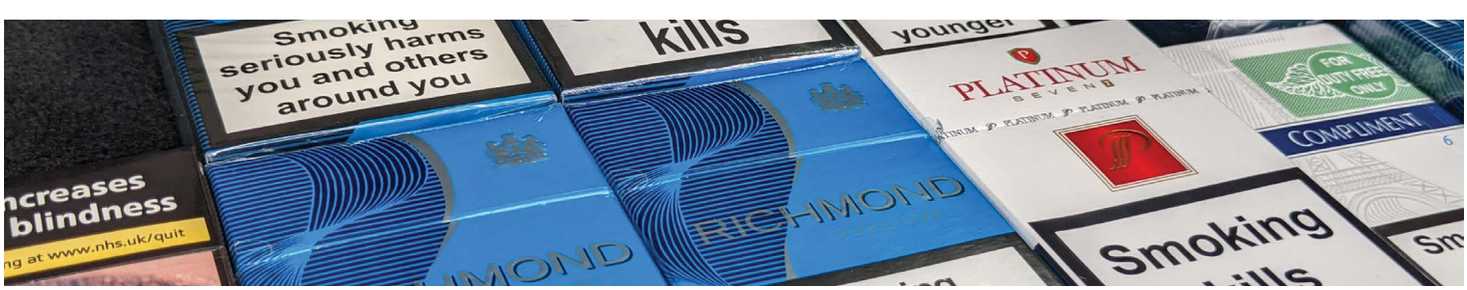


If you would like to discuss this topic further, please send an email to Catherine.Goger@pmi.com

DOING JUSTICE TO DIGITAL

The MoJ has been tasked with tackling major backlogs while also delivering ambitious reforms. The ministry's digital chief **Mark Thompson** tells **Sam Trendall** how tech and data will play a key role. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Joining the Ministry of Justice as group chief digital and information officer in April, Mark Thompson was delighted to find that there had been "some really good work done on data" already.

"I'm really, really impressed at the level of understanding and maturity of data and the use of technologies," says Thompson, who arrived at the ministry from an equivalent role in the Cabinet Office.

"We've got the fundamentals: we've got an analytics platform that's really good, and very well-engineered in terms of the depth of understanding of the different datasets."

The department is certainly not short on datasets.

The homepage of the *Justice in Numbers* section of GOV.UK tells visitors that there were 9.4 million crimes reported in government's most recent annual survey. These incidents cost an estimated £58.9bn.

Some of them may have been among the three million-plus cases that went through a court or tribunal during the year – or among the record-high 74,561 that sit in the crown court backlog. They may even have added to the current prison population of 87,726, or the probation caseload of 240,362.

Each time those numbers – and many, many other statistics that stem from them – change represents a piece of data collected by the Ministry of Justice. However big the numbers in question, this adds up to a lot of work – and a whole lot of information at the ministry's disposal.

Of the courts backlog – which, as of September last year, has hit and remained at a new record high – Thompson says the work undertaken to increase understanding has involved "really getting under the bonnet of where the flows were in the data".

"There's a great deal of insight on that data, which we had to work in partnership with the court system to really get to the bottom of," he adds.

Thompson says the department now has the analytical cases to drive progress, as well as the necessary technical skills to do so. He adds: "But the thing about data – and this universe – is there are lots of very knotty problems that we don't fully understand. And policy, therefore, can't be fully developed, because it's not fully informed." The digital chief points to one recent example – where his MoJ colleagues worked on new and accurate ways of determining how many children have a parent in prison – which illustrates the potential for better data to support improved planning and policymaking.

"There's quite a few social issues that can arise from not thinking about this; children of prisoners have different needs, and they actually can end up with worse outcomes through school," Thompson says. He says there is also the need to think about "how you accommodate them in prisons so they get to maintain contact".

One thing that the department wasn't sure of was the size of the problem.

He adds: "There's been a number of methods, and we've drawn on machine learning to trawl through notes and other records and a whole mix of other datasets to really work out what the actual number is, and how many people in prison actually have dependent children – and we discovered that, essentially, our reporting of them had underestimated the number by half."

The conclusion was that there are 192,912 children in England and Wales with a parent currently in prison – compared with an estimate of about 100,000 made in 2023 by leading civil society group the Prison Advice and Care Trust, which derived its numbers from MoJ data.

Thompson says this is a good example of a data team using "a full plethora of machine-learning ops and data analysis" to solve a particular problem. "And they're now working on all sorts of detailed insights from that," he adds.

"This is almost a once-in-a-generation opportunity in government to actually think and deliver over a number of years"

Security and spending

The MoJ – and the wider justice system – has been asked to deliver some of the most ambitious and high-profile policy objectives of the Labour government. This includes plans to significantly ramp up the capacity of the probation system and provide a big boost in staff and equipment, as well as delivery of the recommendations set out in Brian Leveson's major two-part review of sentencing.

Thompson says these intended reforms represent a "strong aspiration from the government" and that they are accompanied by a "settlement from the Spending Review that is favourable to the department". While Thompson admits they didn't get everything they bid for, he says it is "a good step forward".

All of which adds up to a singular chance for digital and data to match the ambition of the policy and programmes it will support in the coming years, according to Thompson.

"My role is to make sure – as the digital, data, technology and AI partner – that the capability of the department is optimised and set up to really deliver against the objectives," he adds. "And I think, with a three-year window, this is almost a once-in-a-generation opportunity in government to actually think and deliver over a number of years. Because for some while, we've had relatively short spending-review cycles, and it's quite difficult to [address] complicated problems." He says there is now "a real moment in time and a real opportunity to drive" that progress and that one of his key priorities is "to make sure we're set up for that".

While carefully planned long-term reform programmes may offer the chance to approach tech transformation more thoughtfully, sometimes an unexpected short-term crisis can also present a valuable opportunity.

In April, MoJ arm's-length body the Legal Aid Agency suffered a cyberattack in which criminals accessed what the agency described as a "significant amount" of citizens' personal data, including contact details, criminal histories and financial information.

Since then, ministers have – perhaps unsurprisingly – not been shy in pinning a significant proportion of the blame on the previous government, claiming that the breach was made possible by fragile

IT systems resulting from "long years of neglect".

After first acknowledging that the fallout of the attack has been "incredibly difficult" for the legal profession, and for its "technical people and business people", Thompson agrees – in much more diplomatic language than his ministerial colleagues – that the incident has accelerated the argument for much-needed upgrades.

"It's been really disruptive but, actually, it ran alongside the development of us thinking about transformation," he says. "So in some respects, it's been quite helpful because it's enforced all our understanding of the Legal Aid Agency – and I have a much better understanding about how it works. And in order to try and restore some of these services, we've tackled things that we probably wouldn't have tackled for years – things that we thought might take us three years and millions of hours to do – through a combination of policy change and business change."

"A lot of prison officers have monitors and cameras... and there's a greater use for safety and effectiveness through that type of technology"

AI ambitions

The MoJ recently unveiled a department-wide action plan for artificial intelligence that set out a vision to "embed" the technology across the ministry.

Thompson reveals that trials of common AI platforms – including Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT – are already under way.

ChatGPT is "there for people to use safely by loading documents and asking questions", to which it can help suggest "ways forward and edit things," he says. Copilot is "very good because it has access to your email and your documents" and so can, for example, "very quickly scan 500 emails and give you a summary that says: 'Here's where we are on this.'"

"It's like having a very good assistant that goes away and finds stuff for you," Thompson adds.

To support more complex potential use cases across the wider justice system, earlier this year, the ministry launched an AI and Data Science Ethics Framework developed in collaboration with the Alan Turing Institute. According to the MoJ's online guidance, the document is intended to encourage "ethical reflection and deliberation throughout all stages of a project's lifecycle".

Alongside these ethical fundaments, the MoJ will also look to build its future uses of AI on sturdy technical foundations. Thompson once again cites the recent Spending Review – and the long-term policy objectives government hopes it will support – as a singular chance for digital progress. But for an organisation that operates 140 separate digital products – each with its own development roadmap – it is an opportunity that requires careful thought and planning.

"We are looking at the backbone and asking: what's the technology architecture that we're going to move forward with? And then that will combine with the allocation of money, and allow us to be really clear on our roadmaps," Thompson says. "The AI work we are currently doing is good for now... but a bit of tightening up and optimisation will allow us to really accelerate these things and bring them to life quicker. Because scaling up is the hard thing – you can get a pilot working with one prison easily enough, but to get it in 120 prisons takes a bit more work."

THE MOJ'S DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR PRISONER SERVICES

- Design for basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills
- Anticipate complex access needs
- Build trust, show respect, design with data
- Prioritise privacy
- Practise authenticity and diversity
- Push boundaries, realistically

Prisons and probation

A "fundamental part" of the digital progress plans set out in the MoJ's Spending Review bid was an ambition to deliver "more modern tools to make it much easier for a probation service to operate".

One of the first such tools is a new app – currently going through a pilot phase – which aims to provide probation officers with a single hub from which they can manage a caseload that, in recent years,

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

PT Public Technology.net

has reportedly grown to more than 50 offenders for many frontline workers.

The app provides one place that allows a probation officer to see where 30 or 40 people are, what their needs are, and what the officer's calendar appointments are. It is a mechanism from which the team can "build out lots of capabilities", Thompson says.

Alongside these internal tools, the MoJ has already delivered some hugely impactful digital public services, according to Thompson.

One of the earliest – and most powerful – examples of this is the online service for booking prison visits that, since replacing a "very tedious manual process" about a decade ago, has been used to successfully arrange 760,000 visits. In each case, the time taken to do so has been reduced from about one and a half days to less than 30 seconds.

Families have also benefitted from a deployment of video-call options – that began during the early weeks of the Covid crisis – while the process for moving prisoners securely from one facility to another has also been digitised.

The ministry revealed last year that it had established a set of six principles to guide digital designers in developing services for prisoners: design for basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills; anticipate complex access needs; build trust, show respect, design with data; prioritise privacy; practise authenticity and diversity; and push boundaries, realistically.

The overall ambition is to create "simple designs with clear messages, delivered in a trauma-informed way".

In guidance published in 2022, government described the trauma-informed approach to service delivery as a method that is intended "to see beyond an individual's presenting behaviours and to ask, 'what does this person need?' rather than 'what is wrong with this person?". Other prominent adopters of this model include the Department for Work and Pensions.

Thompson says: "A key part of any digital strategy is putting the user first, and we do lots of user research into getting the design right so that it works and it's accessible." Trauma-informed services "are, essentially, an added dimension of that – to recognise that, in our space, these are not just general groups of users with particular personas", he adds. "These are people with very complex needs, which require a deeper level of analysis and of psychological understanding." Some of the needs relate to multi-layered traumatic experiences – "they're not just somebody with one particular" service need, Thompson says. "They've had a very different lived experience and – rather than just how a service looks and feels, and what people might engage with – we really need that deeper understanding when we start to develop these things. It's about awareness."

Launchpad for progress

Work to deliver more and better digital services for prisoners has accelerated in the past couple of years with the MoJ's Launchpad programme, which provides in-cell access to laptops and specialist digital services – with the aim of better supporting rehabilitation.

"The key to success for a prisoner on release is how well connected they are in society," Thompson says. He points out that some people have been in prison since before the internet was invented, and then "come out into the world".

Whilst there are targeted training and work programmes within prisons, there's value from trying to provide better technology to them, he says, by giving them access to learning, to their banking, and "some controlled communication with their family with videoconferencing".

The programme has already been deployed across 19 prisons and is delivering benefits to 13,000 prisoners, according to the digital chief.

Gradual rollout across the rest of the prison estate – encompassing 122 institutions in England and Wales, 105 of which are operated by HM Prison and Probation Service – will continue from this autumn onwards. The pace of progress from that point will be subject to the availability of funding – as well as to the project's inherent technical complexity.

"It's quite hard, because we've got quite an old estate," Thompson says, pointing out with a smile that Victorian engineers were hardly thinking about WiFi when they were designing prisons.

Beyond the rollout of such technological basics, Thompson sees a longer-term opportunity – working alongside the ministry's Justice Science Unit – to use digital platforms and data to help drive use of emerging tools to improve the management and, ultimately, the safety of prisons.

"We can use all the intelligence we have about location through cameras and other detectors – technology which is already there. There are pilots taking place, and we've got an opportunity to really leverage that to drive much more effective management and insight, and risk management," he says. "You can do things like monitor if someone in a cell is unconscious through infrared monitoring. You can detect all sorts of behaviours or potential aggression – a lot of prison officers have monitors and cameras... and there's a greater use for safety and effectiveness through that type of technology."

There may seem to be an inherent friction between making such forward-thinking plans on the one hand, while work is still underway to bring ancient buildings into the 20th century – let alone the 21st.

But Thompson says that these two imperatives are "not a million miles apart".

"They're not completely competing with themselves," he says. "But we are constrained naturally, not always able to do it all at once. So, we have to be a bit clever in how one thing enables another or is built on top of it, and we need to be able to take a broader architectural and strategic approach to this.

"But we have got the ability to hang all that together and make sure it is coherent. We tell a good story." ■

WORKING WITH GDS

As well as striving towards its own transformation ambitions, the ministry is also working with colleagues from the expanded Government Digital Service. Since being moved into its new home in the reimagined "digital centre" of government in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, GDS has ramped up its delivery of several major new platforms for both departments and citizens.

"We are engaging with them on a couple of things at the moment, including the GOV.UK Wallet, and One Login – two big, cross-cutting investments being made by government," Thompson says. "There are services that we've got that might make sense, [for the wallet] – power of attorney might be one. That is a mature product, which could integrate quite well."

Unlocking social value through place, people and procurement

Procurement can be a powerful tool for inclusive growth. From supporting prison leavers and veterans into employment to diversifying the supply chain, Amey's place-based approach is helping to unlock potential and deliver lasting impact across communities

Michelle Wiggins
Head of Social Value
Amey

When we talk about the UK's growth agenda, the conversation often starts with infrastructure and ends with delivery. But every street, building and workplace tells another story – one of the people who live, work and thrive there, and the opportunities we create when we see "place" not just as bricks and mortar, but as a catalyst for change. Over my career at Amey, I have seen first-hand how procurement can be more than a contract fulfilment tool; it can be a lever for good, opening doors to jobs, skills, and resilient local economies that meet the specific needs of each community.

People, place and productivity, are they really separate? I do not believe they are. At Amey, procurement isn't just for delivery – it is a vehicle for change, driving growth through place, providing good-quality jobs and strengthening local supply chains.

With 11,000 people working to support the buildings and infrastructure we rely on every day, Amey builds long-term relationships with charities, communities and partners. Our teams are uniquely positioned to listen, learn and remove barriers to work and prosperity at both a macro and micro level.

As a key supplier to government, we approach social value with legacy mindset. Every strategy is tailored to the specific contract, the people and communities it serves, and the actions that will deliver the most positive impact. We understand our role in creating good-quality jobs, nurturing

thriving supply chains and supporting the government's ambitions for growth.

Place as a catalyst for growth

Government property covers more than 100,000 assets, with around half-a-million civil servants working across the UK, and countless more interacting with the services provided through these spaces every day.

From our perspective, place is a thriving ecosystem, with jobs, supply chains and communities at its heart. A huge passion of mine is working with colleagues to unlock the opportunities within these spaces, an often-hidden value in place. This is central to Amey's role in managing and enhancing the nation's assets, and it's a distinctive strength in the markets we serve.

Shining a light on value

In 2024, 7.2% of our new hires were individuals facing barriers to work, such as prison leavers, veterans, care leavers, and those not in employment, education or training (NEETs). We're aiming for 10% in 2025. Our approach is to give a voice to those impacted by these challenges, partnering with local organisations, charitable bodies, and public departments like the Department for Work and Pensions to unlock potential and provide cohesive support as they navigate the world of work.

This effort is not a quick fix; it requires time, care, compassion, and an individual approach to provide long-term job security. But the impact extends well beyond the job itself – it creates a ripple of potential through families, communities and workplaces. These individuals bring diversity of thought and experience, helping transform the way we work, particularly in the face of challenges like the climate crisis and the decarbonisation agenda.

Amey's approach to reducing reoffending, developed over the past decade alongside employment advisory boards, charities, prisons and those with lived experience, reflects this ethos. For example, our work at HMP New Hall showcases how collaboration can open up employment opportunities for women on release, helping to break the cycle and create lasting change.

Championing supply chain diversity

We spend around £1 billion with our supply chain, recognising the importance of going beyond direct spend to include tiered suppliers. As a strategic supplier, we are well-positioned to open doors for a diverse supply chain, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and voluntary, community and social enterprises (VCSEs), and to help grow, diversify, or establish these organisations.

Through initiatives like the Buy Social Corporate Challenge, we've supported programmes to accelerate VCSE growth, including seed funding and incubator models. In 2021, for example, Amey seed-funded e50k, a social enterprise led by military spouses and veterans. This initiative supports our 'Move You In Pack Project,' providing eco-friendly hampers for service families relocating to new homes. It has created employment for 188 military spouses and delivered over 2,600 hours of community engagement.

We also partnered with Hays on an accelerator programme to support VCSEs in infrastructure and workforce solutions. In 2024, four organisations received grants and tailored support, including Standing Tall, a social enterprise pairing individuals experiencing homelessness with stable, real living wage jobs. Standing Tall has since secured a contract with Amey and is now part of our inclusive recruitment supply chain.

Unlocking potential through procurement

We believe flexibility and adaptability are essential in addressing social issues and will continue to advocate for a greater focus on social value within contract management, not just at the outset, but throughout operational delivery and beyond.

By focusing on the people and places we impact, asset managers and central government can maximise social value and help create an inclusive, productive economy. At Amey, we call this people potential – and we believe that together, we can transform lives through procurement.

Amey

WHAT NEXT FOR ONE LOGIN?

PublicTechnology recently revealed a new delivery deadline three years later than initially scheduled with £100m-plus to be spent this year – but DSIT indicates that the project is being expanded. Where does one of government's most ambitious ever tech projects go from here?

The formal end date for completing delivery of the new government-wide GOV.UK One Login system has been pushed back by three years, with additional extra investment likely to add up to hundreds of millions of pounds.

However, government has insisted that the move does not constitute a delay against the previously scheduled timeline – but rather an expansion stemming from the success of the project's implementation so far.

Plans to create a new cross-department online account and sign-in system for citizens were first announced in 2020. Work formally began and One Login was added to the Government Major Projects Portfolio at the start of the following year, with a scheduled end date of March 2025. Most, if not all, government online services were to have completed implementation of One Login by that time, ministers and senior officials indicated. A press release from summer 2023, for example, stated that: "Over 100 public services will be using GOV.UK One Login by 2025, covering the vast bulk of all central government services."

Transparency documents recently revealed that One Login's delivery date has been formally set back by three years. A letter confirming the retention of the project's senior responsible owner – Government Digital Service official Natalie Jones – states that "implementation of a single, simple and secure way for users to sign on and, where necessary, prove their identity to access all central government services... is expected to take until 31 March 2028".

But GDS parent organisation the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology claims this extended delivery date should not be considered as a delay. Rather, the coming three years of work will see additional services brought in scope of the programme – and should be seen as an endorsement of progress so far, the department said.

"GOV.UK One Login is making it easier and safer for people to access public services online, with more than 7.8 million users already signed up. Over 80 services are now live on the platform, with another 100 in testing," a DSIT spokesperson said.

"The timeline for delivery has not been delayed. The service originally scoped to onboard 145 services by 2025 and now, because of its success, it will be expanded to bring a further 160 services onto the platform over the following three years to ensure we can capture the full range of benefits and savings for taxpayers."

The letter extending Jones's role as SRO also reveals that a budget of £115m will be provided to support delivery during 2025-26 – the first of the three additional years that the project will remain part of the GMPP setup.

The original estimated budget for delivery of One Login was £305m – a projection that was increased to £329m in 2024. The £115m spending dedicated for this year alone represents an increase in costs of at least 35% – with similar further investment likely to be required in the two subsequent years.

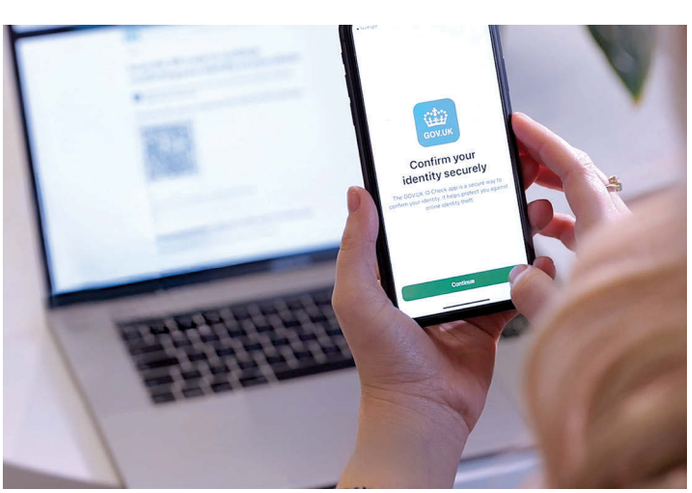
In a recent written parliamentary answer, then-digital government minister Feryal Clark said the programme is "currently undergoing HM Treasury approvals for a new business case, which will run until 2027-28".

NISTA act

The recent annual report reviewing the status of the Government Major Project Portfolio provides some support for DSIT's characterisation of progress and expansion – while also identifying delays and risks to successful delivery.

One Login has retained the amber delivery-confidence rating awarded last year on the traffic-light rating system. This means that assessors from government's National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority have concluded that "successful delivery appears feasible but significant issues already exist, requiring management attention", according to the report.

In the case of One Login – responsibility for which has, since last year, been moved from the Cabinet Office to DSIT – these issues are presented by "the complexity of the roadmap and ongoing dependencies on other departments for



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

PT Public Technology.net

onboarding and benefits realisation".

To keep on top of these risks, those in charge of the project must maintain regular and fruitful engagement with representatives of agencies across Whitehall, according to the detailed datasets released alongside the report.

"These interdependencies present delivery risks that require continued active management," NISTA analysis says. "The scaling of internal capabilities and steps taken on accessibility and digital inclusion are progressing positively, but overall deliverability is still contingent on cross-government alignment and sustained engagement."

While the amber rating acknowledges clear and present challenges, it also speaks to evaluators' conclusion that issues "appear resolvable at this stage and, if addressed promptly, should not present a cost/schedule overrun" for the project in question.

The One Login review says: "The amber rating reflects steady progress and strong momentum across delivery milestones, including a growing number of live services and expanded user adoption." It adds that the rating "was driven by the programme's demonstrable operational maturity, sustained leadership support and positive onboarding decisions from major departments".

More detail on the progress of the rollout – and additional explanation of the decision to reset completion of the programme to 2028 – is provided in a departmental "schedule narrative" included in the NISTA release.

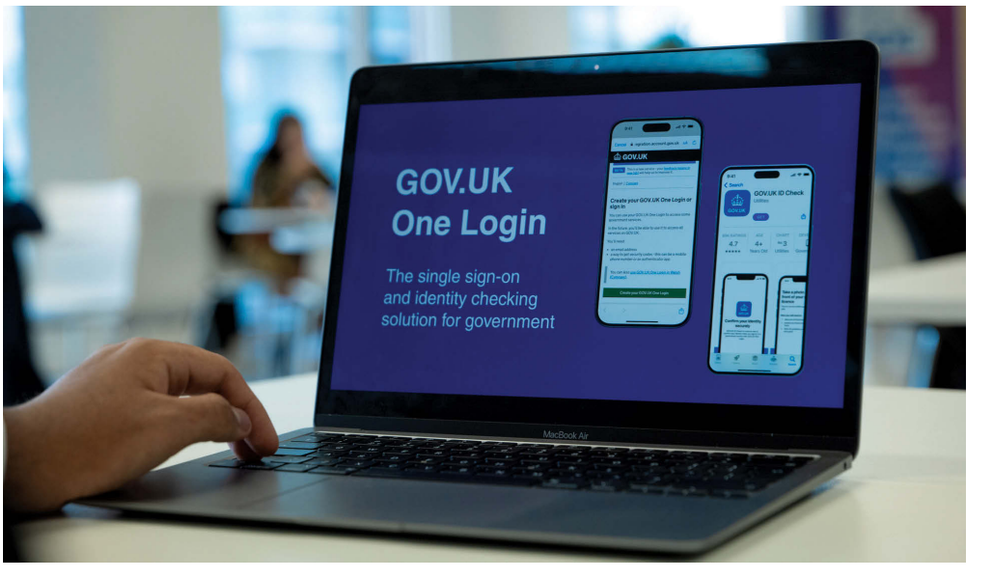
"Key motivators for [that] decision include the continued expansion of live services, the successful onboarding of significant departments (HMRC in private beta, DVLA, a first DWP service, and some devolved administrations; eg. Welsh Gov), and the projected scaling of user adoption," it says. "The decision to keep the programme on the GMPP for a further three years supports the ambition to complete onboarding of all central government services. While the programme continues to meet key internal delivery targets, the schedule remains dependent on departmental onboarding timelines and the coordination of benefits realisation across government."

The narrative adds: "The leading issue facing the programme relates to service migration, however, a number of treatments and mitigations are in place to effectively counteract service onboarding slippage. The programme continues to iterate a features roadmap which captures the initiatives and functionality that will be delivered over the next three financial years. This is closely aligned with our onboarding and migration roadmap, which shows the future 'pipeline' of services that will move to One Login between now and when the programme reaches critical mass."

The NISTA report does not appear to take into account the additional £115m scheduled to be spent during 2025-26 – but, beyond this, does record a £13m increase in overall costs compared with the prior year: from £329m to £342m.

Programme analysis indicates that this chunk of extra cost can be attributed to delays in adoption by major departments, security risks and the expense of using external suppliers and freelancers – something which is a result of restrictions on hiring full-time civil servants to work on the project.

NISTA documents say: "Key factors that motivated the increase in whole-life costs in FY24-25 were: onboarding complexities that led to delays in the onboarding of key reliant parties this year; emergent cybersecurity risks related to geopolitical events requiring increased resilience in order to protect the programme from cyber threats; and increased reliance on more expensive managed service providers and contingent labour contractors as a result of civil service headcount caps, which meant the programme could not recruit civil servants into these roles." ■



STATS

31/3/2028
New final delivery date for One Login, three years later than initial schedule

£3.64bn
Updated projected project benefits – almost double the figure published in the previous NISTA report

7.8 million
Number of citizens already signed up for One Login, government claims

£115m
Money to be spent in 2025-26, with more to be required in the two following years

9/2020
Date ministers first outlined plan for new cross-government account

COMMERCIAL SUCCESS

Andrew Forzani took up the mantle of government chief commercial officer – and head of the commercial and grants management functions – in February, just as the Procurement Act was coming into force. He talks about the act's impact, building skills and working well with departments. Words by **Suzannah Brecknell**

After a wide-ranging career in public sector commercial roles, has there been anything which surprised you in your first six months as GCCO? And what has excited you most in the new role?

The breadth and overall scale only really hits you once you start to oversee the whole system. With around £80bn of procurement going through government departments each year, and over £300bn in the wider public sector, the range of activities and the impacts they can have on both the citizen and the market is extraordinary, and every day throws up different opportunities.

What really excites me is the opportunity we have across the commercial and grants functions to be at the forefront of the digital transformation. In particular, our role in ensuring that public services are delivered and underpinned using the latest technology advances – including effective use of AI and how we can get the market to co-design this with government.

You lead the 6,000-strong government commercial function – can you give us an idea of how the function is split between different parts of the commercial cycle?

The vast majority of our function is working on the market-shaping and procurement stages of the commercial lifecycle, working with colleagues to scope requirements and understand what the market can offer, and working on commercial strategy. This is an area where we can often make the biggest difference and we have been working hard to spend more of our time in this early design phase. The core part of our role remains the procurement phase, where we design and run market competitions and award contracts. Finally, contract management is a team sport across HMG and commercial is one of many functions that are involved in ensuring contracts deliver. It is probably the area of biggest opportunity and we have been running an upskilling programme for contract managers for a number of years to ensure we improve in this area.

Many functions have some very specialist, little-known roles that other civil servants might not have heard about, despite their importance – which is your favourite example of this within the GCF?

I recently sat down with the commercial leadership team at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and was struck by the global scale and specialist nature of their work. Their role goes far beyond traditional procurement and has a huge focus on international development. Their work spans helping children in conflict zones to access life-saving treatment in the UK, to delivering the Integrated Security Fund, which helps prevent conflict and protect UK national security.

What are some of the common challenges your colleagues in the GCF face across government?

This is a time of significant global and local challenge, and public procurement can be a powerful lever for positive change. The GCF continues to react flexibly to tackle economic challenges including trade tensions and tariffs, striving to deliver efficiencies, drive innovation – especially via new digital technology – and contribute meaningfully to the government's mission-led agenda for growth.

More specifically, the GCF is adapting to successfully deliver the major changes »

“The Procurement Act coming into force in February was the most significant procurement reform in a generation”

ANDREW FORZANI'S CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2021-2025
DG commercial, Ministry of Defence
2017-2021
Chief commercial officer, Ministry of Defence
2013-2017
Chief commercial officer, Department for Work and Pensions
2008-2013
Head of procurement and commissioning, Surrey County Council
2003-2007
Head of procurement, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
2000-2003
Procurement manager, Nuffield Health
1989-1999
Procurement manager, Crown Agents

in procurement policy brought about by the Procurement Act 2023. This is all about continuing to upskill to understand the market, including new entrants and SMEs and how to contract successfully with them to ensure we get great outcomes.

The Procurement Act 2023 came into effect a few weeks after you started as GCCO – what has been the biggest impact of that act so far on commercial teams, and how is the GCF supporting those teams to make the most of the opportunities it offers?
The Procurement Act 2023 coming into force in February was the most significant procurement reform in a generation. The act and the government's National Procurement Policy Statement have together established public procurement as a powerful lever in the government's Plan for Change.

One of the key changes is the introduction of more flexibility for procurement processes. We really want to encourage commercial teams to work with the marketplace in designing procurement procedures that will improve outcomes – and we are already seeing some good practice. For example, including supplier tech-demonstration phases in the procurement; working collaboratively with bidders to define performance metrics; and including detailed negotiation stages to drive the best final outcome. I am really pushing our teams to use this flexibility and also share this best practice across the public sector.

The other area we are particularly pleased with is the focus on transparency and the introduction of the Central Digital Platform, which is our new one-stop shop for buyers and sellers to see all procurement opportunities across the public sector. This is a big step forward for SMEs in particular to see what opportunities are coming to market across all sectors.

You recently spoke to the Public Accounts Committee about the need to raise capability and capacity to support digital procurement work – can you tell us more about how you plan to build the right skills in the GCF to support digital transformation?
Whilst we already have a strong core of digital commercial experts spread across departments buying tech and digital services, we need to raise the broader digital skills across the whole function. Digital is increasingly a critical component of service and product delivery, so we need all our commercial colleagues to be confident to specify and buy in a digital environment.

The Cabinet Office and DSIT have launched the Digital Commercial Centre of Excellence as a co-funded team. This centre will lead the development of a category-based structure that more closely unifies digital and commercial skills, acting as our in-house digital experts, that will raise digital capability across the function. We will be rolling out core digital-skills courses across the function over the next few months, and then further supporting those roles that need more in-depth knowledge with an additional tranche of training in 2026.

"The relationship between the centre and departments is always a challenge of alignment and priorities"

The GCF's last strategy, published in 2021, set out a vision of becoming the best commercial function in the UK, with work across four fronts: people; data and transparency; simplifying and improving processes; and building influence and scale. What do you see as the main successes of the GCF as it has worked on that strategy over the last few years?
I am really proud of how the function has continued to improve over this period, raising standards both at a people and process level, which we have been able to evidence against our functional standards, self-assessments and reporting metrics. We have been able to do this whilst delivering a major change in regulations with the Procurement Act and a huge portfolio of procurement programmes that has increased year on year. Our continuous improvement culture has been a big part of our success, which has underpinned the strategy and is something I am keen to continue as I lead the GCF forward.

You were the MoD's commercial director general when the strategy came out – what challenges did you perceive from the perspective of a departmental leader? And how do you hope to address those challenges now you are in a central role?
The relationship between the centre and departments is always a challenge of alignment and priorities. A practical example from my experience is the regular ask for data and reporting, often without a clear explanation of why and what it will be used for, which was often a challenge to prioritise alongside departmental priorities. I want to ensure that going forward, we only collect and commission data that is absolutely necessary – and then ensure that it's clear why we are doing this and what the benefit is to all of us across our functions.

As you're in a period of building a new strategy, there is obviously work going on to define the function's overall priorities for the next few years – but alongside that, do you have any personal priorities for what you'd like to achieve as GCCO?
For me personally, this role is about how we lead people and set a great culture. Across the two functions, we have over 10,000 talented professionals. The most important thing to me is that people feel the commercial and grants functions are great places to work and that they have an environment and culture to develop, collaborate across departments and thrive. ■

NICOLA COLSON THE POETRY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

THREE SURPRISES FROM A YEAR STUDYING FOR AN EMPA – INCLUDING HOW THE UK LEADS THE WAY ON INNOVATION

You might be forgiven for thinking that all civil servants are the same – bland pencil-pushers who can be recognised in fiction of any time period. There is a consistency to the stories we tell about bureaucrats, from Dickens's Circumlocution Office to *Yes, Minister's* Department of Administrative Affairs to *Futurama*'s Central Bureaucracy. We are the Vogons from Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, writing terrible poetry and insisting that Earth had a reasonable consultation period in which to object to its destruction to make way for a hyperspace bypass.

So I was surprised by what I found when I spent a year studying for an Executive Masters in Public Administration alongside public servants from around the world. Comparing notes with others working in local, national and international government gave me a better sense of how the UK civil service's experience compares – where we are the same, and where we are distinct.

First surprise: Civil service reforms in the UK look a lot like reforms everywhere else

The 19th century saw the birth of the first truly professional public administrations, and ever since then we have been reforming and modernising. We normally look at reforms through the lens of domestic politics, but viewed internationally, they look more like a series of trends.

Starting from the 1980s, many countries implemented reforms collectively known as New Public Management or NPM (those who study public administrations are as fond of acronyms as those who work in them). NPM can broadly be described as making the business of government more businesslike. KPIs and performance-management measures were introduced and large ministries were broken up into more specialised agencies. However, this increasing specialisation led to people working in silos, and so the next wave of reforms – from the 2000s – focused on joined-up government. Mobility between departments was encouraged, with the merging of senior grades to form a single, government-wide executive cadre, and competency-based recruitment practices were introduced. That focus on consistency has given way in the last decade to a focus on change and innovation, with reforms aiming to create digital government and adopt approaches such as agile from tech startups just as NPM adopted practices from corporations.

"We are the Vogons from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, insisting that Earth had a reasonable consultation period in which to object to its destruction"

Second surprise: The UK is an innovator among public administrations

The UK tends to be among the earliest and most comprehensive adopters of each wave of reforms. I found that my classmates and often my professors saw the UK as a frontrunner in many areas, and it saddened me that this positive reputation is so little known here.

One really simple example is that today's UK government department is a paperless office, and it has been for the decade I've worked here. You might consider that a small win, but I encountered people working in other highly developed countries (including G7 and EU members) where paper still moves physically from office to office, and is amended by a literal red ink pen rather than edited in a shared document. Japan last year announced that its government had successfully phased out the floppy disc. Germany still use fax machines.

Third surprise: The UK civil service is among the most neutral in the world

I was already aware that the UK is associated with a highly mobile, "generalist" model compared to more "specialist" models in other countries. I was, however, surprised to learn that the UK civil service is considered among – if not the – most neutral in the democratic world.

In many countries, civil servants are able or even encouraged to join a political party, be politically active, run for and hold political office, and then return to the civil service. In places where ministers have a say in senior promotions, an ambitious civil servant must seek political patronage to progress, and junior politicians see the civil service as a route to power. In one country, I was told, opposition-affiliated civil servants in a department meet and discuss opposition policies and politics openly and regularly. This was a blasphemous concept to me as a UK civil servant. But my classmates were astonished at the idea that I had implemented policies regardless of my personal views, and took pride in successful implementation whether or not I agreed with the decision.

While we should always work at becoming ever more professional and more modern, there is rather a lot of baby in this bathwater. We should make sure we reflect on what we want to keep and celebrate, as well as what we want to change. It may admittedly still be Vogon poetry, but here in the UK, we apparently do it rather well. ■

Nicola Colson currently works for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, where she leads the department's Expert Exchange Programme. She joined the civil service in 2015

HIDDEN TREASURY

Mario on some of the ground occupied by the original Treasury Chambers in Whitehall Palace, between the MoD building and 61 Whitehall

All images Mario Pisani

The Treasury has had many homes over the last 350 years. Treasury History Network co-chair **Mario Pisani** takes us on a tour, from Whitehall Palace to 1 Horse Guards Road and the Darlington Economic Campus

In my role as co-chair of the Treasury History Network, earlier this year I gave a lecture looking at the history of the Treasury's buildings over the past 350 years. Of all the things that could be said about the Treasury, why focus on its buildings? For a number of reasons.

First, because even though the Treasury is one of the oldest institutions of the state, it is not readily identifiable with a single building. Despite its longevity, the Treasury has been a bit of a Whitehall nomad: it has moved around repeatedly over the centuries, often in response to unexpected events like wars and fires, but has never gone very far – at least until its recent expansion to the Darlington Economic Campus. Second, because the relatively unknown and seldom-told story of the Treasury's buildings highlights the impact that the working environment can have on our institutions. In the civil service, we all work on different policies and programmes, for different governments, at different times. This makes our buildings some of the clearest reference points for our collective memory.

Chronology of the Treasury's buildings

The history of the Treasury can be traced back – sometimes faintly, sometimes clearly – for nearly 1,000 years. While there is evidence of revenue collection and distribution during the Anglo-Saxon period, it is only after the Norman conquest that we see the reference to "Henry the treasurer" – the official charged with administering the royal treasure – in the Domesday Book of 1086.

In the centuries that followed, the treasurer and the Exchequer were located together in New Palace Yard, next to Westminster Hall. In the 16th century, after a fire in the Palace of Westminster destroyed the chambers of King Henry VIII, he moved into a property just up the road. By 1536, this had become Whitehall Palace, the official residence of the monarch. In the 1660s, the Treasury separated from the Exchequer and moved into Whitehall Palace.

These are the first rooms used by the Treasury as a separate institution. The original Treasury Chambers were on the ground floor of the Privy Gallery building in Whitehall Palace, a location that I have been able to locate in present-day Whitehall.

But the Treasury did not occupy these chambers for long. Because in January 1698, a huge fire destroyed most of Whitehall Palace, including the Treasury Chambers.

William Kent's Treasury of 1736, Horse Guards Parade

The work of the Treasury moved into a building formerly used as a cockpit (an arena for cockfighting) on the park side of the palace. By the 1730s, this building was in terrible condition and architect William Kent was commissioned to build a replacement on the same site. Kent's building, completed in 1736, was the first purpose-built Treasury building. It is still there today, on the south-eastern corner of Horse Guards Parade.

Over time, more space was needed.

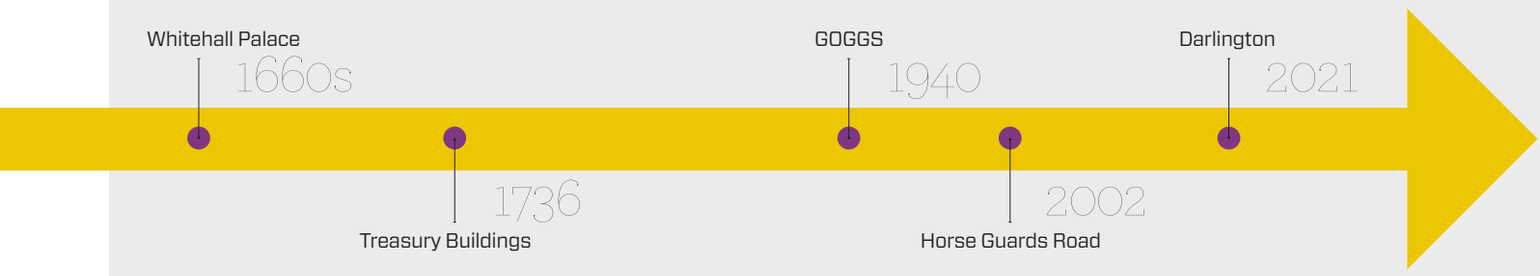
John Soane's Whitehall building (1820s) known as "New Public Offices" but linked to William Kent's Treasury behind it

In the 1820s, architect John Soane was commissioned to build offices connected to Kent's Treasury, but on the Whitehall side. His building, over budget and not well regarded, did not last long: in the 1840s, architect Charles Barry was given the job of updating it. Barry extended the building along Whitehall, added an additional storey, and improved the frontage. This building became known as the New Treasury Offices – although we now know it as 70 Whitehall – and was occupied by the Treasury and three other government departments.

WWII and the Treasury

Over the centuries, the Treasury's policies have often been shaped by the financial imperatives created by war: the introduction of a "temporary" income tax after the Napoleonic Wars, or the abandonment of the gold standard at the outbreak of the First World War. The same is true about »

TIMELINE OF THE TREASURY'S BUILDINGS SINCE THE SEPARATION FROM THE EXCHEQUER IN THE 17TH CENTURY



70 Whitehall, known as New Treasury Offices when it was built by Charles Barry in the 1840s

its buildings. In October 1940, during the Blitz, German bombs damaged the Treasury building on Whitehall. This meant that the majority of Treasury staff had to relocate to Government Offices Great George Street, or GOGGS, on the corner of Parliament Street and Great George Street – where HMRC and HM Treasury are located today.

In 1940, GOGGS was already a busy building, with many ministries located there as part of the war effort, so the Treasury had to jostle with other government departments for space. The Air Ministry was one of the largest occupants at the time and had use of some of the nicest rooms. The Air Council used the large room on the second floor on the north side of the building – this room eventually became the office of the chancellor of the exchequer between the 1950s and the 2000s.

The October 1940 air raids also damaged Downing Street and the prime minister, Winston Churchill, had to relocate. In December 1940, he and his wife moved into a set of rooms in GOGGS repurposed for their use. They were on the ground floor facing St James's Park. These rooms became known as the "Downing Street Annexe" – which the Churchills lived in until the end of the war in 1945.

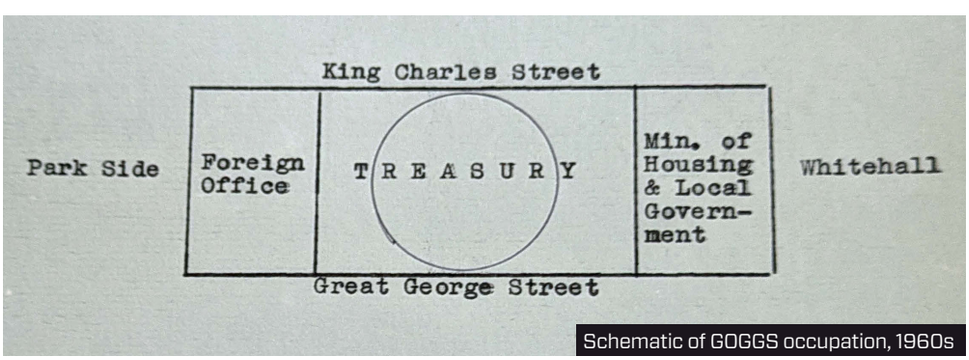
Churchill was not the only celebrated occupant of GOGGS during the war. It was around this time that one of the most famous economists of all time – John Maynard Keynes – worked at the Treasury as an unpaid adviser to the chancellor. The exact location of his office in GOGGS has long been a mystery but, as part of my research, I have been able to locate it. It is now an open-plan office used by HMRC colleagues.

In the decades following the war, the Treasury ended up as the biggest tenant at GOGGS and occupied the space around the circular courtyard and the centre of the building, with the Treasury entrance on Great George Street.

Post-war decline and revival

By the 1990s, GOGGS had fallen into disrepair. A number of schemes for refurbishment were considered, but it was only in 1999 that the project got the go-ahead. Between 2000 and 2002, Treasury staff squeezed into the eastern end of GOGGS facing Parliament Street (plus some spillover in a tower block in Victoria) so that work could start on the western side of the building facing the park. The Treasury then moved into the newly refurbished section of GOGGS – renamed as 1 Horse Guards Road. The refurbishment of the eastern side of the building then followed and was completed in 2004.

Beyond London, the Treasury has had a longstanding link with Norwich, dating back to its responsibility for the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency and then the Office for Government Commerce, which in 2000 became part of the Treasury Group. The idea of a Treasury office in the north of England was first floated in the run-up to the 2019 general election. The following year, chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the intention to create a Treasury outpost in the north, just around the time that the Covid pandemic forced a range of employers to introduce hybrid working. Then-permanent secretary Sir Tom Scholar explained that "it was of course entirely coincidental that the pandemic happened just as the Treasury was starting to plan the new office outside London. But in retrospect, the experience of working remotely through the lockdown was critical in helping the department make a success of the new office."



Schematic of GOGGS occupation, 1960s

National Archives

GOGGS today, the 1 Horse Guards Road entrance

“1 Horse Guards Road now feels like an open and efficient modern office. This has transformed the way the ministry operates”

In spring 2021, the chancellor announced that the chosen location for the northern campus would be Darlington. The Treasury initially moved into a building called Bishopsgate House, sharing accommodation used by other government departments already located there. In 2022, Treasury staff in the Darlington Economic Campus moved into Feethams House. Plans are progressing for a move into purpose-built offices in Brunswick Street in 2027.

Lessons for today

After the House of Commons was destroyed in the Blitz in 1941, Churchill said that “we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us”. What does the history of the Treasury’s buildings tell us about the institution?

First, it explains the importance of geography to one of the central relationships in Whitehall: that between the leader of the government and the Treasury. At the turn of the 18th century, the most important source of political power stemmed from the ability to control the financial machinery of government. One of the reasons Downing Street became the official residence of the prime minister is because of its proximity to the Treasury – which at the time was located in the Cockpit, and then William Kent’s building on the same site.

Second, it tells us something about how the physical environment can affect institutional culture. The Treasury entered GOGGS at a time when the building was literally a bunker. In the years that followed the war, a closed and suspicious approach became central to the way the department operated. The 2000-2004 refurbishment created a distinctly new working environment, which promoted openness and collaboration. Some 20 years after the refurbishment, 1 Horse Guards Road now feels like an open and efficient modern office. This in turn has transformed the way the ministry operates as an institution.

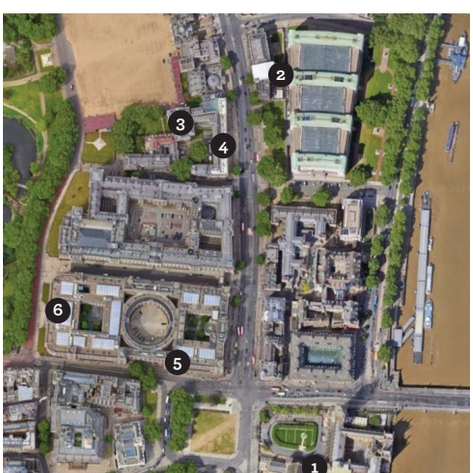
Third, it shows the importance of having a broader national footprint. The Darlington Economic Campus houses more than 1,000 officials from across departments, of which more than 300 are from HMT. As an institution, our presence outside of London has never been this significant. It changes the way we do our work by providing a gateway to better policy innovation, diversity of thought and new stakeholders. It has enabled an active engagement programme to exchange views and perspectives with businesses in the region and has given the Treasury access to a wider set of labour markets.

These are just some of the stories and lessons that we can take from the remarkable history of the Treasury’s buildings over the centuries, but there are many more that I hope to tell over time. ■

Mario Pisani is a deputy director at HMT

Feethams House, Darlington Economic Campus, which today houses more than 300 HMT officials

Mario Pisani



1. Exchequer Receipt Office, New Palace Yard Westminster; 2. Treasury Chambers, Whitehall Palace; 3. The Cockpit, Whitehall Palace; 4. Treasury Buildings; 5. Government Offices Great George Street; 6. 1 Horse Guards Road

FROM THE ARCHIVES

After 10 years leading The National Archives, **Jeff James** recently became chief executive at the Disclosure and Barring Service. He speaks to **Tevye Markson** about social purpose, flexible working and football

"You couldn't ask for a better alignment," says Jeff James, as we discuss his old job at The National Archives, his new one at the Disclosure and Barring Service, and the PhD he finished 18 months ago.

In 2016, James, the then-chief executive of The National Archives, began a PhD in sociology and history focused on 19th-century crime and poverty, and specifically how vulnerable children and adults were treated in workhouses through the lens of punishment.

During his research, he was able to make use of his easy access to The National Archives. His studies also inspired his next job move.

"I spent seven-and-a-half years thinking quite hard about issues like abuse and neglect, and power and control, and how officials and institutions in the 19th century had an impact on paupers and vulnerable people," James says.

"I immediately recognised in DBS that it was the logical extension of that historical interest, applied to a modern day setting." This, he says, was one of the main reasons why DBS "was such an attractive position for me".

He also notes that some of those themes "play through" into the current era.

James says an example of this is the popular misconception that vulnerable paupers "were somehow docile and compliant" and "incapable of resisting, never mind influencing, the way that they were treated or mistreated.

"During my research I came across countless examples of extraordinary and determined agency by those that society often thought of as being without worth," he says.

James says this included a young single mother who "absconded over the workhouse walls with a bowl of sour gruel infested with insects that had made dozens of people, including children, ill" and who "demanded that local officials taste the contaminated food that they said their pigs would not eat".

"I've always looked for a combination of intellectual and emotional engagement"

"The concept and practice of agency, begrudgingly tolerated in the 19th century, is now echoed in modern safeguarding thinking around empowerment, protection and partnership where individuals are supported to make their own decisions, give informed consent, have support and representation where needed and where local solutions are delivered with and through their communities," he adds.

James joined DBS as its chief executive in June after 10 years as boss of The National Archives. Prior to this, he began his career with a 14 year-spell in the Royal Navy.

These long stints strike a contrast to the high rates of churn seen among senior civil servants. What made him stick around in those roles?

"I guess I've always looked for a combination of intellectual and emotional engagement," James says. "If you look at my career history, my roles have tended to be in organisations where there's a really strong purpose. But it's also been something that I emotionally engage with, something that I felt was important, that gave me satisfaction. And DBS is exactly the same."

He notes its "really strong commitment to safeguarding, to protecting vulnerable people", alongside "massive digital and technology transformation opportunities.

"So they're the common threads, I suppose, if you look back over my career. I felt like there was a real social purpose to what I was doing. It wasn't just an operational and efficiency thing. It was also about providing a societal benefit."

Growing up in the north-east of England, James says it was common for people from that area to join the armed forces. Indeed, it's a path taken by many in his family. »

James himself joined the navy in 1984, aged 16, as an apprentice artificer – an electronic engineering role ("it's fantastic to see apprenticeships back in popularity; it's one of those things that I thought perhaps had had its day," he says). Specialising as a submariner, he first worked on Polaris submarines and later on Trident submarines, and says it was "an interesting time... and a very different time".

"I sometimes look back and it feels like a different life," he says. "As you would expect, I can't really talk that much about it given the nature of what I did, but it was a hugely enjoyable period."

Leaving the navy in 1998, aged 30 – "just at the point where people were recruiting for Y2K" – James says he had built up a broad skill set that meant that he could choose between a range of fields from project management, to engineering, to IT. He went with the latter, working at the University of Leeds in an IT role for six years. He returned to the public sector in 2004, joining the British Library, where he led its document supply service in Boston Spa, and went on to become head of operations for the south. He then joined The National Archives in 2007, initially as head of advice and records knowledge before being promoted to director of public services and then director of operations. He became chief executive in 2014.

James has fond memories of his 16 years at TNA.

"It was a really interesting place. It was incredibly varied. I got to engage directly with some of the most iconic documentary heritage of our nation. So Domesday, two versions of the Magna Carta, Guy Fawkes's confession. Probably one of the most privileged things was doing an exhibition in 2016 for the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare. We had to conserve the will, and it was fascinating to see the expert conservationists who spent about six months carrying out repairs and making sure that the will was in a good physical condition to be displayed."

James recalls regularly switching between "hats" and every day being different, which made the job "really fascinating". Not least after the emergence of Covid, he recalls, when "physical access was removed overnight" and DBS "had to suddenly pivot what we were doing and accelerate some of our digital work to make sure that people could still engage with things like family history, which they tended to do even more during the pandemic".

James says it was also "really humbling" to see how people interacted with documentary heritage.

"The emotions that came through. Not just with the iconic records, but with personal records as well. When somebody was looking for the army service record of their grandfather and you could see the emotional impact of it... that was incredibly moving, and it happened on a regular basis."

James held a long list of simultaneous job titles as the top civil servant at The National Archives, including chief exec, keeper, controller of Her Majesty's (and then His Majesty's) Stationery Office, historical manuscripts commissioner, and Queen's (then King's) printer for acts of parliament.

"As long as the services and products that we provide are delivered, it doesn't really matter where they happen"

Is it easier having just the one now? "It's simpler, that's for sure. I think I had seven titles at one point, and that's actually to do with the way that the archives came together as an organisation. It was constituted from several different bodies, so lots of different functions were brought together under one umbrella organisation.

"DBS is no less fascinating, but it has a comparatively more straightforward structure. I'm enjoying just having the one title now, and one thing to focus on."

He's joining DBS at what he calls a "really exciting point in its journey", due to a programme of tech-based reforms "which will transform the way that we engage with our customers, will allow us to deliver better value for money, higher quality services, and ultimately lead to better safeguarding outcomes". This will include piloting AI-driven enhancements such as refining its police matching algorithm to decrease unnecessary police referrals.

These and other planned technological improvements over the next few years will help DBS to serve what James sees as its dual function: "[DBS] sits at this crux between making sure that people who shouldn't be working with vulnerable adults and children aren't, but at the same time helping employers to make good decisions that allow them to have confidence in the workforce. And as that workforce changes, we need to be able to adapt to it," he says.

James describes DBS as being "in a really good place" due to the significant change that his predecessor oversaw in the previous five years. "But equally," he says, "there are massive opportunities for the future in thinking about how we can make our services more accessible, make sure they are aligned with the needs of employers, make sure they are robust and good quality, and that we're making really good data and evidence-led decisions that are fair and transparent and open." A key part of this will be designing services in a more user-centric way "so that we can be confident that what we do in the future is going to meet the needs of our customers," he adds.

In April, the government launched a review of arm's-length bodies, with a presumption that all quangos will be scrapped unless there is a compelling reason for them to remain independent. Has James been asked to make the case for keeping DBS as a separate entity – and is he confident it will stay as it is?

"Well, whatever happens with us in the future, our main purpose remains supporting the government to make good safeguarding decisions," he says. "So as long as the services and products that we provide are delivered, it doesn't really matter where they happen. We've got a very strong purpose, a very strong mission, and we've got bold ambitions for the future. The environment may change around us, but that doesn't really detract us from our core purpose."

In the introduction to DBS's 2025-28 strategy, published just a few weeks before James took over in June, his predecessor Eric Robinson mentioned

Last Will Shakespeare's will, in which he famously bequeathed his wife his second best bed, on display in 2016

planned changes, including "the internal reshaping of our operations teams".

James says this is happening because DBS, like The National Archives, was formed from multiple entities – in DBS's case, the 2012 merger of the Independent Safeguarding Authority and the Criminal Records Bureau – "and some of the ways that we had previously been operating were still segmented, in terms of disclosure and barring.

"Over the last year or so, we've brought those functions together," he says. "So the functions that were traditionally in Darlington and in Liverpool in the barring and disclosure services have now been brought together into an operational services directorate, which has got almost 1,000 staff in it who are multi-skilled and who are keen to develop themselves in a more flexible way of working."

At the National Archives, a non-ministerial department, James and his colleagues were civil servants. But at DBS, they are public servants in a non-departmental public body, which means they are not held to the government's 60% office-attendance mandate.

"We're not subject to the usual civil service constraints, but obviously we do align ourselves with that general pattern of work where there's a combination of people who are in the office, some people who work remotely, some people who work in a hybrid kind of way," James says.

He cites numerous benefits of this approach: "Our staff engagement is very high, our productivity is very high, and it allows us to deliver better value for money as well, because we're gradually reducing our physical footprint in order to deliver our services more efficiently. And we get the benefit of being able to engage with a talent pool which is not geographically constrained. We're able to look for the best people across the country."

James says investing in technology has been key to enabling this flexibility, and that he believes more is needed "to really double down on the advantages".

He says his customer services team, which had previously been limited to an office environment, can now be based either in the office or at home, or some combination of the two. There is a method to this flexible model: when staff are new and being trained, there is a more fixed approach of office-based working so they can be appropriately supported. Once they gain confidence and familiarity with the technology, it becomes more fluid.

Does he think DBS has got the right balance?

"I don't think you ever get there," he says. "It's an evolutionary thing, isn't it? You're constantly evolving as you're using technology and developing your working practices, and thinking about how you can provide a work context in which the individuals themselves benefit at the same time as the customers and at the same time as the people who pay for the services that you provide."

For the record As boss of TNA, James had multiple job titles, including 'keeper' and 'historical manuscripts commissioner'

What does James do when he's not running a complex, vital and constantly evolving institution? Based in Liverpool, he says he likes to unwind by going for a run along the river – but he's a dad of three sons, 11-year-old twins and a 13-year-old, "and they're all football mad".

So he spends most of his spare time "on touchlines in wet, miserable weather supporting them in their various football matches. Because that's what you do, isn't it? As a parent. So if I'm not running, I'm probably supporting grassroots football".

The night before our interview, though, it was professional football. We're speaking the day after the Lionesses won their second Euros on the trot, and both interviewer and interviewee are in good spirits.

"It was very peculiar because my wife missed the Sweden game and I had to tell her, you know, you wouldn't believe this game, this amazing game that you missed. I said it's been 14 penalties and we won, but we only scored three.

"So when we got to penalties last night, she was feeling quite downbeat and I was like, 'no, no, it'll be fine. This is our tournament. I just feel confident that we're going to get through.' So [there was] a massive cheer from our household last night when they won. Fantastic achievement! Absolutely brilliant." ■

Subbing in for each other in their joint DG role at the Department for Business and Trade is part of life for **Gavin Lambert** and **Caleb Deeks**. They tell **Susan Allott** about the surprising benefits of job-sharing

Gavin Lambert (left) and Caleb Deeks (right)

TRADING PLACES

"I wouldn't have wanted to do a director general job at this stage in my life if it wasn't in this arrangement"
Caleb Deeks

Caleb Deeks and Gavin Lambert are treating *CSW* to a rare phenomenon: they are in the same room at the same time, side by side at a boardroom table. "Normally you'd never see us together," Deeks says. "We usually divide and conquer."

Substantive proof, then, that they are not the same person. But they do possess a "superpower" of sorts: they are job-share partners, jointly directors general for competition, markets and regulatory reform at the Department for Business and Trade. Taking inspiration from other civil service job-sharers, they went into the arrangement because they wanted to advance their careers while protecting their time away from work. What they discovered was a way of working that brought advantages beyond their expectations.

They had been colleagues in the business department for around 10 years when Deeks raised the idea of job-sharing with Lambert. He'd been thinking about it and talking about it for quite some time, he says: "I slightly started to feel that I'd done a lot of talking about it and no doing of it." So when it transpired that Lambert was about to take adoption leave, it seemed like an opening. "We weren't especially close colleagues, but I think we knew each other well enough to have a mutual respect for what we did and how we did it," Deeks says. "So it was great that the opportunity presented itself."

They went for a walk in St James's Park one day in 2018, and Deeks asked Lambert what he thought of the idea. Lambert recalls: "Job-sharing wasn't something that I had necessarily thought about. But I was about to head off adopting children, so my priorities had somewhat shifted."

Following that conversation in the park, a plan was hatched. "We agreed we'd spend the time while I was off on adoption leave exploring what job-sharing could mean for us, and what we'd need to do to succeed, learning from others about what success requires and working that through," Lambert says. "So we did that for about a year."

They talked to several people across the civil service who were working as part of a job-share, or had done so, to learn how they did it. "What their tips were for job-split versus job-share, what insights they could share with us around how to make it work," Lambert says. "And we did some work on our own leadership – whether we were aligned in terms of how we lead, and how we deal with people, which was super helpful."

"We talked to Polly and Ruth, of course," Deeks says, referring to the renowned civil service job-sharers Polly Payne and Ruth Hannant, who have shared five roles in five departments, with two joint promotions. Currently directors general for policy at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Payne and Hannant were the first job-sharers to break the DG ceiling, and are credited with forging a new way forward for people who might otherwise have compromised on their careers when children or caring responsibilities came along.

"People go, 'Oh, it's great to see some senior males doing a job-share,'" Deeks says. "It's really obvious to us that the only reason we're able to do this is because people like Polly, Ruth and others blazed that trail, showing that it could work and frankly showing us how to do it. So, you know – massive amounts of gratitude for that."

During Lambert's adoption leave, Deeks was working on the civil service reform brief in the Cabinet Office – a role that Lambert had held 10 years earlier, under then-Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude. They shared the role for a short time when Lambert returned to work in 2020. "We were considering what role to move into, and the timing meant it was best for me to join Caleb in that job," Lambert says. "But then our current job [in DBT] arose as an opportunity too good to miss. So we put our hat in the ring, and we got the DG job."

Do they have any reflections on what makes a job-share successful – maybe a few tips they would like to pass on?

"Yes," they say, simultaneously. "We love talking about this, by the way," Lambert adds.

"It's obvious that you need to communicate a lot and share stuff and work-share. And we do that," Deeks says. "But I think there are two things that have really stuck with me about making a success of a job-share partnership. First of all, being completely aligned on what you're trying to achieve in the role. And then secondly, having alignment on your values."

They have different strengths and different networks, which they agree is positive – they complement one another in certain ways. "But I think we've got a similar commitment to doing a really good job, like really high standards, but also doing it in a way that takes care of people, is positive, is respectful and kind," Deeks says. "And »

I think that alignment is really crucial not just for making it work but also for the experience of all the people that we work with."

They want the job-share to feel seamless to other people, Deeks continues: "You want people to be able to have a conversation with one of you, forget who it was, and it doesn't matter – you're going to pick it up, whoever's there. And the feedback we get tells us that we are managing to achieve that, which is brilliant."

Lambert says that trust is very important. "When I'm at home with the kids on Monday and Tuesday, I can completely trust Caleb will be getting on and doing it and making it work, and whatever he decides, I completely trust his judgement. And I will defend and support that."

"We succeed together and we also fail together" *Gavin Lambert*

How do they manage the handover process – the pooling of information which makes job-sharing so collaborative, but which can also take up a lot of time in its own right? On this, Deeks and Lambert learned from job-sharers such as directors general Katherine Green and Sophie Dean, who spoke to *CSW* last year about the "personal overhead" of the handover process, which they carry out on a Sunday night to avoid cutting into the week.

"We spend an hour or so every Sunday night going through everything," Lambert says. "We do a little agenda and run through what's going on. It's super helpful." And like Green and Dean, they don't resent the interruption of their weekend: "I really look forward to it. It's the highlight of my Sunday night, which probably sounds quite sad," Lambert says. "I'm more productive on a Friday, knowing I'm going to be marked by Caleb on a Sunday night. But also, I get an hour of feedback on how I've done things.

"We end the call with me saying, 'Caleb, would you have done anything differently? Was there anything you thought didn't look quite right?' And it's not every week, but occasionally there's a couple of things – just a bit of course-correction or a different pair of eyes." This level of "really frank, direct feedback" is a unique thing, Lambert says, and gives them a resilience as a duo that they didn't have working alone.

Deeks feels the same about their Sunday night handovers: "It means that I really hit Monday morning running because I'm not thinking of them as I did when I worked for the previous 20 years on my own," he says. "If I'd had a weekend that wasn't interrupted by a work thing, I'd start on Monday thinking, 'What? What am I doing?' Whereas now, I've had that conversation on Sunday night so in the morning, I know exactly what my priorities are and what's going on."

On a Wednesday, which is their crossover day, they often have breakfast together, followed by a senior management team meeting. "But otherwise we're activating the job-share superpower of being in two places at once," Deeks says, "which is brilliantly useful on occasion."

The benefits of the job-share have surpassed what Deeks expected – he says he went into it looking forward to an improved work-life balance and more time for his family. "I hadn't anticipated how big the professional effectiveness benefits of working in a job-share would turn out to be," he says. "For me, those are actually more profound than the personal benefits."

Deeks also appreciates the recovery time that the job-share affords him. "When things have been really intense, really busy, trying to deliver a lot in a short space of time, it's brilliant to be able to hit it really hard for a few days and then go off and have a bit more time to recover and do it again the next week."

Lambert has a note of caution on this – he's aware that he has a level of resilience that his team might not have. "Particularly towards the end of the week, when I've only done three days, I just check in with those in our team who've put five days in, and who are probably a bit knackered by Friday lunchtime," he says.

Their job is challenging, nonetheless. "We've got a big portfolio, we've got more stuff that we pick up," Deeks says. The pair has around 1,000 policy, delivery and operations staff working for them, with a brief that includes the oversight of 15 arm's-length bodies, and responsibility for the regulatory frameworks that support growth. "Our goal is to help the economy grow and make sure we've got decent salaries going into people's pockets every month, and there's the taxation available to support public services," Lambert says. "We see ourselves being critical to that."

They also oversee the setting of the national minimum wage, and the plan to make work pay. "It's a really big transformation in employment rights, protecting those in more insecure work, including zero-hours contracts," Lambert says. This is something he's especially proud of: "I was chatting to a mum in the queue for school the other week. She was asking me about what we're doing on zero-hours contracts because she's on one. And she connected with it because it will give her more stable employment. She was asking how quickly it's going to happen. Not as quickly as she would like, but we're on it. And that's hugely inspiring – that the work our teams are doing, it really matters to people."

They have a team focused on product safety, which tackles problems such as the use of conversion kits to turn pedal bikes into e-bikes: "There's a rather horrifying possibility that they can explode when they're charging," Lambert says. And they cover competition policy – from Oasis tickets being sold through re-sellers to regulating big tech firms like Google – alongside a raft of measures to reduce the burdens on business.

Have there been any difficult days? Any big decisions that weighed heavily? Deeks has to go back to the pre-job-share days to find an example. "I was working in the Treasury in 2007 or thereabouts on spending on prisons," he says. "It was one of these prison crisis periods which we've had experience of again more recently. And you were busy but there were very hard decisions to make that were going to have effects on people's lives out there. I remember feeling that quite acutely," he says.

Lambert recalls a previous DG role in the business department that he did on an interim basis – he was involved in the collapse of "a high-profile industrial company who will remain nameless, but it's probably fairly obvious", he says. "And it was sort of all on me... And you think about the thousands of families that are directly affected as a result of that. Similar decisions, albeit different ones in this current mode, are less acute, I think, because I've got Caleb to bounce things off just as a sense check."

The interim DG role lasted for around six months, and Lambert decided against applying for the permanent position. Why was that? "It wasn't a fit for me with the kids," he says. "And just in terms of my time of life, doing it full time – it wouldn't have been the right fit."

Deeks is equally clear on this: "I wouldn't have wanted to do a director general job at this stage in my life if it wasn't in this [job-sharing] arrangement," he says. "I'm really confident that together, we do a better job than either of us would individually."

Lambert clearly agrees. He values the transparency in their working relationship, which means neither one of them has to be defensive if something doesn't go well, or take weighty decisions without a trusted sounding-board. "Because we succeed together and we also fail together," he says. "It is super, super powerful." ■

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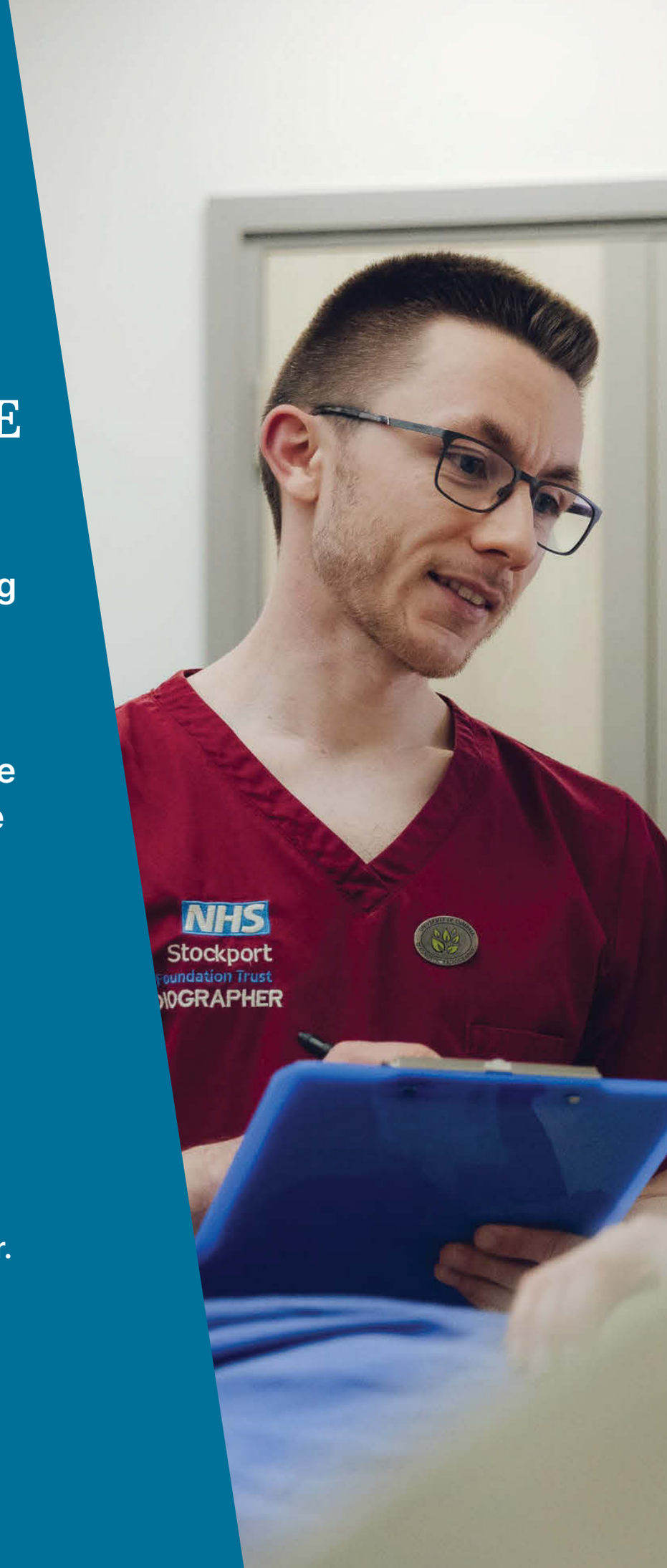

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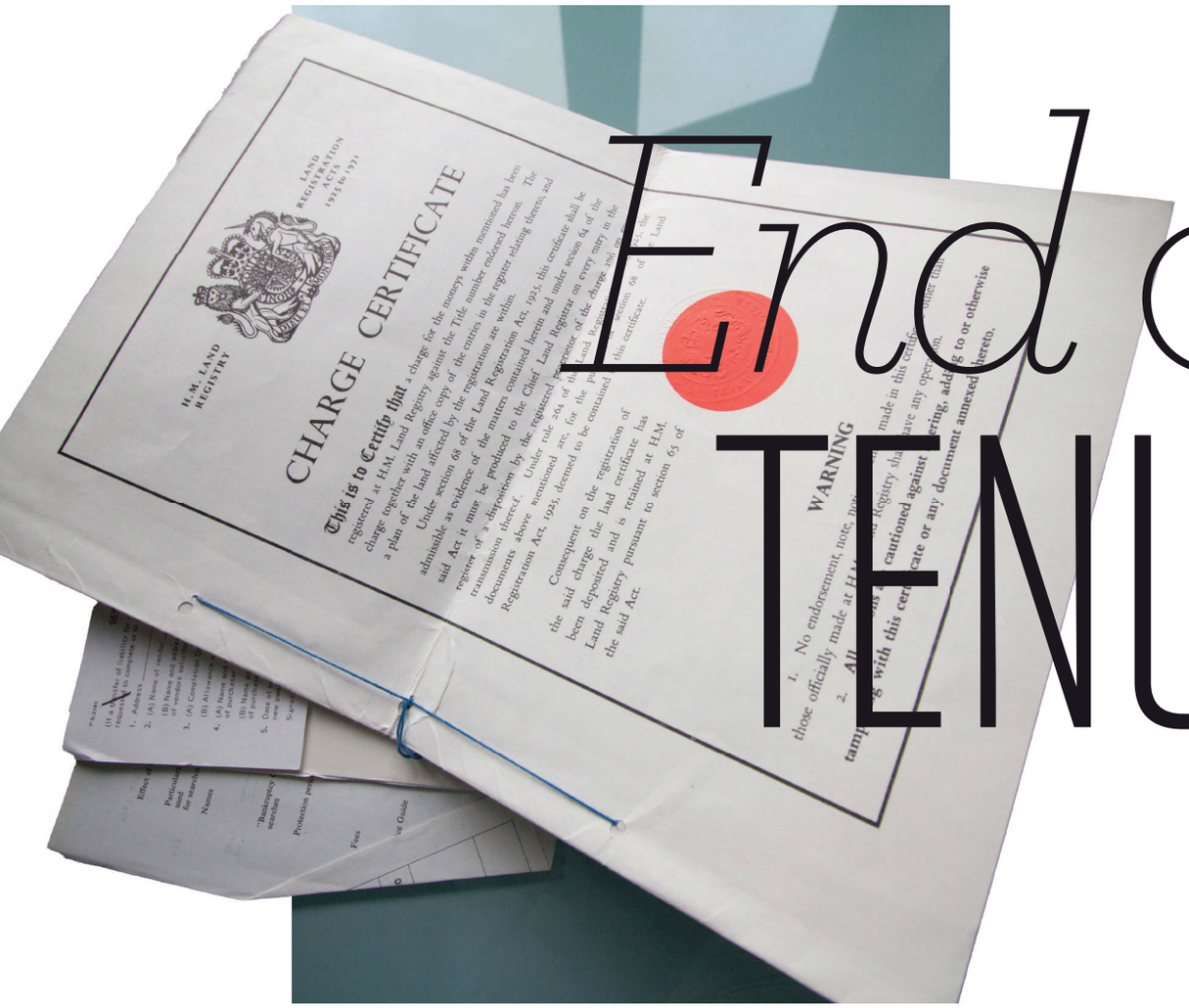


End of TENURE

As **Simon Hayes** leaves HM Land Registry for Sport England, he talks to **Jess Bowie** about home-working, historic documents and hindsight

On a sweltering day in August, the walk from East Croydon station to HM Land Registry's office takes you past the lunchtime crowd at a trendy Boxpark. Some of the patrons – who are being blasted by person-sized fans as they eat street food from the shipping container stalls – presumably work in numbers 1 and 2 Ruskin Square just down the road. These buildings have become beacons of the government hubs programme: since 2017 and 2024 respectively, HM Revenue and Customs and the Home Office have had major bases here. The Land Registry got to Croydon first, however: its HQ moved here from central London in 2011.

Giant fans are apparently the order of the day. As *CSW* settles down to meet Simon Hayes in a humid boardroom in HMLR's office on Bedford Park, a huge whirring contraption on wheels – rather than air conditioning – offers scant relief from the heat.

It might seem fitting that one of the world's biggest buyers of microfiche readers (of which more later) wouldn't have aircon. But don't be fooled – this 160-year-old organisation has recently undergone a huge transformation programme. Hayes has spent the last few years leading reforms that he says have improved the Land Registry's quality and outputs, as well as staff engagement. A sizeable programme of work to digitise its records is also now under way.

When he began his civil service career nearly three decades ago, Hayes wasn't thinking about title deeds and safeguarding property ownership. "I had quite a traditional Whitehall introduction to the civil service," he says. He began life as a fast streamer in the Home Office, where he remained for years, working in policy and private office roles and ultimately some very senior operational delivery roles.

"I think 20-plus years in the Home Office is character forming... in lots and lots of ways," he says with a smile.

His time there wasn't always easy, he adds: "I dealt with an incredibly challenging operational environment in immigration that is made harder by the strength of feeling around it – your room to operate within that is heavily influenced by the politics of the day. That doesn't always

marry up with the most straightforward long-term planning on how to deliver."

But he also remembers this as a time when he "achieved a great deal in some really quite difficult circumstances". As director of visas and citizenship at UK Visas and Immigration following the Brexit referendum – another "highly politically charged situation" – he set up the EU Settlement Scheme for European citizens living in the UK, which was successfully launched in 2019.

Later that year, Hayes left to become chief executive of HMLR. Asked what drew him to the non-ministerial department after so long in homeland security, he points to its uniqueness, its "fantastic heritage" and its "history of achievement".

Land registration plays a fundamental role in the economic and financial structure of the country, he says. "We are a part of the critical national infrastructure of the financial system. And more than that, it gives real security to homeowners in England and Wales. For the vast majority of people, this is the biggest asset they will own in their lives."

Beyond that, he was attracted to HMLR's reputation as having a good working culture with staff who are passionate about their work, he says.

"I was looking for a CEO role – it was what I wanted to do next in my career. And so the opportunity came up, and it felt like a good match in terms of the skills and experience I could bring around performance improvement, particularly. But it also suited where I wanted to go next in my career."

When Hayes arrived at the Land Registry, he inherited what could diplomatically be called a lean organisation. "It was clear we didn't have enough people," he says. HMLR had long relied on a shrinking pool of seasoned staff, while waves of redundancies during housing downturns meant there was no new generation coming through.

Then, just as Hayes had familiarised himself with the quirks of his new brief and was gearing up to launch a variety of initiatives to increase capacity and productivity, the pandemic hit, forcing civil servants to work from home. Lockdown was "very challenging" for HMLR, he says: the organisation had never processed a case outside of one of its offices and before 2020, very few employees worked from home.

"We were so unprepared that we spent the first three months literally driving computers around to people's houses," Hayes says. At the same time, a Covid-fuelled housing boom – prompted by people rethinking their lives and relocating – sent demand soaring.

"The challenge was compounded by the nature of our government funding, with any surplus going back to the exchequer rather than being carried over for us to use the following year," Hayes adds. Recruitment typically halted when the property market slowed, leaving the organisation scrambling to rebuild every time it picked up. "By then you're already too late – and you've let your most experienced people go," he says.

"If I had my time again, I would spend more time communicating to people exactly why we were doing what we were doing"

Although his plan had always been to rebuild capacity and productivity, doing so during a lockdown meant recruiting and training remotely. ("Very hard" is Hayes's understated verdict on that). Progress was slower than hoped, leaving HMLR battling a perfect storm of staff shortages and record demand. "The last few years have been about fighting back against that," Hayes says.

Unsurprisingly, staff engagement fell during that period because – as Hayes says – "it's very demoralising to feel like you're getting behind".

It took a concerted effort and several operational adjustments to improve morale at the Land Registry – along with its quality and output. "Those are the three things I'm really happy about," he says.

Two major changes were recruiting "a huge number of people", aided by the launch of a Land Registration Academy as a new central training function; and a large-scale restructure that enabled the department to use its 14 existing offices as business units.

"The analogy I've been using with staff is: it felt like we were cycling uphill and the summit seemed further and further away at times. We're not [yet] freewheeling downhill but I do feel like we are now on flatter ground, and building momentum," Hayes says.

"Now that we're in that position, it is a really good foundation to go on to the next stage, which is about keeping that capability and that level of performance, and accelerating the transformation."

Would he approach those changes differently if he were to do it again? "I think that I would spend more time communicating to people exactly where we were and why we were doing what we were doing," he says.

"It became clear, with the benefit of hindsight, that we didn't get the communication around it right, and people didn't understand as clearly as they needed to why we were doing it."

And what advice would he give other leaders facing backlogs or a surge in demand? Having good data is important, he says: "You've got to have a really good understanding of the scale of the issue and the scale of the demand.

"That can be hard, especially when that information could be quite sensitive or reputationally challenging, or cause potential political problems."

Then, "almost invariably", there is the need for "more people, more knowledge and more traditional experience, because it's very hard to »

In deed Hayes and some of his team at HMLR

transform from a position of weakness.

"You haven't got the time to develop whilst you've got customers metaphorically banging the door down to say: 'Where's my case, where's my decision, where's my registration?'"

Another, more recent, challenge came after HMLR tried to enforce a rule stating that staff must spend three days a week in the office. Starting in January, PCS union members at the organisation spent six months working to rule following a ballot in which 69% of those who voted backed strikes and action short of strike.

The industrial action was called off in July after managers agreed to increase flexibility, with office attendance being measured over three-month periods instead of weekly. They also committed to running a consultation should government back down on its cross-civil service 60% in-office demand.

Reflecting on the dispute, Hayes says he doesn't think "we should be aiming to go back to a time where everybody came into the office for a certain period of time every day.

"I do, though, believe it's important for an organisation like ours, where collaboration and learning from colleagues is important, that people spend time together face to face in an office to help with that." Hybrid working is, therefore, "the way forward", he says.

"The challenge comes around how prescriptive you are," he adds, before admitting that there are real challenges in balancing the needs of the organisation with the best deal for employees.

"I think that the action taken in Land Registry could have happened in other places as well, it wasn't specifically about HMLR, and I'm pleased that the dispute has finished. We managed through it. But I don't think it's quite the end of the story, because we are all learning about what the best way forward is."

When its members voted to end the action, PCS criticised what it called "arbitrary and interfering management decisions" and "micromanagement through access and misuse of staff data" at HMLR.

Asked whether that is a culture that he recognises, Hayes says it's "perfectly legitimate" to track when people are on site or not. "In fact, I think it's a responsibility of management to know where their staff are," he adds.

"The issue of micromanagement refers to both the management of attendance and the management of performance. And we are still on a journey around performance management – if I'm being completely frank, I think HMLR still has some way to go on that. I think other organisations are further down that track, including the Home Office. But I hope we can work with the unions on that, and not in a way that's simply being in a constant dispute with them."

After some discussion about whether leaving the Land Registry to lead Sport England means his days as a civil servant are over (technically, they are – Hayes will now be classified as a public servant), *CSW* is curious what he would change about the civil service as a whole, given the chance.

"First of all, I think it moves too slowly," he says. "It is not prepared to make decisions fast enough, partly because everybody is justifiably concerned with thinking through every aspect of what we're doing, because we carry a huge amount of responsibility."

He gives the example of the Land Registry underwriting more than £9tn worth of property, which means that making mistakes is "potentially catastrophic". A low-risk appetite "around some of the things you do" is therefore appropriate.

But this caution can lead to inertia, he says, "because you simply find reasons not to do things all the time.

"It's something I spend quite a lot of time talking to our non-executive directors about – the vast majority of whom have come from private sector backgrounds. They struggle with that, understandably," he says.

"They're pushing us all the time: 'Can we move faster on this?' And I agree with them. It's a hard mindset to address when people are dealing with so much responsibility, and the weight of that responsibility is emphasised so strongly."

He says that with insufficient reward for innovation and "enormous downsides" to getting things wrong, "the incentives are skewed so that people will always take the conservative option". "At different times in my career I've pushed for innovation, and it's not been particularly well received. That, I think, is something that would need to change if we're really going to change the level of performance significantly."

Speaking of innovation, the hot topic of the moment is artificial intelligence, and whether civil servants can use it to radically improve productivity. Could AI help the Land Registry achieve its goals?

Hayes points to an all-too-common hurdle in public services: "I think AI is a massive opportunity for us, but one of the big challenges is around the data."

The Land Registry holds records on 88% of all the land ownership in England and Wales – and while some of these documents are fully digital, some are in formats that are difficult to use, like PDFs. Meanwhile, some of its historical records are on paper, and HMLR is still one of the world's leading consumers of microfiche readers.

"We also have two types of information, which makes it particularly challenging. We have textual information, which is reasonably straightforward. But we have geospatial information as well: maps

and title plans and so on," he explains.

"We've got to make those digital and readable to do all of our work. So that's the next phase – and the truth is, that's probably a 10-year or even 20-year programme. And if you come back to customer expectation now, which is very much, 'It should be immediate, it should be online, why isn't it?'– we need to communicate that to people and explain why we're doing it and why it will take that time."

"It felt like we were cycling uphill and the summit seemed further and further away. We're now on flatter ground, and building momentum"

That long-term work to digitise information, and to digitise the register as a whole, will have another major benefit, Hayes says. Land registration "provides an incredible dataset in terms of the landscape of England and Wales: how land is used, who owns it, where the opportunities for development are, and how we could drive more economic growth off the back of that". Adding more records to that will enable the data to be "used and exploited by more and more people – that will unlock even more opportunity", he says.

That work will have to continue without Hayes, however: from September, he will be fully ensconced in his new organisation. *CSW* wonders out loud how many of his friends have remarked that he is going to work for the Ministry of Fun.

Laughing, he replies that while sport is, of course, a fun leisure activity, it's also a powerful agent for change in society and in people's lives. "I've always felt that. So the job has quite a personal element for me around doing everything that we can to promote the benefits of sport and activity in England. The benefits for health, for wellbeing, for resilience, for education, for community, are all very well understood."

If it was the Land Registry's uniqueness and heritage that drew him to the non-ministerial department, one of the things that appealed to him this time around was the consensus around Sport England's mission: unlike emotive policy areas such as immigration, sport is not – if the pun can be forgiven – a political football.

"So it's really about how we can maximise that impact," he says.

Sport England already has a long-term strategy in place that is "well regarded and supported by the sector", Hayes says. "So I don't think it's a case of rethinking those strategic aims, but I think there is an opportunity to really focus on outcomes, on making the organisation as efficient as it can be... and becoming more of a delivery-focused organisation than it might have been in the past."

He's also excited about the opportunities to work with other organisations "more effectively and dynamically", pointing to the health and education departments in particular, where he says there is "huge opportunity" for partnership working.

"That already happens, but can we take that to the next level? Because I think there is so much that happens there that can benefit other government missions... bringing people from the sports sector and trying to improve those partnerships across government is a really big part of the role," he says.

And what of Hayes's own favourite sport? "I'll watch anything, but ultimately, like so many people, it's probably football," he says. Nottingham Forest is his team and – like "every young boy", he dreamed of being a footballer. "I would have loved to play cricket as well; that's another great passion of mine," he adds.

Does he still play any sports?

He smiles wryly. "Well, I think that changes as you get older. I've always played football – but that gets harder as you get to my age, sadly. So I'm transitioning more into older-people sports. I probably play golf more than anything else now." ■

CHILDCARE CHAMPIONS

Delight Patel (third from left) and the Ofsted Early Years Data and Analysis team winning at the 2024 Civil Service Awards

Tevye Markson speaks to **Anita Patel**, leader of the multi-award-winning Ofsted team that dug deep into childcare data to make sense of gaps in availability across England

At the 2023 Spring Budget, the then-chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, announced a series of reforms to the childcare system to enable more parents to work and, in turn, boost growth.

This included a commitment to 30 hours of funded childcare for most working parents, a policy Labour has retained since coming to power last year.

Realising there was a big gap in evidence on why and where parents were struggling – or managing – to access services, Ofsted's Early Years Data and Analysis team launched a project to quantify neighbourhood-level access to childcare in England.

Two-and-a-half years on, the resulting project, Understanding barriers for working parents: where are childcare deserts and oases?, is feeding into No.10 delivery dashboards and informing the Department for Education's evaluation of its £14bn investment in expanded childcare – and has received plenty of plaudits.

Last December, the team won the Evaluation and Analysis Award at the 2024 Civil Service Awards. It followed this up with two prizes at the Analysis in Government awards in January, before winning the Royal Statistical Society's Campion Award for Excellence in Official Statistics (awarded in partnership with the UK Statistics Authority and *CSW*) in July.

Civil Service Awards judges said the team "transformed disparate cross-government and commercial data into novel, real-world insights on the everyday experiences of parents seeking nurseries/childminders". The RSS's judges praised it as a "strong example of statisticians working to fill a significant gap in our data" and said it has delivered "essential insights for both policymakers and the public". And the government analysis function said the project enabled targeted interventions; supported the government's growth and opportunity missions; and demonstrated cost-effective innovation by leveraging existing data and tools.

CSW spoke to the team's leader, Anita Patel, to find out how they achieved such acclaim.

From anecdote to hyperlocal evidence

While the team knew anecdotally that local access to childcare was one of the biggest barriers to parents returning to work, there was very little evidence to substantiate and quantify this.

Existing models "made a lot of assumptions about local authority or aggregate data that do not reflect what happens in reality, where parents are crossing multiple areas because of their work – or whatever their situation is – to access childcare," Patel says. In London, for example, some working parents might make a 15-minute tube journey to access childcare, spanning multiple boroughs. Traditional methods could not measure this or look at how childcare access varies within a local authority.

So the team decided to "dig deep" into hyperlocal statistics, looking at 180,000 neighbourhoods in England, and used a two-step floating catchment model utilised by the University of South Wales "to account for the location of childcare providers; different transport modes, such

as driving or public transport; and the number of children aged zero to seven in those areas accessing the childcare".

Patel says this meant working with "extremely large, complex datasets at a really granular level". Helpfully, the team managed to get funding from the Cabinet Office and Treasury in January 2024 to help accelerate the work and put the ideas into practice.

Getting help

Another big challenge was how to communicate these granular findings in a visual and interactive format.

"We were a little bit stuck when it came to using our GOV.UK publishing platform," Patel recalls. The team liaised with existing contacts in the analysis hub at the Office for National Statistics to see if there was an opportunity to collaborate.

The ONS helped in two ways: it added in some of its own socioeconomic data to enhance the insights; and its data journalists helped the Ofsted team to create "semi-automated robo-journalism" to showcase the interactive, neighbourhood-level statistics. To operate the tool, the user simply types in a postcode and instantly gets an automated story on that neighbourhood.

This kind of collaboration was "really central" to making the project a success, Patel says.

Within government, the team worked with policy colleagues at Ofsted, DfE officials, and staff within the No.10 data science team – as well as the aforementioned support from the Cabinet Office and HMT.

They also worked closely with international experts from academia. Initially, the team got in touch with academics in Melbourne who had done similar work, to understand how it could be deployed in England. The Australian team had come up with the idea of childcare deserts and oases, and Patel says the discussions were really useful to understand some of the challenges she and the team might face.

"Obviously, geographically, Australia is very different to England," she says. "But there are similar challenges in terms of urban and rural access to childcare, so there were a lot of parallels and things to learn from them about how to build the model."

Then, looking a bit closer to home, the team established a partnership with computational geographers at the University of South Wales who had established the "multi-model" two-step floating catchment method, which looks at how far a childcare provider or service is from the centre of a given neighbourhood – which comprised 40 to 250 households – and then at the children who are competing to access those places. This work was based on the Welsh model of 15 hours' free childcare and it was, therefore, relatively straightforward to adapt the methodology to Ofsted's registered places in England. The academics in Melbourne also helped the team to understand how similar metrics had been developed across Australian cities.

Patel's team also worked with data scientists at the University of Liverpool who specialise in population data, and who shared their experience of sequence analysis and mixed effects modelling. "They were vital to our quality assurance of findings ahead of publication," Patel says.

Working with academics from across the world allowed the officials to turn data into real-world accessibility metrics that were easy to understand and could inform wider government work.

Adapting to a new administration

A general election in July 2024 and a change of government provided another challenge. The disruption delayed some of the timescales for delivery of the project, and the new administration's policy to open many more school-based nurseries across the country has necessitated an expansion of the project's focus. SBNs currently make up about 20% of provision in the country, and Labour has pledged to open some 3,000 more, taking the proportion to 27%. Around 200 SBNs are being launched in September, with another 100 joining them later this year.

"The [new government's] focus is very much on expanding early years in schools and that was something that we didn't include initially," Patel says.

"Geographically, Australia is very different to England. But there are similar challenges in terms of urban and rural access to childcare"

Schools that have nursery provision for two-to-four-year-olds were not initially included in the project because they do not have to register with Ofsted. The data on them is collected by DfE and it doesn't entirely align with Ofsted's data.

But Patel says the team built enough flexibility into the project's design to pivot and include data from school-based nurseries.

"That's where our partnership with DfE works really well," Patel adds. "And we are working closely to the point that we just received some data from the department which will enable us to look at the whole early years [system].

"We're working hard to incorporate that. That's one of our immediate next steps."

The key to success

What advice does Patel have for officials across government who are approaching similar tasks?

"Collaboration is key," she says, advising officials to use "any contacts you have across government departments, whether that's in the analyst community or whatever you're specialising in, but also academics".

Patel adds that having a dedicated team with a broad range of specialisms was also vital to the project's success, and to support this it was important to have "really clear milestones and a shared vision" that meant the multi-disciplinary team could still "measure progress and keep things on track".

Another win The team scooping the Campion Award earlier this year

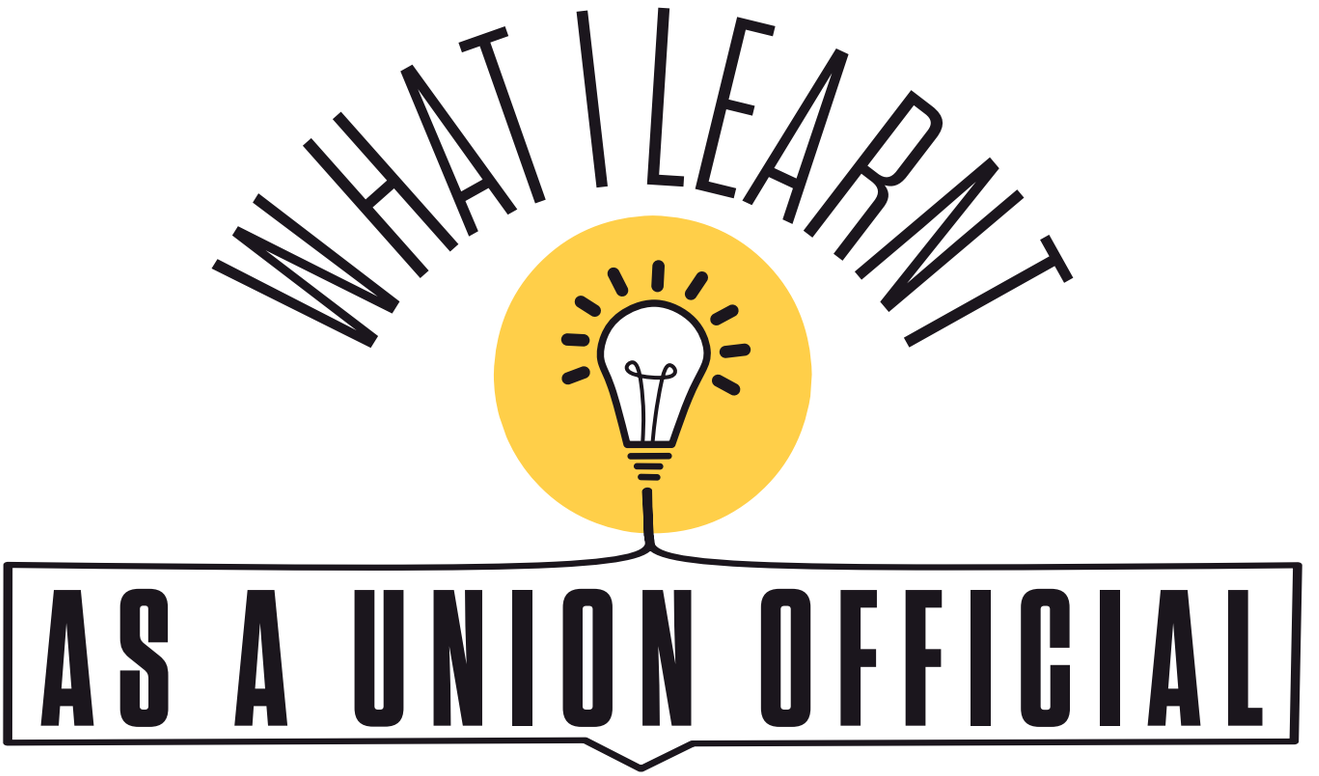
She says it is also important to look for opportunities to be innovative and to focus on having a tangible impact. "I think what is great about this is it has delivered real-world impact based on a policy that's been set out and we've been able to do quantitative analysis to support that as the rollout happens," she explains.

That impact has been significant. Patel says the project has generated "substantial insight" around childcare access and helped to monitor policy implementation and mitigate potential risk around childcare policy.

The work has also had sustained interest across government – and beyond – and "has really helped for any future decisions in the childcare sector", she adds.

"We've done so many presentations, I think I've lost count. Within government, but also externally – to think tanks, academics."

Winning the RSS's Campion Award, to add to a well-stocked cabinet, has been "the icing on the cake", Patel says. "It was a true honour". ■



Outgoing FDA assistant general secretary **Lucille Thirlby** shares why patience and looking after your own wellbeing are crucial when pushing for progress

My main reflection at the end of my career is that I am fitter and thinner than when I started in housing for local government 35 years ago! Union work is hard and demanding and at the beginning of my career the average trade unionist was a heavy smoking/drinking man – who unfortunately would often die pretty soon after retirement (if they made it that far). Instead of fitting in with that stereotype, I wanted to change my outcomes and consider my own wellbeing. So from age 30, I stopped smoking and started swimming – both of which I have maintained, keeping me sane and healthy at difficult parts of my working and home life.

I learnt my leadership and management skills in UNISON, where I undertook a whole range of jobs from organising up to being a senior leader. It was tough at times within a political organisation. By working alongside great people in the union, I was able to learn how to build relationships, listen and make things happen. I learnt the art of self-development and reliance, rooted in a context of working with others and not as an island.

My move to the FDA saw the demographic of the workforce I was representing change from predominantly low-paid women to civil servants, including the most senior officials in the country. However, fundamentally, the workforce issues faced by members were the same: public sector workers subject to poor pay outcomes. No government seems to have the appetite to deal with it – not because they don't recognise the case for fair pay, but because they deem it too politically difficult.

I have learnt that things do change, however slowly. The progress we should all see in the workplace still has to be fought for and all these years on, I despair about people's lack of understanding around equality and inclusion. When I first started working, I had no workplace rights as a lesbian, but there is now legislation and statutory grounds to enforce my rights.

I have spent my career trying to advance equality and leading policy development. Whilst there has been progress developing thoughtful policy, the implementation is by happenchance without employers driving the skills to manage difficult situations. All too often, we see this lead to union casework, employment tribunals or internal processes, which drain employers, unions and individuals alike. The constant political attacks and the lack of understanding remain stubborn and depressing.

Unions play a key role in helping our members understand their pension and as I reflect on my retirement, I have delved into how I can live in my next 20-plus years (fingers crossed). Whilst I know I am pensions literate, having been the strategic lead for some years at the FDA, it is so important to take an interest in your own pension and to financially plan like you do other aspects of your life.

I have been working with volunteers my entire career and I owe so much to them. It's the day-to-day trade union workplace representatives who I value and enjoy working with. In the case of the FDA, this means getting to work with reps who are active across all four nations of the UK, including policy advisers, lawyers, tax professionals, statisticians, museum curators and diplomats based throughout the world.

Looking to the future, I am very positive about the change the current government is pursuing with their Make Work Pay initiative. This is long overdue because, frankly, employers are not good enough at talking to and engaging with their staff to improve employee relations. After 35 years, I know that a well-organised and pragmatic union is the best way to ensure that! ■

Lucille Thirlby has been assistant general secretary of the FDA union since 2018

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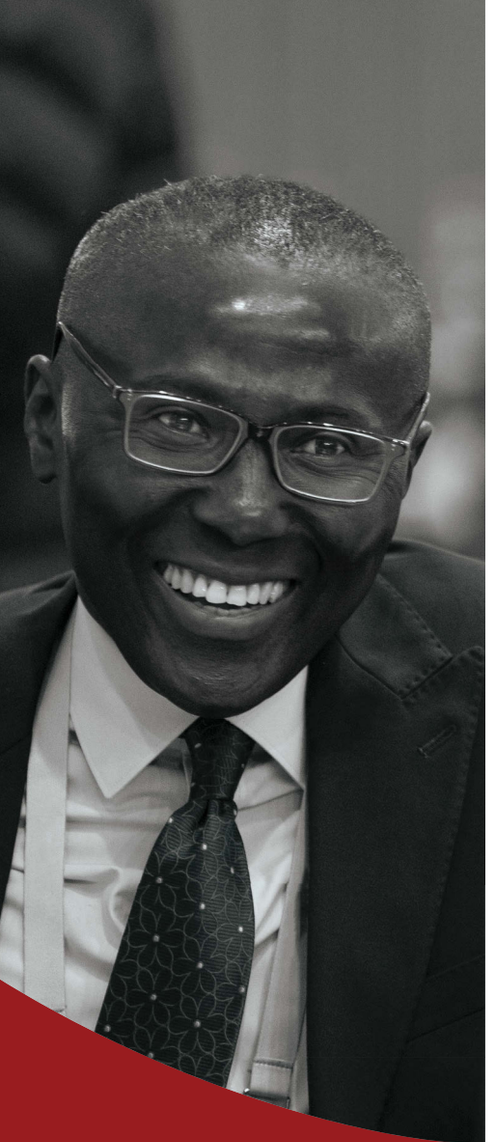

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