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CIVIL SERVICE WORLD 



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CUSTOM MADE

An exclusive interview
with **Angela MacDonald**,
HM Revenue &
Customs' second
permanent secretary

DATA FOR THE DIARY

National Statistician Sir
Ian Diamond looks ahead
to key trends in 2022

SPECIAL DELIVERY

The launch of a new
leadership programme
for the Operational
Delivery profession

EARTH CHANGING

Wasim Mir, Cop26 chief
operating officer, on
running the UK's largest
ever international summit



— TAKE A BOW —

Full Civil Service Awards winners supplement, plus Awards champion Shona Dunn on what made this year so special



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CONTENTS

January 2022

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RED BOX

4 INBOX

Letters & editors' musings

6 NEWS

Scandal-hit government under the scope

OPINION

8 EVERYONE COUNTS

National statistician Ian Diamond on making data more timely and inclusive

9 PARTY PEOPLE

FDA's Dave Penman on culture of No.10

10 THE HARDEST WORD

Andy Cowper's whistle-stop tour of NHS news

12 LEAVING THE CAPITAL

Andrew Hudson reflects on relocation

13 CLIMATE MOUNTAIN

Jill Rutter says the hard work on net zero starts now

DIGITAL AND DATA

14 A COSTLY LEGACY

The problems caused by ageing tech

FEATURES

18 YORKSHIRE TO STAY

HMRC second perm sec Angela Mac-Donald on new hubs, tackling Covid fraud and her love of God's own country

23 SPECIAL DELIVERY

New leadership scheme launches

24 COPING STRATEGIES

Cop26 COO Wasim Mir on the "most challenging summit ever"

28 GOING PLATINUM

Civil Service Pensions Alliance turns 70

30 MISSION POSSIBLE

Economist Theo Curtis on the value of taking risks in policymaking

31 IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU DO IT

What set this year's Civil Service Awards winners apart



FROM THE EDITOR



It is a truth universally acknowledged that Downing Street is a strange place to work, where offices, staterooms and flats form a maze filled with history, mice, and very busy people.

At the best of times, those people can feel beleaguered. It's not uncommon for critics to describe a "bunker mentality" among the close-knit team of advisers both official and political.

What's less common is for No.10 staff themselves to describe a bunker mentality, or to characterise themselves as heroes driven insane by their endeavours. Perhaps this was why certain comments reported in *The Times* – in one of many pieces exploring the "Partygate" scandal – were so striking.

One adviser, attempting to explain why No.10 staff appear to have held regular parties while the rest of the country was in various levels of lockdown, told the paper: "There was a sense that we had lashed ourselves to the mast while the rest of the civil service had gone home. The work people were doing in No.10 was of a high degree of importance and

couldn't be done remotely."

As even a classicist of the PM's calibre would know, it was Ulysses who tied himself to the mast while passing the Sirens so that he would not fling himself onto the rocks of their deadly island. Perhaps less obvious is that Ulysses didn't need to do this. He could have plugged his ears with wax, as his crew did, under his instructions. But he wanted to hear the Sirens' song, and he knew he would be driven mad by it. He chose temporary insanity, and pain, in order to gain an experience that no other mortal had known.

Perhaps the metaphor reveals more about No.10 staff than they care to admit, as do the reference to civil servants going home, and the assertion that No.10's work with a "high degree of importance... couldn't be done remotely".

This attitude towards those working outside of Downing Street is so dismissive as to be offensive. One wonders if the No.10 adviser thinks the work of officials standing up furlough schemes at HMRC is not of high importance because it was done at home,

or because it was delivery rather than policy-focused?

Perhaps No.10 advisers were so caught up by the siren song of power that they didn't notice who was providing them with daily updates on Covid cases, hospitalisations, deaths and – eventually – vaccinations? They will certainly have visited the Covid dashboard updated by officials at Public Health England each day. Those public servants were working entirely remotely to produce, with great innovation and hard work, something which has been vital to policy-makers, businesses and individuals. They are still working remotely – some of the team have never met in person despite having, as lead developer Pouria Hadjibagheri has described on Twitter, "practically lived together day and night on Teams".

There are many more examples of important work done remotely, just as there are examples where work could not be done remotely but staff managed to travel to their office (or school, hospital, laboratory etc.) and return home without flouting lockdown guidance.

Not everyone in No.10 attended the work-event-parties, of course. We await the results of Sue Gray's investigation for details of who gathered when, and what concerns were raised.

What we do know, even now, is that there is a belief at the centre of government, including among many politicians, that important work can only be done in an office, ideally near a minister. That belief doesn't bode well for civil service reform, and not even a pandemic has shifted it. ■

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INBOX

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EVALUATION OF NOTHING

A National Audit Office report that concluded government is not learning from its successes or failures because of a lack of evaluation struck a chord with some readers.

“No surprise,” **Charles Perry** said.

“Unfortunately implementation and monitoring falls second place to the sexier world of policy making. Think it’s a cultural issue as much as anything, there’s definitely plenty of skilled people within the civil service,” **Tahmid Chowdhury** wrote.

The Good Economy said the report was a “stark reminder that impact management frameworks are just as important in the public sector as the private sector”.

PRISON BLUES

Readers were unimpressed with the revelation that HM Prison and Probation Service had spent nearly £100m on a new case-management system, only to scrap it because the project was so delayed the software was outpaced by new technology

“Utterly shocking waste of money. Presumably the contractor who failed to deliver, kept the £100M. Just how did the HMPPS project management allow this colossal amount of money to be written off?” **Geoff Eales** wrote.

“Imagine if they had invested that

money in pay rises for their hard working staff, maybe they wouldn’t be leaving in their droves,” **@daveparry1976** added on Twitter.

PARTY LINE

Readers were incredulous about the revelations that have emerged over the last few weeks about multiple – apparently lockdown rule-busting – parties that have taken place in Downing Street and elsewhere in government since the start of the pandemic.

“Is it a normal practice to drink while working and who pays for the booze? Has anyone in the civil service been penalised for drinking at work and on what basis I’d this is a common practice in 10 Downing Street and parliament?” Twitter user **@EM96929853** commented.

HIGH PRICE TO PAY

PCS’s announcement of a consultative ballot on pay, as the trade union said civil servants face the biggest hit to living standards in a decade, sparked sympathy but also concern.

“The problem with strike action is that the union is asking people who are already struggling to make ends meet, to take a hit on their pay to make a point. For some that could mean the arrears on commitments the members have becoming worse or even mean the roof over their heads,” **Dwayne Gotting** said.

LONG SHOT


There were mixed reactions to a call for civil servants to step up and volunteer to help with the Covid vaccine rollout, to enable the government to fulfil the prime minister’s promise to offer boosters to every adult in the UK by the end of January.

“Is that not the planning you should do before you announce a plan against a challenging deadline? Otherwise all you have is wishful thinking. Strangely incompetent way to run any organisation, let alone a country,” **Geoff Eales** asked.

There were conflicting views on Twitter about how successful the volunteer drive would be, following a second letter instructing permanent secretaries to each produce a “concrete plan” to free up civil servants keep to step up.

 **jim downie @jimdownie50**
They are stepping up in their thousands

 **Annoné Butler @bookishwgc**
They’ll be trying to recruit all the pensioners soon too. Blind panic

 **Texas @spooky143_esq**
Relying on our goodwill again. Thinking we have forgotten how badly they regard us ■

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

An exclusive interview with **Simon Tse**, head of the Crown Commercial Service.
PLUS we review progress on the Declaration on Government Reform

WHITEHALL WISDOM

The great and good pass judgement on government

Quotes taken from Twitter and the *Civil Service World* Archive

OUT OF TOUCH

“No 10 culture reflects the PM. In my experience, No 10 under Thatcher was hardworking, focused, out of touch. Under Johnson: disorganised, self-indulgent, no respect for rules. It’s mutually reinforcing: leader creates the culture, the culture amplifies the leader’s behaviour.”

Caroline Slocock, director of Civil Exchange, and first woman Private Secretary at No 10, shares her views on the Downing St culture

FAMILY AFFAIR

“Once the door closed and you were inside, it was a family and you were absolutely trusted. There was a certain pragmatism about things – if they felt you could do the job, you did.”

Barbara Hosking, press secretary to prime ministers **Ted Heath** and **Harold Wilson**, on the close knit team at No10



Broken norms, reforms and 'doing the right thing' – examining a scandal-hit government

After a year of almost constant scandals, the government is facing calls for resignations and reform. **Tevye Markson** explores how the standards system and culture of government could change to stem the flow of misconduct

Greensill. Bullying at the Home Office. Matt Hancock's Covid-breaching affair with a colleague. The PPE VIP lane. Owen Paterson and the attempt to change the rules. The Downing Street flat refurb. Partygate. Breathe.

In the last few years, a litany of breaches, and alleged breaches, of ethical standards in government have led many

about different groups of people (ministers, civil servants, special advisers and MPs) and different rules (lobbying, bullying, breaching Covid rules, undisclosed donations). But "the snowball effect of all of them", Durrant says, has taken its toll.

"It's been a very damaging 12 months for the government in terms of people's perception about standards in

Breaking norms and conventions

The UK, with its famously "unwritten" constitution, relies on what historian Lord Hennessey called the "good chap" theory of government. That is the assumption that people at the top of the system will both understand and choose to follow its norms and conventions.

Professor Elizabeth David-Barrett, director of the Centre for the Study of Corruption at the University of Sussex, puts the "general decline in standards" down to a willingness among those at the top to violate these norms and conventions, and a lack of pushback or consequence when they do so.

"When you see that the prime minister is someone who doesn't take [these conventions] seriously, then that has a corrosive effect on people who are in lower positions in the system," David-Barrett says.

She adds that Johnson's government has a "culture that is conducive to corruption, because it's a culture that permits rule breaking and which seeks to be

secretive". And those are "conditions in which you might expect corruption to flourish," she adds.

Asked when the decline started, David-Barrett said: "There have been some pretty serious and severe declines under the Johnson administration.

"There are always scandals, periodically, but I think it's

been a lot more consistent and systematic and there have also been some systematic attacks on some of the institutions that have an accountability role."

Responding to the concerns raised by David-Barrett, a government spokesperson said: "The government has committed to continually reinforcing high standards of conduct in public life so the public can have trust and confidence in the operation of government at all levels."

Getting ethical standards in public life back on track - the importance of reform

Alongside norms and conventions, there are formal rules and bodies which regulate ethical standards in public life in the UK.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life, which advises the PM on how to best ensure those who take up public office meet such standards, released a report in November, recommending an overhaul of the current system.

The committee promotes the seven Nolan Principles – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. Its report called for improved procedures, a better system for ensuring rules are complied with and greater independence for those regulating compliance.

The CSPL review was commissioned after the Greensill affair, which saw former prime minister David Cameron embroiled in a major lobbying scandal.

The IfG's Durrant describes its recommendations as "a really ambitious but also deliverable set of reforms that if the



Partygate Protesters outside Downing Street

to call for reform of standards, systems and cultures.

The last 12 months have seen so many leaks and revelations that it has become "almost a year of rolling scandal", according to Tim Durrant, an associate director at the Institute for Government.

Each scandal has been

government and whether or not they are stuck to," he says.

"And it's never really felt like the government has been getting out in front of the problem and doing anything about it.

"It's always been on the back foot, and it feels like where 2021 left off, 2022 carried on."

government said ‘okay, we are going to do all of these things’, that would mark a real change.”

He adds, however: “Personally, I’m not optimistic that that’s what they will do. But it would be nice to see because I think that would help the government draw a line under this as well.

“It’s not helpful to them to always be being criticised for this stuff. It’s distracting and annoying and it is not doing well for the Conservatives in the polling.”

Lobbying and revolving doors

As well as these changes, CSPL chair Lord Evans has also called for reform to the body which advises former ministers, senior civil servants and other crown servants on the roles they take after leaving government.

The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments is not able to sanction those who do not follow its advice, and Evans told the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee earlier this month that the regulator “lacks teeth”.

David-Barrett says this question of the “revolving door” – which sees politicians and officials move readily into private sector roles – and the lobbying that results is a key challenge for standards.

“I think that’s where there’s the most serious risk of policy being seriously distorted, because of capture by narrow interest groups,” David-Barrett says.

“Often these debates are focused on things like how much time is being spent on doing second jobs, but there’s not enough focus on how much the policy decisions are being distorted by a system in which it’s far too easy for very narrow interest groups to influence government policymaking.”

She points to the

Greensill scandal, in which former PM David Cameron contacted government officials, including the chancellor, to try and secure a government-backed loan for now-defunct company Greensill Capital. MPs said he showed “a significant lack of judgement” but did not break any rules.

“For someone with huge status in the Conservative Party and among his peers in government, to use that to try to get inside access and preferential treatment for a company is quite remarkable. And I think that is quite indicative of how those norms and conventions have been avoided,” says David-Barrett.

She warns that the UK is at risk of moving in the direction of the US, where “lobbying is much more deeply entrenched in the political system and it is very easy for narrow interest groups to be extremely influential on public policy”.

David-Barrett also suggests that government needs to be more transparent about who is meeting who and must adapt to changes in technology, such as people largely communicating via WhatsApp.

“There have been some pretty serious and severe declines under the Johnson administration”

Resigned
Owen Paterson

The importance of Christopher Geidt’s role

Another key element of the CSPL report is giving PM’s independent ministerial adviser more power.

The prime minister’s standards adviser Lord Geidt says he expects to be given greater authority and independence within the next few



months after a row over Boris Johnson’s Downing Street flat refurbishment, including the ability to start his own investigations.

“That would mean that the role was independent,” Durrant says. “But we won’t find out until April. Fundamentally, on all of these things, it is the prime minister who’s in charge and has the final say, and so Lord Geidt can ask for these changes but the PM has to agree to them.”

Johnson’s previous independent adviser on ministerial standards quit after the prime minister rejected his findings that home secretary Priti Patel breached the ministerial code by bullying Home Office officials.

But David-Barrett says the PM cannot continue to ignore advice without consequence; “There is a cost every time Johnson fails to follow that advice. The more powers that we give Lord Geidt, the more difficult it is to resist that advice.”

Now that’s what I call a party

The impact of leadership is also being felt in the “Partygate” scandal. There have now been at least a dozen gatherings, either confirmed or reported, which were attended by a mix of civil servants, ministers, special advisers and the PM himself, which may have broken the lockdown rules.

Tackling this behaviour goes further than just strengthening regulation, David-Barrett says.

“It takes not only changing the institutions, but also some real leadership from individuals in senior positions who are determined to do the right thing and willing to call out

their peers and colleagues if they’re not doing the right thing,” David Barrett says.

“That people thought [holding these events] was reasonable is quite remarkable. But also, were there people who were willing to say that they don’t think it is the right thing to do?”

“You can’t legislate for everything. You can’t regulate everything. So, what we really need is people who are doing the right thing because that’s what drives them.

“People often talk about the culture of civil service in Britain, and it was about doing the right thing, not being just people who are tied to trying to meet the rules or get around the rules.

“If you have too much of a rule-based system, you give a signal that it’s okay to do what you can get away with. We don’t want that.”

Ultimately, the prime minister is responsible for the culture of government and what action is taken, Durrant says: “It’s always going to be led by the prime minister. The culture of any organisation is led by the people at the top – that’s how it’s always going to be.” ■

IAN DIAMOND MORE THAN JUST NUMBERS

EXPECT A CONTINUED PUSH TOWARDS REAL-TIME STATISTICS AND ANALYSIS THIS YEAR, SAYS NATIONAL STATISTICIAN

While many of us took a well-earned break over Christmas, others worked throughout to ensure there was minimal disruption to the vital services we all rely on. This was also the case for many of my colleagues at the Office for National Statistics, who have continued to produce the robust and timely data and analysis, such as the Covid-19 Infection Survey, that has become more important than ever in these challenging times.

As 2022 gets under way, this demand for rapid data will only increase. But what exactly will the year hold? If the last two years are anything to go by, it's impossible to say with any certainty.

From the UK's first survey to track the spread of a pandemic, to the use of de-identified mobility data from phone companies to assess the impact of lockdowns, the word "unprecedented" has become frequently used for good reason.

What we know for certain is that we will continue to source and work with new forms of reusable data from across government and beyond, combining traditional survey data with the likes of de-identified admin and industry data to ensure we can produce more of the robust, close-to-real time information that we've come to rely on in recent years.

Last year we produced more than 1,000 statistical bulletins that gave us a wide variety of vital insights, such as how people were feeling and coping during lockdowns; the ups and downs of our economy and our personal finances; the number of people out of work; the level of Covid-19 infection in our population; and the level of carbon-dioxide emissions.

This year, we are building on our statistical outputs with more close-to-real time economic stats, based on more experimental data sources such as supermarket scanner data; more environmental outputs in the run up to the next global climate conference in Egypt; and improvements to our measurements of the value of nature to the UK.

All our new products – alongside new initiatives like the UK Climate Change Portal, which brings climate statistics together in one place for the very first time – will be essential to understanding this year's major challenges, such as rising food and fuel prices, the spread and impact of Omicron and efforts to achieve net zero and adapt to climate change.

It's also more important than ever that we are able to look at our population as a whole, and that's where the census comes in. The results of last year's digital-by-default census

will give us the richest picture across England and Wales for a point in time. Arguably, this was more important during the pandemic than ever as it provides an important foundation to ensure we make the most informed decisions.

But the full value of the census is when we use it alongside as many other data sources as possible, and that is exactly what we will be doing with areas like commuting habits to ensure the data remains the most relevant and timely.

Looking beyond the census results, we have set out our clear intention to provide more frequent and detailed population estimates using administrative data sources to give the most accurate picture of the UK in the years to come.

But it's not all about introducing and releasing new data; over the last couple of years we've demonstrated the immense value of engaging more widely across all sections of society, so this year we'll be progressing our new plan of action to transform the inclusivity of UK data and evidence to ensure everyone is counted. This will include feasibility work on how new data sources can be used to fill data gaps, and initiatives to identify currently under-represented groups of people in data, including collaborative work with other departments and devolved administrations to improve data on people not living in households.

Last but not least, our other top priority for 2022 will be to ensure teams at ONS and across government have the best tools, infrastructure and data to meet the

ever-increasing need for more rapid but robust stats and evidence. We've made a great start, with ONS continually sourcing new types of data for faster and more detailed insights, but now we're taking steps to forge a new culture of secure data sharing and analysis with the development of the new Integrated Data Service.

Building on the success of our well-respected Secure Research Service, which has been securely providing a variety of de-identified data to accredited researchers for more than 15 years, the IDS will make a huge variety of ready-to-use data, from

across government and beyond, accessible to approved analysts through a secure, multi-cloud environment. The service will allow more detailed analysis to be delivered at pace and provide policy-makers with the best possible evidence to make vital decisions that benefit everyone, whilst continuing to protect personal information.

Data driven decision making has never been more critical, so it's just as important to continually look outwards, question the data and methods we've used before, and challenge ourselves to do even better. I look forward to working with colleagues from across government throughout the year to build on the great strides we've made and to ensure our decision makers continue to have the robust and timely data needed to address the challenges of the day. ■

Prof Sir Ian Diamond is national statistician and chief executive and permanent secretary of the UK Statistics Authority



“It’s more important than ever that we are able to look at our population as a whole”

DAVE PENMAN PARTY BEFORE COUNTRY

NO-ONE CAN ESCAPE THEIR PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FOLLOWING THE LETTER AND SPIRIT OF THE LAW, AND THOSE IN GOVERNMENT SHOULD SET AN EXAMPLE

I first moved to London in the 90s as an organiser for PCS. Part of my pitch was Whitehall and I couldn't believe my luck, large groups of potential members all in the one building with almost unlimited access.

I recall visiting reps in a large Whitehall HQ one afternoon and, when finished, being invited to go to "the bar" for a drink. I was surprised that a central London building had a bar, so I headed down to the basement, expecting a night of low-price boozing. To be honest, "bar" was pushing it a little. It was more of a kiosk, run as a hobby by some Belgian beer fanatics. I joined a rather sad group – mainly men in their 50s, all nylon jumpers and beards – then quickly made my excuses.

Civil servants I know work incredibly hard, as do the staff in Downing Street. There are many whose social lives revolve around their work and, when you work in central London, that's easy to combine. Westminster is hardly short of bars and for a while FDA HQ was by St James's Park, right in the heart of Whitehall. I've been known to enjoy the odd tippie or two and, when in one of the many local hosteleries, you could tell there were large groups of staff enjoying an after-work drink, particularly on a Thursday or Friday evening. I'm not saying I can spot a civil servant at 20 yards across a crowded pub but when you're an organiser on a recruitment drive, you get a sixth sense for these things.

I'm old enough to remember when it wouldn't be frowned upon to go for a few drinks at lunchtime and come back smelling of booze, or the 1980s as it's called. That culture quickly disappeared, with a recognition that alcohol and public service delivery are not a good mix.

I've been around Whitehall now for more than 20 years. I've been in most departments late in the afternoon or early evening, as it's the witching hour for union branch AGMs or recruitment drives. I've known hundreds of reps, from dozens of departments and the stories emerging from Downing Street do not represent anything approaching a culture that I'm familiar with.

As those around a beleaguered prime minister plot their "Save Big Dog" strategy, a narrative is emerging of a "civil service culture" that's led to the incidents now being investigated as part

of "Partygate". Seeking to distance the prime minister from a series of damaging allegations, their line appears to drift from a "didn't inhale" strategy, where he stumbled, unprepared upon dozens of staff drinking and assumed it was an extension of the working day, to "he regularly dons noise cancelling earphones at around 4pm each day to concentrate on detailed policy documents, so probably wouldn't have seen or heard anything".

I've seen nothing to suggest that any cultural problems around No.10 are anything other than that, a No.10 issue. Sue Gray has a difficult enough job without me adding in my tuppence worth, but those who want to conveniently point the finger elsewhere might better spend their time considering how this might have developed.

No.10 is an incredibly pressured environment at the best of times. In the middle of a pandemic, few of us can imagine what it was like to be working in that pressure cooker. Although, maybe not that few. Civil servants up and down the country were at the heart of the response to Covid. Many, around 25%, were also in their offices throughout the pandemic. Those that weren't were working longer hours at home, juggling the challenges of home schooling while developing innovative new ways of working to keep public services going and respond to the health and economic emergencies.

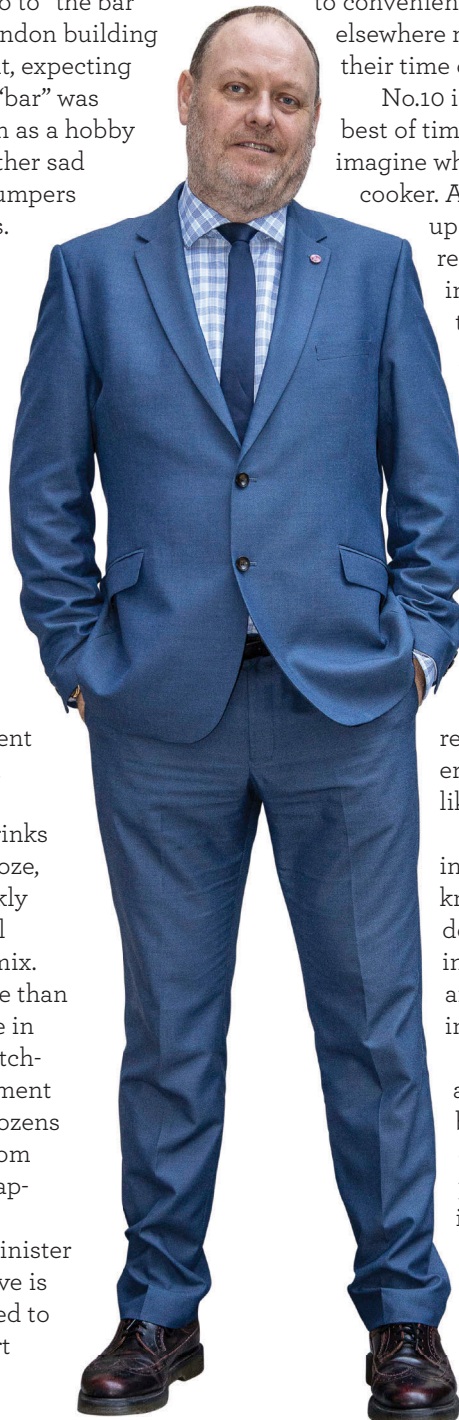
Those on the NHS and social care frontline were working flat out, many in full PPE, and countless other public servants as well as those who kept our food supplies going were, quite literally, critical workers.

No-one can escape their personal accountability for following the letter and spirit of the law. Those in government have an additional responsibility to set the example they seek others to follow. In a small rarefied environment like No.10, it can be easy to lose perspective.

That's why leadership is so important. Motivating beleaguered, exhausted staff by ensuring they know what an incredibly important job they're doing is vital to keep morale up but understanding the broader perspective, making the right calls and living your values is also critical, particularly in a small organisation, which ultimately No.10 is.

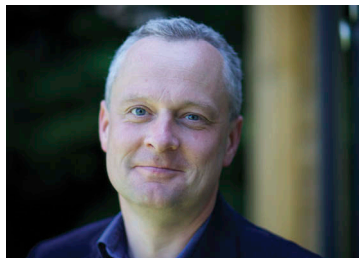
Culture and tone in organisations are invariably set by those at the top. Demonstrating the best of behaviours and challenging the worst comes with the burden of leadership. If you're not prepared or not able to do that, don't go looking for a leadership position because you can't hide from the accountability that follows. ■

"Culture and tone in organisations are invariably set by those at the top"



Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union

ANDY COWPER PARTY GAMES



THE PM'S NON-APOLOGY ON THE "BYOB" NO.10 GARDEN PARTY WON'T CONVINC MANY. MEANWHILE, WORKFORCE AND WAITING LIST CHALLENGES REMAIN

If you were in government during a pandemic of a fatal respiratory disease like Covid-19, you'd want your citizens to take you seriously when you advised or ordered them on how to live to cut the risk of infection and death.

This means that you'd want to stick by your own rules and recommendations: maybe even set an example. That's the obvious theory.

It seems that this has not been obvious to the current administration. The past month has seen a wave of further revelations about parties in Downing Street and Whitehall which clearly broke the rules during lockdown restrictions.

Not least of those is the email sent by Boris Johnson's principal private secretary Martin Reynolds inviting more than 100 Downing Street staff to a "bring your own booze" party in May 2020, when permitted meetings were limited to two people outdoors.

The PM's claim that he didn't know about or see the invitation to the BYOB garden party has been undermined by reports that he was warned the event would be a "party" and should be immediately cancelled. One source told the *Sunday Times*: "I was told that Johnson's dismissive response was to say they were 'over-reacting' and to praise Reynolds as 'my loyal Labrador'."

Probably even more damaging was the subsequent revelation of two parties in Downing Street the night before the burial of the Duke of Edinburgh, which forced No.10 to apologise to the Queen.

We also learned that Kate Josephs, the former head of the Covid Taskforce, held a boozy leaving party

in Whitehall during lockdown.

Meanwhile, the PM and his wife appear to have repeatedly violated travel regulations to move between Downing Street and Chequers during lockdown.

THE NON-APOLOGY APOLOGY

"Mr Speaker, I want to apologise," Johnson told the Commons at the following PMQs. He then didn't, obviously and repeatedly.

The PM's defence – that while he went into the No.10 garden for 25 minutes "to thank groups of staff" before going back inside", he "believed implicitly that this was a work event" – had evidently been legalised to within an inch of its life.

Conservative Party chair Oliver Dowden (who reiterated the Covid rules in a televised briefing just nine minutes before the event started) later suggested that the "underlying culture" in Downing Street had fed into Partygate.

The *i* reported that PM had toured the Commons Tea Room telling Conservative MPs that the BYOB party "was not his fault" (he wasn't sent the invite) and he was "taking the blame for others" (civil servants and special advisers).

The PM's self-preservation plan, Operation Save Big Dog, apparently involves laying down the careers of junior staff and civil servants for Johnson's political life.

Greater love hath no woman or man: I'm sure they'll all be bang up for that.

THE EFFECTS ON THE WORKFORCE

The mathematics of Omicron infections' exponential growth hit health and care staff hard, with almost 10% of the workforce off sick on New Year's Eve. Of these 110,000,



nearly half were absent due to Covid-19.

Health Select Committee chair Jeremy Hunt predicted that NHS workforce issues will get "increasingly severe" this year, causing unprecedented stress on hospitals and GP surgeries, with "extremely concerning implications for care quality and safety".

It is now clear that the targets on primary care recruitment of 26,000 extra staff are almost certainly going to be missed.

And staff fatigue and exhaustion is a real problem. This might get overlooked amid Partygate, but it shouldn't. The whole NHS "not overwhelmed" nonsense is obscuring real risks to the ability to deliver safe care.

PRIVATES ON PARADE: IN EXTREMIS NOT OVERWHELMED

Civil Service World and the *Daily Mail* aside, there was oddly little coverage of NHS England Pope Amanda Pritchard's decision to request ministerial direction from health-but-social-care secre-



who refuse to vacate NHS beds for offered short-term step-down care should be threatened with legal action.

This is likely to age about as well as the infamous NHSE “immediately stop all ambulance handover delays” guidance.

Because when a system is under enormous and sustained pressure, more shouting at people to do the obvious but unresourced thing always helps.

MORE ‘TRACE A TEST’ THAN TEST AND TRACE

Pre-Christmas announcements from ministers (prime and sub-prime) focused on individual caution and regular testing, before a late segue into mentions of ventilation and meeting outdoors wherever possible.

The problem was the lack of available testing. Javid talked about having to “constrain” the system of supply over the coming fortnight, which included the return of schools.

So on top of poor availability of self-tests, this would be a remarkably bad time for testing to screw up, no?

Oh dear. The *Sunday Times*’ Shaun Lintern reported on a leaked UK Health Security Agency document showing a secret backlog of 25,000 Covid PCR pillar 2 tests, affecting 4,600 care homes and 70 prisons across the country.

GOOD NEWS

It’s a relief to be able to end with some good news.

Recent national data dashboards have shown

small declines in the seven-day hospitalisation rate. This may signal the peak of the Omicron wave – although it’s worth remembering that more demanding infections from the return of schools, transmitting their way up into older and more vulnerable populations, probably lie ahead.

Let’s also remember that there are still almost as many people in hospital with Covid-19 now as there were during the first wave.

And let’s remember that the government’s plan for dealing with the NHS backlog – promised by the end of November 2021 – is still not here. ■

Andy Cowper is editor of Health Policy Insight

tary Sajid “The Saj” Javid’s mandating of the NHS to buy capacity from the private sector on what looks very much like the old independent sector treatment centres “take or pay” model.

Pritchard is being smart. To the best of my awareness, no previous NHS England chief exec or commissioning board has requested a ministerial direction.

The Saj emphasises that this must only be done “in extremis” which, as definitions go, is about as reassuring and clear as “unsustainable”.

There are a few problems with this strategy. The main one is the lack of clarity that this capacity actually exists in the private sector. Anecdotal evidence tells me it does not.

Similarly, I’m hearing that NHS doctors who formerly did a little private work on evenings and weekends to practice lower-intensity medicine with “nicer” patients in pleasant settings with proper admin sup-



port have begun to stop doing so. A common cause for this is that the NHS meltdown has pushed far sicker people into the private system, making the work as stressful and high-stakes as their NHS practice.

WAITING TIMES WORSEN - AGAIN

The latest NHS England data shows a further deterioration of waiting times, with the waiting list moving above 6 million. The interruptions in care due to the Omicron wave will of course make this figure grow yet further in February. A leak to *HSJ* reveals that the number of patients who waited 12 hours or more in an emergency department grew by 15% in December.

In a stunningly foolish move, NHS England issued guidance that people

ANDREW HUDSON LONDON IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

NOW COULD BE A GOOD TIME FOR MINISTERS TO BE ORIENTING THE CIVIL SERVICE AWAY FROM THE CAPITAL, BUT THERE'S NO ESCAPING THE NEED TO GET THE BASICS RIGHT

When I became chief executive of the Valuation Office Agency in 2004, there was a report around that said: "There is no clear reason why the VOA should have a central London head office." My heart sank at this. The track record of earlier moves of whole organisations was patchy. And I didn't relish telling my new colleagues that they would either have to up sticks and relocate or find another job. Fortunately, the then government didn't push us to move.

However, there is now another, more determined move to decentralise government departments, and this time I'm optimistic that it will work in every sense. In this respect, the pandemic may well prove to be a game-changer.

There are some strong arguments for decentralisation, including the policy work done closely with ministers. The biggest one for me might sound amorphous but is the way that living and working in London generates a London-centric view of the world which can distort policymaking, because of an undue focus on London house prices or the attitude of London councils.

This was brought home to me when I moved to Newcastle for a few months in 1991, after 10 years in London, and realised how my perspectives shifted. Moving out of the capital brings access to a wider talent pool. Attitudes here have been changing for a while. When I started work in 1980, it was still the practice that you moved when the office required you to. By the time I was at the VOA in the 2000s,

most people weren't prepared to do that: they would travel frequently, and come to London for meetings, but not relocate.

There might also be benefits for the towns and cities where departments relocate, although the evidence looks less clear. Bootle and East Kilbride weren't transformed by chunks of the then Inland Revenue moving there in the 1970s. Moving 400 Treasury staff and 350 others to Darlington is a significant step,

but not by itself transformative for a town of 100,000 people.

Past efforts at shipping out senior staff and policy staff didn't really work. In the late 1990s, I worked closely with colleagues from the Department of Health whose nominal base was Leeds. In practice, they were on the train to London virtually every week, sometimes several times. There was a video link, but it was temperamental and not great quality at best – I only saw a minister use it once in three and a half years. Culturally we were all used to working face-to-face for anything at all serious.

Here's where the pandemic has made a real difference. It's demonstrated that meetings on screen can work not just from office locations, but from the fabled kitchen table. And culturally, we have now all become used to working in this way.

Both from past and current experience, I'd suggest a few conditions that will be needed for the decentralised operations to work well.

First, the process of setting up the new location has to be managed sensitively. We should avoid the old approach of shifting every job at once, giving some staff really tough choices.

Second, senior officials and indeed ministers will need to demonstrate that civil servants outside London aren't, in practice, second-class citizens. Officials

in the Treasury and elsewhere watch very carefully who gets what job and who gets early promotions. If there's a bias towards London-based staff, don't expect many people to volunteer for a stint elsewhere.

That said, some jobs will be hard to move. I can't personally see how a minister's private office could be outside London, though someone might correct me. And some meetings will still have to be face-to-face.

And finally, the benefits will be bigger if staff cluster in a relatively small number of locations and make efforts to build links with other public services in the area.

Like most aspects of civil service reform, decentralisation requires both practical and cultural change. It's not worked well in the past, but

because of the new ways of working accelerated by the pandemic, I am optimistic that this time, it will really take hold. ■

Andrew Hudson is a former chief executive of the Valuation Office Agency and director general of public services at HM Treasury. He currently chairs the Centre for Homelessness Impact



"If there's a bias with promotions towards London-based staff, don't expect many people to volunteer for a stint elsewhere"

JILL RUTTER NET ZERO'S HARD YARDS ARE AHEAD

AS COP26 FADES INTO THE DISTANCE, MINISTERS STILL HAVE A MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB TO DELIVER THEIR CLIMATE-CHANGE AMBITIONS

Cop26 in Glasgow seems a long time ago. It happened before there was Omicron, before rows about whether or not to move to “Plan B”, before the political class got consumed in the never-ending saga of bring-your-own-booze work events.

In the run up to the Cop, the government finally published its comprehensive net-zero strategy. Alongside it we had the long-awaited heat and building strategy, and the final report from the Treasury’s net-zero review. That gave the government a strong platform in the Cop from which to point not just at ambitious targets, but also better-developed plans on how to meet them than most of the other attendees.

Glasgow itself delivered some useful wins – even if there was clear frustration that it did not quite go the distance that Cop president Alok Sharma and the UK team hoped. Still, the decision to ask nations to revisit their nationally determined contributions not in five years time, but next year in advance of Cop27 at Sharm-el-Sheikh allowed him to claim that the ambition of keeping global temperature rises to 1.5 degrees or less was still alive, albeit “on life support” or with a weak pulse. Turning Glasgow words into actions will be a big task for Sharma in 2022.

But while 2021 and the run-up to the Cop saw a flurry on domestic net zero activity, there is a danger that the momentum that built up dissipates. And potentially more threatening to the government’s long-run strategy on net zero is the emergence of political opposition on its own backbenches.

That could become toxic for the government if it cannot manage the current energy cost crisis and make clear how whatever measures it takes now to help households fit with its long-term strategy. So as civil servants help ministers develop a package of support in the short term, they also need to set out clearly how this fits with the longer term destination of energy policy in a net zero economy.

That may mean using the current crisis to ramp up measures to boost energy efficiency and cut bills and to show how net zero in the longer run puts the UK less at the mercy of volatile gas prices. If they cannot get over the hurdle of this April, when the energy price cap rises, their 2050 ambitions may go up in smoke.

But those working across government on net zero also need to build on the strategies published pre-Cop. In the Institute for Government’s *Net Zero: Agenda 2022* report, we set out six further steps the government needs to take.

The first is to recognise that there were gaps in the strategies developed and those need to be filled in. The biggest omission was the lack of a strategy for reducing emissions from agriculture and land use: indeed agriculture and land use finds itself at the intersection of multiple government ambitions but without a clear vision from government for the future.

There are other gaps too – the government needs to provide more detail on emissions trajectories so that the Climate Change Committee and parliament can properly hold it to account for progress. Vague ambitions need to be turned into concrete plans with dates and timelines – and clarity about what government will do itself and how it will work with or support business and local government to deliver the rest.

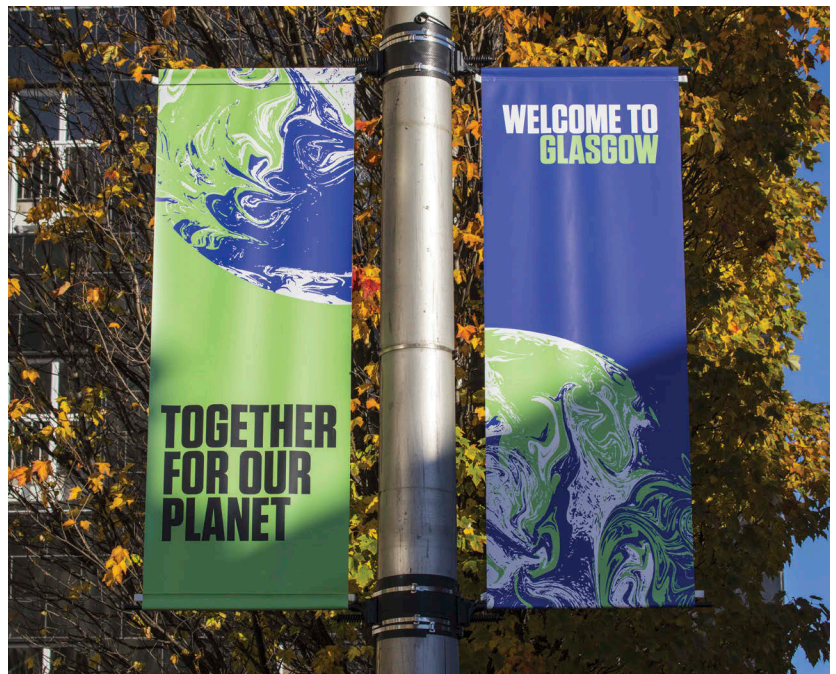
Meanwhile ministers need to explain how they plan to embed net zero across government. A net zero test has been promised for spending. But that needs to extend across other policies. The Treasury needs to look at the tax system, produce a net zero tax strategy and commit to assessing budgets against the net zero goal. And government needs to show how it is using its independent trade policy to promote its climate change goals.

To support this we need some machinery of government changes.

“There is a danger that the momentum built up for Cop26 dissipates”

In 2020 we argued for a beefed up net zero unit at the centre of government. Now we have a mix of the Cop26 team and part of the Cabinet Office secretariats supporting Alok Sharma, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy still leading on net zero and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on adaptation, while No.10’s Delivery Unit chases progress on net zero as one of the PM’s priorities.

Over time, the central units need to morph into a single



powerful net zero unit and help the prime minister ensure outstanding policy differences are resolved and plans are delivered. After a decade with little progress on adaptation, that too needs to come to the centre – either to the Cabinet Office or the Treasury (since it is the ultimate spend-to-save policy).

Net zero is for life, not just for Glasgow. And policy makers across government need to recognise that. ■

Jill Rutter is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government



CAN GOVERNMENT DESTROY ITS LEGACY?

As much as half of government's near-£5bn annual spend on IT is dedicated to the maintenance of ageing or unsupported tech. A range of digital leaders tell **Sam Trendall** about the issues they face with legacy, and how they can be addressed

“**T**he move from legacy IT and contracts to a future of services designed around user needs; smaller contracts; shorter terms; a more diverse supplier community that is welcoming to SMEs; open standards; open source; more use of commodity. These are the new parameters.”

According to the annals of GOV.UK, the statement above, made in 2012 by then-Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude, represents the first reference to legacy technology in public comments made by a senior official or minister.

The Government Digital Service, the creation of which had been championed by Maude in part to help address the issue of ageing or ineffective technology, was less than a year old at a time.

The organisation recently celebrated its 10th birthday and, following the September appointment of Steve Barclay as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, digital government has now also been overseen by 10 different ministers since Maude departed the front bench in 2015.

While Barclay's face may be new, the issues he inherits are not. But the persistence of the problem means that the new Cabinet Office chief arrived at the department with what seems to be a well-developed understanding of legacy technology – particularly given his prior posting, as chief secretary to the Treasury.

Indeed, during his 19 months at HM Treasury he worked with GDS on the creation of a tool to provide data to inform government investment decisions. In July 2020, in the first speech he delivered in his previous role, Barclay spoke of his hope that the planned government three-year spending review – which was ultimately delayed by a year because of the pandemic – would have a keen focus on addressing legacy IT and serve as a springboard to delivering “fundamental change” in Whitehall's digital and data infrastructure.

“The average tenure of a secretary of state is less than two years, and so it's no surprise that issues such as legacy IT are often deprioritised in favour of the new and exciting,” he said. “Such an approach is not

only expensive, it also poses cybersecurity risk, and prevents agile ways of working and cross-departmental interaction.”

A major report from the National Audit Office last year – which flagged up “a consistent pattern of underperformance” of government digital programmes going back 25 years – singled out legacy systems and data as one of six key areas where lessons from past projects need to be learned to ensure greater success for future programmes.

Just a few days later another report, commissioned by the government and written by the Digital Economy Council, found that half of government’s annual IT spend – £2.3bn out of £4.7bn in 2019 – is dedicated to the maintenance of legacy technology, otherwise known as “keeping the lights on”.

The scale and significance of this problem has, as Barclay hoped, at least been somewhat recognised by the Treasury in 2020’s one-year spending round and the full three-year review that followed in 2021.

In 2020 a £600m funding commitment made for technology upgrades was dished out between HM Revenue and Customs (£268m), the Home Office (£232m), the Department for Education (£64m) and the Ministry of Justice (£40m). The comprehensive review that took place in November 2021 promised £2.6bn across government over the next three years to update old kit and mitigate cybersecurity risks.

A recent roundtable event, hosted by *Public Technology* in partnership with security and IT management firm Tanium, brought together a range of senior officials to discuss the issues they face with legacy IT, what causes them and how they can be addressed. Among the 10 participants in the virtual gathering were the digital heads of several major departments, as well as those from smaller executive agencies and local authorities, and representatives of the commercial profession. To enable the discussion to be as open as possible, the event was held under Chatham House rules.

Attendees first considered the question of how to define legacy – and whether and why such a definition is useful in tackling the problem.

According to one participant, for those in the digital, data, and technology profession, there is no intrinsic taxonomic value in defining legacy.

“It is probably not useful just to think: are these things legacy or not? It is about

why: what are the problems... [and] what are the drivers of those issues?,” they said. “Is it about capability? Is it about security? Is it something that is no longer in support? It is about understanding what the problems are, so we can do something actionable about them – rather than being able to say whether they go into the ‘legacy’ box or not.”

However legacy is defined, participants agreed that one common shorthand definition is often inaccurate, and can be unhelpful in enabling better understanding of the issue among ministers and senior managers outside the DDaT profession.

“Legacy doesn’t mean old,” said one senior digital leader, pointing to the fact that age does not feature anywhere in the Cabinet Office’s five-point checklist for what might constitute a legacy sys-

“There is a huge unmeasured people cost in dealing with all the old technology and legacy data. Maybe if government could be a bit more aware of this cost, that would help make the case for funding for improvement”

tem or business process. Rather, these five points are: being considered end-of-life; impossible to update; no longer supported by suppliers; no longer cost-effective; or considered to be above government’s acceptable risk threshold.

Attendees agreed that there is plenty of technology of five, 10 or even 20 or more years’ standing that remains in use across government and continues to work well and serve the purpose for which it was implemented. This, perhaps, requires a different term – ‘heritage’ was suggested – that does not come loaded with the negative connotations of legacy.

“We need to start separating out what people mean [by legacy] to make it useful for ministers. If we are going to them and saying: ‘we’ve got this legacy tech, but it is absolutely fine’, then I think it confuses things,” one roundtable attendee said. “It would be interesting to test what ministers think the word ‘legacy’ means.”

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The first of the seven principles of managing legacy technology laid out by the Cabinet Office is “aim to use continuous improvement planning to keep your technology up to date”.

Enacting incremental upgrades and patches is, from a technical standpoint, the key to avoiding potential issues with legacy systems – which can crop up even if the technology in question is comparatively new, according to one attendee.

“Without continuous improvement, legacy can rise up,” they said. “If you’ve got a new product which no-one is looking at because it isn’t 20 years old yet, then it just sits there and becomes legacy very, very quickly.”

Even with a careful approach to deployment and a commitment to ongoing upgrades, government tech professionals can still be subject to the caprices of IT firms.

The digital leader of one executive agency said: “I currently have a service that has been live since September, and I have been hit twice with this legacy thing... it is the vendor: they have changed something and taken a component out. This is a modern, digital service, using the latest technology. But the vendor has twice taken the service down. You build something new, and you try to future-proof things – but there are different types of exposure.”

Another participant, from a big-city local authority, agreed that “we all try and design so we don’t get legacy”.

But, without the processes – and the ongoing budget – to support the approach of continuous improvement, systems and services can go for long periods without a proper assessment of risk.

“We often design a service for a lifespan... which is possibly tied into a contract with a supplier,” they said. “Sometimes the legacy issue comes up because those services are designed for two or three years, but don’t get reviewed for eight or 10 years: there isn’t the capacity in the public sector to go round and review everything at every point that it needs. It is only where you can build in that continuous improvement that you cut out the legacy. Otherwise, quite often what you see is a service that is built however many years ago and it has got to the point that it is creaking, and we are fixing it and designing a service for the next period of time, rather than taking that continuous improvement approach.” ➤

DEFINITION OF LEGACY IT

- end-of-life
- impossible to update
- not supported by suppliers
- no longer cost-effective
- above acceptable risk threshold

£2.3bn

Amount spent by government on serving legacy tech upkeep, out of a total of £4.7bn total IT spend

11

Number of ministers that have overseen digital government since 2015

HMRC, Home Office, MoJ, DfE
Departments that received a cumulative £600m in the 2020 spending round to urgently address legacy IT

Paul Jackson, head of public sector at Tanium, said that in recent years he has seen changes to contracting models and commercial discussions that have at least reflected a greater awareness of the risks posed by allowing technology to become outdated.

“Previously the way contracts were written made it quite hard to do some of that evergreening,” he said. “But I have seen a shift in the conversation to consider how to be futureproof. There is more awareness to try and provide that evergreening, to try and make sure it is part of the decision-making process, and that it is recognised you need a level of innovation and improvement.”

ARE COSTS EFFECTIVE?

As is so often the case, funding represents another major contributory factor to the issues caused by legacy tech. But, according to digital leaders taking part in our discussion, it is not just a question of how much money is available, but rather the structures, considerations, and processes that inform how and where it is provided, and for what purpose.

Support is invariably provided in large, one-off chunks – often to address the urgent need of a service or system that needs to be fixed. And, thereafter, digital and IT teams are tasked with keeping things running as cheaply as possible.

“Technology is one of the most raidable budgets when funding gets tight,” according to a digital leader at a major department. “There is big upfront funding, then minimal running costs [are expected], which doesn’t really suit the way technology works now.”

Funding processes should make provisions for the expectation that the value of technology – both financial and otherwise – can only be realised and calculated over time.

“In most other industries, they recognise that the IT that is supporting your services is part of your asset base. I don’t think central government and its funding arrangements are particularly wired up to deliver that forward-thinking service-delivery model,” said the digital leader of another large department. “Let’s assume 10-20% of the value of the asset... should be going into continuous improvement, and made available to those product teams. But that is not typically how we do things.”

They added: “This is something for

us to tackle – and we need to talk about it overtly as part of this discussion, as it is as relevant to policy and delivery leads as it is to the technology leads.”

Another department represented at the roundtable has tried to build in some longer-term consistency into funding for digital objectives, with the inclusion of a consideration of the ongoing cost of continuous improvement. Once again, the importance of including colleagues from policy and delivery was stressed – for whose ease-of-reference the dedicated funding has been characterised as ‘maintenance’.

“There is always a pressure on business-as-usual [operations] to ‘reduce, reduce,

“Without continuous improvement, legacy can rise up. If you’ve got a new product which no-one is looking at because it isn’t 20 years old yet, then it becomes legacy very, very quickly”

reduce’; but there has now been this creation of a ‘maintenance’ conversation on top of this,” said one of the department’s senior digital leaders. “We go out to the rest of the department and say, ‘usability, availability, security – these are the things we think we should be aiming for, do you agree? Well, in order to do that, we are going to need X amount more’, which we have labelled ‘maintenance’.”

Another participant pointed out that the money needed to deliver a service does not end with the deployment of the necessary technology; employing the people needed to support the tech – particularly for ageing systems – can represent as much as 60% of the overall cost of a service over its lifespan.

“There is a huge unmeasured people cost in dealing with all the old technology and legacy data and bringing it all together,” they said. “Maybe if government could be a bit more aware of this cost, that would help make the case for funding for improvement and address transformation issues.”

REFRAMING THE ISSUE

The Central Digital and Data Office, created within the Cabinet Office last year to help set digital and data strategy across government, is currently working on the

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

creation of a framework to allow for better assessment of legacy technology – particularly at the level of individual services, rather than department-wide. The aim is to recognise problems that cut across departmental boundaries, and map out a model through which risks and opportunities can be calculated, and priorities set.

The CDDO is currently working with departments to identify the biggest legacy-related issues affecting services and those that are expected to crop over time, covering factors such as capacity and resources, funding, and security.

Once complete, the framework will represent a record of the issues being caused by legacy tech and what is driving them, as well as how they can be remediated and the benefits of doing so, alongside the risks

of leaving things as they are, even if systems are still seemingly in decent working order.

The aim is to create a unified means for departments to assess opportunity and risk, and prioritise projects. The Cabinet Office also hopes that the creation of the framework will allow it to better understand how and where it can support departments, with money, personnel, or through forging connections.

The digital director of an executive agency claimed that the “CDDO can play a big role in connecting people” – particularly in helping tech professionals share bad experiences, as well as good.

“In the very early days of GDS, there

was a network and, when people were putting together programmes of work, you would be connected with someone who had done a similar thing,” they said. “We used to host quite a few people here [to talk about] legacy contracts. Most of the time we didn’t tell people how to do it – we told them what not to do. Lessons learned is a big thing.”

Another aim of CDDO in its work to address legacy over the coming months is to help bring together colleagues from different professions. As well as connecting digital specialists with policy and delivery professionals, procurement and commercial representatives also need to play a key role in the conversation.

A commercial director of an executive agency said that, in their experience, DDaT professionals from different departments are accustomed to making connections, and have created “a number of forums” for doing so.

“But my experience is that policy-makers are generally very departmentally aligned,” they added. “To make that [connection]

there is an awful lot of work to do, and it is more difficult to do that centrally.”

But, according to a senior digital leader, the legacy of failing to broaden the discussion to include all stakeholders could be long and troublesome.

They said: “It would be interesting to ask service delivery people ‘what are you doing to deal with legacy?’ And, if the answer is: ‘it is an ICT or digital issue’ then we will still be having this conversation in 10 or 20 years’ time, because it will still be a digital or ICT issue, and we’ll still be the ones that are trying to fix it.” ■



Cabinet Office minister Steve Barclay

A MATTER OF TAX

As well as undergoing a massive office rationalisation programme, HMRC is a key player in both the Covid response and EU transition – all while keeping the tax system running. Second perm sec **Angela MacDonald** tells **Beckie Smith** about the move to new hubs, tackling furlough fraud, and why she'd never leave Yorkshire

More than 20,000 civil servants went into lockdown working in one HM Revenue and Customs building and have returned from lockdown into a different one. It is six years since the department announced plans to consolidate 170 smaller offices around the country into 13 regional hubs, but it is in the last 18 months that the department's estate has really begun to look very different as offices have closed.

"You can imagine the sheer logistics of inducting those colleagues and the change for those colleagues – their lives have altered. For some of them, they might have been working around the

corner and now they've got to get on a train. There's quite a lot of change which we would have gone through anyway, but lockdown put rather an interesting break in the middle," MacDonald says.

The second perm sec – who is based in Leeds – sounds genuinely thrilled when she talks about her visits to Birmingham and Liverpool to see the new and "incredibly magnificent government hubs, all now teeming with life as people are returning into offices".

But the hubs programme has had mixed reactions from staff and the communities that have lost HMRC branches. There has been grumbling in small towns like Shipley – a 10-minute train ride from Leeds – for which HMRC has been a major employer for many years. The small West Yorkshire town had, until recently, been home to hundreds of HMRC jobs, >>

“I have spoken to colleagues who say, ‘I’m not going to get promoted because I don’t want to go to London’. What a waste of talent that is”



most of which have moved to Leeds. The town's councillors have fought the office closure since it was announced in 2015.

CSW wonders if there is a risk that moving jobs to already-thriving cities might harm, not help, local communities. MacDonald responds by framing the move as a continuation of a long-running trend: HMRC, and its predecessors HM Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue, have been "gradually shrinking for 40 or 50 years", she says. Even before the hubs programme began, technology had meant there was no longer a need for a revenue office where people could see their local taxman in "every small town and every port".

Some "very deliberate choices were made" about what the consolidation would look like, MacDonald says. "That meant understanding that we would be moving some roles from smaller towns, but trying to look forward to the circumstances that would give our people the biggest career opportunities, that would allow us the best flexibility, but also trying to make sure that we were in places where commuting would be the easiest."

The regional centres are typically within a few minutes' walk of a train station. The Wellington Place hub is ten minutes from Leeds station – a simple move for many of

those being displaced from Shipley, MacDonald says. But not all: last year, HMRC offered voluntary redundancy to 227 staff whose branch closures meant they were beyond reasonable daily travel of an office. Some of those staff worked in Shipley.

Overall, however, there have been fewer redundancies than expected – remote-working arrangements introduced during the pandemic helped save around 490 jobs, according to HMRC's latest annual report. That also coincided with a long-running effort to reform staff contracts, which came to fruition at the beginning of last year. The deal entitled staff to work remotely at least some of the time, as well as standardising working hours and annual leave.

In the last couple of years, the deputy chief exec says HMRC has had growing interest from other departments as the government's levelling up agenda and the Places for Growth programme, which aims to move more civil service jobs out of London, gather steam. A number of its centres have become cross-government hubs, housing staff from several organisations. "The fact that we were already there and on that journey is a wonderful coincidence of us being able to facilitate and support those [organisations], be-

cause they would have had to go and find different buildings anyway," she says.

"I think for other departments, there are big ambitions from the centre to move [roles out of London], but we were doing levelling up before any of this started; that's been the nature of our organisation for many a year," she adds. Having policy and delivery teams in several regions makes HMRC more accountable and "better informed by people who work, live and connect locally".

Unusually for a central department, more than 50% of HMRC's senior civil servants are already based outside London. As the government's most visible non-London-based perm sec, MacDonald feels it is "absolutely vital" that top officials are seen basing themselves elsewhere because "an enormous chunk of what we do as civil servants is to lead our people, and our people are spread over the country".

It's significant, too, that MacDonald's ascension to second perm sec in 2020 came after a career spent in operations – including two decades in the insurance industry and stints at the Department of Work and Pensions and the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. The majority of government's perm secs have come from the policy profession, and her promotion shows a different career trajectory is possible.

"I have spoken to colleagues over my years as a civil servant who say, 'Well, I'm not going to get promoted because I don't want to go to London'. But what a waste of talent that is, for people who could aspire to the most senior ranks but whose 'life wants' mean that they don't want to up sticks and go and live in the southeast. So if we're going to make the most of all of our talent, then we need to bring those job opportunities."

When she talks about "life wants", she's not being flippant; she was born in Hull, grew up in Leeds and has "never moved very far". "It's where I've grown up, and where my family is – that's a big part of it. It is part of our identity as well. But also, you live a very different lifestyle in a less urban environment. It's a lifestyle thing, isn't it?"

The self-confessed "passionate Yorkshire person", who says she'd never live outside God's own country, gushes about the countryside, the towns, and the rail links – "I can be in London in an hour and 15, which is probably a faster commute than somebody who lives in Kent. So, you know, what's not to love?"

She says much of this is possible because of timing; advancements in technology and the normalisation of widespread

MENOPAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Alongside her role at HMRC, MacDonald is also the cross-government menopause champion. She sponsors the menopause network, and is sharing her own experience as well as working with gender champion Antonia Romeo to open up conversations that she hopes will help civil servants going through it.

In a blog marking World Menopause Day last year, MacDonald says she was "totally unprepared" when symptoms hit her. Scare stories and a lack of knowledge about topics like hormone replacement therapy "added to my confusion at a time when I was probably least able to engage with it".

Our society is "not well educated" on the symptoms of menopause, the experiences of people going through it

and the impact it can have on their careers, she tells CSW. "It's only since I've started going through it myself that I've really understood the issues and consequences... And if I think about my menopause, my husband is experiencing it with me – my health, my mental health, the consequences for me don't just impact me, they impact my family, too.

"But for whatever historic reasons, it is not something we talk about, supposedly, in polite society, which is really short sighted. And I think it's fantastic that we're finally bringing these conversations out."

She says she wants to push those conversations forward and make sure HMRC is supporting its employees as well as it can – and not

just around menopause, but around reproductive health issues more broadly. "Half our workforce is suffering from a whole variety of issues where with more knowledge, those people could be better supported. Managers could manage them better, we could get better outcomes for them and better outcomes for us.

"But it's one of the last taboos, isn't it? Reproduction is still one of the things that we somehow have not managed to find a way to talk about in public. I've got to 51 and I've only really just started to get to the point where I can talk about it, which is really ridiculous. It is very weird that something so fundamental is something that we struggle so much to talk about."



“We’ve managed to do the job, which was already a full-time job, plus two extra major full-time jobs as well. I couldn’t be more proud”

flexible working means “physical place becomes less of a barrier” to certain jobs.

“But it is going to be a mindset. We will need to try very hard to make sure that as we come back out into the ‘real world’ that we don’t slip back,” she cautions. “There’s no point in me living in Yorkshire if I spend five days a week living in a hotel in London... you’ve defeated the object. It’s not just about where you are, it’s where you do your business.”

MacDonald is still in the minority, with many of her colleagues still firmly affixed to Whitehall. Can she foresee a time where half of government’s perm secs are based outside London? “It’s definitely our ambition to be there,” she says, but stresses: “We need to be realistic.”

“I’m busy going, ‘this is all fantastic, out you come,’ but there are a whole load of incredibly capable, London-based civil servants for whom this will feel worrisome,” she says. Ensuring there continue to be strong career paths for them is as important as it is for those in the regions. “So this is definitely going to take us some time to achieve... but the momentum has started.”

As other departments move in next door, does MacDonald ever worry about losing staff to rival organisations? “Oh, gosh, no,” she says animatedly. “I’d love to believe that the only magnificent people in the civil service work for HMRC but really, that’s not true.”

“Those colleagues who get a variety of experience – who spend time in different departments, seeing different agendas, working with different leaders, speaking to different people – grow, and eventually become the kind of senior leaders that we need,” she says. “So no, for me, that’s not a risk; it’s one of the massive opportunities of why we should do it. Of course, people will move out of HMRC. But great people will also move in, and that will be fantastic.”

She says that as an operational delivery leader, she spends a lot of time thinking about who will lead government’s “massive organisations” in future. With 65,000 staff, HMRC is bigger than many businesses, and “it’s really hard to get people who have the skills and experience to do some of the really challenging jobs that we have,” she says.

The nature of the challenges HMRC faces means not everything has gone to plan over the last few years, and there have been compromises. “There have definitely been things that we’ve had to pull back on and deprioritise – where we’ve asked ministers, ‘you can have one of these, or one of these, which would you like to have?’, and ministers have



Wellington Place
HMRC's Leeds hub

made those choices,” MacDonald says.

“But priority one has been about supporting what the government needed on the pandemic; priority two has been about making sure that we played our vital role in the EU transition; and wrapping round both of those has been ‘and something needs to pay for all this, so the tax system still needs to keep running’. So much of that is hidden from the world but actually, we’ve pretty

much managed to achieve all three of those. The tax world did not fall apart.”

She notes that dire predictions that the customs system “would fall over” when Brexit hit did not come to pass – partly because of a herculean effort to get new systems in place. When the 2016 referendum

happened, HMRC was in the middle of a long-running project to replace its old customs system, CHIEF, with a new Customs Declaration Service as part of government plans to operate a “fully digitised border”. That project began in 2013 and “started as solving a particular problem in a particular set of circumstances; when we voted to leave the European Union, that threw the environment of customs completely into a different universe,” MacDonald says. CDS was designed to handle 100 million declarations annually – comfortably more than the 55 million made by traders in 2015. Brexit meant it would need to be ready to handle 255 million declarations a year.

The urgency and magnitude of work needed to get it ready meant HMRC had to stop, suspend or scale back more than 100 digital and transformation initiatives. “The team did remarkably to pivot both of those – a programme which was already in flight, and the legacy system, CHIEF,

which was never designed to have the scale that it had,” MacDonald says. The full rollout has been delayed several times, but last year HMRC announced CHIEF would finally be phased out in 2023.

As it emerges from crisis mode, MacDonald says HMRC is starting to move “in a future-facing direction, whilst recognising we’ve got a big chunk of current – and urgent – things that we’ve still got to hold on to”. Last year’s long-anticipated Spending Review brought new priorities – among them, delivering the National Insurance rise that will fund the new social-care levy, and supporting net-zero initiatives. These will run alongside major programmes to modernise the mechanisms of the tax system and improve digital services.

There is also still a “big chunk of Covid work to do”, MacDonald says. One of its urgent priorities is clawing back some of the £5.8bn lost to fraud and error on three Covid support schemes it administered: furlough, self-employment income support and Eat Out to Help Out. The National Audit Office has said HMRC could have done more to mitigate the risks.

HMRC set up a Taxpayer Protection Taskforce last March, which had recovered £800m by November, when HMRC chief exec Jim Harra said the department was on track to recoup two-fifths of the cash that had gone astray by March 2023. But this month, HMRC revised down its estimate, saying it only expects to recover £1.5bn by that time. It has not said whether it

will be able to recoup any of the remaining £4.3bn, but Harra has already acknowledged the department won’t recover it all.

MacDonald says her department put in an “immense amount of effort” early on that prevented a “significant amount of loss” to fraud and error. She notes that claims that fall under this category haven’t all been malicious, and that thousands of businesses have contacted the tax agency to correct mistaken claims. “Quite a lot of money has been repaid as a consequence,” she says.

Whatever else has happened over the last couple of years, MacDonald says there is no denying HMRC’s achievements. “And I accept completely that there are some challenges in some aspects of our service delivery at the minute,” she says.

“Fundamentally, we’ve managed to do the job, which was already a full-time job, plus two extra major full-time jobs as well. I couldn’t be more proud of what we’ve managed to do.” ■

"Colleagues who get a variety of experience will grow and become the kind of senior leaders that we need"

DELIVERING EXCELLENCE

A new course aims to prepare “DG-ready” public servants for the challenges of operational delivery leadership.

Beckie Smith went along to the launch event

It is December, and Angela MacDonald is telling a room of operational delivery professionals that she didn’t spot the turning point when the public started to lose patience with her department. Early in the coronavirus pandemic, while it was handing out loans and cash through the Covid support schemes, newspaper headlines about HM Revenue and Customs had been unusually positive.

But she found herself in her annual appraisal admitting to permanent secretary Jim Harra that she didn’t predict “the point at which, despite the fact that we were consistently and persistently doing exactly the same thing, the external sentiment would change”.

The headlines grew more sceptical, the public more resentful, with criticism of service delays and cash lost to fraudsters on the Covid schemes. “Lots of public ser-

vices are in that exact same position: ‘I’m now in a recovery position trying to recoup my external reputation,’” MacDonald tells the room. “Just when you think you’re toddling along and everything is fine, suddenly from left field, the external world can alter, and you find yourself trying to protect your organisation, and deal with this other stuff at the same time.”

MacDonald is trying to give aspiring leaders a realistic picture of the skills they will need. “We’ll all have been in that place where it’s not just what you’re doing; it’s what you’re seen to be doing in asking your

service delivery organisation,” she says.

She is speaking at the launch event for OpDel Excel, an “accelerated development scheme for high-potential leaders with the aspiration to become operational directors general”, at HMRC’s Wellington Place hub in Leeds. The course aims to give people technical leadership skills and prepare them for DG posts in the government’s biggest



“We’re trying to make sure that this is additive to the leadership development that we already do”

profession as well as encouraging networking and sharing of best practice.

The first round of the scheme will run for between 18 and 24 months, anchored by three residential stays where participants will learn from academic resources, case studies and “capability master classes”. They will also visit other departments to get to grips with their operating models and challenges, and will be paired with coaches to help guide their career journeys.

Part of the reason for launching the scheme is to help public servants “think about operational delivery as a profession

where we invest in skills, capability and leadership”, according to Department for Work and Pensions permanent secretary, Peter Schofield, who heads up the profession.

“I really want us to be thinking about the leaders of the future, and how we need to equip them. And it’s not necessarily just relying on them going from one job to a bigger job to a bigger job, but actually thinking about how we can help them to build a range of experience – not just learning things in a classroom, but seeing them in real life,” he says.

“And particularly, I’m really keen to see operational delivery done at its very best. People’s expectations of what government can do for them are, quite understandably, always rising. People receive services from all sorts of different organisations, public and private sector, and technology and other things mean that people are expecting more and more and they expect just as good – and just as professional – a service from government.”

The first intake of participants comes from the civil service, local authorities

and the charity sector, and Schofield says he hopes it will “reach out across the public sector-private sector divide, so we can learn from the best organisations, wherever they are”.

MacDonald says they considered enrolling some private sector professionals on the scheme “because operational delivery is not a government thing – it’s an every-industry-you-could-possibly-think-of thing, so when you’re thinking about learning, would there be value about bringing in people in the

broadest possible sense?” They opted not to for the first intake to prevent the focus of the scheme becoming too broad, but that could change.

Those leading the course will be watching the first cohort closely to see how things can be improved for future intakes.

“We’re trying to make sure that this is additive to the leadership development that we already do... we’re trying to teach a lot of stuff which is very particular to the things people will face as a leader of a delivery organisation. So we’re going to be testing out whether or not we’ve pitched that quite correctly,” MacDonald says. Part of that means preparing leaders for dealing with the “sharp end” of delivering services, which civil servants in other professions may encounter less. ■

VIEW FROM THE COP



Organising a climate summit amid a pandemic was a massive logistical and diplomatic undertaking. Cop26 COO **Wasim Mir** tells **Beckie Smith** how his team put together “the most challenging summit anybody’s ever held”

There are many things Wasim Mir can do, but one thing he cannot do is bend time and space. Cop26's chief operating officer certainly never expected to be explaining that at a logistical briefing at the start of the climate-change conference in November.

Cop president Alok Sharma was, he recalls, "very keen for people to voice their concerns about logistics upfront". The briefing was one way to make this happen, and was where "one delegation raised a concern with me when I was at the podium - there must have been 500 people there in the plenary - that the venue was very big, so was there anything I could do to create a shortcut through it? The way the venue was set up, it kind of elongated from one end to the other. So unless I created some kind of time warp, it was quite difficult to create shortcuts."

Mir says he used his "best diplomatic skills" - honed during a career spent largely in the Foreign Office and the UN - "to explain how the venue worked, and how we'd done everything we could to make sure that people could travel quickly around it".

Despite its strangeness, the question was one of the simpler ones Mir has had to navigate over the last few months as he has overseen operations for Cop26.

The UK's Cop presidency brought about what he thinks may just have been "the most challenging summit anybody's ever held". This is also the most challenging job he's ever had, he adds - and for a long-time diplomat who has worked in Brazil, New York and at the UK Representation to the EU, that is saying something.

Even under normal circumstances, the Conference of the Parties is a massive undertaking. Mir was the "gold command" of a cross-civil service team made up of officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office - the department most experienced at leading massive events - and the Cabinet Office.

Among the many items on the operations team's to-do list was organising transport to get 120 world leaders safely into Glasgow; planning out how rooms would be used for each of the summit meetings; and working with Police Scotland to make sure people could protest, but in a way that didn't disrupt proceedings.

Then there was accommodation to secure. Most of the UK civil servants working on Cop were asked to stay in Edinburgh to free up government buildings and hotel space so delegates could stay nearby - "you've got people coming from, you know, the Pacific islands for three days and they need to be heard,

we wanted them to be in the best shape possible to help with the negotiations."

And there is no denying that the venue was big. Because of social distancing requirements, Glasgow's Scottish Event Campus had to be expanded using temporary structures to accommodate the more than 30,000 delegates. Cost-saving requirements meant construction on parts of the venue didn't begin until a few weeks before the conference started, and Mir stresses that there was "a lot to do, right until the end" of the project - not helped by the fact that the boyband JLS was performing in the venue's main arena just a week before Cop26 began.

A month out from the opening ceremony, Mir admits risk ratings for several parts of the conference operation were marked red, and "a lot of things were worrying". But while the unexpected did happen - with the collapse of a crane bearing a Cop26 banner providing one memorable example - it did come together. "You do your planning as well as you can and you make sure you've got the right things in place to be able to respond. You can't control everything," Mir says.

The days leading up to the conference and the first few days when the World Leaders Summit took place were especially taxing as the team was on high alert for any last-minute snags, he adds. "After that, we got a little more in the groove of how we were running things."

In those early days, Mir - who spent three years as deputy head of mission at the British embassy in Brazil and led a UN team in the early 2010s that brought together governments to set the global agenda for tackling HIV - found himself running around making sure thermostats were adjusted. "I didn't really expect that would be part of my role, to field complaints from one set of delegates that it's too cold and another set of delegates that it's too warm," he says with a smile.

GOING WITH THE FLOW

Underneath the clatter of all the preparations was the hum of fear that Cop might have to be cancelled. "The government was really, really committed to going ahead. But the one thing we've learned about Covid is it's been unpredictable and we knew if there was a massive change in the circumstances in Scotland, that >>>





“I think it’s an important lesson for HMG to make sure that, delivering operations, you resource that as strongly as you resource policy”

could have consequences,” Mir says.

“Luckily, we never got into that situation.” But an enormous amount of planning went into keeping the risk of people contracting the virus – and spreading it to the rest of the city – as low as possible.

All of the attendees had to be vaccinated before travelling, with officials using UK and UN diplomatic networks to deliver doses to several countries where vaccines were not readily available. It was agreed that all Covid vaccines would be accepted, to lower the barrier to delegates from countries where UK-approved jabs were not being offered.

After arriving, attendees had to take daily rapid tests, with some 600,000 tests handed out altogether. “That’s not all that simple, because you’re dealing with people from almost 200 different

countries. Some people aren’t used to not just taking the lateral flow tests, but also uploading them,” Mir says. A testing centre was set up on site with the capacity to process 3,000 people a day for those who had trouble taking tests in their rooms.

One unexpected hurdle was that delegates using VPN services based in different countries ran into trouble when trying to upload their test results. That meant calling in the team running the GOV.UK website to forge a workaround.

Mir says that, in the end, the anti-Covid measures worked “better than we thought”: the infection rate among attendees was a quarter of that seen in the population of Glasgow at the time.

But it wasn’t enough for the event organisers simply to prevent a coronavirus outbreak – and this is where Mir’s diplo-



matic savvy came into play. “I come from a background of doing a lot of negotiation; we were very conscious that as we did the operation, we had to make sure it didn’t just work for our Covid measures, but it worked for delivering negotiations,” he says.

For one thing, social distancing presented not just a logistical challenge, but a diplomatic one. If distancing restrictions meant a meeting room’s capacity was limited to 144, that meant not all of the 196 participating countries could have people in the room.

A digital platform was set up to enable those who couldn’t be physically present to participate in a meaningful way. Organisers were mindful of how being unable to have



as you resource policy. Because I think the risks around operational delivery are really, really hard. So I did feel I spent a lot of time kind of begging, stealing to get the people in place that we needed to deliver – which we just about did in the end, but it was an uphill battle.”

One skirmish in that battle was over the testing infrastructure that government medics determined was needed to make the conference possible. That meant drawn-out conversations with the Treasury to secure funding not just for the testing facilities, but for people who could work with NHS Test and Trace to make the operation work in the context of Cop26.

Asked why he thinks getting resources out of the Treasury took so much cajoling, Mir says it was “perhaps because we were not used to doing things this complicated; we perhaps underestimated a little of what was required”.

“Maybe part of it was the way we were doing this under these circumstances, but it did mean that we had to really push very hard to get people in place,” Mir says. “It made it harder to deliver.”

ATMOSPHERIC CHANGE

There are few who would conclude that the pledges which ultimately came out of the Cop26 summit represented an unqualified success. Indeed, many felt the Glasgow Climate Pact did not go far enough, as illustrated by Alok Sharma’s tearful apology after the agreement was watered down by a last-minute amendment to the text on coal.

But Mir says global leaders did take some big steps forward at the summit – completing negotiations on the Paris rulebook that sets out steps towards a zero-carbon future, which have been rumbling on for six years.

“It’s a major achievement to be part of a team that helped do that. Feeling that my team created some of the circumstances for that by the way we set up the rooms – but also with the little things,” Mir says. With the big details hammered out, the team had put time into thinking about how to make the experience more comfortable for the delegates – presenting them with Tunnock’s Teacakes and umbrellas.

“I think all that played a little role in making people feel that the UK as a whole was there to try and help them as much as we could. That, I think, creates the atmosphere where people are willing to make compromises and put their necks on the line as well.

“We couldn’t change everything,” he says, before adding wryly: “We couldn’t change the Glasgow weather.” ■



in-person meetings had hampered multi-lateral conversations on climate change in the past, and Mir says digital channels “needed to take account of how negotiation dynamics work, in terms of when people could actually access it just to watch or for two-way communication”. The system also had to allow for participants having to self-isolate – “but participate in a way that doesn’t turn it into a virtual meeting, which then limits our chances of success”.

AN UPHILL BATTLE

There were other times Mir found himself drawing on his negotiating skills when preparing for Cop26. He says he spent “a lot of time fighting to make sure we had the resources necessary to deliver and the right people in place”.

“I think that’s quite an important lesson for HMG, to make sure that delivering operations, you resource that as strongly

between venues using electric London buses – which Mir notes are made just 12 miles from Glasgow – rather than diesel coaches. The team in charge of food and drink, he says, “took a lot of pride in making sure that as much as possible could be locally sourced, as close as possible to the venue”.

Among the many business partners for Cop26 was IKEA, which provided all the furniture for the event and will help facilitate a recycling programme. Through an agreement with Glasgow City Council, the furniture will be distributed to local charities, schools and other organisations over the coming months.

NEUTRAL GROUND

Cop’s climate focus gave the organisers another goal: making the event carbon neutral and as sustainable as possible. They worked with the International Organization for Standardization – an NGO that develops international benchmarks to encourage innovation and meet global challenges – and met its latest standard to reduce the strain of large events on local infrastructure and resources.

They eschewed diesel generators, often used as a backup to mains power, instead using generators that ran on recycled vegetable oil, which emit 80% less carbon. Civil servants were instructed to travel by train rather than fly, and delegates were ferried

The Civil Service Pensioners Alliance marks 70 years of offering help and support to retired officials this year. **Andy Baxter** talks to general secretary **Lisa Ray** about the campaigning organisation's past and its future

YOUNG AT HEART



Don't be helpless against your enemy - inflation", urges a poster from the archives of the Civil Service Pensioners Alliance. That may feel as relevant to civil servants today as it did 70 years ago.

The CSPA was founded in 1952 meaning that, like the Queen, it celebrates its platinum jubilee this year.

While the vintage poster hints that many of the issues facing civil service pensioners haven't changed over the decades the organisation certainly has. For a start it's now led by a woman - Lisa Ray. She's the CSPA's first female general secretary. After a career in the civil service including stints in HM Revenue and Customs, doing policy at the then Department for Culture, Media and Sport and helping craft legislation ensuring compensation for victims of terrorism, Ray joined the CSPA as deputy general secretary in 2013 before stepping up to the top job in 2018.

"It's a job that lets me help people who have a public service ethos and ensure they are treated decently in old age," she says.

That focus on ordinary civil servants and defending their interests and income means one thing in particular continues to rile Ray when it comes to coverage of public sector pensions. "The media likes

to say that civil service pensions are 'gold plated' but that's really not the case," she says. "The average civil service pension is around £8,000 per year, for widows it's around £4,000. That's not a huge amount of money so it's all the more important that we fight to protect every penny.

"When the media talk of gold-plated pensions they are usually really talking about those at the very top – and even then those people's pensions don't compare to the private sector. If you reach the top in any field you're entitled to a decent pension and those at the top of the civil service are implementing government policy in a position that comes with a lot of responsibility. We represent all civil servants working anywhere in the public sector."

The CSPA now boasts around 50,000 members. But it's always on the lookout for more. Civil servants are eligible to join 10 years before their scheduled retirement date. As the civil service has changed, Ray is keen to attract a more diverse membership and get greater diversity into the organisation's top team. "Getting involved is a really good opportunity to continue being part of the family of the civil service," she says.

Though it was founded as a voluntary organisation focussed on improving pensions for civil servants, particularly via an index link to take rises out of the hands of politicians, the CSPA is now an independent, professional outfit with a small team working to represent the interests of civil servant pensioners. It campaigns on a range of issues affecting older people. It is also recognised by the Cabinet Office as representing retired civil service pensioners and must be consulted before any retrospective changes to public service pension regulations can go ahead.

The original aim of an index link for civil service pensions was achieved in the early 1970s. With inflation on the rise again, the CSPA has been making its voice heard in calling for the pensions triple lock to be reinstated as soon as possible.

Another campaign it's running focuses on the heart-breaking scenario some civil service widows and widowers face when they want to settle down in a new relationship but find that out-of-date rules mean that if they do so they must relinquish the pension their deceased partner built up. CSPA members have shared stories of new relationships ending and family disputes because of the desperate choice



“The media likes to say that civil service pensions are ‘gold plated’ but that’s really not the case”

between love and money. "People shouldn't have to choose between financial security and happiness," says Ray. "If people have to give up their widows or widowers pension they may lose their financial independence and effectively become the responsibility of their partner. It's a Victorian attitude that needs to be changed."

The next big issue on the CSPA radar is the impact of the McCloud judgment, a Court of Appeal ruling on age discrimination. It found that rules put in place in 2015, which kept workers within 10 years of retirement age in their original pension scheme and moved younger civil servants to the new Alpha scheme, were unlawful. This will see many civil servants who were employed in 2012 asked to choose between the provisions of their legacy pension scheme and the Alpha scheme pension for the period 2015-2022 on reaching retirement. "It's complicated," says Ray. "I'm concerned that people have clear information on this in a format that they can understand. We'll be running seminars, we've got an expert working for us specifically on this issue to help"

All pension schemes have their unique and sometimes idiosyncratic rules. Civil service pensions can be more complex than most. "We offer tailored support and

advice because it's only civil servants that we help," Ray explains. "When people first approach us the first thing they usually tell us is that they are panicking and the second thing is that they don't understand what's happened. Civil service pensions are complex and mistakes are made. We help and support them to understand how and why to respond."

For all the big policy wins in the last 70 years it's those individual cases that matter most to Ray. "Lots of little achievements add up to making a big difference. For example, if someone has been overpaid and has received a demand for repayment we can take that on for them and the result could make a huge difference to someone's life."

CSPA campaigning has come close to home for Ray. When she was asked to give evidence to parliament's Women and Equalities Committee recently on the

issue of rights for cohabiting parents it dawned on her that it's an issue that could affect her and her partner since they've never married and she'll start drawing her civil service pension in five years' time. "I've an extra incentive to win on that one," she says.

Ray is hoping the CSPA will mark its platinum jubilee with a series of campaigning and policy wins. But it will also be putting on an exhibition of the organisation's 70 years of existence featuring archive items like that early poster referencing the menace of inflation. "The cost of living crisis just goes to show that some issues never go away for pensioners," Ray says.

And after a number of years holding its AGM online Ray is hoping members can get together at a special anniversary event in the autumn.

The organisation was born in the aftermath of the second world war. Civil servants have stepped up again over the last two years in dealing with pandemic response. Ray reckons that highlights the ongoing public service ethos that civil servants demonstrate and why it's so important that ethos is recognised in pension provision.

"We hold the value of civil servants' work very close to our hearts at the CSPA, so my message to civil servants today is that you work hard, and you're entitled to a decent pension," she says. ■

LEARNING FROM MOONSHOTS

From industrial strategies to booster campaigns, government announcements are full of ‘missions’ at the moment. **Theo Curtis**, an economist at the business department, digs behind the buzz to find out what a mission-oriented approach to policymaking really looks like

In 1962 US president John F. Kennedy committed his country to put a man on the moon within a decade. The accomplishment of this ambition is often held up as the historic standard of human ingenuity, and this first “moonshot” is frequently invoked today, whether by environmentalists seeking an “Earthshot” to save the planet, or those praising the technical accomplishment of the world’s first Covid-19 vaccine.

In her book *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Saving Capitalism*, Mariana Mazzucato draws out lessons for policymakers. By discarding old orthodoxies and embracing a “mission-oriented” approach, governments can create a more equitable and sustainable capitalism by focusing policymakers on achieving missions related to the grand challenges of climate change, ageing populations, and health.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS?

The mission-oriented approach discards the view that government policies are justified by the need to fix market failures. Instead of viewing government intervention as inherently a second-best solution deployed in specific circumstances, states are viewed as co-creating markets and technologies with firms. This point has been driven home during the coronavirus pandemic by the way that public and private actors collaborated in the world’s fastest vaccine development programme, as well as the role that public agencies have historically played in creating a range of technologies – technologies that Mazzucato details in another book, *The Entrepreneurial State*.

HOW DO WE APPRAISE POLICIES?

Typically, policymakers appraise policies by summing up the potential costs and benefits at the outset using a cost-benefit-analysis approach. Mazzucato argues that reality is too complex to predict, particularly when government procurement can be used to drive unpredictable dynamics of innovation and spill-overs. The Apollo programme, for example, generated large commercial spill-overs, not least by catalysing the development of compact and powerful computers. However, to NASA planners such benefits would have been unknowable, so a CBA approach would likely have doomed the project due to its \$28bn cost (\$283bn in inflation adjusted terms).

“Public officials should abandon the unrealistic notion that they can predict all the future costs and benefits of a policy”

Public officials should abandon the unrealistic notion that they can predict all the future costs and benefits of a policy. Instead, policies should be appraised on the basis of whether they realistically assist in achieving the chosen outcome specified by the overarching mission.

HOW SHOULD GOVERNMENT APPROACH RISK?

Policymakers are generally risk-averse and often frame policies in terms of de-risking and facilitating private sector activity. This is reflected in widespread concern that governments should abjure from ‘picking-winners’, out of a concern that unrecoverable investments in specific firms or industries may be wasted. The mission-oriented approach calls on the state to embrace the spirit of entrepreneurialism, recognising that all investments generate risk, and that failure is a necessary part of the learning process. This is reflected in the new high-risk strategy of the Advanced Research and Innovation Agency, which consciously adopts a high-risk strategy that accepts most programmes will fail, but views such failures as justified by a few profound successes.

THE MISSION-ORIENTED APPROACH

Taken together, the mission-oriented framework suggests that we should discard the view that policymakers focus merely on correcting market failures. Instead, governments should pursue risky and ambitious missions that require the co-creation of new technologies and capabilities alongside private sector actors. While the investments required to achieve these missions will potentially be on an even larger scale than those of the Apollo programme, the outcomes and the unpredictable spill-overs will more than justify the expense. ■

Theo Curtis is an economist at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Winning ways

As the 2021 Civil Service Award winners celebrate their achievements, **Suzannah Brecknell** speaks to awards champion **Shona Dunn** to find out what set them apart from a strong field of nominations

The lyrics of a 1939 jazz song – which would be reimagined to become a hit again in the 1980s – may not seem like an obvious source of inspiration for civil servants. But it's that song which springs to mind when talking to Civil Service Awards champion Shona Dunn about the 2021 winners. When civil servants across the country are achieving amazing things, then if you want to be a winner it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.

This year saw a record number of nominations for the Civil Service Awards, with 1,481 nominations across 14 categories. Whittling these down to a shortlist of 38, and then a final list of winners led to some “tough judging decisions”, according to Dunn, since the quality was also particularly high.

She attributes the quantity of nominations in part to a complete refresh of the categories – based around the “A Modern Civil Service” pillars of skilled,

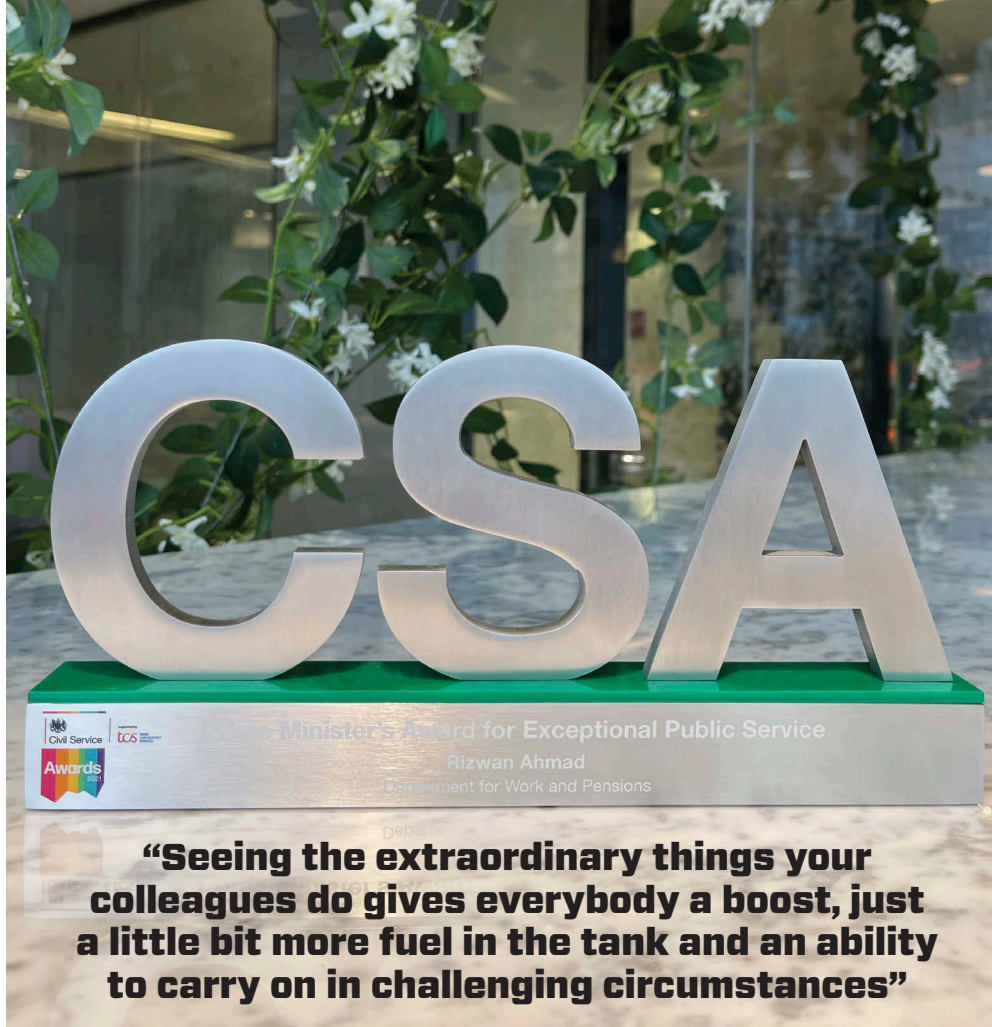
innovative and ambitious – which helped to make the awards more inclusive.

But it was also, she believes, because civil servants wanted to recognise their colleagues who were doing extraordinary work in an especially challenging year. Writing on the civil service blog as the shortlist was announced, Dunn said: “Given the various issues civil servants faced in the midst of the pandemic, I think people just wanted to show their appreciation for their colleagues by nominating them.”

Speaking to CSW as the winners were announced, Dunn adds: “The skill, innovation and ambition demonstrated by some of these winners and our other nominations is extraordinary. And we never give ourselves enough credit for the extraordinary levels of skill and creativity that we bring to incredibly challenging tasks day in and day out.”

Encouraging civil servants to be better at celebrating their own success is a passion of Dunn's. “We are no good at trumpeting our achievements,” she





says. “In a way, that humility is a characteristic of the civil service that many of us – and many in society – value.”

But, she adds, taking time to celebrate success is not just about showing appreciation – it has a wider impact on teams.

“The appreciation is important, but equally as important for me is the extraordinary effect it has on the motivation of everyone,” Dunn says.

“Seeing the extraordinary things your colleagues do gives everybody a boost, just a little bit more fuel in the tank and an ability to carry on in challenging circumstances.”

Inevitably, many of the nominations and eventual winners related directly or indirectly to the Covid response. But, Dunn says, “we were really pleased still to see a very large number of nominations coming forward on issues that were unrelated to Covid”.

She continues: “The dominance of Covid during the year of course meant that, where other teams were doing really critical activities to serve the public, they were doing that in a more challenging context.”

One result of that context is that for the second year running, winners have been unable to receive their awards in person, as the ceremony – planned to take place in London in December – was cancelled due to rising Covid cases.

“The most important thing,” Dunn

says, “is that the cancelling of the event was not a postponing of the celebration.”

Winners were announced on 16 December as planned, and a series of articles and videos will be released to celebrate their success.

“We were really sad not to be able to go ahead with the event, but it's definitely not the right time to do that. And we were determined not to lose the opportunity of celebration,” Dunn says.

There will also be a celebratory event this year “when the time is right,” Dunn says. She is determined that people will receive their trophies together but – like so many of us – wary about making concrete plans as the pandemic continues to bring new challenges.

NEWCOMERS

Two new categories were introduced as part of the awards revamp this year. Both these awards, Dunn says, open up the opportunity to celebrate the whole range of civil servants’ achievements, rather than focusing on work within particular functions or types of role.

The Lifetime Achievement Award – given to six individuals this year – honours people who have been in the civil service for longer than 30 years. In some cases, Dunn notes, their civil service careers have been much longer than this. “We've had some nominations, when people joined

us in their teens and are still here in their 60s and even 70s, and have done incredible things,” she says. These six winners were the stand-out individuals in a list of 75 Lifetime Achievement recipients, all recognised for their decades-long service

The Prime Minister’s Award for Exceptional Public Service was introduced “to celebrate someone not in senior civil service, who has done something extraordinary and, as a consequence of whom the public have seen and benefitted from the very best of the civil service”. This year, the inaugural award was given to Rizwan Ahmad, who oversees over 1,990 colleagues across 16 jobcentres and one service centre in East London. Ahmad’s work – including opening six new jobcentres and reintroducing face to face services – has resulted in the best performance at district level anywhere in the UK.

So in a year when the unique role of public servants and government was made obvious to so many, what lifted Ahmed and the other winners above the impressive work of so many of their colleagues? Here we come back to that classic lyric – it wasn’t just what they did, but the way that they did it.

“What we were looking for in the round was how people had done things as well as what people had done,” Dunn says.

The winners showed “fantastic individual and team leadership at every grade and level,” she says, as well as “an extraordinary level of personal commitment and personal resilience,” whether as individuals or as team members supporting each other. Another strong theme was collaboration: “breaking down boundaries to support each other, across sectors, across departments, and across functions.”

Having explored the qualities which made the winning entries stand out, Dunn reflects again on the breadth and standard of the work which civil servants do. In a challenging year, people across government have achieved amazing things, and that quality of work, the skills, ambition and innovation, “came singing through, at every level”. ■

Over the next 21 pages you can read details of all the 2021 Civil Service Award winners. More interviews and advice from the winners will be published on civilserviceworld.com from 24 January to celebrate the Week of Winners

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Contents

- 4 Introduction
- 5 Meet our Champions
- 9 **Excellence in Delivery Award**
SUPPORTED BY PALANTIR
- 11 **Developing and Supporting People Award**
SUPPORTED BY COMPUTACENTER
- 12 **Diversity and Inclusion Award**
- 13 **Science and Innovation Award**
- 15 **Best Use of Data and Technology Award**
SUPPORTED BY NETAPP UK
- 17 **Evaluation and Analysis Award**
- 19 **Project Delivery Award**
SUPPORTED BY TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES
- 20 **One Civil Service Award**
- 21 **Productive Partnerships Award**
- 22 **Rising Star Award**
- 23 **Lifetime Achievement Award**
- 24 **Programme of the Year Award**
- 25 **Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award**
- 26 **Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service**
- 27 **16 years of CSA**

Introduction

The Civil Service Awards are now in their 16th year and offer the opportunity to recognise and celebrate the wealth of inspirational individuals and innovative projects within the Civil Service.

In June this year we launched our new vision for 'A Modern Civil Service', that is more Skilled, Innovative and Ambitious. The Civil Service Awards categories now embody our new vision and each award falls under these headings. The 2021 nominations process opened on the 29th of July and closed on the 20th of September. Remarkably, we received a total of 1,480 nominations against the 13 award categories.

Sifting panels were conducted throughout September and October to whittle down the nominations in each category. Panels were chaired by the respective

Category Champion, and panel members comprised of stakeholders and individuals selected either due to their skillset or their membership in a profession or network. Our Awards Champion, Shona Dunn, and her final judging panel then selected the top 3 finalists in each category, forming the official shortlist for 2021.

Many congratulations to this year's shortlist and of course our winners! This is a fantastic recognition of the incredible work you have delivered and an achievement you should be proud of.

The Civil Service Awards Team

Meet our Champions



Shona Dunn,
Awards Champion
Second Permanent Secretary,
Department of Health
and Social Care

Madeleine
Alessandri CMG
Permanent Secretary,
Northern Ireland Office

Sam Beckett
Second Permanent Secretary,
Office for National Statistics



Simon Case
Cabinet Secretary and
Head of the Civil Service



Alex Chisholm
Chief Operating Officer for the
Civil Service and Permanent
Secretary, Cabinet Office



Tamara Finkelstein
Permanent Secretary,
Department for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs



**Dame Elizabeth
Gardiner DCB QC**
First Parliamentary Counsel
Permanent Secretary of the
Government in Parliament
Group, Cabinet Office



Sue Gray
Second Permanent
Secretary, Cabinet Office



Jim Harra
First Permanent Secretary
and Chief Executive, HM
Revenue and Customs



Tricia Hayes CB
Second Permanent
Secretary, Home Office



Sarah Healey
Permanent Secretary,
Department for Digital,
Culture, Media, and Sport



Dame Shan Morgan
Former Permanent Secretary,
Welsh Government



Antonia Romeo
Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Justice



Peter Schofield
Permanent Secretary,
Department for Work
and Pensions



Sir Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific
Adviser and Head of
Government Science and
Engineering Profession



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AstraZeneca/Pfizer Project Team

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Vaccine Taskforce)

The UK was the first country in the world to approve the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines. This historic achievement is due to both the vision and leadership of the AstraZeneca and Pfizer team. The Vaccine Taskforce (VTF) demonstrated the collaborative behaviours and commitment required to secure and deliver these vaccines at record speed.

The VTF combined a range of delivery and technical expertise to manage the end-to-end lifecycle, from commercial contracting, logistics and delivery. This project truly epitomised excellence in delivery and demonstrated what the Civil Service can achieve through its innovation and collaboration. This project has set the blueprint for successful delivery.

CIVIL SERVICE LGBT+ MENTORING PROGRAMME

WINNER OF THE

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING
PEOPLE AWARD



Developing and Supporting People Award

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Recognising excellence across learning, skills development, talent management and strengthening capability. Or, demonstrating a highly effective contribution to promoting or improving health and wellbeing within the Civil Service.



Civil Service LGBT+ mentoring programme Cross-Government

The Civil Service LGBT+ mentoring programme is a new cross-departmental scheme developed by the cross-government LGBT+ Network. Since work began in April 2021, 425 mentors and 550 mentees have registered, more than 500 people have been given training, and more than 1,150 mentoring matches have been facilitated by the programme. By mid-2022, it will have generated more than 3,000 hours of mentoring.

The programme has been led by John Peart, who has designed and delivered the project on a voluntary basis in his spare time. It is one of the largest mentoring programmes of its kind in the Civil Service.

Civil Service

Diversity and Inclusion Award

Recognising those who work to embed diversity and inclusion, driving positive change for our colleagues and making the Civil Service a model, open and transparent employer to better serve the public.



Diversity and Inclusion Team Department for Work and Pensions

The North East Diversity and Inclusion group, led by Joanne Gartland, was determined to make a difference, bringing teams together across the North East group. They worked to embed a culture where diversity is celebrated, employees feel respected, accepted, supported and valued, and where only individual capability and skills are the measure for personal growth and development opportunities. With a large number of new recruits from diverse backgrounds, the group looked for ways to harness previous experiences, ideas and creativity, making the North East a great place to be. Jo secured a Diversity and Inclusion lead to embrace inclusivity at the heart of teams, and this kickstarted their journey.

Science and Innovation Award

Championing and using the best scientific insights available (including from academia and outside institutions) to support innovative policy design and delivery (as per reform declaration).



SPI-M Secretariat

Advisory Body to Department of Health and Social Care

The secretariat to the Scientific Pandemic Influenza group on Modelling (SPI-M) has provided the interface between world-leading mathematical epidemiologists and the government throughout the pandemic, driving and maintaining science-led decision-making.

The team's work has helped underpin the government's COVID-19 decisions and been prominent in public discourse throughout the pandemic, but the team itself has been out of the limelight, consistently producing work of extraordinary quality under huge pressure.

It's been a full team effort, with brilliant staff working brilliantly together, across government and with the scientific community.

Congratulations to the amazing go-getters, the winners of the Civil Service Awards!

Your achievements using data and technology are not only inspiring, but also downright incredible. You make a difference, rockstars. Thank you!

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Best Use of Data and Technology Award

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Recognising excellence in the application of data or digital technology to solve problems or improve things; celebrating people whose commitment to technological improvements creates measurable outcomes.



HM Passport Office Digital Application Processing (DAP) Project Home Office (HM Passport Office)

HM Passport Office's Digital Application Processing service has transformed passport application processing. Built in-house, the project has co-designed a caseworking system with its users, achieving significant speed and quality improvements through digitisation and automation. It is now processing over 70% of all passport applications.

DAP uses a cloud-based storage solution to break the link between the paperwork provided by 6.5 million citizens annually, and where their application is actually processed. For the first time, casework can be distributed to any passport office on demand. In future, it will eliminate more requirements for paper by linking directly to the General Register Office.



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**DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION**

Evaluation and Analysis Award

Recognising development in the areas of evaluation and analysis for improved insights and to better inform our work.



DFT Analyst and Data teams Department for Transport

The Department's statistics and data teams, working with the central crisis response team, transformed the data and insight available to decision makers across government and the public in a matter of days. This was brought about by a range of innovative approaches, including use of new partnerships across the transport sector, new methods and technology, and novel re-use of existing information previously reported quarterly. The consequence of this was providing real-time data to GOV.UK, 10 Downing Street, and SAGE, to inform decision makers and the public during the pandemic.

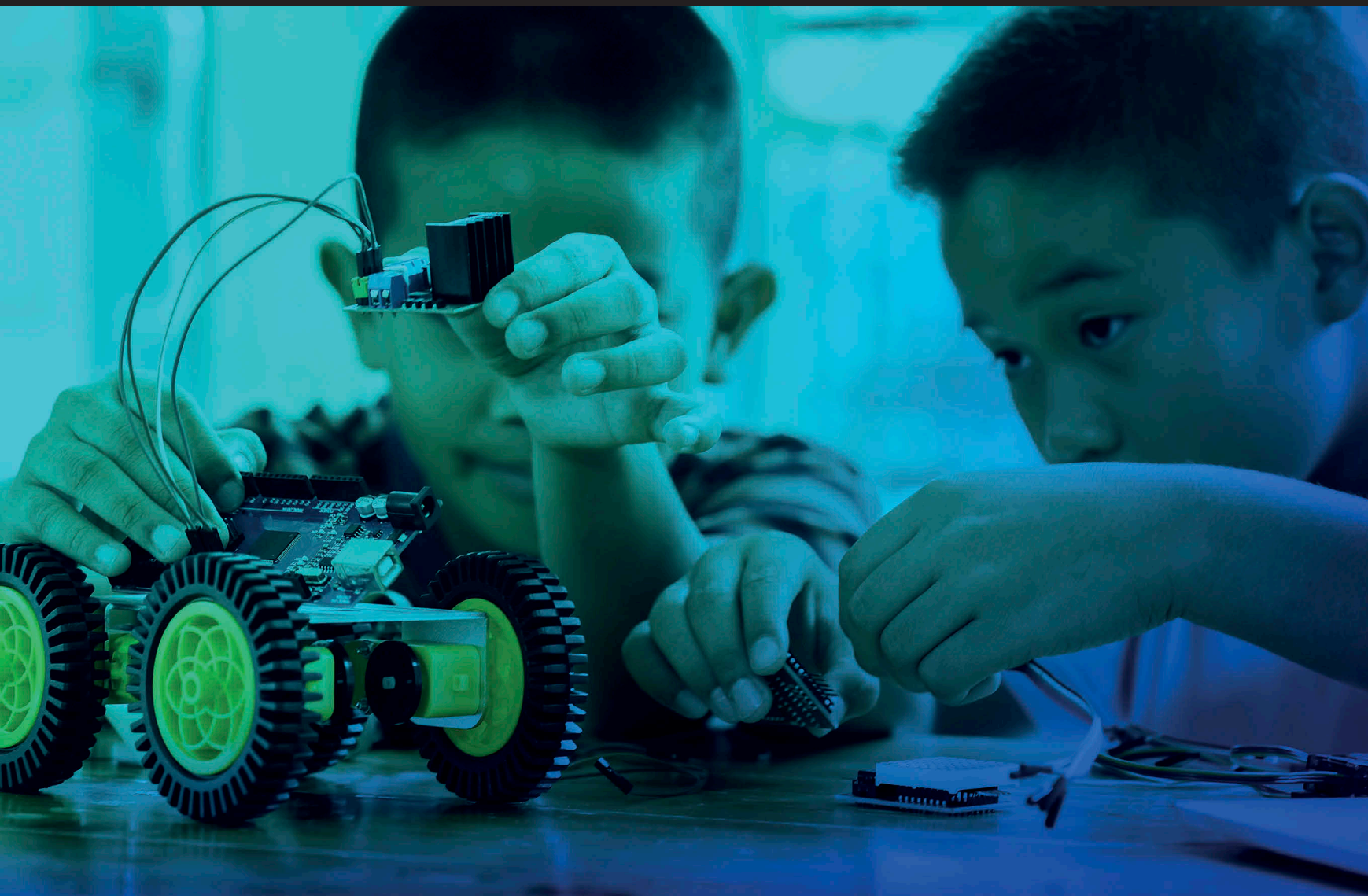
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Project Delivery Award



Recognising skilled programme, project, or portfolio management to deliver complex work to a high standard, in line with the Government Functional Project Delivery Standard.



Economic Resilience Fund (ERF) Welsh Government

The ERF delivery team has delivered more than £2.1 billion to 250,000 recipients in 2020/2021 in order to support their survival and the continued employment of an estimated 250,000 citizens. This has been a phenomenal challenge and successful delivery has been achieved under intense pressure, significant scrutiny and tight timeframes. Through the use of cutting edge digital and replicable operational delivery principles, the team have developed models which have significantly enhanced the resilience of our business support options for future years.

AWARDS
Civil Service

One Civil Service Award

Recognising excellent collaboration that spans the boundaries between administrations, government departments, agencies, and bodies.



Covid-19 Oxygen, Ventilation, Medical Devices and Clinical Consumables Programme

Department of Health and Social Care

The programme was established to meet the exceptional demand COVID created within the NHS for oxygen, ventilation and consumables. This needed to be achieved at speed, in the face of immense global competition for supply and significant uncertainty as to the progress of the pandemic. This was achieved through harnessing the unique expertise of numerous government departments and working seamlessly across NHS and Devolved Administration boundaries. This work now provides a strong foundation for subsequent longer term resilience and supply collaboration, and has helped ensure the UK has the medical supplies it needs during the pandemic.

Productive Partnerships Award

Recognising those who successfully build, maintain, and make the most of strong relationships between organisations across different sectors (public, private and third).



Energise Africa

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Energise Africa is a crowdfunding platform raising investment in enterprises delivering household solar systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, by connecting them with ethical retail investors in the UK. It was established by the FCDO with additional support from Virgin Unite, working with UK charity Energy4Impact. Since launching Energise Africa in 2017 via the Ethex and Lendahand joint venture, the partnership has built an investor community of more than 4,200 crowd-investors, raised over £25 million for distributed renewable energy companies, and enabled more than 600,000 people in Sub-Saharan Africa to access life-changing clean, affordable electricity.

Civil Service

Rising Star Award

Recognising the potential of someone in the first five years of their Civil Service career.



Andrew Jones

HM Courts & Tribunals Service

Andrew's integrity has led him to consistently seek to improve the operational procedures of our service area, with the invaluable objective to improve the quality of service for its users. This has involved him completing learning, extra work, research, and reports outside of his usual work role. His contributions have benefitted the service at national level, and procedures have been improved that have a daily beneficial impact on staff and service users. He has an innate ability to engage, inspire and achieve.

Lifetime Achievement Award

Recognising those who have been in the Civil Service for over 30 years, demonstrating long-term commitment to the Civil Service.

New for 2021, the Lifetime Achievement Award received a staggering number of nominations, which equated to over 3,000 years of dedication to the Civil Service from our nominees. This combined length of service and commitment deserves to be celebrated, therefore in addition to our winners, we have an honor's list recognising 87 outstanding civil servants - all of these colleagues met the category criteria and are recognised on the awards website.

Out of the entrants, there were six exceptional nominations who have been selected as the first ever winners of this category. They are:

David Gott

Department for Transport

Dr Jo Gillespie

Department for Levelling Up,
Housing and Communities

Robert Buckley

Home Office (Border Force)

Jacqueline Byrne

Department of Education

John O'Hagan

Department of Health
and Social Care

Sharon Cardwell

HM Revenue & Customs

Programme of the Year Award

Recognising exceptional achievement from a programme anywhere across the Civil Service.



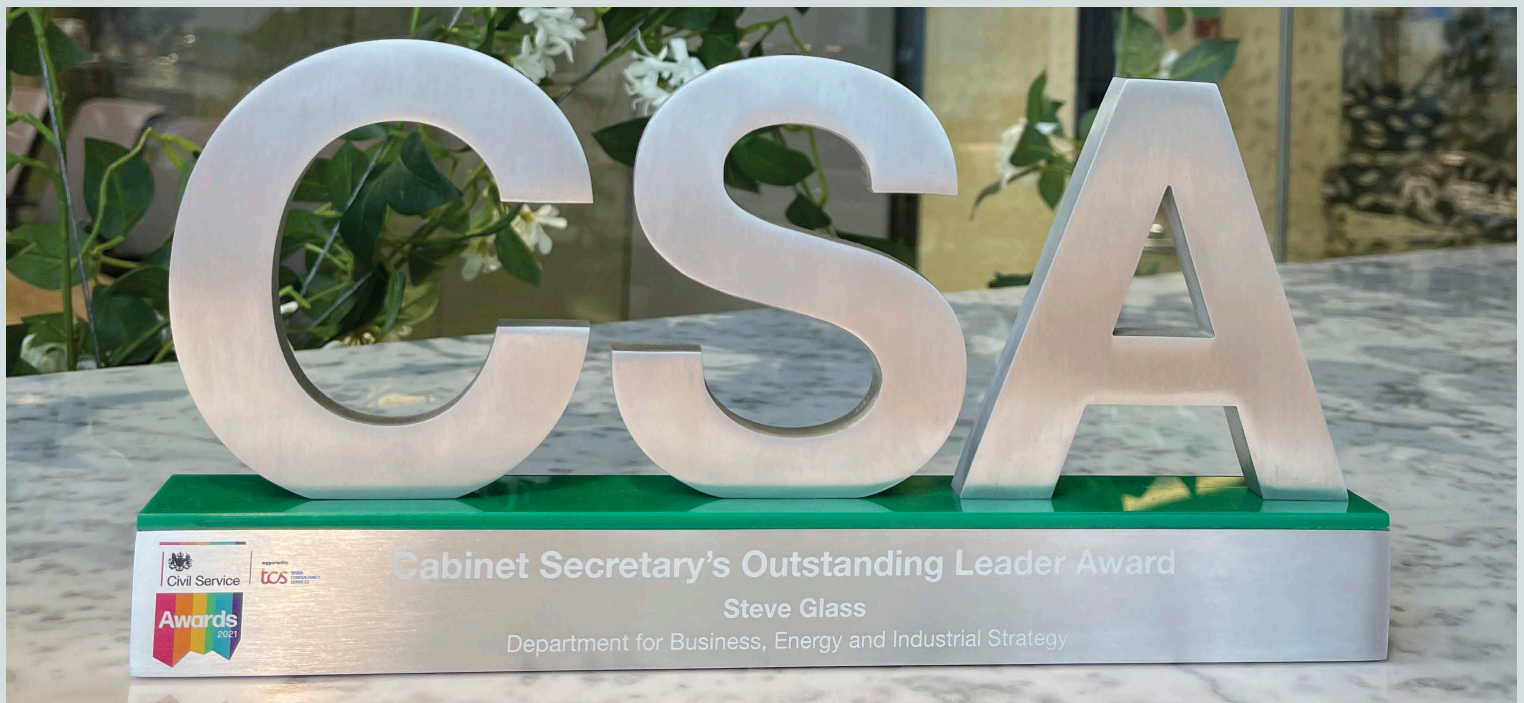
The Vaccines Programme

Department of Health and Social Care / Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

The COVID-19 Vaccines Programme has brought together teams from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Vaccine Taskforce, NHS England, the UK Health Security Agency, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, and NHS Digital to deploy over 100 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines so far. The teams have worked at extraordinary pace, overcoming daily hurdles to get millions of people vaccinated safely and quickly as possible. The Vaccines Programme has saved at least 120,000 lives and prevented more than 230,000 hospitalisations and 24million infections. Uptake has exceeded all previous vaccination programmes and the pace and operational excellence of the programme have been globally recognised.

Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award

Recognising individuals who have demonstrated
outstanding leadership, regardless of grade or role.



Steve Glass

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Steve exhibits incredible leadership of a dynamic & multidisciplinary team of civil servants, academics and industry experts who are collectively delivering a high-risk, hugely complex vaccine programme. Demonstrating consistent insight, calmness and outstanding tenacity under pressure, Steve's leadership has ensured phenomenal progress. Four out of every five adults are now fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and the booster campaign is underway, with a total supply of 123 million doses in the UK. Steve personifies Civil Service values through his unwavering commitment to serving the public and developing a spirit of resilient confidence in his teams.

Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service

Recognising someone at Grade 6 or below who has performed exceptionally, going above and beyond the call of duty to make a tangible difference to our nation and the lives of its citizens.



Rizwan Ahmad

Department for Work and Pensions

Rizwan has successfully remobilised face-to-face service delivery across the East London Jobcentre network. His focus on supporting people back to work has resulted in the best performance at district level anywhere in the UK. Thanks to his efforts, over 5,500 young East Londoners have now joined the Kickstart programme.



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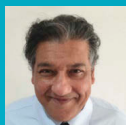
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Speakers include:



Tom Read

Chief Executive Officer
Government Digital Service



Daljit Rehal

Chief Digital and Information Officer
HM Revenue & Customs



Tracey Jessup

Chief Digital and Information Officer
UK Parliament



Lisa Emery

Chief Information Officer
The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation

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