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Dual purpose

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On the cover
An exclusive photo of Jessica de Mounteney taken by Louise Haywood-Schiefer at 1 Horse Guards Road, London

FROM THE EDITOR

It was just over two years ago when *CSW* broke the news that civil servants were to be told they must spend 60% of their working hours in the office. We knew then that it would be a contentious move – but after several aborted post-lockdown back-to-office drives by ministers, it was the one that stuck.

Two years on, officials have, mostly, settled into a routine of spending some time in the office and some at home. We asked civil servants what they make of the mandate now *(p.8)* and for some, the 60:40 split works. Some are still pushing back with industrial action, while others see the situation more like an uneasy truce. It is apparent that at the heart of many people's objections to the policy is a feeling that it is a blunt instrument and the benefits touted by ministers – of productive water-cooler conversations and camaraderie – are not universal. While some said their time in the office has supported genuine connection with colleagues, others spoke about frustrating days spent in the office on Teams or productivity lost to long commutes and noisy working environments. With many teams spread across the country, some said they feel the 60% mandate represents a failure to embrace change.

For many, the key objection stems from the fact that no one has ever answered the question: why 60%? In the face of ministers' reticence to explain their working and the absence of published research, some see the order as infantilising. One interviewee summed this sentiment up succinctly, if not elegantly: "I do genuinely feel that 60% was just an arbitrary number they picked out of their arse."

It's hard not to notice parallels with another theme woven through this issue: evidence in policymaking. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero's former chief scientist Prof Paul Monks says he is a "big fan" of evidence-informed – rather than evidence-based – policymaking *(p.32)*. Science is not the only important factor when it comes to creating good policy – and politics, he says, is often "the art of putting apples and oranges together".

This is an important consideration for a policy area as huge and impactful as the clean energy superpower mission – our policy focus for this issue. Ministers and officials must balance the energy "trilemma", Monks says: energy must be affordable, reliable and sustainable and any push for renewables must balance these three considerations. And, he adds, net zero "is not a moral crusade" and must be weighed alongside other priorities like economic growth, healthcare and defence.

Elsewhere in this issue, we highlight an area in need of more evidence. Rates of bullying and discrimination reported in the annual Civil Service People Survey dropped unexpectedly in 2020 – the year Covid lockdowns forced most teams to work remotely *(p.12)*.

These figures had remained stubbornly static for several years before the pandemic, despite well-intentioned efforts from several parts of government. So understanding why levels did eventually drop – was it just down to the physical distance between staff who were being bullied and their bullies, or were other factors at play? – and why they have not bounced back could help leaders learn how to reduce them further.

The stats also show huge variation in experiences across different demographic groups. Understanding both the overall drop and the continued difficulties faced by some groups will be vital in helping to ensure all civil servants feel safe and valued at work.

But evidence isn't enough if we want to drive change in any area, as policy profession co-head Susan Acland-Hood points out on *p.52*. She reflects on wisdom she picked up from Prof Sir Chris Whitty, who argued that to do anything well, you need both strong evidence and a good bedside manner: "the bit where you understand people, you connect with them, and you really think about what's going to shape effective shifts in behaviour".

Getting the evidence right and the connection wrong, she says, is the opposite of good policymaking – something that holds true whether you are trying to reduce bullying, tackle climate change or find the right working pattern for half a million people. ■

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Are efficiency plans tackling the real sources of government waste?

Comparing civil servants' experiences with the departmental efficiency plans shows promising intent yet reveals gaps that could limit progress on reducing waste in government delivery

Emma Charles
Industry Director
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Earlier this year, departments submitted efficiency plans to the Treasury outlining their savings commitments. Six months on, Hitachi Solutions' research with *Civil Service World* and *PublicTechnology* means we can view those plans from a new angle. Having gathered new insight directly from civil servants about what waste looks like in their daily work, our report and this article examine the efficiency plans to highlight where efficiency is being sought vs where it's needed most, the bigger picture that is "waste", and the risk we run of doing the wrong thing efficiently.

While the plans point in a positive direction, they often prioritise headline commitments while service redesign, governance reform and workforce readiness appear only briefly. These gaps are not unexpected given the high-level nature of the exercise, but they matter when considering how ambitions translate into real savings. In the following sections, we explore what our research reveals about the pressures behind them.

Service modernisation appears frequently. DHSC focuses on shared patient records. HMRC emphasises digital tax interactions. DWP seeks to streamline claimant journeys. These areas matter because they touch the core services where duplication, slow handoffs and repeated manual work are most likely to occur.

Most plans also lean on estates reduction, shared services and channel shift. Departments such as MoJ and MHCLG plan to consolidate office space. HMRC and DWP aim to move more routine contacts online. Several departments reference legacy IT replacement. They cover what was asked, but the internal drivers of waste are largely unaddressed.

Our research shows why that gap matters. Just 21% of surveyed civil servants think their organisation is equipped to eliminate waste; 71% say they often complete work that adds little value, and 62% highlight duplication as a major issue. These pressures rarely feature in the plans, but they will influence whether ambitions translate into real savings.

Take digital adoption, for example. Almost every plan mentions automation or AI, yet few explain how they will fix workflows and data first. Only 16% of surveyed civil servants believe technology reduces waste, noting that tools are often layered on existing processes, so rework moves rather than disappears. Several plans flag automation, but rarely link it to redesigned, end-to-end journeys.

Governance is another area where gaps appear. 69% of respondents say decisions take so long that waste accumulates while teams wait. While a few plans hint at lighter change control, most do not address governance directly. Without faster decisions, reforms will stall.

Departments often refer to reuse, and MHCLG describes plans to consolidate grants systems, but most stop short of explaining how teams will identify overlapping platforms or decide when to adopt instead of build. Case management, grants, payments and licensing systems all exist in multiple forms across government, and without clearer visibility of what is already in use, repeated effort is hard to avoid.

Viewed through the lens of our research, three conclusions emerge about the plans' likely effectiveness.

First, most plans emphasise estates, channels and digital access, yet the biggest sources of waste arise inside services through rework, unclear processes and unnecessary handoffs. Departments that track time returned to staff, fewer repeat contacts or improved first time resolution, will be better placed to deliver meaningful efficiencies.

Second, the few plans that describe workforce change, role design or data improvement point to what will be needed more widely. These are the elements that make efficiencies hold once the initial changes are made.

Third, the underlying drivers of waste remain largely unaddressed. Visibility of duplication, clearer ownership and faster decision making are essential if plans are to deliver more than headline improvements.

Overall, the plans point in a broadly positive direction, but the root causes of waste remain only partly tackled. The opportunity now is to link the ambition in the plans with the realities surfaced in the research, so that savings come from removing waste rather than moving it around.

To explore the full research please scan the QR code provided

Hitachi Solutions

MOVERS & SHAKERS

Want to be first to know who's in, who's out and who's shakin' it all about? Look no further than *CSW*'s quarterly guide to all the key moves in government

If you would like to let us know about a move in your team please email csw.editor@totalpolitics.com

TAKING THE HELM

Jeremy Pocklington has taken up post as permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence, succeeding David Williams.

Pocklington was previously perm sec at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the then-Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Defence secretary John Healey said Pocklington's leadership would help to drive the delivery of the Strategic Defence Review and make defence an "engine for growth" in a new era for the sector.

Healey added that he was "deeply grateful" to outgoing perm sec Williams's leadership of the department over the past four and a half years.

Clive Maxwell is serving as interim perm sec at DESNZ.

NEWS AT NO.10

Former Treasury director general of tax and welfare **Dan York-Smith** was appointed as principal private secretary to prime minister Keir Starmer in September.

York-Smith replaced Nin Pandit in the role. He previously served as PPS to then-PM David Cameron from 2013 to 2015.

His move back to No.10 came as part of a raft of changes that included the appointment of **Tim Allan** as Downing Street's executive director of communications. Allan is a former deputy director of communications to Tony Blair.

Other changes included the appointment of former Department for International Development permanent secretary **Baroness Minouche Shafik** as Starmer's chief economic adviser.

UNWIN-WIN

Former Joseph Rowntree Foundation chief exec **Dame Julia Unwin** has been appointed chair of the Charity Commission for England and Wales after a pre-appointment hearing with the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Unwin's career has been spent largely in the voluntary sector. She has also served on the boards of a number of regulatory and government bodies, including five years as a charity commissioner in the late 1990s. She chaired the Civil Society Futures Inquiry, which reported in 2018, and was made a dame in the 2020 New Year Honours for services to civil society.

Unwin will take up the job at the non-ministerial department, which has been without a permanent chair since April, on 1 January. Interim chair **Mark Simms**'s term has been extended by three months to allow for the recruitment process to be completed.

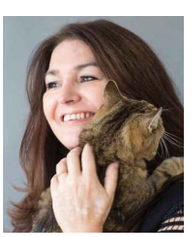
LOOK NORTH

Tom Riordan, the Department of Health and Social Care's second permanent secretary, has been appointed as the government's envoy for the northern growth corridor.

Riordan, who joined DHSC a year ago, will work three days a week for an initial 15 months in the role and will be based at the Darlington Economic Campus. He will continue to work for two days a week as second perm sec at DHSC until February.

In his new role, Riordan will work across government departments, with mayors and with other external partners to co-develop a plan to support growth and investment across the north.

SWEET CHARITY



Two senior civil servants have left their roles to take on leadership jobs in the third sector.

Joanna Rowland has left her role as DG of the Home Office's customer services group to become chief executive of animal charity the RSPCA.

Rowland said she had spent her career leading large-scale organisations dedicated to improving people's lives. "I am looking forward to bringing my expertise to an organisation that transforms the lives of animals," she said.

Michelle Dyson, who served as director general for adult social care at the Department of Health and Social Care for more than four years, became chief executive of Alzheimer's Society in November.

Dyson said she had personal experience of the "terrible human consequences" of dementia and that Alzheimer's Society had a "striking" sense of ambition and possibility.

HOME OFFICE-BOUND

Planning Inspectorate chief executive **Paul Morrison** is moving back to the Home Office in January to become director general for visas, passports, citizenship and

resettlement services.

He has spent around 17 years of his career at the department, most recently serving as director for resettlement, asylum support and integration at UK Visas and Immigration.

In his new role, Morrison will take on some responsibilities previously held by Joanna Rowland *(see previous)*.

Planning Inspectorate chief operating officer **Graham Stallwood** has been appointed as interim chief executive.

FELLOW TRAVELLER

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office director general **Jenny Bates** has left her role to become the fourth Heywood fellow at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government.

The fellowship, created in memory of the late cabinet secretary Lord Jeremy Heywood, gives a senior UK civil servant the opportunity to explore issues relating to public service and policy.

During her fellowship, Bates will "consider the changing global economic order and seek to develop a refreshed approach – or longer-term strategy – for the UK".

Current FCDO perm sec Sir Olly Robbins was the inaugural Heywood fellow.

KNOTT GOING OUT

Government chief technology officer **David Knott** is stepping down from his position.

Knott, who has served in his current job at the Government Digital Service since May 2023, said being CTO was "one of the most challenging, rewarding and exciting technology jobs in the country".

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, where GDS is based, said Knott's departure followed "a change in personal circumstances" and thanked him for his "expertise and service".

Knott is due to leave at the end of December. In an advert for his successor, DSIT said it is seeking candidates for a fixed term of 12 months.

NET-ZERO HERO

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has appointed world-leading climate scientist **Prof Emily Shuckburgh** as its chief scientific adviser.

Shuckburgh has held numerous jobs at the University of Cambridge, including being director of its "Cambridge Zero" initiative. Her CV also includes more than a decade working at the British Antarctic Survey, where she led a research programme on the Southern Ocean and its role in climate.

She joined DESNZ in November, replacing Prof Paul Monks *(see p.32)*, who finished his five-year term in the role.

SAM'S QUANTUM LEAP

Treasury second permanent secretary and chief economic adviser **Sam Beckett** will retire early in 2026. She has held the role since May 2023, and has been head of the government economic service for the last decade.

Before becoming second perm sec at HMT, Beckett held the same role at the ONS and was also deputy chief executive at the UK Statistics Authority. During her more than 25-year civil service career, she was also briefly acting perm sec at the now-defunct Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in 2020, overseeing the department's Covid response.

The Treasury is seeking a director general, economics and chief economic adviser to replace Beckett, rather than a second perm sec.

WELL TRAVELLED

The Department for Transport has named **Prof Patricia Thornley**, director of Aston University's Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute, as its chief scientific adviser.

Thornley is a Royal Academy of Engineering fellow and has three decades of experience spanning bioenergy, clean transport and negative emissions. She has led major national initiatives including the Supergen Bioenergy Hub and the Clean Maritime Policy Unit, as well as serving as deputy chair of DfT's Science Advisory Council.

Thornley will join DfT in early 2026. She replaces Prof Sarah Sharples, who became vice-president and dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the University of Manchester in September.

Government chief scientist Prof Dame Angela McLean said Thornley "will bring great insight into sustainability to the chief scientist network".

ICIBI-SPY

John Tuckett has become government's independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, more than a year after his predecessor, David Neal, was sacked.

Tuckett, a former Royal Navy submarine commander, stepped down as immigration services commissioner in early October to become ICIBI.

He has held numerous leadership jobs in government over the past 30 years, including serving as chief executive of Defence Medical Services and the Marine Management Organisation.

Immigration minister Mike Tapp said Tuckett brought "exceptional experience in public service leadership and organisational transformation" to the post of ICIBI.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

Emma Churchill has left her role as director general of the Cabinet Office's economic and domestic secretariat – whose former postholders include cabinet secretary Sir Chris Wormald and perm secs Dame Antonia Romeo and Dame Sarah Healey – to become a director general at the Ministry of Justice. The Cabinet Office is currently recruiting for her successor at the EDS.

Richard Hughes has resigned as chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility. He stepped down following an error that saw the OBR accidentally release key details of November's Budget early. In his resignation letter, Hughes called the early publication of the watchdog's report a "technical but serious error". ■

OFFICE POLITICS

Two years on from its introduction, officials tell **Susan Allott** what they really think of the 60% office-working mandate

As the winter chill sets in, civil servants bundling up for their commutes might be casting their minds back two years to November 2023, when then-prime minister Rishi Sunak began pushing perm secs to "set and implement an expectation of increased office-based working". While it wasn't the first back-to-office drive ministers had tried since the Covid lockdowns began, it is the one that has stuck.

When *CSW* first broke the news that civil servants were to be told they would have to spend 60% of their working week in the office (or out and about on official business), the response was mixed. Sunak said the move was driven by a consideration of the "significant benefits" arising from working in-person with colleagues – but unions urged flexibility and questioned the lack of published evidence for the threshold.

Within weeks, a poll of more than 13,000 PCS union members showed that two in five were considering leaving the civil service as a result of the mandate. Eighteen months later, the FDA carried out a survey of 7,000 officials, in which 78% said they believed the office mandate had been a failure.

And staff in some departments, including the Office for National Statistics, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and HM Land Registry, have gone as far as taking industrial action in protest against the policy.

Beneath the dissatisfaction and protest, there is a more nuanced picture to be found. Research carried out in 2023 by the University of Bath found that while 80% of civil servants were happy with hybrid working, 50% also reported challenges: blurred boundaries between home and work; longer working hours; back-to-back virtual meetings.

Two years on from the introduction of that mandate, *CSW* has been speaking to officials about where we are now. How has the 60% requirement affected their motivation, their productivity, their career progression? Have "significant benefits" arisen from working in-person with colleagues? And if they would like things to be different, what would the alternative look like?

So that people could speak openly, officials' names have been changed throughout.

"Pre-Covid, I liked working in the office," says Jo, a grade 6 official at a central department. "I genuinely didn't mind it. I like bouncing ideas off people. I'm a proper collaborative worker."

Today, Jo feels differently. "The only time I can genuinely see a benefit to being in the office is when we're having some kind of team workshop," she says. "And I understand that if you're new to the civil service or you're new into a department or you're just younger and you're starting off your career, there are benefits to being in the office. But at the same time, some of those benefits are tapered because working in the office is not what it used to be."

Jo's perspective is a familiar one among the officials who spoke to *CSW*. Office-based working was an accepted norm before the Covid lockdowns forced teams to go remote. But norms have since shifted and the requirement to go into the office, for many officials, seems unreasonable.

Why is that? "We've seen the light," Jo says. "People have seen how much happier they are." She gives the examples of being able to pick children up from school or to care for loved ones at home, alongside the "reduction in stress from the daily commute, the ability to log on earlier and finish later". And, she insists: "I can do my job from home." Going into the office takes hours out of her day, costs money and rarely benefits her productivity.

Is it the mandate that people are resisting, rather than the experience of office working itself? Mark, a grade 6 official at the Ministry of Defence, thinks so. "I do genuinely feel that 60% was just an arbitrary number they picked out of their arse," he says. He considers himself lucky that his manager doesn't enforce the mandate, and is happy for Mark to go into the office twice a week, provided he gets the job done.

What would he do if his manager were to enforce the mandate more strictly? "We'd probably have an argument and then I'd probably end up finding another job, to be quite honest," he says. "I'm not going to go and sit in an office for three days if I don't need to. We did that pre-Covid. I look at my outputs then versus now and I was nowhere near as efficient, and nor were the team."

Prior to the introduction of the 60% mandate, the civil service had a strong reputation as a flexible employer, blazing a trail in its approach to part-time working and job-shares, alongside attractive packages for maternity and joint parental leave. These benefits allowed officials to achieve a healthy work-life balance and attracted people who might otherwise have chosen a higher salary in the private sector.

Anecdotally, the civil service is now losing people who need to work flexibly. Becky, a working parent, is one of them – she had reached SCS level at a central department when the 60% mandate came in. She feels the change – at least in her department – was "implemented pretty poorly".

Becky had been working four days a week, but was discussing the possibility of increasing her hours with her manager – she was hoping to return to full-time working, with the majority of her week being home-based. "For me personally, the announcement meant that I stayed working part time rather than increasing back to full time," she says. "Largely because I couldn't make the practicalities work with commuting three days each week."

"I genuinely feel 60% was an arbitrary number they picked out of their arse"
Mark, MoD

Becky left the civil service earlier this year. "I was fortunate. I got a new role, which paid more and gave me a home-working contract," she says, adding that the 60% in-office requirement "felt to me like a distinct step backwards and a change in ethos" for the civil service she had worked in for 15 years.

According to the Hybrid Work Commission, women who work from home are much more likely to work full time, and enforcing in-office working therefore disproportionately affects women. Meanwhile, the Institute of Employment Studies has found that the benefits of home and hybrid working are especially pronounced for disabled workers. The IES also points out that "remote and hybrid working allows employers to recruit from wider talent pools, without being limited to their local area."

These findings are reinforced by the officials who got in touch to contribute to this piece, with several saying they feel the mandate's rigidity implies a lack of appreciation for the diversity of the civil service workforce.

The ability to work from home was a game-changer not just for women but for many neurodivergent people, says John, whose office in Wales has recently been converted into a large, open-plan space. He didn't fully appreciate how much more productive he could be in a quieter environment until he had the chance to work from home. "If there's lots of conversations going around me, I find that difficult," he says.

One argument that is often made to support on-site working is the need for younger employees to integrate and build networks, and to learn organically from their colleagues. But in a report on flexible and hybrid working practices in July, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that of the 1.1 million employees who left a job last year due to a lack of flexibility, the majority were younger people. Does the older generation have rose-tinted glasses about office working?

Roger, who has recently retired after a 30-year civil service career, certainly does not. He also belies the myth that more senior staff are automatically happier to enforce the mandate. He believes government is "losing the goodwill" of its employees.

"I think it's dumbing down the civil service," Roger says. "You're not allowing that leadership and creativity to flourish." In his experience, the best people leave when they aren't given trust and autonomy. "It's almost like the lights go out in people's eyes – people who were previously passionate start thinking: 'Do you know what? This isn't fun any more.'" The next thing, he says, is "the old 'quiet quitting': doing the bare minimum to keep my job rather than thinking, 'Oh, I've got an idea about how this can be better.'"

Becky was equally uncomfortable about enforcing quotas before she left: "As a manager, you ended up having less flexibility than you did pre-pandemic to do the right thing for the individual

HOME AND AWAY

74%
Employers that offer hybrid working (84% in 2023 and 77% in 2022)

65%
Employers that require employees to be in the workplace a minimum number of days per week/month (52% in 2023)

Three days
Most common requirement for office attendance

19%
Employers that plan to increase flexible working provision in the next year

53%
Employees reporting a great deal/fair amount of pressure to spend more time in the office

Source: CIPD, *Flexible and Hybrid Working Practices in 2025,* survey of 2,050 HR professionals in the UK

OFFICIAL VIEW

78%
Officials who say the mandate has not been beneficial

61%
Officials who say the mandate has decreased their productivity

61%
Officials who say the mandate has not improved team collaboration

62%
Line managers who say the mandate is misaligned with the needs of their team

69%
Officials who say designing quiet zones for focused individual work could improve office working

45%
Disabled officials who say the mandate has significantly worsened their work-life balance

Source: FDA, *The Future of Office Work in the Civil Service* (2025), survey of 7,000 officials, including 3,600 line managers

and your team. People's attendance was being tracked and sometimes called out in meetings with colleagues."

Meanwhile, Jo, who has disabilities and a chronic health condition, feels under pressure to go into the office, despite having reasonable adjustments in place that let her work from home. "My peers and my team don't care – they know they can reach me whenever they need to," she says. "It's my managers, my seniors. It's the backhanded remarks, the passive-aggressive emails."

"I think what really annoys people is that the 60% requirement is evidence-free," says Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA union. "And there's just not a discussion to be had about it, which is why it feels like a very top-down decision." He argues that the mandate "is not delivering what it was set up to deliver – it's a fallacy that people are more productive in the office. It's having a negative effect on productivity."

Penman agrees that "people working together and interacting in person is better", but says a mandate is too blunt a tool for achieving this – it needs to be applied with sensitivity and nuance. The failure to recognise this "builds resentment".

Does he believe the back-to-office drive was a political move? "Of course it was. We've challenged the government to produce the evidence of why the answer is 60%, or why there is a single answer for the entire civil service. Why is there one answer to all of this complexity? It's become a thing driven by political ideology."

The FDA's 2025 survey found civil servants are not opposed to office work, "where it is purposeful and fosters collaboration". Officials we spoke to also stressed this point: most are happy to work on a hybrid basis, but they despair of having to go into the office only to find that everyone is on Teams calls, or that no desk space is available near where their colleagues are sitting.

"If I haven't been in the office for a while, I do start to miss it. I want to be there," says Mark. "I like having those off-the-cuff chats – speaking to that guy over there, speaking to this person over here. A lot of the relationships I've built have been developed through those almost-pointless discussions." He schedules his office attendance for days when he can afford to lose a bit of productivity.

"I was missing the buzz of the office," says Ben, who left his grade 7 role at the Department for Education earlier this year. "My productivity was down as a result. I found it hard to focus at home – the office environment used to help me to lock in, but it changed after Covid." He found himself disengaging, and says he found another job before he was pushed.

Ben's experience is concerning, and not unusual: those who thrive on being in the office are finding work isn't giving them what they need. Even more concerning is the fact that when someone is struggling, it can be harder to identify the problem and solve it than it used to be.

HOME TRUTHS

75%
Say hybrid working has impacted positively on their work-life balance

52%
18-24-year-olds who say there are greater opportunities to learn new skills in the office – compared to 43% of older professionals

33%
Find it easier to speak to more senior colleagues when in the office

40%
Find it easier to have good relationships when working in the office

49%
Find it easier to focus on their work when at home

69%
Find it easier to juggle parenting children under 18 due to hybrid working

Source: *Hybrid Work Commission 2023,* based on a poll of 2,016 UK adults

"You can't read someone's body language in quite the same way on a Teams call," says Tara, a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Justice. She is currently dealing with a "very difficult situation", where a member of her team is "disappearing for periods of time and then claiming that they are online but their tech isn't working properly". She doesn't want to suggest that the answer is to monitor people more closely. "It's extremely

difficult to manage... It's not just a performance issue. What is your responsibility towards somebody in terms of pastoral care, if you can't identify where they are?"

Tara describes another subtle benefit to in-office working: people can stop by and ask for a few minutes of her time when she is at her desk – whereas online interactions need to be scheduled into her busy diary. "Someone might say, 'Sorry to bother you, but can I just ask you about this little thing?' I think some bits of work get done more quickly as a result."

She says putting pressure on people to come into the office isn't the solution, and is far too one-size-fits-all. "If you're based in a tiny office in Plymouth where you literally don't know anybody, all those corporate messages about the networking benefits ring really hollow, you know?"

The Cabinet Office confirmed its support for the 60% mandate in October, saying a "consistent approach to in-office working" is the best way for the civil service to deliver for the people it serves.

But what might a better approach look like? And how could we get there?

"We need to make the new way work," Tara says. "I think my job as a senior civil servant is creating opportunities for people to come together."

She suggests an investment in "proper collaborative spaces where people can come together as a team". She says national teams like hers that are based around the country might not see a benefit in going to their local office, but "still really want to get together face-to-face when there's a purpose to it". Office spaces might need to be redesigned to suit this new use, she says.

In *CSW*'s Autumn 2025 issue, Simon Hayes, the departing head of HM Land Registry, spoke about the challenges around deciding how prescriptive to be about in-office working, and the need to balance the requirements of the organisation and its employees. Industrial action by HMLR staff ended in July after managers agreed to greater flexibility, including measuring office attendance over three-month periods instead of weekly. Hayes told *CSW* he didn't expect that to be "the end of the story", adding: "We are all learning about what the best way forward is."

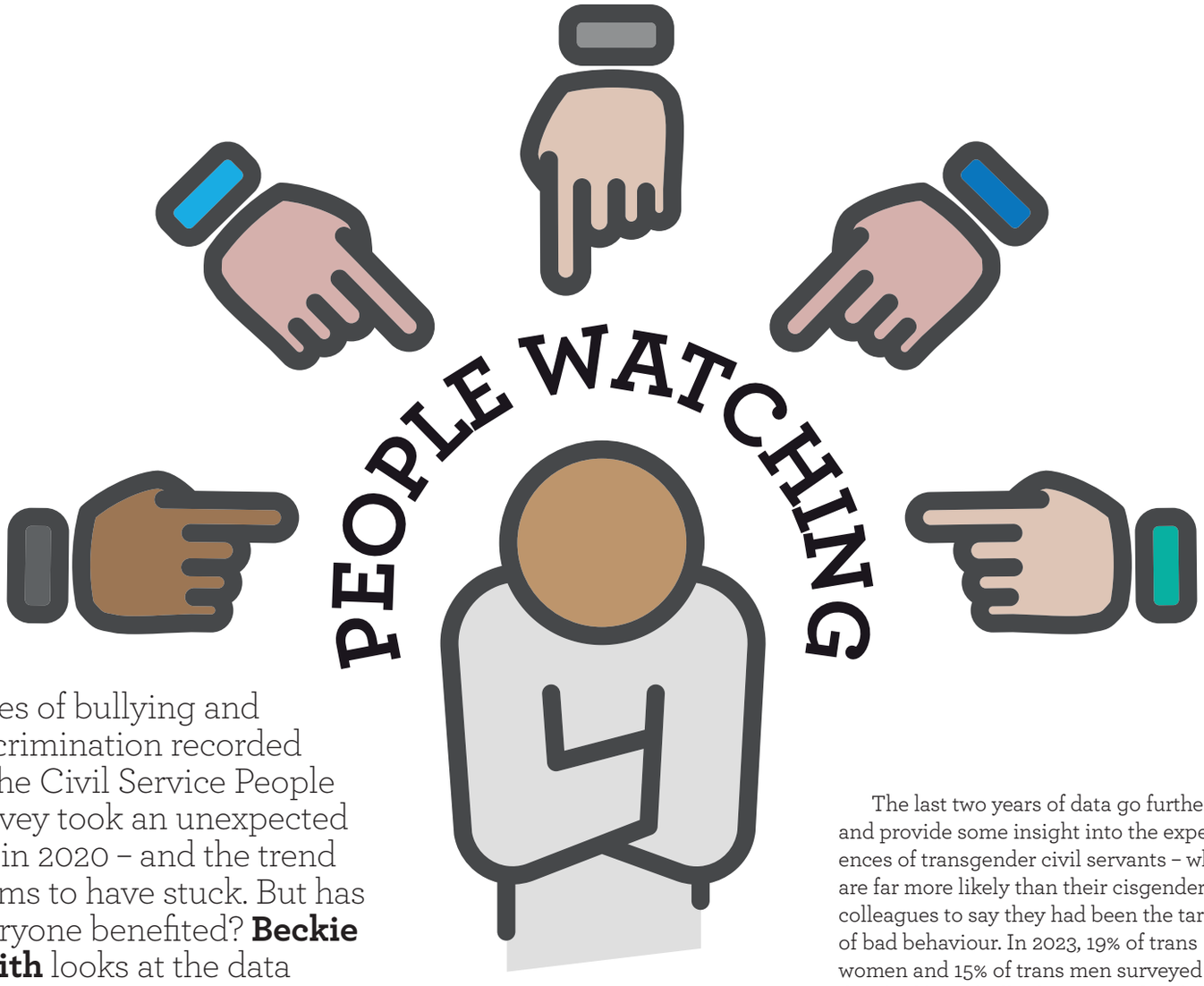
Jo suggests a similar approach could work in other areas of government. "Or maybe there should be a quota over the year," she adds. She makes the point that the mandate is inconsistently applied by different managers, and argues that more flexibility would remove some of this absurdity.

Mark thinks flexible hybrid working is the way forward. "If I was at the top, I'd say, 'Do what works for your team and focus on the outputs,'" he says. He would like to get away from the back-to-back meeting culture that Teams has fostered, which often doesn't allow him time in the day to eat or go to the loo. Like many officials, Mark feels he works incredibly hard, and sees the office mandate as infantilising and a waste of precious time: "We're all too busy to worry about whether someone's in the office three days a week, quite frankly."

"I think my job as a senior civil servant is creating opportunities for people to come together"
Tara, MoJ

Roger agrees: a mandate is not an appropriate way to deal with grown-ups, he says. "It's a bit like telling a child, 'You've got to go to school.' If you're being controlled in that way, it shapes your behaviour."

Penman resists offering up a single solution. "It's complex and it's not easy but we have to figure it out," he says. And the most important thing, which he says we are sorely missing, is "a reasoned discussion and debate about what is the future of work. What works? What doesn't work? How can we make this work?" ■



Rates of bullying and discrimination recorded in the Civil Service People Survey took an unexpected fall in 2020 – and the trend seems to have stuck. But has everyone benefited? **Beckie Smith** looks at the data

Bullying has been a persistent problem for the civil service. Between 2015 and 2019, the proportion of officials telling the Civil Service People Survey they had been bullied or harassed in the 12 months leading up to the annual poll hovered stubbornly at 11-12%.

However, this figure dropped to 8% in 2020 – when Covid forced the vast majority of teams to work remotely – and the reduction has persisted in the years since.

Discrimination has followed a similar trend, with the proportion of civil servants saying they had been discriminated against dropping from 11% in 2019 to 8% in 2020. Again, the poll has not since seen a return to the pre-Covid figures.

But while clear trends have emerged across the civil service, looking at the data in more granular detail shows the picture is far more nuanced. *CSW* worked with academics from King's College London – Michael Sanders, professor of public policy and director of KCL's School for Government, and research fellow Julia Ellingwood – to look at how experiences of bullying and discrimination compare across demographic groups in the civil service.

In their analysis of the figures, Sanders and Ellingwood also looked at inclusion and fair treatment scores for different groups. These scores are based on four questions asking whether civil servants feel they are treated fairly and with respect by the people they work with; if they feel valued for the work they do; and whether they think their organisation respects individual differences – such as differences in cultures, working styles or backgrounds.

Gender gap

Until 2016, the proportion of male and female civil servants saying they had been bullied in the prior 12 months was roughly equal. But since 2017, the researchers found, there has been a statistically significant gap between the two, with women more likely to say they had been bullied. This gap has persisted despite the civil service-wide fall in reported bullying since 2020, with 7% of men and 9% of women saying they had been bullied in the 2024 survey.

Discrimination has followed a similar pattern. In most years up to 2014, male civil servants had been slightly more likely to say they had been discriminated against; since then, the reverse has been true, with 7% of male and 9% of female civil servants saying they had experienced discrimination in 2024.

The last two years of data go further and provide some insight into the experiences of transgender civil servants – who are far more likely than their cisgender colleagues to say they had been the target of bad behaviour. In 2023, 19% of trans women and 15% of trans men surveyed said they had been bullied, compared with 8% of cisgender respondents. By 2024, those figures had fallen to 15% and 9% for trans women and men respectively, while the number stayed steady for cis civil servants.

But in the last two years, trans women have reported a rise in discrimination – from 20% to 24% – while trans men have reported a fall, from 17% to 12%. Again, the stats for cis officials stayed steady at 8%. This divergence could reflect "the wider discourse" around the rights of transgender people, which has focused overwhelmingly on trans women, according to Sanders and Ellingwood.

Over the last decade and a half of the people survey, women have reported a slightly stronger sense of positive inclusion than men. The gap was widest in 2013, when female civil servants' inclusion score stood at 77% – four percentage points higher than for their male colleagues. However, this gap has narrowed over the years and had completely closed by 2024, with both groups scoring 81%.

Trans civil servants bucked the civil service-wide trend on inclusion, which has plateaued at 81-82% since 2020. Inclusion scores for trans women and men fell from 77% and 78% respectively in 2023 to 75% for both in 2024.

Sexuality stats

In 2009, 19% of LGBO – lesbian, gay, bisexual and "other" – civil servants said they had experienced discrimination, compared to 12% of heterosexual staff. By 2024, this seven percentage-point gap (which widened slightly to nine in 2010) had narrowed to five percentage points, with 13% of LGBO respondents saying they had been discriminated against.

Bisexual civil servants experienced higher rates of bullying and discrimination (both at 13%) than their lesbian and gay peers (11%). Civil servants who fall into the "other" category – which includes asexuality – fared worse still, with bullying at 15% and discrimination at 19%.

It is not possible to cross-reference data on gender and sexuality in the people survey, which could enable researchers to compare trends among, say, lesbian and gay civil servants or bisexual women and men. Sanders says research he and fellow academics have carried out at King's – including looking at student data – has revealed "very big differences" within the LGBO grouping.

Straight civil servants have consistently had higher inclusion scores than their lesbian, gay, and bisexual colleagues, and those with "other" sexual orientations. However, the gap has been gradually narrowing over the last decade and a half as scores have risen for both groups. Inclusion for LGBO officials stood at 78% in 2024 – three percentage points lower than for heterosexual civil servants, compared to seven points lower in 2009, but still "statistically significant", according to Sanders and Ellingwood.

Again, the granular data highlights substantial differences in the experiences of civil servants within this LGBO grouping. Gay and lesbian officials had the highest inclusion scores in this group (80%) and those with "other" sexualities had the lowest (76%).

"Discrimination toward those who are often vulnerable and considered fair game by those with power or influence is not new" *Diane Ebanks, PCS*

Health check

The contrast in survey feedback is starkest when looking at responses from officials with long-term limiting health conditions – defined as having a physical or mental health condition lasting 12 months or more that reduces the ability to carry out day-to-day activities. These officials are more than twice as likely as their peers to experience bullying and discrimination.

This finding matches the observations of the civil service's biggest union. "We know from our own internal records that instances of discrimination are highest when it comes to our disabled members," says Diane Ebanks, head of equality at PCS. "They are – by far – the group most likely to raise grievances and to escalate to a review of their personal cases by PCS's legal team."

As with other groups, reported bullying rates dropped in 2020 – from 22% to 17% – while discrimination fell from 24% to 21%.

The more severe a health condition was reported to be, the more likely officials were to say they had been treated poorly. Nearly a quarter – 22% – of staff with a condition that had "a lot" of impact on their day-to-day activities said they had been bullied in 2024, and 28% said they had been discriminated against. Among those with a condition that had "no impact" on their day-to-day activities, these figures fell to 9% and 8% respectively.

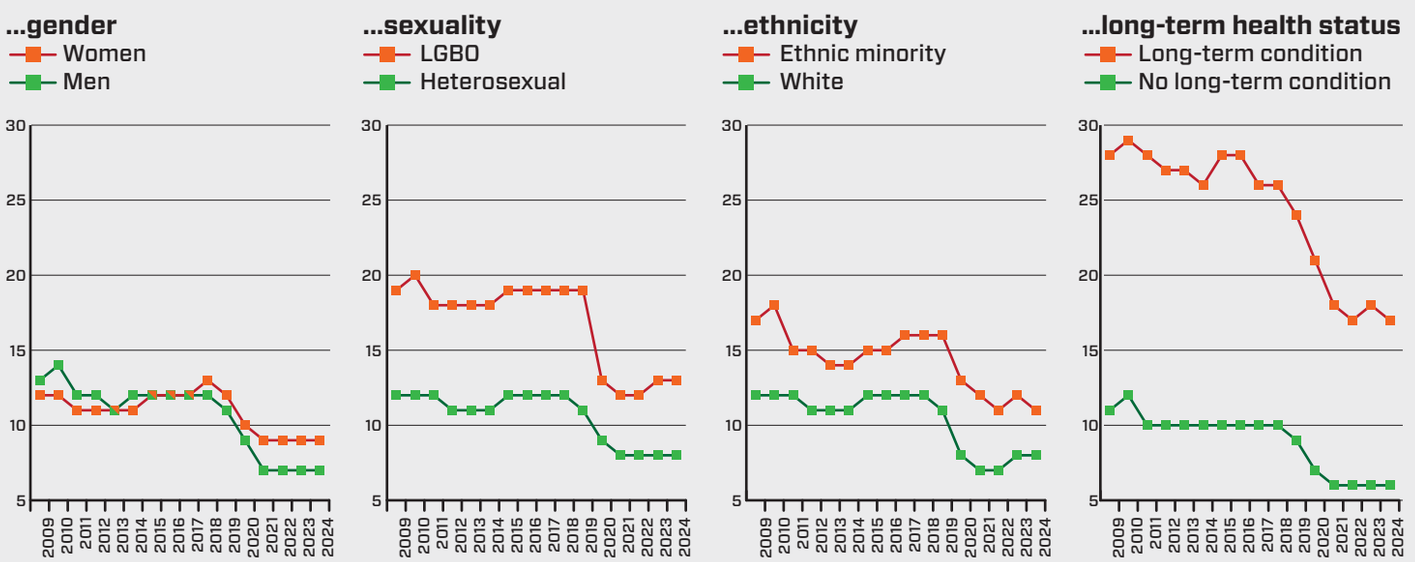
Positive inclusion scores for chronically ill civil servants have risen steadily since 2010, following the overall trend – but have remained significantly lower than those of their counterparts without long-term health conditions. In 2010, inclusion for chronically ill civil servants stood at 57%, rising to 72% by 2024 – six points lower than for non-chronically-ill officials. Among those with the most limiting conditions, this 2024 figure dropped to 63%.

Minority report

Less stark but still persistent is the finding that civil servants from ethnic-minority backgrounds experience significantly more discrimination than their white colleagues: 11% in 2024, compared with 8%. The gap has narrowed, but slowly – 15 years earlier, those percentages stood at 17% and 12% respectively. The trend is similar for bullying: a four percentage-point gap in 2009 had narrowed to two by 2024, when 10% of officials from ethnic minorities said they had been bullied.

More granular data shows reported »

PERCENTAGE OF CIVIL SERVANTS WHO SAID THEY HAVE BEEN DISCRIMINATED AGAINST IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, ACCORDING TO...



Source: Civil Service People Survey

bullying was highest among the "any other ethnic group" category (13%), followed by staff with mixed heritage (11%), in 2024. Around 10% of Black and Asian civil servants said they had been bullied. Breaking down the data further, civil servants in the "white: Gypsy or Irish traveller" cohort were most likely to say they had experienced bullying, at 17%. They also reported the highest rate of discrimination, at 18%, and the lowest inclusion score, at 68%.

Inclusion scores have been rising gradually for both white and ethnic-minority staff since 2011 – but have diverged since 2018. Last year, inclusion for civil servants from ethnic-minority backgrounds was 80% – two percentage points lower than their white peers. More detailed demographic data shows that while inclusion was highest among the "Black or Black British: African" cohort, at 83%, it was lowest among Black civil servants with Caribbean heritage (75%) or any other Black, Black British or Caribbean background (72%).

What next?

The drop in bullying that came with the onset of the pandemic was "a big surprise", Sanders says. "Everything else we measure about the workforce – wellbeing, anxiety, happiness, physical health – gets worse during the pandemic, but this one thing gets better."

Ebanks at the PCS union says having the option to work from home "will have had a positive impact, as it can remove staff from negative environments and perpetrators". While staff at most departments have returned to the office in some capacity, many are spending more of their time working from home than they did before Covid hit *(see p.8)*.

In their analysis of the data, Sanders and Ellingwood have said the drop in bullying and discrimination since 2020 – and how it has been achieved and sustained – "warrants considerable additional attention".

How might senior leaders in the civil service go about this? "The first thing I'd like to see is a more qualitative study looking at civil servants who have been in post for more than five years and getting a sense of what their experiences have been, and to see if there's anything particular that happened, and anything that we can replicate and take forward," Sanders says. Ellingwood's PhD is on this subject and the researchers would be keen to help, he adds.

Sanders says he would love to see the raw data behind the people survey. "We could see so much more if we could see that, but we're also just super grateful that the civil service publishes what they do," he says.

But he says he would love to be able to cross-reference the more granular data on responses from different demographic groups. At the moment, "we can't really look at intersectionality, which is clearly an important piece of the puzzle here", Sanders notes. Enabling civil service-watchers to cross-reference responses from people who fall into multiple marginalised groups would paint a much richer picture of civil servants' experiences, he says.

Ebanks agrees that there should be a "concerted and genuine attempt to understand why these issues are so persistent". While there has been a drop in bullying and harassment since 2020, the numbers are "still too high", she says.

"Discrimination toward those who are often vulnerable and considered fair game by those with power or influence is not new. Knowing that our members are being targeted due to their protected characteristic is shameful and should not be acceptable in any place of work," Ebanks adds.

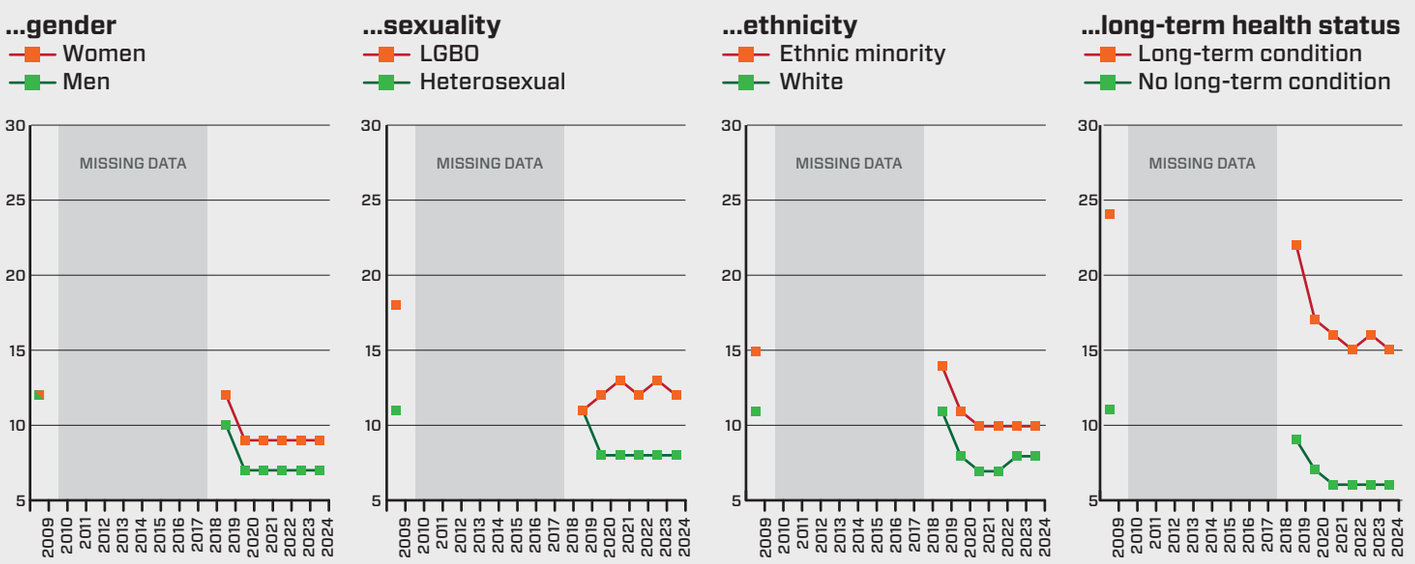
"We would particularly encourage efforts on management training to establish working cultures. This should be cascaded down to all staff so that they see and believe that there is a necessary change to come, and that it is taking place."

A Cabinet Office spokesperson said: "We want the civil service to be a great place to work, which is why we regularly seek feedback from staff and have improved how departments respond to and report bullying, harassment and discrimination."

Work includes the launch of an organisational readiness assessment tool to identify and fix internal work environment inefficiencies; the expansion of the annual Speak Up campaign to encourage whistleblowing; and updated line-management standards.

The Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022 to 2025 committed to a review of progress on handling bullying, harassment and discrimination across the civil service. Its findings will inform the upcoming Civil Service Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. ■

PERCENTAGE OF CIVIL SERVANTS WHO SAID THEY HAVE BEEN BULLIED IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, ACCORDING TO...



Source: Civil Service People Survey

Identifying and responding to 'powerful perpetrators' of sexual misconduct

Dr Natasha Mulvihill, associate professor in criminology at the University of Bristol, introduces a groundbreaking comparative study into high-status/high-public-trust UK professionals who perpetrate sexual harm across work, home and public spaces – and how professional regulators and membership bodies can best identify and respond

Dr Natasha Mulvihill
Associate Professor in Criminology
University of Bristol

We have become familiar with media stories about high-profile cases of sexual misconduct, often among celebrities or in the business world. However, an under-recognised group is what could be termed 'high-status/high-trust' professionals: in particular where they offend against adults rather than children. These professionals may hold a confidante role (such as doctors, psychiatrists or religious leaders), or they may act as physical protectors or guardians of our rights (consider police, military, barristers, judges or politicians). The professional role can give them social licence to move freely through both public and intimate spaces, and it affords them authority as experts. Given their public-facing and important work, they may derive moral standing and a default presumption of noble intentions. For this reason, such professionals can be 'powerful perpetrators'.

Following an award by the European Research Council, and funded by UKRI, this five-year study looks first at the nature and prevalence of such perpetrators within and across those professions. The aim is to build a robust body of evidence on individual, organisational and wider cultural factors that may facilitate, conceal or fail to challenge their behaviour. Second, it looks at the internal disciplinary and professional regulatory responses to these individuals, once identified. These 'administrative justice' spaces may be particularly important where criminal justice routes are not available, not desired or not successful.

The term 'sexual misconduct' does not always convey the gravity and impact of this behaviour. Indeed, this form of attenuating language is common in describing professional offending: doctors 'conduct unnecessary intimate examinations'; police 'have inappropriate sexual relationships with victims of crime'; judges 'behave dishonourably'.

But it is serious. It harms individuals physically, sexually and psychologically, including long-term. It impacts colleagues, bystanders, families and other service-users; it compromises the delivery of work though stress, absence and avoidance; it affects recruitment and retention; it creates legal and reputational costs for employers; and it adds to demand on health and support services. Fundamentally, it can corrode public trust in key social institutions.

We are approaching national regulators for the professions of interest to request anonymised case numbers and examples of anonymised case files. We are interviewing individuals involved in

any aspect of disciplinary and regulatory processes in relation to sexual misconduct to learn from their experience and insight, and we are interviewing journalists who have investigated this area. We are anonymously surveying individuals who have experienced or witnessed abuse by professionals. And we are methodically searching and cataloguing case data already in the public domain: either published by organisations, in the media, or through Freedom of Information requests.

The multiple initiatives and reports within different sectors may suggest that sexual misconduct is a problem that has been addressed. But we believe effective intervention requires understanding practice both within and across professional groups. That way, we can see the connections (and differences) in how powerful perpetrators operate. We think more effective practice will emerge from combining collective knowledge and insight. That is what this study aims to achieve.

University of BRISTOL

Get in touch

We would welcome your help. If you wish to talk in an interview or off-the-record, complete our survey, or make suggestions about the project, then visit our website on https://powerfulperpetrators.org.

As our findings emerge, we would value your expertise in translating them into practical and meaningful change. For more information, email the project lead Dr Natasha Mulvihill at natasha.mulvihill@bristol.ac.uk

DAVE PENMAN HURRY UP AND WAIT

WITH CIVIL SERVICE REFORM, PATIENCE ISN'T JUST A VIRTUE – IT'S A REQUIREMENT. BUT SLOW PROGRESS IS ALL THE MORE REASON TO FORGE AHEAD

There's a line from an episode of *The Young Ones* where Alexei Sayle plays a shotgun-wielding convict who comes to the house. He says, "Excuse me I'm not actually known for my patience" and Rick replies, in his smarmiest tone, "Oh, well you're probably not Dr Kildare then" – only to promptly get thumped.

Watched on Thursday nights on BBC2 in my mate's bedroom – as he was the only one with a colour 14" portable TV – it was one of those sitcoms that spawned a thousand notable lines and catchphrases for that generation. The patience/patients pun has become a mainstay of my dad-joke repertoire over the years.

In my trade, patience isn't a virtue – it's a requirement. Whilst change may be slow, progress is glacial. The complexities of making progress across the civil service are endless. Delegation makes civil service-wide change extraordinarily complex – in terms of both the power dynamics to get alignment on an outcome and the nuances of separate legal entities agreeing to do the same thing. Overlay that with the influence of the Treasury and the political dynamics within departments as well as with the Cabinet Office, and you find yourself in an endless doom loop of dialogue, with little actual progress.

That's not to criticise any individual. It's the result of a system that also drives frustration among civil servants themselves – never mind ministers. Then there are the sensitivities around improving the lot for civil servants. Which minister thinks there are votes in better pay for civil servants, never mind senior civil servants? Regardless of evidence about the impact, successive governments of all colours have baulked at major reform and have failed to reverse the trend of civil service salaries falling ever further behind their private sector counterparts.

Then there's the problem that reform of civil service pay is, in many ways, just another area of government policy. It requires political interest and weight behind it to make something happen, not just bright ideas from civil servants in pay and reward teams. There's a closer link between ministers and those issues in areas like education or health than there is in the civil service.

Rarely have we seen an interested minister given the time to have an impact. Under the Blair/Brown governments, we had more than a dozen ministers with the portfolio, including one young Pat McFadden. Francis Maude, who followed in the coalition years, saw out a full term in government on the brief – and delivered on some pretty major reforms. Not all were welcome, of course. Then we had the political merry-go-round of the next decade, with little interest or time for ministers to have an agenda, never mind deliver on it. I had high hopes with the appointments of McFadden (again) and Georgia Gould, only to see them reshuffled after a year, just as it felt we were starting to make progress.

We're now about a third of the way into the term of this government. There has been a notable step change in the dialogue we've had both with ministers and officials over the last 18 months. Yes, there's been a lot of "talk about talks", but gradually that has become more focused.

Now we need to see tangible results: real outcomes for civil servants. Resources are settled and whilst we've yet to see the long-promised workforce plans, departments are working through their structural change. The civil service will be smaller, as ministers made clear they wanted, but where is the quid pro quo on skills and pay?

Job hopper CDL-turned-work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden

"Which minister thinks there are votes in better pay for civil servants, never mind senior civil servants?"

Money is tight, but then money is always tight. That's not a reason to do nothing. It's a reason to be in a hurry, because real progress will take time and be incremental.

Unlike Alexie Sayle's character, I do have patience. I'm too old and, hopefully, wise enough to not set arbitrary deadlines I know I can't control. But I can also tell that we have a narrow window to make progress, and it feels like it's getting narrower. 2027 is when we're told we'll have the next spending round. That will be focused on the next election, as well as sucking up all the political and intellectual capital. Time to get on with it. ■

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY MONEY TALKS

CSW'S NEWEST COLUMNIST JON DAVIS CONSIDERS HOW THE CURRENT SETUP FOR ECONOMIC POLICYMAKING AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT COMPARES TO PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATIONS AND ASKS: HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO HAVE HARMONY ALONG DOWNING ST?

"I need history to return to the Treasury," said its permanent secretary, Sir Nicholas – now Lord – Macpherson, to me in 2012. He had concluded that the department's institutional memory was found wanting during the 2007-09 financial crisis, having waned in the years since its historical section was abolished as part of the 1976 IMF cuts.

One of the ways we have worked to mitigate this has been through the King's College London-partnered *Chancellors and the Treasury: Managing the British Economy* class, now in its 11th year. Recurrent themes have been the often-turbulent relationship between prime ministers and chancellors, between No.10 and the Treasury, and reforms to the machinery of government.

This historical context adds significance to the recent changes around economic policymaking at the centre of government, which attracted relatively little attention.

Switching Darren Jones from his job as chief secretary to the Treasury to the newly created chief secretary to the PM role, and appointing an HMT official as principal private secretary to the prime minister for the first time since Chris Martin a decade before, are both interesting.

Disagreeing agreeably? Tony Blair and Gordon Brown

Yet other changes are arguably more significant, as they have caused real difficulty in the past. First, consider the appointment of Ben Nunn, reportedly one of prime minister Keir Starmer's closest allies, as chief of staff to the chancellor, Rachel Reeves. Compare this to when Boris Johnson, egged on by his senior adviser Dominic Cummings, demanded in 2020 that No.10 would choose the chancellor's advisers and Sajid Javid promptly resigned.

Next, the announcement of a new No.10-No.11 "budget board" committee to jointly draw up the budget was also eyebrow-raising, certainly for those who remember the New Labour years. This brought to mind one of the more humorous moments of the Blair-Brown conflicts – known widely as the TB-GBs – when, a month before the 1998 Budget, Tony Blair asked his chancellor: "What about the Budget?" only to receive the response: "I haven't made my mind up yet." The exasperated PM resorted to pleading: "Give us a hint, Gordon!" which occasioned the end of the meeting as, according to Blair's economic adviser Derek Scott, "no one from No.10 could keep a straight face".

The new budget board is co-chaired by Torsten Bell, parliamentary secretary to the Treasury, and Baroness Minouche Shafik, the newly appointed chief economic adviser to the prime minister. Shafik is clearly a significant appointment, having been permanent secretary at the late Department for International Development and deputy governor of the Bank of England – indeed, she had been rumoured to be in the running for governor.

Press speculation around Shafik's appointment pointed to the possibility of friction with Reeves, which has not happened so far. But conflict was certainly the result when, in 1989, Margaret Thatcher became determined to reappoint Alan Walters, a high profile economics adviser. Relations had become strained between the prime minister and the chancellor, Nigel Lawson, thanks to rising inflation and interest rates, not to mention differences over the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and even independence for the Bank of England. But the flashpoint was Walters, whose "hostility to various aspects of government policy was well known", according to Lawson. His – and Walters's – subsequent resignation marked the beginning of the end for the longest serving prime minister of the 20th century.

Starmer, Reeves and the wider government have been at considerable pains to portray the reforms as a consensual effort to improve economic policymaking and avoid accusations of a prime ministerial takeover. But the intriguing question is: should relations between a prime minister and chancellor be smooth? In his resignation speech, Javid spoke of the need for "constructive, creative tension" between the roles. Prof Ed Balls – former minister and adviser to Gordon Brown, and a lecturer on our chancellors and the Treasury course – often talks of the desirable constitutional conflict between Nos.10 and 11 that resulted in energy-sapping, robust, yet – as he argues – successful economic policymaking in the Blair and Brown years. Balls compares this with the close and respectful partnership forged between David Cameron and George Osborne which, some have said, resulted in the Brexit referendum after the latter decided not to obstruct the PM's wishes.

One thing's for sure: Starmer was certainly much more involved in this year's budget than last year's. Only time – and future historians – will tell if this has resulted in better policymaking or simply closer relations at the centre of government. ■

Professor Jon Davis is director of the Strand Group at King's College London

MAKING HIS MARK

Six months into his new role as permanent secretary at HMRC, **JP Marks** sits down with **Suzannah Brecknell** to discuss why change in the department must be a team effort. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Gareth Southgate is perhaps not the most successful manager of the English football team (that honour must surely go to Sir Alf Ramsey, who led the 1966 squad to World Cup victory), but he's the only one whose career arc and distinctive approach to leadership made him a national treasure and inspired an Olivier-award winning play, *Dear England*.

Southgate's leadership style includes investing in his players' mental resilience as well as their technical skills, and fostering a strong sense of accountability for standards in the team. Southgate has also said he wants to empower the players, making sure they feel involved in the team's overall strategy because, as he once put it, "in the 85th minute, they've got to make a decision that might win or lose the game, and we can't make all those decisions from the sideline".

HM Revenue and Customs' permanent secretary, JP Marks, may or may not be channelling Southgate when he spends – by his own admission – "far too much time" thinking over the teamsheet as the coach for his daughter's under-10s team. Since he and his family live in Scotland, the perm sec might well find more inspiration in another famous football manager and Glasgow native: Sir Alex Ferguson.

Whoever inspires his coaching style on the sidelines each Sunday, Marks certainly shares Southgate's belief in the importance of empowerment and accountability when he returns to his day job. Those are two words he repeats again and again when telling *CSW* about an ambitious program of change for HMRC – which he joined in spring 2025 – and when he reflects on what he learned from working at the forefront of change in DWP for much of his career.

Our discussion takes place in a large meeting room in the warren of corridors at 100 Parliament Street, a building HMRC shares with DCMS and other government departments at the southern end of Whitehall. While the room is beautiful, it does feel a rather incongruous setting.

For a start, it's in London – where Marks spends only around a third of his working time, according to his own rough estimate. His working base is Queen Elizabeth House, a government hub in Edinburgh, the city where he lives. His travel schedule in the first months of the job has been "pretty busy", he says, but most of the time he's visiting frontline colleagues across the country, rather than only the London HQ.

A few weeks before our interview, for example, he visited teams in Belfast to find out how they are working with Border Force and Belfast Port officials to embed the Windsor Framework, and his namechecking of other recent visits ("Glasgow, Newcastle, Stratford, Croydon, Birmingham… you name it") is a reminder of just how widely HMRC is spread across the country.

That geographic diversity stretches right to the top. Not only is Marks based in Edinburgh, but five other executive committee members operate from outside London – including his second perm sec, Angela MacDonald, in Leeds. The opportunity to "role model Places for Growth", and show that senior leadership doesn't need to be all based in London, was part of what attracted him to apply for the role.

"Obviously I checked carefully through the process to make sure everyone agreed," he says. "But for our people in HMRC, it's very positive. They want to be able to build civil service careers in all four nations and regions of the UK, and increasingly, that is possible."

The other incongruity about our meeting room is that it is lined with glazed bookcases holding row upon row of serious-looking tomes – seemingly bound copies of Hansard debates dating back a century or so. Yet, while the room is redolent with the history and traditions of government, our conversation focuses on the future and how HMRC will deliver a "simpler tax and customs system [that fits] seamlessly into the way that customers run their lives and business".

The quote comes from HMRC's Transformation Roadmap, published in July, which sets out how the department is moving towards its long-term vision and is structured around three priorities.

The first two priorities – improving day-to-day business and customer experience, and closing the tax gap – are supported by the third: modernising and reforming the tax system. All three are underpinned by a commitment to change how HMRC delivers transformation, shifting from large-scale programmes to a more iterative, agile approach that sharpens accountability and invites greater external challenge.

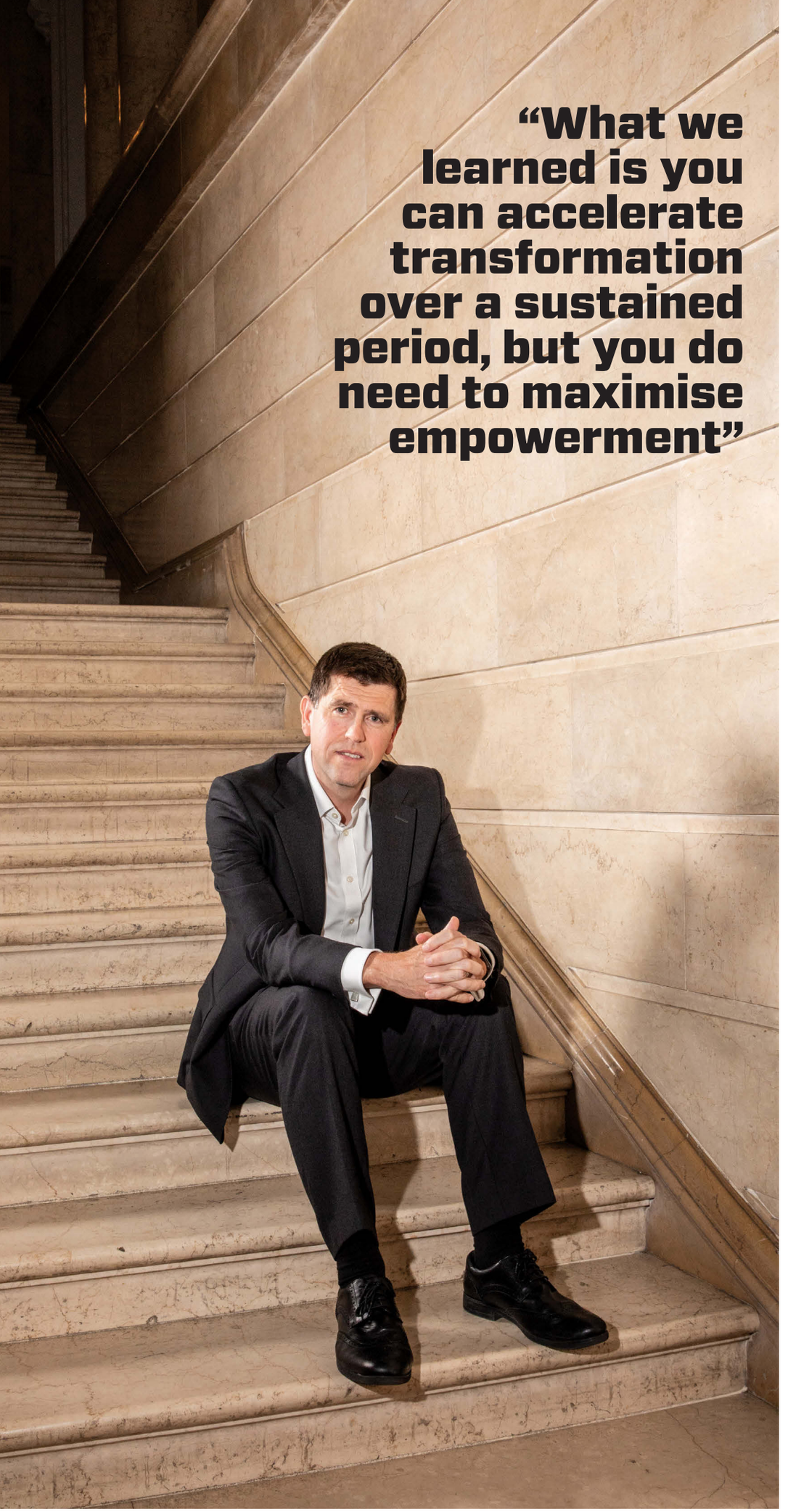
Marks is so proud of the ambition and purpose behind the roadmap that he's brought a hard copy for *CSW* to take away. "The reason we care about the roadmap is: we want to work more in the open. We want to build trust and transparency and share the problems and co-create the change, and we recognise we can't do all that on our own," he says.

"We want to build trust and transparency, share the problems and co-create the change, and we recognise we can't do all that on our own"

The document sets out details of what HMRC will do to achieve each priority, as well as a list of metrics against which it will both track progress and publish updates each year *(see boxes for more details)*. But while it has set out a strategic and enterprise-level plan for how HMRC wants to change, Marks adds that the "detailed design" of how all this actually happens will be achieved by empowering teams within HMRC to "innovate faster" and to improve their areas in the way that makes most sense for each tax regime.

"So that's what we're trying to do: get the right enterprise strategy and then get the right empowerment of our teams to accelerate innovation. We're not there yet. There's definitely more to support that way of working."

Two elements of this are worth flagging up for *CSW* readers keen on tracking how change is happening across government. The first is a commitment to greater use of sandboxes – a technique that tests new ways of working in controlled, isolated environments.



“What we learned is you can accelerate transformation over a sustained period, but you do need to maximise empowerment”

HMRC’s director general for customer services, Myrtle Lloyd, described how this works on a recent episode of the *CSW* podcast: “You take a bit of a problem, you take it to one side, and you really study it in many dimensions,” she said. “Having done it, then you take it out of the sandbox environment, potentially pilot it to see whether it works with a bigger group and then, if it does, you scale it up. It’s a way for us to de-risk our experimentation, but also create a whole lot of engagement and excitement about doing stuff differently.”

The approach has been used to understand why customers were struggling to use HMRC’s digital services, and trial things which will help them to do so – such as having helpline advisers offer real-time coaching to support callers to use self-service options.

Marks describes the mechanism as a way to accelerate change, saying that by empowering and supporting a team to really understand problems and the drivers of those problems, they can “release change that makes a difference faster”. Alongside these focused areas of change, he pays tribute to the department’s digital, change and transformation teams, who are more regularly releasing new functionality across HMRC’s systems to meet user needs.

Together this work is helping to shift the way customers use HMRC’s services. He points to one of the roadmap’s key indicators – the proportion of customers who interact with HMRC digitally. “At the end of 2024, that was around 73 to 75%,” Marks says. “Today, the rate is almost 80%, with a clear expectation that this will increase further.”

He adds that in the longer term, it will be important to quicken the pace of change, not just in customer-facing services but across all of the department’s systems, so it is an “end-to-end transformation, rather than just on the front end”.

Some of that is already happening, he says, “but there’s more to come”, and the sandbox approach encapsulates the way he wants to see HMRC operate in the future. “Multidisciplinary teams, able to focus on key problem statements, with the capability to then make a difference: that is core to the culture that I want to support at HMRC. I see pockets of it already, which is really encouraging, and there’s loads of opportunity to build on that in the years ahead.”

Alongside this culture of empowering teams, there needs to be strong accountability for both spending and increasing collection of public revenue. So, the second mechanism mentioned in HMRC’s roadmap as a driver of change is also a means of

sharpening accountability: the creation of tax regime owners. A tax regime traditionally refers to the legislation, regulation and policy governing how a tax is calculated and collected. Under HMRC's new model, it also encompasses the digital, commercial and operational capabilities that support tax administration. Previously, responsibilities were spread across teams, which made it harder to respond quickly to new priorities.

To address this, HMRC is establishing "end-to-end" leaders for each regime – enabling faster decisions and clearer prioritisation. These owners provide ministers with comprehensive advice, integrating insights from policy, operations, user research and stakeholders. They then have the ability to coordinate different teams and implement ministers' decisions effectively. As Marks notes, this approach mirrors best practice: a single leader who knows their system inside out and can convene colleagues and partners with confidence.

While technical skills like data science and project management matter for these new leaders, "the thing they need to be best at is collaboration, and that's a leadership skill that we can nurture in our organisation", Marks says.

Marks is part of the civil service leadership group, led by cabinet secretary Sir Chris Wormald and Cabinet Office perm sec Cat Little. He is enthused about the opportunities he sees to improve leadership capability right across government – whether in relation to AI, service transformation, collaboration or simply modelling a more productive and agile approach to public service delivery.

Marks learned about leadership by taking inspiration where he found it throughout his career. The model of an end-to-end leader was one he saw work very well at DWP with Universal Credit, where a "fabulous multidisciplinary team" was put together by the product owner and SRO.

Marks spent five years working on Universal Credit, having been drafted in from Jobcentre Plus to take part in a "red-teaming" exercise as part of the 2013 "reset" for the long-running benefits reform programme.

Working in the red team was in itself "quite an experience, quite intense", he recalls. But it obviously hooked him into the importance of the change, and he worked in a number of roles across the programme.

Marks was grateful for the digital and adaptable nature of the Universal Credit system in 2020 when, having been made DWP's director general for work and health and head of Jobcentre Plus, he was at the front line of the department's work to rapidly pivot the benefits system in response to the Covid pandemic.

DWP perm sec Sir Peter Schofield spoke to *CSW* last year about a pivotal moment in spring 2020 when the department's executive committee realised they needed to skip almost all the early stages of their pandemic response plan and move all their resources to Jobcentre Plus. "We looked at the spike in claims and thought, if this is the first indication of the impact of a future lockdown, we're going to have to do something very dramatic," Schofield said.

"As a result, we pivoted the whole organisation into paying Universal Credit claims first and foremost. If we hadn't done it, looking back, we would have been overwhelmed. But at the time, it felt like a massive, dramatic step." What are Marks's reflections on that dramatic time? "Peter led the department through the pandemic with deep integrity. We would speak every day in those early weeks and months," he says.

"On the one hand, it was, of course, very daunting. On the other hand, it was one of those moments where we got to see the civil service at its most resilient, creative best and watch teams, over 24 or 48 hours, rewriting guidance processes, pivoting to different systems and retraining at scale to cope [with the demand]. Of course, with HMRC's furlough scheme and the other employment schemes, we ultimately emerged from the pandemic with unemployment relatively low, and it could have been very different.

"One of the things that Peter did exceptionally well through that period was get the balance right between empowerment and accountability," Marks adds.

"We would be sending him daily updates outlining the policy and process changes we had made that day, along with our best assessment on impact. All of that would then be on the record for our executive team, and he could note the progress and update ministers accordingly.

"We felt supported in moving at that pace. At the same time, we were clear: he's the accounting officer, and he's accountable... So I think what we learned in that period is you can accelerate transformation over a sustained period, but you do need to maximise empowerment and you need to join up multidisciplinary teams and give them the capabilities they need to take risk-based judgements, accelerate the change and deliver impact."

CLOSING THE TAX GAP

The government has estimated that in 2023-24, the UK's "tax gap" (the difference between what is owed and what is actually collected) stood at £46.8bn, or about 5.3% of total possible revenue.

To close this gap, HMRC intends not only to make it easier for taxpayers to get their tax paid correctly and on time – improving compliance – but also to improve its capacity and capability to tackle non-compliance through more, and better equipped, compliance and debt-management officers.

The 2025 Spending Review included plans to recruit 5,500 more compliance officers and 2,400 more debt officers. "That's a significant scaling-up of HMRC and a real investment in our front line, which is great," Marks says. "We obviously need to move smartly with onboarding that capacity, building on the opportunities of Places for Growth [to access different talent pools] and to consolidate that capability well so we keep quality high."

HMRC is also investing in digital capabilities to get better at things like data segmentation and using third-party data to improve the productivity of compliance work. It has already announced a series of targeted crackdowns on high-risk taxpayers such as wealthy individuals and "phoenix" companies that dissolve and re-emerge to dodge liabilities.

In the longer term, the aim is to make it easier for taxpayers – including small businesses, who make up some 60% of the tax gap – to get their tax right the first time, preventing non-compliance rather than having to spot and tackle it after the fact.

For more details on tax gap projections see the OBR's Fiscal and Economic Outlook, Nov 2025

Marks spent much of his career at DWP, an operational department similar in scale and complexity to HMRC. While HMRC's role as the UK's tax authority is unique, he notes that it's not uncommon for officials to move between the two organisations. Their respective executive teams meet frequently to discuss things like data sharing and fraud, and the departments also have shared dependencies on key systems like real-time information and National Insurance, he says. "So it's obviously been a busy first six months getting to know the HMRC team, but I have been working with HMRC in different guises over the last two decades. So it feels like a good place to be."

Between the two departments, Marks spent three and a half years as permanent secretary of the Scottish Government – he describes that time as a privilege and notes, with some understatement, that he and the three first ministers he served (Nicola Sturgeon, Humza Yousaf and John Swinney) "stepped through some tough times" together. This encompasses the global shocks of the end of a global public health emergency and double-digit inflation with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as the political upheaval caused by rapid changes of leadership in the Scottish National Party (which he doesn't mention explicitly, opting instead to talk of "delivering the first ministers' programmes in the context of a lot of change").

At a Treasury Select Committee hearing over the summer, Marks set out the challenges and opportunities he had observed coming into HMRC. One challenge was the need to rebuild trust in the system, and the other was staff engagement. At 56%, HMRC's staff engagement score in last year's Civil Service People Survey was nearly 10 percentage points below the civil service average – though it has been moving upwards in the last five years and Marks is confident that the department is making inroads in improving engagement further. Asked to reflect on what makes the difference, Marks links it back to the importance of connecting to purpose and improving experiences for customers and colleagues.

"For our front line, they want to deliver a good service. They want to look after the wellbeing of their customer, be customer-centric, make sure that they can answer that inquiry 'once and done'. And that is what I've found on all the visits I've undertaken so far in the role. But what I hear consistently is a frustration that that is not as easy as it should be."

He is positive about the progress made on improving things like average speed to answer the phone and other indicators of customer experience, but he also points out the importance of HMRC staff understanding the deeper purpose behind their work, which he describes as, "ultimately, funding the nation".

"Already, last year, we exceeded our yield targets and bought in record revenue that funds our public services in this country. That will increasingly remain the case," he says. And he wants teams to take pride in that, as well as understanding the changes that are under way in terms of meeting the roadmap's three priorities.

"People are responding well to that sense of purpose but, as always with big operational organisations, the proof is in the pudding. You know: 'I like the narrative, now show me the delivery.' And the strategy is delivery: constantly improve outcomes and, I hope, engagement will follow as people feel there's a sense of momentum and feel that sense of pride and that sense of progress. But at the end of the day, we have to deliver." ■

CUSTOMER SERVICES

HMRC's customer service levels have come in for plenty of flak recently – with a critical NAO report (and the subsequent PAC report) highlighting long waiting times for people calling the department, and delays with processing.

The department has a target that at least 90% of all customer interactions should be digital by 2030. To underpin this, it will be investing in new technologies but it will also change the way it designs and runs services so it's easier for taxpayers to get things done – and done right.

Customers can already use a range of digital services, including the HMRC mobile app – which in 2024-25 had around six million users – and in the next financial year, a new online service will roll out to allow all PAYE taxpayers (about 35 million people) to check and update their tax details directly and in real time.

Other planned improvements include a pre-population of self assessment returns with child benefit data from April 2026 onward, and a digital inheritance tax service by 2027–28.

HMRC is also embedding AI-powered digital assistants to answer queries online at any time, reducing the need for phone calls or paper correspondence, and will also expand online tracking tools so people can check the status of claims or refunds themselves.

To measure success, HMRC will monitor the share of digital interactions, customer-satisfaction ratings for digital services and reductions in customer calls and paper correspondence.

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SECOND THAT EMOTION

The best leaders inspire great effort from their teams instead of just demanding it. But what does that effort look like, and how can leaders harness it effectively? **Kate Sturdy** and **Andy Ormerod-Cloke** explore emotionally intelligent leadership.

Between us, we have led teams to achieve big things inside and outside the civil service for over 30 years. But what prompts us to write on leadership is having been led by 50+ senior leaders in our careers. At times, we have felt very well led and at others, less so; and having reflected deeply and discussed extensively, we wanted to share our thoughts with a wider audience.

Despite never previously crossing paths and working almost exclusively in different departments, we found we have shared views on what makes government departments productive and effective. In this piece, we explore the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership, and offer some ideas on how to embed this essential skill.

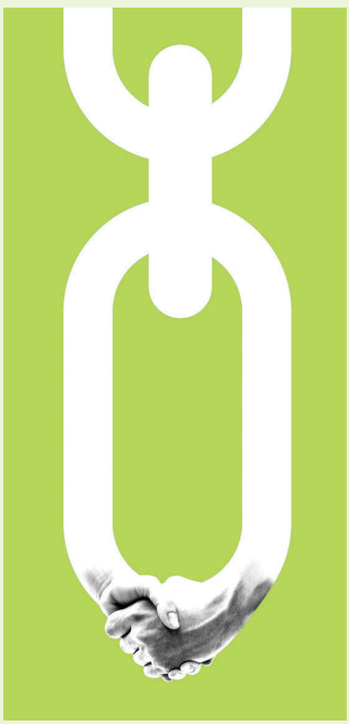
»

KATE STURDY

Creating resonant organisations requires leading from calm

Productivity and the public sector

Government departments look at productivity through quantitative measures, usually financial expenditure against activity completed. The annual Civil Service People Survey provides additional qualitative insight into how engaged civil servants feel. But even



together, these measures miss the critical element of relationship effectiveness.

All organisations are rich in opportunities for wasting human effort – whether it be through suboptimal leadership, bureaucratic frustrations or unsupportive culture. There are good reasons why such pressure is particularly intense in the political crucible of the civil service. Scrutiny is high, failure is acutely exposing, money is scarce.

Our volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world burns up human energy in managing emotional responses to stress – both one's own and others'. I know from experience that there are ways to improve leadership to support a more productive and motivated workforce.

Leadership in the civil service

The nature of public sector leadership matters. Politicians and taxpayers rely on civil servants to bring both ethics and efficacy. As well as signing up to core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality, many civil servants are motivated by altruism. The chances are high, therefore, of civil service leadership creating "resonant" organisations. According to neuroscientists, these are characterised by leaders who are emotionally intelligent, empathetic and able to build positive emotional climates. The resonant leader will take seriously the interpersonal aspects of leadership – not just the delivery aspects.

The opposite of this is "dissonant" organisations, which feature leaders who are out of sync with those they lead. They are often directive, critical or emotionally disengaged, producing stress and disengagement in followers. This can happen when leaders naturally prioritise getting things done over engaging their teams. It can also happen when organisations are under phenomenal pressure to deliver. This is often the case in government departments – and it drives all leaders towards deprioritising energy spent on relationships. Departments also tend to be heavily hierarchical in nature. Research into bureaucracies shows that rigid hierarchy can create emotional distance between leaders and teams because the culture rates compliance over connection.

Ironically, this "delivery at all costs" mentality has negative consequences for productivity. The leaders in the organisation fall into greater hierarchical "command and control" styles, and everyone becomes less capable of regulating their response to stress – and to each other.

Encouraging resonance in leaders

When leaders are dissonant, and their ability to self-regulate is burnt out, they have lower empathy for self and others, and make poorer decisions. This gets to the heart of leading teams productively.

Resonant leadership requires leading from calm. Being better able to empathise, regulate one's own responses and make good decisions helps get the most from teams for successful and sustained delivery. It also happens to tick the ethical boxes by being the right thing to do by others. Leading from calm protects leader and team alike against burnout, and promotes inclusion. This is not only more effective; it also chimes with those core and wider values held dear by civil servants and public alike. ■

ANDY ORMEROD-CLOKE

Discretionary effort is the lifeblood of high-performing teams

The civil service often delivers remarkable things: think of the Vaccines Taskforce and leaving the world's largest trading bloc, but also less headline-grabbing work like enabling communities to take ownership of their prized village pub. It is an institution that gets things done and helps people to live lives of value.

Where it is well led, it carries out this work in a way that benefits and develops those that work within it; where it isn't, it delivers at their cost. In my experience, the best civil service leaders are those who secure freely-given discretionary effort of those that they lead, enabling delivery for citizens while developing and caring for their people.

Discretionary effort

Discretionary effort is all those things that relate to a person's performance for which civil service employers cannot contract. Those exhibiting discretionary effort are the people who fire their hand up first for any new initiative, who prioritise ruthlessly so that they get the big, difficult things done early in the day and spend the rest of the day supporting others. They share learning far and wide, actively drive their own development, and find opportunities to overlap outside reading with inside work interests (for which Anthony King and Ivor Crewe's *Blunders of our Governments* must still be the prime book recommendation: a lesson in how not to do things).

Discretionary effort is visible – it exudes from someone through their demonstrable focus on the outcomes they are aiming at, ignoring all the distraction and demands for delay the bureaucracy inevitably throws up. It is the lifeblood of high-performing teams. When you are surrounded by it and it is given freely, you sense that almost anything can happen.

Contractual effort
Contractual effort, on the other hand, is the Parisian approach to street cleaning: things get done but they do not sparkle. Contractual effort says: "This is a job and I will treat it like that." The human dynamism required to overcome the stultifying effects of bureaucracy does not present itself where obstacles arise; they are accepted. For many, this is just the space and energy they have to commit and their discretionary effort goes on other areas of their life. But in reality, human energy is, at the marginal level, a zero-sum game and to get ambitious things delivered, leaders need to persuade people that they should give their discretionary efforts within work.

Freely given vs not freely given
A leader's role, then, is to inspire people to expend their discretionary efforts inside work and in pursuit of ministers' objectives – and not merely demand it. But it is essential that these efforts are freely given and not extracted. There is something intrinsic in us as agentic beings that means a sand timer is turned as soon as we are forced to act against our will in some way, leading inexorably to our departure in mind or spirit, or – where we hold our work too tightly – burnout.

Leadership that demands discretionary effort and doesn't inspire it is the self-interested kind, focused only on reputation and career. When this kind of leader faces a tradeoff between their own image and their team's wellbeing, they pursue their own interests; their team is merely the port in which the ship of their ambition is temporarily docked.

How it is that leaders secure freely-given discretionary effort
The question, then, is how leaders secure freely-given discretionary effort from those they lead for the benefit of their teams and for the citizens they serve. The answer, from my experience, is a combination of connection and direction.

Nature offers us a wonderful metaphor here. Researchers have discovered that trees are connected with each other through a web of roots and fungi, something wonderfully termed "the wood-wide web". When a tree is damaged, other trees in the network feel this through this web of connections. This kind of connection has to exist for discretionary efforts to be given freely; teams must know that they are connected to their leader and that if they feel pain, they won't feel it alone. Bonus points are no doubt available if the team environment is as calm as a forest.

The direction required for discretionary given effort is not just an echoing of ministerial objectives but an articulation of the change in the world that everyone's collective efforts will achieve, and how citizens will feel the benefit of this change in their lives. It is the capacity of the leader to tell a story that translates the political into an opportunity for each person to serve the public good. When led effectively, people feel as though their leader is both alongside them and showing them the way to this end state. The great leaders also make it fun.

There is of course only so much a leader can do. The Overton window of employee engagement is wider or more narrow depending upon the person's past experiences or interest in the subject matter, neither of which any leader has any control over.

Now that I have left the civil service I have some space to see also how arid the land of bureaucracy can be for developing and supporting emotionally connected leaders. So for me it's all the more impressive how many there are who manage it. ■

Drawing out what is common between our sense of resonant leadership and freely given discretionary efforts, we arrive at the following components for effective leadership in the civil service.

Self-accountability As leaders in the civil service rise, their power rises with them. This creates a leadership choice: does the leader connect with those they lead and hold themselves accountable for the impact they have on others, or do they instead expect their teams to shape themselves around what the leader wants and needs? Leaders with self-accountability ask: "Am I giving the people I lead what they need to feel valued and motivated?" For those that don't, they are the centre of their world, and their teams are not.

Emotional intensity The most effective leaders unbottle their emotional intensity, care deeply about achieving ministers' goals and connect wholeheartedly with the citizens they are serving.

Emotional self-regulation This is the underpinning for self-accountability – and the vital partner to emotional intensity. Whether this be through reflection, coaching, meditation or any other practice, a leader has to understand what is going on in their house to minimise the shadows they cast and not serve their own needs unknowingly.

Empathy This is the connective tissue that, for example, ensures that when a leader is advising on what can be delivered, they think about what the demands on the team will be before providing assent. They show up in human form and all the humans they lead feel the sunshine that emanates as a result.

Now the question is: How do we develop these traits in our leaders? – on which we plan to write a follow up. How about a new Maslow's hierarchy for civil servants: one in which emotional intelligence is the foundation for all other leadership skills and hence organisational productivity and effectiveness? ■

Kate Sturdy is an executive coach, trainer and leadership consultant. Andy Ormerod-Cloke is a policy entrepreneur and founder of Citizenry

Green bill OF HEALTH

What do the last three years of data tell us about how departments are meeting their environmental targets? **Mark Rowe** examines progress against the Greening Government Commitments

Any government urging the nation to address climate change needs to lead by way of example and for 15 years, successive administrations have sought to do so through the Greening Government Commitments. Under the initiative, 22 governmental departments and their arm's-length bodies have applied in-house means of mitigating climate change and improving sustainability through rolling out ever-stricter environmental targets. These include reducing impacts from water consumption, landfill waste and business flights; implementing carbon-cutting measures across the civil estate; and, most recently, accommodating power-hungry datacentres. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has responsibility for the GGC framework.

All this matters because, with more than 500,000 staff across the UK and producing almost 1.7 million tonnes of greenhouse gases a year, the civil service's carbon footprint is similar to that of a medium-sized town. Not only that, but NHS emissions alone account for 4% of England's total carbon footprint. Trimming the carbon fat from these operations is not just politically symbolic; it is impactful.

Earlier this year, the government belatedly published GGC data for three financial years, covering April 2021 (three years late) to March 2024. At the time of writing, Defra was unable to say when 2024-25 data would be published. A spokesperson said: "Given the wide and diverse scope of GGCs, the need to collate and quality assure data, and a time lag on data being available from utility providers, it takes time to produce a comprehensive picture of performance."

The next round of commitments, for 2025-30, were supposed to apply from April 2025, but have not yet been published (the spokesperson said Defra was "reviewing the next set of GGCs to ensure that they align with the government's priorities").

The latest data measures progress against a 2017-18 baseline and paints an uneven picture: positive in parts (reductions in emissions and landfill, collectively saving millions of pounds) but revealing a systematic lack of preparedness for planning for long-term climate change impacts. The euphemism "working towards" is regularly deployed when a department has failed to meet a target.

There's good news in relation to the cornerstone of climate action, greenhouse gas reduction. In 2023-24, the government's overall emissions were 41% lower than the baseline, cutting carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2e) from 2.9 million tonnes in 2017-18 to 1.7 million tonnes. In addition, by 2023-24, 11 departments had met or even exceeded their individual overall emissions targets for 2025, including HM Revenue and Customs, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Food Standards Agency. These reductions in energy consumption saved the government an estimated £298m on bills in 2023-24. Across the three years of the frameworks, these reductions amount to an estimated £753m in savings. The Cabinet Office, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Office for National Statistics routinely met or exceeded most emissions targets.

Importantly, the biggest energy guzzlers, the Ministry of Defence (covering military bases and hardware) and Ministry of Justice (which also includes prisons), both made significant emissions cuts. The MoD, which typically accounts for around half of all government emissions, cut emissions from a baseline of 1.34 million tonnes CO_2e to 900,000 tonnes in 2024, beating its 30% reduction target by three percentage points. While the MoJ missed its target of a 41% cut in baseline emissions, its 31% cut reduced emissions by 120,000 tonnes of CO_2e. Defra – with, presumably, the incentive to lead by example – only reduced emissions by 24% in 2023-24, missing its target of a 50% cut.

The phasing out of diesel and petrol cars has proved politically awkward for all parties, but the latest data suggests government is leading by example. A commitment for 25% of the government car fleet to be ultra-low emission vehicles by December 2022 was exceeded, with ULEVs accounting for 30%. The standout is DHSC, where ULEVs account for 90% of the 2,439 departmental cars; while 39% of the Department for Transport's 4,530 vehicles met this category.

Progress on cutting emissions from departmental flights is more mixed. Overall, government reduced its emissions from domestic business flights by 28% compared to the baseline – just missing a collective target of 30% cuts. In 2017-18, domestic flights produced 14,687 tonnes CO_2e, dropping to 10,636 tonnes CO_2e in 2023-24. Almost all departments made cuts exceeding the 30% target. Underlying trends, however, suggest this progress is being undone. After two years of substantial flight reductions, emissions from MoD flights rose in 2023-24, from 4,071 tonnes to 6,356 tonnes CO_2e – just a 3% cut against its baseline. Other departments reported similar 2023-24 trends, though Defra says this is likely due to Covid-related flight restrictions distorting data earlier in the recording period.

International flight data also appears to be headed in the wrong direction for similar reasons. Defra was unable to provide a baseline figure or targets but the collective distance flown across all departments has almost tripled, from 467 million km in 2021-22 to 1.5 billion km in 2023-24. The Cabinet Office's distance travelled internationally by air rose from 2.15 million km to 4.7 million km; Defra's total jumped from 2.9 million km to 22.5 million km; the MoD's rose from 328 million km to 1.1

EMISSION STATEMENTS

1.7 million
tonnes CO_2e: government's overall emissions in 2023-24, down 41% since 2017-18

£298m
savings on bills in 2023-24

11
number of departments that have already met or exceeded emissions targets for 2025

30%
MoD's emissions target

900,000
tonnes CO_2e: MoD's emissions in 2023-24, down from 1.34 million in 2017-18

Flying high There has been mixed progress on cutting emissions from departmental flights

billion km. The Defra spokesperson noted that "the MoD has many international commitments, including military attaché work and senior officer and staff meetings with international counterparts".

Efforts to tackle government waste and resources have been positive. In 2023-24, government produced 153,613 tonnes of waste: 18%, or nearly 35,000 tonnes, lower than the baseline (against a 15% target). Reductions in waste saved government an estimated £8.6m from 2021-22 to 2023-24.

The biggest waste producers cleaned up their acts – the MoJ cut waste from 50,900 tonnes to 43,000 tonnes (a reduction of 16%) and the MoD from 47,300 tonnes to 39,000 tonnes (18%). HMRC achieved the biggest proportional cut, of 67% against the baseline. Meaningful progress also appears to have been made when it comes to landfill, with just 4% of waste sent to landfill in all three years; by way of comparison, 13% of waste was sent to landfill in 2017-18, the baseline year. Several departments, including the Cabinet Office, Home Office and the now-defunct Department for International Trade, reported years in which they sent no waste to landfill.

"Trimming the carbon fat from these operations is not just politically symbolic; it is impactful"

By contrast, water-consumption targets have been missed by a significant margin. In 2023-24, water consumption was 1% lower than the baseline, well short of the 8% cut required. Even so, over the three reporting years, consumption dropped by 5.2 million m3 – equivalent to around 2,100 Olympic swimming pools – saving an estimated £11m.

More recent GGCs relate to climate change adaptation. Departments are required to conduct a climate change risk assessment across their estates and operations to better understand risk, to target areas that need greater resilience and then develop a climate change adaptation action plan. By 2023-24, just seven departments had met these requirements. Departments and partner organisations were also expected to develop and deliver nature recovery plans for their land, estates, development and operations, such as tree planting, woodland cover and pollinator-friendly habitats. By April 2025, just 11 departments (including Defra, MoJ and DfT) had achieved this.

In the lifetime of the GGCs, increasing demand for AI and other energy-heavy computing has driven rapid rises in CO_2 emissions from the datacentres needed to power new technology. The *Greening Government: ICT and digital services strategy*, published alongside the GGCs, shows how datacentres now account for 24% of IT emissions, behind end-user devices such as PCs, laptops and smartphones (33%) and IT equipment such as monitors (27%). In a blog at the start of 2025, Defra's chief digital and

FLIGHT STATUS

30%
government's missed domestic flight-emissions target

10,636
tonnes CO2e: emissions from domestic flights in 2023-24

1.5 billion
km travelled internationally by air in 2023-24

information officer, Chris Howes, described "steady, though not dramatic, improvement in the data reported". The MoD managed to cut these emissions by 19% from 2022-23 to 2023-24, while DHSC made a 35% cut, collectively saving more than 47,000 tonnes of CO2e. However, Howes cautioned that "the increasing digitisation of government continues to create upward pressure on emissions and waste targets".

In a late 2024 report on government's approach to the environment and climate change, the National Audit Office praised GGCs for providing "a stable framework". However, it found that "more active leadership" was needed from the centre of government to address what the watchdog described as "a patchwork of different measurement and reporting frameworks for climate and environmental metrics and targets across the public sector".

Responding to the latest GGC data, Toby Perkins, chair of parliament's Environmental Audit Committee, called on ministers "to provide reassurance" that momentum had not been lost. "The Greening Government Commitments are an important demonstration to the public that policymakers take seriously the need to decarbonise in our own back yard as much as in industries across the economy," he said. "I would like to see renewed focus on delivering genuine sustainability within government."

The message that GGCs send out is important for government "to demonstrate leadership in terms of meeting carbon targets", says Grace Henderson, civil service coordinator at the Carbon Literacy Project, which organises carbon-reduction training to a range of government departments (12,000 civil servants have been certified as "carbon literate"). The implementation of GGCs is not just down to environmental and sustainability teams; instead, a culture of cutting carbon should be embedded into departmental thinking in the same way as equality, diversity and inclusion and other policies, Henderson says. "It's about empowering everyone in a department, not just the delivery teams, giving them the skills and motivation and making people aware of the many co-benefits of cutting carbon, such as wellbeing and cost efficiencies." ■

Big energy guzzler MoD figures include emissions from military bases and hardware

WAR ON WASTE

15%
government's waste-reduction target

153,613
tonnes of waste produced in 2023-24, down 18% since 2017-18

£8.6m
saved from 2012-22 to 2023-24

HMRC
department with the biggest proportional reduction in waste (67%)

4%
proportion of waste sent to landfill each year between 2020-21 and 2023-24

8%
government's missed target to reduce water consumption

5.2 million
m3: drop in water consumption across government between 2020-21 and 2023-24

2,100
Olympic swimming pools of water saved

NET BENEFITS

As chief scientific adviser at DESNZ, **Prof Paul Monks** worked at the heart of the clean energy superpower mission. He speaks to **Beckie Smith** about the benefits of investing in green tech, his 'Damascene conversion' on AI, and why being a civil servant is like working in a hair dryer

Just weeks after leaving the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Prof Paul Monks says his five years as a chief scientific adviser have left him with the conviction that "science, in many respects, and the way that it deals with policy, has got to be more pragmatic and less idealistic".

When he joined the civil service in 2020, "I kind of thought I knew how science and government worked," he tells *CSW*. By that time, he had spent 10 years chairing the Air Quality Expert Group that advises the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and had gone on to co-chair Defra's Science Advisory Council under Sir Ian Boyd, its chief scientific adviser at the time. "And then you get let inside the barbed-wire fence and you realise it's completely different."

The main difference? Being able to explore ideas more freely. "As government is formulating policy, it doesn't really want to formulate that in the public eye. We've now got this 24-hour, 365 news cycle. So it wants to be able to think a little bit – rightly in my view – about what the options are," he says. Leaks and "cheap stories" with little substance have, he says, made departments "slightly less willing to air their working".

And within government, "you also get to understand what the political imperative is a little bit more clearly", he says. This is where pragmatism comes in. "Often, our job as scientists is to be slightly idealistic. I realised that science had a particular role to play in the policymaking process, but it was just one of the voices [contributing]," Monks says.

He describes himself as a "big fan of evidence-informed policymaking" rather than evidence-based policymaking, which he says "often becomes quite prescriptive". "Politics isn't a science, frankly, and is, in many instances, the art of putting apples and oranges together... our job is to produce the best advice, but at the end of the day, it's for ministers to decide against all the facts," he adds.

"You have to check the ego at the door. Academia is, in some sense, a lot about self, isn't it? It's a lot about being the professor of *this* and being the best in *this*," adds Monks, who is a professor of atmospheric chemistry and Earth observation science at the University of Leicester. "In government, it's not; it's making a difference for the greater good. It's not about you."

In many cases, he says, his greatest strength was not deep subject-matter knowledge but "bringing the scientific method to policy thinking. It was often that the way a scientist takes apart a problem is very different to somebody who's trained in a different way. And often, our value was saying: 'Well, have you thought about it like this? Does it really work like that?'"

One of the last tasks the former chief scientific adviser completed at DESNZ was publishing areas of research interest for the clean energy superpower mission. The document maps out important areas where R&D is needed and the departments responsible for each area, such as energy system infrastructure, integration and flexibility; heat and buildings; transport; and agriculture and land use.

The document also sets out priority R&D challenges for the two pillars of the mission: delivering at least 95% of electricity generated from low-carbon sources by 2030; and reaching net zero by 2050. It asks questions such as how AI and digital tools can help to reduce the need for peak-time gas generation; and how transitioning to a circular economy and enabling electrification of key sectors – industry, buildings and transport – can help reduce emissions and waste.

The cross-government document is aimed not only at government departments, but also agencies, funders, arm's-length bodies and regulators, including organisations such as the Met Office and Ofgem. The priorities have been picked up by the R&D Missions Acceleration Programme in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, a £500m initiative to fast-track research and innovations aligned with the missions.

Typically, departments publish their own ARIs each year – but the decision to come up with a mission-focused list instead was a deliberate one. "Why is that important? Because it tries, essentially, for a bigger outcome," Monks says. Expecting departments to work in silos on their priority areas would be "stupid", he says with a laugh. "It's a systems problem." He says the missions approach "provides focus".

How optimistic is Monks about the future of the mission – and what does he consider its biggest threats? He says the climate goals are "stretching", but adds that mission head Chris Stark and the central Mission Delivery Unit are "very focused".

"I think the challenge is always: How fast, how far?" he says. "Part of the issue is getting it wrapped in geopolitics. Because [net zero is] not a moral crusade; it's about making sure that it sits in the right portfolio of energy security, economic growth, industrial competitiveness, healthcare, defence – that it's the right balance within that basket of priorities."

Then there is the challenge of the energy "trilemma": "At any given time, energy has to be affordable, reliable, sustainable – you're balancing those three factors." Renewable sources have the potential to drive energy costs down as well as cutting carbon; but any innovations must preserve energy security.

Monks sees a clear imperative to invest in renewables and green technology because they have become "absolutely dominant as a global force". "I think the government is right to be saying: 'Can we make sure that we've got our fair share of those industries of tomorrow?' To do that, you have to be active in this market," he says.

"You have to check the ego at the door. Academia is a lot about self. In government, it's not about you"

In his five years in government – first at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and then in its successor department DESNZ – Monks served six secretaries of state under four prime ministers. But while ministerial churn can often lead to policy priorities getting lost in the shuffle, he says there was "one constant... [which] »

was the usefulness of science to be able to support the development and delivery of policy".

Energy security and net zero is a "long-term policy game", Monks adds. "These are national endeavours, for want of a better word. So, in some senses, the direction is set.

"I'm a huge fan of the civil service. I think it does an incredible job. I say that now as a former member of it, but I think that it has very good resilience to be able to deal with that sort of change."

Man of honour Monks received a CB in the 2025 New Year Honours for services to science in government

As DESNZ's top scientist, Monks contributed evidence to a huge range of policy areas, from carbon capture and storage, climate change, nuclear fusion and fission, to the Cop summits. Ultimately, he saw it as his role to "make things slightly better than they could have been". And looking back on his five-year term, he can point to instances where "things turned out substantially better" thanks to scientific input.

One such example was leading the effort to set up the UK Critical Minerals Intelligence Centre in 2022 and chairing the expert group – which included scientists, NGOs and mining companies – that advised the government on its first critical minerals strategy. "That allowed us to get that critical voice into the initial strategy," he says. With a new strategy expected soon, the structures Monks helped put in place will ensure government continues to receive expert input.

And he thinks back to his work on Covid in the months after he joined the civil service, between the 2020 summer and winter waves and "when the science was uncertain". "I remember writing advice on mask-wearing on the steering wheel of my car on 23 December, because we needed to get advice out," he says.

The following spring brought the Events Research Programme, which gathered evidence on whether it was safe to open events following the Covid lockdowns – "one of the most brilliant things I've ever done". Monks coordinated the science board with the culture department's then-chief scientist Tom Rodden for the programme, which was unlike anything he had done before, having been used to years-long research projects. "We literally did it all in six weeks," he says.

The programme ran a series of pilot events, including the World Snooker Championships in Sheffield, the FA Cup semi-final and final at Wembley Stadium (which Leicester City, his team, won), and Download Festival in Leicestershire. It concluded that the risk associated with attending events depended largely on attendees' behaviour beforehand and afterwards – on public transport, while socialising on site, and celebrating afterwards.

"That allowed the government to think about opening these events safely and more effectively, more quickly. The cultural aspect of this is quite an important part of wellbeing, so it was an important programme," Monks says.

"We found, interestingly, that if you don't want to catch Covid, golf is the best thing to go and watch – if you don't die of boredom," he quips. That's not only because the sport takes place outside, but also because fans don't tend to visit pubs beforehand.

Monks has spoken recently about his "Damascene conversion" on artificial intelligence. He says he used to describe the Large Language Models – like ChatGPT and Gemini – as "nothing but stochastic parrots" that "just repeat back to you what you already know". "I thought, 'Oh yes, yes, there's nothing to see here'... And then I began to see really incredible things coming out of the world of AI," he says.

One intervention that changed his mind was visiting The Alan Turing Institute – the UK's national institute for data science and artificial intelligence – and watching demonstrations about how AI could affect public service delivery. Another was running a programme of seminars in DESNZ engaging with the energy sector on how AI could help better and cheaper delivery of energy for customers.

So the former sceptic set up an AI committee in DESNZ to monitor opportunities and threats from AI to the energy system. He says then-prime minister Rishi Sunak was "right" to focus on the issue.

"I do think that AI will change the British industrial landscape. And those sound like very big words, but I can see it in my work at the moment with the Henry Royce Institute," he says. Since becoming chair of the UK's national institute for advanced materials research and innovation in September, Monks has seen how much of the design for manufacturing can be done in "digital foundries" and exported directly to machines in a factory.

Much as he sees an imperative for the UK to embrace green technologies, Monks says "we have to grasp the opportunity" AI presents for the economy. "Because if we don't, we won't get jobs. We're a service economy in the main, so we've got to particularly be cognisant of how that's going to change the service-based elements of our economy," he explains.

"I think the government is right to be saying: 'Can we make sure that we've got our fair share of those industries of tomorrow?'"

And AI will "revolutionise medicine", he says. "Because what's medicine about? Spotting patterns. And if you can do triage – for the 111 service, for example – without having to phone somebody up and get them to read questions out to you, why not?"

How can Monks see AI being useful in government? One area is consultations: "You get 1,000 responses. What's AI really good at doing? Summarising. It

can help and smooth a lot of processes."

He says he can also see AI assistants taking some of the admin work off civil servants' plates, leaving them to concentrate on their core tasks. "I think it will lead to great efficiency, but it will also increase the quality and impact of the work that you're able to do," he says. He experienced something similar when he got a secretary for the first time: "My work didn't change, but the quality of work did."

He is hopeful that AI can help make public service delivery more efficient – something that is critical as financial pressures bite. He gives a recent example from his own life, when he used a chatbot to help resolve an issue with his bank, saving a time-consuming phone call.

Power trip DESNZ's science team at Sizewell B nuclear power station

He stresses the importance of ensuring groups such as older people and those with limited access to digital technologies don't get left behind: "We've got to not have a digital divide. We've got to make sure that we work with people who are socially disadvantaged. We've got to not create a new inequality around digital; we've got to support people through that transition. But also, I think in doing that, we'll make a digital-ready workforce."

After all the talk of net zero, *CSW* has to address the elephant in the room: the increasingly widespread and vocal criticism of AI tools for the huge amounts of resources taken to power the datacentres they need to function.

Monks takes a glass-half-full view. While he acknowledges that the more widespread use of AI will mean using more computing resource, he thinks the datacentres "don't have to be part of the problem".

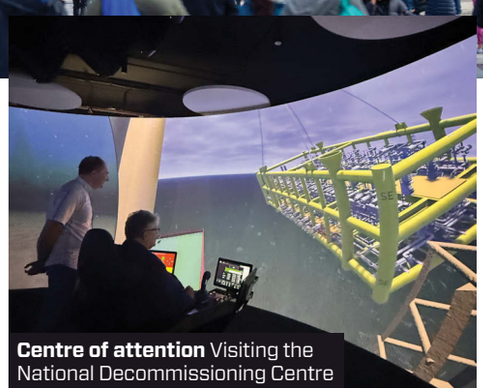
"Nobody's interested, frankly, in burning vast amounts of energy in these datacentres – so it's all about energy efficiency," he says. "I don't think we're using particularly energy-efficient technology at the moment," he adds – noting that the graphics processing units used for generative AI were designed for home gaming consoles rather than large-scale image creation.

One avenue being explored is "distilled AI" models, in which large, powerful models are used to train smaller ones. "Once those models are computed, they're quite efficient and can be quite small," Monks says. "There's also a big debate about whether you're going to do edge compute or central compute – [in other words] will you compute it in your Alexa or a datacentre?"

He says the "wild card on the AI horizon" is image processing and animation, which use huge amounts of processing power. But he feels optimistic that datacentres could be powered in a greener way, and about efforts to re-use the heat they generate. "Right place, right time, right size" is how he sums up a successful approach.

Inside job Visiting JCB's Hydrogen Internal Combustion Engine plant

Sweet FA The FA cup final at Wembley, run as part of the post-lockdown Events Research Programme



Centre of attention Visiting the National Decommissioning Centre

Having left government, Monks has plenty to keep him busy. As well as his posts at the University of Leicester and Henry Royce Institute, he chairs the British Geological Survey and is a science trustee for the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. He is also non-executive director of one of the High Value Manufacturing Catapults – part of a network of R&D centres supported by Innovate UK to accelerate the commercialisation of innovative products and processes.

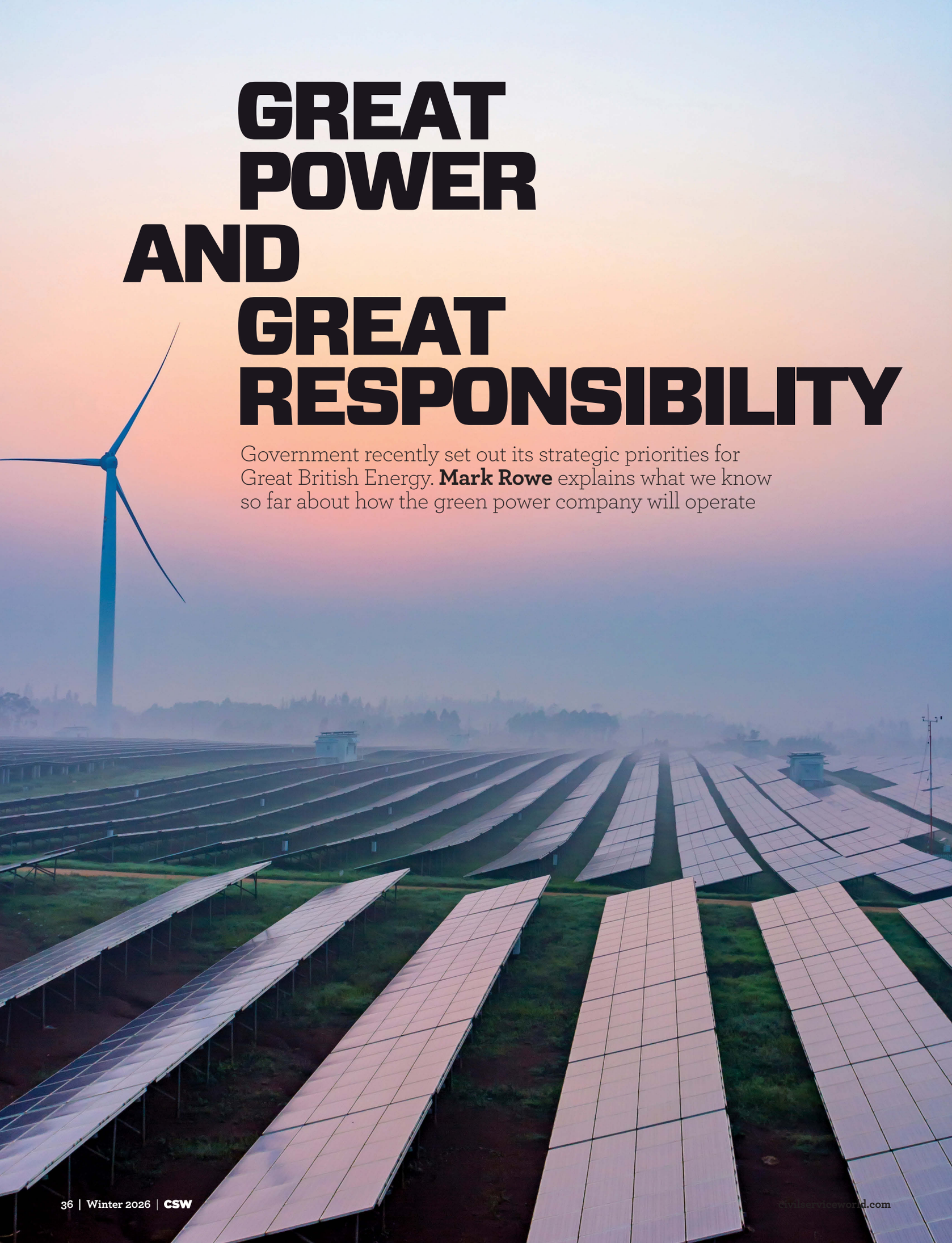
In the next stage of his career, he says he wants "to use the knowledge and the big-picture thinking that you get from working in government to make a difference to science and engineering and its outcomes".

He says his time as a civil servant has "absolutely" changed his approach to his work. Working in government was "like working in a hair dryer", he says. "My life was diaried within a minute of its existence; you're dealing with vast volumes of information. And so you learn a lot about how to take it up a level – to a strategic level – to affect outcomes.

"I think there's something that you can then take out from that experience and say, 'Well, how have you applied that approach in some of these other areas? Can it make a difference there as well?' So that's what I'm exploring with the organisations that I'm working with." ■

GREAT POWER AND GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Government recently set out its strategic priorities for Great British Energy. **Mark Rowe** explains what we know so far about how the green power company will operate



The UK has ambitious aims for decarbonising the economy and ahead of the last election, the soon-to-be Labour government made it clear that a new entity known as Great British Energy would be a core part of its industrial strategy. Energy secretary Ed Miliband has declared that GBE will "turbocharge energy independence and unleash billions of investment in clean power", helping deliver net zero by 2050 and substantially decarbonising the electricity system well before that – targets outlined in the Clean Power 2030 Action Plan.

In recent months, more detail has emerged about just what GBE will entail – and what it all means for the civil servants who must make it work. The government intends to invest £8.3bn into the publicly owned green power company, funded by an increased windfall tax on oil and gas companies (from 75% to 78%, £1.2bn over the course of the parliament) and by what is described as "responsible borrowing".

The Great British Energy bill received royal assent in May, setting the legal foundation for the creation and operation of GBE as a new, publicly owned energy company tasked with "investing in, developing and owning energy-generation infrastructure, with a focus on promoting environmental sustainability and delivering value for public money". At the time of the bill's passing through parliament, Miliband said it would "help to get off the rollercoaster of fossil-fuel prices and protect families' finances". The act also outlined provisions for ministerial oversight and the appointment of a board of directors.

GBE has started deploying funds. Its first projects have included £180m to install solar panels to lower bills for hundreds of schools and hospitals; £10m for mayoral strategic authorities to invest in renewable energy projects; and £300m to support domestic offshore wind supply chains. These include a range of regional initiatives: in Scotland, a £4m renewable scheme has been launched to support community-led clean energy projects, including onshore wind, rooftop solar and hydropower; in Wales, nearly £3m has been allocated for local renewable projects to benefit Welsh communities.

Exactly what GBE will look like and what it will do are becoming clearer. It will be a standalone company, headquartered in Aberdeen, sitting outside of government. In a statement of strategic priorities published in September, the government confirmed that two entities, operating as separate and allied publicly owned companies, were being capitalised: GBE and GBE – Nuclear. The latter is intended to provide specialist capability and the skills necessary to help deliver the government's nuclear power agenda, including the small modular reactor programme. The statement of strategic priorities outlines that GBE should work towards becoming a financially sustainable and self-financing organisation. Its two core objectives are: to drive clean energy deployment across the whole of the UK (acting as a strategic developer, investor and owner of clean energy projects); and to ensure that UK taxpayers, billpayers, communities and the current energy workforce benefit from the clean energy transition (by increasing public ownership and community involvement in the development of clean energy projects, and supporting jobs and economic growth across the UK).

Ed cheerleader Energy secretary Ed Miliband has said GBE will "turbocharge energy independence"

"Government needs to own the trade-offs. GBE should not be criticised later for prioritising one thing over another if the government has failed to provide a steer" ***Matthew Gill, IfG***

A permanent chief executive, Dan McGrail – who has private sector experience as chief exec of RenewableUK and of Siemens Engines – has been appointed, along with board chair Juergen Maier, the former chief executive of Siemens UK. They have been tasked with producing a strategic plan by spring 2026. A GBE spokesperson elaborated, saying that the company will be "overseen by an experienced, independent board of industry and trade union experts who bring knowledge on workplace rights, building UK supply chains, and driving investment in clean energy".

When it comes to wider staffing, the statement of priorities says GBE is expected to acquire technical expertise from across the clean energy sector, establishing a highly skilled and expert workforce. The GBE spokesperson added that "hundreds of thousands of engineers, scientists and technicians call Aberdeen home" and that GBE intends to "draw on the abundant local talent".

According to the statement of strategic priorities, "GBE should look across the clean energy technology spectrum for opportunities to achieve its objectives, including in established and nascent technologies", which "include, but are not limited to, opportunities in renewables, energy storage and low-carbon technologies". GBE should seek to provide certainty »

to industry, in order to "catalyse investment into the clean energy sector" by derisking projects across their lifecycle, particularly at the development stage. It will need, in some cases, "to take on more risk than the private sector would on its own".

Matthew Gill, programme director for the Institute for Government's work on public bodies, says the statement of priorities "includes a lot of asks" and that further clarification is required on where the emphasis lies between the many priorities. "The government is effectively asking GBE to work out how to prioritise between these asks in its business plan," he says, "but government needs to own the trade-offs. GBE should not be criticised later for prioritising one thing over another if the government has failed to provide a steer."

"Governance arrangements are rarely prioritised after a body is established, so they must be correct from the off" ***Matthew Gill, IfG***

GBE's funding arrangements will be "complex by government standards", cautions Gill, and there will be a need to ensure departmental budgets and oversight mechanisms can adapt. "They will need to respect GBE's independence without abdicating responsibility for trade-offs that are ultimately for ministers to make. This needs working out proactively and on an ongoing basis."

The priorities outline that GBE will not be a silent funding partner but instead must "own stakes in the projects it develops itself, as well as being an engaged and proactive co-developer with the private and public sectors, devolved and local government, and community energy groups and wider public finance institutions and bodies". The mechanisms by which all this happens will vary, according to the statement of priorities, and will divide into commercial and non-commercial operations. Commercial policy will involve originating, building and operating assets; and financing through equity and joint ventures for both clean energy projects and supply chain investments. Non-commercial operations will feature grants, loans, blended finance, capability and capacity support and joint ventures for local government or community groups, as well as grants for clean energy supply chains. While the civil service has experience of handling such activities, for the most part on a one-at-a-time basis, Gill says the challenge of "having all of them in one organisation is a lot" and officials will "need to learn from where they have worked – or haven't – before… and work out how they lock together strategically".

Then there is the question of exactly where GBE will sit within day-to-day governmental operations and its relationships with other departments. Those with obvious interests include the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Department for Business and Trade (competition law), Treasury (delivering oversight and capitalising projects and rules around how money can be spent and timelines), Ofgem and the Environment Agency. So will civil servants from the Scottish administration, since GB Energy will be based in Scotland (in the longer term, sites in Glasgow and Edinburgh are planned, said the GBE spokesperson, although they were unable to elaborate on what function these bases would have). The Cabinet Office will also have some involvement in relation to the wider mission of 2030 targets.

Then there is the new Mission Control, headed by Chris Stark, former chief executive of the Climate Change Committee.

Such interdepartmental cross-cutting, and the related complex demands this asks of staff, are nothing new, Gill says. "That's a perennial challenge for government – the key thing will be to work out who leads on what, and to build strong relationships in all relevant directions. There isn't always a structural solution when the work actually being done is multifaceted." The same pressures apply to recruitment. Gill says GBE needs to "recruit and retain a commensurate range of skills" and cautions that "it's important that bodies aren't duplicating, both to avoid wasted resource and to avoid unduly distorting markets".

The government could do worse than heed the advice of the IfG, which last year published a guide, *How to set up a public body*, suggests Gill. "Governance arrangements are rarely prioritised after a body is established, so they must be correct from the off," he adds. GBE could also thrive on internal and external support. "Building a new public institution can give people a shared purpose that is motivating," Gill says. "This will be key for Labour, which put new bodies like Great British Energy at the heart of its election campaign."

The political climate – where polling shows strong support for Reform, which has made clear its hostility to net zero – appears likely to inform the speed at which GBE hits the ground running. The Green Investment Bank, launched in 2012, was defunded by the 2015 Conservative administration but Gill believes if GBE quickly proves its value, it could survive any vagaries in political ideology. The British Business Bank, he points out, was initially a Lib Dem idea under the 2010 coalition government but was able to build cross-party trust and demonstrate delivery over time. "Implementation is key, particularly in the early years," he says. "GBE should demonstrate it can deliver well and avoid too much mission creep. It needs particular attention in this case, given the range of parties who will have expectations. I'd advise any organisation [in this climate] to be proactive." ■

Renewables roadshow Keir Starmer visits a clean energy site in South Wales with Welsh first minister Eluned Morgan

Looking to 2050: Why civil servants must engage with the future of local government

A new report outlines how government can work better with well-defined roles, stronger partnerships, and a long-term strategy. Civil servants play a crucial role in transforming this vision into tangible results for communities

Adele Gritten
CEO
Local Partnerships

England's system of local government is on the cusp of a generational shift. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, introduced in July 2025 and currently progressing through parliament, sets out a bold vision for streamlined governance.

The new report, 'Looking to *2050: The Future of Local Government in England*', authored by the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) and supported by Local Partnerships, sets out a bold vision for how our governance structures must evolve. It's a vision that matters to councils, combined authorities and to civil servants across Whitehall and beyond. The report makes clear that without clarity of purpose, functional division of responsibilities and a long-term roadmap, reform risks becoming a patchwork rather than a coherent system.

For civil servants, this is about translating policy into outcomes. At its parliamentary launch, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage said she had "always believed that devolution by default, with national government responsible only for services that cannot be delivered locally, was the right way to go".

The context: A system under pressure

The report identifies a future where strategic authorities operate alongside a single tier of local government, creating a streamlined and resilient system that can respond to fiscal, demographic and environmental pressures. The principle underpinning this vision echoes Baroness Taylor's thoughts: local by default, regional where beneficial, national only where necessary.

For civil servants, this means thinking differently about the role of central government. It's about enabling and setting frameworks rather than dictating delivery, and that shift requires new mindsets and a commitment to partnership working.

Three themes in the report with direct implications for civil servants stand out:

Clarity of purpose is non-negotiable: Strategic authorities must be system leaders, not service providers. Their role is to coordinate regional priorities where scale matters. For civil servants, this means designing policies that empower these authorities to lead, rather than creating overlapping responsibilities.

Division of responsibilities must be functional and durable: Councils remain the democratic leaders for people-centred services; strategic authorities provide regional capacity and central government sets the guardrails. This clarity matters for civil servants because ambiguity breeds inefficiency. Civil servants have a vital role in embedding this principle into policy, funding settlements and performance frameworks, translating into better outcomes and not adding to bureaucratic complexity.

From left to right: Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, Jonathan Carr-West, Adele Gritten and Clive Betts MP

A long-term pathway and enabling frameworks are essential: The report calls for a roadmap to 2050 and practical tools to make collaboration real. Integrated funding settlements, shared outcomes frameworks and dispute-resolution protocols are not optional. They are the backbone of a resilient system, and civil servants will be central to this.

Why this matters for civil servants

This report is about empowering better outcomes for economic growth, resilience, housing delivery and public trust. Civil servants are the architects of the enabling environment. Your decisions on policy design, funding and accountability will determine whether devolution becomes an enduring system or remains a patchwork of deals.

At Local Partnerships, we are already helping local and regional leaders turn ambition into action. We support governance reviews, design accountability frameworks and develop toolkits.

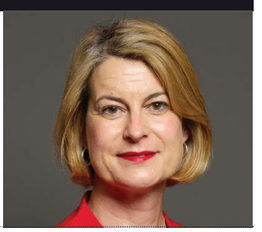
The next decade will define whether England's governance system is fit for the future. This is an opportunity to shape a system that works for today and through to 2050. Read the report at bit.ly/futureoflocalgov. Engage with its recommendations. And join us in building a governance framework that delivers outcomes for the communities we all serve.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

SELECT FEW

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

EDUCATION COMMITTEE



Chaired by Helen Hayes, Labour MP for Dulwich and West Norwood

Current inquiries Reading for pleasure; education and skills; early years: improving support for children and families; higher education and funding: threat of insolvency and international students; solving the SEND crisis; children's social care

What makes a good select committee chair?

The chair needs to be passionate about the subject matter and prepared to read voraciously on a wide range of relevant topics. Working collaboratively with your cross-party colleagues and finding compromises is key. It is a pleasure to work with such a committed and knowledgeable group of colleagues. That's where the energy to learn and develop a deep understanding of the issues comes from, and it is how we develop strong recommendations.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?

The sheer breadth and depth of the evidence we receive can be a challenge, particularly with this committee having one of the most emotive, people-centred policy areas. Our SEND inquiry, for example, received around 900 written submissions. We really want to do justice to the evidence and to ensure that the voices of people directly impacted by services are heard.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?

Ministers and leaders such as the chief inspector of Ofsted have been very obliging, as we would expect. In the final session of our SEND inquiry, the schools minister was unwilling to give much away regarding the reforms that DfE

Roger Harris Photography © House of Commons London

is planning for the upcoming white paper on SEND. Whilst this was understandable to a degree, I would argue that greater candour from our witnesses really helps us to make strong recommendations.

How responsive has your chosen department been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?

Some government responses have not been as positive or as detailed as I would expect, accepting only a handful of our recommendations. However, there is a track record of departments rejecting a committee's recommendations, supposedly for practical reasons, but then quietly adopting them further down the line.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?

We are looking ahead to the reforms on SEND. When they are published, it will be a critical moment for the government. I believe our committee will be among the most authoritative voices when the time comes to scrutinise those proposals. The higher education sector is also in a precarious situation, and we will be making recommendations in this area soon. We have big plans for a range of new inquiries in the New Year. ■

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Chaired by Ruth Jones, Labour MP for Newport West and Islwyn

Current inquiries Farming in Wales in 2025: challenges and opportunities; prisons, probation and rehabilitation in Wales; the environmental and economic legacy of Wales's industrial past; promoting Wales for inward investment

What makes a good select committee chair?

Being able to foster a collegiate atmosphere. The committee scrutinises a range of complex and diverse issues affecting our communities, and it is only by putting party politics aside and working together effectively that will we see the most impact for the people of Wales.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?

One of our biggest challenges is navigating the complexities between the UK government and Welsh Government's responsibilities. Looking at our prisons inquiry, the UK government oversees prisons, probation and rehabilitation services, while responsibility for intersecting services such as health, education and housing is devolved to the Welsh Government.

It's important, therefore, that both governments work effectively together in the best interests of people in Wales. It will take good relations between Westminster and Cardiff, which is why I'm keen to ensure that we have a productive relationship with those in the Senedd, such as through our regular scrutiny sessions with the first minister of Wales.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?

I'm grateful to all our witnesses who have given their time to participate in these hearings. It has been immensely informative for us. We haven't shied away from asking tough questions or, where needed, expressing concerns with the quality of information provided. In a recent evidence session on prisoner healthcare, I raised serious worries about the lack of detail provided and have since called for CEOs of the relevant health boards to appear before the committee. All the evidence we take ensures that we can think critically about the challenges facing our communities and make recommendations that truly deliver for Wales.

How responsive has the government been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?

We are yet to receive the government's response to our first report on the challenges and opportunities for farming in Wales.

It is disappointing the government didn't take the opportunity to delay its inheritance tax reforms in the Budget, which my committee and many others had called for. We need a Welsh-specific impact assessment to understand the true impact on current and future generations living in farming communities across the country. The current proposals do not take into consideration the needs and the distinct nature of Welsh farmers.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?

We are continuing our inquiries investigating how best we can promote inward investment, and exploring the legacy of Wales's industrial past and how to support the transition to the economies of the future. We will also be continuing our prisons inquiry. In the new year, we will be looking at the proposed restructuring of Welsh rugby and what it will mean not just for the professional game, but for all the communities where the sport is so important. ■

OMBUDSMAN ON A MISSION

Paula Sussex has taken over as the ombudsman responsible for looking into complaints from members of the public about services provided by the UK government and its agencies and the NHS in England. **Tevye Markson** meets her to discuss her leadership style, listening to customers and the long road to reform

It's a Thursday in September and day four of the week-long tube strikes. We've both made it to our offices. And as the clouds darken and threaten rain, I'm grateful that those offices happen to be in the same building – a lift down, a dozen steps across, up another lift, and into the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's London HQ.

CSW last interviewed Paula Sussex nine years ago. Back then, she was chief executive at the Charity Commission, her first public sector role after 26 years in the private sector – a move she says she made because she wanted to do something more "pointful". Next, she ran the Student Loans Company, before leaving in 2023 to become the chief exec of financial technology startup OneID.

But Sussex soon felt the pull to return to public service. This summer, she was appointed as PHSO, a role that looks into complaints from members of the public about services provided by the UK government and its agencies and the NHS in England.

Sussex says the role was another opportunity to "contribute to making things better, which is simply irresistible".

She takes this contribution seriously: when asked about her leadership style, she says public servants need "that huge and constant reminder of how responsible you are in your job".

"I have a firm belief that it is never about you, the individual, and that means you need to listen very carefully... to what people are saying. It is a privilege to be doing these jobs and the Student Loans Company, Charity Commission, this organisation are really important to the fabric of our country. You'd better do it well then, I always think," she adds.

One way Sussex tries to listen well is by hearing directly from customers. At SLC, she would sit down each week with colleagues to review the most significant complaints that had come through, and talk to either a student or a repayer about the issues.

"I used complaints as almost an audit function," she says. "I would look at the complaint and say, 'Is what we're doing in our technology transformation going to address this? If not, are there more of these? Is this systemic? Is there something else that we need to do?' I found it an incredibly useful process. I think that gave me an appreciation of the power of complaints. 'Complaints' is not always [seen as] a positive word, [but] it's the voice of the user, which is so important to have in your ear."

"'Complaints' is not always seen as a positive word, but it's the voice of the user, which is so important to have in your ear"

In her second week at the ombudsman, Sussex had her first meeting with PHSO's public engagement and advisory group – members of the public

who have been complainants and operate as an advisory committee.

She says several of the group's members had made complaints that the ombudsman had not upheld, but that they were nevertheless "so positive about the experience that they had and also that their voice was heard", and were keen to talk about their experiences. "Getting that window onto the world of the customers that you serve... is incredibly valuable," she says.

The government accepted PHSO's finding of maladministration in the Waspi scandal but said it could not justify paying compensation

Upon her appointment as ombudsman, Sussex said she planned to focus on "the key themes where PHSO's investigations and recommendations can have the greatest impact". She tells *CSW* these themes are still being finalised but are "likely to be quite complex, involving different organisations".

She does hint at one potential area of focus when asked about PHSO's report into the Waspi – Women Against State Pension Inequality – scandal. In December 2024, the government accepted the ombudsman's finding of maladministration and apologised for a 28-month delay in writing to women born in the 1950s about the increase to the state pension age from 60 to 65. Despite this, the government said it could not justify paying compensation.

"With Waspi there are ongoing legal proceedings, which I don't think we are conjoined in," Sussex says. But she adds that PHSO will be looking at the systemic issues "that may be at the root cause" of what went wrong, "about communications, about the accuracy of information given to the public".

In 2023, then-ombudsman Sir Rob Behrens told a select committee that in 2017, he had inherited "a deeply unhappy organisation, unclear where it was going, with a toxic organisational culture". Behrens, who left the role in 2024, said PHSO had needed a year to bring itself out of this crisis.

Sussex's experience as Behrens's successor has been a far cry from this. She says her staff have supported her effort to focus on a set of key themes – and have wowed her with their attitude.

"I see an organisation that is markedly proud of the work it does, hugely focused on the purpose of working there, highly values-based, and also really thoughtfully thinking about where the organisation can have more impact," Sussex says.

"I have no sense that the team will say, 'We have rising demand, we're running as fast as we can, we've increased productivity on our complaints work, that's enough.' They are saying, 'Where can we have more impact? How can we bring better outcomes, better results?'"

Assessing PHSO's strengths and weaknesses after a few weeks in the job, Sussex picks out case handling for both – and her predictions on technology and process also look to have been a good bet.

She says the ombudsman's "extraordinary team of caseworkers" are able to spot patterns and trends in their casework. However, she says staff have to do "a lot of manual work" due to the state of legacy IT, meaning PHSO cannot fully make use of its "fabulous reservoir of data, which is unique in England".

Like many areas of the public sector, PHSO has experienced a spike in demand since the Covid pandemic. Sussex says it is currently receiving around 10% more complaints than it had forecast for this year. With every complaint needing to be properly assessed, the ombudsman can't always handle complaints as quickly as it would like to.

"All of us would like to be able to get to handling complaints and cases faster," Sussex says. "But I am very clear-eyed and realistic about the state of data in all IT estates that have been going for longer than 10 years."

One area where PHSO has come in for criticism over its approach to case management relates to its use of a "severity of injustice scale" to decide which cases to prioritise. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee said in 2024 that the approach was a temporary measure introduced while Covid restrictions were in place that had led to some cases not being resolved, and also not being subject to detailed investigation.

PHSO is now using a "public value model", which Sussex describes as a "significant upgrade". This model aims to prioritise cases with the "highest potential impact" using a scored test that focuses on the seriousness of the impact on the affected person and whether investigating the complaint could lead to a wider public benefit.

This enables caseworkers to focus on the most important complaints, Sussex says, adding: "We are taxpayer funded – we must do that."

In her pre-appointment hearing with PACAC in April, Sussex said she wanted the ombudsman to play a more active and proactive role in improving public services. What opportunities has she spotted so far to do that?

"We would very much like to have more central government work. We have a low number of complaints coming through the MP route. I still don't understand why"

As heavy rain patters the building and thunder begins to roar, Sussex notes that PHSO does already play an active role in improving public service through its statutory powers of laying reports, publishing recommendations and working directly with organisations. "And there is a very, very high compliance rate with our recommendations," she adds.

But she says she wants to go further and "get right to the heart of the substance of the complaint and work deep within the organisation" to identify systemic issues and, where appropriate, help set standards.

Sussex also says she anticipates working with a small number of organisations where it is "thematically sensible", and with whom PHSO can find a common agenda and retain its independence.

Such organisations include the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, the Care Quality Commission and NHS Resolution in the health domain. As for government, Sussex says she's looking forward to meeting with the National Audit Office, which she describes as "a really important body... doing superb value-for-money work".

She also wants to get a message out to MPs asking them to pass on more complaints from their constituents. Unlike health-related complaints – which make up around 80% of PHSO's casework – complaints about departments and arm's-length bodies must first go to an MP, who can then pass them on to the ombudsman.

"We would very much like to have more central government work," Sussex says. "We have a low number of complaints coming through the MP route. I still don't think I understand why. We're extremely keen to be able to support MPs in their constituency work by taking on these complaints."

In 2024, the Victims and Prisoners Act removed the so-called "MP filter" for complainants who are victims of crime. Sussex says it is too early to tell what impact this has had.

More comprehensive legislative reforms to PHSO's structure and operations have long been sought but have failed to get government go-ahead. PACAC has been calling for reform of PHSO since 2014, while both of Sussex's predecessors' attempts to drive forward changes have failed to bear fruit.

Desired legislative reforms include creating a single public service ombudsman; bringing it together with the local government ombudsman, as is already the case in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and giving the ombudsman "own-initiative powers" to investigate issues, which most of its European equivalents have.

In May 2024, the then-Conservative government said it was "not convinced" that fundamental reform was a priority, "nor that legislation is the answer to many of the issues identified by the committee". The current administration has yet to address the question of reform publicly. A Cabinet Office spokesperson said: "The PHSO does important independent work, setting high standards across government and improving public service delivery."

What is Sussex's view on the reform debate? She says there is "some really good thinking" in the reform proposals put forward by her two predecessors, but adds: "Equally, I know that many of them require legislation, and it's always a busy legislative agenda, so I'm realistic about that. There are some good proposals, but let's see how far we can go under our own powers as we are at the moment."

Along with the change to the "MP filter" for victims of crime, another reform Behrens achieved was the creation of new national frameworks on complaint standards in the NHS and in central government, which he has described as "a lasting legacy" of his time as ombudsman.

Sussex says the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Natural England have thus far adopted the UK Central Government Complaint Standards. "Would we want other departments to [follow suit]? Yes. Do we have the power to mandate? No."

All raising the question: what would stop them from adopting the standards? "As I work my way around the departments of state, I will be asking that question as part of my introductory meetings," Sussex says.

The ombudsman has reported this year on issues at two organisations that Sussex previously led.

In March, it urged the Student Loans Company to improve its advanced learner loans processes after finding around 4,000 students had been hit by a system error that meant their loans were not written off. The timing of the errors include the period when Sussex was chief exec.

Reflecting on the concerns PHSO found, Sussex says: "It was a known issue around that particular loan type – legacy IT estates, too many financial products, having to do manual rework around highly complex policy.

"But that's not to say that we didn't appreciate it being pulled out by PHSO to say 'Yes, we've got it, we agree, we're fixing it as fast as we can and we're learning from it'."

In September, a few days before our interview, the ombudsman called on parliament to hold the Charity Commission to account, saying the organisation had failed to comply with recommendations following an investigation into its handling of concerns about sexual abuse. Sussex – who left before these failings took place – says she can't comment on the case because legal proceedings are ongoing.

How useful does she think it is that she's led organisations under PHSO's remit? "I do think it is hugely important if you do this job that you have experience of delivering public service. So I hope all of your readers appreciate that I feel as though I have been in their shoes," she says. "With a number of organisations in our jurisdiction, I understand how they tick... which gives a better understanding when we're looking at our complaints to what the root cause analysis might be."

In her interview with *CSW* nine years ago when she was at the Charity Commission, Sussex said the organisation's demands made it a "morning, noon and night job, leaving little time for other interests".

These days, she says she does "all the usual things" to unwind: "Family and friends and galleries and a bit of exercise... and a little bit of travel."

"I do naturally unwind very easily," she says, as the clouds start to clear and are replaced by blue sky.

She reflects that "as you get more experience, the stress hits you less" and that "a sense of perspective is important".

"I remember when I was working in IT thinking that I'd had a really dramatic, stressful day. And I would always find a way on a Friday night of doing something to round off the week, which sometimes was going to the British Museum and going to some of those epic battle scenes of ancient Sumerians where 3,000 people died in a day or something, and you go, 'that's much more stressful than my day'. That helps." ■

PAULA SUSSEX ON... HYBRID WORKING

"I observe that it is working well. I can't see any particular issue and there's quite a good level of collegiality in both offices. The teams are mostly in two-to-three days a week and there's a lot of kitchen chat. If I sit out in the open area, I hear a lot of: 'Can I just ask you a bit about this case?' So it feels to me as though it is working, and people have settled into a truly hybrid form.

"There's a role for the office, there's a role for working at home. A number of these cases are complex, which means you do need to get your head down. It's the nature of the type of casework that we do. You need that quiet time, and you need time with colleagues to compare notes. I think it's also the way the brain works."

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A GOOD INFLUENCE?

Creative endeavour New-media friendly Keir Starmer holds a No.10 reception for content creators

Numerous departments acknowledge the use of online personalities and content creators for comms purposes but, as **Sam Trendall** discovers, questions remain concerning details of those involved and the cost to taxpayers

For the average member of the general public, it is likely there is a marked contrast in their respective perceptions of the serious and starchy environment of government, compared with the flashy froth of the world of online influencers.

Or, more concisely: a bit of a swag gap.

But as social networks and digital platforms take an ever-greater share of our attention – and take it away from the likes of newspapers and traditional broadcast TV and radio – government faces new challenges in delivering public information campaigns via channels where it may lack cut-through.

It may even be absent from these channels entirely. The use of TikTok is formally prohibited on government devices, outside of certain "exceptional circumstances", thought to include the release of urgent public-safety messages regarding the likes of civil unrest, extreme weather or terror incidents.

Understanding and responding to these exceptions is a key part of the remit of the Cabinet Office-based New Media Unit, which was created a year ago and now has almost 20 staff and an annual messaging budget of £13.2m. The unit is intended to "reach audiences where they are most active", according to ministers.

Since its launch, the NMU has been behind the creation of an official government Reddit account, as well as orchestrating a recent Downing Street reception for around 80 online influencers.

The role of these internet personalities in supporting government communications has been subject to significant parliamentary scrutiny in recent months. Opposition MPs have filed numerous questions seeking to find out the identity of influencers used to deliver public messaging campaigns, as well as information on costs and operational details – with decidedly mixed results.

While a handful of agencies have provided information on money spent to support influencer marketing, numerous departments have declined to do so. None has been willing to name individuals engaged in state-backed messaging – despite a ministerial acknowledgement that "it is obvious [when a post] is an advert paid for by the UK government or part of a government campaign".

Responding to a series of written questions submitted by Conservative MP Sir John Hayes in September, seven departments indicated that they had spent some money on influencer marketing since the 2024 general election. However, when pressed, they would not provide any information on costs – either overall or per-influencer – citing "commercial sensitivities".

These departments are: the Cabinet Office; the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; the Department for Education; the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero; the Department of Health and Social Care; the Department for Transport; and the Ministry of Justice.

Alongside this septet, there are three departments for which the supposed "commercial sensitivities" seemingly do not apply.

They include the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, which was happy to acknowledge £490 dedicated over the preceding 16 months to spreading its messages via online figures.

But there were also two ministries – the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Work and Pensions – which, when asked, provided details of much more significant levels of spending on influencer marketing.

Since summer 2024, the departments have respectively spent £39,700 and £120,003.

And, despite claiming that commercial sensitivities meant that it could not provide a departmental spending figure, the

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Cabinet Office did answer a query concerning money that the NMU has invested in influencer campaigns. Since its creation, the unit has spent just under £115,000 in this area, its parent department said.

'Modernising outdated practices'

Despite the increasingly widespread use of online personalities for government campaigns, there remain a number of major departments that still make no use of influencers, recent ministerial responses indicate.

As of September, 11 departments indicated that they have not spent any money on influencer marketing since July 2024, including: HM Treasury; the Home Office; the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs; and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland Offices have also not used influencer marketing, nor has the Attorney General's Office. And, despite Keir Starmer's recent Downing Street shindig with TikTok's finest, the Prime Minister's Office has not directly spent any money via influencers, according to parliamentary disclosures.

The Ministry of Defence said that it could not provide "a full departmental response [as this] could only be provided at disproportionate cost", but did say that "the Directorate of Defence Communications, as the lead department for communications, has not had any spend for promotion through social media influencers since July 2024".

PublicTechnology contacted the Cabinet Office requesting comment on the growing use of influencer marketing – and on the disparity between the opacity of departments' activities, in terms of disclosing costs and details of people involved.

In response, a government spokesperson said: "We are committed to modernising outdated practices across government, including making sure the public hears what their government is doing for them, no matter where they get their news. That means working more closely with creators and influencers to tell our story alongside traditional media. This is innovation, and it is a good thing."

Top lads

In their answers to MPs' questions, several departments also commented on the benefits of spreading their message to the followers of popular online accounts, including citing some specific recent campaigns.

Earlier this year, DfT worked with digital publishing group LADbible, which supported the department's long-standing THINK! road-safety campaign. The initiative was "amongst the first campaigns to trial advertising on TikTok as part of a government pilot", according to comments made in March by local transport minister Lilian Greenwood.

Several months later, the then-aviation and maritime minister Mike Kane added: "As part of the THINK! campaign to reduce speeding among young men, the department ran a media partnership with youth platform LADbible, which involved working with two content creators as part of a wider partnership."

DBT, meanwhile, worked with "six digital influencers" on TikTok and Instagram to support a campaign to spread awareness of the National Minimum and Living Wage. While DBT would not provide an overall spending figure, it did reveal that 3% of the campaign's total budget was committed to influencer activities.

In July, the then-employment rights minister Justin Madders said: "Influencer marketing is a credible paid communications channel, which... can be an effective way of reaching audiences that the government and traditional marketing channels find hard to reach. We used this channel to raise awareness of the new National Minimum and Living Wage rates to ensure audiences such as young people, part-time female workers, ethnic minorities and disabled groups are paid correctly."

The MoJ – which declined to quantify its spending on influencer marketing – has seen the benefits of new communications channels, particularly in supporting hiring people in key frontline roles, according to victims minister Alex Davies-Jones.

"The Ministry of Justice uses social media, influencers and online advertising to support the department in delivering its key priorities," she said in September. "These priorities include our recruitment campaigns for prison officers, probation officers and magistrates, which help to ensure our frontline services are safely resourced and able to deliver swift access to justice, as well as our campaigns that support victims of crime to access the support they need.

"Commercial sensitivities exist around aspects of this spend which could prejudice commercial interests. All spend in these areas is subject to the standard value-for-money assessments." ■

KEY STATS

£120,003

Amount spent by DWP on influencer marketing since July 2024

7/10

Proportion of departments that acknowledged use of influencer marketing but would not provide information on spending amounts

Six

Number of TikTok and Instagram influencers used by DBT to support a campaign about the National Minimum and Living Wage

November 2024

Creation of the New Media Unit, which has a remit to use new comms channels for government campaigns, including social media influencers

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IDENTITY CRISIS?

The PM's plan for a new national ID system is one of the most significant – and hotly debated – digital projects ever embarked upon by government. Amid the conjecture and criticism, **Sam Trendall** runs through everything we know so far

Since being unveiled in September, the government's plan for a new national digital identity regime has not been short of detractors.

Anyone wishing to engage with criticism

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of the proposals could turn to any of the Labour government's rivals, with all other major UK parties – across the breadth of the political spectrum – disparaging the plans. Others seeking critiques could simply search for "digital identity" on any social media platform and see what people – so many people – have to say on the matter.

But, then again, according to Matthew Feeney, advocacy manager at Big Brother Watch: "It's not very easy for me to criticise the digital ID policy – because there isn't one yet. The government announced this in September and, since then, we've been waiting for a consultation and we've been waiting for legislation – and we [recently] learned that this consultation, which we were expecting in a few weeks, is going to be kicked down the road until 2026."

Speaking at a panel discussion organised by think tank the Institute for Government in November 2025, Feeney told attendees that – speaking theoretically – he believes that "not only will this likely not work, but I think there's significant privacy and security concerns.

"One of those is that this kind of scheme would turn us into the kind of society that the UK has traditionally rejected – which is a permission-seeking, 'papers, please' kind of society," he said. "We don't exist at the permission of the state – we go about our lives, getting public services by using [a range of] identification methods."

Feeney added: "It also seems to me that for this to be effective, to do what the government wants it to do, the government will need a bird's-eye view of the data, [including] when it's being used, how it's being verified and, if not direct data gathering, at least metadata gathering, and I think that may be a rather attractive target for criminals and foreign adversaries."

Others have different theories, not least Morgan Wild, the chief policy adviser for Labour Together and co-author of the report *Britcard: a progressive digital identity for Britain* – a policy paper widely credited as informing prime minister Keir Starmer's subsequent proposals.

Wild told the IfG event that a digital identity programme will "help us do three things better – if we do it right".

Reality check Then-home secretary Alan Johnson with a national identity card issued through a 2009 pilot scheme

"Firstly, I think we have to accept the pragmatic reality where we have lots of different ID systems in the UK already – the government has your data in all kinds of different nooks and crannies of the state, of varying levels of security," he said. "And the fact that we don't treat that data well at the moment contributes to injustices that ordinary citizens face as a consequence: most famously in recent years, the Windrush scandal [can be laid] at the door, partially, of poor data-management processes."

"Using a closed group like the 300,000 veterans shows the technology works, and that we can dispense with some concerns around privacy and security"
Digital government minister Ian Murray

Wild added: "Secondly, this makes everyone's lives a little bit easier. If you've got digital ID, it's gonna be an easy way of accessing public services and it's gonna be an easier way of proving who you are to various businesses...

"Thirdly, I think it'll help with illegal migration. It won't be a silver bullet, but it will make Right to Work and Right to Rent checks more effective. The way it will do that is by providing an audit trail to the state of when those checks have been conducted. The Home Office [currently] has no idea... if any of your employers have done their checks. At the moment it is, to a large extent, enforcement theatre."

While neither proponents nor opponents of digital ID can say exactly how the technology will work in practice, details of government's thinking concerning the operation of the new regime have begun to emerge.

So, what do we know so far?

Do we already have digital ID?

Since 2022, citizens and companies have been allowed to use digital identity to complete the Home Office's Right to Work and Right to Rent checks. These processes can be completed using one of – at the time of writing – 57 third-party ID services that have been accredited via a government certification administered by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Under the PM's proposals, pre-employment checks, based on a state-issued ID, will be mandatorily digital by the end of this parliament in 2029.

These digital credentials will contain the holder's name, date of birth, nationality and residence information and a photograph – which will be used for biometric checks.

The ID and supporting services are being developed by DSIT's Government Digital Service, while the Cabinet Office recently assumed control of policymaking requirements and any necessary amendments to the UK's legal framework, as well as broad oversight of implementation.

The new identity record will form part of a growing suite of electronic documents formally issued by government – beginning with a digital version of the Veteran Card, which was launched in October. This will be followed by digital National Insurance cards, marriage and birth certificates, and status evidence of the completion of a Disclosure and Barring Service check.

Also digitised will be documents confirming lasting power of attorney, and proof of receipt of state benefits such as Universal Credit, Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payment.

Government has also indicated that it intends, at some point, to offer a digital version of the passport – although this is not likely to be usable for international travel in the near term.

Users will be able to store all these documents, as well as the mandatory digital ID for employment checks, on their smartphone – with the plan being to offer a platform known as GOV.UK Wallet where all forms of state identity can be kept. Officials are also actively exploring the possibility of enabling storage via the wallet platforms offered by Apple and Android.

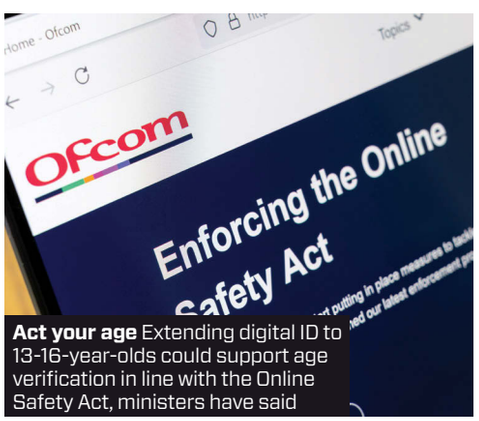
At the launch of the virtual Veteran Card, digital government minister Ian Murray told *PublicTechnology*: "Using a closed group like the 300,000 veterans is a really good case study to show that [digital ID] does work and it will be very beneficial. It shows the technology works, and it shows we can prove [that] and dispense with some of those – legitimate – concerns around privacy and security."

"It's not very easy for me to criticise the digital ID policy – because there isn't one yet"
Matthew Feeney, Big Brother Watch

How will this apply across the UK – and beyond?

Government's plan is for the new identity system to be introduced throughout the four countries of the UK.

Answering one of a vast number of recent parliamentary questions on issues related to digital ID, Murray said that "the government has engaged with the devolved governments... and will continue to work closely with [them] throughout all stages of the programme's development".



Act your age Extending digital ID to 13-16-year-olds could support age verification in line with the Online Safety Act, ministers have said

There have been particular concerns about the potential impact of the scheme across the island of Ireland. Since the Good Friday agreement of 1998, Northern Ireland's inhabitants have the right to hold either British or Irish citizenship – or both. Citizens of the Republic, meanwhile, retain the right to live, work and travel freely in the UK – irrespective of Brexit.

Since the digital ID plans were announced, ministers have repeatedly stressed that the technology will be introduced without jeopardising "the commitments in the Good Friday Agreement, the Windsor Framework and the Common Travel Area".

There are, as yet, no specific details of how these commitments will be protected.

Further afield, it is understood that British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies will be offered opportunities and support to adopt the UK's new digital identity system – but it will be up to local legislators to decide the extent to which to do so.

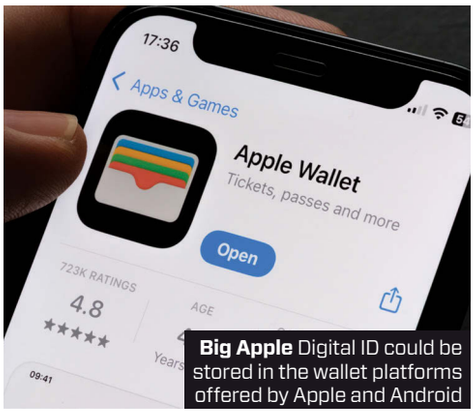
This includes the three dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, as well as 14 overseas territories: the Cayman Islands; Bermuda; Gibraltar; the British Virgin Islands; the Turks and Caicos Islands; Akrotiri and Dhekelia; Anguilla; the British Antarctic Territory; the British Indian Ocean Territory; the Falkland Islands; Montserrat; the Pitcairn Islands; Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha; and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

While all of these are largely self-governing, Westminster has far greater power to unilaterally legislate in the overseas territories. However, while it is understood that the 270,000 people that live across the 14 areas may be able to obtain a digital ID, it will be down to local governments to decide whether to fully adopt a similar regime as in the UK.

The same choice will also face legislators in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Any regions that do wish to fully adopt digital ID will be supported by central government to do so.

Will ID be offered to children?

Because digital identity will be mandatory in employment checks, electronic IDs



Big Apple Digital ID could be stored in the wallet platforms offered by Apple and Android

are expected to be issued to all citizens as they pass their 16th birthday – as is the case with National Insurance numbers.

Those aged over 16 at the time the regime is introduced will need to apply for an ID if and when they are required to complete a Right to Work check.

Government has also previously indicated that the rollout may be extended to children as young as 13 – who, in a number of local council areas, can be legally employed for part-time roles. In regions where this is not the case, the minimum age for paid employment is 14.

The potential expansion of the new identity programme to cover children of legal working age will be subject to an upcoming public consultation, which will seek feedback on numerous policy and operational aspects of the plans.

Ahead of this process, Cabinet Office minister Josh Simons espoused the potential benefits of providing children with a digital ID document.

"Extending the national digital credential scheme to include 13 to 16-year-olds could streamline administrative processes involved in employing young people," he said. "Inclusion of this age group could also support children's online safety by supporting age verification for online services in line with the Online Safety Act 2023."

Will there be physical ID cards?

The 30 or so Labour MPs who have been in parliament long enough to remember the party's last spell in government are likely to have unhappy memories of previous attempts to introduce a national identity card scheme.

But, despite Tony Blair's much-maligned attempt to introduce such a programme, his party's current leaders have resurrected the possibility of the dreaded ID card.

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

PT Public Technology.net

Asked about whether government's new identity plan might include alternative options to the electronic document and support for the digitally excluded – offered over-the-counter via Post Offices – Simons said: "We are considering options like a digitally enabled physical alternative for those without access to technology, as well as in-person onboarding support for those who struggle to engage digitally. This may include Post Offices but that decision has not yet been made and will depend on several different factors."

What about digital exclusion?

Questions regarding in-person support mechanisms and alternative ID options form part of a wider disquiet from some critics regarding the implications of the new regime for those lacking access to technology or the confidence to use it.

The latest statistics from Ofcom show that 6% of UK adults do not have internet access at home – a figure that rises to 15% for those in the D or E social grades (including unemployed people and those in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations) and 21% for over-65s. A total of two million people aged over 16 do not currently go online at all, according to the communications regulator.

Some 4% of households do not possess a smartphone, including 11% of homes with a total annual income of less than £26,000 and 18% of those inhabited by over-65s.

To help support these people, the government published a Digital Inclusion Action Plan in February 2025 – the first nationwide strategy dedicated to tackling tech exclusion in over a decade.

The introduction of digital ID will augment, rather than impede, this plan, according to ministers, who have pledged that the rollout will be accompanied by the "largest-ever digital inclusion programme ever delivered in this country".

Digital ID champion Digital government minister Ian Murray

Digital government minister Murray said: "The government will deliver a comprehensive inclusion programme to help ensure everyone eligible is able to access the new digital ID. This will include targeted support for both people and businesses who may struggle to access or engage with digital services or devices."

He added: "The inclusion programme could also have wider benefits for people who are currently digitally excluded, such as enabling them to access wider benefits of being online, such as getting support with the cost of living and the public services they are entitled to."

Where will data be hosted?

Amid concerns about the data sovereignty and cybersecurity implications of the new ID regime, government has pledged that all data gathered and processed by the initiative will be hosted in IT storage facilities based in the UK.

Many government agencies now rely heavily on public cloud services delivered by US-based vendors – chiefly Amazon Web Services, whose clients include the Cabinet Office and DSIT, which are jointly working on delivery of the new national digital ID.

While data related to the new virtual identity will be kept in a cloud environment, the physical datacentre facilities used for this storage will be situated in the UK, according to junior Cabinet Office minister Simons.

"Data associated with the digital ID system will be held and kept safe in secure cloud environments hosted in the United Kingdom," he said recently. "The government will work closely with expert stakeholders to make the programme effective, secure and inclusive, including taking insights from previous IT projects where appropriate."

The technical details of the identity system will be one of many policy and operational aspects of the programme that will be covered by the upcoming public consultation, which is expected to launch in the new year. The results of this process will help shape the design and delivery of the scheme over the coming years, according to Simons.

"The government will conduct a full public consultation on the new digital ID to inform our approach," he said. "We are currently exploring best practice from other countries with digital identity schemes and other private sector companies who have digitised their services in order to develop the set of proposals to take to public consultation." ■

VITAL STATS

2022

Year in which Home Office rent and employment checks began allowing the use of digital ID

57

Number of third-party ID services currently accredited via government's standards framework

One in nine

Proportion of households with less than £26,000 annual income that do not possess a smartphone

13

Minimum age at which digital ID could be made available

Identity politics Graffiti seen in Brighton in September

DOUBLE VISION

Susan Acland-Hood and **Gareth Davies** have been hard at work since being named co-heads of the policy profession this summer. They tell **Beckie Smith** about their plans to develop the profession, embracing generalism, and why it's important to ask the right questions

Much has been made in recent years of the demise of the civil service generalist. But Susan Acland-Hood, who was named co-head of the policy profession this summer alongside Department for Business and Trade permanent secretary Gareth Davies, admits there is part of her "that's still a little bit fond of the bit of generalism that's about having range and being able to make connections".

The Department for Education's top civil servant notes that the previous policy profession head, Dame Tamara Finkelstein, "was very anti the word 'generalist'".

"I started off trying to defend it... and she basically convinced me that, although she agreed with the concepts that we want people who've got the connectivity and the ability to bring ideas together, the word 'generalist' wasn't necessarily the most helpful way of expressing that," Acland-Hood says.

"I don't think any of us like the bit of generalism that gets translated into gifted amateurism or not having to be serious about professionalism... or not feeling like you have to properly understand the world you're operating in."

Finkelstein – an economist who began her career in the Treasury – made the case that "generalist" skills should be developed within a profession, to allow for formal training, transparent career development and transferable qualifications. She argued that the policy profession should be the home of many of the civil servants who identified with the label, which has been characterised by frequent job-hopping and a lack of structured learning.

Both Acland-Hood and Davies – who says he was "super excited" to take on the role he "happily lobbied the cabinet secretary" for – are longstanding members of the policy profession. Acland-Hood has been its deputy head since 2020, while Davies leads the profession in DBT. That experience "gives you some views about where we're good as a community and where we can go further", according to Davies: "We've got some real shared views about where we want to go together."

And he says he has been "blown away by the level of energy and enthusiasm [among the profession's members] and how it feels like everyone I meet has got an idea about what more we can do".

"So I think the challenge is not going to be galvanising the community; it's going to be focusing ourselves down, thinking, 'Okay, well, there's so much we can do... Where should we really focus to make the biggest difference?'"

The perm secs' approach to leadership has been informed by conversations they have had with members, as well as those years of experience and the three pillars – strategy, democracy and delivery – that underpin the profession and act as an antidote to the pitfalls Finkelstein identified.

Strategy, Acland-Hood says, means

asking: "Have you got the right question? What's your evidence base? How are you putting together the right pieces of the puzzle? Do you have a theory of change that you're anchored in? Do you understand the domain you're operating in?"

The second pillar is concerned with the democratic framework in which officials work – "it's always slightly surprising how many people, when they get down to brass tacks and have to do a piece of secondary legislation, don't quite know what that is until they get stuck into it," the DfE perm sec says – as well as citizen engagement and user research.

The final pillar, delivery, is about whether policies actually work. "If you aren't thinking about delivery from the outset, then there's a risk that what you end up with is a really lovely piece of paper," Acland-Hood says.

"There's very little policy you create on a greenfield site," she adds. "You're almost always looking at something that's operating in the world now and thinking about how you might want it to operate a bit differently in the future. So [it's about] having the delivery understanding, [and] bringing the people who are doing the delivery into your policy conversation early and often to help you shape it."

"There's very little policy you create on a greenfield site. You're almost always looking at something that's operating in the world now"
Susan Acland-Hood

These pillars will shape a new, universal policy learning offer: part of a wider effort to develop skills and capabilities as the first strand of the co-heads' three-part plan to develop the profession. "That's about trying to make sure we're both setting really clear expectations and giving people really high-quality, quite demanding and quite serious training and development that helps give them a common language, but also a repertoire of tools that they can use to make brilliant policy," Acland-Hood says.

This is an area where Davies is keen to bring some of the strengths of the professional services world, where he spent the first decade of his career, to the civil service. "Professional services are really good at giving people a great foundation," he says, recalling the training on writing, presenting and software skills he received in the early weeks of his private sector jobs. "Whilst that was great individually, because it meant you quickly got up the learning curve, it also meant that as you joined new teams, everyone had a shared language... so it meant you could quickly and very easily collaborate across boundaries.

"We know that often, the hardest problems to try and tackle in the policy profession don't fall neatly into teams or groups – or even departments," he adds.

There are already several courses on offer including Policy 101, which is aimed at early-career policy professionals and officials from other professions, such as science or economics, who are involved in the policymaking process. At the higher level, there are programmes such as the Executive Masters in Public Policy, developed with King's College London under Sir Chris Wormald – now cabinet secretary – who led the profession from 2012 to 2022.

Acland-Hood and Davies wanted to add a programme that would be a step up from Policy 101, while being as widely accessible as possible. The high-level courses on offer are "brilliant... and they give us very skilled people", according to Acland-Hood, but are only available to a small cohort at a time. The universal policy learning offer is currently being tested with policy professionals and will "pop out of the sausage machine for more widespread testing" early in 2026, she says. It is being built in segments that follow the policy

cycle and will draw on learnings from areas such as the Fast Stream, where Acland-Hood began her civil service career, and will be designed to integrate seamlessly with the wider civil service learning offer.

There is also work happening to formalise continuous professional development and to move towards the expectation that policy professionals will undertake core learning and keep their skills up to date.

The second strand of the plan is "policy in practice", which recognises the importance of working effectively both with other policy professionals and in multidisciplinary teams.

Like conducting an orchestra, Davies says, policymaking is "about bringing together different skills and experience to solve, often, really complex issues to make the world a better place". He wants the profession to think about its work not only in abstract terms, and to look for ways to do things better. For example: "How do we get together to do a white paper or a consultation, and how do we then make sure it's not just theoretical, but actually then translates into delivery?"

"I want to make sure we're not trapped in models that I might have [been using] from having been around for 20 years," he says. Among other things, he wants officials to be thinking about how they can use AI and other technologies to work more effectively and efficiently.

CSW wonders how the perm secs use AI in their jobs. Davies says he is "still learning and experimenting" but uses tools like Microsoft Copilot mainly for "synthesis and fresh perspectives". He might ask for an overview of literature to get up to speed quickly on a topic or to understand what a critic might say in response to a paper.

Acland-Hood says she has been looking at whether AI can help in creating accessible versions of documents more quickly, as well as for "word polishing" and writing for different audiences. That's alongside AI tools being developed in DfE, such as one to help teachers with lesson planning. "We're still at the stage where we're encouraging people to use, experiment, test, trial and feed back on what they found," she says.

The third and final strand of the perm secs' plan is pride. They want members to have a sense of community and pride in their profession "for the right reasons", Acland-Hood says: not because of a label, but "proud because you have the professionalism and you understand that great practice".

"Policy professionals sometimes get seen as the people who think they know it all in their ivory tower," she says. "But I think sometimes, actually, they've felt that they haven't got as clear a professional identity as some of the other professions we've created across the civil service, like finance."

Policy people Susan Acland-Hood with Selvin Brown, director for net zero buildings at DESNZ

Meeting of minds Gareth Davies with delegates at the Policy Festival 2025

Davies – who is also the civil service's social mobility champion – adds that "demystifying" the profession is "one of the biggest jobs we've got on our hands".

The biggest misconception about the profession, he says, "is it's full of posh people and it's limited to people who've been to Oxbridge and work in SW1".

"The profession, when it's at its best, is an incredibly diverse community, and you can do policy right the way across the UK. Actually, we've got people working on policy right the way across the world... I think there's a really interesting overlap between my role with Susan here and on social mobility, demystifying what policy is about. That's why the skills and qualifications bit is so important."

CSW is speaking to the two perm secs shortly after Policy Festival 2025, a week-long programme of speakers, workshops and mentoring sessions. "I've basically been living my best life this week," says Acland-Hood, recalling conversations she had with chief medical officer Professor Sir Chris Whitty about science and policy; historian and educator Sir Anthony Seldon about the role of history in policymaking; and former politician Ed Balls about policymaking for ministers.

One theme that struck Acland-Hood as she attended the festival was that policymakers are operating in "a world which

has got a lot of challenge in it". She left the event thinking about the ever-present risk of the public losing trust in government and the need to ensure policy improves citizens' lives. "That's always been important, but it feels more charged and more important than ever, I think," she says.

Her conversation with Whitty stuck with her in particular. "Sometimes people imagine that if you're focusing on science and evidence, that's separate from engaging people," she says. But Whitty – a former GP and practising NHS consultant – was "arguing very strongly... that to do things effectively, you have to bring together the hard science and the bedside manner: the bit where you understand people, you connect with them, and you really think about what's going to shape effective shifts in behaviour".

"So, you can get the hard science right and the connection wrong. And, actually, that isn't you getting a good, evidence-based policy done. It's the opposite," she says.

Whitty shared a harrowing and poignant example of this problem from his experience working with communities in west Africa to curb the spread of Ebola when he was chief scientific adviser at the Department for International Development. "I'm sorry, this is slightly grim," Acland-Hood says.

When the Ebola epidemic broke out in 2014, experts knew that the safest way to prevent transmission via corpses – which remain infectious – would be to bury victims as quickly as possible in an unmarked grave. But, Acland-Hood explains, "that cut across everything that the community wanted to do and understood about how you mark somebody's death" and sometimes led people to "go to enormous lengths to find where their loved one was buried and dig them up and give them the rituals and rites that they wanted to give them". The experts concluded that it was safer to work with communities to find ways for them to bury their loved ones with dignity "and then wrap a set of scientific safety protocols around that".

"I thought: that's quite a powerful example, isn't it? We have to take science and evidence incredibly seriously, we have to connect with people properly, and the right answer is the one that combines those two things," the DfE chief says.

"There are very few examples of policy that don't involve thinking about the user themselves. Their own engagement, their own behaviour, is part of what makes your policy work or not work," she adds.

For Davies, the highlight of the Policy Festival was attending the profession's annual awards ceremony, which wrapped up the week of activities. He nods to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' Lindsay Roome, who took home the Leadership in Policy Award for her work leading the development of harmonised carbon reporting and standardised eco-labelling, where previously there had been only fragmented data. Judges praised Roome's ability to secure ministerial support and drive consensus among government, industry and civil society.

Davies says Roome's work exemplifies "a much underrated virtue in Whitehall: persistence". He adds: "There's lots of really high-profile policy, but there's [also] lots that sometimes takes years to get right... So it's great to hear these things about people who are beavering away, having an incredible impact on our country."

"The hardest problems to tackle in the policy profession don't fall neatly into teams or even within departments"
Gareth Davies

What other qualities do policy professionals need to be successful? "Curiosity is probably one of the big ones," he says. "Because it's not just a single discipline. You've got to go broad.

"I think the best policymakers are curious about what's going on internationally, because the challenges we face here are shared... and historically as well."

He says on a recent visit to Singapore and Japan, he was struck by the realisation that his counterparts are "grappling with exactly the same issues [as us] about how you grow the economy, how you handle technology, how you get skills right".

A sense of purpose, and keeping citizens in mind, is also crucial, he says: "Sometimes, when we get it wrong, [it's because we're too focused on] what goes on in Whitehall – whether you're briefing for a meeting or aligning different departments or running a good session with stakeholders, you've always got to be focused on, ultimately, the person that it serves."

Acland-Hood returns to the profession's three pillars and the bridge-building that made her reluctant to abandon the "generalist" label. "I think that the cross-cutting skill that sits underneath that is the skill to convene and put together the right multidisciplinary team around your problem," she says.

Persistence pays Davies with Defra's Lindsay Roome, winner of the Policy Leadership Award

"You have people whose core central skill is as a policymaker, and you also have lots of people who will have another disciplinary background but have a role in the policymaking process... it's not as simple as bringing everyone into everything, because that leads to endless 'committeeage'.

"It's about saying: 'Well, this particular problem has these characteristics, and that means if I don't have an economist working on it, we won't be solving the problem right.' Or: 'I'm doing a piece of work on environmental regulation, I really need somebody who's got the environmental science that sits underneath that to be part of my team.'"

After all, she says, policymaking is "applied problem solving". "This is one of the things that really gets me up in the morning," she adds. "It's just about trying to get things right for people." ■

Pedro Caiado

CHURNING *and* LEARNING

A new board game puts players in the shoes of civil service policy professionals. **Tevye Markson** spoke to co-creator **Dr Melissa Jogie,** a UK Research and Innovation policy fellow, to find out more. Photos by Nasirul Islam

Turnover in the civil service – including both moves between departments and exits from the civil service entirely – has hovered between 8% and 14% a year over the last decade. Over that same period, the policy profession has more than doubled in size. The growing challenge: how to build policy capability quickly. Could a board game be the answer?

Dr Melissa Jogie, a UK Research and Innovation policy fellow and director for research, culture, impact and early career development at Roehampton University, and Katie Thorpe, head of learning and development at the Institute for Government, have co-designed Churn, a board-based simulation that drops players into the unpredictable world of policymaking.

Players come up with a policy idea and then try to develop successful, long-lasting policy by building a team, marshalling political capital and allocating resources, while responding to sudden events such as ministerial resignations, elections, funding cuts or crises. Using real-world scenarios to recreate the unpredictable environment in which policy is made, Churn aims to equip players with a practical understanding of how to confront the messy realities that civil servants and policymakers face daily. Each game lasts about an hour, and no two outcomes are the same.

"You're under pressure with government changes, public demand, understanding evidence... The game is trying to get you in the mindset of getting comfortable with that level of discomfort" ***Melissa Jogie***

Initially created to help academics understand the policymaking process, Churn has attracted interest from departments, including the Home Office, as a training and development tool for new policy staff. *CSW* attended the launch of the game and had a go at it – working in a team to successfully deliver a policy for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to subsidise all energy bills (not this author's idea). Afterwards, *CSW* spoke to Jogie to find out more about the game.

What was the inspiration for the game?

As part of my UK Research and Innovation policy fellowship, I attended training at the Institute for Government on how successful policy is made [delivered by Thorpe]. Even

though Katie put together a nice training pack, there was a lot of PowerPoint and it was very difficult for someone from a non-policy mindset to step into a crash course on how successful policy is made. It was like seeing a whole new world for the first time without really spending any time to go through the steps in detail. So I thought: is there a proactive way? And then I picked up this conversation with Katie and quite coincidentally had started designing a version of this game in theory. And I said to her: "Why don't we collaborate and really bring it to the table?" So it went from being an idea in her head to suddenly having a team, us working on it together, piloting it with different audiences, and then launching it.

What problem is it trying to resolve?
It's trying to demystify the policymaking process, because there are so many elements within the dynamics of how policy can be made. You're under pressure with government changes; public demand; understanding evidence, how it's applied; who the right audience is; how it's communicated. This is what the game is hoping to flex: our muscle of strategising, thinking, optimising when you don't have all the options before you and you're hedging yourself against the risk that this may not be the government priority tomorrow, or it may be needed yesterday. The game is trying to get you in the mindset of getting comfortable with that level of discomfort.

Why is it called Churn?
The name was entirely Katie's idea. I think because it was the arresting moment of when everything is going really well, but everything could suddenly go wrong. In government, a prime minister can be replaced overnight. When that happens you lose staff, relationships and momentum. We all know from our own workplaces how disruptive a change in leadership can be – and in government, there is often no time for proper induction or handover. High turnover and shifting priorities mean that new people constantly reshape the direction of work. That instability is at the heart of the game's message: can you survive the churn?

Team effort Churn aims to support policymaking

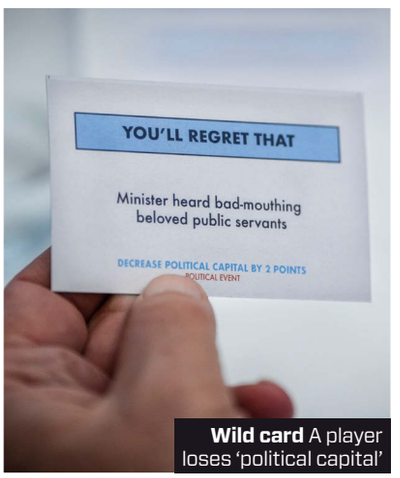
Do you think it could help the wider public to understand how government works and how difficult the job of being a civil servant is?
Yes, [we saw it] when churn happened in games. Because they may have just got an analyst on their team or an expert and then to just lose those people through churn, I think it did build empathy.

What sort of interest has there been from the civil service? I understand the Home Office has enquired about it.
The Home Office's enquiries were about trying to understand: "What is this new thing? Can it help with problem solving? Could we bespoke the game to help talk about specific strategies? Can it be used for an induction for staff into new teams?" »

Churning it up Policymakers test the game

Game changer Departments have expressed interest in using Churn as a development tool

It can be a team-building agenda, but it can also be bespoke for a specific policy. Certain rounds of the game can be paused to have a conversation around the particular policy that they have in mind. So we're experimenting with: can it actually be used to help teams as a sounding board? But we're working that through because we need to do the experiment with a couple of teams and see how that goes.



Wild card A player loses 'political capital'

What stage is the development of the game at now?
I'd say we're 40-45% there. We have a tangible board. Some of the parts still need to be finessed a little bit. The cards in the game are based on real life examples of things that happened in government in the past. So there's an option to put a QR code in and make it into trivia: which minister did that? Which team did this? We would also like to make an expansion pack where we do particular ministries with extra decks of cards. And then there was a conversation around digitising it. Some people recommended virtual reality. I have no idea how VR in a game like this might work. But we're not turning down the possibilities of: how far can you push this gameplay?

"Churn captures my lived experience in a really uncannily accurate way. Losing half your team in the blink of an eye can be really problematic"
Nick Dean, Policy Profession Unit

Game on *CSW*'s Tevye Markson gives Churn a go

What's your end goal for the game?
I think the end goal would be finding a way to teach the fundamentals of policymaking in a really efficient and engaging way. It would be great to use this as a tool to help researchers who are awarded funding. So many of them gave us testimonials of having worked for many years as a researcher and not knowing the policies that they're working against. For early-career researchers, for students studying policy, I see this as a really good educational tool to get the conversation and engagement going around policy because, while you can still be in a group setting, the learning is still autonomous so you get to have this dialogue with your peers as you play through the game. So I think it's a really healthy way to bring everyone to the table. And running this as a training programme for all of these audiences would be really wonderful, if it took off.

Do you imagine going into a department for a couple of hours to play the game and having someone who comes in and chairs it?
Yes, because you can take breaks between the six rounds and do something else in between, or do a reflection activity afterwards. There are different ways for us to transform it into what we'd call a pedagogical means of delivering this. We do think delivering it is a lot more engaging. But if it took off and it became the next Monopoly? We may not inherit any of those riches; it might take centuries for people to buy it every Christmas. But we are open to both ideas. ■

FEEDBACK ON CHURN AT THE GAME'S LAUNCH

Nick Dean, co-head of the civil service's Policy Profession Unit: "I run education for policy professionals in government – there are 38,000 of them. It's been bags of fun. It's been really bold and innovative to come and play an immersive game that captures my lived experience as a policy professional in a really uncannily accurate way. I recognise the problems Churn throws up... losing half your team in the blink of an eye can be really problematic. I recognise also that the political process has many ups and downs."

Prof Rosie Meek, UKRI policy fellow (Ministry of Justice), Royal Holloway University: "I've loved it. To be able to have the crossover of the day job with the gamification has been really fun. It sparked a bit of a debate and discussion, and that's always a good thing. I think it would be quite interesting to my undergraduate students, because I work with them in terms of translating research into policy and practice, and I think it gives them a better idea of the reality of what we're doing when we're trying to develop policy. But I also think the team I work with at the Ministry of Justice would quite enjoy it at one of the team away days, to get a better sense of how they're working alongside different colleagues across government and how different events that happen in the world will impact our policymaking efforts."

Huw Morris, UCL Institute of Education, on secondment from the Welsh Government: "I'm working with a team to evaluate the policy fellowship scheme that Melissa was on when she developed this policy game. I've been incredibly impressed by everyone's engagement, the sophistication and realism of the game, and the way in which it held everyone's attention. What I find is that in universities, there's not a particularly good understanding of how policy is developed. And that is slightly a problem because many areas of university education are very practical, and it's important if people are going to work in social work, teaching, healthcare settings, police, that they understand how the rules and regulations governing what they do are developed and how they can influence them. Because frontline staff or staff in senior positions have got valuable insight that policymakers and politicians need to know about."

A 'smoke-free country': The secret to success

With over one billion adults across the world still smoking, some countries are setting the example and becoming smoke-free by embracing smoke-free alternatives

Duncan Cunningham
Director of External Affairs
Philip Morris Limited

There are an estimated 1.3 billion tobacco users worldwide[1]. This number has only decreased by 0.02 billion in the past 10 years and is predicted to fall by a mere 0.1 billion by 2030, leaving 1.2 billion across the world still smoking[2]. Yet, some countries have significantly reduced their tobacco use and are soon to reach the coveted title of 'smoke-free' – they have brought smoking rates down to less than 5%. How have they achieved this? Real-world evidence suggests this is because of the positive approach to smoke-free products.

Sweden boasts one of the lowest smoking rates in Europe and is the first country to be considered 'smoke-free'. With just 4.5% of its adult population reporting that they smoke cigarettes daily[3], Sweden is 17 years ahead of the EU's target. This is significantly lower than the UK's 10.6% smoking prevalence[4]. This is all thanks to the country's adoption of oral nicotine[5].

Sweden's tobacco and nicotine regulations are similar to those in the rest of the European Union, with one important exception: Sweden is the only EU country where oral nicotine has been positioned by the government as a viable alternative to smoking and has been embraced for decades.

Look across to the other side of the world, and you will find similar success. Japan has brought its smoking rates down by almost 14% in seven years[6]. Between 2011 and 2015, cigarette sales were slowly declining, but the introduction of heated tobacco products in 2016 attributed to the accelerated decline since[7].

The sales and smoking prevalence data from Japan continues to show how heated tobacco products have had an impact on accelerating the decline of smoking prevalence by transitioning adult smokers away from combustible tobacco.

Over in New Zealand, there is yet more evidence to substantiate how smoke-free products can have a positive impact on smoking rates. In November 2024, New Zealand published the 'Getting to Smokefree 2025', a report on the final actions needed to achieve the Smokefree 2025 goal[8]. A key factor of this push includes the provision of vaping starter kits as a successful method of going, and staying, 'smoke-free'[9]. This position has been further supported by the government's 'Vaping Facts' campaign, launched in 2019, that promoted the use of vaping as a method to quit smoking[10]. Smoking rates have reduced by 9.5% over the past 11 years to reach 6.9% in 2023/2024[11], and New Zealand is on track to join Sweden as a 'smoke-free country.'

The real-world evidence is clear: smoke-free products are a viable solution to reducing smoking rates and helping countries go smoke-free. While we can all agree that the best thing smokers can do is quit smoking altogether, the reality is that many do not. And if the UK fails to recognise the role SFPs play in supporting adults who smoke to switch away from cigarettes, we will struggle to follow the success of countries that are realising a smoke-free future.

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

MINDING THE GAP

Jonathan Simcock, author of *The Delivery Gap*, tells **Susan Allott** why civil servants should stay excited about huge government projects, despite their failure rate

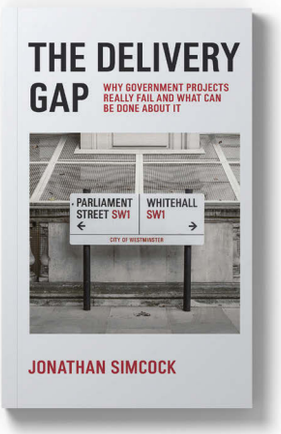
"It was like going into a sweet shop," Jonathan Simcock says, recalling his first impressions of the project portfolio being run from the civil service in 2007. "What struck me immediately was the huge scale and diversity of the biggest projects in government. There were so many extraordinary things happening."

He was to lead what was then the Major Projects Directorate – now incorporated into the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority – in the Treasury. The projects he remembers from those early days include the first iteration of identity cards being introduced and setting up the Rural Payments Agency. There was also a big project led by the Home Office for vetting and barring people who were going to work with children and vulnerable adults.

There was one thing that these enormous projects had in common, according to Simcock: none of them were on track to succeed. "It wasn't a secret, really, that not everything was going well," he says. The Rural Payments Agency "was kind of a poster child for disastrous projects". And the Home Office project, which grew into what we now know as the Disclosure and Barring Service? "That

wasn't going well either."

Simcock is talking to *CSW* a few weeks after the publication of his book, *The Delivery Gap: Why Government Projects Really Fail and What Can be Done About It*. After 18 years involved in government work, he is ready to be candid about the significant government projects he's seen at close quarters – from Crossrail to smart meters to HS2 – and why so many of them are seen to have failed.



A qualified mechanical engineer, he arrived at the civil service in his 40s, "mid-career", following 25 years at Shell, where he oversaw a wide range of projects. A lot of people who make the move from the world of business "either sink without trace or leave", he says. "They come in thinking, 'all we have to do is to run government as though it's a private sector organisation'".

But this view is flawed, he says: government is far too complex to run as a corporation, "and that's one of the reasons I enjoyed it so much. I like working on complex problems, and there's nowhere in the economy really where things are more interesting and complex."

Complexity is a double-edged sword, according to Simcock. He argues that the largest government projects can't be measured against those carried out in the private sector. In fact, government has to address the challenges that are too complex for the market, and it can't always turn down projects just because they look too difficult – the problems are often too important to walk away from.

"Crossrail could have happened two years earlier, and been £2bn cheaper, if they'd faced up to reality"

"A major international oil company might have a portfolio of 30 or 40 mega-projects, of which they end up doing 10. The government wants to do them all," he says. "Societal problems, from defence of the nation to bringing people out of poverty, are going to be highly complex. And really complex endeavours never end up where you think they're going to end up. They're intrinsically kind of chaotic."

And here is his key point, the one he returns to several times in his book: it is "essentially impossible" to deliver highly complex projects to a predictable timeframe and cost, especially when they are determined long before the scope of the work has been finalised.

Despite his own love of complex challenges, Simcock warns that the civil service is too much in thrall to complexity, and resistant to the idea of breaking complex problems down into simplified, manageable projects until they are deliverable. "The Cabinet Office manual on setting up projects for success has well over a hundred references to complexity but no mention of simplification," he says in his book. And recruitment into the Fast Stream promises "projects of unparalleled complexity".

The response to a complex social issue should not be a highly complex project, he explains. "In fact, if you make the project highly complex, then you shouldn't expect it to do what you think it's going to do."

When *CSW* asks Simcock for his headline advice to senior civil servants preparing to green-light a major project, he says: "If what you are looking at is huge, unique and highly complex – don't."

SIMCOCK'S CV HIGHLIGHTS

- **2017-present** Strategic adviser, various
- **2019-2025** Independent non-executive director, Sellafield Limited
- **2021-2024** Non-executive chair, Submarine Delivery Agency
- **2018-2021** Non-executive director, Submarine Delivery Agency
- **2018-2022** Member of the independent investment programme advisory group, Transport for London
- **2016-2020** non-executive member of investment committee, Department for International Development
- **2013-2017** Chief executive officer, Smart DCC Limited
- **2009-2014** Non-executive director, Association for Project Management
- **2009-2012** Vice president, manufacturing, CRI/Criterion
- **2007-2009** Executive director, major projects, Office of Government Commerce
- **1982-2007** Various roles, Royal Dutch Shell
- **1979-1982** BSc mechanical engineering, Imperial College London

The fate of the problem-plagued HS2 project, which he had seen evolve over the years as a member of the Major Projects Review Group and a review team leader, is what prompted Simcock to investigate why government projects fail. Then-prime minister Rishi Sunak's announcement in 2023 that phase two of HS2 – the northern leg of the project – was being cancelled felt like "proof that I was living in 'can't do' Britain", he says in the opening chapter of the book. "The fate of this railway amplified an unacknowledged notion that was already resonating in my head. A growing feeling that failure of huge government projects is somehow predestined. Even worse than this depressing idea was my feeling of complicity."

When did this feeling of complicity begin? Simcock is reluctant to name a specific project. But he describes being "in the situation where the plan is on the table halfway through delivering something, and it no longer looks like you can do what you said you would be able to do".

He says he felt "a genuine tension" in that moment, between "do we re-baseline into something that we could genuinely deliver, or do we keep the pressure on?" While re-baselining would be the honest response to the problem, he says this runs the risk that "everyone will relax... and we will be back in exactly the same position in a year and a half". All the incentives in this situation drive a lack of candour about the problem, he says.

"If your choice is going upstairs to explain a delay to the minister now, or putting it off for 18 months, by which time he'll be gone and you'll be gone... the temptation to leave it to the next person is really strong." Why would you take the hit to your reputation, he adds, if you don't have to; if there's a chance that a forthcoming election might mean a change of direction? "So it's these cumulative incentives that drive us collectively to not bite the bullet."

A significant factor, Simcock suggests, is the way in which projects are announced by politicians, with an apparent certainty about what is to be achieved, by when, and at what cost. Announcements are "always over-optimistic", he says. Some government

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projects would not even get off the ground without what he calls a "systemic but unspoken conspiracy to get projects sanctioned by collective self-deception".

This discrepancy between what gets announced and what is achievable is what Simcock means by the "delivery gap". He cites the Crossrail project as a good example. "Large numbers of people bought homes in the anticipation that they would be able to commute to work on this new line in 2018," he says. "But they were not able to do so until 2022. That's the delivery gap."

But it's wrong to simply blame politicians for the problem, he says, despite the fact that over-optimistic announcements often come from them in the first instance. He points out that in 2018, Crossrail Limited was still saying it was going to open the railway by December of that year. The delivery body would have known at this point that the project would be undeliverable in that timeframe. "That wasn't because a minister was forcing them to do that, or politics was forcing them to do that. So it's too easy to just blame the politicians."

"Success and failure are pretty easy to define in the private sector," Simcock says. "Either you're driving the share price up or you're not." And even the most challenging private sector projects are unlikely to be a completely new endeavour: "A deep sea oil platform might be bigger and more difficult than the last one you did, but you did one before."

Public sector projects, he says, tend to be unique. This means it's "almost impossible" to accurately predict how they will play out.

Ultimately, he says, being more courageous earlier would allow government to redefine success and failure. Sometimes a project appears to be failing when in fact, had its problems been acknowledged in a realistic way, it might have been seen as a great success.

The Elizabeth Line, as Crossrail is now known, is one example among many, Simcock says: "It is a magnificent piece of infrastructure. And in 30 years' time, when it's still a magnificent piece of infrastructure, people aren't going to look back and say, 'Well, you know, it cost a few billion more than they said it would.'"

A much less obvious example is the Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme. "Viewed through one lens, you could say that of all the projects I describe [in the book], this is the most successful," Simcock says.

This is hard to fathom. The restoration is an example of a project that urgently needs to happen – it's commonly understood to be just a matter of time before someone is seriously hurt by falling masonry, or the whole place goes up in flames.

But fixing the problem would be astronomically expensive – estimated to cost £7-13bn and to take 19-28 years. Announcing such a project seems politically impossible. And so the work to make the Houses of Parliament safe appears to be indefinitely stalled.

"Really complex endeavours never end up where you think they're going to end up. They're intrinsically kind of chaotic"

But, Simcock argues, the decision not to go ahead is "a bizarre kind of success". The nation's elected representatives listened to what the Delivery Authority told them it would cost... and decided not to do it. "Maybe that's better than pretending it will be cheaper and quicker than it really will, and starting a project that's doomed to fail. If there is no economically or politically acceptable project available... then maybe the earlier you reach this conclusion, the better."

He also accepts that the decision not to proceed with the project is far from ideal. He

Delivery gap Problems with Crossrail "should have been evident" much earlier

For the better? Simcock says the decision to stall the restoration of the Palace of Westminster can be viewed as "a bizarre kind of success"

describes the problem in poetic terms in his book: "The nature of our democracy might just cost us the home of our democracy."

In conversation, he puts it more bluntly: "It won't feel like a success if the Palace burns down tomorrow."

Does the delivery gap really matter, if we will ultimately come to see projects such as Crossrail as great achievements?

"It absolutely matters," Simcock says, "because of the real impact on real people." Crossrail had a huge impact on those thousands of people who moved house to be within commuting distance of a station that didn't materialise for several more years. It also left Transport for London with a huge hole in its finances.

"TfL had to pay the extra £4bn to finish the project, and didn't receive the fares they had been expecting until years later... So the impact of the delivery gap on Transport for London is absolutely real.

"A lot of excellent people had their careers damaged by the Crossrail experience," Simcock continues. "But the problems with Crossrail should have been evident – and in some cases they were evident – to people much earlier. And had they been acknowledged several years earlier, then, yes, there would have been a bit of a political storm. You know, the mayor would have had to stand up and say, 'I know we said we were going to do it by 2018, it's going to take a bit longer.' But that storm would have passed."

He provides an estimate of the size of the Crossrail delivery gap: "A general view is that [Crossrail] would have happened probably two years earlier than it actually did – because the project wouldn't have been in crisis, re-baselining would have been a planned process – and it would probably have been £2bn cheaper, if they'd faced up to reality earlier."

Derelict duty Safety risks remain at the Houses of Parliament

"In very complex situations, it is human nature to underestimate uncertainty and risk," Simcock writes. Asked to expand, he says that this leads to a "reluctance to face reality". He prefers not to call this dishonesty, feeling that the term is too judgemental of people who are part of a wider problem requiring systemic change. He refers to civil servants as "excellent people who are doing their best" but who, in some cases, "make decisions that afterwards they probably really regret".

An enforced duty of candour – such as the statutory obligation in the forthcoming Hillsborough Law – is one of the proposals he puts forward in the book, to correct this problem. "Nobody should think of my solutions as the last word," he says of these proposals. "What I'm trying to do here is to raise our level of disquiet with the status quo and to advance the debate."

He accepts that the civil service code already requires civil servants to be honest, and says the duty of candour would need to be backed up with other measures, such as stronger accountability for decisions. "If I am the chief financing officer of an arm's-length body and I say that, in my professional opinion, an appropriate cost and timeframe for this project is X, I should be expected to be held to account for that, and I should expect the system to have my back. And if I do succumb to the pressure to say that X is three when it's really six, then I should expect to get found out, and there will be consequences for me," he says.

Reflecting on the experience of getting a book published, Simcock says, "In a funny sort of way, I don't really care how many people read this book. If I could choose the 100 people I really want to read it, then I wouldn't care if nobody else read it. And of those 100 people, 60 would be readers of *Civil Service World*."

Does he have a final word for those readers?

"Don't let yourself slip into cynicism," he says. He characterises this as a perception that "nothing ever works". He believes civil servants should remain excited by the vitally important, high-profile projects that government undertakes. "Scepticism and realism are really valuable, but cynicism is a killer. You know, it's an absolute guaranteed way of making sure nothing works." ■

THE ART OF DRAFTING

What does it take to turn policy into law? And is AI ever likely to learn the skills for the job? **Suzannah Brecknell** meets first parliamentary counsel **Jessica de Mounteney** to find out. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

William Gladstone is remembered as a colossus of the Victorian age, known for his modernising zeal that took in everything from reforming land law in Ireland to introducing secret ballots and commissioning the Northcote-Trevelyan report, which would become the foundation stone of the modern civil service.

In 1869, embarking on the first of his four terms as PM (having already served four stints as chancellor of the exchequer), Gladstone created a central unit that aimed to improve the way laws were written across government. The Office of the Parliamentary Counsel was led by eminent barrister Henry Thring, who had proposed its creation after working as a parliamentary counsel for the Treasury and noticing the variable quality of legislation being produced by drafting teams in other departments.

Among the first bills Thring worked on in his new role as first parliamentary counsel was the 1870 Irish Land Act, which strengthened protections for renters and disestablished the Irish Church.

Years later, Thring described how Gladstone communicated his instructions for the bill. "I used to attend him at his house, generally by myself. I never hesitated to tell him my mind," Thring recalled. "He would then stand up, his back to the fire, and make me a little speech urging his view of the case. I then replied shortly till the point was settled."

The image of Gladstone making speeches by his fire – perhaps rehearsing the remarks he would make in parliament as the bill passed – might seem quintessentially Victorian, but the back-and-forth discussion to test arguments and clarify legal points remains a key part of how Thring's successors work today.

Whereas back then, the Office of Parliamentary Counsel comprised two drafters, three shorthand writers, an office keeper and an "office boy", today, it is around 50-strong.

It is led by Jessica de Mounteney who, like Thring, began her career as a barrister. Also like Thring, she sees the drafters' role as more than simply churning out the right legal language.

"I suspect that for people who've been in the civil service a long time, they may well have an image of OPC as quite an academic and dry place to be," she says. "And there's an idea among the wider public that what we do as drafters is just take a policy and turn it into legal language. Neither of those is quite right: we have a much more active role to play in helping ministers really get to the bottom of what it is they want to change."

De Mounteney joined OPC in 1997, at which point fireside debates had been replaced with a more formal interaction between drafters and politicians or policymakers. In the pre-email era, written instructions would arrive at the OPC's building in 36 Whitehall where the team was – in de Mounteney's words – somewhat "distant" from the rest of government. Drafters set about creating bills, with comments and revisions returning from departments again in largely written form.

De Mounteney joined this team more by chance than design, having discovered after a few years at the Bar that working as a criminal barrister was not for her, but with little idea of what might suit her better. She spotted a job advert to join the OPC and, with a twin love of political science and linguistics (she studied politics and French at Bristol for her first degree), felt the job could have been made for her.

That she has stayed in the team for nearly three decades – punctuated by secondments to the Law Commission and the Government Legal Department – demonstrates two things. Firstly, that her hunch about the role was right, but also that legal drafting is a skill that takes years to hone. Indeed, parliamentary counsel tend to stay in the office for their entire careers. This, de Mounteney reflects, adds to their ability to help crystalise policymaking as they "become the repository for quite a lot of knowledge and corporate history" across government, "which means that we're pretty strongly placed to play that central role in bringing people together".

Over the course of her career, are there any bills which de Mounteney is particularly proud of having worked on? She points to two quite different feats.

The first was the "technical marathon" of consolidating nearly three decades of legislation about the NHS into the National Health Service Act 2006 and the National Health Service (Wales) Act 2006. This not only brought together all NHS legislation from 1977 onwards

into two coherent single acts but was also the first time that England and Wales legislation was fully divided in a consolidation. "That work felt, to me, like writing a play or writing a book," de Mounteney says of the three years spent on secondment to the Law Commission, where she worked on the bill. "I had all this material and I had the most incredible freedom – as long as I didn't change the law – to restructure it.

"You almost never have that kind of freedom when you're drafting programme bills because you're working in an existing legislative landscape."

Devolution, she says, has transformed the drafter's landscape. "Now we're in a world where on every bill, one's having to consider what's devolved, what's reserved... It's actually quite difficult in the first place to find the answer to that. And then, once you have found the answer, there's a question about whether the devolved governments may want to do the same as the UK government, or something similar but different. There's a real challenge of knitting the statute book together."

That complexity demands coordination. "I meet every six months with the heads of the three other UK drafting offices," she says. "We rotate around London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and we keep in pretty close contact." Though working for different administrations means there may be restraints on some elements of their discussion, she notes: "There is a relationship of trust there, which is really important."

This relationship came in useful during the drafting of the other bill she cites as one of her proudest achievements: the Coronavirus Act 2020.

Unlike the NHS consolidation work – which she wrote entirely on her own – her role in this bill was leading a much bigger team and she did little of the drafting herself.

"My role included liaising with the Scots and the Welsh and Northern Irish and working out who could do which bits. It felt like something where the civil service was at its best."

"We did an enormous amount in a really, really short period of time," she says. "Not only did it feel very important and hugely relevant, I think the teamwork that we had on that bill was really quite staggering... we produced it in the space of weeks and at one point, almost half of the office here were working on it."

These two examples illustrate the spectrum of ways in which bills are created – from the smooth and linear model to a more iterative one.

"Each bill is different," she says, "but the paradigm case is that you get a perfectly formed set of instructions [from the department]. You do your drafting, you send it back and they give you a few comments, and then you do another draft, and it's all done."

"We have an active role to play in helping ministers get to the bottom of what they want to change"

This kind of bill is generally one that is not time pressured and may be more about reforming or improving law rather than achieving a political aim. She offers land law reform as an example of a bill where "you might get much more fully formed instructions" because it will often have been developed over many years, perhaps by the Law Commission.

"From that 'perfect' scenario, there's a whole spectrum down to where you will literally get an idea on the back of a proverbial cigarette packet, from which you work very collaboratively with lawyers and departments' policy people."

A recent example of this kind of bill was the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act, which passed in April.

"That really was a very strong team effort," she says. "We went from a place where it wasn't clear at all what was needed, but it was clear that something was going to be needed very quickly, to introducing the bill in a very, very short space of time."

Most bills probably fall somewhere between these extremes. The OPC is officially instructed not by departments but by the Government Legal Department, whose lawyers will liaise with drafters to turn departmental policy into bills. De Mounteney's secondment at the GLD gave her useful insight into the pressure its teams face. "I think there was a time when we at OPC took a sort of rigidly purist view of everything, and that sometimes put the GLD as our legal clients in quite a difficult position," she says. "It's a never-ending conundrum... how far do you go down the route of drafting in a way that is politically helpful, whilst maintaining legal integrity and clarity?"

Whatever the process, there's a consistent value that parliamentary counsel bring. Just as in Thring's day, the core of this value is the ability to help clarify and articulate what it is a minister really wants to achieve.

"The purpose of legislation is to change the law," de Mounteney explains, "and we will sometimes be in a position where we will have to explain why what's been asked for isn't actually a change, because

CROSSING THAT BRIDGE

As well as holding the role of first parliamentary counsel, de Mounteney is also permanent secretary of the Government in Parliament Group – which includes, as well as the OPC, some 60 civil servants who provide support for the Leaders and Whips Offices in the Commons and Lords.

The Government in Parliament Group is "very much the bridge between government and parliament", de Mounteney says, before explaining that the group also works closely with the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Secretariat team in the Cabinet Office to agree and schedule bills and agree things like "which House they should be introduced in".

De Mounteney herself also works closely with the Government Legal Department – which has oversight of legal teams across most departments – to ensure that resources are properly allocated to help bills make it through parliament. Her experience – and that in the wider OPC – means she knows which bills are likely to be complex and to take more time and legal capacity from departments. "I will quite often go direct to colleagues in the GLD and say: 'These are things that are on the horizon. Do you think you've got the right people in the right places to deliver this bill?'"

Alongside these roles, de Mounteney serves as the civil service's parliamentary champion, promoting understanding of parliamentary process among officials. "Keeping parliamentary capability and awareness up in the civil service is really important," she says. And it's an ongoing process. "Because of the turnaround, particularly in ministerial private offices, it's a rolling programme to make sure that people are aware of the basics, but also know where to go to get more information."

She's also keen to help policy professionals understand what it takes to get from idea to statute. "It's about making sure they understand what's involved in developing legislative proposals – not just about the parliamentary process of how you get a bill through the Houses, but about what's involved in crafting a policy proposal in order to get a robust legislative vehicle."

either it doesn't completely finish the story or it doesn't quite understand where the law currently is. So we help people articulate what changes they want to make."

She is clear, of course, that drafters do not make policy decisions, though they can help to unearth and clarify such decisions because "it's interesting how often there is quite an indistinct line between a drafting problem and a policy decision... I quite often say that if something is very difficult to draft, it means that the policy doesn't make sense."

Once the required legal change is clarified, she says, a good bill will do "everything, but no more, to achieve moving from where you are to where you want to be".

"It's almost inevitable that you do occasionally get into situations where, in order to make sure that different interests are met, there will be some stuff in bills which, arguably, you could have done without," she says. But she adds that this is just part of the process of "actually getting a bill through parliament".

De Mounteney's predecessor as first parliamentary counsel – Elizabeth Gardiner – once described the way bills can shape-shift as they move through parliament as being like crafting an elephant but then being told that legislators actually wanted a crocodile. At the end, Gardiner concluded, "you have got bits of the elephant chopped off and some bits stuck on... maybe it is a functioning crocodile but not as nice a crocodile as you would have created".

De Mounteney smiles in recognition at this quote, and *CSW* wonders whether drafters feel a sense of frustration as the bills they have crafted leave their desks and shape-shift in parliament. If so, how do they manage that frustration?

"I suspect that every single person you ask that question in here would have a different answer," de Mounteney answers. "For me, very quickly on starting this job, I recognised that the bill was not 'my' bill – it was much bigger than me. It's really important to me that bills, as introduced, are as clear and effective as they can possibly be – that they are as perfect as it's possible to make them as they leave our care. But I've also always been pragmatic about the fact that this is part of a political process, so various compromises may end up being made.

"I quite often say that if something is very difficult to draft, it means the policy doesn't make sense"

"The only time I get frustrated is when I've produced something beautiful," she adds. "I remember being very frustrated in relation to the NHS acts because I produced around 500 pages and it was all absolutely perfect. Then, within about a year or two, various things happened, policy changed and I thought: 'Oh no, but I didn't want a section 52a between sections 52 and 53!'"

Although the NHS consolidation acts have a particular place in her heart, de Mounteney says one of the joys of the job is that – even without the chance to debate wording around the fire with a prime minister – drafting programme bills offers a way to really get to the heart of helping governments achieve their aims. "Pretty much everything I've done I've ended up being proud of, which is actually one of the things that's great about this job," she says. "Whatever subject matter you're drafting on, if you do it well and get to the bottom of the policy, then it's a very creative job." ■

LEGAL AI

Earlier this year, the Incubator for AI – part of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology – began to roll out a product named Humphrey, containing a range of AI-powered tools tailored specifically to the work of civil servants. Among them is Lex, described by the department as helping "officials research the law by providing analysis and summarisation of relevant laws for specific, complex issues".

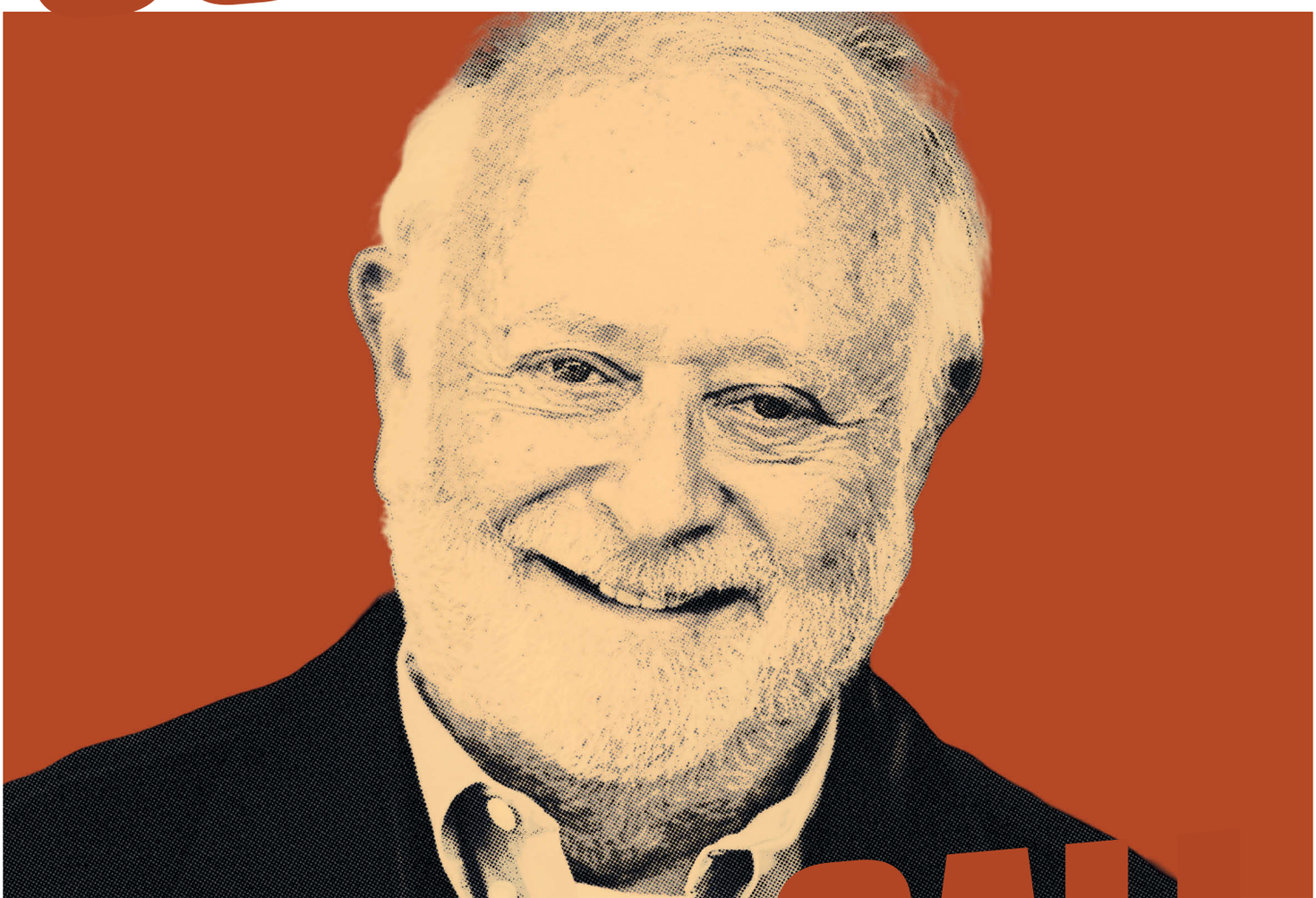
It includes a tool that generates explanatory notes on legislation swiftly, and a powerful search function that could help drafters or policymakers to uncover relevant legislative materials more easily – though a page of online notes about the tool includes a disclaimer that "legal knowledge and expertise is likely to be needed" to understand what the search results actually show. The i.AI team has even used Lex – which is not yet being widely used across government – to create an experimental 'map' of UK legislation.

De Mounteney, like many officials, is very positive about the ways in which tools like Lex could improve the processes of their daily work, but there is currently a limit to how far AI can help. "I've been in touch with a lot of my peers across the Commonwealth, and we are all coming up against the same thing," she says. "At the moment, large language models can't do the analysis required to interrogate policy proposals, so using them to draft for complex ideas is currently beyond their reach."

She also notes a concern that is common to most professions: the impact of automating key processes on skills. "Many of [a drafter's] skills are developed over the course of many years of judgement... If you automate a lot of that junior work, you have to think about how you're going to replace that skill set and that ability to learn," she says.

"There's probably about 10 of us here who will be retiring in the next seven to nine years - that is an enormous degree of experience and expertise that's going to go out the door." In this context, the potential of AI to streamline how drafters work will be important, but so too will be finding the right training models that will ensure the OPC retains its core analytical and drafting capabilities.

CURTAIN CALL



Ahead of his new play *I'm Sorry, Prime Minister* opening in January, *Yes Minister* creator **Jonathan Lynn** tells **Jess Bowie** about his favourite moments in the iconic sitcom, why satire still matters and why Sir Humphrey and Jim Hacker's last hurrah will be "a bit like *King Lear*, only funnier"

You've said that neither you nor Sir Antony Jay "knew much about government" before you began co-writing *Yes Minister*, and that *The Crossman Diaries* were your first source. Do you know what gave Tony Jay the idea to write about the inner workings of government in the first place?

We were both interested in politics. Tony had been a BBC executive for many years and he often remarked on the BBC's similarity to the civil service. He had recently been on the Annan Committee on Broadcasting and had gained a little insight into Whitehall. I think he wanted to write a situation comedy, realised that successful examples of the genre were institution-based and that this was a subject nobody had ever approached. He had just read Crossman. »

On Location the cast of the original *Yes Minister* sitcom filming in 1982

Given the extensive research you both then undertook for the show, what was the most surprising piece of Whitehall lore or institutional tactic you uncovered that perfectly encapsulated the civil service?
It is important to put political advisers into offices as far away as possible from the prime minister. Influence diminishes with distance.

What's your favourite episode of *Yes Minister* or *Yes, Prime Minister* – and why?
I don't really have favourites. I particularly like *Party Games*, the hour-long episode in which Jim Hacker becomes PM and Sir Humphrey becomes cabinet secretary, because it was hard to engineer a believable plot and maintain the comedy over a full hour.

And your favourite scene?
Hard to choose. But perhaps the scene where Richard Vernon, playing a banker, is confused by the difference between Milton Shulman, Milton Friedman and Milton Keynes. Or the scene when Jim and Humphrey get drunk on an official visit to a Muslim country. Or the scene where Humphrey protests that he is not the Fifth Man in the Burgess, Maclean and Philby Cambridge spy case.

You've said that life sometimes imitated art – like the NHS hospital with no patients. Were there other moments when reality seemed to echo your fictional scenarios?
There is a crisis when Jim Hacker is on a night train and, one by one, a dozen people cram themselves into his sleeper compartment. I got the idea from the Marx Brothers' *A Night At The Opera*, only to be told later that exactly the same thing happened to Harold Wilson on his way to a party conference in Blackpool on the night Ian Smith announced the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Rhodesia.

***The Thick of It* was influenced by *Yes Minister*, but with significant differences in tone and style. What did you think of *The Thick of It* when it first aired?**
Very funny.

Do you think satire still has the same power today to illuminate the workings of government, or has the political landscape changed too much?
Satire is always necessary and potentially powerful. But you have to get it right! Previous comedy shows had represented civil servants as silly, inconsequential chaps wearing bowler hats and drinking tea. We showed that, on the contrary, they are extremely clever people who run the country.

"Previous comedy shows represented civil servants as silly, inconsequential chaps wearing bowler hats and drinking tea. We showed that they are extremely clever people"

***Yes Minister* is often considered compulsory viewing for those entering government. If you could distil one piece of wisdom from the series for an incoming senior civil servant, what would it be?**
"He that would keep a secret must keep it secret that he hath a secret to keep."

Do you feel in any way guilty for creating the enduring stereotype that senior civil servants are not only master obfuscators, but also there to serve themselves, rather than the democratically elected politicians of the day?
No. Sir Humphrey believes that he and his colleagues are patriotic guardians of the

national interest and a necessary bulwark against vote-grubbing politicians who will do anything to get elected. He has a point.

Along with Sir Humphrey, you also created the hapless ministerial and prime ministerial character Jim Hacker, but people always seem to forget that and concentrate on Sir Humphrey. Why do you think that is?
People have seen many hapless politicians, both in fiction and real life. Sir Humphrey was new to them. Most people didn't even know that there is such a thing as a permanent secretary. He is Jeeves to Hacker's Bertie Wooster.

You've said the programme may have "made the government worse" and that "overall it has not been good for the government of the country". Could you say more about why you think that is?
If politicians believe that Sir Humphrey is, as you put it, "the master obfuscator, only there to serve himself", it can make incoming members of the administration over-suspicious and distrustful of their staff. Which is unlikely to be good for government.

Viewed charitably, Sir Humphrey could be described as a custodian of the national interest, protecting the country from foolish and short-term political decisions. Do you think that's still a fair depiction of the civil service today?
Yes. Civil servants are full time and fully trained to run their departments. Politicians are part time and constantly reshuffled for party-political reasons. When we were writing the series, the average tenure of a minister was about 11 months. Since then, there have been as many as half a dozen prime ministers in eight years. Without the civil servants, there would be no continuity and absolute chaos. As Bernard Woolley said: "Red tape holds the nation together."

Powering on Eddington, Hawthorne and Fowlds head into No.10 as Jim Hacker, Sir Humphrey and Bernard Woolley

Guest prime minister Margaret Thatcher appears in a *Yes Minister* sketch in 1984

Nothing in government ever really changes, which is what makes *Yes Minister* so timeless. But if you were writing the series today, what themes or tensions within government would you want to explore?
The themes don't change. The economy, inflation, unemployment, a Middle East crisis, our relationship with the EU, the aftermath of Brexit, HS2 and problems with the railways, immigration, Russia/Ukraine/Nato, the rise of the far right everywhere, the collapsing NHS, awkward publicity-seeking spads, the appointment of a young and inexperienced cabinet secretary, a turf battle between the Cabinet Office permanent secretary and the cabinet secretary, how to deal with an unpredictable US president, and so forth.

How would a modern-day Sir Humphrey approach the challenge of managing a "disruptor" minister obsessed with radical, rapid change or – for example – AI? Is the institutional resistance you documented still as effective today?
The same way, probably. I don't know if institutional resistance has lessened but, judging by the last few governments, I hope not.

Your new play *I'm Sorry, Prime Minister* addresses issues like cancel culture and generational clashes, which are very different from the political landscape of the original series. How did you approach adapting the dynamic between Hacker and Sir Humphrey to remain both funny and relevant while tackling these modern, culturally sensitive themes?
This play is about loss of power. Two elderly men who have no work and feel the loss of friends, loss of family, the loss of any kind of usefulness. This is a universal problem. What is it like to be forced into retirement, ignored and irrelevant after having such power? A bit like *King Lear*, only funnier.

You've dubbed this the final chapter of the *Yes Minister* franchise. How hard will it be to say goodbye to these iconic characters?
Not hard. It looks as though they're going to be around for a while. ■

***I'm Sorry, Prime Minister* opens on 30 January 2026 at the Apollo Theatre. Tickets are available from www.imsorryprimeminister.com**

Former senior inclusive practice lead **Brian Stanislas** on conviction, collaboration and putting yourself out there

I started my civil service career as a temporary administration assistant in a jobcentre in Bristol, finishing as an assistant director over 28 years later in the Cabinet Office in Whitehall in October. Here are some key things I learnt.

Know what you believe in. You will always succeed in something that you just can't let go of or let fail. For years, I promoted flexible working like a campaigner simply because I disagreed with something a senior male colleague said to me when I was trying to develop the Civil Service Job Share Finder website 10 years ago. He couldn't understand why any senior leader would want to sponsor the website's creation as it only seemed to cater to a minority of civil servants: women with children! I didn't agree that they were an "edge case"; research showed me the website could also benefit other groups such as disabled people, carers, pre-retirees and, of course, fathers. I worked like a flexible working evangelist on the website from 2014 to 2021, won several awards for it and gained an MBE for my work promoting flexible working and equality in the workplace.

Seek out collaborators because you like to be in their presence. You should look to work with people who have complementary knowledge and skills, but most importantly, they need to make you feel comfortable, energised and inspired. I believe one of the keys to my work successes has been knowing who to collaborate with to have a great work experience.

For example, in 2017, I met Peter Cunningham (then a business intelligence manager, now Cabinet Office head of digital analysis capability) via a video call. He was impressed with my use of data in a CS blog on promoting flexible working. We met up and almost immediately got on like a house on fire. We had emotional and intellectual synergy and empathy for each other's backstory and aspirations. We worked together after hours to develop the Government Recruitment Information Database (now the award-winning Government Research and Insights Database), which we launched in 2020. We used GRID to power the Job Opportunities Map developed for the Civil Service Careers website when I was its product manager from 2017 to 2021. Peter and I continued collaborating up to when I left the civil service. We just enjoyed hanging out and producing ideas to put into motion.

Accept that you will have to become more visible if you want to progress a service you lead... or your career. When I started promoting the Civil Service Job Share Finder in 2015, it was difficult to drum up interest as it was the first service of its kind. I realised I would have to learn how to raise the service's profile to get colleagues interested in it. I threw myself into writing blogs and joined LinkedIn to promote it on social media. I entered the product in external benchmarking competitions and was fortunate enough to win a Working Families Special Award in 2016. I wrote my first CS blog talking about winning the award.

It was scary feeling so exposed, but it taught me the benefits of reaching a wider audience. I published CS blogs and presented at Civil Service Live. Years later, I realised that I also had the opportunity (and duty) to take my part in yearly Black History Month activities by virtue of my increasing corporate visibility. The high point of my visibility within the civil service was delivering my innovation video case study in the One Big Thing Innovation Masterclass, from 2024 to 2025, with 160,000+ colleagues accessing the online training. Necessity calmed my nerves as I accepted that I would have to be visible to get my message across to as large an audience as possible. ■

Brian Stanislas was senior inclusive practice lead in the employee experience and people performance directorate of the Government People Group

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

To mark two decades since the Civil Service Awards began, *Civil Service World* asked past winners about the impact of their award, and their advice for this year's shortlisted teams

John Fletcher

Project and Programme Management Award, 2006

Then: Business resource efficiency and waste (BREW) programme manager, Defra

Now: A consultant at Deloitte, working with central government clients

Won for: Leading a programme to orchestrate a set of high-impact initiatives designed to help businesses reduce their energy consumption and waste, saving money in the process »

Fancy a BREW? John Fletcher won in 2006 for his waste-reduction programme

What impact did winning have on you? It gave me confidence that programme management could be both rigorous and impactful. Personally, it validated the path I was on and gave me the courage to take programme management further as a career. And even now, the award continues to carry meaning – while sorting through my "memories drawer" recently, I came across the magazine edition that featured the award. My young son has enjoyed looking at the award itself, and it is now in pride of place next to his Lego.

Advice for this year's winners and shortlisted teams? Treat it as more than a trophy. Use the recognition to amplify your approach, share your lessons, and build confidence in your methods. Celebrate properly, but also see it as a platform to shape the future of your profession.

Emma Hopkins

Cabinet Secretary Award, 2008

Then: Head of organised immigration crime, Home Office

Now: Chief executive at the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn

Won for: Developing and implementing the UK's first strategy for prevention of human trafficking

What is your strongest memory of the night you won? It was a real honour to receive the award from Gus O'Donnell – to me he epitomises what a cabinet secretary should be. And I remember that David Normington, our permanent secretary, was even more excited than me. I was on maternity leave at the time, and you can lose a bit of professional confidence when you are off on leave. That evening reminded me of what you can achieve when you believe in yourself. It was a confidence boost at exactly the right moment.

Do you have any advice for this year's winners and shortlisted teams about making the most of their achievement? Be proud. There's a lot of modesty in the civil service, but these awards shine a light on professionalism and integrity. They represent the best of us – people who go above and beyond.

Strategic success Emma Hopkins won for her work to prevent trafficking

"These awards represent the best of us – people who go above and beyond" ***Emma Hopkins***

Sam Lister

Communication Award, 2015

Then: Director of communication, Department of Health

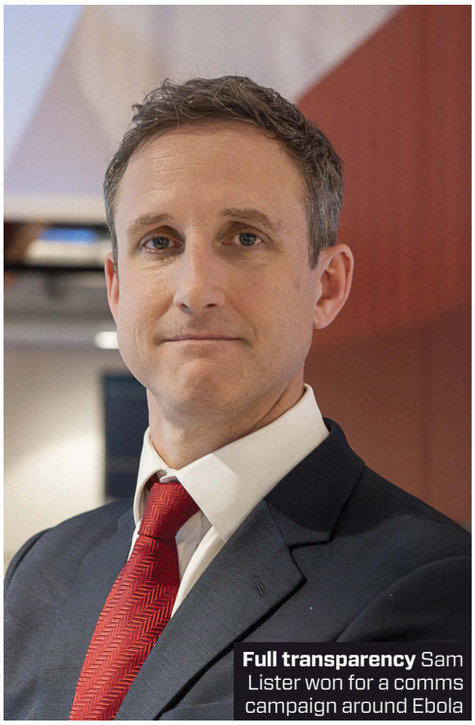
Now: Director general, industrial strategy, Department for Business & Trade

Won for: A public communication campaign to raise awareness about the likelihood of the Ebola virus arriving in the UK

What were the main challenges that you recall? We wanted the government to adopt a campaign of measured but maximum transparency – including the likelihood of the virus landing in the UK, that there could be multiple cases, and the operational challenges we were working through. Initially, there were understandable nerves that this was too high-risk an approach, but we stuck to it, made the case, and showed the evidence that it was effective.

What impact did winning have on you, personally or professionally? It was an important endorsement of our approach: that taking thoughtful, well-evidenced risk, in a world that can often squeeze that out, can be the right thing to do.

Do you have any advice for this year's winners and shortlisted teams about making the most of their achievement? Enjoy, and give yourself time to reflect – we spend a lot of time in the civil service worrying about what's going wrong and don't do as much reflecting on what's getting done well.



Full transparency Sam Lister won for a comms campaign around Ebola

Suzanne Newton

Dame Lesley Strathie Award for Operational Excellence, 2014

Then: Programme director for real time information (RTI) for PAYE at HMRC

Now: HMRC's director general for change delivery group

Won for: Leading a virtual team of 400 and working with hundreds of payroll software suppliers to deliver the biggest change to the PAYE system in 70 years

What lesson did you take from the project? One of the biggest lessons was the importance of involving end users right from the start and being crystal clear about the outcomes you want. I also learned that bad news doesn't get better with age; being open and honest, even when it's uncomfortable, is absolutely vital. And finally, resilience is everything. Projects are relentless, but if you build a supportive team around you, you can get through anything.

Who did you tell first? The first people I told were my family and my team. My family – I had young twins at the time – had been there through all the late nights and early mornings, and my team had given their all to make the project a success. Sharing that moment with them was incredibly special.

Do you have any advice for this year's winners and shortlisted teams about making the most of their achievement? Absolutely – take the time to celebrate! Recognise everyone who played a part and don't be shy about sharing your story and what you've learned. Use the recognition as a springboard to support others and keep building on your success. Stay humble, stay curious, and remember: the best projects are built on trust, honesty, and a shared sense of purpose. There's always more to learn and new challenges ahead, so keep going! »

PAYE pal Suzanne Newton won in 2014 for leadership of a payroll project

Winning combo Gail Peck and Ian Barton won in 2018

Gail Peck and Ian Barton

Health and Wellbeing Award 2018

Then: Part of Team Chaffinch, a group of civil servants from across different departments who were involved with the CS Local Academy

Now: Gail – culture and engagement lead, DBT; Ian – retired

Won for: The A to Z to Better Wellbeing project – a comprehensive resource offering enjoyable and accessible ways to enhance wellbeing

What impact did winning have on you, personally or professionally?
Gail: Winning with Team Chaffinch was truly transformative. It proved that dedication and teamwork really do pay off. Personally, it gave me the confidence and skills to progress in my career. It stands out as a highlight of my civil service journey – an achievement I'll always cherish.

Naomi McGoun

Efficiency Award, 2006

Then: Head of human resources for forensic services at the Metropolitan Police, providing HR leadership to around 1,200 forensic officers across London

Now: Chief executive of Therapy 4 Healing, a social enterprise supporting vulnerable communities with complementary health and wellbeing services in South East London

Won for: A project which transformed the culture around sickness absence and wellbeing in Forensic Services. We reduced sickness absence by the equivalent of 6.45 working years, and did so by building trust and improving the working environment for staff dealing with emotionally, mentally and physically demanding work.

What were the main challenges that you recall? Changing perceptions of HR from enforcement to support. Forensic officers manage highly sensitive and often traumatic material, so building confidence in the process took time, consistency and clear leadership.

What impact did winning have on you, personally or professionally?
Professionally, it opened doors and led directly to new opportunities, including my promotion the following year. Personally, it affirmed that the quieter, behind-the-scenes work can have a major impact.

The work later received further recognition, including as runner-up in the CIPD People Management Awards (2007).

Do you have any advice for this year's winners and shortlisted teams about making the most of their achievement?
Celebrate it properly and use it. These awards give you visibility, credibility and opportunities. And remember that every award reflects collective effort. ■

"Winning an award gave me the confidence and skills to progress in my career – it's an achievement I'll always cherish" *Gail Peck*

Do you have any advice for this year's winners and shortlisted teams about making the most of their achievement?
Ian: Have a think about the legacy of your work. How can your learning and insights be captured, retained and continued by the organisation? We aren't always good at retaining knowledge, but make the effort to capture what you've done so someone new could pick it up at a later date. Enabling others to build upon the impact that you have made is perhaps the best legacy for your work.

And as for the awards, enjoy the moment whether you win or lose, and remember that you are all making a positive difference to people's lives.

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Civil Service AWARDS 2025 20th ANNIVERSARY

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Introduction

Gareth Davies CB

Permanent Secretary, Department for Business and Trade

Welcome to the 20th anniversary of the Civil Service Awards – a significant milestone in celebrating the excellent work happening across government.

Since 2006, these awards have recognised the inspiring individuals and innovative projects that exemplify the very best of the Civil Service.

This year we have received over 2,500 nominations – the highest number in the awards' history. This reflects not only the calibre of work being delivered across government, but also the growing recognition of how important it is to celebrate and learn from each other's achievements.

Whether pioneering new approaches, demonstrating outstanding leadership, or delivering exceptional results, each nominee represents the innovation and excellence that drives our Civil Service forward.

To everyone nominated, shortlisted, and recognised: thank you for your outstanding contribution. To our sponsors - Accenture, Mastek, Baringa, Local Partnerships, Newton and PA - thank you for your ongoing support.

Meet our Champions

The Civil Service Awards Category Champions are proud supporters of the awards and promote their specific category to colleagues through networks across government and actively encourage nominations.

Our Category Champions select an expert panel to support them in reviewing the nominations before choosing the top entries within their category.

Excellence in Delivery Award

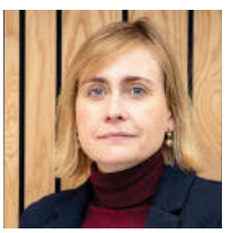
Jo Shanmugalingam

Second Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport

Excellence in Delivery Award

Joe Griffin

Permanent Secretary, Scottish Government



Developing and Supporting People Award

Dame Sarah Healey DCB CVO

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Developing and Supporting People Award

Fiona Ryland

Former Government Chief People Officer, Cabinet Office

Innovator Award

Cat Little CB

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

Innovator Award

Susan Acland-Hood

Permanent Secretary, Department for Education

Evaluation and Analysis Award

James Bowler CB

Permanent Secretary, HM Treasury

Evaluation and Analysis Award

Sam Beckett

Chief Economic Adviser, Head of the Government Economic Service and Second Permanent Secretary, HM Treasury

Collaboration Award

Julie Harrison

Permanent Secretary, Northern Ireland Office

Collaboration Award

Susannah Storey

Permanent Secretary, Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Delivering for Citizens Award

Dr Andrew Goodall

Permanent Secretary, Welsh Government

Delivering for Citizens Award

Susanna McGibbon KC (Hon)

Treasury Solicitor and Permanent Secretary, Government Legal Department

Programme of the Year Award

Sir Peter Schofield KCB

Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions

Programme of the Year Award

Angela MacDonald

Deputy Chief Executive and Second Permanent Secretary, HM Revenue & Customs

20th Anniversary: Lifetime Achievement Award

JP Marks CB

First Permanent Secretary and Chief Executive, HM Revenue & Customs

20th Anniversary: Lifetime Achievement Award

Beth Russell

Second Permanent Secretary, HM Treasury

Rising Star Award

Dame Antonia Romeo DCB

Permanent Secretary, Home Office

Rising Star Award

Arnie Delstanche

Winner of the Rising Star Award 2024

Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award

Sir Chris Wormald KCB

Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service

Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award

Kevin Clark

Winner of the Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award 2024

Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service

The Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KCB KC MP

Prime Minister

Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service

Pauline MacNeil

Winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service 2024









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Excellence in Delivery Award

Recognising a programme from anywhere and for their contributions to improving delivery across government.

BOLD Programme - North Essex Probation Delivery Unit Case Information Dashboard

Ministry of Justice

Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD) programme created a digital system for probation officers which brings together holistic information from across prisons, probation, and police into a single unified view of an individual. As a result of this work, over 70% of probation practitioners said that it made a positive impact on their way of working and enabled them to make evidence-based decisions. Tentative evaluation findings indicate a 17-minute reduction in time spent preparing for an appointment with an offender, saving over 33,000 hours of time per annum (equivalent to c.£1m savings) for the North Essex Probation Delivery Unit. The proportion of probation practitioners reporting that they had confidence in having a good understanding of an individual's needs from using this tool increased by 40% and over two thirds of users reported high confidence in assessing risk of offenders.

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Developing and Supporting People Award

Recognising outstanding achievements in strengthening Civil Service capability, breaking down barriers to build an inclusive Civil Service, or enhancing the Civil Service's reputation through exemplary work and influence.

Neil Osliffe

Department for Work and Pensions

Neil has made an outstanding contribution to investigation training across NW & Wales, voluntarily taking on this role alongside his Team Leader duties to address the lack of structured support for new and existing fraud investigators. He designed and delivered a comprehensive training programme grounded in DWP's strategic values, quality standards, and lawful, Tier 2-compliant methodologies. Over the past three years, Neil has developed 11 bespoke training presentations, using real-life examples to simplify complex investigative processes and build confidence among new recruits. His dedication has led to measurable improvements, including reduced Tier 2 failures and higher-quality submissions to the CPS, resulting in more successful prosecutions. Feedback from colleagues highlights his engaging style, practical examples, and ability to make complex concepts "click" for learners.

Celebrating excellence in public service

Civil Service AWARDS 2025 20th ANNIVERSARY

Congratulations to everyone shortlisted for the Civil Service Awards 2025. Your dedication and impact have set new standards in reinventing public services. You have shown what is possible in times of disruptive change. We are proud to celebrate your achievements and the future you're building to deliver better public services for all of us.

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Innovator Award

Transforming public services through creative solutions.

Splink Team

Ministry of Justice

Splink is a free open-source software package for deduplicating and linking large datasets, supporting the government's National Data Strategy. Originally created to link MoJ datasets lacking a shared unique identifier, Splink enables more accurate reoffending data and cross-system analysis, overcoming challenges of duplication and siloed data. Since its first release in 2020, Splink has been downloaded over 12 million times and adopted by central government departments, local authorities, NHS bodies, charities, universities, and international organisations including the UNHCR, EMA, and governments in Germany, Canada, Australia, and Chile. It works on datasets 1,000 times larger and 100 times faster than alternative software, with a positive match rate rising from 83% to 92% at MoJ. Splink has improved data quality across key government assets, including the census, Demographic Index, Business Index, NHS patient data, and justice datasets. The software has delivered significant cost savings, avoiding licensing fees and contractor costs estimated at over £2 million per year, with wider government savings likely in the tens of millions.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Congratulations to all nominees of the CSW Awards from Local Partnerships

Local Partnerships is proud to be part of the public sector family. We are an in-house delivery partner jointly owned by HM Treasury, the Welsh Government and the Local Government Association, and work solely for the benefit of the public sector.

As a key interface between local and central government, we provide expert advice and practical resources alongside project and programme delivery support, enabling public services to thrive.

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Welsh Government

Delivering for Citizens Award

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LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Recognising those who prioritise actions which result in better outcomes for citizens.

AI Diagnostic Fund Programme

Department of Health and Social Care

The AI Diagnostic Fund (AIDF) has successfully deployed AI diagnostic support tools across over half of NHS hospital trusts in England, exceeding the original target of 40–50 trusts while delivering under budget at £19m. The AIDF is projected to significantly reduce turnaround times for priority lung cancer scans, benefiting thousands of patients nationwide. Amid rising NHS demand, workforce pressures, and an ageing population, the NHS AI Lab identified chest X-rays (CXR) as the highest-impact use case due to their volume, clinical importance, and technical readiness. Over one-third of CXRs and 13% of chest CT scans across the NHS are now being routinely augmented by AI and to date over 2.4 million chest x-rays have been supported as a result of the AIDF. There has also been an improvement in 24-hour reporting benchmarks, with one dramatic example seeing a network increase compliance from 4% to 90% within two weeks. Beyond lung cancer, emergent benefits include early detection of vertebral fragility fractures, sepsis identification, and improved monitoring of nasogastric and feeding tubes.

Celebrating the Civil Service Awards

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Programme of the Year Award

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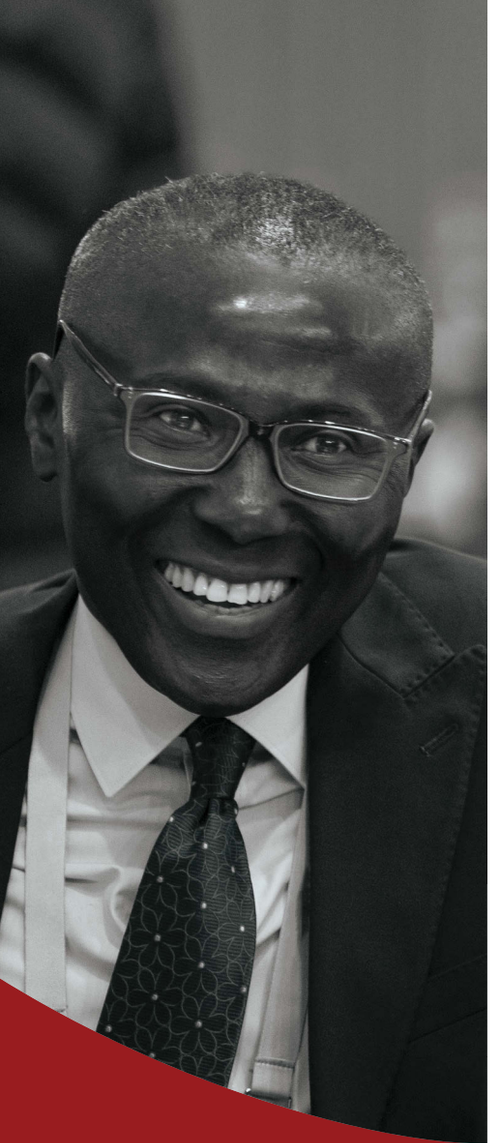
Recognising exceptional achievement from a programme anywhere across the Civil Service.

One Public Estate

Cabinet Office

Prisoners Building Homes (PBH) is an innovative, cross-government programme transforming rehabilitation into regeneration. Prisoners are trained to build modular, low-carbon homes on public land, providing safe housing for vulnerable communities while reduce reoffending. Launched in 2021 through the South West Reducing Reoffending Partnership, and supported by the One Public Estate programme, PBH equips prisoners with construction skills, delivering high-quality homes quickly and cost-effectively, supporting Net Zero targets, and boosting the modular housing industry. The pilot successfully upskilled over 100 prisoners, with 89% securing construction employment upon release. Reoffending rates among participants have dropped to 0%, compared with the national average of 35%. PBH has delivered over 80 homes to date, with 700 more in the pipeline, involving 10 house builders, 10 prisons, and more than 20 local authority and third-sector landowners. Homes can be delivered in under 16 weeks for £100,000 per unit, generating long-term social value estimated at £29 million by 2029.



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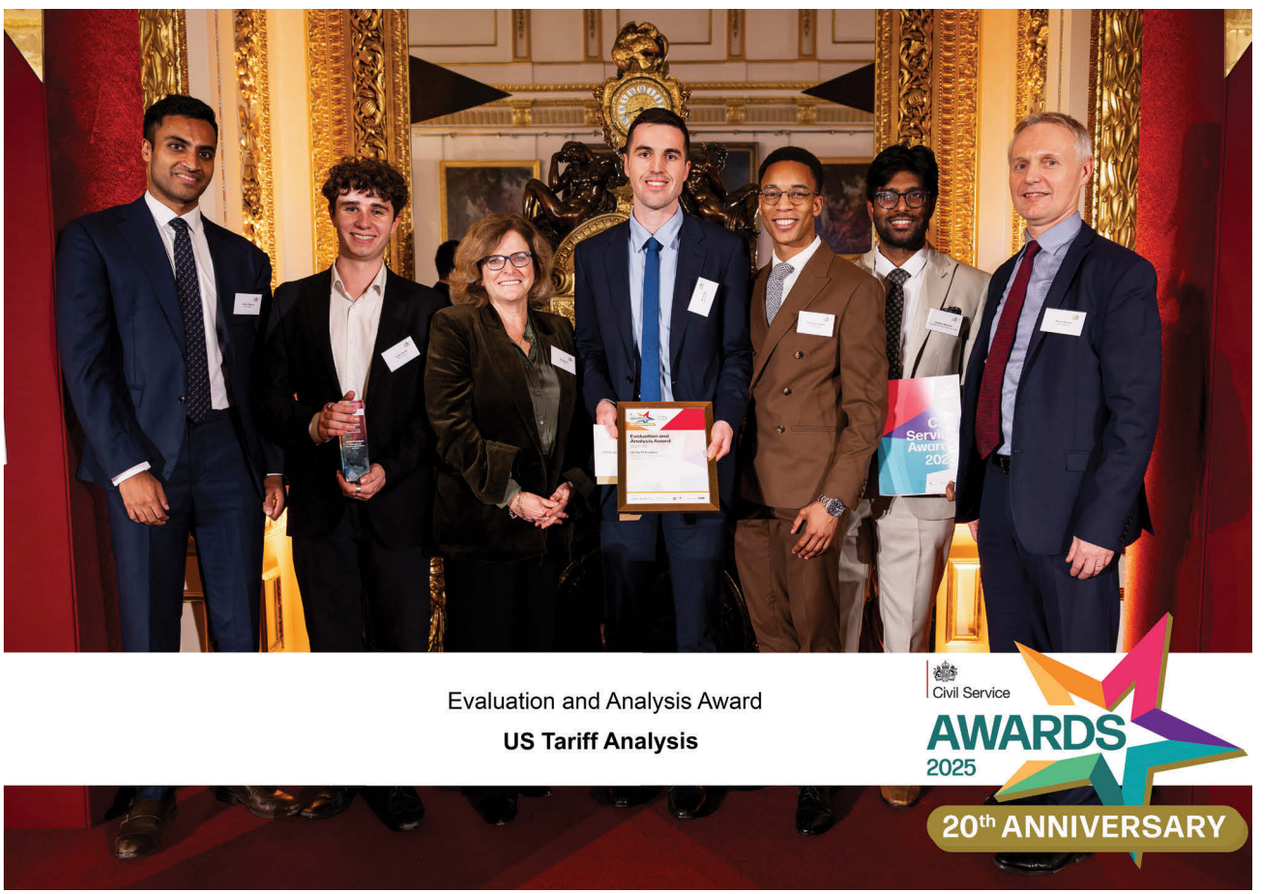
Evaluation and Analysis Award

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



US Tariff Analysis

HM Treasury and Department for Business and Trade

The Global Economics team at HMT and Trade Modelling Unit at DBT played a pivotal role in analysing the economic impacts of US tariffs, supporting ministers and the UK negotiating team. Using a combination of general and partial equilibrium models, structural and macroeconomic frameworks, and qualitative evidence, the teams provided rapid, high-quality analysis during a period of unprecedented trade uncertainty throughout 2025. The teams produced timely insights which were instrumental in supporting ministerial decisions, shaping policy and enabling negotiators to secure the UK-US Economic Prosperity Deal. By providing a rigorous, evidence-based framework, the teams have strengthened the UK's long-term capacity to respond to trade policy shifts and safeguard national economic interests.

Baringa

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Collaboration Award

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Collaboration Award

Recognising cross-Civil Service and external partnerships, including enterprise, charities, and foreign governments.

Air India 171 crash response

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Department for Transport

On 12 June 2025, flight AI171 from Ahmedabad to Gatwick crashed killing 260 people, including 52 British nationals– the largest loss of British life in an air accident for more than two decades. The continued impact of this tragic event on families and loved ones of those that died cannot be overstated and our thoughts remain with all those affected. Officials immediately stood up a crisis response to provide direct support to bereaved families, establishing response centres in Ahmedabad, Delhi and London with additional staff rostered in the UK, India and the wider region. The needs and welfare of British nationals were front and centre of the response, with specially trained consular staff deployed to Ahmedabad to support families through the immediate period following the crash. In addition, HMG logistics teams, joined by Disaster Victim Identification-trained experts, Red Cross specialists and UK Air Accidents Investigation Branch investigators, helped deliver a coordinated response on the ground, working with Indian authorities to establish information needed. The Foreign Office continues to provide support to bereaved families including dedicated consular caseworkers to each family who requests support.

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Heartiest congratulations to our inspiring Civil Service teams!

Since 2014, we've proudly partnered with our dedicated Civil Service to deliver departmental policy outcomes and help transform the Public Sector.

Together as one team, we have helped to protect vulnerable people, and communities, secure our borders, manage migration, improve trade flow, reduce crime and keep our country safe.

That's why we're so proud to be here today, to celebrate you – the inspiring civil service individuals and teams who lead by example. We thank you for fostering a genuine culture of excellence, diversity, inclusion, and collaboration.

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We celebrate your unwavering leadership, dedication, and commitment. #CSAwards

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20th Anniversary: Lifetime Achievement Award

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Celebrating exceptional civil servants with over 20 years' service who have demonstrated sustained excellence and created lasting positive change.

Tracie Jackson

Home Office

Tracie Jackson has dedicated nearly four decades to transforming border security and canine detection in the UK. Since joining Customs & Excise in 1987, her career has spanned diverse operational roles, from passenger screening, controlled deliveries to leading multi-functional teams across major UK ports and airports. Early experiences at the Dover and Sheerness Dog Units laid the foundation for her pioneering work in detector dog operations, including the groundbreaking passive response dog trials ahead of the Channel Tunnel opening. In 2019, Tracie joined the Border Force National Dog Team, leading the development of the world's first canine detection capability for New Synthetic Opioids (NSOs), including nitazenes. Collaborating with the University of Lincoln and scientific partners, she introduced novel training methods, evidence-based benchmarking, and advanced chemical analysis, redefining standards in detection science globally.

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Congratulations to all those shortlisted

About Newton

Newton is a strategic delivery partner to central government to improve and innovate how public services are delivered. We turn policy and strategy into action and outcomes, building productive and personalised services that meet the needs of the people and communities that use them.

Whilst supporting with the significant and immediate challenges of today, we focus on rewiring public services for the future, including by preventing need and demand and transforming how public services target, coordinate, and engage with individuals. Our work brings together data and technology with real-world operational insight to innovate the fundamentals of service delivery, operating models, and systems.

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Rising Star Award

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Recognising exceptional potential in new starters and future Civil Service leaders.

Faeeza Jabeen

Department for Work and Pensions

Faeeza has demonstrated exceptional leadership and innovation in redesigning the Movement to Work (MTW) programme, which supports disadvantaged young people into employment. Recognising low engagement and high dropout rates, she led a strategic overhaul, introducing a flexible hybrid delivery model aligned with DWP goals on inclusion, digital transformation, and social mobility. Faeeza engaged stakeholders across government, youth ambassadors, and delivery partners to identify barriers, including accessibility challenges posed by traditional in-person sessions. She led a working group to design virtual modules paired with practical, community-based projects, while incorporating one in-person employability and networking day. Her model included structured participant engagement, risk monitoring, and continuous quality checks, ensuring fairness, flexibility, and impact. The redesigned programme delivered measurable improvements: completion rates increased significantly, participants secured employment quickly, and community projects generated tangible results.

Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award

Recognising mission-driven leadership at all levels.

Shahida Mamanji
Home Office

With a distinguished 32-year career in the Home Office, spanning UK Visas & Immigration and Immigration Enforcement, Shahida exemplifies exceptional public service and transformational leadership. Rising from AA to G7, she brings deep operational insight, inclusivity, and strategic direction to every role she undertakes. As Head of Non-Detained Casework within the Foreign National Offender Returns Command, Shahida has revolutionised case management for foreign national offenders (FNOs) in the community. By creating dedicated decision-making teams and introducing new methodologies, she increased deportation decisions by 120% and achieved the highest-ever number of enforced removals from the community. Her leadership of joint operations on charters, and Skylark has strengthened collaboration with HMPPS and police partners, delivering tangible public protection outcomes. During the pandemic, Shahida played a pivotal role in advising Ministers, coordinating crisis briefings, and leading on improvements in the judicial process to deliver early finality in deportation appeals.

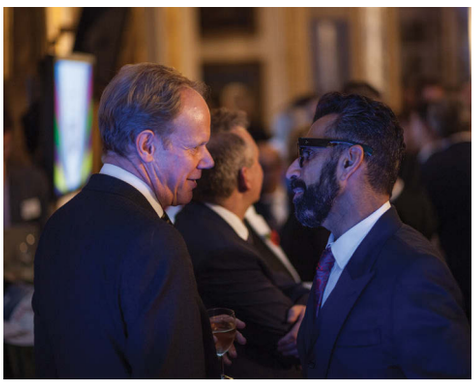
Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service

Recognising outstanding contribution to Public Service.

School Attendance Team

Department for Education

Following the unprecedented rise in pupil absence during and after COVID-19—with one in five pupils persistently absent and 171,000 missing over half their schooling—this team led a national transformation in school attendance. Recognising the complex causes spanning mental health, housing, and illness, they developed a bold, evidence-driven strategy. Central to their approach was an upgraded, world-leading attendance data tool, now enhanced with AI-powered benchmarking and early-warning reports for incoming pupils. With over 450,000 interactions and 19,000 downloads, these tools helped schools act early and compare performance with similar peers. The team drove improvement through regional conferences for up to 3,000 leaders, challenge sessions with trusts and local authorities, the creation of an eventual 90 RISE Attendance and Behaviour Hubs providing direct and scalable support to thousands of schools. They also developed an innovative one to one mentoring programme and updated statutory guidance. Their work has helped to recover over 5 million days of attendance in one year, equating to around £3 billion in future lifetime earnings.



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