CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

Issue 317 | May 2022 | www.civilserviceworld.com

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Is the FOI clearing house helping or hindering transparency?

Healthy dialogue

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AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE CIVIL SERVICE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER AND CABINET OFFICE PERMANENT SECRETARY

ALEX CHISHOLM

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ONLINE EVENT

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- How will biodiversity be measured and whose responsibility will it be to measure it?

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ON THE COVER
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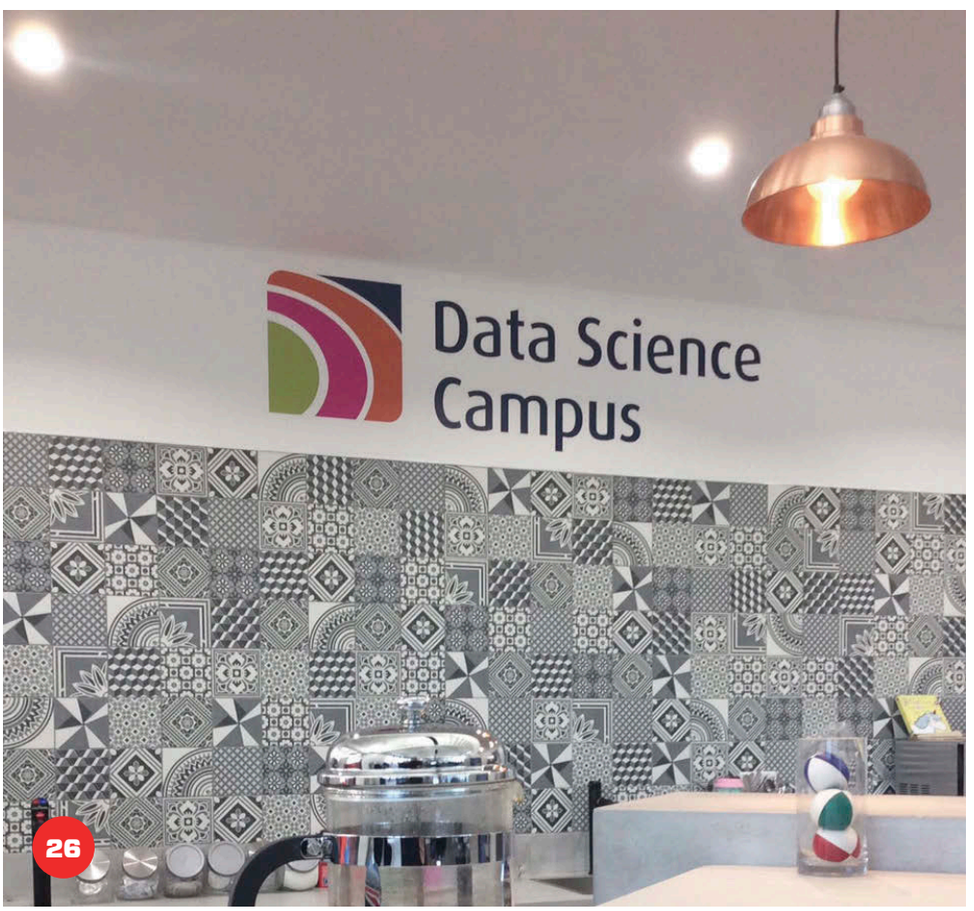

FROM THE EDITOR

You are not very good at judging risk. Sorry, but it's true. All humans have a tendency (studied by psychologists over many years) to assess risk based on an array of cognitive quirks rather than the available evidence. We feel safer driving than flying, for example, despite what the stats show.

Among these quirks is optimism bias, where we think our personal risk is less, relative to other people's.

Our tendency to downplay risk can be a positive force when it drives us to keep working on difficult tasks. Even when we have a well-judged risk assessment there can be many reasons to chose a high-risk, high-reward path. In their book *Vaxxers*, Catherine Green and Sarah Gilbert explain how their teams designed and developed Covid-19 vaccines at an unprecedented speed by choosing to proceed "at risk" on many occasions. They began some processes before funding was secured, judging that the risk of slow development was greater than the risk of having to stop a particular piece of work if funding did not emerge.

Similar thought processes were going on across government – emails published this month by the Good Law Project show then-health secretary Matt Hancock telling officials to go "hell for leather" when awarding testing contracts, despite concerns about overriding the usual procurement processes.

Alongside optimism, humans tend to share another bias – hindsight bias – which makes us think things were more inevitable than they really were.

Because of this, people are likely to think differently about the risks taken by Gilbert and Green (weren't they bound to succeed?) than the risks taken by ministers and officials when working on policies that did not meet the desired outcome (didn't they realise it was bound to fail?).

There are, of course, many issues to consider when assessing decisions taken around procurement in the early days of Covid, including questions of VIP lanes, cronyism and the impact of austerity on pandemic plans. That's why a full inquiry is being held – to tease out these issues and unearth lessons that will help future governments in moments of crisis.

The job of the inquiry is made harder by hindsight bias, which makes us judge past decisions on our current knowledge, even if we think we are simply remembering what "everyone knew" at the time. In late 2021, Professor Christopher Meyer of King's College London set out some strategies to help unpick this bias and allow meaningful lessons to be learned, including ensuring the inquiry panel had a mix of experts; clear timelines about what was known and when; and which experts were most likely to have been listened to.

Meyer also notes that public inquiries "should not wait until memories are beginning to fade, and public narratives about the meaning of a crisis have consolidated."

The Covid inquiry is yet to begin in earnest. If this delay means a strong panel and robust terms of reference, that is positive. But in the meantime, details about the early days of the pandemic are already emerging through court cases and news stories and they don't inspire confidence. As our analyses from two health policy experts show (*p.8 and p.13*), Matt Hancock seems to be trying to shape a narrative around bad advice and hamstrung ministers, rather than seeking to support a process which might help his successors at the despatch box deal more effectively with crises they will inevitably face. ■

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EDITOR
Jessica Bowie
jessica.bowie@dodsgroup.com
020 7593 5587

Suzannah Brecknell
suzannah.brecknell@dodsgroup.com
020 7593 5587

DEPUTY & ONLINE EDITOR
Beckie Smith
beckie.smith@dodsgroup.com
020 7593 5687

REPORTER
Tevye Markson
tevye.markson@dodsgroup.com
020 7593 5582

CONTENT STRATEGY MANAGER
Murielle Gonzalez
murielle.gonzalez@dodsgroup.com
020 7593 5794

COMMERCIAL ENQUIRIES
Dominic Risolino
dominic.risolino@dodsgroup.com
020 7593 5534

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Tim Shepherd

SENIOR ARTWORKERS
Max Dubiel
Matt Titley
Antonello Sticca

ADVERTISING
020 7593 560

PHOTOGRAPHY
Alamy, Adobe Stock, unless stated otherwise

Redesign devised by Antonello Sticca

PRINTED BY
Magazine Printing Company
www.magprint.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED BY JYL

SUBSCRIPTIONS
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020 7593 5510
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UK public sector: £49
UK private sector: £99

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PUBLISHED BY
DODS

POSTAL ADDRESS
Dods, 11th Floor, The Shard
London Bridge Street SE1 9SG
TELEPHONE
020 7593 5500
FAX
020 7593 5501

ISSN 2515-0235 (Print)

INBOX

editorial@civilserviceworld.com
twitter.com/CSWNews

PASS NOTES

Home Office perm sec Matthew Rycroft's response to criticism of HM Passport Office DG Abi Tierney working from home – in which he said her work location had "zero bearing" on her productivity and HMPO were "working flat out" – was a big boost to morale.

"100% agree. I am proud to work for Abi; she is a fantastic and very talented leader who will support her staff and now it's time we stand up and support her," ***Angela Duncan*** said. "I have a daily 5hr round trip commute to London. If we didn't have hybrid working I would not be able to put in all the hours I have supporting the Covid, Afghanistan and now Ukraine crisis as well as supporting my family."

"Nice to see Matthew Rycroft supporting his people. As a civil servant I know how very hard the majority worked during the pandemic and still do. The narrative from some sectors of the press about WFH is so offensive. People are not sitting on their bums watching daytime tv. The majority of civil servants are probably putting in longer days on the days they work from home – I know I do," ***Kate Rushby*** said. "Prior to the pandemic the passport service was one of the best customer focused digitalised services out there. Let's give them a chance to deal with the backlog caused by the spike in demand. I have no doubt they will soon be back on track."

"Thank you for supporting your staff in the civil service when all we hear in the press is that we're all slacking off while working from home," ***Simon Beatty*** said. "It's nice to know that you have stood up for us against the naysayers who think we all do as little as possible like they do to get their salary."

"Great to see our perm secs defending this. Frankly, I'm way more productive when working at home," ***Jon Woodcock*** said. "And yes, as it's Deaf Awareness Week, Teams/Zoom makes my life a whole lot better too. Work is what we do, not where we go."

Sammantha Worboys agreed: "Yes! This is so good to see and hear. It's about time someone stepped up for all those colleagues who have been working so hard during the pandemic. When a lot of people were furloughed or businesses closed the civil and public servants were still working juggling Covid, caring responsibilities and more. Where we work doesn't matter, we still work and we work hard."

The department's head of productivity and efficiency, ***Sophie Reece-Gadhvi***, also weighed in. "The Home Office is fortunate to have a senior leader with Abi's integrity, talent and commitment and her willingness to work flexibly from multiple offices across the country (and from home when appropriate) is an asset as the senior civil service plays catch-up outside of London," she said. "Thank you Matthew for backing Abi, on behalf of many of us who admire and respect her."

TEACHABLE MOMENT

Department for Education staff were upset this month that their leadership had not spoken out as publicly, and about a new 80:20 office-home working mandate, using an all-staff call to voice their concerns. Readers reflected on CSW's exclusive.

"This is at the heart of it – 'not defending them from unfounded attacks from media and ministers;. Whatever the truth of it, staff morale is about perception and DfE have a task now," ***Charlie Barnes*** said.

Lorna Pirozzolo commented: "Having so many disabled friends who were refused jobs because 'they couldn't be done remotely' suddenly find those jobs were easily done remotely during the pandemic, I struggle to accept that we are going to go backwards and needlessly alienate disabled people from the workforce yet again."

But not everyone agreed. ***Rhys Lewis*** said: "I personally am really pleased that we're getting back to some modicum of pre-pandemic working patterns. Teams that hang together, stay together. And being together in the office is critical to achieving this and the govt's wider ambitions for education reform!"

BAD DLUHC?

Not everyone was surprised to hear the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities had called in consultants to help improve its "brand" after finding a "scarcity of senior talent" to take up jobs at its Wolverhampton headquarters.

"I'd love to get these consulting gigs. A review of the 'DLUHC' brand - it sounds like one of the cheap dodgy brands you get for cheaper items off Amazon, not sure there's a whole lot of brand recognition there. Doesn't help that levelling up is a bit of an embarrassing title to have in your official name," ***Tahmid Choudhury*** said.

FURIOUS GEORGE

Readers didn't take too kindly to Australia's former high commissioner Geprge Brandis saying UK civil servants' anti-Brexit "protectionism" made it harder to reach a trade deal.

Former Foreign Office perm sec ***Simon Fraser*** commented: "Call me old fashioned, but in my day it was accepted diplomatic practice that you did not voice public criticism on domestic matters in your host country... Imagine the outcry if an outgoing French ambassador had made comparable comments..."

ANTISOCIAL MEDIA

There were mixed opinions about the Department for Transport's decision to contract Capita to screen job applicants' social media accounts during pre-employment checks.

"Kind of a legal minefield, whatever DfT's spokesperson thinks," commented ***Owen Boswarva*** – adding that the arbitration service Acas advises against the practice.

But ***John Murray*** replied: "Social media has been common practice in the private sector for many years, together with ongoing monitoring of staff social media. I've experienced it a number of times, even for contract positions. A major finance company turned me down for expressing 'strong opinions' online." ■

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Who is the modern civil servant? CSW interviews officials from across the country to paint a picture of the civil service in 2022

Plus, expert advice on tackling sexist cultures in departments and our analysis of government's ability to achieve the levelling up missions

Defying clarity

The Cabinet Office has set out proposals for an internal review of its secretive FoI clearing house. **Tevye Markson** looks at the backstory

Despite being established 18 years ago, little is known about the Cabinet Office's "clearing house" for Freedom of Information requests. But a court battle set in motion a chain of events that is starting to shed some light on one of the most shadowy parts of government.

Parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs committee launched an inquiry last June into the Cabinet Office's handling of FoI requests after a judge concluded there was a "profound lack of transparency" over the clearing house's operations.

The Cabinet Office subsequently promised its own internal review into the unit, which offers guidance to departments on how to respond to FoI requests.

PACAC published the findings of its 10-month quest for answers last month. MPs called for the Cabinet Office to show stronger leadership in coordinating the handling of requests and "drive a cultural shift" across government towards actively supporting FoI principles.

Hours before this report was published, the Cabinet Office finally unveiled details of its planned in-house review, which will be led by Home Office non-executive director Sue Langley.

Ahead of the PACAC report and Cabinet Office update, *CSW* spoke to FoI experts who gave evidence to the committee to find out their concerns about the secretive unit and what they think needs to change.

FOI: Why is it important and what has gone wrong?

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 provides access to information held by public authorities, with the aim of aiding transparency. But the government's performance in responding to requests has worsened over the last decade. The percentage of FoI requests granted in full dropped from a high of 62% in 2010 to a low of 40% in 2021.

The Institute for Government says the speed with which departments deal with requests has been "declining since before the pandemic", often missing the 20 working-day deadline for responses.

Government responded to 87% of FOIs on time in 2020, a 10-year low, although this increased to 88% in 2021.

Journalists, politicians

and researchers have all raised concerns about the role the mysterious clearing house may have played in this descent into ever-deteriorating transparency.

What do we know about the clearing house?

"One of the big problems we've got with the clearing house is we don't actually know very much about what it does," says FoI expert Ben Worthy, a senior politics lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London.

Little was known about the unit until campaign group Open Democracy took the Cabinet Office to a tribunal last year. It argued the department was obstructing access to information it was entitled to seek under FoI rules.

Ahead of the tribunal, the Cabinet Office published documents revealing that the clearing house was established in 2004 and is run by a small number of staff, who have a range of wider responsibilities.

It said responsibility for FoI policy transferred from the Department of Constitutional Affairs and its successor, the Ministry of Justice, before reaching the Cabinet Office in 2015 where it now sits as part of the FoI and Transparency team and wider Cabinet Secretary Group.

Open Democracy secured a judgement in April 2021 ordering the government to release further information on its operations.

"One of the big problems we've got with the clearing house is we don't actually know very much about what it does" ***Ben Worthy***

A Cabinet Office spokesperson told *CSW* that the function was set up "to ensure there is a consistent approach to dealing with FoIs across government and that requests for particularly sensitive information are handled appropriately". FoIs can be referred to the unit if they related to national security matters, the royal family, significant live policy development or implementation issues, or are round robins requests, they added.

The spokesperson claimed "robust" processes ensure requests are considered without knowing the identity of the requester, however the government accidentally leaked evidence to a Politico journalist suggesting otherwise.

"From what I pieced together, it was initially there as a kind of support mechanism, officially, for coordinating FoI requests," Worthy says.

"It seemed that in the first few years, it was actually designed to disappear. Slowly, there were fewer and fewer requests going to it," he says. "And then suddenly, more recently, it popped up again.

"Formally it's there to help coordinate and offer guidance. The big problem is to which extent guidance becomes giving people orders or interference. And that's the grey area where, on at least some occasions, it fell away from offering guidance to seemingly issuing orders about what should be done."

The key criticisms levelled at the clearing house are that it causes delays and that there is a near-total lack of transparency about its operations.

"There is a lot of delay in the FoI system already, even when it's working well," says Martin Rosenbaum, a former BBC political journalist who trains reporters on how to use FoI legislation.

"[The clearing house] exacerbates that problem. Particularly for journalists, that's obviously a very big issue. You can get information a few weeks or months later and it's no longer really relevant to whatever you were planning to do with it in the first place."

All this secrecy sends a bad message about the importance of transparency, Worthy says. "When you've got a government who seems pretty keen on secrecy, and you've got FoI requests resulting in less and less disclosure and more and more delays, what it looks like is a wholesale undermining of the idea of transparency."

A Cabinet Office spokesperson told *CSW* that the government "remains fully committed to its transparency agenda, routinely disclosing information beyond its obligations under the FoI Act and releasing more proactive publications than ever before".

What needs to change?

FoI has been around long enough not to require very much coordination, says Worthy. He argues the clearing house has "outlived its usefulness" but says it would be easier to make a judgement if the Cabinet Office was more open about what it does.

Worthy says it would help if senior ministers made "more supportive noises about the idea of transparency".

Rosenbaum thinks the criteria for requests going to the clearing house need to be narrowed and wants those that are referred to be "dealt with really quickly".

He agrees senior figures need to argue for "a much more open and transparent way of working and willingness to be open and transparent to outsiders".

PACAC acknowledges encouraging evidence of this in the last year. But it also calls the government's decision to exempt the new Advanced Research and Invention Agency from FoI a concerning "slide away from transparency".

Cabinet Office review

Speaking before details were finally revealed, Worthy, Rosenbaum and Open Democracy's Jenna Corderoy were not optimistic that the Cabinet Office's review would be a meaningful examination.

Rosenbaum suggested Cabinet Office officials "panicked" when PACAC began its work, thinking "we've got to be seen to be doing something, so let's announce our own inquiry".

He said the eight-month delay in appointing someone to lead the review showed it was "obviously not a big priority" and wasn't being taken seriously.

Corderoy said the Cabinet Office had spent "a good three years" trying to stop her from accessing information about the clearing house. "I don't think that they care about this," she said. "What has changed?"

A Cabinet Office spokesperson said: "We do not recognise these claims and strongly disagree with this characterisation of the clearing house." ■

Care home judgement hints at battle lines to come in Covid inquiry

A High Court judgement over discharges to care homes in early 2020, and Hancock's pugnacious response, show the battle at the Covid-19 inquiry between ministers and officials is likely to get brutal. By **Richard Vize**

The High Court judgement that the policy of discharging untested hospital patients into care homes as Covid-19 erupted in the UK was unlawful sheds light on the respective roles of advisers and ministers as they grappled with the evolving science, while Matt Hancock's response shows his determination to blame officials for mistakes. The first wave of the virus killed more than 20,000 care home residents.

The judgement – Gardner & Harris v secretary of state for health and social care – is a significant staging post for the public inquiry, which will be led by Baroness Heather Hallett. It reveals how evidence for asymptomatic transmission gathered pace and the extent to which officials and ministers were aware of it and reflected it in public statements and policy.

On 28 January 2020, just under a month after China notified the World Health Organization of what we now know as Covid-19, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies – SAGE – concluded "there is limited evidence of asymptomatic transmission, but early indications imply some is occurring".

In February and early March, scientific papers around the world gave increasing indications that asymptomatic transmission was occurring. Ministers knew there was growing evidence for it – health minister Lord Bethell told the Lords on 9 March that "large numbers of people are infectious or infected but are completely asymptomatic and never go near a test kit".

Four days later, chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance told Radio 4's *Today* programme: "It looks quite likely that there is some degree of asymptomatic transmission. There's definitely quite a lot of transmission very early on in the disease when there are very mild symptoms."

Yet official guidance to local authorities, care homes and the NHS published the same day was far less clear that asymptomatic transmission was a significant risk that needed to be mitigated.

On 16 March the government announced that people living with a symptomatic case should isolate for 14 days. The secretary of state explained to the Commons that the aim was to reduce asymptomatic transmission.

A troubling question for Public Health England is why, as the first wave of the pandemic gripped the country in late March, it was reticent to give force to asymptomatic transmission concerns. For example, on 24 March – the day after lockdown – version 7 of its paper *Are asymptomatic people with Covid-19 infectious?* said asymptomatic infection cases "do not provide evidence for asymptomatic transmission [emphasis added] of SARS-CoV-2… The currently available data remains inadequate to provide evidence for major presymptomatic/asymptomatic transmission."

This contrasts with evidence from then Public Health England medical director Prof Yvonne Doyle to the health and social care select committee on 26 March, when she explicitly confirmed that people could be spreading the virus for up to five days before showing symptoms.

The judges said the submission on behalf of the

Due care The decision to discharge untestd patients was unlawful

Anger Protestors at a march in central London, June 2021

secretary of state that ministers were entitled to rely on advice from experts "is too simplistic a view of the issue. It is undoubtedly right that there was no scientific proof in mid-March 2020 that asymptomatic transmission was occurring, but it was well recognised by the experts that such transmission was possible."

They added that "the fact that evidence is not conclusive does not mean that it carries no weight. Ministers were obliged to weigh up not just the likelihood that non-symptomatic transmission was occurring, but also the very serious consequences if it did so... the growing appreciation that asymptomatic transmission was a real possibility ought to have prompted a change in government policy concerning care homes earlier than it did."

On the key issue of the policy options for how asymptomatic patients would be discharged into care homes, the judges said: "Since there is no evidence that this question was considered by the secretary of state, or that he was asked to consider it, it is not an example of a political judgement on a finely balanced issue. Nor is it a point on which any of the expert committees had advised that no guidance was required. Those drafting the March Discharge Policy and the April Admissions Guidance [for care homes] simply failed to take into account the highly relevant consideration of the risk to elderly and vulnerable residents from asymptomatic transmission."

"The judgement is a significant staging post for the public inquiry. It reveals how evidence for asymptomatic transmission gathered pace and the extent to which officials and ministers were aware of it and reflected it in policy"

In an article for the *Telegraph* after the judgement, then-health and care secretary Matt Hancock blamed Public Health England for sending patients to care homes without tests, claiming the ruling demonstrates that the risk of asymptomatic infection "was not... included in the advice I received from PHE". Anonymous figures also briefed the *Telegraph* that Prof Duncan Selbie, then the chief executive of Public Health England, was ultimately responsible for failing to tell ministers what they knew about asymptomatic transmission.

The judgement, and Hancock's pugnacious response to it, show the battle at the inquiry between ministers and officials over who is ultimately to blame for failures and mistakes is likely to get brutal. Ministers will be scrutinised over the "Watergate question" – what did you know and when did you know it – while Margaret Thatcher's aphorism that "advisers advise and ministers decide" and the boundaries of responsibility that implies will be subjected to searching examination. The long-term implications for the machinery of government will be seismic. ■

Richard Vize will be providing regular analysis of the Covid-19 public inquiry for CSW

GRAHAM ATKINS DATA BLACK HOLE

GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO FILL DATA GAPS IN LOCAL SERVICE PERFORMANCE

The 2010s were a decade of change in English local government. Seven years of spending cuts followed by three years of limited growth left total local authority spending in the 2019/20 financial year 16% lower than in 2009/10. Meanwhile, rising demand for social care squeezed out spending on neighbourhood services – those services most citizens use and notice such as libraries, parks, children's centres, bin collections and road maintenance. Councils' spending was almost evenly split between social care and neighbourhood services in 2009/10; by 2019/20 almost three quarters went on social care.

Our new IfG report analyses how this played out differently across England – and how it affected services. It finds that, surprisingly, the most grant-dependent and deprived areas such as Birmingham, Lambeth and Salford received the biggest cuts because the coalition and subsequent Conservative governments reduced grants in a way that did not fully account for how much different local authorities relied on them in 2010. In contrast, the least grant-dependent and least deprived areas such as Rutland, South Gloucestershire and Wokingham may have faced bigger increases in demand for social care – and certainly increased spending on adult social care more than most authorities.

Another result of this approach to budget cuts was that the local authorities that cut spending on neighbourhood services the most – either because they had large grant cuts, big increases in demand for social care, or both – were somewhat randomly distributed. Councils facing the largest cuts and care pressures included a mix of urban and rural areas such as Bexley, Cornwall and Liverpool.

Even taking rising demand for social care into account, the most deprived areas were more likely to cut spending on neighbourhood services more deeply – because of the depth of the grant cuts in the most deprived areas. In some cases, this resulted in bigger declines in performance in the most deprived areas. A third of England's libraries closed between 2009/10 and 2019/20, with more closures in the most deprived areas; miles covered by bus routes fell 14% during the same period, again with deprived areas feeling the effects most. In other cases, it did not. The overall percentage of roads in need of maintenance did not get worse between 2009/10 and 2019/20, and 37 local authorities saw an improvement in road quality during the decade.

Poor data collection hinders government's understanding of local needs

While the quality and accessibility of neighbourhood services that we can measure have mostly declined, there is still much the government doesn't know. There are only publicly available performance indicators for around a third of neighbourhood services spending, meaning the government does not have a good picture of what is happening in the other two thirds – which accounted for £10bn of local authority spending in 2019/20.

Closed book A third of England's libraries closed between between 2010 and 2020

> **"There are only publicly available performance indicators for around a third of neighbourhood services spending, meaning the government does not have a good picture of what is happening in the other two thirds"**

In all the services we analysed, changes in spending did not determine changes in performance. This suggests there could be scope for greater efficiency and for local authorities to learn from each other. However, they will not be able to do so unless the government collects useful, comparable local authority data on the quality and accessibility of services.

The Johnson government's stated ambition in its *Levelling Up the United Kingdom* white paper, published in February, to make more subnational data available is laudable – but if the current government wants to understand how local authority performance varies, and why, it will have to decide which areas of spending it thinks are most important and bring together, or possibly collect new, comparable local data on the quality and accessibility of services. ■

Graham Atkins, outgoing Institute for Government associate director

DAVE PENMAN HOME TRUTHS

CIVIL SERVANTS HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF 'WOKE FROM HOME' CRITICISM

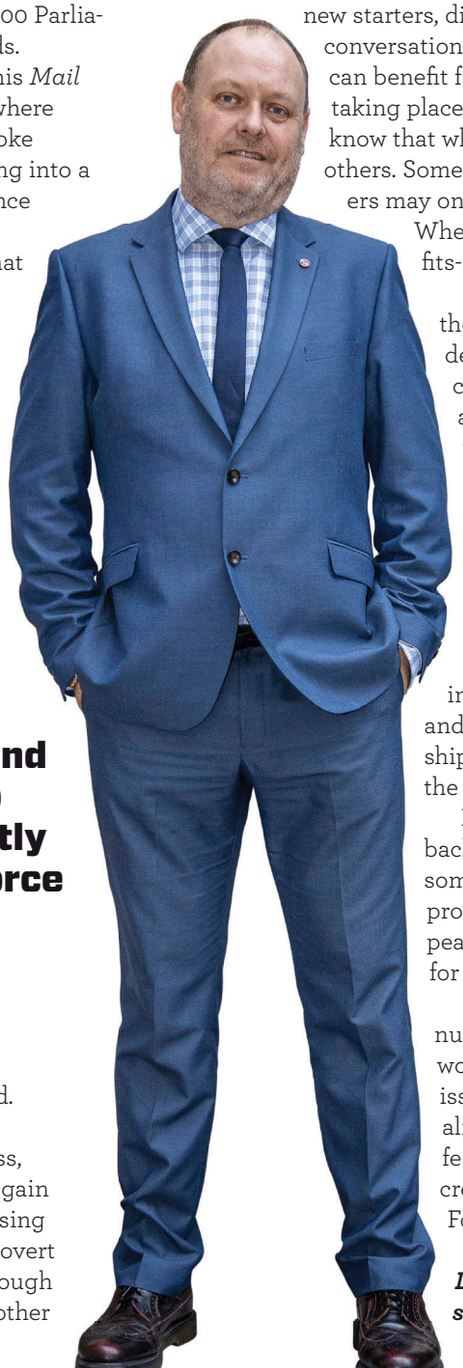
I feel like a little bit of me dies every time I'm compelled to write about the latest shenanigans over hybrid working. There is, as you know, a lot of "stuff" actually going on, so it seems ridiculous that this is dominating the agenda around the civil service.

I suppose one of the questions, though, is, is it? Is this just a Westminster bubble thing? Certainly Jacob Rees-Mogg's recent "clicker and clipboard tour 2022" didn't get beyond SW1. It doesn't make for a great tour T-shirt when the venues on the back only include 100 Parliament Street, 70 Whitehall and 1 Horseguards.

Also, the whole stunt was just to set up his *Mail on Sunday* column, and create a brouhaha where he emerges as the poster boy of the anti "woke from home" brigade. Are we, therefore, falling into a trap by responding? As a wise PR person once said, "Twitter isn't the real world".

Indeed, there's some evidence around that from our cousins across the pond. A study by the Pew Research Centre found that, while about a quarter of adults use Twitter, an incredible 97% of the content is produced by the most active 25% on the site. Of this content, almost half are retweets and one third replies. This all supports the sense that it becomes an echo chamber with very little original content or opinion. Does that mean that social media, or the proverbial storm in a media wine glass, can't impact real world events?

Rees-Mogg's point was to create a story, hence the heavy anonymous briefing about lazy civil servants that accompanied his league table being published. What, though, is the impact of this?



"I find it hard to understand why anyone in leadership would think that constantly undermining their workforce and trashing their brand is a successful strategy to motivate their staff"

His passive-aggressive notes were a crass, condescending extension of his strategy to gain column inches. They added to the demoralising effect of the constant drip feed of criticism, overt and covert, around working from home – though let's not kid ourselves that this is anything other than the latest salvo in the culture war against the civil service.

I genuinely find it hard to understand why anyone in a leadership position would think that constantly undermining their workforce and completely trashing their brand is a successful strategy to motivate their staff or attract the brightest and best from elsewhere. Yet this is now routinely what we get with some ministers.

On tour Jacob Rees-Mogg

Civil servants know that there are aspects of their work that are better done in person. Collaboration on some tasks, team building, new starters, difficult conversations – all can benefit from taking place in-person. They also know that what is required in their role will be different from others. Some roles may require almost daily attendance, others may only require attendance at scheduled team events. Where, therefore, does that fit with the one-size-fits-all approach being advocated by ministers?

So the reports of the town hall meeting at the Department for Education, following the decision to push for four days in the office, can come as no surprise. Staff were clearly angry as they know this is in response to competition between ministers to see who can be the most rufty tufty on this issue, or to simply get off the bottom of the league table.

It's hugely frustrating because as hard-working public servants, they know it's not centred on the reality of their work. They know it's not about what works best or is most efficient. This is top-down micromanaging from ministers for the sake of a headline and so, ultimately, it also undermines the leadership of the civil service. Another one to add to the list of achievements from this strategy.

Perhaps the reports of ministers pushing back and focusing on productivity is a sign that some recognise how damaging this whole approach is. Who knows, but as Rees-Mogg appears to be getting the green light from No.10 for all of this, I'm not holding my breath.

Meanwhile, civil servants tell me in increasing numbers they've had enough of it, that they simply won't be treated like this. I get responses on this issue like no other. It may be that the damage is already done. It may be that, by the time this manifests itself with good people leaving, those who created it won't be around to reap their rewards. For those of us who will, we should be worried. ■

Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union

ANDREW HUDSON LOCALLY-SOURCED POLITICS

IN WHITEHALL, THE TEMPTATION IS TO GLIDE PAST LOCAL ELECTIONS. BUT THAT WOULD MISS VITAL CHANGES

With the focus on Ukraine and rising energy bills, most people – including many civil servants – won't have paid much attention to the fact that we had local elections across Great Britain on 5 May, and Assembly elections in Northern Ireland.

For Whitehall, too, the temptation is to glide past this event. After all, most councils won't change, and the officers are still in post. But that would miss vital changes for some.

It's easy for civil servants to grossly underestimate the importance of the political and personal in the working lives of senior local government officers. Before I went to work in local government in 1999, I was in charge of the Health Team in the Treasury. We spent a fair bit of time with local government officers, and read the local government press – indeed it was building that understanding that prompted me to move to Essex County Council. But I too had not fully grasped the nature of the interaction with local politicians.

As a civil servant, most of your contact is likely to be with chief executives and other chief officers such as the director of adult social services. They tend to be sitting on working groups, or hosting visits from Whitehall. And there certainly used to be more focus on how a new "chief" might be livening up a sleepy council than on political change. Of course some local political leaders had a very high profile, both locally and nationally, but they perhaps stood out because they were the exception.

That started to change in the late 1990s, as the Blair government implemented changes to the way local councils were run, replacing the old cross-party committee system with either an elected mayor, or a leader and cabinet. The latter remains most prevalent, and it deliberately puts more focus on political leadership. Individual cabinet members have a clearer and bigger role in decision making than the old committee chairs.

That trend has continued. There are more elected mayors, and more cabinet members who are full time in their roles, which wasn't always the case, indeed would have been the exception 20 years ago. A younger generation of leading councillors looks to be more in this mode.

Changes in leadership are now taking place up and down the country. The outcomes locally reflect the sheer variety of local government. Some councils have remained effectively one-party states. At the other extreme, some councils are always finely balanced: a colleague of mine was chief executive at a big unitary where the majority was always down to the odd seat, and one-third of the councillors were up for election every year, so political control could tip very easily – and that's before the impact of illness, death, and personal fall-outs in between elections. Officers in those councils need to be particularly skilful at navigating changing political waters.

"Contact with the politicians is closer and more immediate than in Whitehall: they don't on the whole have private offices, so when we wanted to talk to them, we just rang them up"

Others may need to acquire those skills quickly, if the electorate decides on a change.

One thing that helps – and again something not always appreciated in Whitehall – is that local government officers constitutionally work for the council as a whole, rather than just for the leadership of the day. So as (effectively) director of finance at Essex, I would meet the opposition ahead of the budget-setting meetings, to explain the background and answer questions, though not of course to talk about the administration's proposals. And that brings out that contact with the politicians is closer and more immediate than in Whitehall: they don't on the whole have private offices as gatekeepers, so when we wanted to talk to them, we just rang them up, and they did the same. That can be great for both sides where the relationship works well. It can be career-changing if it doesn't, in a way that is not unknown in Whitehall, but happens much less often.

Understanding of local government has improved in the civil service: at one point, if you said you were going to County Hall, some people would assume that was somewhere near County Mayo on the left hand side! But it's important to be sensitive, this May, to the fact that working life for some colleagues in councils up and down the country has become very different, overnight, thanks to local democracy. ■

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

ANDY COWPER ANYTHING BUT THE TRUTH

MINISTERS HAVE BEEN GLOATING ABOUT THEIR HANDLING OF THE COVID PANDEMIC – BUT THE FACTS TELL A DIFFERENT STORY, WRITES ANDY COWPER

WHO got Covid-19 right?

The World Health Organization's release of estimates for country-by-country data on excess deaths caused by Covid provoked some gloating by members – and former members – of the government.

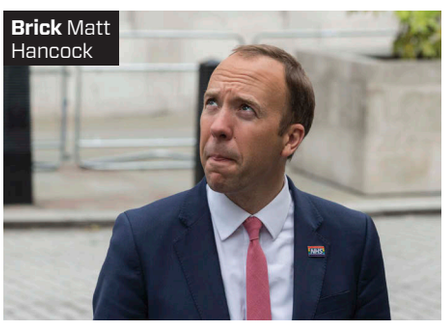
Former health secretary and Partridge-esque polo-neck-wearer Matt Hancock responded by claiming that "once the measurement issues are stripped away, the UK performance was similar to or better than most comparable countries. In the UK, we measured very carefully and published data as accurately as we could."

Ahem, Mr Hancock: biostatisticians will probably argue over these WHO estimates for some time, but let's remember your "100,000 tests for a day" cheating fiasco, which prompted a rebuke from the UK Statistics Authority.

Just as pertinently, Bristol statistician Oliver Johnson points out that this is often used to re-fight the war of the first lockdown when "autumn and winter 2020-21… was the period when more than half of our total pandemic deaths occurred".

Let them catch Covid-19: liability and responsibility

Another significant recent announcement came from DHSC, NHS England, the UK Health Security Agency and the devolved governments' health agencies, of a major reduction in infection controls measures for those with Covid-19, or close contacts thereof.



Brick Matt Hancock

Let them catch Covid, basically. This is living with it, incarnate.

HSJ reported that the isolation period for inpatients with Covid-19 can now be reduced from 10 days to seven if their condition improves and they have two negative lateral flow tests – taken on consecutive days from day six onwards. Inpatients considered contacts of people with Covid-19 but who are asymptomatic no longer have to isolate.

Whether or not this increases capacity and capability (and we have very little way of knowing), the implications of this are potentially significant. To actually throw in the towel in this way is a bold move, and one with legal liability consequences.

Lying about the High Court judgement

Among the remarkable trends of our time is the national media's incuriosity as to whether statements made by the government, MPs and their representatives are in any way true.

I note this in response to the PM's and Hancock's blatantly false claims about the High Court ruling in the cases of Gardner & Harris vs. secretary of state and others, regarding legal responsibility for hospital discharges of patients with Covid-19 to care homes in March and April of 2020. To quote the judgement: "It was irrational for the DHSC not to have advised until mid-April 2020 that where an asymptomatic patient (other than one who had tested negative for Covid-19) was admitted to a care home, he or she should, so far as practicable, be kept apart for 14 days.

"The court dismissed the other aspects of the case brought by the claimants, including claims under Articles 2 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and a claim against NHS England (which is legally distinct from the secretary of state)."

The PM and Mr Hancock (at the time in question, still SoS) promptly went out to bat with alternate versions of reality. During PMQs, Mr Johnson told parliament ministers didn't know Covid "could be transmitted asymptomatically in the way that it was", adding: "That is something I wish we had known more about at the time." A spokesman for Mr Hancock said: "This court case comprehensively clears ministers of any wrongdoing and finds Mr Hancock acted reasonably on all counts. The court also found that Public Health England failed to tell ministers what they knew about asymptomatic transmission".

There is just a slight problem. The judgement itself says that three academic papers published on 8 March 2020 "all pointed to the real possibility of pre-symptomatic transmission of the virus".

Chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance indeed mentioned this possibility of pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic transmission in an interview on 13 March 2020, saying: "It looks quite likely that there is some degree of asymptomatic transmission. There's definitely quite a lot of transmission very early on in the disease when there are very mild symptoms." A number of journalists have since pointed out inconsistencies in the erstwhile health secretary's defence.

Blame hound

Anonymous sources close to Mr Hancock (ones which probably occupy the same pair of shoes) briefed the *Telegraph* that former PHE chief executive Duncan Selbie was "ultimately responsible for informing Mr Hancock of the risks". This is as subtle as a brick.

I noted above that the changes to nationally-mandated infection control regulations regarding Covid-19 may have legal consequences. This High Court judgement (although declaratory rather than financial) may well trigger further compensation claims, which could bring Professor Selbie into a witness box to have these allegations put to him under oath.

That could be very interesting indeed. It is also well worth re-reading the transcripts of the Public Accounts Committee's June 2020 evidence sessions into preparing for the peak of the pandemic. ■

Andy Cowper is the editor of Health Policy Insight

CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT

Suzannah Brecknell sits down with civil service chief operating officer **Alex Chisholm** to hear about relocation, remuneration and transformation. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Like many of us, Alex Chisholm has been re-expanding his horizons in recent months. In 2020, when he had just become civil service chief operating officer and Cabinet Office permanent secretary, Chisholm met *CSW* virtually from home. In 2021, he was back in his Whitehall office, but still using Google Meet to share his plans for reforming the civil service. In 2022, we are not only meeting in person, with views over Horse Guards Parade and the chance to admire his smart standing desk, but Chisholm is full of enthusiasm about recent trips to new government offices in Salford, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

These offices – among others – are posterchildren for Places for Growth, a key part of the modernisation and reform programme he is leading. His excitement about the drive to move civil servants out of London is palpable: it's the first thing he mentions when asked to reflect on progress of the Declaration on Government Reform, a document published just under a year ago in which ministers and perm secs set out their joint vision to rewire and revamp government.

Chisholm mentions this area of reform not only because there has been "measurable" progress – 4,000 roles have moved out of London, and departments have published plans to move another 15,000 – but because it ties with wider aims to change the face of the civil service. "It's so important to make the best use of the talent we can across the country and get close to the communities we serve," Chisholm says. »

“If I could fast forward to 2024-25, I think people will say the civil service has generally become much more UK-wide. That’s a big and important change”

The Cabinet Office, he continues, had just a handful of people in Glasgow a year ago, but when he visited this spring there were 250 staff there. Some of those staff are in a photo montage hanging on Chisholm's wall, celebrating the first 100 people who joined the department's Scottish office. This particular development is close to his heart, clearly, but he also mentions other examples of progress over the last year which are less visible. The Government Major Projects Portfolio has been expanded, bringing better oversight to a raft of crucial projects; there have been improvements in the contract management function; and the new Campus and Curriculum for Government Skills, which is available to all civil servants, will be "critical to our ambitions to be more skilled as well as innovative and ambitious civil service", Chisholm says.

Those three words – skilled, innovative, ambitious – are the key strands of the modernisation and reform programme, and form the structure for this year's Civil Service Live, government's annual, cross-department learning event. The event, comprising five conferences across the country, is taking place in person again this year after two years online. Chisholm points out that the event will not only be "getting people back together" but is in keeping with government's "whole UK approach".

"It's London, it's Edinburgh, it's Cardiff, it's Blackpool and Newcastle, so there'll be one near you, and we've tried to tailor the programmes and speakers to make those feel like local events as well as a national event."

Those attending Live can expect not only a range of sessions organised by teams who are energised by the chance to create in-person discussions *(see box, p.19)* but also to find out first about the next steps in the modernisation programme. The Declaration on Government Reform sets out 30 actions which were due to be completed by April 2022 . Government's own reporting, as well as separate assessments from *CSW* and the Institute for Government, show that fewer than a third of these actions were completed, and several were not even under way by the deadline. The IfG called for government to refresh the programme and create a greater sense of urgency.

Chisholm acknowledges that if reform is to succeed, it requires a constant focus: "Long-term watchers of government would say that with government reform, you need to keep putting more air into the balloon. It needs to continue to travel up, and that's what we absolutely plan to do in the second year."

So he is "sure there will be new actions", though he stresses that those actions must not become an end in themselves but always focus on driving real change, and he gives a few hints as to the announcements we can expect at Civil Service Live.

Firstly, there is OneLogin, the plan to replace a plethora of sign-in services with a single system across government. Chisholm describes this as "a big, incredibly important and very

strategic programme" which will save money, improve citizen experience and also open the door for improvements in the way services are delivered.

Then he flags up the importance of creating a civil service which is "data confident". "We've got huge amounts of data across the system and [we need to be] increasing [our] ability to share that data both through interoperability and legal gateways," he says. "Are people confident in the use of that data? Do they understand how they can use that to drive policy, to drive better outcomes for delivery, to shorten the timeframe to be able to fix issues that need fixing. Whether you're an AO or permanent secretary, all of us need to be data confident and we all need to be skilled up further to do that."

Ambitions for OneLogin and data use have both been enhanced by the first multi-year spending review since 2015 – for instance with the announcement of an Integrated Data Service being developed by the Office for National Statistics which will make it easier for departments to share data.

"With things which include a lot of initiatives and announcements, the question is: do you then follow through?" says Chisholm. "So I took great heart from the fact that this spending round does actually commit to deliver on those big priorities."

Chisholm is a self-confessed government reform nerd, whose job is to be enthusiastic about modernisation. But one wonders if all of the civil servants he is leading feel the same about another round of change. After several hard years, with ever-increasing workloads, what is his approach to ensuring his teams feel energised, rather than overwhelmed, by the prospect of yet more reform?

His answer is to harness the public service motivation which most civil servants share, as well as the pride in what they have achieved during years which have been, he concedes, "very intense". The "sense of public service and mission" has kept people going, he says, but he also believes civil servants have been motivated by seeing the immediate impact their work had as they got better at "fixing things fast".

"Rather than saying: 'Here's a nice paper about something that will be launched in a year and a half's time' there were literally sometimes decisions taken at a morning meeting, which were announced that afternoon and where you could see the effect the next morning to change people's behaviour," Chisholm says.

Similarly, he believes the pandemic helped to reinforce a connection between civil servants and "their fellow citizens", pointing to business loans which kept companies going, and to the shift which enabled people to receive benefits through digital channels because offices were closed.

"Things like that have given people a lot of pride, and that is key to the motivation about public services: to feel that what you do really matters to your fellow citizens, and you get real recognition for that," Chisholm says. He believes civil servants also want to keep finding ways to do things better, and it's this which will drive their engagement with reform programmes.

A central part of plans to change the way government rewards development of skills is the introduction of capability-based pay, which will determine pay for senior officials using performance assessment frameworks focused on professional skills and leadership. The reform, which has taken many years to develop, was described by outgoing civil service chief people officer Rupert McNeil in an interview with *CSW* as a "huge, once-in-a-generation opportunity" to reform civil service pay.

It is Chisholm, along with McNeil's yet-to-be-named successor, who will oversee implementation of the plans. What does the COO think is key to ensuring they achieve the desired outcomes? He begins by noting there is "a broad commitment" to capability-based pay, both to address the problem of officials moving between jobs too quickly, and to "give both recognition and incentives for people to build on their knowledge and skills."

"All of us need to be data confident and we all need to be skilled up further to do that"

He points out that the system has been carefully designed, tailored to different functions and levels of seniority. "We've had some successful pilots," Chisholm continues, "and we're also demonstrating that these will pay for themselves in terms of producing better results – lowering churn, lowering costs and having to recruit new people. So, we're quids in, and that's really important."

But then, he shifts focus. "We haven't yet spoken about the kind of environment in which we'll be working over the next year, but I'm enormously conscious, as I'm sure you are and anybody reading this will be, that economically it's going to be challenging."

Given the economic outlook, he says, "all of us as civil servants have to look incredibly critically at all our own areas of expenditure and opportunities to economise." This means improving efficiency and prioritisation, but it also affects the number of people the civil service can employ.

"The civil service has grown a lot – necessarily, I think most people would say, in response to the demands of the EU exit and Covid," he says. "But we now need to reverse out some of that growth because we clearly have too many civil servants relative to what is affordable, and also those tasks are behind us, and we should be getting better at doing things as effectively with a smaller number of people."

In the early years of the coalition government's austerity drive, civil service leaders drew connections between pay restraint and falling headcounts. Pay was frozen then, and leaders argued this could mean fewer job losses because it would reduce the overall pay bill.

Things are different now, but Chisholm strikes a cautionary note for anyone expecting reform to mean big salary increases.

"Everyone would have been pleased to see, I'm sure, that the chancellor decided that the pay freeze should be lifted last November. Equally, there's only a certain amount of money to go around, there's huge demands on the public purse, there's a very high level of indebtedness following on from the response to Covid. I'm not expecting the overall provision of resources to be increased. So, therefore, we need to look at the number of people as well as the pay we're able to support."

Given this outlook – where officials may be rewarded more effectively for developing key skills, but shouldn't expect their salaries to be significantly greater – it seems all the more important that civil servants feel they are benefiting in other ways, such as job satisfaction and career development. It also makes the "porosity agenda" – aiming to make it easier for people to move in and out of the civil service – more pressing.

Chisholm wants to create a system where people can join the civil service at any stage in their career, in any part of the country and bring new skills, knowledge and connections to the organisation. "Some of those people will come and do five years and they'll say, 'I've had a great experience and now I'll

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go and do something else.' Every one of those people should say, 'I've had a good experience. I've done important, worthy public work. I've added to my skills; I've learned a lot. I'm a more employable person, a better person as a consequence [of my time here].'"

Yet this is part of the reform agenda that government has acknowledged "has not moved as far and as fast as you would have wanted to," Chisholm says. He adds: "There's no one big switch you can flip."

The recognition that "for porosity... a quick solution is probably a bad solution" chimes with Chisholm's insistence that as the reform programme moves forward, it must focus not just on hitting targets and deadlines, but on achieving lasting change. It's easy to measure how many jobs are moving out of London, for example, but this is not the point of Places for Growth. Rather, he says, the aim is to "recruit new people who are different from the ones that we have already, tapping into different parts of the communities and talent pools available to us".

"We're also hoping that in some of those cases, people will stay with us longer and will bring new thinking and new ideas about how to deal with problems which are better understood at a local level rather than sitting in an office in Whitehall," he says. "That is harder to measure for an outcome, but it's actually very important."

It does seem to be starting to deliver this change, he says. For example, he points to the business department's new office in Salford, where the socio-economic background of new recruits is more diverse than in the London office. "Half the people there have been recruited locally and the most common thing they said is: 'I would never have come to work in London. If this job wasn't here, I wouldn't have known about, and I wouldn't have even considered it because this is where my community is.' It's very, very powerful but also, it means that that group of people want to help change us, which I think is great." Openness to feedback and change is something which Chisholm thinks the civil service has got better at since he first joined as a young graduate in the late 1980s, especially from the perspective of how it delivers services. "Compared to the civil service I used to work for, the modern civil service is not only more focused [on service delivery], but able to measure the experience people have," he says.

"We clearly have too many civil servants relative to what is affordable and we should be getting better at doing things as effectively with a smaller number of people"

"We have lots of new ideas about how to sharpen further those feedback loops from the users of public services to the providers, and for those to be coming in on almost a daily flow. I think that will help make us more responsive to customer needs, but also accelerate the continuous improvement culture that we want."

Chisholm is keen to stress not just what is being done to change government, but how. The Modernisation and Reform unit in the Cabinet Office has worked hard to engage with people across government, he says, including recruiting around 2,000 people to act as "reform champions". The reform plans themselves were based on work which sought the opinions of 14,000 people. "It's not like we just sat in a room and dreamt up some things that we thought looked half good," Chisholm says. "It does reflect the views of the civil service. We've also worked incredibly hard externally [engaging with] think tanks and the business community. We've compared ourselves to the top 10 governments around the world, and that all fed into the reform programme. So now, we like the design. We like the goals. We see the support we've got across government. Now, it's very much: let's make it happen. Let's bring about tangible changes for the better."

And what will those tangible changes be? "If I could fast forward and get to 2024-25," he says, "I think people will say the civil service has generally become much more UK-wide and that's a big and important change.

"This is not just support operations or specialists in delivery bodies. This is all the roles. Treasury are saying that you can do any job in Darlington that you could do in Horse Guards – that's a fantastic offer. And it's really going to shift the way in which people develop their careers as civil servants, but also the perception that other people have about what the government does."

He also hopes that the civil service will be known for being "fantastic at using data to shape policy for delivery to solve problems faster" and that it will be ever-more focused on delivery.

"My third area of difference would be that we're not sitting in offices coming up with plans for the future," he says. "We are actually focused on delivering for citizens today – doing what I think people expect of a civil service, which is to do a great job to deliver the government's priorities." ■

LIVE AND IN PERSON

"No matter how skilled you are, you have to keep learning and developing because the world keeps changing so fast."

It's for this reason that Jaee Samant, director general for public safety at the Home Office, is so passionate about Civil Service Live.

Samant is senior responsible officer for the 'Skilled' strand of this year's event, which takes place in five cities in June and July.

Asked which skills she thinks civil servants need to focus on, Samant mentions digital but adds that "overall, we need to be consistently better in leading, managing and developing our people; we need to improve our project and programme delivery; we also need to have greater knowledge about the environment in which we operate – such as understanding business and markets if you work in an economic department."

Although Samant is working on the sessions badged as "skilled", the whole of CSL is geared towards helping officials build and deepen the broad range of skills they need to do their jobs well. The two other themes of the event – Ambitious and Innovative – encompass this overall drive.

Jonathan Mills, director general for Labour Market Policy and Implementation is SRO for CSL's 'Ambitious' theme. He's keen to stress that he doesn't think the civil service currently lacks ambition, but rather needs more support to match high aspirations. "When I speak to people in any department, they have really high hopes for what they want to achieve – they are there because they care," he says. "What we can do is give some examples of success, give them confidence about how you can make it happen."

So in his strand, he says there will be case studies of both well-known successful programmes – such as the vaccines roll-out – but also stories which attendees may not have heard, told by officials in "different jobs across the UK".

Mills has challenged his team to be ambitious themselves as they plan for Live, and in response they have a number of unusual sessions, including what civil servants can learn from stand-up comedians.

The invitation to learn from a comedian certainly proves an assertion made by Mills' fellow SRO Joanna Davinson – leading the 'Innovative' theme and also the head of government's Central Digital and Data Office. Davinson believes the civil service is "open to new ideas and actually quite radical transformation of how we deliver our core services". Like Mills, she sees her role in developing sessions as supporting civil servants to realise the innovative ideas which already exist across government.

Her team is working on sessions which will help to support innovation from the bottom up and the top down. For senior leaders there will be discussions about how to "foster a culture of innovation within the organisation, trying to convey that it's everybody's accountability to do this, it's not about waiting for someone to come and innovate".

Meanwhile for officials in any grade there will be practical sessions showcasing people who have developed and delivered their ideas. These will share the mechanisms which can help support new ideas, such as the Civil Service Data Challenge, an annual initiative to unearth new ways of using data to improve outcomes which will launch at Live this year. The sessions will also have practical tips on how to build a business case for a new idea when good evidence is not available.

Speaking to this trio of SROs, it's clear that there is a lot of excitement about this year's CSL, and the opportunity it brings for colleagues to meet and learn in-person after two years online. And there will be much for attendees to talk about. As Chisholm, the overall SRO for the event, points out, the civil service has achieved some remarkable things since the last in-person Live was held – from the rapid set-up of digital services during lockdowns to the hosting of Cop26 and the G7 during a pandemic. "The things we do really matter," he says, adding that this drives civil servants to keep improving. Mills echoes this sentiment, saying that "one of the great privileges of the work that we do in the civil service is that we work on things that really matter to a lot of people". This means, he adds, that service users and industry partners are usually keen to work with government and when officials can harness that it leads to much better outcomes. He points to the vaccine roll-out as an example of this but also to the work that goes on every day in his department, the DWP, where work coaches "work as part of their community" to deliver change.

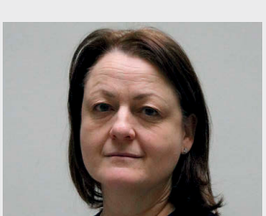
"The question is, how do take the magic from those examples and use that more widely," he says.

This makes a neat summary of the approach which shines through for this year's Civil Service Live – taking the skills, ambition and innovation which already exist in teams across government, deepening them, and spreading them more widely.

To find out more and register to attend visit civilservicelive.com


Jonathan Mills


Jaee Samant


Joanna Davinson

COMMS WITH APLOMB

Using the government response to the horsemeat scandal, swine flu and Covid-19 as examples, **Lydia Martin** gives her eight rules for communicating public health risk in a crisis

Over the last two years, the risk of Covid-19 to public health has fluctuated according to case rates, variant severity and transmissibility, restrictions and vaccination. So too have public perceptions of risk.

How has the UK government sought to inspire trust, discredit misinformation and change public behaviour in order to slow the spread of Covid-19? How have its crisis communications compared with Labour's handling of the swine flu pandemic in 2009 or the coalition's response to the horsemeat scandal in 2013? By evaluating government communications during each of these threats to public health, we can identify eight fundamental rules for communicating risk in a crisis.

1 Estimating – Clarifying the difference between NHS planning assumptions and public health risk

At the beginning of a public health crisis, the government is under huge pressure to calculate the level of public risk based on limited evidence. Italy's experience of Covid-19 provided the UK with some insight into the risks posed. However, when swine flu hit the UK, there was little data on which to base decisions. The government risked either underestimating the threat or causing unnecessary panic.

The government mitigated reputational risk by being open and frank about the levels of uncertainty. It targeted different messages on the level of risk: health services were given planning assumptions to help them prepare for the worst, while the public was made aware of the current threat to health. Despite government making it clear that planning assumptions were not predictions, certain media outlets used them to create sensationalist headlines. The chief medical officer's "reasonable worst case" planning assumption of 65,000 fatalities on 16 July 2009 was widely reported in alarmist terms.

Unavoidably, those modelling the level of public risk continue to be criticised for over or underestimating the threat. This year, Professor Graham Medley, chair of the government's Covid-19 modelling committee, acknowledged that worst-case scenarios were not coming to pass, insisting it was his job to warn ministers how bad things could get and that he would "just have to accept" criticism from MPs and the media – "when I say they were not predictions, I mean they were not predictions".

2 Targeting – Target high-risk audiences with tailored messaging and representative spokespeople

Just as separate communications strategies need to be implemented to meet the respective needs of the public and NHS, the public itself should be segmented to target high risk groups. As the chief executive of the Race Equality Foundation Jabeer Butt said in 2021, the government needs to get data on "who has been offered the vaccine, who has taken it up and use that to target messages".

To increase vaccine uptake in Black and Asian communities, vaccines minister Nadhim Zahawi, Labour MP David Lammy and Conservative MP James Cleverly featured in a video, that was promoted on social media, about how they had lost relatives to the virus. A targeted approach was also taken when pregnant women were identified to be at greater risk of swine flu: media coverage was generated in women's magazines and the director of immunisation Professor David Salisbury and then-health secretary Andy Burnham took part in webchats to reach this group.

In both pandemics, at-risk groups were targeted through the media channels they typically consume. The current government selected spokespeople that represented an at-risk community, in this case racially, knowing that they would resonate more with the target audience. The discipline of communications has evolved to be more representative – it is hard to imagine webchats targeting pregnant women today being fronted by two men as they were in 2009.

Achoo-ning
Swine flu campaign used targeted messages to encourage people to change behaviours

3 Public information – Influence behaviour change to help individuals reduce health risk

Efforts to increase vaccine uptake are part of a wider behaviour-changing strategy to persuade people to limit the spread of disease and lower personal risk. The "Catch It, Bin It, Kill It" swine flu campaign and "Hands, Face, Space" of the Covid-19 pandemic used paid-for advertising to extensively communicate health messages and change behaviour.

A consumer-focused response to the horsemeat scandal saw the Department for Environmen, Food and Rural Affairs hosting live Q&A sessions on Twitter, while guidance on swine flu was published weekly on the Health Protection Agency website. In the Covid-19 pandemic, BBC online has been regarded by many as the go-to source of reliable information; the government website lacks a consumer focus and has not been foremost in Google searches about vaccine safety or the latest restrictions. In December, it was announced that vaccinations would be offered to at-risk five to 11-year-olds but no information was shared about how they would access them until five weeks later. During this period, parents searched Google and called local NHS services in unsuccessful attempts to find out how the policy change would work in practice. Government communications have been weighted more towards reputation management than anticipating and communicating the information people need to know. Both are vital in a crisis.

"During a public health crisis, government communications should prevent speculation"

4 Coordination – Promote consistency across government and the public sector

In a crisis, central government should coordinate with other public sector organisations to ensure a smooth and consistent response and inspire the public's trust. Yet just a fortnight into the first lockdown of March 2020, there was a widely reported disconnect between how the government expected lockdown to be enforced and what the police understood their role to be. With the number of enforcement notices issued in the first week ranging from 123 in Lancashire to none in Bedfordshire, it is unsurprising that the National Police Chiefs' Council chair, »

Martin Hewitt, wrote to police chiefs about the need for greater consistency in the application of emergency powers.

Better government communications would have ensured consistency from the beginning. At the time, cabinet minister Dominic Raab told reporters that "obviously we need some common sense" from the police. Rather than hope for sensible interpretations, the government should have collaborated with police on the development of precise guidelines in advance of the lockdown.

In a better coordinated approach during the swine flu pandemic, the Department of Health worked closely with devolved administrations, the NHS and the Health Protection Agency to agree on strategy and ensure consistency in messaging. During the horsemeat scandal, Defra worked with police press offices to ensure that the public received one, clear message on the role of the police in investigations and raids.

Horses for courses
Government horsemeat scandal 'deflection' would not have worked during Covid crisis

5 Government action – Promote every government action to reduce health risk

In both the swine flu and Covid-19 pandemics, regular press briefings were held to promote every action taken in response to the crisis. During the horsemeat scandal, the government raised awareness of efforts including Food Standards Agency raids, meetings with the food industry and the environment secretary leading the response in Brussels. Social media drove traffic from Twitter to the government website, using the hashtag #horsemeat to widen the reach, just as the current government is doing with #vaccine.

In the horsemeat scandal, the government defended its reputation by stating that there were private companies that should also be held accountable. Its commitment to identify what went wrong and make the system stronger was communicated alongside the point that retailers, manufacturers and suppliers were legally responsible for ensuring correct food labelling. This strategy successfully prompted Tesco and other industry representatives to publicly acknowledge their responsibility.

During the recent pandemic, however, the public would have been critical of any attempt by the government to deflect accountability elsewhere. In fact, the government managed its reputation well by promoting its collaboration with industry and academia, especially with regards to the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine development. In all three crises, promoting every action that is being taken in response to the threat wins public confidence and pre-empts criticism.

6 Response – Rebut inaccurate information and develop strategy to counter these narratives

A successful reactive media strategy involves quickly identifying and correcting misinformation to minimise the number of people misled. The coalition government robustly rebutted inaccurate claims made by media and stakeholders about the horsemeat scandal. When the *Financial Times* reported horse DNA at levels of less than 1% "will not be considered a problem," Defra promptly published a 'myth bust' on the website and promoted it on Twitter before the FSA chief executive issued a statement later the same morning. The current administration has taken the same approach, listing and rebutting "multiple inaccurate and misleading claims" regarding ventilator procurement.

Reputation management involves anticipating criticism and preparing reactive statements to be issued to media within press deadlines. Just as with Covid-19, it was alleged that the swine flu vaccine had been rushed into production, without rigorous testing, and was therefore unsafe. Both governments consistently countered these allegations in media reports.

As well as rebutting misinformation, the best communications teams use inaccurate claims to inform their proactive communications strategies and messaging. Ministers and medical experts have proactively used press briefings and media engagements to communicate the Covid-19 vaccines' safety, effectiveness and role in ending restrictions. And in the swine flu pandemic, government used concerns voiced on Mumsnet forums to inform targeted messaging for pregnant women.

Inspiring confidence
Updates from impartial experts like Sir Chris Whitty aided public trust during Covid pandemic

7 Probability – Contextualise the level of risk to keep it in perspective

Putting the level of risk into context helps counter sensationalist headlines and provide the public with a truer picture of the likelihood of harm. Anti-vaccination rhetoric has persisted throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and health risks of the swine flu vaccine were still being reported years after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic over. When new evidence emerged of a link to narcolepsy in 2013, NHS Choices made clear the statistical level of risk by putting the Daily Mail headline, "Fears one million children received jab" into perspective with the statement: "if one million children did receive the vaccine (which is a matter of debate), even at the highest risk estimation (one in 52,000), just 19 children would be expected to develop narcolepsy."

During the horsemeat scandal, concerns about food safety generated very high-profile media coverage, particularly when the horse medicine, bute, was detected in product tests. In response, the trusted and politically neutral chief medical officer made clear in broadcast interviews that a person would need to eat between 500 and 600 horsemeat burgers containing bute to experience any ill effects. This everyday analogy very convincingly substantiated the government's position that there was no risk to public health.

"Communicating the latest product test results in real time on Twitter reassured the public and inspired trust"

8 Transparency – Inspire the public's trust by communicating the latest information openly

In all three health crises evaluated here, public trust was won when government communicated the latest information on public risk promptly and transparently. In both pandemics, regular press briefings have helped to prevent an information vacuum emerging that could otherwise have been filled by dramatic speculation. Choosing politically impartial medical and scientific experts to communicate updates, such as the chief medical officer, has further enhanced public confidence. During the horsemeat scandal, the latest product test results were communicated in real time on Twitter. These direct communications reassured the public of the government's continued action and inspired trust.

By contrast, briefing stories to a select newspaper undermined trust and fostered a sense of uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, on 27 January last year, the prime minister told the House of Commons when a roadmap out of lockdown would be published and when schools would reopen. While all newspapers reported the PM's plans the following day, one uniquely quoted "a Whitehall source" which made the PM's position far less clear: "*The Telegraph* understands that officials are working on proposals which *could* see most shops closed until April... it *could* be at least another month after that before non-essential shops would be allowed to open...shops would be *unlikely* to get the green light until April, while pubs and restaurants *could* remain closed until May" (my emphasis). Giving an "exclusive" to one newspaper is a long-established practice inWhitehall to generate detailed coverage the day before an announcement. It is a misguided tactic to deploy when government should be open with the latest information on a public health crisis. By briefing out information selectively, the government opened the door to speculation and uncertainty.

Conclusion

During a public health crisis, government communications should prevent speculation by communicating the latest evidence transparently and comprehensively. Managing reputation includes promoting each action taken to reduce the level of public risk and responding promptly to criticism or misinformation. To win public confidence, strategy and messaging should be coordinated between government departments and public sector organisations, in advance of public announcements. To help people reduce their risk to health, public information and behaviour changing strategies should be deployed, targeting high risk groups where necessary. Lastly, probabilities, when communicated effectively, give the NHS planning assumptions and the public an accurate understanding of their own level of risk. ■

Lydia Martin is a healthcare associate director at APCO Worldwide. Previous civil service roles at DHSC and Defra included managing the government's crisis communications response to the swine flu pandemic and horsemeat scandal

HIDDEN HOSTILITY

WHY HAVE 8,000 VISAS BEEN DELAYED?

Despite ministers calling time on the "hostile environment", Brexit-induced policy change and opaque decision-making are delaying visas for thousands of Turkish nationals **Sam Trendall** reports

"Hostile is not a term that I am going to use; it is a compliant environment." These words, said by Sajid Javid shortly after taking on the role of home secretary in April 2018, were taken by some as a signal that the government was ready to change its approach to immigration.

The "hostile environment" policy pursued by his predecessors in the Home Office – chiefly Theresa May – was widely blamed for the Windrush scandal that emerged in the months prior to Javid's appointment.

Four years on, the environment still feels markedly hostile to some of those who are exposed to it. Their ranks include about 8,000 Turkish nationals – some of whom have lived and worked in the UK for many years – who are currently awaiting decisions on applications to extend Turkish Businessperson visas. The visas are also known as European Community Association Agreement – or ECAA – visas.

For many the wait has now lasted well over a year. During this time, they have been unable to return to Turkey – even after a bereavement, or to see their children – because their visa application would be automatically withdrawn by the Home Office.

The lack of documentation has also left many struggling to prove that they have the right to rent a property, work in

the UK, or send their children to school.

The Migrants' Rights Network, a charity, is working with people affected by the delays. Chief executive Fizza Qureshi told *Civil Service World*'s sister title *PublicTechnology* the situation is splitting up families and causing financial hardship.

"A lot of people are at risk of homelessness and destitution – they do not have recourse to public funds and do not have a safety net. There are also consequences for their businesses," she said.

MRN's representations to the Home Office have been met with the response that the cases subject to delay are those that have inherent "complex issues" – and that applicants remain free to leave the UK if they wish to withdraw their application.

"They are creating their own complexity, and there is a real lack of clarity," Qureshi said.

An end to ECAA

The ECAA – also known as the Ankara Agreement – was implemented in 1973. Before Brexit, its terms enabled Turkish citizens to obtain a visa to work or establish a business in the UK.

The UK's formal departure from the European Union at the end of 2020 marked the closure of all new applications for ECAA visas. But anyone who is already in the UK can apply to extend their visa as many times as they like, according to guidance published on GOV.UK.

Visa extensions of up to three years are available. Those who have been in the UK for more than five years are typically eligible to apply to stay permanently – known as "indefinite leave to remain".

Government data indicates that the looming end of the ECAA visa scheme prompted a surge in applications.

In 2020, the volume of annual applications increased more than fourfold, to 31,821, compared with the previous year. After new applications were closed on 1 January 2021, the number of Turkish nationals applying to work – or continue to work – in the UK fell back to 11,447.

Although 22,784 applicants received a decision last year, the disparity between cumulative claims and resolutions over the past three years stands at more than 12,000.

Of the cases that have been concluded, the proportion of applications for Turkish nationals that have been refused in the last two years stands out when compared with other countries.

In 2020, 44% of all ECAA cases resolved were refused. The highest refusal rate for work visas among the other top 20 countries was 7%.

For cases resolved in 2021, the proportion of ECAA refusals increased to 75%. This means that of the 25,754 applicants across all countries denied a visa to work in the UK in 2021, almost 17,000 were Turkish.

"A lot of people are at risk of homelessness and destitution – they do not have recourse to public funds and do not have a safety net" – *Fizza Qureshi*

Cause of complexity

PublicTechnology spoke to someone we will call Elif, who has been in the UK since 2016. She has been waiting for 14 months for a decision on the renewal of her visa.

"There are thousands of us," she said. "The Home Office is being like a black box about it, not giving any sort of indication as to what the delays are related to. We never know what this so-called complex issue is... there is absolutely no detail."

As of the start of this year, Elif's case was one of 8,079 ECAA applications recorded as being a "work in progress", according to one Home Office dataset.

This waiting list – which stood at just 1,157 at the beginning of 2020 – has grown steadily since, and did not reduce in size at all during 2021.

Ministers have repeatedly been asked parliamentary questions about the cause and scale of delays to the processing of ECAA cases.

Despite the public availability on GOV.UK of the data, in June 2021 immigration minister Kevin Foster claimed Home Office migration statistics "do not capture the number of Turkish Businessperson visa applications which are still to be processed".

Little detail has been provided on what is causing the delays and backlogs, although it is understood that in a number of cases the "complex issues" cited by the department may relate to visa applicants who applied to the government's Bounce Back Loan Scheme during the height of the pandemic.

This is especially problematic in processing applications for indefinite leave to remain. The right to settle permanently in the UK is subject to a "good character requirement" – one of the metrics of which is a test of the applicant's "financial soundness", including debt and any directorships of businesses that have closed.

PublicTechnology asked the Home Office about the cause of the visa delays, how they are being alleviated, and when it expects to clear the existing backlog.

"Where applications to this visa route are straightforward and non-complex, the majority are concluded within our published six-month service standard," a spokesperson said.

"If applications are more complex they may take longer to consider – we have notified customers of this and we aim to conclude each application as quickly as possible."

It is not known whether current home secretary Priti Patel shares her predecessor's distaste for the word "hostile".

But the adjective was conspicuous by its absence from a major speech she made last year setting out an immigration plan for the years ahead. She said the government wished to "fix the system – to make it logical and fair".

Meanwhile, there are 8,000 people who could suggest where that repair work could begin. ■

Sam Trendall is editor of Civil Service World's sister title Public Technology

8,079
Number of ECAA visa applications awaiting a decision as of the beginning of 2022, compared with 1,157 at the start of 2020

44%
Proportion of work visa applications from Turkish nationals that were refused in 2020, compared with a rate of 6% across all other countries

31 DECEMBER 2020
DEADLINE FOR NEW APPLICATIONS FOR ECAA VISAS

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

PT Public Technology.net

Five years after being established, the ONS's Data Science Campus wants to become a "powerhouse" – while still retaining its innovative edge. **Sam Trendall** talks to its acting director **Arthur Turrell** to find out more

THINKING BIG

Over the last decade, many advocates of digital transformation – both within and without Whitehall – have suggested that, for all the differences between the two, government could learn something from start-up culture. The ethos of the tech disruptor has often been invoked in relation to the work of the Government Digital Service, particularly in its early years.

A national statistical office with a history dating back to the Second World War does not share a lot of obvious common ground with a trendy young app publisher from Hoxton or Silicon Valley.

But, in 2017, the Office for National Statistics launched an entity that could be considered its own start-up.

The Data Science Campus, based at the ONS's Newport headquarters, was created to provide an opportunity to innovate – including the time and space to experiment with no guarantee of achieving the desired outcome.

Since then, the facility has delivered 87 projects, through which it has sought to gain unexpected insights from unexplored data sources. This has included studying the likes of quarterly VAT returns and the movement of ships in and out of UK ports to provide indicators of the country's economic performance, and using artificial intelligence-powered natural language processing techniques to help Brexit negotiators comb through responses to public consultations on trade tariffs.

The campus also has a remit to serve as a hub for data-science professionals across the public sector, as well as to increase expertise, both among specialists and the wider workforce – including 1,000 managers that have gone through a Data Masterclass for Senior Leaders.

All of which means that, after five years – and having grown from eight employees to more than 80 – the campus is ready to move into the next stage of its development.

"We are making this transition from start-up to powerhouse," Arthur Turrell, recently appointed as acting director, tells *CSW*.

He arrived at the facility – which also operates from locations in London,

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Titchfield, and Darlington – after five years as a senior research economist at the Bank of England, an institution which Turrell says "got into data science quite early", allowing him to explore emerging analytical techniques.

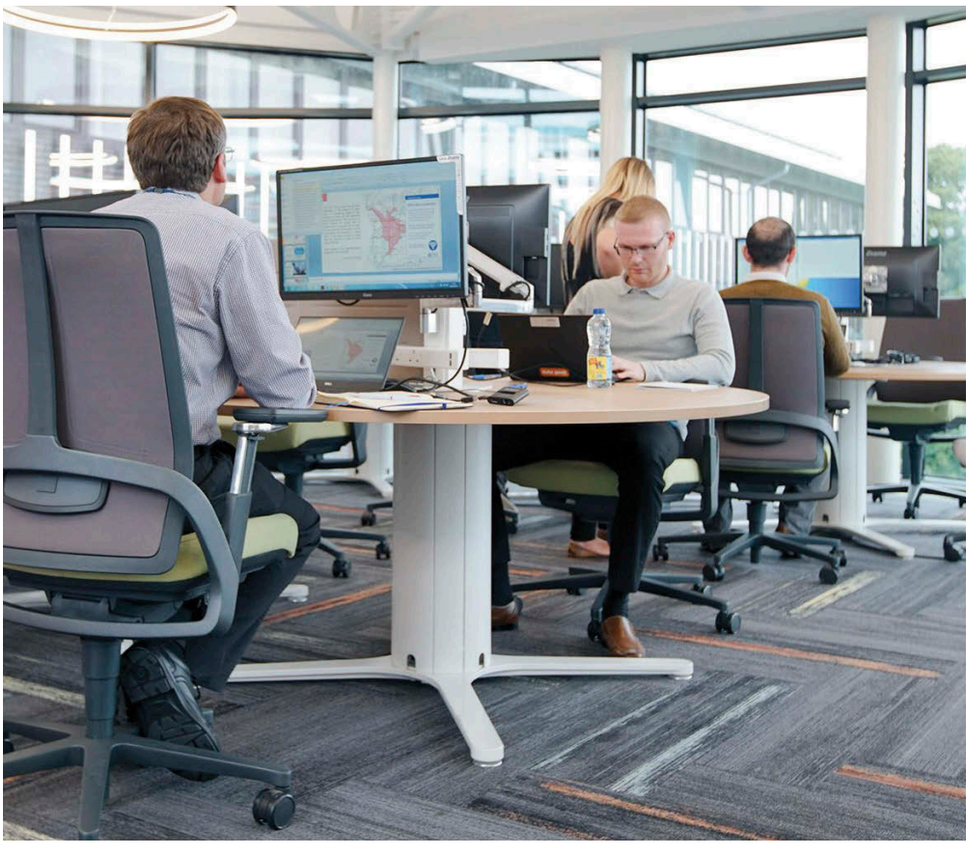
His time at the central bank included a six-month secondment at the US Federal Reserve Board in Washington DC.

Earlier in his career, Turrell spent a number of years in academia and, last summer, he also published a popular science book: *The Star Builders: Nuclear Fusion and the Race to Power the Planet*.

He joined the campus in 2021 as deputy director and has now taken acting charge of the organisation following the departure of former chief Tom Smith.

He says he was attracted by "the chance to apply data science to some of the most important policy questions" currently facing public service. He identifies three core "USPs" of the campus.

"One is access to the best data in the country," he says. "Two, we have the wider public sector remit – we are not just about central government, we are about devolved administrations and ALBs. Three is our appetite for innovation and research. We have to strike the balance between working with policy-relevant things and working [on longer-term] projects. We still want to be a hub for data science: we need to recognise that there are now so many data scientists in the rest of government, that it is also about being a hub for them, where they can come and collaborate."



'The leading edge'

As Turrell suggests, the intended evolution into a "powerhouse" requires the campus to balance two roles, acting not only as an innovator – with an in-built tolerance for failure that is far higher than would be accepted elsewhere in government – but also playing an ever-greater role in supporting major projects and policy imperatives.

Turrell stresses the importance of maintaining an appetite for experimentation – which he says complements the unit's ability to help deliver urgent programmes of work.

"That we innovate and do research – that is one of our USPs. If we are going to be that guiding light, we need to be at the leading edge, and innovation and research is part of that," he says. "I think it is increasingly important over time – especially when we get bigger in scale – that part of the vision for the campus is, as well as doing the short-term, high-priority policy-need stuff, we keep space for innovation and research. And that really benefits the short-term work as well: when there is a crisis and we need to work fast and respond to the policy demands of the day, that innovation helps."

"I want us to make a major contribution to the cost-of-living crisis and levelling up"

Of course, government's work over the past two years has largely consisted of responding to a crisis, in the shape of a global pandemic. The Data Science Campus has played its part in helping shape this response with initiatives including the analysis of data from CCTV cameras to help better understand social distancing in urban areas and its relationship with the spread of coronavirus, as well as the impact on city centre commerce as restrictions were lifted.

Turrell points out that local authorities typically own the cameras, with imagery often already made available publicly for use by transport sector professionals.

The campus studied new and historical data – beginning from March 2020 – drawn from cameras in Durham, London, Southend, Reading, Manchester, northeast England and Northern Ireland. The locations were chosen to provide a range of settings, from rural areas, through small and mid-sized towns and onto big cities. A cloud computing environment was created, with automated feeds providing updated information every 10 minutes.

A report on the project published by ONS concludes that "traffic camera data can offer tremendous value to public authorities by providing real-time statistics to monitor the busyness of local populations... [which] can inform policy interventions such as those seen during the coronavirus pandemic".

The campus hopes its methods can once again play a supporting role in enabling government's response to other looming emergencies.

"I want us to make a major contribution to the cost-of-living crisis and levelling up," Turrell says.

The ONS has previously experiment- »

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ed with the use of so-called web scraping technologies to track online retail prices, and the campus intends to further this work in the coming months by keeping ongoing tabs on supermarket pricing, as listed in their online stores.

Data scientists will also build on work undertaken during the pandemic to provide insights into global supply chains. As part of the campus's economic indicators work, worldwide

"I think permanent secretaries get that data science is the key to delivering lots of benefits, but also to deliver more and better analytical insights. Because what policymakers really want to know is why something happens"

GPS information is already used to track the movement of ships.

"We knew that the ships that were bringing goods into the country were backed up outside ports," Turrell says.

The ambition is now to derive information from bills of lading – the documents issued by shipping firms to importers containing information on the cargo being carried.

Turrell says that this could enable better understanding of levels of supply of goods, and help spot patterns and possible shortages.

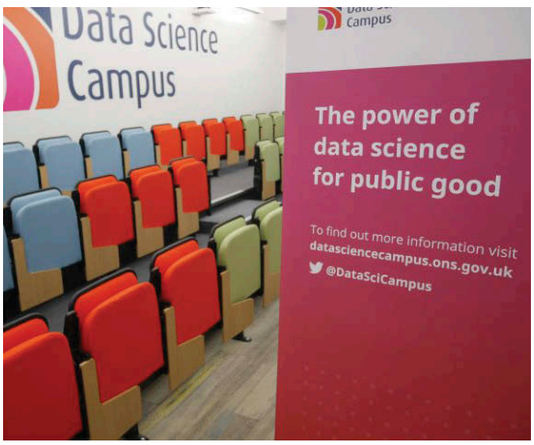
"We know where the ships are, but what we would like to know is what is on them... and what does it mean if a ship is, for example, 70% trousers and 30% iPhones? And how many units does this equate to?" he adds.

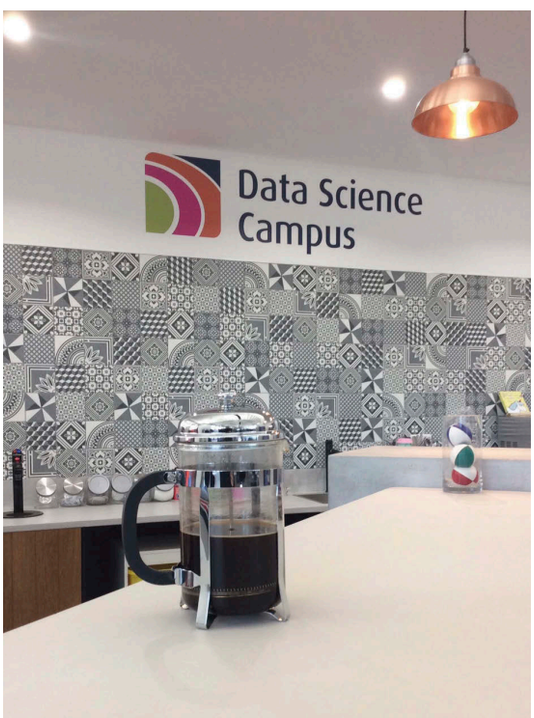
Big ambitions

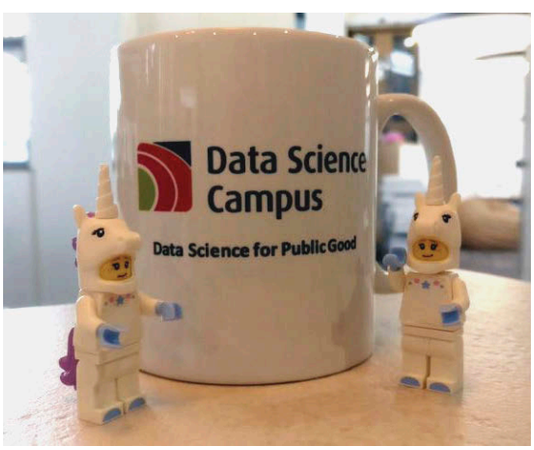
Such a project – involving the collection and collation of big data sources – is an archetype of the kind of work in which the campus specialises.

Big data refers to large volumes of information that is, invariably, complex and unstructured – making it much harder to organise and analyse. This contrasts somewhat with the traditional work of the ONS, in which information is precisely gathered, often through surveys designed especially for that purpose.

Turrell believes that the tried-and-trusted methods of statistical research can combine with the more experimental techniques of the campus. "I think there is a complementary role," he says.







Innovative data science has begun to play a part not just in the rest of the statistical profession, but in the work of government more widely; last year, the campus delivered training to 4,000 people, according to the campus director.

CSW wonders whether Turrell thinks permanent secretaries have grasped the potential of data science, and are supportive of its use by policy and delivery professionals.

"My sense is a strong 'yes'," he says. "I think they get that data science is the key to delivering lots of benefits, but also to deliver more and better analytical insights. Because what policymakers really want to know is why something happens."

To better enable this to happen, the campus runs two-month accelerator programmes for government analysts to study data science and data visualisation.

"We pair up someone with a mentor; they can learn some data science from us and take it back to their home department," Turrell says.

He adds that he considers it "a great success of data science if people are using" its methods without necessarily knowing that they are doing so.

"Not all data science is going to be embedded... but there are some things which are just so useful and, hopefully, a bit more accessible, and my ambition is that these things will be completely embedded," he says.

The campus also wishes to remain as a central hub for experts – and attract and retain some of the best talent the sector has to offer.

Government has long faced difficulties in competing for staff with private sector employers. Such challenges are especially steep in a field where skills are so in demand.

"I may be biased, but I think we have a really, really strong proposition in many ways," Turrell says. "Firstly, we have the most exciting data in the UK – whether it be economic or social. If you are in a private firm, the main data that you have is about your customers, or sales or products."

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1000

Number of government senior leaders that have taken the campus's data masterclass

27 March 2017

Date on which the campus was founded

87

Number of projects data scientists have completed, with 31 currently ongoing

80

Approximate number of staff at the campus, having risen from just eight five years ago

10 minutes

Intervals at which the campus gathered CCTV images from thousands of cameras around the country to help understand urban movement trends during the pandemic

He adds. "What data scientists really want to do is data science – and the campus is a fantastic place to come and do that. Public policy is really interesting; if people want to make a difference and make an impact on the world, then you can do that – you can work on the UK's most important issues, whether it is supply chains, the cost-of-living crisis or Covid-19, and this is a place where you can really make a difference. There are obviously always constraints in the public sector in terms of pay – and that is challenging in a world where data scientists are so well remunerated. But we have an appetite for innovation and research, and you can really make a difference."

As part of its journey from start-up to powerhouse, the campus is "really thinking about our delivery model", according to Turrell. This model is summarised as: explore; embed; enable.

To support this, the position of head of delivery was recently created. Sharon Hill, a 30-year veteran of the ONS – and an expert in agile project methodologies – has been appointed to the Grade 6 role. The post sits at the head of a delivery-management team, which will be "borrowing things from the software-developing world" and applying them to the data science projects, Turrell says.

The likely focus of these projects is reflected by the area of interest of each of the nine data science "squads" housed within the campus.

These include: levelling up; economic insights; trade, ships and global supply chain; data capability, mobility; Covid-19; and net zero.

The penultimate squad is run jointly with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and focuses on international development.

The last of the units is dedicated to synthetic data – which uses real information to automatically generate comparable anonymised data sets. This allows analysts to study individual, rather than aggregate, trends – without compromising privacy.

"Synthetic data is an emerging area of technology; if we could unlock it, there could be big benefits," Turrell says.

And, five years after starting up, it's just one of a growing number of ways in which the Data Science Campus is thinking big. ■

LIFE

BOOKS_FILMS_THEATRE_TV_
PLACES_MUSIC_HISTORY_FOOD
THINGS TO DO OUTSIDE THE OFFICE

BOOK

House style

An eloquent and impartial critique of the arcane mechanics of Westminster, Dr Hannah White's impressive debut book is a timely and fantastic tool for unpicking the workings of Parliament

- **Held in Contempt: What's wrong with the House of Commons?**
- **By Hannah White**
- **Publisher Manchester University Press**

Brexit and the pandemic have shown both how important parliamentary procedure is and how ripe it is for reform. In her new book, *Held in Contempt*, Dr Hannah White argues persuasively that for the public to have confidence in the Commons, they should stand a chance of understanding how it works.

The deputy director of the Institute for Government, White previously ran the Committee on Standards in Public Life in the Cabinet Office, and before that was a clerk in the House of Commons advising on parliamentary procedure. Her extensive knowledge gained from over a decade of experience in parliament and the civil service is evident throughout her debut book.

Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic have placed parliament front and centre in the public consciousness, so the book is well timed and should attract readers beyond SW1. Impartial expertise is often lacking from public commentary on how the House of Commons works, making this book relatively unique. For this reason, it has never been more important to understand how the House works. *Held in Contempt* is a fantastic tool for unpicking the workings of parliament and offering the reader an insight to the House of Commons that very few have. White eloquently captures the importance of the work of the House, and particularly its ability to scrutinise the government.

White is also incisive in identifying where improvements to the parliamentary system should be made. Indeed, the difficulty in receiving timely answers to parliamentary questions has been a problem since the early months of the pandemic that continues, even now, to be a subject close to my committee's heart. Other problems, such as the level of abuse received by (particularly women) MPs, is severe enough that it actively causes MPs to leave parliament or to never want to join at all. White quite reasonably concludes that this has the potential to negatively affect the make-up of the House of Commons for years to come.

"It has never been more important to understand how the House works - Held in Contempt is a fantastic tool for unpicking the workings of parliament"

The book's strength – its impartial expertise – is also perhaps why there is a lack of explanation of the politics of parliament. While White acknowledges that the reduced role of parliament "to some extent has been due to the unavoidable constraints on the operation of government, but it has also been a matter of political choice," a further chapter expanding on how political context has shaped the House of Commons would improve what is already a very impressive debut – perhaps something for a second edition?

Brexit and the pandemic have – somewhat surprisingly – not proven to be crises leading to change. The Commons is still adjusting itself (slowly) to the new requirements of legislating in a United Kingdom which has left the European Union, and the balance of opinion in the House is to return to and reinforce many if not all of the traditional ways of doing things. The book's conclusion acknowledges that no change will come until a government wishes it to. ■

Karen Bradley Conservative MP for Staffordshire Moorlands and chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee

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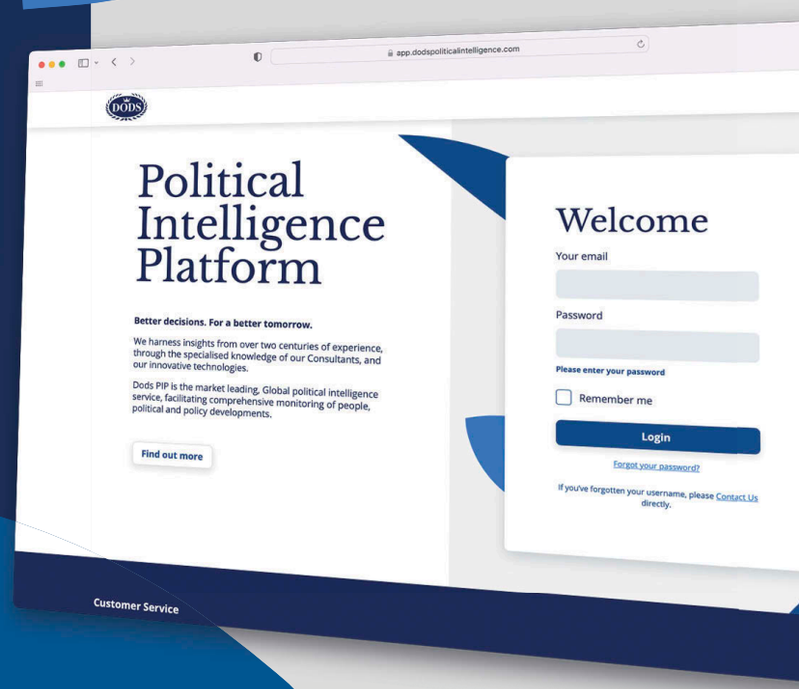

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