CSW

Issue 323 | Spring 2023 | www.civilserviceworld.com

Security and Policing focus

Border Force chief Phil Douglas

The National Crime Agency's Dr Lauren Wilson

Science and tech in policing

Building cyber resilience

HOME IMPROVEMENT

Sir Matthew Rycroft

on his work to transform the Home Office

WORKING ON COMMISSION

Gisela Stuart reflects on one year as first civil service commissioner

THE GREAT BEYOND

Former civil servants share why they left – and what would bring them back

SCIENCE OF THE TIMES

The legacy of chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance as he leaves government

TRADING PLACES

Your guide to the international trade profession

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Published by
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FROM THE EDITOR

As we write this, your *CSW* team are surrounded by moving boxes, preparing to shift our official HQ a few miles along the banks of the Thames to Millbank Tower. Among those boxes are several hundred – 322 to be precise – neatly ordered issues of *Civil Service World* and its predecessor title *Whitehall and Westminster World*.

When we launched 322 issues and 19 years ago, we aimed to help government leaders communicate across departmental divides – this was back before such things as all-staff newsletters and cross-government blogs, let alone more notorious communication methods such as Twitter and WhatsApp.

Over the years, government has changed and we have changed with it, moving from a fortnightly newspaper to a daily news website and a monthly publication. Now, we're changing again. Not the daily news – you can still rely on us for that, and you can get it straight to your inbox with our free newsletter as well. But the magazine has morphed into a new, quarterly publication – and the first issue is in your hands now.

The change to a quarterly reflects our central mission: to help senior civil servants in their professional lives with a range of informed and informative articles. Our online daily news and analysis aim to keep you bang-up-to-date with the issues and stories that matter, but we wanted to create a space for more long-form pieces, practical case studies and in-depth articles that step back from the day-to-day agenda and offer a chance to reflect on all aspects of a civil servant's job.

In the new magazine you'll find sections exploring some of those different aspects, from parliament and constitutional work to digital and data, a regular policy focus and articles on the complexities of being a leader in government.

Though our policy focus this month is security & policing, another theme has also emerged throughout the issue: challenge.

Speaking truth to power is a central part of the civil servant's role – or, at least, it should be – but in the current climate of political turbulence and ministerial distrust, it can be hard to offer effective challenge. We look at this question in a number of ways across the magazine. In our cover interview, for example, Home Office permanent secretary Matthew Rycroft *(p.28)* reflects on the challenge that his team gave to the controversial Rwanda deportation scheme before it became official government policy. Elsewhere, digital leader Paul Maltby *(p.72)* discusses the times when challenge is a bad thing (hint: when it's done just to have something to say), and former perm sec Dame Una O'Brien uses her new column to suggest ways leaders can create a culture that encourages challenge *(p.17)*. On page 80, we also have the reflections of a former senior civil servant on the importance of standing your ground with truthful but unpalatable information.

We hope the revamped *CSW* will enlighten and entertain you, offering food for thought and perhaps a few practical nuggets that will make your job easier.

Like any good delivery team, we will be learning as we go and improving our product as we gather user feedback so we would love to hear yours through email (csw.editor@civilserviceworld.com) or Twitter (@CSWnews). ■

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

DISTRIBUTED BY Magprint

PUBLISHED BY
·Total·Politics·

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ISSN 2515-0235 (Print)

Boundless announces four charity partners for 2023

Public sector and civil service membership club Boundless has announced the four inspirational charities it will partner with in 2023 through the Boundless Foundation.

Public sector and civil service membership club Boundless has announced the four inspirational charities it will partner with in 2023 through the Boundless Foundation.

Each year Boundless supports a range of charities which help those working in or retired from public sector or civil service roles, and that are close to its members' hearts. This year its chosen charities are Education Support, Air Ambulances UK, the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship and The Charity for Civil Servants.

Launched in 2016, the Boundless Foundation has so far raised £150,000 for previous charity partners thanks to the generous support and fundraising efforts of its members. Each week Boundless members can pay £1 to play the Boundless Foundation lottery for a chance to win prizes. All funds raised go directly to the Boundless Foundation and are distributed to its chosen charities.

Boundless encourages its members to fundraise for its Foundation charities and runs a scheme where it will donate £5 to Education Support, the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship and The Charity for Civil Servants each time a supporter of that charity becomes a member.

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and education staff in schools, colleges and universities. The charity's head of fundraising Laura Larrett said: *"It's an honour that Boundless has chosen to partner with Education Support. We feel it's an organisation that shares our values about the importance of education staff making the most of their free time.*

"The membership is great value for money and it's been such a bonus to be able to provide something of real value to our supporters. The money-saving is especially helpful during these challenging times and aligns well with the financial support we offer to education staff in times of need."

While the Charity for Civil Servants helps current and former civil servants with practical, financial and emotional support, the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship is dedicated to helping former civil servants and their dependants make the most of their retirement.

Graham Hooper, CEO, Charity for Civil Servants with James Street, Group Business Development Manager at Boundless. Photo by Seb Higgins.

This is the second year Boundless has pledged support for the charity, having donated £5,000 to the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship at the end of 2022.

Chief executive David Tickner said: *"Last year the Boundless Foundation's generous donation of £5,000 made an important contribution to our national fundraising initiatives and supported the delivery of our charitable services. We are looking forward to building on that relationship this year to enable all of us to extend the important work we carry out for former and current civil servants and their dependents."*

Graham Hooper, CEO of the Charity for Civil Servants, said: *"This is a fantastic opportunity for us to work together to deliver on exciting plans for civil servants – current, former and retired. We want everyone to get involved in raising funds, enabling us to reach civil servants with advice and support services, whenever life gets tough."*

Air Ambulances UK supports the life-saving work of all the UK's air ambulance charities, which are collectively dispatched to more than 100 lifesaving missions every day, delivering advanced pre-hospital care to people with a sudden life-threatening injury or illness.

CEO Simmy Akhtar said: *"We are delighted to be supported by the Boundless Foundation and their members to help air ambulance charities across the UK save even more lives. Each lifesaving mission by air costs on average £3,962 and are funded almost entirely by donations. Every penny counts towards saving lives across the UK."*

This year Boundless is celebrating its centenary, and the club remains committed to supporting its members to make the most of their free time and save money along the way.

Colin Slinn, CEO of Boundless, said: *"This year, as we mark 100 years of supporting our members, I am proud and delighted that we are partnering with four excellent charities through our Boundless Foundation. The Charity for Civil Servants, The Civil Service Retirement Fellowship, Education Support and Air Ambulances UK all provide invaluable services, and we are very excited to be supporting the important work they all do."*

boundless
BY CSMA

For more information about Boundless, please visit www.boundless.co.uk.

MOVERS & SHAKERS

Want to hone your dinner party gossip about who's in, who's out and who's shakin' it all about? Look no further than *CSW*'s quarterly guide to all the key moves in government

SAGE ADVICE

Dame Angela McLean has been appointed as the first-ever female government chief scientific adviser, taking over from **Sir Patrick Vallance**.

Dame Angela McLean

McLean is currently the Ministry of Defence's chief scientific adviser and will move to her new role on 1 April. She will provide independent scientific advice to the prime minister and members of cabinet and lead the government science and engineering profession.

Sir Patrick Vallance

A professor of mathematical biology at Oxford University's Department of Zoology, McLean has played a key role in the government's response to Covid. She has been a regular attendee of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies that provided evidence for the government's pandemic response, and also chaired the SAGE subgroup Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, or SPI-M-O, which prepared advice for government using epidemiology, data analysis and mathematical modelling.

McLean will also be part of the executive team of the newly formed Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. The department's aim will be to grow the economy by generating high-skilled jobs and driving improvements in health, education and transport. ■

MOVING UP A LEVEL

Ed Whiting, David Cameron's former deputy principal private secretary, has been hired as a levelling-up director by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Whiting, who left the civil service in 2016, started work in his new Leeds-based role in February.

Writing on social media, Whiting said details of his new role were "TBC" but likely to include "a big focus" on working with authorities and organisations across northern England on economic growth and prosperity.

"I'll be based in Leeds, hoping to be travelling round North and London often too," he said on Twitter. "Thrilled to be working in my hometown for the first time as a grown up. I love Leeds, and have enjoyed seeing more of it since we moved back up here. I'm excited about its future and how we get there." ■

COMMS CI COMMS ÇA

Helen Bower-Easton is joining the Financial Conduct Authority as director of communications, replacing Tom Willetts.

Bower-Easton moves to the FCA from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, where she has been comms director since 2017. Before that she was official spokesperson for prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May. ■

REARRANGING THE PERM-SEC CHAIRS

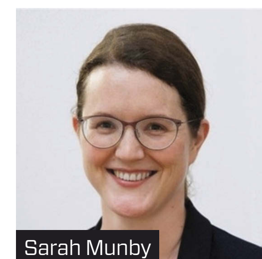
Rishi Sunak's reorganisation of government departments led to a reshuffle of permanent secretaries stretching from the three new business, energy and science departments to the levelling-up ministry.

Jeremy Pocklington

Jeremy Pocklington has moved from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to lead the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

Pocklington spent two years as a DG in the Department of Energy and Climate Change – the department some have said Sunak is recreating in DESNZ – before the then-PM Theresa May shut it down in 2016. He was subsequently director general for energy and security at BEIS before moving to the housing ministry in 2018.

Pocklington will be joined by BEIS's recently appointed second perm sec, **Clive Maxwell**, who will take up the second perm sec role at DESNZ. Maxwell was BEIS's director general of energy transformation between 2014 and 2017, before spending five years as DG of high speed rail at DfT.


Sarah Munby

Sarah Munby, who has headed up the now-defunct Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy since 2020, will now lead another of its offshoot departments: the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. New government chief scientific adviser **Angela McLean** will also be based in DSIT.

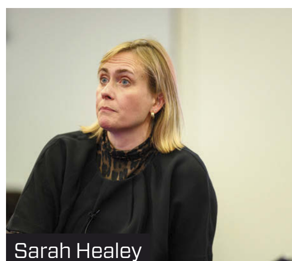
Gareth Davies, who became perm sec at the Department for International Trade a month before that department was wound down, will take the helm at its replacement, the Department for Business and Trade. Davies previously worked as a director general in BEIS, before becoming second perm sec at the Department for Transport in 2021.

Gareth Davies

Replacing Pocklington at DLUHC will be **Sarah Healey**, who has spent

Pippa Fowles No 10 Downing Street. Strand group.

the last four years heading up the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Prior to this she was a director general in DCMS, and has also worked in the Department for Exiting the European Union as well as the education and work and pensions departments.


Sarah Healey

Ruth Hannant and **Polly Payne**, job-share directors general for culture, sport and civil society at DCMS – which has retained its acronym but dropped its "digital" brief – were appointed as interim perm sec while a new perm sec is recruited. ■

IT'S THE ECONOMIST, STUPID

Clare Lombardelli is stepping down as the Treasury's chief economic adviser to become chief economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Clare Lombardelli

Lombardelli has worked in government since 2005, after starting her career as an economist at the Bank of England. During this time, her positions have included principal private secretary to the chancellor and private secretary for economic affairs to the prime minister. She has also worked as a technical adviser for the International Monetary Fund.

> **"I have loved my time in the civil service – it has been a huge privilege to work with such talented colleagues as we've tackled the UK's biggest economic challenges"**
> ***Clare Lombardelli***

"I have loved my time in the civil service and the Treasury – it has been a huge privilege to work with such talented, dedicated and supportive colleagues as we've tackled the UK's biggest economic challenges," she said. ■

LAST BUT NOT LEAST…

Sir John Armitt has been re-appointed as chair of the National Infrastructure Commission for two years until January 2025. **Julia Prescot** was appointed as deputy chair until April 2027.

Sir John Armitt

Professor Richard Prager was appointed as chief scientific adviser at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, succeeding **Professor Alan Penn**.

Julia Prescot

Alyson King OBE has been appointed as His Majesty's ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo from April, succeeding **Emily Maltman** who will be transferring to another diplomatic service appointment.

Sarah Cardell was appointed chief executive of the Competition and Markets Authority, having held the position of interim chief executive since July 2022.

Adam Williams

Adam Williams joins the Intellectual Property Office as chief executive and comptroller-general.

Sir Mark Walport, **Baroness Mary Watkins** and **Professor Sir Simon Wessely** have been appointed as non-executive directors of NHS England for three years. Meanwhile **Paul Heath**, **Chris Hughes** and **Caroline Trotter** have been made members of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation for three years.

Sir Mark Walport

Baroness Mary Watkins

Tim Reid became chief executive of UK Export Finance on 1 January.

Dame Alison Nimmo was appointed lead non-executive director of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities board for three years until 8 December 2025.

Sarah Cooke will become British high commissioner to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, succeeding Robert Chatterton Dickson.

Sir William Worsley

Sir William Worsley was re-appointed as chair of the Forestry Commission for three years until February 2026.

Dame Alison Nimmo

Vinay Talwar has been appointed as His Majesty's ambassador to the Republic of Djibouti from April, succeeding **Jo McPhail** who will be transferring to another diplomatic service appointment. **Simon Walters** becomes His Majesty's ambassador to the State of Israel from August, succeeding **Neil Wigan OBE** who will be transferring to another diplomatic service appointment.

Lord Amyas Morse

Lord Amyas Morse, formerly head of the National Audit Office, will be interim chair of the new Office for Local Government. ■

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

James Shaw, RCPsy, RCPsy, BIS Digital Image Library, HM Treasury

DIRECTORS' CUT

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

CHRIS CARR

Director of Brexit Opportunities Unit, Cabinet Office

What does that involve?
Primarily the "Brexit freedoms" bill, but also wider work on non-legislative opportunities like better regulation.

To do your job well you need...
to be plugged into the needs of a wide range of stakeholders. My team constantly has its ear to the ground when it comes to the support businesses need to make a success of life outside the EU.

First job in government?
Tax inspector trainee (1996)

Proudest achievement to date?
Lord Heseltine's *No Stone Unturned* (2012), which set out a comprehensive plan to improve the UK's ability to create wealth, involving proposals to unleash the potential of local economies and enable every part of the UK economy to raise its game.

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Playing switchboard operator in private office when my minister was phoning from Rome to agree lines in real time for a colleague to use on *Question Time*. This was before Zoom or Teams, so I was literally juggling three phones in the office on my own at 10pm.

"The best piece of professional advice I've been given? Choose jobs that interest you over those you think will advance you" ***Chris Carr***

If you weren't a civil servant you'd be...
I've never thought of that. I'd like to say musician or pilot, but probably a lawyer or academic.

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
Choose jobs that interest you over those you think will advance you.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
I'd suggest colleagues at all levels understand the value of giving advice, even if that advice isn't followed to the letter. Offering expertise is what we do best in the civil service, and it always helps ministers reach the decisions they have to make. ■

ROBERT JONES

Intermediaries director, HM Revenue and Customs

What does that involve?
We work to transform HMRC's approach to those various bodies (paid tax agents and other "intermediaries") that act in some way between HMRC and its customers. Our aim is to make the system more efficient while driving up market standards and ensuring customers are properly protected.

To do your job well you need…
Strong internal and external stakeholder engagement skills to build a persuasive, evidence-based case for change and then drive forward whatever action is needed to make that change.

First job in government?
An immigration officer at Dover stamping passports, interviewing asylum seekers and searching lorries – there was a separate immigration and customs function back then and I interviewed travellers entering the country.

Proudest achievement to date?
Probably setting up the first national response to victims of human trafficking. We were implementing an international treaty in UK law, meaning that for the first time there would be a multi-agency framework for identifying and providing protection for victims of trafficking. Within a year, we'd identified the first victims and provided them with appropriate, targeted support. It was a frantic period of change with a tangible outcome which provided the basis of today's modern slavery response.

Bribe-to-be Jones was offered Chinese medicine as a sweetener

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Working for the immigration office landed me in some strange situations, from a night in the back of a van with Essex police waiting for a vehicle suspected of carrying illegal immigrants to unload, to being offered a bribe of Chinese medicine. Memorably, I once interviewed a traveller who had already been refused entry to the UK, but insisted it was her first visit. When shown her details on the computer she claimed that was her identical twin sister, same name and everything. I asked if this was very confusing for her family, but she said it never caused problems, then invited me out for dinner. I refused, of course!

If you weren't a civil servant you'd be…
a forester – I like trees and woodland. I was a chef for a while so I could have done that, or maybe a professional tennis player if I'd had any talent!

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
To identify and control risk but not be scared of it. You have to take risks to make a difference.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
I'd make it less constrained by bureaucracy and process, and to have a greater appetite for risk and be more willing to fail and learn from it. ■

CONRAD BIRD

Director of campaigns and marketing, Cabinet Office

What does that involve?
Overseeing government paid-for campaigns (assessing them for value and effectiveness), as well as delivering major cross-government PM priority campaigns, such as for Covid-19 and most recently on the cost of living.

To do your job well you need…
Resilience, optimism, a good sense of humour and a powerful desire to do public good.

First job in government?
Strategic communications at the now defunct Central Office of Information.

Proudest achievement to date?
Receiving a CBE for my work on the GREAT Britain Campaign, and 23 months of Covid-19 communications (including creating the "hands, face, space" slogan!)

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Hard to give just one… being grilled by 23 editors for four hours in the Democratic Republic of Congo on the subject of Great Britain without an interpreter; a fleeting visit to war-torn Eritrea, taking only a laptop and PowerPoint presentation; persuading David Bailey to photograph Her Majesty and presenting three major campaigns to a former PM in under 10 minutes…

If you weren't a civil servant you'd be…
A cartoonist.

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
Make a decision and move on.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
Recognise and value the importance (and messiness) of creativity in everything we do – take more risks. ■

EMMA FRASER

Co-director for housing markets and strategy, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

What does that involve?
We're responsible for developing the overall housing strategy for government, how the market as a whole operates (including home buying and selling) and overseeing the performance of many of our big housing investment programmes, including Help to Buy.

To do your job well you need...
A diverse, motivated and committed team! As directors, we can only succeed through the leadership, skills and enthusiasm of the people who work for us, so investing in attracting and retaining great people in the team is absolutely critical.

First job in government?
As an executive officer, working on the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 in the Department of Health (which was then responsible for children's services). Something must have stuck. I did two more health and social care bills in the next five years.

Proudest achievement to date?
When my 15-year-son told me that he'd learned about Ebbsfleet Garden City in his GCSE geography lesson as an example of good urban planning and design. I was able to tell him that I'd set up the development corporation that delivers the garden city and had worked on the masterplans for the site!

On the syllabus Ebbsfleet Garden City

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Getting stuck in a lift in the House of Commons with a very senior minister. I won't say which one.

If you weren't a civil servant you'd be...
A detective. I spent a year in the Home Office in a finance and strategy role and was inspired by the visits I did with local police forces. They do their job – often going above and beyond what they're paid to do – in hugely challenging circumstances.

"As directors, we can only succeed through the leadership, skills and enthusiasm of the people who work for us, so attracting and retaining great people in the team is critical" ***Emma Fraser***

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
Before going into a stakeholder meeting or event, to think about who I want to be in the discussion, rather than worrying about the detail of what I need to say. The overall impression you leave is much more important than landing a few clever points.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
I'd like to see people staying in policy areas for longer. I worry that many people end up moving roles (or departments) just at the point that they have developed genuine expertise, which the government's reform agenda is already working to address. ■

JANET HUGHES

Director of farming reforms at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

What does that involve?
I lead a wonderful team who are, with our delivery partners and stakeholders, taking England out of the Common Agricultural Policy, phasing out farming subsidies and instead investing the money to support food production and productivity, as well as improvements to the environment, climate and animal health and welfare.

To do your job well you need...
The serenity to accept the things you cannot change, courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

First job in government?
In the Government Digital Service, 10 years ago – I was part of the team that transferred all 24 government departments

onto GOV.UK. I loved it, it was a real highlight of my career.

Proudest achievement to date?
I wouldn't single out a particular achievement, that's not really what it's about for me – I'm much more interested in and proud of the long, patient, hard and often uncelebrated work involved in building relationships, ways of working and trust within teams, with delivery partners and with our users and stakeholders.

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work
I once lost an MP in rural Uganda. Fortunately, we found each other again a couple of hours later!

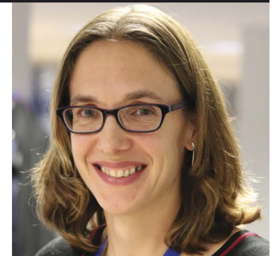
If you weren't a civil servant you'd be...
A gardener. I absolutely love my tiny south London garden and my allotment. Gardening calms me down and keeps my feet on the ground. I love it almost as much as I love delivering complicated things in government. Almost...

Happens to the best of us Hughes once lost an MP in rural Uganda

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
Leadership isn't about becoming brilliant at everything, or somehow overcoming your inevitable weaknesses. It's about understanding what you have to offer and what you need others to bring to the table, and then cultivating the right combination of people and ways of working so that you and your team can thrive and deliver your best work.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
I'd make it possible for everyone at all levels of the civil service to regularly spend time with the people affected by their work, listening to what they have to say and learning about how things work for them. ■

EMILY ANTCLIFFE



Director of individuals policy, HM Revenue and Customs

What does that involve?
I'm responsible for the policy within HMRC on all personal taxes, pensions, NICs and welfare – working closely with the Treasury though the policy partnership.

To do your job well you need...
To really care about all the people who work in your directorate, and invest in getting to know them and letting them know about you.

First job in government?
Working in Defra's science directorate, looking at how we could use horizon scanning in policymaking.

Proudest achievement to date?
Work: Delivering the Eat Out to Help Out scheme – from a standing start to delivery in about two weeks! Non-work: Running a sub three-hour marathon or completing a half ironman.

Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work?
Finding myself in a field in Somerset, in the dark, looking through night-vision googles to see how effective they were. Less bizarre but quite fun was travelling to Milan to eat beef cooked by an Italian celebrity chef to celebrate the lifting of the British beef ban in Europe!

If you weren't a civil servant you'd be...
either a vet or working in the food industry (I was offered a job on a food production management graduate scheme a week before getting the offer from the civil service.)

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?
You will drop a plate at some point – what matters is how you pick it up again.

If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?
The confidence of the people who work here – we do truly amazing things as an organisation and I don't think we are very good at owning that and shouting it from the roof--tops! ■

Eat Out to Help Out From a standing start to delivery in a fortnight

ANDRÉ SPICER STUCK IN THE MIDDLE WITH YOU

MIDDLE MANAGERS ARE MUCH MALIGNED BUT THEIR ROLE IN NAVIGATING THE TRICKY TERRAIN BETWEEN THE TOP TEAM AND THE FRONTLINE IS A VITAL ONE

A few weeks ago, I was surrounded by middle managers from a major government department. We were on the top floor of a collaborative working space. The surroundings were more bar than office. The middle managers were clearly trying to blend in. They had traded suits and ties for the kind of calculated casual you expect at an away day.

The topic of the event was innovation, but what got most of the middle managers excited was the barriers they face. It was clear that many of them wanted to do something innovative, but also knew that any new proposal they had was likely to die. When they were asked why this happened, there were many culprits. The most reviled of all was middle managers themselves.

Middle managers are certainly not popular. Their underlings see them as petty tyrants, while senior executives deride them as myopic functionaries. What struck me during this discussion was just how much middle managers can hate themselves. One of the most vociferous critics of middle management is often middle managers themselves!

Although it might seem easy to blame many of the problems of many organisations on the middle management, research suggests they are actually a vital part of getting anything done. The late Steven Floyd, an American business school professor, spent decades studying the difference middle managers make. His research showed that the great visions of corporate leaders only get transformed into reality through a lot of work by middle managers. In one study, Floyd pointed out that middle managers can make a large difference through either improving the quality of decisions which are made or more efficiently implementing decisions. We also know from decades of research that middle managers often make a huge difference to employees' experience of the workplace. Surveys have shown that one of the single biggest explanations of people's level of job satisfaction is the quality of their manager.

The vital role these managers play in organisational performance has recently been highlighted by Zahira Jaser from the University of Sussex. After spending a career in middle management in the financial industry, Jaser was interested in finding out what made a good middle manager. She discovered that the best middle managers were those who sought to bring together their subordinates and superiors in strategic ways. She noticed that these managers did so in different ways. There were the tightrope walkers who sought to diplomatically balance the demands of their superiors and subordinates. There were conduits who saw their job as selectively 'amplifying' the voices of their subordinates upwards. There were the brokers who sought to strategically connect people from upper and lower echelons. And finally there were the 'janus faced' managers – who showed one face to their followers and another to their leaders.

Jaser noticed that each of these strategies could work, but each came with demands. Often brokering the tensions between fed-up followers and senior managers who wanted things done rapidly was difficult. They often found themselves cognitively over-loaded, emotionally burnt out and feeling stuck in double-binds. However, she did notice that the most skillful middle managers found ways of balancing these tensions in ways which allowed them to get things done.

The research has some important lessons for any organisation. First, leaders of most organisations spend a lot of time worrying about who is appointed to the top management team. While this is important, perhaps they should spend a little more time worrying about who sits in the middle. Second, lower-level employees often assume their boss is being unreasonable, stupid or cruel. Much of the time, their boss is simply trying to balance the competing demands of their followers and their boss. This means a big question people should ask themselves is not just "what does my boss want?", but also "what does my boss's boss want?". Finally, middle managers need to be a little easier on themselves. It is a hard job and you will often find yourself stuck in the middle of unresolvable tensions. Often simply acknowledging these tensions and seeking support in dealing with them can help turn a lose-lose situation into something which can be managed. ■

"Middle managers need to be a little easier on themselves and should seek support in dealing with the tensions inherent in their roles"

André Spicer is the executive dean of Bayes Business School and a professor of organisational behaviour

DAVE PENMAN THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE, AND PARTICULARLY AT THE HEART OF GOVERNMENT, MATTER. WHEN THEY'RE ALLOWED TO FALL BY THE WAYSIDE, THE EFFECT IS CORROSIVE

It has not, by any measure, been a good couple of years for standards in government. The Johnson administration pushed at the boundaries of accepted norms, interspersed by personal failing and scandals.

It ultimately spelled the end for Johnson, and took its toll on those around him. You can see why the current PM tried to put clear blue water between his administration and the previous two by talking about leading a government of accountability and integrity.

He chose those words carefully, taking them from the seven principles of public life, or the Nolan Principles as they are affectionately known (Coleen, I think).

Of course, the pop question is: what are the other five? You'll need to close your eyes for this bit. Selflessness, objectivity, openness, honesty and leadership. If that doesn't get you in the mood for dancing, I don't know what will.

The political consequences of a lack of integrity have been clear to see. It may take time, but the public rightly expects their elected leaders to embody those principles, and the reality of governing is they get tested almost every day. You can only fail those tests for so long before they come back to bite you on the bahookie.

The difficulty, in a civil service context, is that these aren't just policy failures; they are a failure of governing, and that impacts upon the senior leadership of the civil service too.

The ministerial code is actually clear for once: "It is not the role of the cabinet secretary or other officials to enforce the code." There is, however, not only an expectation but a defined role for the civil service in advising ministers and prime ministers not just about policy, but about how they govern.

The civil service code deals with it under political impartiality: "Act in a way which deserves and retains the confidence of ministers, while at the same time ensuring that you will be able to establish the same relationship with those whom you may be required to serve in some future government".

When ministers act in a way that undermines ethical standards in government, there's an expectation that the most senior civil servants have tried to put ministers on the right path.

Those difficult conversations – about behaviour, conduct or conflicts of interest – are part of the role. No one, except those in the room, can fully understand how difficult those conversations are, and must have been over the last few years.

All people see – and by "people", I mean civil servants – is the outcome, and in too many cases that wasn't pretty. So inevitably questions get raised: how hard was the push back?

For all those quick to criticise, they are not the ones who had to deal with a government that – right up to the very "good chap" at the top – had scant regard for ethical standards.

When the failings start with the prime minister, it's very hard under our system to enforce standards, certainly by a civil servant. But the effect is corrosive – it undermines the civil service's leadership and the values so vital for those who choose public service.

"If you trumpet your credentials on ethical leadership, it means taking tough decisions"

Back to our current prime minister. When Sunak appointed his ethics adviser, Sir Laurie Magnus, he chose to keep the same remit as Johnson. That means the PM retains a veto on whether an investigation is conducted, as well as being the arbiter on any outcome.

Sunak didn't have to, of course, and the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommended that he allow the independent adviser to have, well, independence when it comes to investigations. That he didn't do so means every time there's an ethical issue about a minister, it also becomes about the PM's judgment.

Sunak has refused to answer a direct question on whether he knew of concerns about Dominic Raab's conduct when he appointed him deputy prime minister, hiding behind the lack of formal complaints.

As those formal complaints piled in, Sunak could have suspended Raab pending the investigation – that is what would have happened to you or I in similar circumstances. Instead, Raab's doing the broadcast rounds and Sunak's sending a signal to the complainants, whether that's his intent or not.

Leadership is tough and if you trumpet your credentials on ethical leadership, it means taking tough decisions before you're forced to by events. As we've seen with Sunak's predecessors, failing to do so has a corrosive effect beyond No.10 and cabinet. ■

Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union

REVOLUTIONARY THINKING

Civil service reform is always on someone's agenda. But recently, former permanent secretaries have been among those offering unflattering views on the state of Whitehall and the need for change. **Jim Dunton** reports

Politicians who embark on bold civil service reform programmes – or even just talk about the prospect – quickly earn a special degree of notoriety among departmental staff. When former permanent secretaries, independent think tanks or academics broach the prospect of reform, it's a little different.

Former Department for Education perm sec Jonathan Slater and erstwhile Department for Exiting the European Union counterpart Philip Rycroft have both gone on the record with their views in recent weeks. Neither was brimming with praise for the status quo.

Both painted a picture of an organisation hampered by its own traditions, of an imbalance between responsibility to ministers and the delivery of outcomes among permanent secretaries, and of a lack of accountability for the quality of advice provided to political masters.

Their views come more than two years after then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove's Ditchley Lecture on government reform and the Declaration on Government Reform that followed in the summer of 2021, a project now seen as having lost much of its momentum.

Slater and Rycroft argue that civil-service reform should be backed by statute to provide a clear mandate for change. In the process, they say, the power of parliament should increase in contrast to that of ministers.

The civil service would have a clearer framework to get on with its core work, protected from ministerial influence. By the same token, officials should – Slater and Rycroft say – have greater accountability for the quality of advice provided to their political masters.

The former perm secs set out their thinking at a recent event hosted by the think tank Reform.

'Whitehall tries to do too much'

Rycroft said he had "absolutely no doubt" in his mind that Whitehall tried to do too much and that – based on his experience of working at the European Commission – there was an argument for reforming the relationship between civil servants and ministers.

"My own view on this is we do need to turn it into a more transactional relationship, get away from this notion that permanent secretaries are the key adviser to the secretary of state in a close-knit sort of way, with that relationship never being exposed to the glare of public analysis," he said. "I could imagine a system, as you have in Brussels, with all the ministers in one building with their *cabinets*, and this more distant, transactional relationship with the civil service, and those civil servants being held to account for the quality of advice they give pretty much in real time. It sounds a bit scary, but ultimately, that would allow the public to see what the civil service is up to... and it would ultimately be healthy for our democracy."

In the European Commission, a *cabinet* is the personal office of a commissioner and its members are equivalent to special advisers in the UK government.

Slater said the knowledge that departmental decisions would be scrutinised in public had a direct impact on the advice civil servants gave to ministers. He cited Public Accounts Committee sessions as a great example of "uncomfortable" but behaviour-changing scrutiny.

"The civil service isn't going to vote for this, because it's uncomfortable – unless you spend your life doing it, and then it becomes normal," he said.

Slater's career at the helm of DfE ended in the late summer of 2020 when he was sacked over the exams fiasco created by the government's decision to use algorithms to award GCSE and A-Level grades to pupils in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic.

He drew a direct contrast between open policymaking in local government and more opaque processes in Whitehall. He said his council career had seen him play a direct role in setting out the basis for important decisions on local issues, such as school closures, at public meetings.

"I make sure that advice is pretty good. I've got to be able to explain to the kids. I'm not just working out what the minister wants," he said. "It's just open."

Slater suggested that having to set out DfE's evaluation of the options for awarding 2020's exam grades before MPs may have resulted in better decisions being made down the line.

Both Rycroft and Slater were careful to stress the strengths of individual civil servants at the Reform event. But both also described the institution of the civil service as delusional about its place in the world and poorly placed to fix itself.

"The majority of the people at the top of the civil service haven't the faintest idea just how poor it is," Slater said. "Why haven't the people at the top of the civil service got any idea how poor it is? Because they've never done anything else."

Rycroft said he believed the current system was failing many thousands of "good, clever hardworking"

civil servants, and not giving them the opportunities they should have.

"Over time, I think that the place the civil service has in the running of the country has diminished," he said. "If we don't fix things, that process will continue. It's not dramatic, it's not going to fall off the edge of a cliff next week. But it will mean that the civil service is less capable, less confident and less able to influence the functioning of the country than it has been in the past. So I think this is quite serious."

Rycroft acknowledged previous attempts at reform overseen by cabinet secretaries of the day Gus O'Donnell and Jeremy Heywood. But he said reform was never "dropped deep enough into the system".

Pressed about the coalition-era work of former Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude and civil service CEO John Manzoni, Slater acknowledged that they "achieved a lot" but cited the policy profession as a major omission.

"The system can change if the people in charge want it to. Everything has changed about the civil service apart from policy. The red boxes, the submissions. It's all identical," he said.

In addition to a rebalancing of accountability between ministers, officials and parliament, Slater and Rycroft advocate a requirement for prospective members of the senior civil service to have worked outside Whitehall before being considered for promotion. Rycroft believes the minimum should be three years of service in another part of the public sector or in industry.

Growing consensus

Many of their arguments chime with thinking at the Institute for Government, and ideas set out in former prime minister Gordon Brown's *A New Britain: Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy* report, which came out towards the end of last year.

In a report in March 2022, the IfG called for the civil service to be given a new statutory footing that would clarify its role, boost accountability and improve its effectiveness. The report said the civil service's long-term capability and resources are "poorly managed" and a lack of leadership and governance makes strategic, long-term planning difficult. It added that the current system "incentivises diffuse accountability for decision making at the expense of more effective government" and left accountability for failures "publicly unanswered and ambiguous" too often.

IfG programme director Alex Thomas led work on the report, core elements of which are repeated in the think tank's latest *Whitehall Monitor* publication.

He says there is a clear need for the civil service to be able to have greater control over the staffing it requires to support the functioning of government and provide advice about the long-term implications of policy.

Thomas says that the turmoil of the past two years – ranging from the tail-end of the coronavirus pandemic, fallout from the Partygate scandal, the political vacuum at the end of Boris Johnson's time in No.10 and Liz Truss's brief but chaotic spell as PM – has shown why reform is needed.

"The civil service doesn't have author- »

“The majority of the people at the top of the civil service haven’t the faintest idea just how poor it is. They’ve never done anything else” *Jonathan Slater*

ity and legitimacy by magic,” Thomas tells *CSW*. “It has it because of its effectiveness, and so the civil service needs to be constantly demonstrating its effectiveness in order to justify its existence.

“There is a heavy responsibility on the leadership of the civil service to be able to demonstrate that it is as effective as it can be. That requires the civil service to have more of a sense of itself and a restlessness to reform itself.”

Thomas says that the benefit of a statute would be the ability to set out “clear objectives that create a sphere of civil service responsibility” that officials could be held to account for running.

“To do something like that it doesn’t require the prime minister to say ‘this is my number one objective’,” he says. “But it does need the prime minister to give a Cabinet Office minister and the top civil service team licence to explore that kind of possibility.”

The IfG started 2023 with a call for Rishi Sunak to prioritise reform in the remainder of the current parliament, arguing that it would prove a “valuable legacy” whatever the outcome of the next election and create short-term wins.

Thomas acknowledges that momentum behind the Declaration on Government Reform has “stalled” – not least because the political drivers behind it have moved on to different roles. Indeed, Dominic Cummings had left before the declaration was even given a public airing.

Nevertheless, Thomas would like to see the declaration “revived and refreshed”. “You don’t need to reinvent it. The themes are right. They reflect decades worth of discussion about government reform,” he says. “Revive it and develop a much more directional plan for how you want to improve the civil service and then publish that, rather than the aspirations and a list of 30 actions.”

Part of the process could be publishing a draft statute for the civil service – or starting a consultation to lay the groundwork for one, he says.

Sunak has no bandwidth

Colin Talbot, emeritus professor at the University of Manchester and expert on government reform, is not holding his breath for such a refresh.

“They’re going to be in survival mode until the general election, firefighting,” he says of the government. “I think they’ll just say: ‘No. Sole priority is to concentrate on things that are going to minimise the damage when we get to a general election’.”

Talbot does acknowledge the potential for more “populist gesture politics stuff” on reform, such as the kind Jacob Rees-Mogg specialised in during his tenure as minister for government efficiency.

“There may be some things like that: cheap pops at the civil service,” he says. “But I don’t see any statecraft, in the sense of them thinking seriously about how we want to reshape the state to work better. They haven’t got the time or energy.”

Talbot says it is “pretty obvious” that none of the last three prime ministers had much interest in civil service reform. “To the extent that it’s happened before, it’s always been because there’s been somebody in the chair who really wanted it to happen – like Thatcher, or Major or David Cameron, even. Certainly Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.”

Talbot says Blair’s commitment to routinely spending time with departments and talking through exactly what they were doing and how they were improving services “made a huge difference in terms of priorities”.

He is also supportive of the idea of a civil service statute and other elements of Brown’s *A New Britain* report – particularly its “shared government” proposals for giving the UK’s devolved nations and England’s regions a stronger role in central-government decision making.

“The place the civil service has in the running of the country has diminished. If we don’t fix things, that process will continue” *Philip Rycroft*

Talbot says there is a “window of opportunity” for strengthening local democracy and a “big push” from metro mayors, local Labour groups and “quite a lot of Tories”. Increased devolution is also important for Slater and Rycroft.

Serious moves to devolve further power to local authorities would require the centre of government to become more of a coordinator for ongoing work than the driving force for it, Talbot observes. He adds that such work was not an area of strength during the pandemic.

“I think that’s going to be the central issue,” he says. “The civil service has got to play a critical role in it. Which bits need to be centrally coordinated and how do you do that? How do you engage properly with central power?”

While Talbot cites the need for political will to drive reform, Slater stressed the need for those at the top of the civil service to have an appetite, too.

“Leadership matters,” Slater said. “When Gus [O’Donnell] was running the civil service, he had some things that he wanted to achieve and he achieved them. Watch who replaces Simon Case, when that happens, and what their agenda is. If they want to do some stuff in this space, they can.” ■

UNA O'BRIEN SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN

A CULTURE OF SILENCE IS DANGEROUS FOR THE WORKPLACE. THE CIVIL SERVICE MUST ENABLE A 'SPEAK-UP' ENVIRONMENT SO EMPLOYEES CAN VOICE CONCERNS WITHOUT FEAR OF REPRISAL

"See it. Say it. Sorted." We hear it every day, everywhere on the rail network.

Has there ever been a more irritating or, in reality, more effective safety and security slogan? Memorable, easy to act on and, crucially, with a member of the British Transport Police primed and ready to pick up legitimate concerns.

Wouldn't it be great if we could speak about our concerns at work as easily? Why can't we have an equivalent for our organisations?

The call of "See it. Say it. Sorted" is, to the travelling public, an opportunity to speak up about something that "doesn't look right". We act on a genuine concern; there's unlikely to be a downside to us personally from raising an issue in this context.

We are not, for example, in fear of being excluded from trains or ridiculed next time we travel because our concern turned out to be awkward for rail management… and therein lies the crucial difference between the appeal of this slogan and the reality inside too many of our organisations.

When it comes to speaking up at work, we face two essential questions. Firstly: do I have the inner courage to do this? Each one of us will have taken similar steps in the past and our willingness to act is likely to be as shaped by those experiences as by the immediate issue we face.

Second: will I be in heard respectfully without negative consequences? The policies and procedures might look polished and inviting, but sometimes, especially in the civil service, a culture of hierarchy and dismissiveness can cause us to hold back.

We only have to go back to last year and recall Sue Gray's report regarding No.10: "Some staff had witnessed or been subjected to behaviours at work which they had felt concerned about but at times felt unable to raise properly."

No less disturbing is the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, where they point to the absence of an adequate process for officials to express concerns about policy without fear of damaging their careers.

Notwithstanding some recent changes, these examples shine a spotlight on a deeper challenge for government departments and indeed the wider public sector about the need to nurture a culture where it is safe to speak up.

What is to be done? For inspiration, Amy Edmondson's excellent book *The Fearless Organization* (Wiley, 2018) is a good place to start. She points to the benefits of "psychological safety", an environment at work where we can raise questions, concerns and ideas without risk of humiliation or punitive consequences.

Her research shows compellingly that this is much more than a nice-to-have; teams with an open culture, willing to raise and review mistakes, are more innovative and effective.

One of the hidden heroes of creating a culture of safety in the field of surgery was Professor Marc de Leval. An outstanding children's heart surgeon at Great Ormond Street Hospital, he came to believe the drive to perform faultlessly created a strong pressure to overlook mistakes.

"A culture of safety means having systems that counter deference and encourage staff to speak up"

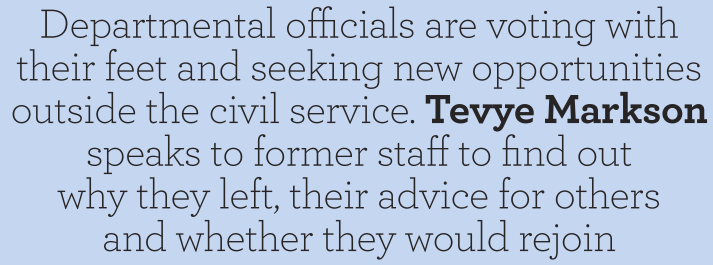
Being curious, he teamed up with a researcher who specialised in studying workers in high-risk environments to observe surgical teams in action. The resulting seminal articles in the 1990s demonstrated that lives could be saved by a more open culture in surgery where anyone on the team, the most senior and most junior, could feel safe to ask questions, admit mistakes or raise concerns.

And there is plenty of mature good practice to observe within the high-risk nuclear and airline industries. Over decades, both have learnt the hard way from serious accidents that a culture of safety means having systems that counter deference and encourage staff at all levels to speak up with concerns.

We need to free people from being afraid of each other at work by tackling the power imbalances that silence. Within organisations this takes leadership, a culture of trust and respect, with policies and incentives that send the same message. It takes focus, time to achieve and is hard work to do.

At an individual level, though, we don't need to wait; each of us can act in our own teams: take a moment to ask, what's one small step I could take to make it safer for the people I work with to speak up? ■

Dame Una O'Brien is a leadership coach with the Praesta partnership and a former permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care



Departmental officials are voting with their feet and seeking new opportunities outside the civil service. **Tevye Markson** speaks to former staff to find out why they left, their advice for others and whether they would rejoin

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Civil servants are leaving their jobs at the highest rate in a decade, with some 44,000 officials departing in 2021-22, half of them resignations.

The government says large numbers are leaving "naturally" because so many have joined since 2016, while jobs related to Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have also been phased out. Unions blame heavy workloads, low pay and ministers' attacks in the media.

The appetite for leaving the civil service also looks to be on its way up: 22% of officials who responded to the 2022 Civil Service People Survey said they wanted to leave within 12 months, compared to 20% in 2021.

CSW speaks to four ex-civil servants who left in the last 18 months to find out why they quit, the hardest part about leaving and how their move has gone. They also share advice on how to make the move and reflect on how outside experience can make you a better civil servant should you return.

Gareth Conyard is a former Department for Education official who worked his way up from executive officer to deputy director during 19 years in the civil service. He is now head of education at the charity Teacher Development Trust.

Conyard says he was "a bit reluctant" to leave the civil service but was finding it difficult to make a difference as government became "so dysfunctional" over the past few years.

"For most of my career, I felt like I was doing things that mattered. For the last few years, it just felt increasingly hard to get things done," he says. "I felt like I wasn't getting that sense of achievement or purpose that I'd had earlier in my career. So I decided to do something that was a bit closer to the front line and where I could feel that sense of purpose again."

Melissa Case left the Ministry of Justice to set up her own business as a leadership coach in December 2021. She was a director at the department, where she had worked for 20 years.

"I genuinely wanted to pursue the career I'm now in because I loved the development and leadership stuff I was doing and couldn't get enough of it in my job," she says. "And I wanted a different quality of life. I was working all hours. It was incredibly stressful. And I couldn't see around me or above me people who were doing it differently."

Another factor that inspired Case's departure was having to take eight months' sick leave during the height of Covid after being diagnosed with cancer. "I am better now, luckily," she says. "But during that period it made me reassess my priorities."

For others, leaving the civil service was always part of the plan.

Tendai Chetse worked in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport as a corporate strategist and policy adviser for two years before joining the BBC last April. He says going back and forth between the civil service and other sectors is part of his career plan.

"Long term, I see myself being a civil servant and working in government, but I think there needs to be a much more healthy embracing of the idea that you can come out of government, gain experience and come back," he says. "That was one of the reasons why I wanted to join the BBC: because I wanted to understand what the other side of that government-sector relationship was like, and to really get a sense of what it feels like to be on the receiving end of some of the work that we do. I think that can only help you be a better civil servant, when you really actually understand where your sectors are coming from by experience, not just by theory."

Rishi Sunak pledged in the summer that as prime minister he would "tackle civil service groupthink and deepen departments' understanding of business" by getting all senior civil servants to spend a year in the private sector before getting further promotion. Similarly, a Labour Party-commissioned report, published in December, said "no one should be promoted to the senior civil service unless they have worthwhile and extended experience of roles outside of Whitehall".

> **"For most of my career, I felt like I was doing things that mattered. For the last few years, it just felt increasingly hard to get things done"**
> ***Gareth Conyard, ex-DfE***

Chetse says he took the plunge earlier than expected because of the hit the civil service's reputation was taking in relation to Partygate and other ethical concerns.

"There's no other way to put it – we all know the reputational damage that was being done to the civil service and to government, with behaviours around the pandemic," he says. "The values that the civil service tries to uphold are really important to me. And so I didn't want to be in a position where I was being asked to do things where I could contravene those."

Similarly, Samuel Chivers says the government's instability and threats to cut tens of thousands of jobs spurred his move in October.

"It was never a 'leaving forever' type thing," says Chivers, who worked at the Cabinet Office and the Department for Health and Social Care, among others, in an eight-year career.

"It was just that the opportunity presented itself, primarily because there was uncertainty around the prime minister and the government at the time, and uncertainty around jobs in the summer. The job that I was doing at the time was expiring as I was on temporary promotion. I saw it as a chance to get some experience outside of the civil service and decide what I wanted to do afterwards."

'Talk the walk and know your value'

Once you've decided you want to move, the options can be daunting and it can be difficult to know whether your skills and experience will be valued in the sectors you are interested in.

Chetse recommends talking to acquaintances who work in the private sector. "Get them to call out some of the civil service 'isms'," he says. "They need to be very honest. Get them to be a critical friend and say 'that's a real civil service thing'." These "civil service-isms" include trying to overly structure simple things and a "tendency to act like we know it all", Chetse says.

He also suggests seeking out help with job applications, particularly for tips on the different things to emphasise for a private sector job in contrast to a public sector role.

Chivers also thinks civil servants need to get more comfortable with networking.

"I had a few really good chats before I moved across and it just felt like a good fit for me," he says. "But I think sometimes the idea of [networking in] the civil service is something which people shy away from slightly, particularly when it comes to networking with non-civil servants, because there is a bit of an ingrained fear of people taking advantage and of what you are and aren't allowed to do. That's something that I think needs to change."

Conyard recommends speaking to a headhunter. "When I decided to leave, I really struggled to know what to go for," he says. "I spoke to a recruiter and they said: 'Tell me what you did this

week'. That really helped me pitch what I might do outside the civil service, by looking at the skills I had developed."

Conyard also advises civil servants not to underestimate the value of the skills they have built up. "Those skills are really useful in lots of sectors," he says. "I've been able to take things from the civil service, like managing programmes and projects and getting the best out of people. It's worked more smoothly than I thought it might."

Former MoJ staffer Case agrees about the value of core civil service competencies. "You learn how to communicate well, argue well, influence, plan, problem solve and those are all skills to take out into the rest of the world," she says. "If you've been there a long time there's a bit of learning the language of outside the civil service that you have to do, but the skills themselves are absolutely transferable and deep in you."

Chetse says the "short-termism" and "very siloed culture" of the civil service armed him with really useful skills for his switch to the BBC.

"Knowing how to work across boundaries, knowing how to pull together different groups and help them speak the same language, I think that's been probably the most valuable," he says.

"In a really ironic way, the short-termism in government does age you well. People in my team remark that I respond very well, or much better, to short-term, ad-hoc requests compared to other colleagues."

Fears, farewells and excitement

Change is often scary and leaving the civil service for a new sector is no different, especially when you have spent a long time in government.

Leadership coach Case says she worried how she would manage on the outside after two decades in the civil service. "It did feel like a complete leap into the unknown," she says. "And I didn't take a voluntary redundancy, so I had to start earning money pretty quickly. It was both terrifying and really energising."

The most difficult part was saying goodbye to her closest colleagues. "I had a job share and it was very difficult to tell her. And I still feel a lot of grief about leaving my team," she says. "But it was emotional loyalty to the people I worked with, as opposed to actually having any more loyalty to the structures of the civil service."

Conyard also feared the magnitude of change his move represented. "I'd gone from the DfE, which is a beast of about 6,000 people, to a charity with about 25 people," he says. "That's a completely different work environment and I didn't know how I would cope. But I thought it was time to take the leap."

Chivers admits to being "quite nervous" about his career change into the "unknown" world of the private sector and its "cut-throat" culture and different working hours.

"Lots of people talk about it as 'the other side' – some people go as far as referring to it as the 'dark side'," he says. "Particularly when you say you're going to work in consultancy, it's shrouded in mystery and no one really knows exactly what they do. But it turns out that's because lots of different consultancies do lots of different things."

Chivers says that working a lot at the centre of government and in private offices meant he didn't feel he ever got the "perks" of fixed working hours. "I had to be flexible to deliver my job," he says. "That meant it wasn't something that I was really losing."

Unlike the others, Chetse had already worked extensively outside the civil service – in several consultancy, media and tech roles – and was much more excited than fearful.

"Far too many civil servants have a level of scepticism about the sectors that they work with," he says. "And therefore, government has a fairly defensive posture, when actually government in the 21st century has got to be more open. The only way you can be more open is to expose yourself more.

"I was looking forward to that exposure, to be honest with you."

Life on the outside

Leaving the civil service can feel like a big jump but it doesn't mean starting all over again.

"I'm still based very close to Whitehall and still able to engage in the same things which interested me and stimulated me during my time in in government," Chivers says.

Similarly, Conyard says he is

still involved with DfE "in lots of ways" as part of his new job.

Case also has a thread linking her current work to her previous career, as she coaches lots of civil servants. But she admits running her own business came as "a bit of a surprise".

"I had thought about what I wanted to do day-to-day, but I hadn't really thought about the fact that would mean I would have to run my own business and do everything around that," she says.

Case says she spent quite a lot of the first few months trying to work out the rules for the new game she was in, "then realising that there weren't any rules and I had to make them myself".

"If you have spent 20 years following rules and being in a very structured environment, that permission to make your own is quite challenging," she says.

"Suddenly I was in this space where I didn't really know what good looked like; I didn't really know what people thought of me; I don't get appraisal. You have to find intrinsic motivation, whereas the civil service is definitely a place of extrinsic motivation. Some of that was a huge learning curve."

One of the most challenging aspects has been learning to market herself.

"I wanted to understand what the other side of that government-sector relationship was like and be on the receiving end of some of the work we do" ***Tendai Chetse, ex-DCMS***

"That's been a surprise and something you don't get in the civil service so much," she says. "I've learned to love LinkedIn. I've got to be on social media, I've got to be putting myself out there. That is quite contrary to how I felt when I was constantly in the background and never spoke to journalists."

For those who want to leave with an eye on a return, the change can be an opportunity to build on the skills they have already learned and come back with new ones.

Chetse says he has developed much deeper sector knowledge than he could have gained at DCMS. "I've built my network. I've got to work on some really interesting questions at a pivotal moment in a really important institution."

He says the role has been "the best of both worlds in some ways", doing things that attracted him to the civil service, such as working on big, knotty challenges, but "without some of the constraints". One of those freedoms is the ability to speak his mind more, he says.

Although leaving has given them opportunities to flourish, all but one of the ex-officials *CSW* spoke to said they could return to the civil service.

Chetse's intention is to "100% to return", while Chivers says he assumes he will return "at some point". Conyard did not leave with the intention of getting experience and coming back, but says he would under the right conditions.

"I just got frustrated with current politics. The lack of stability," he says. "I think if there's a world in which we had a more stable government of whatever political persuasion where I felt I could go in, I'd be happy to do that. I never thought I'd leave."

For Case, there is less of a clear desire to return. "I don't really miss the day-to-day," she says. "I really like the flexibility that my new life allows and I'm really enjoying learning how to spread my wings in a new world. That's really scary but it's also quite confidence-inducing." ■

At your service

This practical guide will turn you into a service leader of the future, says **Dominic Woodward-Lebihan**

› **The Service Organization: How to Deliver and Lead Successful Services, Sustainably**
› **Kate Tarling (2023)**
› **London Publishing Partnership**

"Organisations don't see themselves in terms of services as their customers and users would think of them."

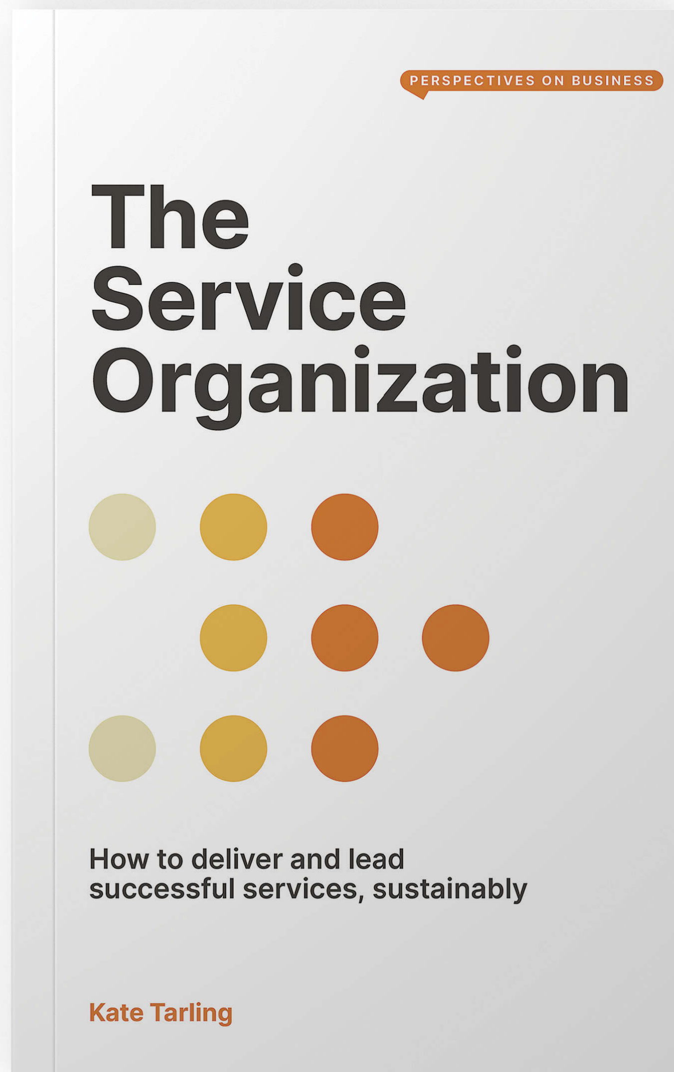
Packed within 13 short(ish) chapters, Kate Tarling's *The Service Organization* explains, in plain English, why this is a problem for so many organisations, and, more importantly, what we should do about it.

The Service Organization is more than just a guidebook for how to design a service well – it's a vision for a world in which things actually work in the way we want and need them to. To get there, Tarling asserts, we need to shift our focus from how an organisation thinks it runs – from "under the hood" things like governance, trackers, boards and recruitment – to the "outcomes users are trying to achieve where that relates to the organisation's core purpose". In an understated way she is calling for a revolution in the priorities, missions and language used by business and government leaders.

Without saying so directly, at the heart of Tarling's work is the logical dismantling of the idea that services can only be improved if governments and organisations invest more money in making them better. In fact, Tarling argues, with the right practical skills, tools and knowledge it's often possible to "bring sense and clarity to chaos" so that everyone has "a clear path to creating true service organisations" – ones that deliver better for those they serve.

Taking us on a journey from defining a service to winning support from people at the top, it's easy to be swept along by Tarling's passion for keeping things simple, concentrating on what matters, and building the diverse, focused teams needed to deliver for citizens.

By explaining the complexities of service design with such simplicity, Tarling makes this a more accessible read than it perhaps first appears. The short summaries at the end of each chapter, alongside real-world case studies from across the public, private and third sectors mean that those newer to services don't have to search too hard for the key insights. Each chapter looks at a major problem that organisations need to solve, with practical ideas for what to do about it.



With this structure, and drawing on huge experience, Tarling effectively provides the scaffolding that organisations need to create the conditions for better services.

Fortunately, despite the ominous "z" in organization, the book's case studies are very relevant for the UK civil servant reader. (There's even a slight overreliance on the Passport Office.) They succeed in rooting each chapter in real world experience, supporting Tarling's case that we must heed the insights and challenge of those who truly understand the "reality of operations" and the customers they serve. Civil servants should take note (even if the suggestion that "the need for some governance processes to reduce" feels optimistic in a world of strict accountability and oversight).

> **"At the heart of Tarling's work is the dismantling of the idea that services can only be improved if governments and organisations invest more money in making them better"**

Tarling's advice isn't limited to practical tips and tools either – it serves a wider, motivational purpose too. "Don't wait" is a constant theme: take action, adapt how you frame issues and tell others it's time to do things differently without waiting for an instruction from your superiors. *The Service Organization* explains how to navigate sceptical leaders, deliver measurable results, be honest about where things aren't working and become a service leader of the future. Don't wait to read it. ■

Dominic Woodward-Lebihan is deputy director of system assurance and corporate services at the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board. He was previously a senior strategy adviser in the Cabinet Office, and worked in policy and operational roles at the Department for Work and Pensions. Most recently he was head of adult social care engagement and governance in the Department for Health and Social Care

Follow the leader?

There is insight aplenty, but the memoir of this ex-diplomat may leave some readers from different backgrounds feeling a touch alienated, says **Jessica Nightingale**

› **Leadership: Lessons from a Life in Diplomacy**
› **Simon McDonald (2022)**
› **Haus Publishing**

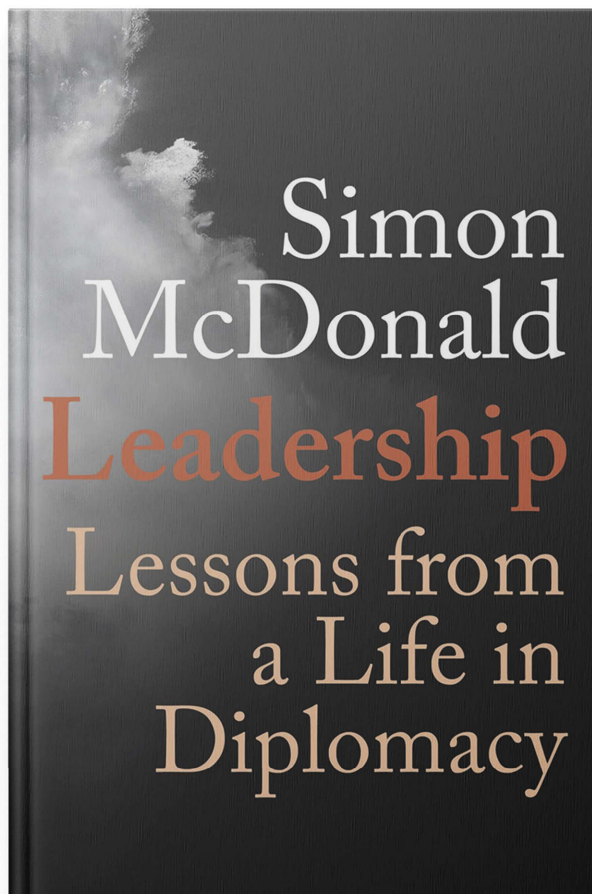
Leadership: Lessons from a Life in Diplomacy by Simon McDonald is three books in one. It's part memoir, detailing some of the extraordinary stories behind foreign-policy headlines from the 1980s through to 2020. It is also a compelling prescription for reforming some of the UK's political institutions. Lastly, it's a sequence of reflections, drawing on Simon's experiences of what makes a "good" leader.

As a memoir, we begin with Simon's early career and meet his role models, and informal mentors. He takes us through his various postings, the people he worked alongside, and the challenges he faced. He then draws on what this means for a leader. A standout section is his discussion of joining the embassy in Bonn, Germany, in 1988 where he felt leaders prioritised giving advice that made the centre "happy" but that didn't reflect how quickly Germany was changing at the time. Simon reflects on what this early lesson meant for his approach to leadership – leaders shouldn't be "imperious" and there isn't a lot of joy in working for an ineffective one.

The reader follows Simon's story as he progresses into the senior echelons of the Foreign Office, becoming the PPS to the foreign secretary, and advising Gordon Brown directly on the Iraq War. His sense of ambition propels you through the memoir elements of this book, charting his story, from the public service ethos and values embedded during his Salford upbringing to becoming permanent secretary at the FCO. Through memoir, we see Simon increase his emphasis on the personal – a good leader lets their team know "what they care most about".

Memoir also underpins his prescriptions for reform which are mostly brought together in the final chapter of the book. He says that post-Brexit, we need to "spruce things up" and fix fundamental institutions including the monarchy, the cabinet, the civil service and parliament. The most interesting arguments are about the institutions he is closest to, grounding these in lived and learnt expertise. Some recommendations are very precise, particularly on reducing the size of the House of Lords and increasing its democratic legitimacy.

The most moving sections reflect on where Simon felt he could have gone further to reform the civil service once he'd become a permanent secretary. Notably, he describes bullying as "the single thorniest issue we failed to tackle". This experience leads to sensible recommendations for an independent process and stronger consequences for those investigated. A must-read section for those who have the power to effect change and tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination in the service today.



This book is a deeply personal take on leadership, rather than an academic text on the subject. It connects Simon's unique experiences to what could be done differently by those in positions of senior leadership. At different points, he collates what he sees as attributes for a good leader but, out of these, he concludes that leaders should be: "clear, consistent, curious, collaborative, courageous and compassionate". These are familiar principles few would argue with, but there is less to learn from his writing on how to *live* those values as a leader. Simon's reflections on senior leaders seem to be referring to seniority of position rather than the more democratic view that regardless of grade, people are leaders in their own way. But that doesn't mean that someone who isn't a permanent secretary cannot learn anything from Simon's experiences.

Yet in having this three-in-one approach, the overall message for the reader gets a little lost. Two chapters, 'The Good Leader' and 'Leadership at the Centre' are most guilty of this. You are swiftly pivoted from reflections on the qualities of a good leader only to find yourself in an extended analogy likening life in No.10 to the Royal Court of King Henry VIII – and then to potential motivations behind the vote to leave the EU. Both chapters eventually return to reflecting on leadership but could have been bought together more cohesively.

For a reader whose background is different from the majority of people we meet in this book, there is a preoccupation with class and title that feels, at times, alienating. Reassuringly, Simon feels that the civil service is a place "where excellence is now more democratic". But it is also one where patronage is an unacknowledged "spectre". Simon should go further and critically consider if patronage really should be the ordering principle of recruitment into the most senior ranks of the civil service. That said, the book brings to life experiences of the "hidden" rules of recruitment detailed in the Social Mobility Commission's *Navigating the Labyrinth* report.

As a memoir, a plan for reform and a reflection on its titular theme, *Leadership* forms an important part of Simon's legacy as a senior civil servant and would be a valuable addition to the bookshelves of readers interested in any one of those subjects. ■

Jessica Nightingale is a civil servant working for the DfE in Manchester

On a mission to help you thrive

Peter Schofield, Permanent Secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions, and **Graham Hooper,** chief executive of the Charity for Civil Servants, discuss being part of a supportive community in which every civil servant has the chance to live their lives to the full

Peter Schofield

Graham Hooper

When Permanent Secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions, Peter Schofield, took over as Chair of the Charity for Civil Servants in 2019, he praised the Charity for "playing an increasingly important part in the wellbeing of so many people". Four years on, this is still true and the Charity's role is even more relevant.

"Thank you to all of our current donors," says Schofield. "And I really want to encourage those civil servants who are in a position to do so to consider becoming a donor and making a difference for colleagues who need our support."

The Charity's performance in 2022 shows that the demand for financial assistance, money advice, counselling and other wellbeing services, which the charity provides exclusively to current, former and retired civil servants, has grown significantly. Since 2020, the Charity has been struggling to cope with the demand, first as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and later due to early signs of what are now the ongoing cost-of-living challenges in the UK. "We know how difficult the last few years have been for people, particularly those most in need of support," says Schofield, adding: "It's in these times that the importance of the Charity for Civil Servants really comes to the fore, and I've been proud and humbled to see how the Charity has responded."

Vital to the Charity's work is the donations from, and fundraising by, civil servants. For Schofield, critical to keeping the community engaged are the excellent relationships across every Department. "I think it's so important that the Charity hears the voices of civil servants in every corner of the UK," he says, noting that dedicated charity staff based in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland speak and listen to civil servants every day of the week.

"The pandemic had such a huge impact on our presence on the ground, as it did for everyone, of course," he adds, putting the spotlight on the staff of the Charity who pivoted overnight to a digital-first approach to deliver

Your charity in numbers:

97,000 requests for **help (up 79%** from 2020)

9,000 people registered for the **Mental Health and Wellbeing Conference**

£1.9m in direct **financial assistance** to those **most in need** in 2022 alone

new help initiatives like the Burnout Hub and the Smarter Working for your Wellbeing initiative. "That really brought home to me that, despite being over 136 years old, the Charity is still as relevant today as the day it was formed."

The Charity for Civil Servants is also growing a base of volunteers and champions who are dedicated to spreading information about its mission, raising awareness and signposting for those in need of key services. "They're an incredible bunch of people who show belief in what we're here for and take time out of their day to support the Charity's work, and their fellow colleagues," says Schofield. "We couldn't do what we do without them, but, frankly, we need more support over the coming months and years so we can meet the growing demand."

For whatever happens

Graham Hooper, a former civil servant with 23 years in the public sector, has been Chief Executive at the Charity since 2015. Sharing his vision for the future, he says "It's about getting to a point where there is a supportive community and everyone has the opportunity to live their lives to the full. Through us, civil servants can help each other overcome life's challenges and help them to thrive."

He is also clear the current economic climate presents challenges for the Charity's own operation, too. "People are under pressure with the rising cost of living, and that's leading to people wanting to get support and help for a variety of different issues," he says, noting the Charity has adapted to meet this demand, but this means that raising funds is more important than ever before.

Hooper explains: "We've adapted our approach to continue to deliver as much help as possible, making sure we do so efficiently and effectively. Delivering support through digital resources is part of this new approach, as this is how many people want to access some of our services. This complements the other kinds of help we offer. If someone has an issue or specific problem and they need to talk to somebody about that, we still aim to provide bespoke one-to-one support, and that's where we want to make sure we have sufficient resources to be able to continue to offer that kind of service."

The Charity has also seen a rise in the number of people wanting to help colleagues and have found the Charity to be the ideal way to do it, through donating and fundraising across the country. "For civil servants who have previously found it difficult not being to help, they've told us they really value donating to their charity and knowing that their support is helping others who need it," said Schofield.

Looking ahead

By 2025 the Charity wants to give more financial support to those most in need, increase the number of people coming to the charity for help and grow funds raised through donations. "The past year has proven to be another very tough one for everyone, including those in the civil service community," says Schofield, noting that things are more and more expensive for those most in need of help and support, while money is tighter for donors and potential donors. "We're clear in our purpose as a charity that we want more people to come to us for help in tougher times – which means we need to try to bring in more in donations, so we have the resources needed to deliver it."

In light of the prevailing economic climate, the Charity has worked to reassess its strategy, along with emerging plans and phasing of fundraising work. "By the end of 2025, we now believe we will see civil servants coming to the charity for help over 100,000 times, including giving around £2.5m in direct financial support to those most in need," says Schofield. "To achieve that, we will need to continue transforming how we do business, and effectively engage with more of our community and to grow our donor numbers. As part of that important step forward, the Charity is set to launch a modernised brand in April and will build on this by launching its 'Mega Miles Challenge', the Charity's very own active participation campaign, which will be delivered across the UK in June 2023. The event will encourage thousands of civil servants across the Civil Service community to 'Lend a Hand and Sign Up' and raise as much money as possible for their charity.

Schofield says all these interventions are designed to signal the Charity's commitment to making it fit and relevant for another generation. But, he adds, "We can only do that by growing the kind support from donors, for which we are always very grateful."

"Our ambition is to place the Charity on a sustainable financial footing and to ensure that every civil servant is aware of the umbrella of support available to them in their times of need, now and in the future."

Keep in touch

Sign up to keep in touch with the Charity, or make a donation, by visiting **cfcs.org.uk/hello**

CHARITY FOR CIVIL SERVANTS

CLOSING IN ON THE WORST KIND OF OFFENDERS

Child sexual abuse is one of the most disturbing offences the National Crime Agency deals with. But as the NCA's **Dr Lauren Wilson** explains, help from partners in the private sector has made a huge difference to the number of suspects arrested and to the safeguarding of children both nationally and internationally

You recently won a Civil Service Award for your partnership working with BAE Systems. Can you tell us a little about what your team does at the NCA?

I lead a team of intelligence officers who work to identify people who commit child sexual abuse (CSA) offences. The NCA's remit is serious and organised crime, which means that my team focuses on some of the highest-harm CSA offenders in the UK and internationally. We estimate that there are between 550,000 and 850,000 adults in the UK who pose varying degrees of sexual risk to children. This includes a broad spectrum of offences, from downloading and sharing indecent images of children to contact offending.

It is not always easy to quantify what "highest-harm" offender means, as any crime against children is significant. At the NCA, our team has dealt with a variety of horrific offenders – sometimes it's one individual who has managed to commit offences against a number of children. Other times, it's a volume of offenders all using the same method of offending against children. In those cases, we manage to identify significant numbers of offenders simultaneously and we work closely with police forces to provide this information in a way they can act on. Together, we have been able to more than double the number of children safeguarded and the number of offenders arrested each month over the last five years.

In all situations, no matter the method of offending, our aim is always to safeguard and protect children.

What challenges were you facing when you approached BAE Systems for this project?

The NCA has partnered with BAE Systems for many years, as they are also dedicated to tackling the CSA threat. Over the years, BAE and NCA have been able to produce some fantastic results, but more recently, the NCA faced a difficult problem in our fight against the CSA threat.

The NCA had received a vast amount of data which, if analysed properly, would enable us to identify a large volume of offenders both in the UK and internationally. Normally, when we receive an individual report that indicates a CSA offence, it would be assigned to a case team. The team would ensure the accuracy of the report and identify any missing information required to make a successful arrest and prosecute the responsible party.

Ensuring the accuracy of all the information we receive is of the utmost importance. False accusations of child abuse, even if they are later revoked, can have a severe and lasting impact on the lives of the individual and their family. At the same time, not acting swiftly allows the abuse to continue or even escalate. When

the data processing is done by individual officers, it can take anywhere between a couple of weeks to several months (and this is assuming there are no complications). With the volume of data we had, it would have taken the NCA over 10 years to process it – and that doesn't even take into account the chance of us having to reprioritise should a more urgent case come in.

BAE developed some solutions to help you – can you tell us how the teams worked together to do this?
One of the NCA team members has described the initial process as being locked in a room with one of the engineers from BAE Systems and knowing they had to come up with a solution before they could be let out. While this isn't quite the reality, it was very much a situation of NCA officers sitting with a BAE Systems engineer and describing the problem we had.

There was some back and forth – the NCA officers represented the subject-matter experts on CSA offending, whereas BAE Systems provided options for expediting our data processing. BAE Systems would test options for data processing and NCA officers would dip-sample and review to assess the accuracy of the material, ensuring it was processed in line with our legislative obligations.

It has been a fluctuating project as well. There were times when we could work at a slower pace, but there were also weeks when the project required constant feedback.

The continual input and collaboration from the numerous people over the years has been phenomenal, and it has been a substantial piece of work.

How did working in partnership change the project?
When you are working to combat child sexual abuse, it is sometimes difficult to quantify how much time that means. A general, non-complex case would take the average police or NCA officer between a couple of weeks to a month to develop. This is taking into account competing demands, and the need to drop everything and refocus your time if there is something more urgent (and with child abuse, there's quite a lot of urgency). I think it was once calculated that if we had the whole department working on just one data set, it would still take us five to 10 years to complete everything with the necessary attention to detail and accuracy.

What did you achieve together?
I can estimate that the work with BAE Systems has enabled us to expedite identification of suspects and safeguarding of children nationally and internationally. I can't give an exact figure, as some of the work is still ongoing, but within the UK I can estimate it has assisted in nearly 1,000 arrests. But really, how can you put a figure on prevention? The sooner we are able to identify and arrest a CSA offender, the sooner we can prevent a child from ever being abused, or stop abuse from continuing. When you consider that the work has helped us reduce the time it takes us to process and identify suspects from years to months… even if it's a day less, it is worth it.

And what have been the longer-term or wider effects of this work?
We've had a substantial impact in the UK, but it is also worth noting the international impact. As a result of this work, we were able to send intelligence on approximately 20,000 CSA offenders to over 100 countries internationally within a couple of hours. While I cannot comment on the full impact of the international work that has been assisted by this project, we have been able to demonstrate that no CSA offender across the globe is safe from prosecution. This is a global problem, and we have to approach it with global collaboration. The impacts of this project are still ongoing and we continue to have results from the work started by the project even to this day.

> **"With the volume of data we had, it would have taken the NCA over 10 years to process it"**

This project was part of a wider relationship – can you tell us a bit more about other ways you work with BAE Systems and the benefits to each side?
Within the CSA unit, we have a contracted BAE Systems engineer who is embedded in the team and works explicitly on the CSA threat. This has excellent benefits for both parties. It gives the BAE employee a snapshot into the unique problems we face in the realm of CSA, and they can often provide significant real-world impact through their work with us. It offers a unique insight into the issues law enforcement face in identifying offenders and safeguarding children. Putting in place a limited contract acts as a safeguard to the BAE employee – ensuring they do not experience burnout from prolonged exposure to CSA material – but it also enables diversity in knowledge and experience. This means we constantly get new perspectives on how to tackle the CSA threat.

More recently, BAE Systems have developed tools to capture material evidence of CSA suspects offending – saving the NCA officers valuable time and protecting their wellbeing from excessive exposure. The teams have also started to develop tooling to allow transcription from audio to text on CSA videos. This is essential when the NCA receives indecent imagery of children in different languages, or from very long videos, as it enables the intelligence teams to pinpoint where they need to start and prevents hour upon hour being spent reviewing indecent imagery.

What advice do you have for people who are building these productive partnerships with suppliers or external organisations? In particularly, do you have any thoughts on how to build longer-term partnerships where appropriate?
It is not always easy to build productive partnerships, as the most difficult part of it is understanding the value and perspectives that other partners bring – as well as your own value. Working with BAE Systems engineers, I often feel dwarfed by their knowledge and talent for technical innovation, but over time I have come to realise the value myself and other NCA officers bring. While the BAE Systems engineers have the technical expertise, my team brings the subject matter expertise of CSA offending – knowledge of legislation the NCA works within, how criminals operate in this arena, as well as greater understanding of the problem we are trying to fix.

My main piece of advice is to not make assumptions, and even if you think the issue you are raising or trying to fix is simple (or too complicated!), starting the conversation can bring you into the realm of what is possible. I have had the privilege of working with several different engineers and each one has brought their own brand of expertise and perspective on the issues we at the NCA face, and we've been able to achieve some amazing results.

While the players may have changed, the constant has been ensuring open conversations continue so we can take active steps toward this goal. ■

Dr Lauren Wilson is an intelligence manager in the Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Team at the National Crime Agency

HOME TRUTHS

‘Permacrisis’ may have been Collins Dictionary’s Word of the Year for 2022, but it’s been part of the Home Office lexicon for decades. What’s it like leading such a closely scrutinised department while trying to transform its culture at the same time? **Jess Bowie** meets **Matthew Rycroft** to find out. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Who’d run the Home Office? Veterans who have done the job and lived to tell the tale speak of constant jeopardy; a place where something, somewhere is always going wrong – but you don’t yet know what it is.

While ministers often come into the Home Office to fill a vacancy left by a scandal, this is not normally the pattern for its permanent secretaries. Except in Sir Matthew Rycroft’s case. Rycroft’s arrival at the department in March 2020 followed a dramatic televised statement by his predecessor, Sir Philip Rutnam, who vowed to pursue a claim for unfair dismissal after the Priti Patel bullying row. Relations between officials and ministers in the department were at an all-time low, and that was not the only challenge.

“First of all, I started on the day lockdown started,” Rycroft says. “Secondly, taking over from someone who had resigned. Thirdly, with almost no notice and very little preparation time, and fourthly it was a week after the publication of the Windrush report – which was very close to saying the Home Office had been institutionally racist.”

There has been little let-up since this baptism of fire. Alongside the day job of leading a department whose remit is to fight terrorism, control the border and oversee police and fire services in England and Wales, Rycroft has also been trying to overhaul the Home Office’s entire culture.

He wears the strain well. When *CSW* suggests he has barely aged since we last spoke in 2018 (when Rycroft was perm sec of the then-Department for International Development), he jokes that while he’s only been in his current job for three years, “it feels like 20” because Home Office years are “like dog years”.

Our hour-long interview is wide-ranging, covering the Windrush response, compassion in policymaking, asylum backlogs, and the uneasy scenes Rycroft faced last summer when Home Office staff seemed to be in open revolt over the government’s controversial scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda.

Observing Rycroft from a distance, particularly since he assumed the Home Office brief, one gets the sense of someone with the clout to tell it like it is.

“There are many areas where we’ve made really good progress on the Windrush response. I’m very proud of the work that everyone’s put in”

"He's confident but not arrogant," as one Whitehall-watcher puts it. Another person *CSW* spoke to – from a partner organisation that works closely with him – says: "He's straightforward; you know where you stand with him and his team. He's a good broker in a tough gig."

This straightforwardness was out in force last year after Boris Johnson reportedly threatened to "privatise the arse off" HM Passport Office if it failed to get on top of delays. Rycroft used a Home Affairs Select Committee hearing as an opportunity to calmly push back. When a HASC member complained to him about a terrible experience her staff had had with the MPs' Passport Office hotline, Rycroft – after apologising for the poor service – said: "Please use that example the next time anyone suggests to you that the way to reduce the size of the civil service is to privatise it, because the only bit of the passport function that has been privatised is that."

Some of his self-assuredness may derive from Rycroft's Foreign Office career. He was once ambassador to the UN – a job that involves standing up to the Russians, the Chinese et al, and also speaking publicly on difficult issues. As one ex-senior official points out: "You are further from ministers as a diplomat and it gives you your own professional personality."

Rycroft is also unstinting in backing his officials. He took the rare step of issuing a statement to rebut a *Telegraph* article which attacked Passport Office director general Abi Tierney for working from home. The story "totally ignored reality", Rycroft said, before adding that Tierney worked "day-in, day-out with teams around the country delivering vital services for the British public" and that her work location had "zero bearing" on delays at the agency.

Today the perm sec – who dedicated his recent knighthood to "unsung" public servants – prefaces a number of his interview responses with praise for civil servants. When he came into the department he was "pleasantly surprised" by how connected everyone was to the mission of keeping the country safe and secure (even if, he admits, that mission "needed to be harnessed and turned into something positive"). When asked about asylum backlogs, he lauds caseworkers for the "outstanding work" they are doing in such a "politically sensitive area".

"Because a lot of [civil servants'] work by its very nature must remain behind the scenes, it's incumbent on those of us who do get the occasional opportunity to talk publicly about what our colleagues are doing," he tells *CSW*.

RYCROFT ON... FOSTERING GROWTH

"The departmental vision, which fits with our values, is for a safe, fair and prosperous UK. The 'prosperous' bit of that is designed to really surprise people, because they weren't expecting the Home Office to be a growth department.

"But work at the border is doing two different things. It's obviously trying to keep out people and things that should not be coming into our country, but it's also trying to facilitate the entry into and out of our country of people and goods who should be and who are entitled to be here. [...] So the work that we lead on the border is also about prosperity and growth.

"Another example: the national security part of the department has an important role in generating growth too. The UK has a strong tradition of not just a defence industry, but a security industry that is good at this sort of thing. And I think there is a valuable role for the Home Office to play in promoting that sort of prosperity for the UK as well."

Transformation

That Rycroft takes Wendy Williams's 2020 *Windrush Lessons Learned Review* seriously was clear when he told HASC – without a hint of flippancy – that he "hangs on to [her] every word". Indeed, the One Home Office transformation programme he has been spearheading was designed as a direct response to Williams's damning report.

Rycroft tells *CSW* the department is on "a journey". There is "definitely further to go", he says, but he is "proud of the steps we've taken so far". While three years have felt like 20, "it's actually quite a short time in terms of changing the culture of a large department of state".

One of Williams's original recommendations had been to improve the diversity of senior staff. Yet 18 months later, in March 2022, she found that "success in this respect remains elusive". Is Rycroft happy with the pipeline of future leaders, if not the current state of diversity at senior levels?

"Wendy Williams was largely positive in her overarching judgement [on our progress], which I agree with," he says. "Within that there were areas where there was either insufficient or limited evidence of progress, which I also agree with. So I accept all of her points, but I think we need to think about them in total. There are a significant number of areas where we've made really good progress and I'm really proud of the work that everyone's put in."

He acknowledges, though, that the department still has "a good way to go".

"We are starting from a pretty low base. So to take one issue which is particularly important for me: the ethnic minority representation in the senior civil service. Last year, we went up from 7.8% to 9.5%. Clearly, 9.5% is not high enough – we need to be at the labour market average, which is about 14%. But we're headed in the right direction."

Challenge

Another major issue flagged by Williams was that of officials feeling unable to challenge decision making. If the Home Office's Civil Service People Survey results are to be believed, this has only become more of a problem. Between 2018 and 2021, successive surveys show that – on the metric 'I feel able to challenge the way things are done' – things have got worse. Combined with the PCS union's threats of staff mutiny over the Rwanda scheme, it hardly suggests an atmosphere where staff feel comfortable speaking out.

"It's very important for me that civil servants know what our proper role is at every stage of the policymaking and operational process," Rycroft says in response. He adds that the Home Office's work on Windrush and "all the other issues that have come along since" have sharpened his thinking about this.

"Before ministers decide on a policy or a new process, our job as civil servants is to provide maximum challenge," he says. "It's all part of the robust policymaking process. That necessarily needs to be behind the scenes, and we need to have the latitude and the openness to have that sort of challenging conversation. I firmly believe the more challenge you can get in early on, the better for eventual policy."

Challenge doesn't need to be confrontational, he adds. It includes things like ensuring the operational teams who will be implementing a future policy are involved in helping create it.

"After ministers have taken a decision, our job changes. Our job isn't then to challenge it, just because we happen not to agree with it. It's irrelevant whether we agree with it or not. If a minister has decided it, and it's lawful, our job then is to implement it.

"Of course there is still space for challenge in implementation. You can always improve the implementation process.

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But you no longer, as a civil service, have a particular role in opposing that policy. And that's really important. Whether you're a member of a union or not, your job as a good civil servant, thinking about the civil service code and the value of impartiality, is to get on with it."

A clear and sensible philosophy. Why then is that People Survey metric so bad?

"So our mantra – of maximum challenge *then* maximum support – is designed to help with the metrics. It's designed to show people that not only is it okay to challenge, actually we have a duty, at that early stage of the policymaking process, to challenge. And, if we're more senior, to create the circumstances that allow other people to challenge. So it is a part of our efforts to improve that aspect of the People Survey.

"There are others as well: there is training so people can really understand how to challenge and what counts as effective challenge; and there are lots of things which we in the executive committee seek to do to signpost when there have been good, effective challenges. But we have much, much further to go, obviously."

Sticking with Rwanda, and when it is – and isn't – appropriate for civil servants to challenge decision-making, *CSW* asks Rycroft about an online staff meeting in April last year, in which he faced a barrage of questions from officials about that controversial immigration policy. The message with the highest number of thumbs up from participants – 224 – said: "Somewhere down the road, when the inevitable 'what went wrong with Rwandan outsourcing' inquiry takes place, the Home Office cannot say that nobody spoke up at the time. We're speaking up. This is a bad idea – don't do it! I think a lot of staff feel this way. Can this be escalated?"

Where do moments like that fit into the "maximum challenge" mantra?

"There are two answers to that. The first is that the maximum challenge before/maximum support afterwards works best for the people who are involved in the challenge beforehand, clearly, because they will have been part of the journey of policymaking and it will absolutely be easier for them to accept the end result, even if it's different from the one that they originally advocated.

"On Rwanda, it was a very sensitive topic with only a small number of people who even knew about it, nevermind had the opportunity to challenge it. And everyone else had to take my word for it that there was a robust level of challenge beforehand. And there was – I'm very proud of what the small number of people involved beforehand *did* do by way of stress-testing and improving the policy."

"Rwanda was a sensitive topic – only a small number of people even knew about it, nevermind had the chance to challenge it. Staff had to take my word for it that there was a robust level of challenge beforehand. And there was"

Although he says that people must take his word for it, Rycroft does have evidence of part of the challenge he mounted – in the form of a ministerial direction which flagged concerns about the scheme's value for money. On that direction, Rycroft says that the success of the policy will not be measured by the thousands of people who get relocated to Rwanda, but by the thousands of people who don't risk their lives in crossing the Channel. "The direction was not saying 'it cannot be value for money'. The direction was saying 'we just don't know yet whether it will be value for money, and so we cannot go ahead with spending without the direction.'"

Rycroft's "second answer" to the question of where Rwanda fits into maximum challenge is that the department's legal advisers, the courts and the attorney general ruled that the policy was legal. "If they hadn't, obviously we wouldn't have gone along with it and it wouldn't be right to loyally support it now. It's not for us as individual civil servants to decide, in our own internal legal system, that it is unlawful. So that's why my maximum support mantra applies also to Rwanda."

Compassion

In response to Williams's report on Windrush, the Home Office published a Comprehensive Improvement Plan in which it pledged, among other things, to adopt a more compassionate approach, putting "people first" and taking "proper account of the complexity of citizens' lives". The Home Office values now include compassion – a rather novel inclusion in a corporate document.

On embedding this new approach throughout the department, Rycroft admits the Home Office must go further. "Being compassionate in relation to, for instance, the communities that we serve, is a very significant shift in culture. And it's a difficult thing to do. Compassion, from my perspective, is about really understanding and feeling things from other people's perspective. If you are a caseworker, it's a really important attribute. Because the decisions that you are taking are hugely important for that individual. But it doesn't happen overnight: this is a long-term journey."

It's also a very tricky one. The department works on sensitive, complex and emotive issues. Home Office officials are well used to thinking about integrity, impartiality, honesty and objectivity as

they navigate divisive issues and offer advice to ministers – but compassion? Doesn't that add extra complexity to the balance of challenge and support that Rycroft has just eloquently explained?

"I agree with your point about the scale of the challenge," he says. "These are knotty, almost impossibly difficult issues to grapple with. But that's why we go into public service: to have a role in grappling with them. I'm pretty sure it's why many of our politicians go into politics as well: they want to grapple with them too, from a different perspective.

"Our values, as a result of all of this transformation work, and in addition to the civil service values, are 'respectful, courageous, compassionate and collaborative'. The compassionate value means that we act ethically, with honesty, care and sensitivity, seeking to understand the realities and perspectives of the people we serve, to build trust and confidence. That's our definition, if you like, of what compassionate means in this context.

"So it's definitely not a test of each policy. It's about how we work on whatever the policy is," Rycroft says, adding that part of the Home Office's transformation plan is to give people tools, such as ethical decision-making frameworks, which can guide them as they do that work.

"When you think about it that way, it's absolutely possible to abide by those values – especially when you're working on an issue that is so difficult. If an elected minister has chosen to do something, which is lawful, our job is to implement it in a compassionate way, whatever it is."

Agile working

Rycroft lives in Kent where the youngest of his three daughters is in sixth form. He says he tries to stay fit, going for the occasional run, and is interested in music. The double bass was his instrument in a previous life and while jamming sessions don't currently feature in his hinterland, he may pick it up again one day when he has "more time and energy". He's yet to see season two of *White Lotus* (but enjoyed season one) and is a big fan of Ian McEwan novels. His morning train ride into the office is reserved for work emails and reading the daily media summary on his phone – including, one assumes, a fair few Home Office headlines from hell.

Alongside thorny policy issues, the Home Office deals with huge operational challenges. And, like the policies, these are often a source of negative media attention. In recent months, the spotlight has been on the backlogs in processing the cases of asylum seekers who are already here. In October, ex-Home Office perm sec Philip Rutnam told an Institute for Government event that he sometimes wondered whether the UK had the right model. "We generally use executive officers as the asylum decision makers. It's a relatively junior level for making a very important, life-changing decision," he said, adding that in Switzerland, asylum decisions were made by officials "three full levels higher".

Rycroft says that his Home Office is in fact "trying to go the other way". He explains that because there are ways of separating out cases by their complexity, efforts are under way to get administrative officers – a grade more junior than executive officer – involved in processing the simplest cases and save the EOs for the more complex ones. "If there are extremely complex or sensitive cases then yes, you would need a decision maker that was more senior than an EO. But in terms of numbers, those are absolutely the exceptions."

According to IfG research, the initial training for asylum decision makers is in-depth and impressive, but caseworkers have complained about a lack of ongoing support: not enough time with their managers, too many people to each manager. What are the plans for the wider development and professional support for decision makers?

"It's a good challenge," Rycroft says, explaining that even though the department has recently increased the number of caseworkers by 80% in response to the backlogs, this has actually caused an initial drop in productivity as experienced caseworkers spend time training new hires. But he says that giving all these new employees a sense of value and a long-term career trajectory will be a key part of improvements.

To this end, the department has brought all its caseworking teams together into a customer service group, headed by a single director general. "So now, if you work on passports or visas or asylum or some of our other casework, you're all in this single group," Rycroft explains. "You may have a particular role in a particular bit of that group, but it is increasingly easy, I hope, for us to move resource around agilely in response to different challenges."

CSW's Marsham Street sources suggest that while internal communication from Home Office ministers about the transformation agenda hasn't exactly been deafening in recent months, Rycroft's personal commitment to the Windrush reforms has been heard consistently and loudly even at junior levels.

For someone who says he still thinks of himself "as a diplomat who happens to be at the Home Office for the moment", Rycroft seems rather well suited to running vast, operational departments. Useful skills if one wanted to go all the way to the top…

Where *does* he see himself in five years – and is it as cabinet secretary? He laughs and then says a firm "no".

Would he enjoy that job?

"'What you're going to do in five years' time' is a good one," he says, politely sidestepping the question. "I ask it in interviews myself quite a lot because it gives a sense of where people are on their career journey and of their ambitions… Although I have to say at this at this stage of my career, it is harder to answer – publicly, anyway."

"Can I email you my answer?" he then asks with a grin.

A few days later, an unexpected email arrives. "I hope to still be in the civil service," Rycroft writes, "but if not, then my pipe dream is to run a breakfast café on a beach somewhere!"

It was a difficult question for a perm sec to answer and one word springs to mind when summing up Rycroft's reply: diplomatic. ■

RYCROFT ON… EFFICIENCY VERSUS RESILIENCE

"We have to build in agility, so that whatever the world is currently throwing at us, we are ready for it to throw something different at us. Although we are, like the rest of the civil service, finding efficiency savings wherever we possibly can, we do also have an uplift in recruitment for the very specific tasks announced by the prime minister and the home secretary to tackle irregular migration.

"Building resilience at a time when we need to demonstrate value for money with all of our ongoing work means we need to be great at prioritisation. We also need to be very clear with our decision making and enable the top decisions to flow all the way through the organisation so that when prioritisation is done, people see that things are being stopped.

"Resilience also comes from how we work. You can have a structure which is resilient – as I've sought to set up here – but we also need ways of working that allow people to invest in their own personal development, for instance. If you've cut corners on things like that, then you might think you're getting a short-term benefit, but you'll absolutely not be getting a long-term benefit."

RISKY BUSINESS

What does it mean to have a cyber-resilient organisation? **Murielle Gonzalez** reports on a discussion between experts from across and outside government covering skills gaps, cyber hygiene, and the importance of understanding risk

Government organisations are currently undergoing a paradigm shift in their cyber thinking. Until recently, cybersecurity has tended to be discussed in defensive terms, focusing on creating and maintaining barriers to repel attacks. But as cyberattacks become an inevitable part of organisational life, protective measures are no longer enough. Today, cyber resilience is required.

The move to a cyber-resilience ethos in the public sector is ingrained in the government Cyber Security Strategy, which outlines the roadmap to establish the UK as "a democratic and responsible cyber power".

It explains that becoming cyber resilient is necessary not only because global threats faced by the UK are increasingly digital, but also due to legacy IT and the digital transformation already happening across the public sector.

During a panel discussion at PublicTechnology Live – a one-day summit convened by *CSW*'s sister publication *PublicTechnology* – the Cabinet Office's David Lovell explained what this means in practice: "Resilience is about protecting your organisation, knowing what you really value and protecting that, rather than trying to protect everything."

Lovell, who is cyber strategy and policy lead in the Government Security Group, also noted that organisations must be agile and proactive when addressing cyberattacks. "There's always going to be a tension in risk-based decisions, in terms of what organisations are trying to achieve against the risk," he said. "Senior officials often say, 'Our risk tolerance is zero', but that would mean shutting down computers and not doing any work. So we have to get the balance right, and I think we're getting better at that."

To Lovell, a resilient organisation accepts that there will be risks and that those risks will be realised if there are issues with data. "But if you have appropriate controls, policies and blockers in place to protect that, you can still have this open-data infrastructure and deliver services to citizens," he explained.

"Senior officials often say, 'Our risk tolerance is zero', but that would mean shutting down computers and not doing any work" ***David Lovell, Cabinet Office***

Being agile and proactive Government Security Group's David Lovell

Tom Hampson/Visual Eye Creative

Beyond the skills gap

One of the biggest causes of cyber breaches is human actions – often errors. It has therefore never been more important for organisations to empower and upskill their staff. Yet cyber is just one of the areas where digital capability does not meet demand.

Talking cyber The panel of experts speaking at the PublicTechnology Live one-day summit

“We all know there’s a skills gap,” Simon Hepburn, CEO of the UK Cyber Security Council, told the March event. “Quite a lot of people have been in the profession for 20 or 30 years, and we need all that knowledge and experience to be shared, which creates a larger challenge. This is about capturing that knowledge and then using it for informing the work we’re doing to enable cyber resilience within organisations.”

He suggested that supporting career change is one way to address the skills gap. “Some of the best cybersecurity consultants haven’t gone through the linear route of academia. They are professionals who studied anthropology or psychology. HR professionals can be excellent cybersecurity specialists.”

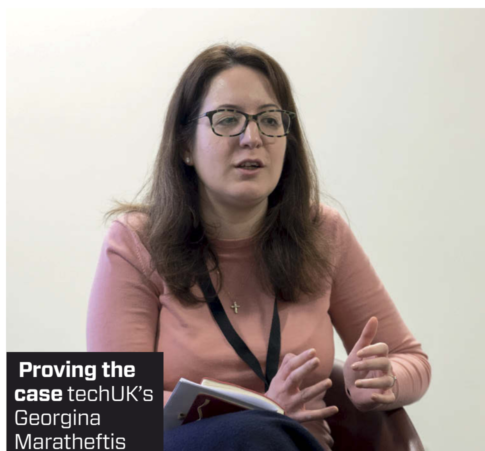
Georgina Maratheftis, associate director for local public services at techUK, concurred, pointing to the importance of working with industry partners to address the skills gap. This can be done, she suggested, through more effective procurement processes.

Maratheftis explained: “If you’re buying something off the shelf, it is really important to understand what the outcome of this technology is going to be, but it is also important to speak with suppliers early to help embed cyber resilience as part of the checklist and ask: is it secured by design?”

During the conversation, Lovell also reflected on life in Ukraine to explain how basic cyber hygiene is essential for cyber resilience. “If you were living in Ukraine right now, you would be aware of the importance of security embedded in everything you do. That proves the case for multi-factor authentication and how we need to be careful about the data we share in apps,” he said.

To Lovell, this goes back to having resilience as security by design. “We need to be careful, though. This isn’t about cybersecurity experts coming in doing cybersecurity things. We’re trying to get that culture where people ask the right questions when engaging with suppliers,” he said, pointing to the ideal scenario where, for example, procurement specialists feel empowered to ask vendors about how data is being handled. “You can’t simply whack everything in the cloud and think that you’ll be secure. There is some truth in that if we do it properly.”

Accepting risk Simon Hepburn


Proving the case techUK’s Georgina Maratheftis

WHAT IS GOVASSURE?

The GovAssure process – completion of which will be a requirement for all Whitehall departments – was first trailed in the Government Cyber Security Strategy, published in early 2022.

As part of the ongoing pilot phase of the new security measures, in January, the Home Office and BEIS were named as the first departments to undergo GovAssure audits, carried out by external auditors.

“Once [the audit is] complete, a department will receive a ‘get well’ report listing current vulnerabilities which will then allow it to spend its cyber budget more effectively and to mitigate specific risks quickly,” according to the text of a contract signed earlier this year.

The Cabinet Office – home of the Government Security Group – awarded the deal in question to C3IA. The Poole-based cyber consultancy will audit three systems at each department.

Looking ahead

For Sue Bateman, interim chief data officer at the Central Digital and Data Office, the shift to resilience rather than defence gives a more positive slant to the discussion. “Setting this [approach] in a proactive light makes it an enabler,” she said. She then asked panellists how organisations were getting the message across that enabling cyber resilience is a good thing which all organisations should be aspiring to.

“We still need to do more to win the argument about understanding that this isn’t about getting rid of legacy or getting zero risk,” said Lovell. “Addressing legacy is part of a broader challenge,” he added, noting that to get leadership buy-in, “we need to get better at showing what the benefits are of transformation.”

The rollout of GovAssure, the new regime of independent audits of cyber resilience in all government departments, is a testament to the new approach on the cyber front *(see box)*. The procedure will see external experts assessing the organisation’s cyber resilience, flagging up potential risks, and recommending improvements.

“With GovAssure, we’re trying to make it much easier for organisations to identify what’s important to their mission, their roadmap to good health, and the steps that should be taken. These will be the indicators of good practice that will take them there,” he concluded. ■

TAYLOR MADE

Following the publication of a new science and technology strategy, *CSW* catches up with policing's chief scientific adviser **Paul Taylor** to discuss how it was developed – and what will be needed for it to succeed

Even based on a short Teams call with Taylor, it's not hard to see why he was chosen for a job which entails communicating with a range of different groups, and energising each of them about the importance of working in new ways together.

Taylor, chief scientific adviser at the National Police Chiefs Council, peppers his conversation with metaphors and has a knack for choosing pertinent examples that bring his arguments to life. When describing the first national policing science and technology strategy, for example, he talks about forests, flourishing seedlings, eggs in a basket and lights under bushels – all before he even gets to explaining how technology has dramatically reduced the waiting time for responses to domestic violence calls, or why we shouldn't fear failure.

As the policing CSA, Taylor's job is to ensure the sector – which includes the College of Policing, the National Crime Agency, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, and individual forces – has access to evidence and advice on any area where science might contribute to crime prevention and detection.

Taylor explains that the newly published S&T strategy for policing "brings together all the component parts of science and technology across policing and articulates how those parts create the forest – the science system – and our collective ambitions for what that science system will deliver for the public today, tomorrow and in 10 years' time".

The strategy has three pillars: engage, evolve, embed. The first, Taylor explains, reflects "the fact that to achieve what we want to achieve, we need to talk to everyone: to academia, who have the ideas; to industry, who can help build the solutions; and to the public, to make sure that our ambitions reflect what they will consent to and indeed what they want from a legitimate, trustworthy police service".

The "evolve" pillar recognises that bringing S&T more effectively into policing will be a journey rather than a one-off change. "When you're doing a piece of science and technology, you don't do it and then six months later the flower is perfectly formed and delivered," Taylor says.

"It takes many years, so 'evolve' is about making sure that we have a system in place that allows early seedling ideas to flourish all the way across what we call technology readiness levels, to a finished product in a way that's seamless, with no gaps in that system where things will fall down."

Work within this pillar includes, for example, facilitating trials of new technologies to help break the catch-22 situation in which firms – often SMEs – are offering innovative tech to police forces who won't trial it because it hasn't been used before.

The strategy's third pillar – "embed" – is about creating a system which supports the use of technology across policing, and then making sure technology is widely and deeply used in that system. "It's very easy to put all of your eggs in the 'technology' basket, deliver the technology and then leave it to sit on the shelf gathering dust," Taylor says. To avoid this, he continues, you need to think about how workforce skills, policy, legislation, finances and procurement – namely "everything that goes around the tool" – can be adapted to support better use of S&T.

As well as building that system, the embed pillar aims to find good practice and spread it. "My view is local innovation in policing is better than any other sector I've ever worked in. Brilliant stuff goes on in local forces," Taylor says. "But of course scaling that from the local to the national can be quite difficult. We've got these wonderful lights under bushels in one part of the country which never get seen by the other parts of the country. So 'embed' is really to create mechanisms that will uncover those lights and allow others across the country to see them and implement them."

One mechanism is the creation of a model in which forces each have science and innovation leads, who meet together on regional committees. These committees in turn feed into a national innovation committee. "What's beginning to blossom out of that now is the different regions are leading in different areas of S&T," Taylor says, adding that the model also enables innovation to be rolled out at a regional level before considering national applications.

"Sometimes the mistake in the past has been that we do [something new] at the force level, then we immediately strive to do it naturally across 43 forces," Taylor says. "I actually think it works better if you move to regional first: they often have comparable systems and ways of working, as well as cultures, because they interact so regularly. Then you can do it at the national level."

To help find innovation that could be scaled up, the NPCC is running a scheme called the Smarter Practice Initiative, which is collecting three examples of innovative technology from each force to create "a baseline catalogue of the great things that are going on everywhere". Once the catalogue is collated, it will be reviewed by a panel of experts to consider how these innovations might be rolled out across the country.

"My view is local innovation in policing is better than any other sector I've ever worked in. Brilliant stuff goes on in local forces"

So far, this seems a fairly straightforward innovation scheme which might not have much to do with S&T – indeed, the NPCC has run similar initiatives before on topics such as homicide prevention. But Taylor's team also wants to bring some scientific rigour to it, by building an evidence base for innovation.

It's here that he talks about the technology – Rapid Video Response – which has been shown to make a dramatic difference in response times for domestic abuse calls, along with improvements in victim satisfaction and time savings for police officers.

RVR gives domestic abuse victims whose lives are not in immediate danger the option of speaking to a police officer via a secure video call to report an incident, rather than waiting for a face-to-face visit. In 2021, Kent Police ran a randomised control trial of this technology, funded by the NPCC, which found that callers who used RVR began speaking to an officer in just three minutes, compared to around 33 hours for those who received a face-to-face response. RVR also meant officers took just over two hours to complete a case, compared to three hours for the standard service, and victims were also more satisfied with their response.

While this randomised control trial is an ideal way to evaluate a new technology, other trials might involve things like analysing data in the months before and after a new technology is implemented. This might not be as robust as a randomised control trial, but Taylor says that in government "sometimes we have to be practical".

"It's better to do some form of evaluation as to whether it's making any difference than not do anything," he says. "In actual fact, a couple of our trials this year have shown the things that we implemented make no difference and I think it's important to celebrate that success sometimes come from the fact that the thing has failed… or rather – I shouldn't use the world 'failed' – that the thing has proven not to be effective, and we've learnt that. That's better than what probably happens in many other cases, where it gets implemented and it's just assumed that it works."

When it comes to the S&T strategy there are – as you would expect – a number of detailed metrics which will allow Taylor and others to judge whether it has worked. But what does he think will help ensure that success?

Taylor points again to the question of local leadership: what matters is for the 43 forces across the country to buy into the strategy. "I have tried to design a strategy that, at its heart, puts innovation, science and technology at the local level," he says. "If forces see the strategy as something that is being done in the national space, and not relevant to them at the force level, then it has failed." ■

CASE STUDIES

Demand management

With industry partners, Lancashire Constabulary is using voice-to-text and natural language processing to understand, categorise and manage the force's annual 1.2 million 999 and 101 calls. By the end of 2021, the system had categorised 730,000 calls, which would have taken the review team roughly 68 years to process manually.

Automation

Eastern region forces and the NPCC lead for Police National Computer (PNC) are piloting an automated process to support vetting enquiries. This tool, which automates procedural PNC record checks, passes key information to a vetting officer for assessment and decision, and has real potential to introduce efficiency for all forces.

Tackling crime

The Home Office Digital, Data and Technology team and forces are collaborating on pilots that utilise Automatic Number Plate Recognition data to identify and proactively target high harm county lines offenders. Applying automated data analytics tools and policing techniques has already proven highly successful in identifying suspicious travel.

A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

Border Force, part of the Home Office, is responsible for securing the UK border and for controlling the movement of goods and people at air, rail and maritime ports across the UK and overseas. Director general **Phil Douglas** shares some of its recent achievements and challenges

It's been two years since the launch of the 2025 Border Force strategy. Can you give us a progress update?
Just like ports, the border must continually evolve to meet the changing requirements of its customers and commercial partners. Border Force serves five different systems – immigration and safeguarding; security; customs; health and environment; and prosperity – creating one of the most complex sets of stakeholder relationships in the civil service. To help us navigate these challenges, we launched our first organisational strategy, Border Force 2025, in May 2021.

Since then, we have made significant progress building a more intelligent border that will provide an enhanced digital end-to-end customer journey, improving both security and the clearance of legitimate travellers and goods. For passengers, this means that the physical border is just one of a series of intervention points which start the mo-

Home Office

ment they decide to come to the UK. We will introduce a "universal permission to travel" requirement, which will require everyone (except British and Irish citizens) to seek authorisation before travelling, and give us 100% coverage on who is coming to the border. This means Border Force officers can focus on dealing with high-harm activity to keep the UK safe.

This summer we are also introducing a new reporting tool to share performance data with industry and government partners, increasing transparency and supporting collaboration to improve performance at the border, helping to articulate the return on investment to industry partners.

To further maintain the safety and security of the border, we will introduce an Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme for visitors who do not currently need a visa for short stays. This will make travel for legitimate visitors smooth and efficient and ensure we have intelligence on those seeking to come to the UK, helping to prevent dangerous individuals entering the country.

With the simultaneously alarming and reassuring news that Border Force intercepted uranium at the start of the year, what more is being done to ensure we can continue to protect and secure our border?
Radiological and nuclear detection at the border is business as usual for Border Force – the capability exists across the UK through a combination of fixed equipment and specialist vehicles. We continue to explore better technology, AI and intelligence capabilities, working closely with our strategic partner countries.

Threats at the border are wide ranging, substantial and sustained. New threats continue to emerge, and existing threats evolve. We have to be ready to pivot to new challenges quickly and repeatedly. Recently, this has included responding to the Purfleet tragedy, small boats, and organised crime groups seeking to exploit the Covid-19 pandemic.

Increasingly sophisticated criminal methodologies seek to exploit the border and bring social and economic disruption to the UK. That's why the work of Border Force has never been more important, and the public expect that those on the front line have the resources, training and support they need.

What are some of Border Force's recent achievements?
Since 2021, we have dismantled 55 organised-crime groups and made over 500 arrests supported by the work of the UK-France Joint Intelligence Cell, where UK and French officials collate and analyse operational intelligence to prevent crossings from taking place and to dismantle the gangs behind them.

There were 22,297 refusals at port by Border Force in the year to September, who subsequently departed the UK – 34% more than the year before. And in 2022, Border Force seized 266 lethal firearms, 1,105 non-lethal firearms and 6,374 knives and other offensive weapons.

What are your ambitions for this year?
Our strategic missions are to "protect, facilitate and adapt". Every day, my staff deliver outstanding work – protecting the UK from harm, facilitating legitimate travel and trade and adapting to new technologies in an ever-changing world.

Equipping Border Force officers with the skills, tools and techniques to continue keeping our border secure is a priority of mine. We're working with the College of Policing to equip our officers with the skills required for the Border Force of the future and responding to intelligence-led, specialist and customs work.

I'll be further investing in our learning and development function, to modernise training provision and increase its accessibility through more delivery methods. It needs to be brought in line with other more modern delivery techniques, based on need. Developing career pathways and associated accreditation where possible will meanwhile ensure that we retain and attract the best.

"New threats at the border continue to emerge, and existing threats evolve. We have to be ready to pivot to new challenges"

What is Border Force doing to tackle illegal migration and the small boats issue ahead of good weather this summer?
Border Force is playing a central role in the prime minister's five-point plan to tackle illegal migration. Stopping Channel crossings is a key priority for the government, and Border Force is working with other teams within the Home Office and other departments to deliver on that promise.

The Small Boats Operations Command has recently been set up in Border Force to bring our Channel and processing operation under a single structure. SBOC will recruit 730 dedicated staff, to bolster our response to curb migrant crossings and ensure Border Force can sustain its other responsibilities.

SBOC also brings with it new air and maritime capabilities, including new drones, land-based radar and piloted aircraft. Border Force supports the MCA-directed Safety of Life at Sea response to these crossings.

Our Border Force Maritime Command crews have rescued tens of thousands of people from the dangerous waters of the Channel over the past five years.

Border Force continues to work closely with the French and other near-borders partners to reduce these illegal and unnecessary crossings, as well as other forms of dangerous irregular migration such as clandestine entrants concealed within freight vehicles. This isn't a new fight and there is no single solution. However, through our existing measures and future work, we will make determined progress to reduce the incidence of irregular migration and the risks to life that it entails.

What are the most challenging parts of your role as director general and what has helped you tackle those challenges?
My role is incredibly challenging but equally rewarding. The variety of the work and the impact I know we are having to the safety and security of the UK is what gets me out of bed every morning.

My biggest challenge is dealing with the variety of pressing issues day to day. But knowing I have such a professional and experienced team, who are passionate about their jobs and the crucial role they play in keeping the UK safe and secure, means I have full confidence in our work and the impact we make.

What is your guilty pleasure?
When lockdown was lifted, I got to know London even better and joined friends on long walks across the city. I enjoyed taking in the old and the new, the culture and art, from tourist areas to centres of business.

I could combine my love of '60s architecture and long walks by taking in places such as the Barbican, home to the London Symphony Orchestra and a prime example of Brutalism; and the Queen Elizabeth Hall at the Southbank centre, where you can enjoy everything from outdoor entertainment to street food. ■

PROFESSIONS PRIMER… INTERNATIONAL TRADE

NEW SERIES!

In this new series, *CSW* provides a guide to professions and functions across the civil service. Each briefing looks at a different group, offering a glimpse at what they do and how they work with other parts of government

Who are they?

The international trade profession is made up of civil servants whose job is to support trade in and with the UK and is headed up by Crawford Falconer, second permanent secretary at the Department for Business and Trade and government's chief trade negotiation adviser.

"Unlike other professions, the trade profession is not so much determined by what type of work people are doing, as what the content of the work is," explains Institute for Government associate James Kane.

What do they do?

Kane describes the work of trade professionals as "bolstering international trade", while Jo Crellin, director general for trade systems at the Department for Business and Trade, describes a continuum of work from the policy-heavy "meta" work of "people who are designing the rules of the WTO" to the more operational end of "people who are supporting UK companies to export and overseas companies to come and invest in the United Kingdom".

How many are there across government?

Just over 3,700, according to the Department for Business and Trade, which is home to the vast majority of trade professionals. It is not, however, the only place they can be found: trade professionals are based right across government in 25 departments and arms-length bodies.

Other departments which have a sufficiently large or significant trade profession to require a 'head of profession' include the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, HM Revenue & Customs, HM Treasury and the Department for Transport. The devolved administrations also have their own trade profession heads.

What is a typical career path like?

As the trade profession was only founded in 2018, many of the roles across it are new.

"Trade roles are really interesting because many of them didn't exist a few years ago," says Crellin. "So as we've been building up the strength of the profession, we've drawn talent from lots of different places."

Many trade professionals started their career elsewhere in government or industry and, given this, the ITP has put a lot of work into creating a comprehensive learning and development offer – winning a civil service award in 2022 for its efforts. "It's a really marvellous offer," says Crellin, who took advantage of it herself when she took up her current role (*see box*). "And it's open to anyone who's interested in trade, not just people who are working on trade, so that is a good way into [the profession]."

She adds that the ITP is more flexible, in terms of location, than you might imagine. Of course there are opportunities for overseas work, but there are also roles across the UK – Crellin and many of her team are based in the Darlington Economic Campus, for example.

Which professions do they work most closely with?

The policy profession and negotiation experts from the FCDO. They also work with analysts and economists as well as operational delivery professionals, and within the ITP there are a number of specialisms which use skills that dovetail with other professions, such as analysts and project managers. Many members of the ITP are also members of other professions, Kane notes, explaining that most are members of the policy profession.

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VIEW FROM THE TOP....

JO CRELLIN
DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR TRADING SYSTEMS, DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS & TRADE

Jo Crellin was appointed director general for trading systems, in what was then the Department for International Trade, in 2020. She describes her directorate as "the bit of government that thinks about the rules [of trade] both internationally and domestically".

"We do a variety of things," she explains. "We promote economic growth through opening markets overseas and removing barriers to trade; we protect and defend the United Kingdom [both] in terms of international rules and making sure that our companies are being supported and defended against any potentially unfair practices. We think quite a lot about economic security and the interface between prosperity, growth and our national security."

Within this work, Crellin oversees the Bilateral Trade Relations team, who lead on regional and country specific trade policy outside formal trade negotiations, as well as helping to tackle market access barriers; the Trade Sanctions team who design and deliver targeted trade sanctions in response to existing and emerging threats; and the Global Supply Chains team who work with colleagues across government and overseas to strengthen critical supply chains.

"What I like about what we do is that it sits in the intersection of domestic and international government, business, prosperity, security – it's a fulcrum that's right in the middle of lots of things that [civil servants] do."

She gives an example of some recent work on standards for cosmetics – an area where there are currently relatively few international rules. The Chinese government requires all cosmetics to be tested on animals. "We obviously don't test on animals in the United Kingdom, so we worked with the Chinese government to persuade them to recognise that the standards we held were adequate and we didn't have to test on animals to be able to enter their market. As a result, we've removed that barrier for UK businesses," Crellin says.

Before taking up her current post, Crellin was trade commissioner for Latin America, based in São Paulo, Brazil, where she was also the British consul-general. She has been a civil servant since 2001, working in HM Treasury and the business department on issues such as nuclear decommissioning, social enterprise and corporate finance.

"As we've been building up the strength of the profession, we've drawn talent from lots of different places"
Jo Crellin, Department for Business and Trade

Most likely to say?

Crellin says two phrases she's likely to say – reflecting the profession's innovative and practical focus – are "now, let's crack on" and "we're doing lots of these things for the first time". She describes working in trade as "a wonderful mix of the strategic and technical" so there is a fair bit of technical language to get to grips with. This includes phrases you may be familiar with such as 'rules-based system', and bilateral and multilateral agreements. Others you may not be familiar with include 'plurilateral' (an agreement which includes more than two partners but, unlike multilaterals, is not designed for everyone to join) and 'demandeur' – meaning the party requesting a negotiation.

The trade world is also acronym heavy – even by government standards – so expect a smattering of things like MRL, FTA and TRQ or even the cumbersome but important CPTPP (*see below*).

What are their priorities at the moment?

As a profession, ITP continues to focus on building capability and a strong network across government, as well as embedding and prioritising diversity and inclusion across all of its work.

In January it launched a job shadowing scheme which it hopes will allow members to experience a variety of trade roles and careers. The scheme is being piloted across executive officer and higher executive officer members to begin with.

In terms of important work this year, the UK is in the advanced stage of negotiations to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership – or CPTPP. This is the first plurilateral the UK has sought to join since leaving the EU, and Crellin describes it as a "really important agreement, which will set the tone for our economic way of cooperating, and that group's way of co-operating for years to come".

Kane, who points out that the ITP – like the policy profession – is very sensitive to changes in government's own priorities, suggests that alongside the CPTPP we could see a renewed focus on a trade deal with the US.

Alongside these agreements, he says, and particularly since the merger of business and trade into a new department, there will also be a renewed focus on trade and growth. "If you look at some things that [business and trade secretary] Kemi Badenoch has been saying since the merger, they're much more focused on the contribution trade can make, practically, to UK growth so I suspect that will become more and more the focus of the profession as it goes forwards."

Kane also points to an interesting crossroads in the ITP's future as head of profession Crawford Falconer may soon step down, having already had his tenure at the trade department extended. "I gather he is planning to leave as soon as CPTPP is finished," says Kane. Falconer's vision for the profession has been "very much around negotiations," Kane continues, in line with Falconer's own experience. A new head of profession may change the focus slightly, Kane suggests, and there is "at least a possibility" that the ITP may merge with other professions.

Where can you find out more?

Visit: https://www.civil-service-careers.gov.uk/professions/working-in-international-trade-and-negotiation, or head to CS Live 2023. The profession will have a stand at all five locations to promote and explain its work. ■

FRONTLINE VIEW...

MATTY MORLEY
TRADE POLICY, NEGOTIATIONS, ENGAGEMENT AND COORDINATION ADVISER

Matty Morley first considered joining the civil service as he left university, but the chance to work in Spain as a sports journalist tempted him away. A few years later, having moved from journalism to business and back to the UK, Morley was working for a large chemical transport firm. His role involved "a bit of everything", including time spent in the US working on deep sea imports.

As his understanding of trade and logistics grew, he noticed frustrations and inefficiencies across the system. "My personality is to ask – and try and get to the bottom of – why things are done a certain way," he tells *CSW*, so he was attracted to the idea of joining the civil service and "being involved in the decision making process".

When an opportunity arose to join the trade department in the new Darlington Economic Campus, Morley jumped at it. "I was already based in the Northeast, and it just felt right, timing-wise," he recalls.

Morley became a civil servant just six months ago, and, despite his grounding in the world of trade, he describes a steep learning curve around the structures and systems of government.

He's been helped on that curve by two things – first that his job is a broad, cross cutting role which gives him insight into different parts of the department and wider government. As trade policy, negotiations, engagement and coordination adviser, Morley's role involves providing support to trade systems and trade negotiations teams in the Department for Business and Trade. This can range from reporting to the Cabinet Office on progress towards outcome delivery plans, or facilitating engagement either across the DBT directorates or externally with other government departments.

Morley also credits not just an extensive training offer but the culture of DBT for helping him to learn the ropes. "There's a really big culture of sort of informal learning, particularly within our directorate, of people sharing experience and knowledge, saying: "We've just done this big project and this is what we learned; here's a mistake you can avoid making in the future."

His experience outside government has helped him bring a new perspective to meetings and projects, he says. "It's especially helpful when we do things like translating trade agreements into language that's accessible to businesses," he says. "I've been on the other side of that, where you [as a business] understand that there are massive changes going on, but are not always able to access information on the impact and effects."

Thinking about what makes a good trade professional, Morley points to good communication skills, the ability to maintain relationships across different groups and a period of time, and the capacity to "manage both the urgent, last-minute things that you didn't see coming, and to look longer term and plan strategically".

SMALL WORLD

Tech a chance Natalie Black at London Tech Week

Natalie Black wants to shrink the globe – at least from a business perspective. The trade commissioner for Asia Pacific talks to **Suzannah Brecknell** about challenges, opportunities and the importance of being well connected

Department for Business and Trade

"A big part of our role is making the world feel smaller and more connected, at a time when it feels quite big and disconnected."

Natalie Black, one of nine trade commissioners who oversee the UK's trade policy in different regions of the world, talks often about connections – between business and investors; between the UK and its international partners; between different departments; between domestic and international policies; and between herself and the eight other commissioners who are helping to make the world feel smaller for UK business in particular.

Black is responsible for trade policy strategy and operations in Asia Pacific – namely Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand and all of Southeast Asia. The region, she says, is "where the action is". A quarter of the world's population is there and generates 40% of global GDP.

Black and her team of 250 officials in 15 locations have a big, and varied, task. She is based in Singapore, but her role involves a lot of travel and the ability to pivot between different work cultures and perspectives.

"You need to be a very good listener to the market you're operating in, and to understand the variety of perspectives," Black says. "At the beginning of the day I might be talking to Australia, and I have to engage with them in a very different way from investors in Japan in the afternoon."

By covering such a wide geography, the trade commissioners make it easier for UK businesses to connect with partners across the world. If you are a businessperson who wants to start exporting or building an overseas operation, Black explains, "there are actually only nine people you need to get in touch with if you need help". »

Go for growth Natalie Black (centre) with colleagues during a visit from the West Midlands Business Growth Company

Black also ensures she is staying "connected with the mothership" of UK government. She works closely with colleagues across the Department for Business and Trade, of course, but also with those in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, HM Treasury and the newly-created Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

She worked with colleagues from DSIT's predecessor department, for example, to launch the Digital Trade Network, which offers targeted support to digital businesses developing their export capabilities. And she supports colleagues from DBT and across government who are negotiating trade deals, such as the innovative UK and Singapore Digital Economy Agreement (DEA).

"Around 40% of UK trade is digitally delivered," Black says, adding that when digital trade makes up that high a proportion of your overall balance "you really care about how trade is delivered digitally". The DEA, she says, signals that the UK wants to "build the partnerships of the future, which are setting the rules of the road".

The DEA took just six months to negotiate – an unheard-of speed for an international agreement – and covers areas which don't feature in most trade agreements but which matter greatly to digital trade, such as digital invoicing and data flows.

On the latter, Black explains, the agreement means that "if you're a company that uses data – that is, pretty much all of them – you have increased reassurance that there is a set way for you to exchange data with Singapore and it will be protected and respected".

Besides the speed of its creation and its content, the DEA is also unusual because it includes a number of sections designed to promote further collaboration and innovation. Like any normal trade deal it is legally binding, says Black, but it also contains several memorandums of understanding which flag specific areas – such as AI, cybersecurity and emerging technologies – on which the UK and Singapore governments want to help increase collaboration.

"So it's a really clear signal to the business community that innovative partnerships will be welcomed, with the added value of having that legally binding reassurance that the way that we do business digitally is going to be easier," she says.

That the UK has just signed a Digital Trade Agreement with Ukraine shows, Black says, that the Singapore agreement has demonstrated "how you can quickly work together to build new types of partnerships, which are very relevant in the modern world, and then apply them elsewhere."

While there is still work to be done on trade negotiations (which don't fall directly in the trade commissioners' remit but do require their support), a big focus for Black's team this year will be working on the implementation of deals such as the DEA.

"Having deals on paper is one thing," she says, "but making the benefits realisable for British consumers and British producers is the number one priority."

As an example, she points to a trip organised last year, when her team welcomed 25 British companies who worked in areas covered by the DEA memorandums so they could meet policymakers, ministers and potential investors in Singapore.

"They walk away with new opportunities, new partnerships, and we continue to track them to see how that all develops," she says.

This, she says, is a really satisfying part of her role: "You'll get an email from a company saying: 'We talked six months ago – sorry we haven't been in touch, we've been really busy, but just wanted to let you know we're going to open an office in Vietnam next week and the team there were a real help.'

"There's real job satisfaction because you see real-world outcomes. You're not creating the jobs; you're not creating the companies, but you are supporting individuals to do that."

As well as championing the UK's tech sector, Black's work covers any part of the UK economy where there's a business which needs help to grow overseas, and she's particularly enthused when she mentions a recent visit from the West Midlands Growth Company, who were in Singapore to discuss work on electric and hydrogen fuel buses.

"I grew up in the West Midlands," she says. "My grandad left school at 14 and tested cars all his working life in Longbridge. There's no way he would believe his granddaughter is now living in Singapore."

As well as the family connection, the visit showed the ways in which domestic and international policies interact. "It's not just about building a bus in the West Mids," she says. "It's about building a bus that is going to transform how we think about transportation."

That transformation might need investment in capability from overseas, as well as access to overseas markets – it's her job to facilitate those connections, and perhaps help change the UK's transport sector in the process.

One obvious example of the connection between domestic and international policies comes through the complex supply chains which bring food and goods to our shops. Most people gave little thought to these networks until early 2020, when they began to creak to a halt.

"The pandemic showed us all how important supply chains are and how important it is to understand, firstly, where they are and, second, what your vulnerabilities are," Black says.

"During the pandemic, there was a whole-of-government effort to very quickly work together to understand what the UK economy needed and where there were blockers, which could be for a whole range of reasons, how those of us based overseas could step in and try to resolve them."

That work has continued, as policymakers and politicians in the UK have recognised the ongoing importance of supply-chain resilience. It's a new area, but one the government is investing in heavily and it is now a "key part" of Black's remit.

Among her team, she explains, are people whose job is to "understand what the economic picture looks like" in their country.

This work might be as practical as creating maps showing how supply chains are connected, or it could be plotting out future demands and challenges along those chains. The job of these officials is also to consider how the UK can get ahead in areas where there is competition for resources that are – or could be – in short supply.

In an increasingly competitive world, Black says, "we want civil servants who are comfortable crossing the domestic and international divide".

To this end, and because she is focused on improving the diversity of her own team, she would like to see more officials applying for overseas roles – and there are signs of progress.

"The attraction of the civil service is you get the opportunity to try and grasp these difficult problems that no one really knows what to do with, and to work with very smart people, often in world-leading settings"

"When we advertise jobs now, we get a huge interest from a whole range of civil servants with different backgrounds, and that's absolutely what we want," Black says. "We're trying to do new and innovative things, so we want people who are going to challenge and have different ideas; who are going to help us pilot new arrangements so we can put the UK at the forefront of everything we're trying to do."

The trade commissioner role is Black's first overseas posting – indeed, her first role which is specifically linked to trade.

Before taking up the post in 2018 she spent three years as deputy head of the No.10 Policy Unit and, for the last year, was also the founding director of the Internet Harms Unit, leading cross-government work to tackle things like online safety and terrorist activity online.

Before that, she led the Office of Cyber Security, part of the Cabinet Office, which she joined in 2013 after working as chief of staff for security on the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games.

Her experience of dealing with cybersecurity incidents at LOCOG introduced her to work happening in government on that topic. "I could see here was an opportunity to be involved in shaping [this work]," she remembers. "The attraction of the civil service is you get the opportunity to try and grasp these difficult problems that no one really knows what to do with, and to work with very smart people, often in world-leading settings."

Black is genuinely proud of the UK's cybersecurity programme, describing it as "one of the best, if not the best in the world". From that work, she says, she began to see how "very specific decisions we were taking on cybersecurity were actually having massive implications [for business]," and her move to No.10 presented an opportunity to look at the broader policy context of these decisions.

"It was complete privilege every day to work in No.10," she says. "Every day you have the opportunity to really make a difference, so the pressure to bring your A game is quite high."

But at the same time, she was noticing another challenge. "There were a number of times when we wanted something to happen in the UK and we hadn't quite got the right arrangements and structures in place.

"I could see with the commissioner role that you would have an opportunity to be right at the front end of trying to attract the very best into the UK and giving the very best opportunities for British businesses overseas," she says.

That Black is enthusiastic about the role is perhaps unsurprising since she helped shape the 2017 Industrial Strategy, which committed to building the commissioner network as part of a range of measures aimed at driving up exports.

Having worked on strategy at the centre of government, and also worked under various strategies at different times in her career, what are Black's reflections on what makes a good strategy?

"Firstly, a really strong data foundation," she says. "Taking that time to really understand the problem. When you're under pressure for whatever reason, there can be a temptation to skip that stage or reduce it."

Second, you need a good understanding of the environment you're trying to influence. "You can have the world's best strategy, but if you don't understand where you want to land, it is probably not going to land at all."

Finally, she says, be as "creative as possible about what levers you can pull to deliver an outcome", making connections and working collaboratively to find solutions.

"This is why it's so important to make sure you're not working across silos," she says, circling back to the importance of connections if you want to make change. "It's when you see that interconnection between issues and opportunities," she says. "That's when something exciting happens." ■

Social INTERACTIONS

Billed as the holy grail that can save public money as well as improving outcomes, social value has been a formal part of public sector procurement for a decade, but what do new procurement rules mean for its future? **Tim Gibson** examines the impact of the Social Value Act and considers what the next decade may hold

Keen observers of parliamentary process will no doubt be following with interest the passage of the procurement bill through the House. Those who are keener still may even have engaged with the Public Bill Committee debates about it that started at the end of January.

If so, they'll have noticed a nuanced discussion concerning the language of the bill. It involved Labour MP Florence Eshalomi making the case for "social value" to receive clear signposting. She proposed an amendment that would make specific mention of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 alongside the bill's existing reference to "public benefit".

Eshalomi's proposal reflects an ongoing feature of discussion about the procurement bill. In its original drafting, the government didn't include the language of "social value", but the House of Lords asserted that it should be there – a suggestion not taken up for the bill's second reading. Even after Eshalomi's intervention, it remains absent. The Noes had it.

But readers who share the member for Vauxhall's enthusiasm for social value need not fret. The Cabinet Office has made it clear to *CSW* that the new bill sits alongside existing legislation and guidance for public sector procurement managers, ensuring all central government buying decisions take due account of the wider social and environmental benefits of a tender as a matter of course.

As Professor Chris White, who proposed the Social Value Act as a private member's bill during his time in the Commons, notes: "If social value isn't explicitly referenced in the procurement bill, that's because it's now so firmly embedded it doesn't need further mention."

A decade of social value

White's is a good perspective with which to begin a survey of the decade since the Social Value Act was enacted. He left parliament in 2017 and now serves as director of the Industrial Policy Research Centre at Loughborough University. He describes himself as "optimistic" about the impact of the act he devised – and, indeed, about its future.

"The purpose of the act was to be light-touch legislation to drive cultural change in government procurement processes," he says. "The original bill was only eight pages in length, including covers. It didn't contain strategies or definitions, but it's had an undoubted impact."

White points to the fact that social value is now "pervasive" in the tendering process. In 2017, he says social value influenced around £25bn of public spending. "That figure is now approximately £100bn and set to grow, which shows that social value is now generally adopted and well understood."

Just in case you don't share such understanding, it's helpful to consider the definition of social value included in the act. It comes in section 3, and says the "[procurer] must consider how what is proposed to be procured might improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the relevant area."

In other words, social value is about driving wider benefit from the award of a government contract. Examples include creating apprenticeship schemes for local »

> **“If social value is properly embedded in contracts, it actually saves the government money by enhancing the quality of public services”**
> ***Andrew O’Brien***

people when a ship-building contract is awarded; pursuing an accelerated net-zero target upon the award of a construction project; or investing in community groups to skill-up local people as part of a tech bid. As White explains: "Social value is about improving the environment, enhancing social mobility, or working with communities."

A key feature of the concept is that it can be hard to define, but people tend to grasp what it's about when they see examples in practice. That makes the job of a government procurement manager challenging, since they need to weigh the benefits of various tenders, which may offer very different proposals to generate social value.

Sharpening focus

That challenge became more pronounced with the introduction of Public Procurement Notice (PPN) 06/20 on 1 January 2021. If the Social Value Act established a general commitment to securing wider economic, social and environmental benefits when contracts are awarded, PPN 06/20 mandated such consideration.

"Social value should be explicitly evaluated in all central government procurement," the note states. It later establishes that social value questions should carry a minimum 10% weighting in the overall score, with procurers given freedom to attribute a higher weighting "if justified".

Our contact at the Cabinet Office observes that the commitment to social value was strengthened by PPN 05/21, which came into force in June 2021. This reminds procurers of the need to consider national priority outcomes when awarding contracts, including "creating new businesses, new jobs and new skills; tackling climate change and reducing waste, and improving supplier diversity, innovation and resilience".

In other words, social value is no longer a "nice-to-have". It's firmly embedded in the government's procurement processes – and very much here to stay.

Delivering social value: good news stories

All of which begs a question: how do contracting authorities secure social value? The government commercial function and Crown Commercial Service publish regularly updated guidance for procurers. Moreover, tools like the Social Value Portal – an independent online resource that guides both procurers and the supplier community through the process of maximising social value in tenders and subsequent contracts – are popular. This uses a framework known as "National TOMs" (themes, outcomes and measures) to quantify social value, thereby offering a standard against which competing tenders can be assessed.

The result has been some excellent practice, with genuine impact on society and the environment. This is a point made by Andrew O'Brien, who was director of external affairs at Social Enterprise UK until March and is now director of policy and impact at Demos, a think tank that worked with Chris White on the Social Value Act.

"There are some great examples of social value emerging from public sector procurements," O'Brien says. "We've definitely seen a mindset change in central and local government, with a commitment to making life better for the planet and the public when awarding contracts resulting in tangible outcomes."

Many such outcomes were highlighted in a report published by Social Enterprise UK last year, entitled *Social Value 2032*. Authored by Chris White, it analysed the impact of the Social Value Act in its first 10 years and mapped a vision for the coming decade.

The good stuff is self evident. Suez Recycling delivering an upcycling and repair hub for Greater Manchester Combined Authority as part of its waste management contract. Shaw Trust committing more than £1m across a 10-year partnership with Somerset County Council to drive social value through its provision of children's services. Siemens influencing its supply chain to deliver sustainability and inclusion. PwC introducing a "Voice of the Victim Forum" to help West Midlands Police and other bodies better manage rape and serious sexual assault cases.

"The government needs to recognise the ongoing work many small companies do to drive social value – that would level the playing field" ***Pippa Birch***

"All these examples speak of the power of public sector procurement to deliver added value, thereby maximising the return on every pound of public money spent," O'Brien says. "If social value is properly embedded in contracts, it actually saves the government money by enhancing the quality of public services."

The challenge

Despite the good news, there is some way to go before the full potential of social value is realised – especially in central government buying. In his report, White references analysis by Social Enterprise UK suggesting that some £760bn worth of opportunities to create economic, social and environmental value may have been missed in public sector procurement between 2010 and 2020. "[That is] equivalent to £56bn a year, or 14 Levelling Up Funds."

Such figures may serve to deflate the sense of optimism around social value, but White sees it as an opportunity to pursue "exponential growth". "The holy grail of policy making is to deliver better public services for less," he says. "If we increase social value in government contracts, we'll achieve that aim, transforming public services and creating an environmentally sustainable future."

To do so, further work is needed to help government procurers embed social value in their tendering processes. That's the view of many in the supply chain, who believe a lack of consistency and proportionality makes it difficult to answer questions relating to social value, and harder still to deliver against it in-contract.

"I see a lot of variation in the questions around social value in tender documents," says Sarah Hinchliffe, founder and chair of the Social Value Group for the UK chapter of the Association of Bid Proposal Management Professionals (APMP UK). "PPN 06/20 has definitely brought it to the forefront of procurers' minds and ensured social value is included in tenders. But there is a lack of consistency in the way questions are asked, or the space given to respond. Equally, there is often no clear sense that the expectation around social value is in proportion to the size of the contract, or of the supplier."

Part of the challenge, Hinchliffe says, is to develop the skills and understanding of procurement managers so they know how to apply the guidance of PPN 06/20 and PPN 05/21. "If social value is part of the mainstream of government procurement, those managing the process need to develop expertise in asking the right questions and assessing them. Then, of course, we need effective governance to make sure it is delivered once a contract is under way."

Working together

One of the themes to emerge from government suppliers across several sectors is the need for clear engagement around social value. For example, a survey by APMP UK in September 2022 found that 75% of respondents disagreed with the statement that buyers engaged well with stakeholders and industry to develop clear social value requirements and questions, while 80% felt buyers' knowledge of social value ranked lower than "good".

A similar picture emerges from qualitative research conducted by techUK and Dods Research – a sister company of *CSW* which is now part of the Total Politics group – in June 2022, published as *Getting IT Done: techUK Public Sector Supplier Perspectives*. While pre-tender engagement has increased, suppliers found the approaches taken by different departments lacked consistency – a general comment that has resonance in relation to social value, where a lack of clarity among buyers can make it hard for suppliers to define their offer.

A solution would be to move away from a contract-by-contract approach to social value. As one respondent to the techUK survey said: "The questions are asked on a per-contract basis. Whereas what you want to know is really about the company and what it does as a whole."

Hinchliffe echoes this sentiment, saying: "Companies of all sizes complain that their established policies, programmes and initiatives typically fail to count for anything in procurement unless they can be extended to be contract-specific – which isn't always feasible, especially on small contracts. Allowing some flexibility to include these would be a big improvement."

This is a particular burden for SMEs, says Pippa Birch, a bid writer specialising in the construction industry: "Companies with smaller budgets are not able to compete with larger corporations when it comes to social value. They can't always afford specific initiatives to win contracts. The government needs to recognise the ongoing work many do to drive social value – for example, in terms of job creation, skills training and environmental care. That would level the playing field."

The endgame is what Chris White calls the "enculturation" of social value across the public sector and its supply chain, or, to use the language of his Social Enterprise UK report, "systems-change". The idea is that social value becomes a part of how businesses and government operate, rather than being centred on specific contracts. When weighing the social value of a particular procurement, the focus is on its contribution to long-term social and environmental goals. "That way, you also circumvent the difficulty of separating the mandatory from the optional," he says, "which ensures innovation and creativity remain a feature of the social-value landscape."

The coming decade

Rather than indicating frustration with the government's pursuit of social value, these comments point to the huge appetite among the supplier community to deliver. In this, there is a clear double coincidence of wants, established by the Social Value Act and hardened in the subsequent decade.

"The next 10 years will see an acceleration of social value in both the private and public sectors," White suggests. "Come back to me in 2033 and we'll have seen a step change in the whole way we transact business as a government and as a society." ■

THE VOICE OF REASON

As government chief scientific adviser, **Sir Patrick Vallance** became a household name as the calm and rational presence at the daily Covid briefings. **Beckie Smith** takes a look at the man behind the TV screen

Gus O'Donnell admits he once gave Sir Patrick Vallance what later turned out to be the "worst advice known to man".

In early 2018, the soon-to-be government chief scientific adviser approached several senior figures for their words of wisdom on how to succeed in the job. One of the questions he pitched to Lord O'Donnell was about the public-facing parts of the role.

O'Donnell, who was cabinet secretary from 2005 to 2011, laughs as he remembers his response: "I said, 'Well, it's pretty rare. I don't suppose you'll have to do a lot of that, but occasionally they need someone in a white coat to look authoritative.' How wrong can you be?"

Just over two years later, Vallance had become a regular fixture on the nation's televisions alongside chief medical officer Sir Chris Whitty and the prime minister at the daily press briefings on Covid-19.

"There's no reason why civil servants would know much about big pharma, but Patrick did and he knew the way they think"
Lord Gus O'Donnell

Vallance and Whitty quickly became known as the calm and reasoned presence sharing information on R-rates and social distancing amid what often became tense exchanges between politicians and journalists.

Throughout, both remained staunchly politically neutral. When the Partygate scandal erupted last year, Vallance's assessment of lockdown-breaking gatherings in No.10 was understated but damning: "It was really important at all stages that everyone stuck to the rules… It is disappointing that wasn't the case."

Professor John Edmunds, an epidemiologist who sat on the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies for the two years it met regularly to support the government's Covid response, says this measured demeanour continued behind the scenes.

"Patrick was working in an extraordinarily pressured situation… and he held it all together with such apparent ease," says Edmunds. Managing the "enormous pyramid of information" and communicating it to ministers was a "huge undertaking", Edmunds says. "It always seemed so easy, and he was never ruffled."

Chief scientific advisers can come from any field of science – and as a physician and clinical pharmacologist, Vallance seemed especially well suited to supporting the response to a global pandemic. His understanding of the private sector was also invaluable, having spent six years as president of research and development at the pharmaceutical giant GSK before moving into government.

"There's no reason why civil servants would know much about big pharma, but Patrick did and he knew the way they think," O'Donnell says. "We were incredibly lucky to have the right person in the right place at the right time."

But as in all crises and policy issues, the chief scientific adviser's job is not to rely solely on their own knowledge, but to draw on expertise in and outside government.

That was no insignificant feat, says Professor Iain Buchan, chair in public health and clinical informatics at the University of Liverpool. "There were religious-like opinions from various academic groups who only saw parts of the problem," he says. Much of this came from outside Sage – such as the "venomous tweeting" about lateral-flow tests and other measures – but Buchan remembers the chief scientist "calmly diffusing unnecessary energy" in meetings on occasion.

Several of the attendees *CSW* spoke to nod to the difficulties of managing egos in a room full of the UK's top experts in their fields.

Derek Smith, professor of infectious disease informatics at the University of Cambridge, says he was "utterly impressed at how collegial everybody was – how people didn't seem to be jockeying for position". Largely thanks to Vallance's leadership, he says, "everybody's ego was in check".

Smith says Vallance "immediately made [him] feel at home". Turning his mind back to the first time he attended Sage, Smith says: "Patrick calls on me as if he knows me. I've never met him in person, it's the first time I've been in a meeting with him."

This leadership style had a powerful effect, Smith says. "It was absolutely clear »

that when there were disagreements or different opinions, or one lab's data said something different from another lab's data, there would be a genuine openness to figure out what was causing this difference."

Smith has spent two decades on the World Health Organization committee that selects global flu vaccine strains each year. He says he has "never seen anybody in Patrick's league" as a chair. "He's absolutely on point. Not only to the government, but to the media, to the country. I never saw him anything but calmly 'on it'."

While welcoming and cordial, Vallance ran a tight ship through those pressured months. Buchan, who led a six-month testing pilot in Liverpool in 2020, says Vallance "rightly" cut him off when his presentation of the findings ran long.

"When I emailed him with more detail that weekend, he sent me a very thoughtful reply," Buchan says. "That's a mark of someone working at multiple levels: as the executive chairman running an efficient national meeting in an emergency situation; and a chief scientific adviser who integrates advice and treats his advisers with good grace. Grace is a very important commodity in a pressured world."

Like the other academics *CSW* has spoken to, Buchan credits Vallance with fostering a "great sense of camaraderie and public service" among the experts. "I was very struck by Patrick's thoughtfulness. He always responded with alacrity, in detail, in a timely and very considered way," he says.

Vallance's approach to leadership may well have been informed by his own experiences. Soon after his appointment in 2018, Vallance told *CSW* how his career had been shaped – and almost radically altered – by his working environment. He said he "nearly" gave up being a professor at University College London in the mid-1990s, "because of an interaction with a senior person who was making my life very, very difficult". A mentor convinced him to stay, and he went on to become UCL's head of medicine.

For Edmunds, getting told off by Vallance was, somewhat counterintuitively, a positive experience. He says Sage members were told not to speak about what had been discussed in the meetings until the minutes had been published a few days later. Amid intense pressure from journalists for information about the pandemic, he admits that "sometimes we slipped up".

"You would get a little note saying, 'can you speak with me?'... but it was all done in such a nice way. You got the message that you had been told off – but it takes a special sort of person to be able to tell someone off and leave them feeling better about themselves and their daily life and their work at the end of it."

In many ways, the Covid pandemic has defined Vallance's tenure as chief scientific adviser – something that was recognised at Buckingham Palace last year, when he was upgraded from his 2019 knighthood to become Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath. But it would be a mistake, says British Academy chief executive Hetan Shah, to think of Vallance solely as "the pandemic chief scientific adviser".

"He may go down as the most influential government chief scientific adviser we've had so far," Shah says. He points to the work Vallance has done to bolster the government science and engineering network, and the creation last November of the cabinet-level National Science and Technology Council to drive the UK's science and tech strategy. With it came the Office for Science and Technology Strategy, tasked with delivering the council's vision.

"Those big structural changes will be with us for a long time and embed the research-science-technology-innovation agenda across government," says Shah. "That is his big legacy, but I'm not sure he's got the credit for it, because people see the pandemic and that's what they'll remember him for."

Vallance has also invested a great deal of time and effort in building up the government science and engineering profession. Setting out his stall in December 2018, he said he wanted the more than 10,000 scientists and engineers across government to have "much more visibility" and more developed career paths.

A few months later came the Government Science Capability Review, which called for departments to up their R&D budgets and for Spending Review bids to set out their research needs and costs. Vallance spoke out publicly about the government's failure to protect science funding, telling *CSW* it was "not surprising" that was where cuts had fallen "because it's an easy thing to cut without making an in-year impact".

Vallance also said he wanted to see science "totally embedded in the Whitehall system" in the same way as economics, both through more funding and a greater proliferation of scientific skills throughout the civil service.

To that end, the capability review called for half of all Fast Stream entrants to have science backgrounds. When Vallance arrived in government, only 10% did, which he said in a 2022 lecture showed a "deficit" of people entering the civil service with science, technology and engineering expertise. This February, it was announced that half of the 2023 cohort of fast streamers will be STEM graduates.

The comparison between the role of economics in government policy and of what Vallance has – perhaps graciously – referred to as "other branches of science" began before he entered government. Despite O'Donnell's admission that his comment on public appearances fell inadvertently wide of the mark, Vallance said the former cab's advice on the role of science in shaping policy was "extremely useful".

"Gus told me his view was that science was good

in parts across government. There were places of real excellence… but it was certainly not ubiquitous," Vallance told the Bennett Institute for Public Policy Annual Conference last April.

He said O'Donnell, an economist who was permanent secretary at the Treasury before leading the civil service, had told him that "science should be as embedded as [economics] is and should be as much a part of everyday life in government".

Sir Ian Boyd, a former chief scientific adviser at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, says Vallance has made "huge progress with respect to getting science much more recognised by central government as a significant component of policy development and delivery".

Boyd says science has been "hugely undervalued" in the development and delivery of government policy. "I think it doesn't get the respect it deserves and, as a result, we have various disasters happening," he says, nodding to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the early response to Covid – which was hampered by the emphasis on influenza in the government's pre-Covid pandemic planning.

Vallance was aware of this and was "more internally focused than a lot his predecessors had been – less focused on issues and much more focused on making sure the profession was working well", says Boyd, whose seven years at Defra spanned four GCSA appointments.

"It takes a special sort of person to be able to tell someone off and leave them feeling better about themselves and their work at the end of it" ***Professor John Edmunds***

One of Vallance's early priorities as a civil servant was filling gaps in the government science advice network. MPs on parliament's Science and Technology Committee were horrified to discover in 2017 that there had been no chief scientific adviser at the then-Department for Communities, Housing and Local Government at the time of the Grenfell Tower disaster, which killed 72 people.

Months after arriving in post, Vallance wrote to the perm secs of each government department telling them to ensure they had a chief scientist in place. But he made it clear the roles must be filled by people with relevant expertise – engineering, in the case of DCLG's successor MHCLG, which oversaw building safety. He told *CSW* in late 2018 that he would not be pushed into rushing appointments, because "it's not a tick-box exercise; it's got to be done the right way".

Familiar face Vallance speaks at a Covid press briefing

MHCLG appointed its first chief scientist in more than six and a half years – architectural and urban computing expert Alan Penn – in July 2019. Over the following months, departments filled the remaining gaps in the CSA network.

Vallance was a "very strong advocate" of the departmental chief scientific advisers' work within government and "somebody we could turn to as a colleague", says Boyd, who is now professor of biology at the University of St Andrews and chair of the UK Research Integrity Office.

When Boyd produced a paper ahead of Brexit on the risks that could emerge as the UK and EU science advisory systems diverged, Vallance "championed that through the Cabinet Office to make sure it was heard at the centre of government that, even if you've got the same science, you're probably going to end up with different advice," he says. "That's quite a difficult thing to articulate to people, and I got a lot of support from Patrick for that."

When Sage supported the government's handling of the 2018 Novichok crisis, Vallance – who was appointed a month after the first poisonings – did a "fantastic job" leading the scientific response, Boyd says. But he says Vallance had no hesitation in standing down the group once the acute crisis had passed and handing over responsibility to him while Defra led the clean-up effort. "He was able to step away from that completely. He trusted me entirely to deliver it, which gave me confidence that he had confidence in me," he says.

Edmunds says this willingness to rely on others was one of the chief scientific adviser's strengths during the Covid crisis. Vallance, he says, was "very inclusive – scientifically as well as of people in the committee".

Buchan agrees that Vallance's openness to a range of expertise and his ability to synthesise large amounts of data and see the big picture served Sage well. "Patrick was very thoughtful in his responses and foresight," he says. The chief scientist, he explains, could "look several months ahead at what might happen, to think about how the country could recover from a pandemic, or the growth of health and life sciences and digital health economies".

This foresight was apparent in the way Vallance interacted with external expert bodies like the royal academies, says Shah. The chief scientist approached the British Academy in the early months of the pandemic to ask for insights on its long-term societal consequences.

"Not every person in government is able to spot how outside organisations can help," Shah says. "He had that concept of the porosity of government and the value of getting outsiders to come and help – and the recognition that lots of people did want to help – which I think has been really valuable."

O'Donnell says he found his early conversations with Vallance instructive. "I think it says a lot that he came to talk to me – his understanding that there were lots of things he knew incredibly well, lots of skills he had, but something he didn't get was civil service and government," he says.

"He knew what he didn't know and was keen to learn so he could be very effective." ■

NEW SERIES

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

ANY REPORT IN A STORM

Who? Public Accounts Committee
What? The defence digital strategy
When? 3 February, 2023
In Brief The Ministry of Defence must fundamentally change the way it operates to implement its new digital strategy at the necessary pace and scale, but still does not have a delivery plan that will allow it to do this, PAC said.

The report said the MoD has been struggling for years to deliver the major programmes necessary to replace over 2,000 systems and applications for 200,000 users, from administrative and back-office IT to military platforms such as ships and satellites.

It said the conflict in Ukraine underlined the urgency of replacing outdated systems. But of the defence IT projects large and critical enough to have their performance reported publicly by the Infrastructure Projects Authority, three had significant issues and two were "unachievable".

The committee said the MoD must make a "down payment" on a whole new way of operating and display a genuine sense of urgency to address these serious issues, accompanied by a thorough, realistic and costed programme for doing so.

Key recommendations

- Updates within six months on how the MoD will embed the cultural and organisational changes needed to ensure the whole department prioritises digital transformation, how it is performing against its delivery plan, and how it has changed its approach to recruitment
- The department should also explain the actions it has taken to improve its performance in delivering major digital programmes

"CSPL said government leaders must not be complacent about upholding standards"

Who? National Audit Office
What? Supporting investment into the UK
When? 27 January, 2023
In Brief The (at the time still existent) Department for International Trade needs a greater understanding of the UK's regional strengths and competitive advantages to aid its work driving foreign investment, the NAO said.

While DIT had made progress in presenting a coherent UK offer to investors, the NAO said it needs to coordinate its work more closely with other departments, local authorities, devolved nations and other local bodies.

In particular, the NAO said that DIT had yet to develop a "UK-wide overview" of local strengths, including skills, infrastructure and supply chain opportunities, and how it will market these to attract further investment – this supporting economic growth and funding for public services.

Key recommendations

- DIT should work with other departments, local authorities, devolved administrations, and other bodies to deepen knowledge of the relative strengths in different industry sectors of UK nations and regions to help identify the most suitable UK projects for overseas investors.
- The department should develop stronger processes, that are proportionate, integrated and used consistently, for reducing the risk of government involvement with controversial companies.
- DIT should assess how actual economic benefits from inward investment projects, such as the number of jobs created, compare with its forecast at the outset.

Who? Committee on Standards in Public Life
What? Leading in Practice
When? January 24, 2023
In Brief The independent standards body urged permanent secretaries to embed a "robust ethical culture" in their departments, saying this is often only prioritised in a crisis.

CSPL said government leaders must not be "complacent" about upholding standards, warning that "the ethical health of an organisation cannot be left to chance".

It urged perm secs to "set the tone for their organisation" by communicating ethical standards clearly and to show "zero tolerance of poor behaviour exhibited by other leaders".

The report identified 20 questions for leaders to ask themselves, including

- How do the people in your organisation know that you care about the Principles of Public Life?
- Is your board clear on their role in relation to the ethical culture of the organisation?

Who? Office for Environmental Protection
What? Progress in improving the natural environment in England, 2021-22
When? 19 January, 2023
In Brief Government's progress on delivery of its 25-year plan to improve the environment has "fallen far short", the watchdog found.

Of 32 trends assessed across the breadth of the natural environment, nine trends were improving, eleven were static, and eight were deteriorating, the

OEP said. The government was not on track to meet any of the 23 environmental targets in the 2021-22 Environmental Improvement Plan for England.

Key recommendations

- The government should identify and fill critical data gaps, focusing firstly on the issues of greatest environmental concern. Government's monitoring, assessment and reporting framework should provide the data needed to understand if environmental goals are being met.
- The ONS should be given a greater role in overseeing environmental statistics, viewing them alongside relevant socio-economic information.
- Defra should develop and publish an evidence-based, accessible and transparent assessment methodology to measure and report progress in achieving the objectives of EIPs

Who? National Audit Office
What? Investigation into the performance of UK Security Vetting
When? 18 January, 2023
In Brief: Continued poor performance by government's security vetting provider is putting the effective functioning of government departments and national security at risk, the NAO warned. It said delays to UK Security Vetting's checks mean government departments "risk being unable to progress work relating to national security".

The NAO said it is "essential that the Cabinet Office sets out a clear pathway for meaningful reform to get the service on track, including recruiting and retaining talented staff "to implement and manage sustainable improvements".

Key recommendations

The Cabinet Office should:

- Recognise the importance of modernising the national security vetting process and work quickly to design an implementation plan with key milestones in place
- Ensure that governance structures are appropriate to enable effective challenge and scrutiny of UKSV without becoming an impediment to progressing work on national security vetting
- Create a set of performance metrics that measures whether clearances are being processed in a timely and accurate way that meets customer needs and avoids perverse incentives
- Ensure that there is sufficient resilience within UKSV to react to events that might drive increased demand for security vetting

OVERHEARD ON COMMITTEE CORRIDOR

Select committee appearances that caught our attention

Another way to cut
Dowden confirmed that major job cuts are still in the offing despite prime minister Rishi Sunak scrapping the controversial 91,000 target. "I think the only difference is that we will be driven by outcomes. And those budget pressures are going to force better ways of working and certainly reduction in headcount as well," Dowden told PACAC on 26 January.

'No fines for the innocent'
At a PAC session on the same day, HMRC chief executive Jim Harra was quizzed on tax errors as the scandal over then-Conservative Party chair Nadhim Zahawi erupted.

Zahawi, who was fined over a tax dispute related to the sale of YouGov shares held by an offshore company linked to his father, blamed "carelessness" for the unpaid tax, but Harra said an unintentional error would not have been met with a fine.

He told MPs: "There are no penalties for innocent errors in your tax affairs. If you take reasonable care, but nevertheless make a mistake, whilst you will be liable for the tax, and for interest, you would not be liable for a penalty."

Harra also revealed his "frustration" with high-profile tax disputes as individuals are able to make claims about their affairs but HMRC is not able to challenge them.

"As a general rule, our duty of confidentiality would mean that if a taxpayer made a public statement about their affairs which we felt we did not agree with, that would not be a matter that we would correct," he said.

Going nowhere
Lingering concerns over job security (not helped by Dowden's aforementioned comments) mean the government's plans to move thousands of jobs outside London – through the Places for Growth programme – are "completely stalling", the FDA union told PACAC hearing in February.

FDA assistant general secretary Amy Leversidge said last May's announcement of job cuts had prompted a recruitment freeze that had hit the ability of new departmental bases outside of London to make external hires.

"The bigger concern for civil servants at the moment isn't that they're going to be looking to move outside of London but that they're looking to leave the civil service," she added.

And finally...
Recent months have also seen a robot giving evidence to a House of Lords committee and some blue-on-blue action.

Ai-Da, a life size AI robot artist, answered questions from peers as part of the Communications and Digital Committee's inquiry into the future of the UK's creative industries. Unfortunately, it broke down during the session and had to be rebooted.

And equalities minister Kemi Badenoch and fellow Tory MP Caroline Nokes clashed in a fiery Women and Equalities Committee session. In a heated exchange, the minister suggested ethnicity pay-gap reporting should be voluntary and some initiatives were "junk". An irate Nokes responded: "Right, so you haven't looked at any of this but you want to make sure if it's being done..."

Badenoch interrupted: "I'd really appreciate it if you stopped putting words in my mouth. I need to be able to speak and say things without..."

Nokes retorted: "Could you please let me ask the question without you talking over me?" ■

Who? Public Accounts Committee
What? HMRC performance in 2021-22
When? 11 January, 2023
In Brief The UK is missing out on £42bn of unpaid tax because HM Revenue and Customs has too few staff working to improve performance, PAC found.

While the £731.1bn HMRC collected in taxes and duties last year was the highest on record, PAC said it is "still not deploying the resources required to maximise the tax revenues it collects or provide an acceptable level of customer service".

The £42bn tax is around 5% of the total owed each year, standing at a similar level to in 2019-20. The MPs criticized HMRC for lacking "ambition" to tackle fraud and error.

HMRC bases its compliance performance and resourcing on maintaining, rather than reducing, the tax gap. But MPs argued this means the government is "missing out on billions in lost revenue".

Key recommendations

- HMRC should return to a formal compliance yield target with the Treasury from April 2023 and report the target publicly, the committee said. Targets should take account of inflation and economic factors, for example by setting the target relative to tax revenue
- It should also set out the amount of investment needed in its compliance teams to reduce the size of the tax gap, and confirm if it intends to pursue this.

Who? Public Accounts Committee
What? Managing central government property
When? 21 December, 2022
In Brief PAC warned that Cabinet Office plans for managing government's extensive property portfolio, valued at approximately £158bn and costing £22bn a year to maintain, are out of sync with current market conditions and lacking in ambition to reduce costs.

The Government Property Agency is "handicapped" in achieving planned reforms by ageing IT systems and incomplete data on post-pandemic office usage, with the risk that taxpayers are locked into long-term, high-cost leases, MPs said. HMRC is a prime example, with six of its twelve new hubs now locked into 25-year unbreakable leases at higher than current market rents, the report said.

The property database has been repeatedly delayed and is now in a position where the procurement of a £1m computer system is hindering effective management of £158bn worth of property, the committee added.

Key recommendations

- The Cabinet Office should get its new property database up and running as soon as possible
- It should set out in detail the benefits and costs of the Government Hubs programme and how it will be adapted in light of the new estimates for post-pandemic office usage

Who? Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
What? Propriety of Governance in Light of Greensill
When? 2 December, 2022
In Brief Ex-ministers and civil servants who break anti-corruption rules should face legal action to improve accountability and public trust in the "integrity of the system", PACAC said.

Rules regulating post-government appointments should be expanded and made legally enforceable, and the body that enforces them – the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments – should be put on a statutory footing, the MPs said.

PACAC's report backed a series of recommendations by the Committee on Standards in Public Life to strengthen anti-lobbying rules, but went further in suggesting rule-breakers could be pursued through the courts.

Key recommendations

- Government should provide an update on making the business appointment rules legally enforceable, and what sanctions will apply.
- Business appointment rules should be extended to a two-year ban on employment in sectors where ministers, spads and senior officials have had "significant and direct" responsibility for policy, regulation or the award of contracts
- Acoba, the prime minister's independent adviser and the Commissioner for Public Appointments should be placed on statutory footing
- The independent adviser on ministers' interests should retain the power to initiate investigations acquired by the previous holder, and complete any legacy inquiries they inherit
- Ministers wishing to appoint a candidate deemed unappointable for a role should have to appear before the relevant select committee to explain their decision
- Chairs of ethics watchdogs should require the endorsement of the relevant select committee to be appointed
- Direct ministerial appointments to senior government jobs should be included in a published register. ■

"PACAC's report suggested those who break anti-lobbying rules could be pursued through the courts"

Baroness **Gisela Stuart** has been in post as first civil service commissioner for a year. With ambitions to improve the recruitment process and make the Senior Civil Service more representative, has she managed to get her house in order?

Photography By Louise Haywood-Schiefer

House of Stuart

When Baroness Gisela Stuart was announced as first civil service commissioner in March last year, eyebrows were raised. Despite being the government's preferred candidate for the watchdog role, the crossbench peer did not receive unanimous backing from MPs.

Unlike the majority of her predecessors, Stuart had not been a civil servant. And as a former Labour MP and Vote Leave chair, concerns were voiced about her impartiality – quite a stumbling block when you consider the Civil Service Commission works to safeguard an impartial civil service.

One year on, has Stuart reassured the doubters and lived up to her own ambitions for the role?

In her maiden speech, given at the FDA union's conference in May 2022, Stuart set out her aim to shake up the civil service recruitment process and "encourage and support new ways of doing things".

While promising to never lose sight of the commission's statutory duty to ensure selection for civil service jobs is open, fair and on merit, Stuart told the FDA that "as a board, we constantly ask ourselves whether we are striking the right balance between our regulatory duties and our desire to be flexible and pragmatic. We want the civil service to innovate and experiment".

Today, Stuart explains what "innovative recruitment" should mean to departments.

"We want them to try new things, albeit within the boundaries of the recruitment framework," she tells *Civil Service World*.

"It's about making sure they're taking regional diversity and diversity of background into account as much as the more standard terms."

That wider recruitment pathway has been smoothed by the decision to make roles open to external candidates by default.

The diversity-boosting move, which also aims to broaden expertise, requires ministers to request an exemption if they want to recruit without advertising externally. So what would constitute an exemption?

"If a vacancy comes up that needs to be filled

quickly, or [the post requires] very specialist knowledge that you will only find within the civil service," Stuart explains.

Extending 'external by default' to all grades means the commission will need to oversee substantially more recruitment competitions. How does Stuart intend to cope with the huge numbers of appointments?

"We're developing a model of earned autonomy," she says. "If you've got really good practice, you can do your own recruitment." The commission will still reserve the right to oversee an appointment, but where a department has high compliance scores and "a good track record", Stuart is willing to move to an earned autonomy position for some roles.

"We've done an early pilot with the Welsh government and it was really successful," she says. "It's a model to work on."

A somewhat thornier issue is pay. The Institute for Government's *Whitehall Monitor* provides an annual assessment of the civil service – how it has changed and performed, and its priorities for the future.

The 10th edition, launched at the end of January, highlights that lower grade officials can rise up the ranks to increase their earnings, but, because there are fewer roles available in the most senior ranks of the civil service, senior officials unsatisfied with their pay are more likely to leave.

This point was underlined by the civil service chief operating officer, Alex Chisholm, who told MPs last November that external candidates for potential civil service jobs were earning multiples of what the civil service could pay.

Throw in the fact that SCS pay has had the biggest real-terms drop of all grades since 2010, and you wonder how government organisations can attract the best talent to those senior roles when the pay is so much lower than on the "outside".

"People wanting to come into government at a fairly senior level know they'll have to take a considerable cut in salary," Stuart says when this is put to her. "But they've reached a stage in their professional career where they [relish] the complex and complicated issues they can get involved in. Government is a challenge. But they regard that challenge as a privilege."

Stuart continues: "Salary is one of the factors that people look at, but it is only one of them."

When it comes to recruitment, one talent pool Stuart wants to dip into is populated by ex-civil service employees. She is keen to attract those who have left the service back into the fold.

"I hope we have movement into the civil service from outside, but also from [former] civil servants [who have worked for] private companies coming in again," she says.

Stuart is prepared to play the long game. "It's about growing that internal talent as much as attracting external talent. Then the talent can move in and out. The big aim is that the civil service brings on those professional skills internally, but then those people also move out and come back in again."

This all feeds into what government leaders are calling "the porosity agenda". The aim, broadly, is to attract people to the civil service from a wider range of backgrounds. Is there anything the commission is doing specifically to help that agenda?

Stuart highlights the Commissioners' Mark of Excellence initiative. Launched in 2022, it's designed to recognise and reward innovative hiring practices – from the basics of improving the wording of job descriptions, through to working with schools to provide employability skills training, and participating in programmes such as the Autism Exchange Internship and the Great Place to Work for Veterans initiative. Anything, essentially, that helps departments to attract and recruit a diverse field of candidates for a career across all grades in the civil service.

The inaugural winner was the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which came top out of a shortlist of 18 campaigns from 39 entries across the civil service.

Stuart was on the judging panel,

which was led by former civil service commissioner Natalie Campbell.

Announcing the winner last July, Campbell said: "BEIS is the first department to explore innovations in game-based assessments and video interviews scored by algorithms, using artificial intelligence."

It is this new approach to recruitment shown by BEIS and the five others "highly commended" by the judges (Office for National Statistics; Scottish Office; Ministry of Justice; Crown Prosecution Service; and HM Revenue and Customs) that Stuart wants to encourage.

Stuart is also keen to partner with England's network of city-regional leaders to progress efforts to level up the civil service by moving it out of London.

"I really want to do more work with strategic mayors," she says. "Whether it's Andy Burnham or Andy Street, in the north-east

or the north-west. We will not achieve levelling up if we don't strengthen that local infrastructure of skills."

The push for "geographic diversity" has already got off to a good start with HM Treasury's Darlington Economic Campus. It's getting positive feedback from staff and currently has strong backing from HMT leaders. What's the secret to Darlington's success?

"Senior civil servants have gone there," says Stuart, frankly. "Whenever you create a hub or any location outside London, it has to start with the most senior figure being the first to go."

But simply creating a hub is not enough, she warns. It's vital to "establish close working relationships with other institutions in the [area] – local universities, large employers and local authorities. You will not see success unless you make sure [the hub] links in with its local environment."

On the subject of close working relationships, Stuart does not shy away from the fact there can be friction between civil servants and politicians. As a former MP, she has first-hand experience of the day-to-day interactions between both sides. And this insight, she believes, can help in her role as first civil service commissioner and her efforts to improve the civil service recruitment process.

"I bring a greater understanding of the urgency politicians have, and the timescale. I understand their desire, but I also see that the starting point [for recruitment] must be the merit of applicants.

"The assumption is that, as a former politician, I'm going to be easier on my [former] colleagues. [But it just means I] understand the pressures a bit more and can say: 'That's not a good idea' or 'That's not the conversation to have.'

"People wanting to come into government at a fairly senior level know they'll have to take a considerable cut in salary"

"The biggest contribution I can make to the role is occasionally asking [ministers] to reflect and say: 'Is that really what you want to do?'"

Even so, Stuart is under no illusion that the working relationship between politicians and civil servants is plain sailing. "Tensions arise, but they are part of the essential checks and balances of a functioning democracy," she told the FDA in her speech.

But when those tension tip over into briefings against civil servants – such as during the working from home row – Stuart draws the line.

"What I really deplore, and I deplore it because it's wrong and it's counterproductive, is anonymous briefings against individuals when they can't defend themselves," she tells CSW.

"Civil servants are servants of the crown. For all practical purposes the crown in this context is represented by the government of the day... and that government should not brief against you."

Stuart says her mission is to ensure people understand that "honesty, integrity, impact, impartiality and objectivity [must be part of] everyday conduct". Sentiments that may have taken a back seat while the country seemingly ricocheted from one crisis to the next.

"We've had the most extraordinarily tumultuous few years – three prime ministers, a change of monarch, ongoing Covid, the war in Ukraine. Civil servants have stepped up to those challenges and supported the government to the best of their ability. They have responded to instructions and shown great professionalism.

"But the challenge for us now is [rather than] responding to emergencies, we must come back to more measured decision making. We've got to remind ourselves what the frameworks are; we've got to start looking ahead at what's coming our way, rather than just responding to events. That's where the focus needs to be now."

And talking of focus, Stuart is keen to ensure the civil service retains a wide view. "We mustn't forget that it's England, Wales and Scotland," she says. "I'm exceptionally keen to ensure we've got a close and continued working relationship with the Welsh and Scottish governments.

"This is a UK civil service. And the more we can move across the nations and outside London, the stronger it will be." ■

ABOUT BREXIT...

As chair of Vote Leave, Gisela Stuart was one of Brexit's most high-profile figures. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, what are her thoughts on it all?

"If 2016 came again and I was given the same choices, would I do anything differently? No, actually, I wouldn't," Stuart tells *CSW*.

"Vote Leave was important to me. This was not, you know, any other party. It was Vote Leave – the group of cross-party politicians I wanted to campaign with, and no other."

Stuart continues: "To me, the referendum was about who would have the final say over our laws. It was never about what the laws are. It was about the ability for British voters to have the final say.

"I thought changes needed to happen between countries who were part of the eurozone – the single currency – and those who were not. And if David Cameron had come back with a deal which addressed the need for a change in the institutional architecture of the European Union which was not opt out, which was for the future, I would have said: 'You know what? You can give that a go.' But he didn't.

"So therefore, if you ask me as a politician: 'Do you wish to reinforce a status quo which you think is not right, or are you going to argue for change?' And these are the only options. I would argue for change."

"WE WANT TO EQUIP GOVERNMENT TO DELIVER BETTER"

Dr Hannah White, the new director of the Institute for Government, tells **Jess Bowie** about her vision and ethos, and offers her expert view on the current state of the civil service

IfG

When Dr Hannah White OBE was announced as director of the Institute for Government in November 2022, few Whitehall and Westminster watchers were surprised. The former secretary to the Committee on Standards in Public Life had been acting up in the role since the previous August, and served as deputy director for four years prior to that.

White brings extensive experience in the very heart of British political life. She started her career as a parliamentary clerk in the House of Commons and joined the IfG in 2014 to lead its research about parliament. She is a go-to expert on constitutional affairs and her first book, *Held in Contempt: What's Wrong with the House of Commons?* came out last year.

Congratulations on being appointed as the IfG's director. How would you describe the leadership style you bring to the role?
The institute is a vital organisation, playing a role like no other in informing the way the government operates. Over the last 12 years, we've built a brilliant team. We're at our best when all those people are enabled to do their jobs successfully, so I want to give them the space and encouragement to do so.

One of the best bits of feedback I heard during last year's party conferences was that IfG events were always chaired by a subject-matter expert. Many think tanks rely on the director to front everything, but we give all our staff a chance to shine.

I want to maintain this as our norm. I will provide direction and strategic advice and be a figurehead. But I'll give our people the licence to be brilliant, because that's exactly what they are.

How do you believe the IfG has evolved since forming in 2008?
Like any start-up organisation, we've expanded and professionalised. We've developed new functions and grown our profile across Westminster and Whitehall. We have grown and professionalised our communications and events, for example, so our ability to do interesting, important research is matched by our ability to tell the world about it.

We've also developed our partnerships function, meaning we're better at finding other people who are interested in our work and developing programmes together. I think we have changed in terms of people's perception of us, and therefore the impact we're able to have.

Brexit was a big stepchange for us. We felt that an important part of helping government do its job well was helping everyone to understand the Brexit process. We became experts on the topic, with a high profile in the media.

As a result, we became less focused on the long research reports that had defined our work until that point. When we need to, we can be much fleeter of foot, creating outputs that are shorter and more digestible.

So our model of impact has changed. In the early days of the institute, we focused on talking to the few people in Whitehall who can make decisions about the things we thought ought to be different. But we realised through the Brexit experience that, if you gain influence by building a wider audience, then those people in Whitehall have more of a reason to listen.

Where do you want to take the IfG during your time as director?
I want to make sure we focus on the issues that have always been at the heart of the institute's activity.

Our primary concerns are: how to make the civil service work really well; how to reform the civil service; how to make policymaking effective and evidence-based; how to bring the best talent into the civil service; and how to help civil servants become more specialist and less generalist.

"We hold the institutional memory that helps serving ministers learn from their predecessors"

We've always been interested in devolution, too. It's great that politicians across the political divide have caught up with this, either through the Tories' Levelling Up agenda or through Labour's "take back control" narrative.

It's important to me that the institute is not just a research organisation and I don't want our impact to be felt only through publications. We're trying to help people involved in the work of government think about problems. We need to build and nurture relationships with officials and ministers, so they want to have a conversation with us about these issues and so we're well-placed to influence their decisions and policies.

How do you want the IfG to work with ministers?
I would like us to do more in this area, particularly helping new ministers develop their skills. When I worked on select committees, members were reluctant to admit they needed any professional development. But it is now considered completely normal for members to come to the IfG for an away day and reflect on how to maximise their impact, or to get tips on how to ask questions. There's a perception as a committee that you ought to invest in yourselves to be effective – which is an encouraging change.

I think we can do the same for ministers, because it's clearly ridiculous to expect someone to do a job as difficult and unique as this with no support or input. These are the most important »

jobs in the country. These people are making decisions on our behalf.

We have already started to see a bit of a change. Ministers who come in with corporate experience think it's normal to seek professional development in a new role. Take someone like Gillian Keegan, for example. She worked with us as a junior minister and has said publicly she doesn't think she'd be a secretary of state without having worked with the IfG during her journey.

We have a huge repository of experience in our *Ministers Reflect* interviews, which are available online. We hold the institutional memory that helps serving ministers learn from their predecessors. Drawing on this and our wider expertise, we can help ministers think about their roles and offer advice on practical matters like setting up and running their private office. A key means of providing this support is through the IfG Academy.

What is the IfG Academy?

Through the IfG Academy, we want to be more proactive in supporting ministers and officials. In the past, such people have tended to come to us with their issues or challenges. Now, we will go to them to offer training, mentoring and advice.

We have three strands of work. One is to work with ministers and the people with whom they interact, such as their departmental teams and private offices. One is to work with people outside government, such as academics, who want to understand how government operates and feed into policy discussions. Unlike our work with the public sector, we charge for this activity, which helps broaden our financial base.

The third strand is the preparation for government work that we have always done with opposition parties before general elections, helping them think through the practicalities of transition if they end up running the country.

What would you most like to change about the civil service?

The first thing would have to be staff

IfG

churn. We need to address the incentives, including pay, that make civil servants feel they need breadth, rather than depth, of experience to thrive. We need more specialists in our civil service.

Of course, churn is linked to political churn and we've had a lot of turbulence in that regard over recent years. We're now facing another big change to the machinery of government after the most recent cabinet reshuffle, and that heightens the challenge for officials – not least because the timescale for new policy initiatives before the next election is tight.

My second change would be to the effectiveness of the centre of government. We have seen with all the crises since 2016 – Brexit, Covid, and so on – that the very heart of government doesn't always work well. The ability of the prime minister to set priorities, to articulate them to government, and then to hold ministers and their departments to account for delivering them is just not up to scratch.

This year, the institute is launching a major Commission on the Centre of Government to think about improving the effectiveness of Number 10, the Cabinet Office, and the Treasury. The hope is to equip the centre of government to deliver better for the PM.

Why is putting the civil service on a statutory footing important?
There can be a confusion of accountabilities and responsibilities at the centre of government and, to some extent, this has fed into some of the tensions between ministers and civil servants over many of the challenges the government has grappled with since 2016. When it becomes the instant response of ministers – who are being held to account for something that has gone wrong – to blame the civil service, that's very bad for morale.

If you have a statute for the civil service, you have a clearly articulated understanding of the job of the civil servant and their relationship to the minister. You also have clear structures to hold both to account. If we followed the example of local government, or places like New Zealand, in having greater visibility of the role of officials in shaping policy, that would make a huge difference. It would also reinforce the impartiality of the civil service.

What do you think is going well in the civil service at the moment?
There are good examples of innovation and things that were done during the pandemic that were very positive. For instance, the speed with which HMRC moved to enable some of the support payments, and of course the Vaccine Taskforce, which is often cited as evidence of the civil service at its best.

I also think the Places For Growth programme is going in the right direction. The Darlington Campus is a positive story about moving civil servants out of London. It's happening in a meaningful way rather than the tokenistic efforts of the past.

With the appointment of Sir Laurie Magnus as the prime minister's independent adviser on ministers' interests, are you optimistic that standards are moving in the right direction?
I think it is a very good thing that Sir Laurie has been appointed after a period without an adviser. It was good that the inquiry into Nadhim Zahawi was conducted rapidly and that there was a clear letter which was published in full quickly. These are things we've not seen in the recent past and they're a stepchange in the way the new PM is using the system.

That said, he's chosen not to strengthen the powers of the adviser to enable them to launch their own inquiries and publish their own reports. That was a missed opportunity.

What is the IfG's position on hybrid working? Is it positive or detrimental for the civil service?
The world of work has changed. That is a reality and the civil service needs to reflect on what it can offer to attract the brightest and best people. It isn't going to compete on pay, especially at the moment, so what other benefits are available? Hybrid working is a viable option for many roles, provided you have the right IT in place.

"We need to address the incentives, including pay, that make civil servants feel they need breadth, rather than depth, of experience to thrive. We need more specialists in our civil service"

Here at the IfG, we proved during the pandemic it is perfectly possible to run a think tank entirely remotely. But the reality is that you can do it even better if you have face-to-face contact with people. So we have a base in London, but offer flexibility to our team.

Finally, how do you unwind?
I recently moved from London to Brighton so I'm enjoying the South Downs and the beach. I have three youngish children (they're 12, nine and five), who keep me busy in my spare time.

We've just rationalised all our TV subscriptions. I think the last thing I watched was the fascinating BBC documentary on Putin and, although I'm primarily a fiction person, I've enjoyed reading *Vaxxers* and *The Long Shot* back-to-back, getting both sides of the Covid-19 vaccine story. My last novel was *The Girl with the Louding Voice* by Abi Daré – passed on by my mum who is a voracious reader and a very useful source of recommendations! ■

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

SEVEN THINGS WE LEARNED AT PUBLICTECHNOLOGY LIVE

Hosted in March by *CSW*'s sister publication, PublicTechnology Live gathered together scores of senior digital and data professionals from across the public sector. As well exploring their challenges and priorities for the months ahead, speakers also enlightened attendees about some of the more unusual considerations of their work. Here are seven things **SA Mathieson** learned

Service teams often need to fix what's 'under the lid'
The underlying processes of many government online services need improvement, Megan Lee Devlin, chief executive of the Central Digital and Data Office, told PublicTechnology Live.

During the opening keynote, the CDDO chief said that there are "pockets of excellence" among such services.

"Sometimes entire journeys are great, but more often than not, the front-end is better than what's under the lid," she said.

CDDO, a Cabinet Office unit responsible for government's digital, data and technology work, has defined what a good-quality online service should look like and is in the process of benchmarking 75 key government services against this. It chose these based on impact and number of users, and is working to level these up to a good standard by 2025, as part of a strategy published in June 2022.

Some theory test candidates cannot drive... a computer mouse
The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency tries to go the extra mile in helping people to take their driving theory test.

Most people sit the test at a DVSA centre using a desktop computer, but some young people do not know how to use them.

"The amount of times in our centres we have to explain what a mouse is," Alex Fiddes, head of digital operations, told a panel session on accessibility and delivery of services.

When required, DVSA can provide someone to read the questions out, modify the language or let candidates take the test at home.

"There's a percentage of people who can't use digital and we have to admit that our service offering is not suitable for everybody," said Fiddes. "For most people who get a driving licence... it's a life-changing event. I have a responsibility to help those people go through that journey."

One person who took the test at home used his new licence to apply successfully for a delivery job: "That's changed his life, his carer's life and his parents' lives," Fiddes said, adding that it shows the importance of catering for those with special requirements.

HMRC has to convince senior technologists not to retire
Some legacy computer systems run by HM Revenue and Customs can only be supported by technologists "well into their 70s", technology transformation director Nic Harrison told the same panel session.

"We regularly have to persuade individuals not to retire on bended knee," he said.

HMRC has a programme, Securing Our Technical Future, dedicated to moving such systems onto more modern hardware while leaving the software unchanged, but there are years of work ahead. Harrison said that projects to update existing systems are easy to put off for cost reasons, but "it's coming home to roost a bit".

One legacy technology Harrison is happy to support is the telephone. While HMRC might be digital-first, it is not digital-exclusive: "Real experts on tax should still be available at the end of the phone, that's what the public wants," he said. "The real challenge is not letting perfect be the enemy of good. We should

Tom Hampson/Visual Eye Creative

have digital services that work most of the time for most people, but we then need to make provision for people that need extra help, whether through accessibility issues or plain 'I just don't understand this'."

Birmingham calls service users 'customers' for a reason

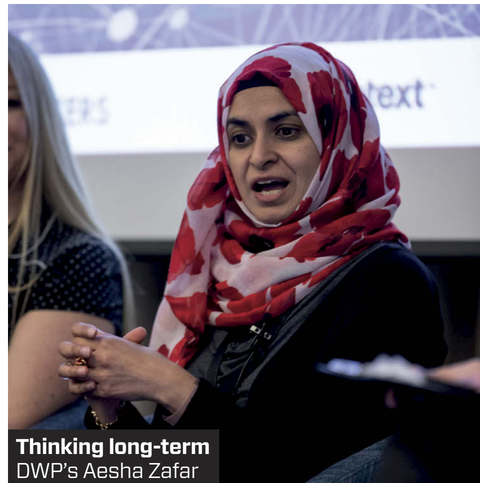
Birmingham City Council considered "citizens" as the general term for its service users, but chose "customers" to include businesses and visitors as well, with assistant director Wendy Griffiths pointing out that last year the city hosted the Commonwealth Games. She told a panel session on transforming and enhancing user experiences that the city's digital services sit alongside those provided by online businesses: "We are not being compared to what happens in Solihull or Coventry, we are being compared by our student population to Deliveroo."

Treating people as customers means respecting their preferences, Griffiths added, such as by providing a choice of channels rather than forcing people to use a single technology. She added that some of the city's 1,200 processes work well through automated self-service, such as reporting potholes or missed bin collections, but others do not, and they are unlikely ever to run all of them through a single customer relationship management system. According to research with panels of citizens, it is more important that people only have to tell the council about something once, however this works. Griffiths added that the city council's 11,000 staff, who mostly live in Birmingham, are asked for their views on how its digital processes work for them as locals.

It can take up to a year to get access to government data

A government analyst or academic researcher asking for a data set can currently wait up to a year to receive it, said Dominic Hale of the Office for National Statistics.

To accelerate this process, the new Integrated Data Service managed by ONS is working on a broad agreement where users do not have to apply for data every time they want to use it. The service, currently running in a limited form before a full launch in 2024, is designed to provide accredited people with secure access to government data on society and the economy to support research and government decision-making. Hale, who is head of strategy for the new service, said that individual citizens are neither identified nor identifiable in the data, although it does include information on individual households. It should reduce bureaucracy, with academics likely to need to answer 11 questions to get access to data compared with 76 for an existing research environment.


Thinking long-term DWP's Aesha Zafar

Handling intense scrutiny Opama Khan

Looking under the lid CDDO chief Megan Lee Devlin

DWP Digital takes a long-term view when it comes to staffing

Staffing a technology service properly means developing tomorrow's staff as well as recruiting today's, according to Aesha Zafar, head of strategic capability for the Department for Work and Pensions DWP Digital unit. "It's about having that flow of people, ensuring that you're not thinking for the short term," she said, including work with schools and coding camps as well as setting up career pathways within the organisation.

Zafar said that DWP created a specific grade for junior technical staff for this reason: "We want a steady flow of people who come in at a junior level that can go up," she said.

Long-term development can involve training people who then leave for better-paid private sector jobs. Zafar said that some would return to the public sector later, as it offers breadth, impact and public service: "I feel there's a public service element of training people for the greater good," she said.

Financial challenges put 'intense scrutiny' on local government digital

The London Borough of Croydon's financial challenges mean that the council's technology team must continually demonstrate the worth of their work, its digital boss Opama Khan told PublicTechnology Live.

"So much good work has gone into setting up our digital delivery over the last four years. It is now under intense scrutiny [asking] 'are these luxuries?'" she said. "Is this something that a financially struggling council should be investing in or should we strip it right back to IT support only?"

In November 2022 Croydon Council issued a Section 114 notice for the 2023/24 financial year, signalling it could not meet the legal requirement to balance its budget. The notice, which bars the council from new spending except in essential areas, is the third such notice it has issued in recent years.

> **"We should have digital services that work most of the time for most people, but we then need to make provision for people that need extra help"** ***Nic Harrison, HMRC***

Arguing in support of digital projects work means highlighting practical benefits rather than discussing technology, according to Khan, the authority's head of digital services, access and reach.

"We say: 'This is the problem, this is what users are trying to do when they come to the council, this is what services need to help them do things more effectively'," she said.

Khan said that she wants to use digital to make it easier to interact with the council, such as paying for a parking permit or a skip licence: "For me, it's always about engaging with our residents and making their user journeys better." ■

“WE NEVER USE THE WORD ‘DIGITAL’”

Jo Goodwin tells **Sam Trendall** how the Centre for Digital Public Services is encouraging a focus on users across the public sector

INSIDE THE WELSH PUBLIC SECTOR’S DESIGN DOCTRINE

Against the perpetual backdrop of budget constraints and increasing demand from citizens for support, public sector organisations might be tempted to put the adoption of a new service-design philosophy some way down their priority list.

But, according to Jo Goodwin from the Welsh Government's Centre for Digital Public Services, the ethos of user-centred design is about small changes that make a big difference.

Goodwin cites the example of a recent project in which the CDPS helped a local authority alleviate the pressure on its recycling and waste staff – simply by "changing a couple of words on the website".

In response to reports of fly-tipping filed online by residents, the council was sending out teams of people in trucks – who often found that the problem was not one of large-scale industrial waste, but simply an overflowing litter bin; an issue that could have been dealt with by a single person.

Working with CDPS experts, the authority has tweaked the language used on its website to better differentiate between fly-tipping and litter issues, and thus ensure front-line resources are being directed where they are most needed.

And this is just one of hundreds of minor adjustments that could have a major impact.

"We have come up with 200 different things you can do that take half an hour or less – just to help people start unpacking user-centred design, and taking away some assumptions," says Goodwin, who joined CDPS in September as head of user-centred design. "We strongly believe that small changes incrementally over time make a big difference."

"My first rule is I never use the word 'digital'; user-centred design is about designing with users at the centre – looking at both online and offline channels"

This playbook of simple measures is part of a wider ambition to "make it easy for people to adopt user-centred design practices", she adds.

CDPS – an arm's-length body of the Welsh Government, created in September 2020 – has identified three main ways it can work towards this objective, according to Goodwin.

The first is to use its convening power to bring people together, and ensure that senior leaders, service managers, and digital professionals are working collaboratively. The second – supported by the checklist of 200 potential quick wins – is to equip organisations with the right tools to design services in a more user-centric way.

Through its roster of itinerant expert "squads", meanwhile, CDPS can also provide additional assistance to public bodies' in-house digital operations which, in many cases, consist of "teams of two or three people supporting 1,500 services".

But, as the name suggests, the central tenet of user-centred design is to focus not on the technology, but on the requirements of the citizen.

"My first rule is I never use the word 'digital'," Goodwin explains. "User-centred design is about designing with users at the centre – looking at both online and offline channels: what is the outcome that a design needs to achieve? Because that outcome is why people interact with public services – which is very rarely because of their preference to do so. Everyone has a unique set of circumstances, and user-centred design reflects that."

Persuasion

Forming part of the national government infrastructure and setting digital service standards for use in public services across the country, CDPS may appear similar in outline to the Government Digital Service's role in the UK government.

But there are several key differences between the two, not least the fact that "GDS has the remit to be able to enforce spend controls; our work is more about being persuasive and sharing what good looks like", according to Goodwin.

The user-centred design chief acknowledges that many public bodies in Wales have not been on the kind of transformation journey exemplified by GDS and may thus be "a little bit behind" those in Westminster and across England more widely.

But, working in a nation of just over three million inhabitants – and with a remit that encompasses the NHS and local government – CDPS has the opportunity for its work to "go a little further" than its Whitehall counterparts.

While the Welsh digital unit is working with a growing number of departments and other public sector entities, Goodwin's objectives for the coming months extend only to reaching a single person: the user.

"My biggest ambition for the next year is that users become a bigger part of service design… and are at the heart of everything when developing new services – but also those that are already live," she says. "We are already working on several policy areas in Welsh Government… we are really lucky to have ministers and policy officers that are very open, and are now knocking on our doors." ■

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

A royal commission is investigating how Australia's use of an automated debt-raising tool that issued 500,000 incorrect debt notices – and led to the biggest class-action legal case in the country's history – was allowed to cause so much damage. **Beckie Smith** looks at the story so far

Justice Murphy's description of the Australian government's failed Robodebt programme is one that is both distinctively Antipodean and familiar to civil servants across the globe. As he rubber-stamped a settlement of nearly two billion Australian dollars over the automated debt-raising system that had wrongly attempted to claw back payments from benefit recipients, he said: "I am reminded of the aphorism that, given a choice between a stuff-up, even a massive one, and a conspiracy, one should usually choose a stuff-up."

The use of algorithms, data analytics and automated systems in public services has come under the spotlight in recent years, particularly their potential for harm if safeguards are not built in at every stage.

For those who have been following the story of Robodebt, it has become painfully apparent that such safeguards were not in place.

Introduced in 2016, the Online Compliance Intervention programme – to use its formal name – was administered by Services Australia, which is broadly equivalent to the UK's Department for Work and Pensions. It used an automated tool to calculate and recover overpayments and other money owed by recipients of benefits through Australia's Centrelink welfare programme.

But the programme used a flawed method of income averaging to compare welfare recipients' reported incomes with their income as recorded by the Australian Tax Office. Where it determined that there had been an overpayment, recipients were automatically issued with debt notices.

In the four years it was in operation, Robodebt issued nearly 500,000 incorrect debt notices. The Australian press was flooded with stories of people being shocked and pushed into hardship by unexpected and aggressive demands for large repayments.

The case led to what is believed to be the biggest class-action suit in Australian legal history, which the government settled in 2021 to the tune of AU$1.8bn (£1bn) in refunds, legal fees, cancelled debts and compensation.

Stuff-up or conspiracy?

It should have been "obvious" to ministers and public servants, the judge who approved the 2021 settlement said, that the income-averaging calculations on which Robodebt was built were flawed. "Ministers and senior public servants should have known that income averaging based on [Australian Tax Office] data was an unreliable basis upon which to raise and recover debts from social security recipients," Justice Murphy said.

The scheme did not account for any variation in people's working hours from week to week, instead using tax data to estimate their "assumed" fortnightly income, which then resulted in falsely estimated overpayments.

This oversight led to a "shameful chapter in the administration of the commonwealth social-security system and a massive failure of public administration", Murphy said.

There are a number of ways the harm and controversy that arose from the use of Robodebt could have been avoided, according to Rich Wentel, a deputy director in the UK's Public Sector Fraud Authority.

Speaking at a recent *CSW* webinar on fraud detection and fairness in the public sector, Wentel said: "There are two key lessons that come out of Robodebt and others, which are: if you don't have the expert people in the beginning to set the framework correctly, you will get rogue outcomes or you have a higher propensity for that. And secondly, if you just believe what the computer says, you're then hostage to fortune."

While data analytics and algorithms can be useful tools in helping to identify fraud, they should be used to highlight anomalies, "never to give an absolute 'pay/no-pay' decision," he said.

"Data flags – or the reliance on data flags – should never be the be-all and end-all," he explained. "It's highlighting things that don't fit a pattern. And if you've done your risk rules correctly, then it will throw out a population of high-risk cases that need review. But that's the key thing: it needs review."

Robodebt lacked this critical review stage: debt notices were issued automatically without any intervention from officials, or any further investigation of the "overpayments" flagged by the system.

"If you don't have the expert people in the beginning to set the framework correctly, you will get rogue outcomes" ***Rich Wentel, Public Sector Fraud Authority***

By contrast, the UK's PSFA uses a multi-step approach to identifying and tackling fraudulent activity for the public bodies it works with. The authority conducts large-scale data-matching exercises for local government bodies, NHS trusts and other organisations, using analytics to flag cases that need reviewing.

"We provide the matches to the customer and then the customer does compliance work, investigation work, and then comes back and tells us if it's fraud or not," Wentel says. "There are false positives in there; there always will be. It's a question of managing the false positive rate against the impact."

Hostage to fortune

While the decision to rely solely on an automated system to detect fraud and recover overpayments left the Australian government a hostage to fortune, evidence continues to emerge that there were several opportunities to change Robodebt's outcome.

Hearings have been taking place in recent weeks as part of a royal commission set up last August to probe the design and implementation of the scheme. Witnesses' testimony is beginning to reveal the extent to which warnings about the programme's potential to do harm were seemingly ignored.

In November, the commission was told that the Department of Social Services, Services Australia's parent department, had received legal advice from a private law firm on Robodebt in 2018 that cast doubt on the scheme's lawfulness. Despite finding the use of income averaging to raise welfare debts was unlawful, Robodebt continued to run until a legal challenge was launched in November 2019.

In a February hearing, the inquiry then heard that a review commissioned by Services Australia in 2017 was discontinued despite finding "a lot of flaws" in the scheme.

"Our view was that there were things [in the scheme] that should have been considered but weren't," Shane West, a partner at PwC, told the commission. West said the consulting giant had "put considerable time" into developing a 70-page draft report that it was later told was no longer required. In that time, it found "room for improvement" in the scheme and "clear evidence... savings weren't going to be achieved".

The commission will continue to draw out lessons from the botched Robodebt scheme in the coming months. But one lesson is clear: public authorities must be rigorous in ensuring that their automated systems are implemented fairly. As Wentel says: "You have to be very, very clear about fairness. The mantra that we have is that we should be our own biggest critic." ■

LUNCH WITH...

Paul Maltby

Former chief digital officer at DLUHC **Paul Maltby** sits down with **Suzannah Brecknell**. Photography by John Russell

"I've seen flashes in the pan come and go, but I do think some of the large language models are going to profoundly affect many of our jobs"

Who? Until November last year, Paul Maltby was chief digital officer at The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities where he focused on improving digital services, working with local government to develop digital capacity, and driving digital and data reform to the planning system and housing sector. Prior to that, he was director of data at the Government Digital Service with responsibility for open data, data science in government, data infrastructure and data legislation. Maltby has a background in public service reform in government with stints in Leicestershire County Council, the Home Office and the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit. He has now joined British tech firm Faculty AI as director of AI transformation in government.

Where

The Civil Service Club is in Great Scotland Yard, between Whitehall and Northumberland Avenue. It provides a restaurant for members and their guests in comfortable, friendly surroundings.

We discussed

Why he left the civil service. I'd been in it a lot longer than planned. Originally, I'd asked for a contract that was only two years – but they kept giving me interesting stuff to do!

I built the digital team in DLUHC from scratch, but I'd reached the point of thinking, "It's good; we're seen as 'normal' now in the department. They're recruiting great people and they don't need me in the same way as when we started." I wanted to leave while it was going well.

Also, I'm a civil service reformer and I needed to recharge my reforming batteries. I had to decide if I was better doing that from inside or outside government. The field is changing; the next generation of digital and data change is out there, and I want to be part of it. Where's the best place to do that? Probably outside – at least for now.

The future of digital change, and whether senior civil servants grasp the importance of data. They have grasped it in parts, but nowhere close to the potential I'd envisioned 10 years ago. Back then, looking around government, there were very few senior folks with any real knowledge of how the internet worked, never mind building digital services. You could see this change in the wider economy – industries being utterly disrupted, undergoing profound transformations because of the business models of the internet age. I thought, surely there will be a deep shift in how we do government over the next 10 years?

A decade on, we have nailed straightforward transactional services. Government knows how to design them well, build them to meet user needs, on sensible technology, make the data available in the right way, at the right time. Even in extreme circumstances, like the Homes for Ukraine scheme, if you ask: "Can you build a service within three days?" The answer is: "Yeah, we've got this." There's real pride in having been involved with that change.

But what I tried to do in DLUHC – on things like planning reform – is to bring an understanding of internet-age business models into the policy work. So, it wouldn't just be the policy community thinking with ministers and then throwing it over the fence to digital. That journey of change is nowhere close to what I would have expected at this point in time.

His work to support digital reform in local government. When I moved to DLUHC, there was a sense the pace of change we were seeing in central government wasn't being replicated in and around local government – as indeed it wasn't in many other spheres of government at that time.

The question was: how can we harness that latent possibility within the sector? How do we track the people making those changes, putting their heads above the parapet and doing things differently, and bring more attention to that? And how do we reduce the burden on each council for making that change?

We were working with GDS and trying a few things out when we had the reshuffle that brought Rishi Sunak in as local government minister. His background meant he was both curious and knowledgeable about these issues. So when I went to see him and talk him through some of this, he asked what could be done and we went from there to develop the Local Digital Declaration and Local Digital Fund.

As well as the opportunity to improve the basic efficiency of services in local government, one of the most exciting things about that work was the sense we were changing the traditional way of doing things. We weren't making local government a delivery agency of central government. This was designed to shift the generation of capability and try to get the practice by default in a different space.

How the Local Digital Fund evolved. I'll never forget my years in local government – mostly for the things we did, but

also for how weird central government looks when you sit in local government. It also taught me that every time we have a process in which you ask people to bid for money you need to think carefully about the cost that imposes on people. Over time it was clear that the pace of agile software development sometimes would move faster than our funding round, which made it hard for projects to keep moving. So the combination of that speed and being conscious of the burdens that you're placing on people meant we moved to a more flexible model, and with good results.

Years when lots of people moved from central digital to local government. Organisations ebb and flow. GDS had its tough years when the leadership team changed and people were looking for different ways to do things. But you could look back on that as being quite a useful moment because it spread a capability that was probably too big and too centralised. I was able to set up the team in DLUHC and grow that capability in a way I might not have otherwise been able to.

Central government needs to understand that innovation is always there, reformers are always among us – half the job is finding them, and then taking action which makes it easier for them, not accidentally making it harder.

His proudest moment. There are a few that stand out. In my old open data job in the Cabinet Office, it was things like the G8 Open Data Charter, and setting up Policy Lab and seeing it replicated around the world.

In DLUHC, it was things like the Homes for Ukraine service and Covid shielding work – hard work, born of adversity, but something that really made a difference.

However, the bigger achievement was showing there's more to digital than just fixing the printers and making the wifi work. We showed what could be done with design skills, with digital and data skills. And we were able to shape things like the planning reform agenda at a policy level.

How to make an experimental approach to government work. There's more that goes on than people commonly understand. Take the work on AI. Some bits of government are more naturally attuned to that – defence, national security, and the more secret bits of the world are quite used to having to engage with, understand, experiment with, and then adopt at scale the useful parts of new technologies, whatever they may be.

"Digital breaks down the barriers between a policy world and a delivery world"

The same is true with machine learning in a way that perhaps, if you're in a more domestic department, there is not quite the same embedded culture around it. Nonetheless, government departments will need to get their heads around large language models. I'm long enough in the tooth to have seen flashes in the pan come and go, but some of the large language models are going to profoundly affect many of our jobs, and many of the routine ways in which we do our business.

How he feels looking at the transparency agenda, comparing aims in 2012 to reality now. The small-picture answer is that policy should develop and change, and political priorities are obviously a minister's business so you would expect that to evolve.

On the transparency side, [former Cabinet Office minister] Francis Maude used to say that transparency is easier to do when you first come into government but gets progressively harder as you go through government.

On the commercial level, understanding what contracts have been won by whom and at what level, the discipline and accountability we now expect to see wasn't the case 10 years ago.

And on the bigger picture, when I first worked in government someone said to me: "The thing about reforming government is, sometimes you are handed a candle and it's your job to not let that tiny flame go out. You can feed it up, but make sure you hold on to it because the oxygen comes into the room and people will say: 'We need some light, where can we go?' And then it's time." A lot of reform work in and around government is understanding when it's time – the moment that sufficient bits of the system are aligned so we can make progress.

Government is the only place you can move at such pace and scale, with such impact on people's lives. Sometimes it moves relatively slowly but, when it wants to, it can move with incredible poise and innovation. There are plenty of those moments – Homes for Ukraine, the stuff that many of us did around Covid – I just wish we could have a little bit more of them without necessarily the crises that go alongside them.

How to keep those flames alive. We obviously have to operate within the space set by the prime minister and the organisations we work for, but there's a degree of personal responsibility and accountability that goes right through the system. What interventions can we make that will keep the flame from dying? We have to use our judgement about how and whether to get involved, and where we can use our personal capital.

What makes a good minister. Clarity, so you can represent them in a meeting on an issue you've never heard them tackle, but you can be pretty sure what their view would be. A clarity and consistency of view that is explained to civil servants is the most powerful thing.

What makes a good perm sec. Understanding so many different worlds, like the political world, the comms world, the organisational delivery world, the policy world, and digital, data and technology – and combining them with a drive to making the organisation work. It's easier said than done.

His *Yes, Minister* moments. We'd hired some civil servants and needed to provide them with laptops. Slightly weirdly, this meant completing a busi-

CLUBBING TOGETHER

The Civil Service Club, celebrating its 70th Anniversary this year, was established using funds originally raised to celebrate the wedding of then-Princess Elizabeth and Prince Phillip. It opened in 1953 to provide "social facilities in reach of all", with the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth as its patron.

The Club continues to thrive, with over 13,500 members for whom it provides a varied programme of activities including comedy and quiz nights. Members can also use facilities in the form of the Queen Elizabeth Dining Room, a convivial bar also serving food, meeting and conference rooms, and 26 ensuite bedrooms.

Membership is available from £50 a year and is open to all serving, former and retired members of the UK civil service and government agencies and NDPBs.

Find out more at: civilserviceclub.org.uk

A stone's throw from Whitehall The Civil Service Club

ness case, which took forever and eventually came back with a comment: "The counterfactuals aren't sufficiently worked through." I thought: "Really? Can we just buy some laptops?"

This speaks more deeply about what's incentivising the system. This was about probably quite junior officials, who are bright, being incentivised to say something clever about reworking the counterfactuals on that business case. So we loop through the whole process again, and this happens again and again in our system. I find it deeply frustrating and unnecessary.

Sometimes, the priority to action, particularly in policy departments, feels quite a long way off. And that understanding of how real things actually happen can easily get lost when other incentives are in the way. I wish I wish we could magic that one away.

His reflections on working in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit from 2003-08. It was an exhilarating experience and personally quite profound. It was a great place to be. It had its flaws, and some of those were really considerable, but I appreciated being able to interact with the cabinet secretary, the prime minister, senior officials and just have the time, almost the grace, to ask: "Where are we? What are we trying to do? How are we trying to do it?"

However, some of the things I worked on – like police reform – felt quite frustrating at the time. Because although many fabulous slide packs were written, the practical question of who was doing what was asked less often.

But if you look at how policing has moved in the last 20 years, it's immeasurable. The progress that's been made on even quite routine things like the allocation of response vehicles to crimes, the allocation of resources to different types of harms. It prompts a degree of hope about longer-term reform even though, at the time, it's hard to see the change you make.

What he would have done differently in PMSU. It's exactly that propensity to action. One of the things I think the digital world is giving governments is disruption of this idea that there's a separation between the policy world and the operational delivery world – which has long been the point of conflict and frustration in the system, commented on in civil service reform papers going back decades. With digital, as soon as you form a multidisciplinary team, the journey from concept to delivery is as short a period of time as you can possibly get. It breaks down the barriers between a policy world and a delivery world.

PMSU, for me, was a moment of clarity that you can have a prime minister powerfully recommending a thing, but the gap between that thing a) being right and b) being worked up on the ground, took many years and many processes.

It felt like an impossibly long chain from the prime minister's thought to the person on the frontline carrying it out – and digital shrank that. That's its power. It was one of those moments of big insight, and I would encourage everyone to try to find that same spirit. I think government will be better as a result. ■

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Alec Steel reflects on his experiences of working with 120 services across government and offers practical advice on making improvements, rather than just making changes

It is funny what sticks in your head. One of my first jobs was helping design services for a government organisation. I recall our project team mulling over how we could get more organisations to comply with the regulations. "How about we ask the organisations to design changes to the service with us?" I suggested. The senior manager told me quickly: "If we do that, they will only tell us what helps them evade the rules."

This experience has stayed with me, so you can imagine what effect it had then. I kept any thoughts about how we might do things differently close to my chest from then on.

Reflecting now, it is hard to see how government organisations can afford to ignore their people's ideas. Imagine the service quality and financial benefits if 480,000 civil servants improve how they work by just a small amount. Even just 1% improvement on the £400bn spent on administering government grants, services and administration is a significant return.

I am privileged. In my work I get to see government organisations, and how they work, up close. From watching how departments review performance and decide strategy in executive team meetings, to seeing how those decisions and new policies become reality. It has taken me onto the streets of Manchester with immigration enforcement teams, to Brixton to see how work coaches help people looking for work and a 6am start at Pirbright barracks to watch how the Army recruits. It has given me a huge appreciation for the challenges that government organisations face. But also common problems and opportunities to do the work of government better.

Some opportunities are longer term, like fundamental rethinks about why organisations do certain activities and the outcomes they are looking to achieve. These are the types of changes that produce allocative efficiencies – choosing which activities to spend on for maximum results, or "doing the right things". They are often whole-system challenges, such as net zero or health and social care reform, and involve people and organisations inside and outside of government. Our guide for senior leaders covers good practice in taking a whole-system approach and pitfalls to look out for.

But whole-system change takes time. Most people working in government might feel whole-system change is for people in senior roles and there is little they can do themselves. Only around 2% of the civil service are in senior civil service grades. But that does not mean there are no opportunities for 98% of civil servants to improve services now. In fact, it is their knowledge, ideas and creativity that you need to tap into. The current cost pressures will benefit from a twin-track approach that carefully balances work on "here and now" improvement and a longer-term perspective.

I see the daily frustrations for people providing services, such as the repeated problems they spend time fixing. What will it take to improve how they work and provide better, more efficient services for people using them? Since 2010 I have worked with more than 40 organisations and 120 services in government assessing their capability in turning strategic intent into service reality.

"It is easy to kill off people's willingness to try to improve, even with a single offhand comment"

There are three basics where government organisations often struggle and ask for help. Understanding demand, using performance information, and systematic improvement. Get them right and you will provide an effective service and reduce costs. If you do not, you will likely face one service problem, or backlog, after another. It is worrying that improvement is the worst performing area in our assessment of government capability and is one reason we produced our guides on improving services. That is not to say there is no change happening at all in government. There is. But improving is different.

What can you do?

First, make sure you are fixing what matters. That needs clarity about the priority problems to fix – what is most important to improve and why? It is about helping people understand what the organisation's objectives mean for their role and aligning on purpose. Alignment removes the risk of improving or fixing problems that take you in different directions and create a disjointed experience for the people using the service. Think about how you can involve everyone. The Department for Work and Pensions did this in bringing together its frontline workers and digital team to improve service for its winter fuel customers.

Next, create capability and obligation so people spend time improving. Obligation requires organisations to create the conditions that mean people can and will improve. That matters because people closest to the service understand the problems best. It is particularly true for services that use tacit knowledge from understanding the diverse needs of the people using it and "learning by doing". Take, for example, the Independent Office for Police Conduct, which estimates it improved productivity in one casework team by 33% by trusting the team to decide for themselves how to manage workload and allocate work. People spend time working on the types of cases they prefer and like working on.

Perhaps the biggest untapped potential in government is the opportunity to learn from others – be that from people in different parts of your service, your wider organisation, or different organisations altogether. I am always asked: "Who does this well?" And while I fear a copy-and-paste approach to learning, which does not consider context, there is much to learn from how people address similar problems and adapting it with pride. Simple opportunities for sharing such as the workshops we held for our improving services guide, provided hints and tips that people took away and used.

I often hear people say that they are too busy to spend time on improvement. But it is time to reframe the challenge because the bigger risk is government not getting the best from its people. Improvement needs behaviours that support it happening.

It is easy to kill off people's willingness to try to improve, to close off a diversity of ideas, even with just a single offhand and discouraging comment. My experience working in government is testament to this. Not every idea you try will work. But what is important is creating a workplace that values and encourages people to try ideas, learn and speak up without fear of the consequences. That will give you the best chance of making improvements that last. ■

Alec Steel is the head of operational management at the National Audit Office. Read the NAO good practice guide series on improving services: bit.ly/3XmG2B1

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Richard Willis analyses the lessons that past and present policymaking can teach those who wish to reform the education system

I was recently in the attic of my home rummaging through several dusty old books when I came across *Educational Policy-Making*, a publication by Professor Maurice Kogan.

As a budding political scientist, I had long wanted to make my mark on the study of politics. To do this, I felt I needed to answer the question: Who and what are the key influences in the making of policy in government?

The blurb on the back of Kogan's book includes a comment by *The Times* endorsing it as "one of the best studies of the process and problems of decision making in politics".

Kogan was one of my tutors at university, and I remember him as an established expert on government. Prior to his academic role, Kogan spent 14 years in the Department of Education and Science (DES). He went on to write numerous other books, including *The Politics of Education*, which involved him conversing with two former education ministers, Edward Boyle and Anthony Crosland.

With Kogan's format in mind, I set about interviewing David Blunkett and Ken Baker, arguably two of the most dynamic education secretaries of the 20th century. I used these conversations to form the background to my book, *Applying the Lessons of UK National Politics to Everyday Office Life*.

During the course of my interviews, I listened to Blunkett and Baker's comments on the civil service and the press. For example, I probed Blunkett on the issues of power within central government. I wanted to know if the civil service really obstructed policies, as portrayed in the TV comedy *Yes, Minister*.

Blunkett chose to speak more about the Treasury and the harmony he experienced between himself and the prime minister, Tony Blair. Baker indicated he was able to win over civil servants in talks "around the table".

I wondered whether the two former cabinet members were presenting the truth. But in their shoes, would I openly admit: "The civil servants completely went against all my views and policies, and rode roughshod over me"?

Nevertheless, I think the two former education ministers did their best to tell me what actually happened.

After my talks with Blunkett and Baker, I learnt more about the influence of other ex-education secretaries: Anthony Crosland, Margaret Thatcher, Sir Keith Joseph and Michael Gove.

Crosland held that it took about two years to get full control over policymaking in the department.

Thatcher acknowledged the same kind of resistance by admitting she felt very dissatisfied with the civil servants she encountered. Thatcher, together with Joseph, ranked the DES as an "awful" entity.

Gove was a politician who had not been that close to his civil servants, choosing to follow his own path instead.

I delved deeper and came across a much more recent study written by the accomplished educational historian, Roy Lowe. He made it abundantly clear that education policy is never made in a vacuum. Lowe's input concerned the role of the mass media, the press and the lobbyists. They all play their part in shaping the debate.

But there has been a shift in the way policies are seen. Some education secretaries had more insight than others.

David Eccles, appointed minister in 1954, was quoted as saying in the Commons that politicians needed to brace themselves for a whole new look at the "secret garden of the curriculum". A fortune-teller looking into her crystal ball on Brighton pier could not have put it better.

I went on to read about the influence of the press, which is not to be underrated. *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* still use bite-size arguments to enforce clear messages. These are reinforced by TV, the internet and social media, which have revolutionised the way education policies are framed.

Education secretaries past and present

Twitter has dominated the scene. I came across one political analyst who called it the "central nervous system" of the internet. In the past, citizens had been in the dark. Now social media allows voters to easily express their opinions and demands.

In the Netherlands, laws relating to the number of teaching hours students are required to follow were moulded by social media. Closer to home, measures to have defibrillators in all English schools owe much to a campaign run by the Oliver King Foundation which, to get its message across, relied heavily on Twitter and Facebook.

I wanted to know if I could discover a statement made by the UK Department for Education (DfE) officially encouraging the use of an online presence affecting decision-making. I did, and soon stumbled upon an endorsement of this sort of digital involvement. The DfE duly acknowledges that civil servants do their best to "read all tweets" and "pass on any helpful suggestions to relevant colleagues".

Some of this may seem trivial, but the obvious is not always clear. There has to be an admission that these forces are applicable to policymaking and what is happening now.

"Policymaking has been enriched by the opportunities for political expression that social media allows"

The impact of modern technology is valued by Alan J Daily, an academic at the University of California, who regards social media as adding "a new ingredient to the educational and policymaking process". Tweets can share news, opinions, web links and discussions in a highly accessible forum.

Others choose to look at the dangers of social media. Lowe warns of its weaknesses and potential for harm. He claims social media has caused an "implosion of the American electoral system" resulting in what has become a "cynical exploitation of Twitter".

Gillian Keegan, the present education secretary, was hacked in recent months when her Twitter account received some unwanted bizarre changes.

On balance, I feel that policymaking has been enriched by the opportunities for political expression that social media allows.

In retrospect, I am conscious the use of social media in Kogan's time was well off the political radar. That was no fault of his own. Yet, since the 1960s, educational reform has taken a huge leap forward.

Views, opinions, and values in our democracy through social media encompass a whole new meaning to the scope and capacity of those able and willing to contribute. ■

Richard Willis is a visiting professor at the University of Sussex

Former SCS **Anne** shares what's worked – the ideas, tips and strategies that can help you overcome the obstacles you may face in Finance

A long time ago, I picked up a newspaper on Boxing Day to discover it brimming with reaction pieces from organisations whose grants or contracts had been cut by incoming ministers. My mother said she didn't know I could swear so much.

We had warned about a reaction but not a press tsunami.

I returned from Christmas to deal with the fallout from the finance perspective. My policy colleague and I were summoned to the highest level. My heart sank as the lift rose.

The systems were set up to provide the aggregate information needed. They did not – then – easily provide the detail on each recipient of every contract and grant.

I was asked to provide ministers with an accurate list of the grants and contracts we awarded and to whom, ready for public announcement. The deadline? Within six days, including a weekend.

To do so meant a major manual exercise, pulling staff off priority work. And because it was a manual exercise, there was a racing certainty there would be errors if we did this at speed.

We knew everything in the public domain would be trawled over in minute detail. The media would not be forgiving of errors, nor would those whose money we had got wrong. I could imagine weeks of unhappiness ahead, with reputations damaged.

In the meeting, my truthful description of what we could do sounded inadequate. I offered an 85 per cent complete exercise by the six-day deadline, with some errors; or a 95 per cent complete list a week later, but still error prone.

The minister indicated they wanted 100 per cent accuracy, by Tuesday.

"I could imagine weeks of unhappiness ahead, with reputations damaged"

I said we would try, but I needed to warn about incompleteness and inaccuracy. I feared I was coming over as a jobsworth and obstructive.

At this point, I take my hat off to our special advisers. They believed this was risky and were concerned about reputational damage. They joined the discussion and suggested another way without the need to go public. I remain eternally grateful to them.

I left the meeting, satisfied the risks were understood. I sent an email afterwards recording the decision and risks.

What are the lessons to be learnt?

If the amounts of grants etc are to be adjusted, those who gain will make little comment but those whose money is cut will complain – loudly. Have a plan. We did but we needed to amend it.

Never overpromise.

Have the courage of your convictions: your duty is to provide professional advice. It is ministers' prerogative to decide, having taken account of the risks.

Record the decision and discussion. As greater folk than I have said: recollections may vary. It is important to establish an audit trail. And remember, 'no decision' is also a decision of sorts and should be noted.

If it's going to be tricky, talk to the special advisers and private office in advance. They may be able to warn the powers that be.

Show your gratitude to those of your staff who have pulled out all the stops to get the information to you.

Ensure, as my department now has, the systems produce what you need. It's always a balance, a cost-benefit exercise. But people, especially those from the private sector, expect high quality, consistent information. ■

Anne, former SCS Finance

DAVID MCVEAN THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE

DEVOLUTION HAS FUELLED A NEED FOR NEW SKILLS AMONG CIVIL SERVANTS WHO SPECIALISE IN POLICYMAKING. DAVID MCVEAN SAYS MUCH HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED BUT DEMAND WILL ONLY INCREASE

When I joined the civil service in 1988, it was Whitehall that determined the policy responses to issues across the UK and their implementation. Time and resources were spent and efforts made to engage with the respective departments for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. But Whitehall held sway.

Ten years later, that landscape changed with the Government of Wales Act, the Scotland Act and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Tony Blair's election in 1997 was on the back of a promise to transfer power. Since then, we have seen a divergence of policy solutions in all four countries. For example, academisation of the school system in England, free prescriptions in Scotland, the Well-being Act in Wales and the increasing convergence across the borders of Ireland.

I have been involved in education policy for more than three decades, either as a civil servant or as a "user". I posed myself the question: does devolution provide policymakers with opportunities or just more challenges?

"Interestingly, there is very little demand for courses on risk, its management and its influence on policy success"

Whitehall departments continue to have a strong focus on the basics around briefing, use of evidence and implementation of policy. Advising, briefing and drafting remains the most popular course we run. Policymaking now brings in aspects like user insight, co-design, co-production. Increasingly, teams spend time and resources building sophisticated models to draw on larger and larger amounts of evidence, all intended to help ministers make better-informed choices. Collaboration between the devolved administrations has helped, though there still exists a feeling that Whitehall has too much sway.

The challenges the four countries face are not always defined by mere borders. People, goods and services all move irrespective of where the lines may be drawn on a map. In 2010, Francis Maude decided that "digital by default" would be the mantra for public service. That remains the default model for policymakers. So how should policymakers adapt and rise to meet these challenges? It is more than co-design or co-production. They are necessary but not sufficient.

At its heart, devolution was an attempt to localise resources and accountability. Communities would have greater say and sway on the issues that mattered and the solutions to be implemented. But global issues and political upheaval have added to the complexities that civil servants now have to contend with.

All too often, partly driven by the political cycle, solutions are designed and implemented for the shorter term. Complex problems require a deeper understanding and more time to develop solutions for the long term. That is the most frustrating aspect for civil servants: the political imperative is often opting for the short-term "fix".

Demands for new, more bespoke training around strategic thinking and systems thinking offer new insights. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places long-term thinking and sustainability at the heart of policymaking. We are seeing a significant rise in demand for training courses in this area. It offers the potential to craft policy solutions in a faster, more dynamic way for a system that is increasingly complex. Yet there are risks, such as whether the system is not well understood, or if policymakers operate in a risk-averse culture.

Systemic thinkers are, generally, innovators by nature. As Thomas Edison found, there is always another way to achieve failure. Yet those failures led to his light-bulb moment. So it is with systemic thinking. Failure must be tolerated if long-term successes are to be found.

Interestingly, there is very little demand for courses on risk, its management and its influence on policy success. In every single policy course I have run in the past 12 months, I have polled attendees on their approach to risk management. Very few of the hundreds of staff adopt a rigorous approach. Yet every one of them is exhausted by having to fire-fight. This is not a coincidence.

As the civil service shapes and is shaped by external events and political reform, there is a healthy demand for training. Whether briefing ministers, designing new policy to meet the challenges our communities face or, more recently, thinking systemically and strategically, it is vital that this investment in skills continues. The challenge to policymakers, trainers and HR departments is to ensure that we have a greater library of training material and case studies from which we can all learn. ■

David McVean is a former senior civil servant who is now an associate for CSW's sister company Dods Training

CAN A NEW DEPARTMENT SUPERCHARGE NET ZERO?

The creation of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is a sensible move – but it will need to learn from its predecessor, writes **Tom Sasse**

The Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) had a bumpy start. Forged in 2008 from "tree-hugging Defra types and coal-burning DTI types", as one official remembers, one of its tasks was to bring together opposing Whitehall cultures and ensure trade-offs were properly confronted. This was not helped by the fact that it began life as a "department with a hole". Neither the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs nor the Department for Trade and Industry had been willing to lose any corporate staff so it spent its first months without much in the way of HR, communications or private offices. The official remembers that as a "real brake on getting going".

DECC's second coming should be smoother. DESNZ (even the department doesn't seem sure of how to pronounce its own name) has not had to scrounge for the basics. It keeps Grant Shapps – "a heavy hitter for the current government", as former DECC secretary Amber Rudd told *CSW*. Many of the officials involved – including Jeremy Pocklington, the permanent secretary, and Clive Maxwell, his deputy – have long experience in energy policy. Its first weeks have been a flurry of activity.

While machinery of government changes are always costly and disruptive, the creation of DESNZ (name aside) passes the bar as being sensible. BEIS had become unwieldy. There were some benefits to bringing the energy and business portfolios together. But having lived through Brexit, Covid and then an energy crisis, its sprawling breadth came at the cost of strategic fo-

Power couple The PM and DESNZ minister Grant Shapps

cus. Much of its time was spent fire fighting.

In the midst of negotiations over an exit deal, a BEIS official I spoke to estimated that energy accounted for just one tenth of the secretary of state's time. That clearly changed following Putin's invasion of Ukraine; but the idea that one department could support businesses and manage the energy transition through such turbulence proved unrealistic. Greg Hands pointed out that as energy minister, he was effectively doing what used to be four jobs.

DESNZ will have a much tighter focus. It's already set out its priorities for this year – including energy security, cutting bills, and seizing the benefits of net zero – and made an early move to cut bills for energy-intensive industries. It should have more time to develop ideas – like Boris Johnson's vague plan for British nuclear renaissance – into workable policies. Shapps has indicated that he hopes to address barriers like cumbersome planning approvals for renewables and the high cost of grid connections for charging infrastructure – both excellent targets.

But the new department arrives at a crucial moment for UK climate policy. At Cop26 in November 2021, the UK could still credibly claim the mantle of climate leadership. It had cut its emissions faster than any other rich country and few, if any, others had published a detailed net zero strategy. Since then, momentum has stalled. In its latest assessment, the Climate Change Committee concluded that "tangible progress is lagging policy ambition", pointing to major policy gaps and weak plans for delivery.

Other countries have been much busier. In the US, the Biden administration has passed the Inflation Reduction Act, a massive programme of tax subsidies to encourage investment in domestic green industries. The Congressional Budget Office has scored its value at $370bn (it has no upper limit so could end up at two or three times that). EU members, fretting about an exodus of green investment, are responding with their own proposals.

This backdrop is why one of the central messages in Chris Skidmore's independent net-zero review, published in January, was that the UK "risks getting left behind". His report has been well received – Rudd says "he's given [ministers] the roadmap" – but not acted upon. The government has indicated that it could take months to formally respond, and appears hesitant about several of Skidmore's recommendations, including boosting onshore wind and funding serious investment in upgrading what he describes as "the UK's antiquated grid".

The UK need not attempt to emulate the US's largesse. In his first interview, Shapps expressed concern about whether the Inflation Reduction Act contravenes state aid rules, saying "obviously the WTO will be interested in it". But DESNZ will need to work on the UK's pitch to green industries. The collapse last month of Britishvolt – a startup aiming to make batteries for electric vehicles, seen as critical to the future of the UK automotive industry, raised howls about the absence of a green industrial strategy.

DESNZ will need a clear sense of where the UK has potential advantages – and the role of government in seizing them. That could mean doing more in terms of regulations to provide businesses and investors with clearer signals about the speed and direction of travel. It is likely to require rapid progress on the types of barriers Shapps has identified.

"DESNZ will need a clear sense of where the UK has potential advantages – and the role of government in seizing them"

DESNZ could do worse than learning from its predecessor's successes – and its failures. DECC overachieved in driving a transition towards renewables, particularly offshore wind. The design of Contracts for Difference, a market mechanism – alongside industrial and planning policies – constitutes one of the UK's biggest policy successes of the last decade. Driving investment relied on a set of policies pulling in the same direction, maintained over years.

Where DECC struggled, as a small department with little clout, was influencing others. As one former official says, "did Defra or [the Department for] Transport care what DECC said? No." This is more important now, because it is in sectors like agriculture and housing where the UK is falling off track for its climate commitments. An updated net-zero strategy is due in March, though officials say it is likely to look similar to the previous one with some updated numbers.

DECC was also seen as a department that was good at policy but guilty of "chucking schemes over the fence to delivery", with little idea of how they would be implemented – notably in the case of the Green Deal, a failed energy-efficiency scheme.

DESNZ's success will partly depend on support from the centre, and its ability to grip delivery. During the coalition years, DECC could rely on strong support from deputy PM Nick Clegg and chief Treasury secretary Danny Alexander, both members of the central quad. Rishi Sunak has shown little interest in spending political capital on advancing the net-zero agenda – though Jeremy Hunt and Michael Gove may be allies. The government should also examine Skidmore's proposals for creating a central office to unblock policy delivery – already proving complex in areas like EV charging.

One person likely to be pleased by all this is DECC's first secretary of state: Ed Miliband.

In public, the now-shadow climate and net-zero secretary has accused the government of "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic". But the government has more or less recreated the department that he established and would like to inherit if Labour wins the next election. If he does, the transition could hardly be bumpier than the first time. ■

A CIVIL SERVANT'S GUIDE TO...

MAKING USE OF INTELLIGENCE

University College London conducted a global study of lessons government can learn from the way the coronavirus pandemic was handled. **Geoff Mulgan** and **Oliver Marsh** explore what the findings can teach civil servants about using intelligence effectively

In any crisis, governments need a range of intelligence – data, evidence, creativity, and more – to support decisions. Covid impacted widely across our lives, requiring intelligence about health impacts, the economy, wellbeing and a great many other domains. Looking at how governments across the world used such a variety of intelligence reveals best practices and gaps, from which we can learn how to improve government decision making both during crises and normal functioning.

At the International Public Policy Observatory, hosted at University College London, we study government responses to crises. One of our key interests is how governments use a range of inputs to make decisions. We collectively refer to these inputs as "intelligence". Examples include data, such as Covid case numbers or mobility data from smartphones; evidence to answer questions such as "how effective is social distancing?"; models, most commonly epidemiological models of how Covid could spread; tacit knowledge; foresight, such as scenario planning; and creativity – gathering and facilitating problem-solving ideas from a range of partners.

Across these multiple types of intelligence, governments had to consider a wide range of domains affected by Covid: health, the economy, wellbeing, and many more besides. Through interviews and literature reviews covering five continents and 30 countries we, along with our colleague Anina Henggeler, looked at how intelligence was collected, shared, and used by governments.

We found that governments deployed and adapted a great range of intelligence-gathering methods, often working very effectively with partners. However, there are important gaps in how different intelligence was synthesised, which need to be addressed.

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Covid crisis watch

Redundancies increase but vaccines drive hope of economic recovery

Richard Partington
Economics correspondent

Britain's economy is approaching a turning point amid hopes for a rapid recovery fuelled by an early coronavirus vaccine, despite renewed lockdowns pushing the country into a double-dip recession, according to a Guardian analysis.

As the government prepares to

Boris Johnson's tier system will run until the spring

first lockdown brought the country to a standstill.

The survey, which is monitored by the Treasury and the Bank of England for early warning signs from the economy, also found that companies were more upbeat about their prospects over the next 12 months than at any time since 2015.

The Bank's governor, Andrew Bailey, said news of an early vaccine could lead to a faster growth rate than previously expected next year. However,

What was done well?

Covid catalysed a huge range of methods for using intelligence. Some of this occurred within governments and related bodies. For instance, we spoke to a team trained in forecasting and horizon scanning. Their analysis skills allowed them to be quickly pivoted to scanning and reporting on emerging evidence on the disease and policy interventions from across the world.

We also heard how Covid spurred various technological developments within governments: this included digitisation, data dashboards, and natural language processing tools to quickly analyse text data. It is now important to build on these developments – firstly by maintaining the technologies and expertise, and also

ensuring that different departments, bodies, and local governments are properly integrated to facilitate intelligence sharing.

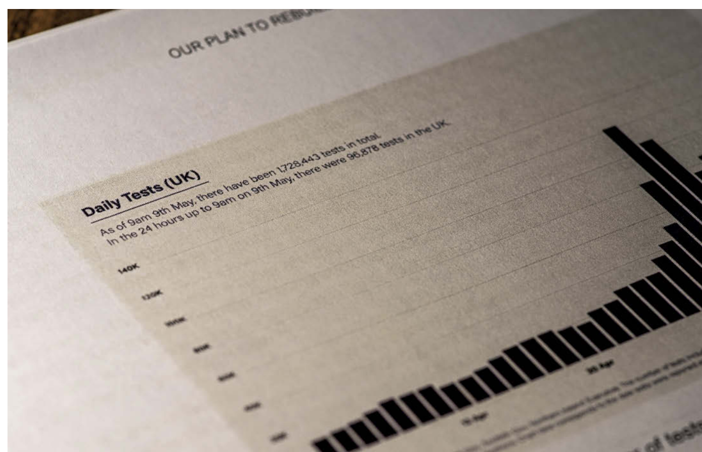
We also saw productive collaborations between governments and various partners, which helped mobilise intelligence. Governments worked with hospitals to understand the disease; with companies to track behaviour through financial transactions and smartphone mobility data; with universities to rapidly produce models; and with civic hackers to innovate services, such as tools to apply for financial support or apps to locate supplies. This was greatly aided when governments were more open and transparent with intelligence, rather than treating it as sensitive and secret.

This approach is not yet fully mainstream, and data and knowledge of all kinds are still often hoarded. But one potential legacy of the pandemic may be to strengthen the arguments made by, for example, the Open Government Partnership, and make the sharing of intelligence a natural part of governing.

What gaps need to be addressed?

Although we have pointed to some examples of partnerships and collaborations working well, there were also less positive examples. Many of our interviewees spoke of an initial surge in collaborative attitudes; however, as the crisis wore on, this was replaced by more conflict between health and economic departments, central and local governments, and different regions in more federal systems.

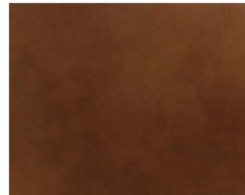
Covid also exposed areas where relationships need to be strengthened. In the UK particularly, there are systems for linking central and local government, such as Local Resilience Forums. However, these have been under-resourced for many years, and struggled to address problems such as running a track-and-trace system.



The main gap we saw across governments was in systematic synthesis of different kinds of intelligence. There were many expert bodies designed to bring together multidisciplinary expertise at both national and international levels, though reportedly epidemiologists in such groups were often overpowered, and social scientists underpowered.

However, synthesising intelligence for understanding is different to synthesising it for action. Syntheses by subject-matter experts can give a holistic understanding of a situation, and identify more research that is needed. But this is not the same as weighing up trade-offs and using intelligence to guide and justify decision making.

Officials are trained in presenting intelligence in ways which can guide decisions. But too often, intelligence was processed within traditional government silos – epidemiological modelling by the Department of Health and Social Care, economic analysis by the Treasury – which led to different "camps" rather than a holistic picture. There were also risks of quantitative models being given greater weight than narrative accounts (for instance around wellbeing), and a focus on short-term



response rather than long-range forecasting. Our concern is that, in the pandemic, synthesis for action was done in a personal and ad-hoc fashion by small groups of decision makers, rather than using systematic approaches or cross-cutting capabilities throughout government.

What should be done?

Governments need to build capabilities to help synthesis for action – bringing together different forms of intelligence, from across many domains, throughout government. This requires cross-cutting capabilities, and also officials trained in handling multiple forms of intelligence.

There are some existing capabilities to learn from, for example in the security and defence fields. In the UK, the Joint Intelligence Organisation provides "all-source" assessments of threats, supported by an intelligence assessment profession of some 1,700 staff, an academy and many processes for making sense of complex signals. But too often departments, disciplines and functions work in silos, and decision makers must weigh up these competing accounts rather than having holistic and integrated guidance. This may have been necessary in the 20th century, but given the multi-domain nature of many crises and the availability of new technological tools, this is no longer always fit for purpose.

Teams and officials should also build trusted relationships in preparation for crisis, which can be quickly and flexibly drawn upon in a range of scenarios. One approach to facilitate this is through regular sessions, whether crisis simulations or broader training opportunities, which bring together a range of stakeholders from across different departments, tiers of government (from central to local), and many partners from outside government. Governments should also consider, well in advance of crises, how to balance the opportunities of trusted personal relationships with risks of favouring insiders.

Finally, learnings from Covid should be actioned in a fast and determined manner. Past crises, as well as simulation exercises, have previously revealed problems to address; but actual changes have come too slow, and been derailed by yet another crisis. Organisations like IPPO can point to many overlapping challenges, from technological developments to climate change, which need to be prepared for but also risk distracting governments further. Governments must therefore not let crisis-fighting permanently distract from proper preparation. ■

Sir Geoff Mulgan is professor of collective intelligence, public policy and social innovation at University College London. Dr Oliver Marsh is a former civil servant and academic specialising in technology, government and politics

ANDREW SOUTHAM STRIKE ONE

THERE ARE PARALLELS BETWEEN THE FIRST EVER CIVIL SERVICE STRIKE AND CURRENT WALKOUTS

Over recent months, we have seen some of the largest civil service strikes for a decade, with staff from the PCS union walking out in support of a 10% pay claim and improved working conditions. However, the precedent for this action was set 50 years ago exactly.

In 1973 the two largest civil service unions, the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) and the Society of Civil Servants, launched the first ever nationwide strike by civil servants.

Never before had the country seen 250,000 officials striking up and down the land.

Conditions creating this precedent were similar to today. Britain in 1973 was gripped by an energy crisis mostly arising from the spring 1972 miners' strike, inflation was moving towards 10%, and industrial strikes were pervasive.

Civil service status and pay had been declining for years and the 1955 system for agreeing pay rises on a "fair comparison with comparable work" outside the civil service had faltered. The principle was undercut by prime minister Ted Heath's 1972 prices and incomes policy, which limited any rise to 4% to control ever-increasing inflation. There were better-paid jobs around in the early seventies, and civil servants knew it.

Other gripes included dirty and overcrowded accommodation, reduced promotion prospects, increasing workloads and sometimes mind-numbing repetitive work, continual government reorganisation and unfair malignment by the press.

CPSA general secretary Bill Kendall, a well-read clerk from South Shields who worked his way up in the union while flirting with communism before converting to Catholicism, led the way for change. His union adopted a strike policy in 1969 and began limited action in 1972 including a Department of Health and Social Security overtime ban and a refusal to work with agency typists.

When November negotiations for retrospective increases frozen by the incomes policy got nowhere, the CPSA decided on the first civil service day of protest.

Head of the civil service Sir William Armstrong – the son of two Salvation Army officers whose influence was so prevalent he was publicly dubbed the "deputy prime minister" – tried stopping it. He wrote a personal message to civil servants instructing them not to strike.

> **"Smugglers enjoyed a successful day – an honesty box at Heathrow airport hadn't proved effective"**

A backlash ensued. Some DHSS staff walked out; and opposition MPs accused Armstrong of implied threats and demanded the letter's withdrawal. The Ministry of Defence CPSA branch at Donnington even burned theirs in a ceremony around the departmental incinerator; they learnt that their printer colleagues had been asked to leave their jobs so that soldiers could print a top-secret document for issue. This turned out to be Armstrong's very letter!

The strike went ahead just days later. Many went to London to protest outside the main ministerial departments. Union official Roger Willson-Pepper provided the press picture of the day when he picketed at London's Somerset House in a pin-stripe suit, smart mackintosh, brolly, brief case and donning a bowler hat under the placard "CPSA demands fair pay".

Not everyone came out and the other civil service unions didn't provide support. However, this single day of action made a mark. Smugglers enjoyed a successful day swanning through unmanned customs counters, some openly carrying cameras and radios which were due duties. An honesty box at Heathrow airport hadn't proved effective.

Unprecedented civil service feeling also moved the then-Civil Service Department and its second permanent secretary Ian Bancroft to establish a July 1973 review examining civil service discontent.

Bancroft, a grammar school scholarship boy at Oxford and a wartime captain, cared deeply about civil service morale and conditions.

His no-nonsense 1975 Wider Issues Review found that "civil servants feel that they have been mucked about a lot in the last five or ten years" and pushed for wide-ranging improvements including in facilities, departmental communication and flexible working. More regional DHSS press officers were even recruited to counter an "unduly bad press" from various newspapers.

A pay agreement had meanwhile been reached in December 1974, but Bancroft still warned that "the most important thing for the wellbeing of the service is to keep its pay right".

And so it proved with pay causing other significant strikes in 1979 under James Callaghan and in 1981 under Margaret Thatcher, which lasted for 21 weeks.

After the 1973 strike, Kendall went on to become the general secretary of the Council of Civil Service Unions in 1976.

William Armstrong, in contrast, suffered from his own working conditions of stress a year later. Amid concerns that the Soviet Union was winning the Cold War, he stripped off his clothes one day in a Downing Street office, lay down on the floor and declared that the world was going to pot. He retired shortly afterwards to become chairman of the Midland Bank.

The 1973 strike highlighted the crucial importance all civil servants play in carrying out government practice and policy, which is even more the case in today's complexity. Ministers might want to heed Bancroft's 1970s advice to them to recognise their "responsibility as employers" and help "avoid discrimination against the public service in the application of their economic and social policies". ■

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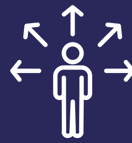
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