

# CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD 

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## ESTATE OF PLAY

A guide to the property profession

### VERBOSITY VERBOTEN!

Speaking plainly  
in the civil service

### VALEXDICTIONARY

A farewell interview  
with Alex Chisholm

### SECURITY & DEFENCE SPECIAL

*JSaRC's Abu Ahmed*

*Rusi's Karin von Hippel*

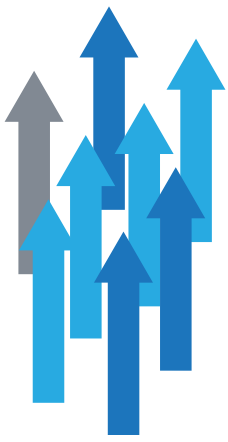
*DE&S's Jill Hatcher*

The challenge of  
energy security

## THREE PERM SECS AND A MOG CHANGE

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH  
JEREMY POCKLINGTON  
SARAH MUNBY  
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# FROM THE EDITOR

**F**ifty years ago, Ted Heath called a snap election with what has become an infamous campaign slogan: Who Governs Britain?

The voters' answer – “Not you, but not really the others either” – reflects not only the unsettled political and economic climate of the mid-1970s, but also the fact that the British public don't seem to like it when politicians shift the blame for national challenges onto other groups.

Theresa May had a similar experience in 2017 when she went to the polls arguing that the government's small majority was to blame for the deadlock over Brexit – and found that majority disappear as a result.

Yet, if anything, politicians seem keener than ever to offer alternative answers as to who governs Britain. In the weeks before we went to press, we heard former PM Liz Truss suggesting that power had moved from politicians to the unelected officials in quangos making up the “deep state”.

We read former home secretary Suella Braverman asserting that “the Islamists, the extremists and the anti-Semites are in charge now” after bullying “our country into submission”.

One could dismiss these as

outlandish remarks from those now outside power, but we also have reports of Rishi Sunak telling police that “there is a growing consensus that mob rule is replacing democratic rule”. And we hear versions of Truss's deep-state rhetoric all the time – it's just the (il)logical conclusion of every ministerial complaint that they couldn't achieve their goals because of sluggish, inept, or obstructive officials.

This blame-shifting isn't bearing short-term fruit, as polls show, and it has grave long-term consequences for government's relationship with the citizens it serves.

The ONS found in March that 57% of people had low or no trust in the UK government. Civil servants recognise this, and think deeply about the role they play in addressing it, as outgoing civil service COO Alex Chisholm tells us (p.16). Yet politicians cynically play into people's feelings of mistrust and disenfranchisement.

The futility of this approach is captured by long-time select committee chair Bernard Jenkin (p.54). He shares the advice he gives to ministers who complain about the civil service: “Given there's a limited time to the election, these are the only civil servants you are going to



have to help you do what you want to do; you'd better engage with them and enhance their energy rather than trashing them. This habit of trashing officials is very demoralising to them.”

Whoever governs after the next election, they will find a civil service which may be demoralised, but which will nonetheless be keen to build trust and deliver ministers' goals. Not all the new government's plans will go smoothly, and of course the civil service should accept its part in problems. But politicians would do well to accept that when you've been given power by the British people, you also need to accept responsibility. If you shirk it, the public tend to reject you.

**H**ere at CSW, we spend a lot of time exploring the challenges of reforming the civil service. We also spend a

lot of time speaking to civil servants about the work they are doing. A striking paradox emerges. People are both the civil service's biggest asset – motivated, skilled, and inspiring in their passion for public service – but also the biggest problem it faces. Recruiting and retaining the best people; dealing with those who are performing poorly; improving systems and levels of pay that are increasingly out of step with reality. All of this is the subject of a report being developed by think tank Reform, and you can help. In partnership with Reform, CSW is asking civil servants for their views on HR processes and systems across government. You can take part here:



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# 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

If you would like to let us know about a move in your team please email [csw.editor@civilserviceworld.com](mailto:csw.editor@civilserviceworld.com)

## BIG MOVE FOR LITTLE

HM Treasury second permanent secretary **Cat Little** will become Cabinet Office permanent secretary and civil service chief operating officer from April. She takes over from Sir Alex Chisholm who is standing down from the role and leaving the civil service. Cabinet secretary Simon Case said Little was "uniquely positioned to lead the Cabinet Office through the next stage of its development". He also thanked Chisholm for his "dedication and service over the last four years, and for his many years of public service before joining the Cabinet Office".



Little spent her early career working at "big four" accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. She initially held director roles at the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Defence, before moving to the Treasury as director-general for public spending and head of the government finance function.

## HITTING THE ROAD

Government chief commercial officer **Sir Gareth Rhys Williams** is leaving the Cabinet Office to become chair of Department for Transport-owned infrastructure company Highways England.



Rhys Williams, who has served in his current role for the past eight years, will take up his new post from April but continue as chief commercial officer on a part-time basis while a successor is found.

Before joining government, Rhys Williams was chief executive officer of hygiene and cleaning services firm PHS Group.

He is also a former chief executive of engineering company Charter International.

At Highways England he will be responsible for overseeing the delivery of the government's £24bn investment into roads. A Cabinet Office spokesperson thanked Rhys Williams for his work at the department.

## FRAN-TASTIC CHOICE

**Fran Heathcote** has taken up post as general secretary of PCS, the civil service's biggest union. She succeeds Mark Serwotka, who retired last month after 23 years at the organisation's helm.



Heathcote was elected in a ballot of members that closed in December and is the first female general secretary in the 130-year history of the union. Serwotka said Heathcote would be a "brilliant" general secretary. "Her style of leadership is to build consensus wherever possible around the issues that matter to members," he said. "Fran is a serious, hardworking leader who will prioritise the fight for better living standards and working conditions."

## SWEET CHARITY

The Charity Commission for England and Wales has ap-

pointed **David Holdsworth** as its next chief executive.



Holdsworth is currently CEO of the Animal and Plant Health Agency, and will take up his new post in July - succeeding Helen Stephenson.

He previously served as deputy chief executive and registrar at the commission, where he led the transformation of the organisation's data handling, digital capability and risk assessment.

Holdsworth also oversaw the commission's response to the Grenfell Tower fire and was instrumental in setting up the National Emergencies Trust.

## DATA WITH DESTINY

The Cabinet Office is recruiting a new executive director for the Central Digital and Data Office to replace chief exec **Megan Lee Devlin**.

It offered nearly £97,000 a year for the role in a campaign that closed last month. Among the successful candidate's



responsibilities will be “management of cross-departmental commitments and targets” set out in the government’s 2023-25 digital strategy.



That mission includes delivering on the strategy’s flagship commitment to transform 50 of government’s most critical services to a defined “great” standard. Lee Devlin joined CDDO in June 2021 and was chief strategy and transformation officer before being appointed chief exec the following year.

## ADIEU, ALEX

The Cabinet Office’s executive director for government communication, **Alex Aiken**, is leaving Whitehall to work for the government of the United Arab Emirates.

Aiken was responsible for creating the Government Communication Service, which he led until 2021, when Simon Baugh was appointed as its first chief executive.

He is due to leave the civil service in April to begin work as a communications advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the UAE.

Aiken joined government from Westminster City Council in 2012. In addition to being responsible for government communication strategy, he managed the combined

Prime Minister’s Office and Cabinet Office communications team until 2021 and has also served as head of the communications profession.



The Cabinet Office said Aiken’s new role had been vetted through the department’s business appointment rules process.

## WATCHDOG FIRED

Independent chief inspector of borders and immigration **David Neal** was sacked by home secretary James Cleverly after concerns about a security-threat “scandal” were leaked to the press.



Neal warned in a newspaper interview that hundreds of high-risk flights were land-

ing in the UK without being checked by border security.

The Home Office accused him of putting “misleading data” into the public domain.

A spokesperson said Neal had breached the terms of his appointment and “lost the confidence of the home secretary”.

Neal said he had released the information because there was a “strong public interest” in doing so and because the Home Office was not publishing his reports.

More than a dozen of his reports to the Home Office were unpublished by the department at the time of his sacking in February.

## LEGAL ACTION

**Elizabeth Gardiner** is retiring as first parliamentary counsel after eight years in the role.



She was the first female holder of the post, heading up the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel – a team of around 50 government lawyers and 10 support staff who specialise in drafting legislation.

Gardiner is also the Cabinet Office’s gender champion.

David Lidington, who was minister for the Cabinet Office during the latter part of Theresa May’s time as prime minister, said Gardiner would be “a hard act to follow”.

The Cabinet Office’s recruitment campaign for her successor offered up to £190,000 a year for the right candidate.

## LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Former civil servant **Owen Mapley** has been appointed as the next chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, succeeding **Rob Whiteman**. Mapley is currently chief executive of Hertfordshire County Council. He previously held finance director roles at the Home Office, HM Courts Service and the Legal Aid Agency. The Government Property Agency has reappointed **Pat Ritchie** for a second term as chair. She will serve in post for a further three years. Her contract extension follows November’s appointment of **Mark Bourgeois** as interim GPA chief executive in November after **Steven Boyd** stood down from the role.

**Richard Fowler** has been appointed as head of the Adjudicator’s Office, which investigates complaints into HM Revenue and Customs and the Valuation Office Agency. He has previously worked at HMRC, the Home Office and the private sector.

The Competition and Markets Authority has promoted **Jessica Radke** to the new role of deputy general counsel, designed to help the anti-monopoly regulator handle increased workload and extra responsibilities. Radke was previously senior director for litigation.

**Amerdeep Somal** has taken up post as local government and social care ombudsman for England. She is also a serving Asylum and Immigration Tribunal judge. Somal’s previous roles include financial regulators complaints commissioner, chief commissioner at the Data and Marketing Commission and founding commissioner of the Independent Police Complaints Commission. ■

# GOING, GOING, GONG

The New Year Honours List marks the extraordinary contributions and service of people across the UK. Here, CSW meets a selection of the civil servants who were recognised in 2024

## ZOE SOOKUN

Project manager Sookun works for Network Rail and received a BEM for services to the railway and to Rail Aid for Ukraine



### What does it mean to you to be recognised in the New Year Honours List?

I am overwhelmingly grateful to be recognised in this way for what was a very complex project to manage. What we were able to achieve was a real team effort, and only through the support and dedication from the entire team were we able to deliver what we did. It's quite a surreal experience to receive an honour, and one that I don't think will ever truly sink in.

### What was your role in the Ukraine crisis? And what did that involve?

I was the project manager on the Rail Aid for Ukraine programme. This involved sending a £10m aid package to the Ukrainian Railways that included coordinating

shipments of bridges, tunnel repair systems and grain handling equipment assembled from the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. The aid package included:

- Eight bridge spans to replace damaged bridge decks
- Bridge supports to replace damaged bridge abutments
- Four heavy JCB construction machines with large clamshell grabs to assist with Ukrainian grain export
- Containers for grain export
- Automated railway inspection equipment to enable UZ (Ukrainian Railways) to accurately inspect bomb damage repairs
- A rapid tunnel repair system for fixing damaged railway tunnels.

It was a very complex pro-

ject with lots of moving parts, but the outcome has made a massive difference to Ukrainian Railways. Due to the tight timescales and the fact that we had not delivered anything like this before, I had to upskill very quickly in international logistics, tax, customs and border controls across Europe, as well as procurement and legal requirements. Supply chain engagement was crucial and I was very lucky to have such an amazing team of suppliers who worked diligently to our requirements and timescales.

### How did you end up in that role?

I have been a project manager for 10 years, four of those within Network Rail, and I was approached in June 2022 to ask if I would deliver the project.

### Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?

I have been really lucky to be involved in successfully delivering multiple projects across the health, safety and environment portfolios. It is hard to pinpoint just one proud moment. I often suffer from a little bit of imposter syndrome, so for me the pride always comes when I successfully deliver a project.

### What does it take to do your job well?

Excellent stakeholder management is the key. If you can get along with and engage well with people, the job becomes a lot easier. Also ensuring you are organised, have a solid governance structure and plan in place is fundamental. ■



# IAIN REEVE

Reeve – head of Ukraine Rail Response Team in the Department for Transport – received an MBE for services to Rail Aid in Ukraine



## What does it mean to you to be recognised in the New Year Honours List?

No pun intended, it's a great honour. It should be seen as recognition for a large team of people working in different government departments, private companies and Network Rail.

I hope it also helps to remind people that the Ukraine war is still going on and that their workers are facing daily risks that we would struggle to comprehend.

## What was your role in the Ukraine crisis? And what did that involve?

Ukraine relies heavily on its rail infrastructure, whether this is the movement of freight, refugees or simply people trying to get to work. Much of this rail infrastructure was damaged in the early stages of the war. Rail workers and engineering depots were specifically targeted, meaning that Ukraine Railways did not have enough basic tools to maintain and repair their railway.

We worked with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to secure a £10m package of aid, including enough bridge repair equipment and tools to repair up to eight bridges.

## How did you end up in that role?

I had previously worked on Covid and its impact on UK rail systems, so it seemed logical to jump from one crisis response job to another.

## Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?

When I joined the civil service back in 1985, I was part of the team which did not close the Settle-Carlisle railway line. Looking back, it seems a little odd to be proud of something that I didn't do, but that now seems like a good decision.

I worked for over a decade



**Waving goodbye** Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, millions of refugees have fled their homes and crossed into Poland and other neighboring countries, with many of them using the train

in different roles to improve the railway station at Gatwick Airport. Before this project, the station was a nightmare to navigate, with a confusing mix of barriers, escalators and signs. The new station is much brighter and easier to use.

It is always gratifying to point to something like a new train station and say "I did that", even if it is only a little bit of it.

## What does it take to do your job well?

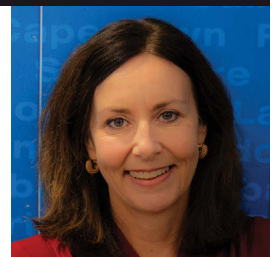
Coffee and Pret coated cranberries. The help and support of excellent colleagues. More coffee.

## Tell us one thing we might not know about your job.

The temporary bridge repair technology that we bought for Ukraine Railways is an evolution of the Bailey bridges developed in WW2. ■

# JENNIFER ANDERSON

Anderson, a director in the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, received a CMG for services to British foreign policy and to British nationals overseas



## What does it mean to you to be recognised in the New Year Honours List?

It is truly humbling to be recognised for work that has involved hundreds, at times thousands, of others. When I first was "sounded out", I thought of what it would mean for my

parents (they were thrilled) and all those who've worked with and alongside me (I wish they'd been recognised too).

## What does your role involve?

I lead the FCDO's Consular and Crisis Directorate, which is responsible for supporting British nationals around the world.

Our assistance is wide and varied. It ranges from replacing lost passports to evacuations from a war zone. We are available 24/7, 365 days a year around the world, with services available online, over the phone and in person. We support over 20,000 British nationals and

their families a year including victims of crime, or those have been detained or hospitalised.

We also provide information and guidance so that British people can take responsibility for themselves when they are living and travelling abroad – this includes

up-to-date travel advice for over 200 destinations.

During my time as director, I have been involved in an unprecedented number of crisis response operations. This has included evacuations from Wuhan during the pandemic, Sudan last year, and, most recently, consular assistance for British nationals in Israel who were victims of the 7 October Hamas attack and those seeking to leave Gaza. Between those operations, our focus has been ensuring the

FCDO has the skills, capabilities and staff necessary to respond and that we are building on lessons learned.

**How did you end up in that role?**

I used to volunteer for an early version of our 24/7 Global Response Centre and then Emergency Unit when I was a fast streamer over 20 years ago. More recently, I worked alongside consular and crisis teams as head of the then-FCO's Counter-Terrorism Department, on terrorist

kidnaps and responding to major terrorist attacks.

**Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?**

That's a hard question. I get a kick out of seeing colleagues and my staff do well, both in terms of the work they do and the roles they progress onto. We circulate a weekly list of successfully resolved consular cases. I love reading about the persistence and professionalism of my colleagues, much of which is never seen by ministers, and

the lovely feedback they receive.

**What does it take to do your job well?**

Empathy, training, practice, passion, resilience and knowing when to stop. We are a 24/7 service but there's nothing worse than an exhausted staff or an exhausted crisis leader.

**Tell us one thing we might not know about your job.**

My team, consular services, are paid for by your British passport fees, which allows us to offer 24-hour assistance, all year round. ■

# ALISON SAVAGE

Savage's work as an officer commanding in the Services Cotswold Centre garnered her an MBE for services to military families



**What does it mean to you to be recognised in the New Year Honours List?**

I feel hugely honoured and humbled. It is a great privilege to be recognised in this way and it is something that I never thought would happen to me. Whilst I may be the recipient, I am tremendously proud to represent my team for the hard work that they do to support service families in the UK and overseas.

**What does your role involve?**

I manage the Services

Cotswold Centre, a tri-service welfare establishment which provides short-term accommodation for those in need. In particular, we provide accommodation for those spouses who have experienced marital breakdown and need help to become financially independent and find civilian housing, for serving personnel (SP) who require time to rehabilitate post illness or injury, and for separated SP who are unable to have their children stay with them in their military accom-

modation so use us for contact housing. We also provide accommodation for those in-between postings or who need to return to the UK for compassionate reasons and we are always on standby to support those who have been evacuated from an overseas posting.

**How did you end up in that role?**

After I left school I started working in what was then the Unemployment Benefit Office and then the Jobcentre, helping those claiming benefits to find work. However, after nearly 30 years I wanted a different challenge so transferred to the MoD where I worked as a business manager/PA in Abbey Wood. I realised that I missed working in a welfare environment so when I saw a vacancy in the Army Welfare Service I applied and was fortunate to secure my current role.

**Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?**

It is difficult to identify one particular moment, to be honest. Families can arrive at the SCC in great distress as their world has been turned upside down. It is therefore extremely rewarding to know that when a family leaves in a much better place that when they arrived, my team and I have been able to make a difference.

**What does it take to do your job well?**

Empathy and resilience. Managing an aged estate and supporting families who are in challenging circumstances can be demanding. However, knowing who to turn to for help and working with other agencies including the Armed Forces champion at DWP and the Child Maintenance Service, and having a great team around you to support you, really does help.

**Tell us one thing we might not know about your job.**

That the SCC has been providing welfare support to military families for over 70 years but many do not know of its existence. It is indeed the Armed Forces' best kept secret. ■



**Welcome home** Glasgow families celebrate at the homecoming parade of the Royal Highland Fusiliers after four-month tour in Afghanistan



# KATE SKIDMORE

Head of aviation resilience at the DfT, Skidmore received an MBE for services to major event responses



## What does it mean to you to be recognised in the New Year Honours List?

It was a complete shock but an absolute honour to have been nominated. I never imagined something like this would happen. To be recognised for the contribution to major event responses makes me feel very proud of the work my fantastic team do and what we achieve.

## What does your role involve?

My team are responsible for ensuring the UK aviation sector is appropriately prepared to mitigate and respond effectively to major incidents. This could be severe weather, IT outages, international conflicts and sanctions, or national

events such as the coronation.

It is a big team effort working with the aviation sector and across government to minimise disruption and maintain safety for the travelling public, whilst also contributing to the successful delivery of national events – it can be a bit of a juggling act.

## How did you end up in that role?

Prior to this role, I worked in the Transport Security Operations Centre, which is the crisis-management function within DfT. This gave me a good basis of government crisis management, but I always had an interest in aviation, so when an aviation crisis-

management role came up it seemed like the perfect job.

## Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?

I think one moment that stands out for me was working on the government's humanitarian response to the Ukraine war. The Department of Health asked for support to transport Ukrainian children to the UK who were undergoing cancer treatment. Working with the aviation sector, I secured an airline and an airport to support with all the necessary arrangements for transporting the children. It was really humbling to see the quick support and flexibility of multiple teams across

government and externally to achieve this operation rapidly.

## What does it take to do your job well?

Teamwork. Whether that is leading the ministerial briefing or someone doing a coffee run. The job would not be possible if the team were not supported by wonderful experts in other aviation policy areas, seniors, cross-government collaboration, and colleagues in the aviation sector delivering for the public.

## Tell us one thing we might not know about your job.

You never know what is going to happen that day. It could be volcanoes, an airport car park fire, or a flood; your to-do list soon changes. ■

# DENISE COOKE

Cooke, an administrative officer in the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, received an MBE for public service



## What does it mean to you to be recognised in the New Year Honours List?

It was a huge honour to be awarded the MBE and it is only just sinking in. To know that someone has gone to the trouble to nominate me, I can't begin to describe how special that is.

## What does your role involve?

My role involves registering deaths at sea of UK nationals or foreign nationals who die whilst aboard a UK-registered vessel. Whilst the role is largely administrative, there is a strong element of "pastoral" work supporting next of kin at a very difficult time in their lives. Also I liaise closely with coroners to

obtain a medical cause of death which is required for registration. Every registration we make is submitted to the General Register Office on an annual basis.

## How did you end up in that role?

I think my people skills were an important factor. This isn't a role that many people take to as some families can be quite emotional whilst others are more matter of fact about death. Either way, you need to be able to respond and support them in a professional manner but with humanity.

## Apart from receiving this Honour, what has been your proudest moment at work?

At the end of my first fortnight into joining the Registry of Shipping and Seamen in 1990, whilst working on the medals desk, I discovered my father, part of the Merchant Navy, had never collected his medals for his service during World War II. I was able to help him with the application process. It was incredibly emotional.

Another standout moment was being awarded the Department for Transport apprenticeship ambassador for 2016. I had done a lot of work supporting apprentices and I was proud to bring the award home to the MCA.

## What does it take to do your job well?

It is important to be calm under pressure and to be able to pacify customers in a highly charged emotional state. It is important to know the boundaries of our jurisdiction with the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 and to have a strong network of internal and external stakeholders.

## Tell us one thing we might not know about your job.

The MCA is the only organisation that registers deaths at sea on merchant vessels (cruise ships, cargo vessels, ferries etc). We produce a "Certified Extract of the Register" which is the marine equivalent of a conventional death certificate issued by a land registrar. ■

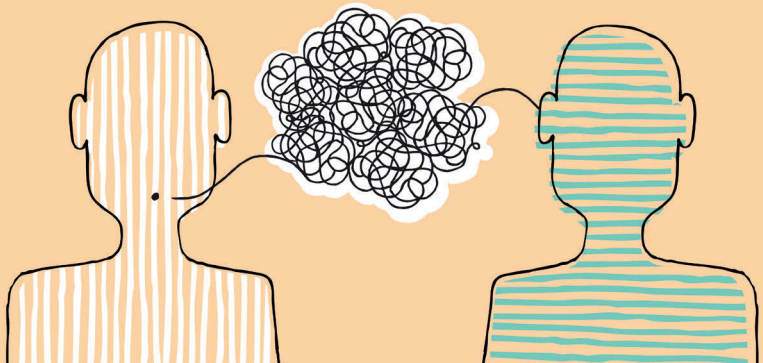
## UNA O'BRIEN SPOTTING THE SIGNALS

**IT'S HARD TO SPOT WARNING FLAGS AMID THE BUNDLES OF INFORMATION WE RECEIVE, BUT THE COST OF FAILING TO DO SO CAN BE HUGE. IT'S TIME TO GET BETTER AT DEEP LISTENING**

**W**hen inquiry reports land this year into the Grenfell fire and the infected blood scandal, findings could indicate that government organisations knew early on of serious risks yet failed to act.

Knowing and not acting – or even worse, covering up a poor or non-response – should never be part of our public institutions. But what about a different scenario? One where, say, a government department receives multiple single items of information dropping over time into a sea of incoming correspondence. How do we learn to spot weak signals and draw out patterns of mounting problems?

On the day back in 2012 that I gave evidence to the Mid-Staffs public inquiry, the short journey from London to Stafford was in sharp contrast to the time it had taken for the extent of patient neglect at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust to fully register in the Department of Health.



Yet the truth was with us all along: I carried with me copies of documents the department had submitted to the inquiry, including numerous letters and emails sent over the years from patients on the wards in Stafford, and their visitors, about something worrying they'd experienced or seen. So worrying they'd gone to the trouble to tell us. A good number had come via local MPs. And many pointed to the issues that eventually culminated in the breakdown in care. Uncovered from amongst hundreds of thousands of items of correspondence, we hadn't linked these together; no one person or system had joined the dots.

The replies were telling. Often signed by officials or ministers, they rarely addressed, or even ignored, the specific concerns. Instead they gave well-intentioned explanations of policies and initiatives underway to improve the quality of

care. This evidence, for me, was a moment of reckoning.

Could we have seen and heard those concerns sooner? If so, were we equipped to respond before matters deteriorated further? The answer, of course, is that we should have been far more alert to what was going on; yet given the systems and culture at the time, that clearly took too long. All this, by the way, was when the department was consistently rated a “best performer” in Whitehall for its swift handling of correspondence.

A lot had to be changed after the Mid-Staffs inquiry reported in 2013, starting with acting on information from the public. We introduced a triage system for incoming emails and correspondence, making sure that witness or bystander accounts of unacceptable and neglectful care were singled out. New arrangements were made to pass information to the independent regulator, who by then

**“Does it bother you as much as it does me that government can still be way too slow to spot and act on serious problems?”**

had a system for surveillance and inspection of hospitals. To drive cultural change, senior officials were, for several years, required to spend time each month on the service front line, getting up close to the sorts of issues and concerns encountered by patients and staff.

Does it bother you as much as it does me that across government, we can still be way too slow to spot and act on serious problems before they

materialise or grow into national scandals? Surely this is a place where AI and machine learning can help with problem seeking, helping to expose hidden patterns of concern.

Change, though, also starts with individuals. We could all do more to really listen to people who are at the receiving end of our decisions and actions. Here are some angles I've learned from experience:

- Ask questions, work to clarify shared facts, get a third party view
- Try articulating the other person's perspective
- Don't automatically assume the worst (that people are making it up, exaggerating for personal gain or trying to cover up their own shortcomings)
- Be wary of projecting new information onto a pattern of past events
- If you must assume, assume positive intentions
- Probe with humility, not defensiveness or aggression. Ask: “What is it you haven't yet said that you want us to know?”

This is difficult work, even counter-cultural, as businessman Ram Charan wrote over a decade ago in the *Harvard Business Review*: “There is a reason that, over the years, you have lost your ability to listen. It feels too passive, like the opposite of action. It's much faster to move to a decision based on the information you already have.... It takes time to truly hear someone and to replay the essence of their thoughts back [to] them so that both parties are clear on what was said. The payback is dramatic, but it comes over the long run.” ■

**Dame Una O'Brien is a leadership coach with the Praesta partnership and a former permanent secretary at the DoH**



# ANDREW PEPPER-PARSONS MORE SAID, THE BETTER

## WITHOUT LISTENING TO WHISTLEBLOWERS, WE ARE DESTINED TO LURCH FROM SCANDAL TO CRISIS WITHOUT LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

**A** report on whistleblowing from the National Audit Office published late last year has reached the verdict that government “must do better” to address failures within the civil service. This follows on the heels of multiple calls from government watchdogs over the past ten years. And yet, progress to improve whistleblowing is moving at a snail’s pace.

The NAO report describes progress as “slow and inconsistent” and says the lack of a joined-up approach to whistleblowing or of data collection across departments means there is no opportunity to learn or understand whether policies are actually working.

Most concerning is that only half (52%) of civil servants believe it is safe to challenge the way things are done. If whistleblowers do not feel safe, they may not raise concerns at all. So it’s disappointing that there is no consistent recording of whistleblower victimisation across government. Nor is feedback sought from whistleblowers who have used the process, despite this being standard practice in any other large organisation with sophisticated whistleblowing systems.

Whistleblowers are essential to good government and challenge is vital in holding organisations to account. Recent scandals, including Greensill, Partygate and the British withdrawal from Afghanistan, showed that people inside government knew about wrongdoing but were too afraid to come forward. The NAO’s report found that around two thirds of officials who raised concerns anonymously had done so out of “fear of reprisal, recrimination or victimisation”.

When workers do raise concerns, too many face negative consequences. Protect’s research (cited in the NAO’s report) found that over half of those from the government sector who contacted our legal advice line had experienced a negative outcome as a result of speaking up. With the UK falling to its lowest ever position in Transparency International’s corruption perceptions index – which ranks countries by experts’ views of possible corruption in public services – it is vital that civil servants feel able to speak up and speak out over wrongdoing with confidence if we want to restore trust in the heart of government.

Every concern raised by a whistleblower is a gift of information to an employer. Whistleblowers’ twin fears – that raising concerns will lead to harm to themselves, or that raising concerns will be futile – are not adequately addressed by central government. With more than three hundred whistleblowing concerns raised every year by civil servants, a huge learning opportunity is being missed. So, what needs to change?

- The civil service lacks a truly independent external option where concerns can be raised and dealt with. One option is to follow the Law Commission’s recommendation to create an independent statutory commissioner looking at investigatory powers, along with public interest concerns involving issues of national security.
  - Each government department should appoint a senior civil servant as a whistleblowing champion. This person would be responsible for leading culture change and ensuring whistleblowing arrangements are working well in practice.
  - With so many government departments and agencies taking different approaches to recording and managing whistleblowing concerns, there needs to be proper monitoring on whether the system is effective. Individual feedback should be gathered from whistleblowers who have used each system, alongside regular surveys to assess staff awareness of and trust in the whistleblowing function.
  - Dedicated training is needed for all those who work in the civil service and central government. Our own research found a stark lack of awareness regarding whistleblowing and speak-up culture, with only a third (34%) of public servants saying they knew how to raise concerns.
- The government’s Public Accounts Committee is currently run-

**“We call on civil servants to send in evidence, whether they have experience of blowing the whistle or have been put off from coming forward”**

ning an inquiry seeking views on the whistleblowing landscape in the civil service. We at Protect will be submitting evidence, based

on our 30 years of working directly with whistleblowers and supporting organisations to embed effective procedures. It is vital that the experiences of whistleblowers inform improvements. We call on civil servants to send in evidence, whether they have experience of blowing the whistle, have been put off from coming forward or have a view on the whistleblowing culture across government departments.

We need government to step up and ensure that it is safe for civil servants to speak out, that departments are lis-

tening to and acting upon concerns raised, and that change follows. If we do not learn, we will continue making the same mistakes. Good government relies on good whistleblowing. ■

*Andrew Pepper-Parsons is director of policy at Protect, overseeing their policy, research and campaigning activity*  
<https://protect-advice.org.uk/>





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# ALEXANDER EVANS PLAIN FAILING

## MENTORSHIP CAN ACCELERATE CAREERS, ESPECIALLY WHEN SENIOR STAFF SHARE THEIR DISAPPOINTMENTS AND SETBACKS

**L**eadership is often about examples – good and bad. The permanent secretary who actively gets to know the security guards, cleaners and catering staff. The deputy director who cascades information well, making sure their teams really know what’s going on. Or the negative example of a director who behaves badly, playing favourites or pulling rank on a junior team in another directorate.

Let me share the story of the “unsuccessful” director general. I won’t name them, but this is someone with a stellar Whitehall career who is frank enough to share their career disappointments, weaknesses and failures. For civil servants seeking career advice, guidance from seniors and peers is often crucial. But so many careers seem effortless: one promotion after another, and reputations carefully nurtured so that nothing could be more natural than their further advancement.

In my experience this isn’t true. Careers are messy and accidental. Luck plays much more of a part than any of us would like to acknowledge. We all have our lists of personal disappointments. I (spectacularly) messed up my first interview for a Foreign Office director role, and to little surprise failed to nail the job. I have not been shortlisted for jobs where my experience and skills seemed a strong fit, yet been interviewed for others where my bid was a deliberate long shot.

Back to our director general. Here’s someone who, when talking about career planning in the civil service, was open enough to acknowledge their (long) list of misses and near-misses.

Against their (brilliant) career there was an extensive list of “could-have-beens”. Their trajectory was marked by plenty of disappointment along the way. And they were willing to share this, to help others navigate amidst uncertainty.

This takes me to career planning. Across the civil service, the strongest asset is people. Public servants drive policy development, the machinery of government and citizen services. And even though management has – I hope – largely improved over the years, what’s often missed in the annual cycle of appraisals, management meetings and feedback is dedicated time for developing the careers of others.

This isn’t just about identifying learning or capability gaps, or identifying top (or poor) performers. It’s about all those who work for us. We know from academic and business evidence that mentoring is a crucial factor in professional success. Those with mentors tend to progress better than those without. And this finding isn’t exclusive to formal mentoring schemes: informal mentoring, coaching and advice is key. And while it’s good that there is growing use of such schemes across the civil service, they don’t reach everyone.

Here openness matters. Can senior leaders in the civil service share – as much as possible – their failures and career disappointments? The scrambled interview, the job that got away, the time they messed up? I realise none of us wants to come across as

**“I realise none of us wants to come across as incompetent, inadequate or unsuccessful”**

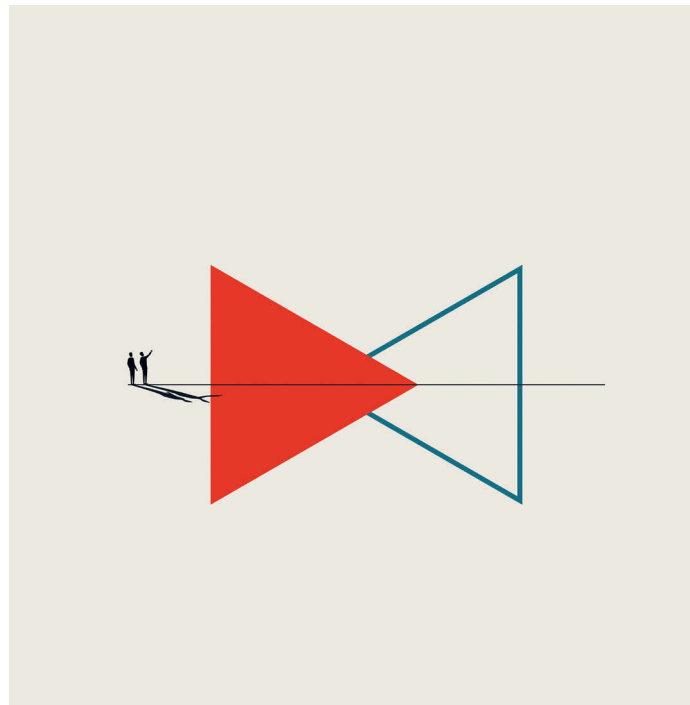
incompetent, inadequate or unsuccessful. But everyone flags and fails sometimes. We let ourselves down – and our career disappointments may be as much to do with the competition, or sometimes chance, as our own actions.

Investing in career mentoring discussions takes time. For busy managers and officials, these are the conversations that are often dropped or foreshortened. But there’s value in making time for them: your colleagues will (hopefully) draw on them, and it shows goodwill to move beyond managing purely for performance to supporting colleagues properly in their career development.

In the late 1990s I worked for a senior civil servant whose approach to management struck me then as inefficient if warm. He belonged to the “management by wandering about” cadre. He made time for people. He nurtured careers. He looked after his teams. And he was open in his argument that the cost of spending time doing this was more than made up for in terms of binding teams together and fostering a supportive environment. I now look back on his approach and see the value in his kindness.

Looking at your own practice, how good are you at sharing career disappointments as well as success? Are you kind enough to properly invest time in supporting career development for all your staff, not just the chosen few? The next time you sit down with a colleague or someone who works for you, make time for that career planning discussion. And be up for sharing a personal career failure – and what you learned from it. ■

*Professor Alexander Evans is professor in practice in Public Policy at the London School of Economics and a former senior civil servant*









# SMOOTH OPERATOR

Looking back over four years as civil service chief operating officer, **Alex Chisholm** tells **Suzannah Brecknell** what he's proud of achieving, what he regrets, and what he will miss most about the job. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer



**I**n May 2022, Alex Chisholm took a risk: he made a prediction. Speculating about the future is fraught enough for any government official. But it seems particularly bold for the man whose department closed nine days after he first became a permanent secretary and whose move into the part of government responsible for national contingency planning coincided with the emergence of a global pandemic.

The risk, admittedly, was a calculated one. Chisholm was setting out three key changes he would like people to notice about the civil service in 2024-25. And at that point, after two years as civil service chief operating officer and Cabinet Office permanent secretary, and with the worst of Covid-19 behind him, he had a pretty good idea about which changes he would be able to drive through.

By 2024, he said, the civil service would be more UK-wide. It would be getting better at using data to shape policy for delivery and solve problems and it would not be made up of people “sitting in offices, coming up with plans for the future, but [those] actually focused on delivering for citizens today, with a customer focus.”

As Chisholm sits down in February 2024 for his final interview in post, he smiles as CSW reminds him of what he said. “I agree with myself that those are still the most important things,” he says.

He’s smiling because he has a good story to tell on these things. He proceeds to set out progress on each of them, listing facts and figures from an extensive briefing sheet and, in doing so, confirming his claim to be a man who values facts, evaluation and data.

On the drive to be a UK-wide civil service, he points out that government has “smashed” its target of moving 15,000 roles out of London by 2025, having already moved 16,000, and has accelerated the Places for Growth programme so that the aim is now to move 22,000 roles by 2027 compared to an initial target of 2030.

The programme is also achieving its underlying goals, Chisholm says, with evaluations showing not only that new locations attract a more diverse set of civil servants but also that those people are staying in post longer than London-based colleagues. Geographic diversity also allows officials to build close links with local communities, business and civil society, which provides what he calls “a great antidote” to any tendency towards London-

based thinking among policymakers.

Chisholm is confident that the change is now a settled part of civil service life. “With any big change in government, there’s often a moment where it’s almost suspended in midair and people question: ‘is this really going to be seen through?’ I think we’ve got over that point. It’s become part of a new normal.”

Progress on the digital and data work is less obvious to outsiders. Much of the focus has been on foundational work such as tackling legacy systems and increasing government’s digital capability through a near-60% increase in the size of the digital and data profession.

Building up this particular cadre of professionals reflects the fact that digital is increasingly core to government’s work, he says. “We needed to not just see digital work as projects where you employ consultants and contractors, and then afterwards, you are left with no deep knowledge or familiarity with how to work those systems.

“Right across government, that’s been

### **CHISHOLM ON... WHAT HE WILL AND WON'T MISS**

**“I love the civil service, it’s an amazing institution. And it has dealt magnificently with this era, which will be remembered in the long run of history because of EU exit, because of Covid, and because of war in Europe. Any one of those things would have been exceptionally difficult to do in a five-year period, and all three have been knocking shoulders in the same period. I’m filled with admiration for my civil service colleagues that we’ve been able to deal with all that. Part of this is because people are very, very committed: they always give of their best and, when there are huge problems, they walk towards them, roll up their sleeves and say, ‘How can I help with that?’ It’s just an amazing culture to be part of. So I’ll really miss that.**

**I think perhaps what I won’t miss is the rate of change that we’ve experienced. In my not-quite-four years here in the Cabinet Office, I’ve had five secretaries of state and 46 ministers, which is a lot. They’ve all been good in different ways, but each one has taken some time, understandably, to get across their brief, to build a new set of relationships. I think that’s been difficult for them, quite honestly, because it’s complex work that we do, and it’s been a greater rate of change than you would want to support that efficient partnership between the civil service and political leadership.”**

a massive change. Now we have a number of departments – I’d pick out HMRC and DWP as leading ones – where they really feel like digital departments. They’ve got really serious capability. We still use the private sector for certain things, but we don’t depend on them for everything. That’s absolutely transformational.”

One element which is obvious to those outside government is the rollout of GOV.UK One Login, a system that aims to make it easier for citizens to sign in to government services while saving money for departments. Chisholm notes that in his previous discussions with CSW this system was “a kind of gleam in my eye” but it is now used to access 26 government services. Four million “digital identities” have so far been issued, with that number set to grow rapidly as big service departments like HMRC begin to roll it out.

The public should also notice an improvement in the most commonly used government services, as the Central Digital and Data Office (part of the Cabinet Office) works towards a target of improving the “top 75 services” so that they are rated “Great” according to CDDO’s assessment system. This work, Chisholm says, will also help to address the final area he mentioned in 2022: the shift towards a delivery and customer-focused organisation.

The reason for picking 75 services, Chisholm explains, is that the CDDO found that there were 7,507 government services, with 1% of those responsible for around 80% of transactions. Using common methodologies and metrics, CDDO works with departments to improve these services. At the first assessment, nine of the 75 services were rated “Great”. Now, it’s 13 – and Chisholm “confidently” predicts that number will be doubled in a year or so.

While One Login and other digital services aim to improve citizen experience while increasing efficiency, Chisholm mentions another piece of work that focuses on the experience and efficiency of civil servants themselves. The interoperability programme – he acknowledges the name is a mouthful – aims to remove barriers that stop civil servants from working across different parts of government. That means practical things like a single pass that allows them to easily visit – or work from – different government buildings (the GovPass system now has 112,000 active users) or a standardised wifi network, which means they can easily get online in those buildings (GovWiFi now has 614,00 users across 274 locations).

Interoperability extends beyond networks and buildings – it’s also tackling



the traditional pain points of recruiting new civil servants and moving officials between departments, as well as helping to build a central picture of the skills and capabilities available across government.

These building blocks, he says, will mean his successor doesn't face the situation he did when prime ministers asked him how many people had the skills or knowledge to help on challenges like EU exit and Covid.

"The answer I had to give was: 'I can't actually tell you that; we'll have to go to departments or public bodies to find out and get people together,'" Chisholm says. "In the future it will be much easier to move people around in much the way that we do with Surge teams now (see box, p.21)."

"We'll be scheduling resources against projects, according to the best set of skills, and that will also create a really strong incentive for civil servants to continue to invest in those skills and feel that they are being used effectively."

Chisholm's title of civil service COO suggests more coherence across the half-a-million civil servants than is in fact the case. Those officials are not employed in one organisation through which a COO can force reform. Instead, they work in autonomous departments accountable to ministers, over which Chisholm has limited direct control.

Luckily, the challenge of achieving objectives using both hard and soft power is not new to him: before becoming perm sec at the Department of Energy and Climate Change (the one that was shuttered nine days after he joined), Chisholm was the first chief executive of the Competition and Markets Authority.

As a regulator, he was used to balancing different approaches to influencing. As he once told CSW, his technique at the CMA had been to "try and create frameworks in which people can do the right thing", rather than "marching around issuing orders to people".

At the end of his time at the Cabinet Office, does he feel that balance has worked, or does he think the COO job could be changed to give it more power? "Obviously there are a lot of different ways that can go," he replies, adding: "What we have tried to do is be firmer in areas where you really had to have a common approach, but more empowering in areas where a common approach wasn't really worth pursuing."

This has meant being "quite fierce

about the Places for Growth numbers", for example, and on ensuring departments sign up to GOV.UK One Login, given both reforms will only achieve their objectives if a critical number of departments join in.

By fierce, CSW assumes, Chisholm means using the levers and controls he does have, rather than shouting at someone in a meeting. "Yes," he replies. "I've never shouted in a meeting... I just want to emphasise that."

The strength comes from combining what he calls "sweet reason" – reminding colleagues why these programmes should succeed – with a degree of flexibility

**"What we have tried to do is be firmer in areas where you really had to have a common approach, but more empowering in areas where a common approach wasn't really worth pursuing"**



over how each department implements change and a solid spending control to act as a backstop on that flexibility.

The reason why OneLogin was properly funded, he says, was because the Treasury and Cabinet Office agreed that alternative digital identity schemes wouldn't receive funding. So, having first built a system which they knew would work, the centre of government ensured that

## CHISHOLM ON... PLACES FOR GROWTH

The ambition to relocate civil service jobs is nothing new, so what has made Places for Growth successful compared to other programmes? Chisholm points to two things which made a difference. First, that it had strong leadership from both political and official sides of government.

"It wasn't enough for Rishi Sunak when he was chancellor to say, 'I'd like to have an office in Darlington. It made as much difference for Tom Scholar as permanent secretary to say 'and you can do any job with the Treasury from Darlington' and for Beth Russell and all the other leaders to say 'and I'm gonna work from there.'"

"The second factor that's been very important in the success of this growth is actually in the locations themselves," he says, describing a "gigantic co-ordination exercise" carried out by the Places for Growth team led by Ravi Chand. This requires balancing pull factors from towns and cities keen to attract civil service offices as part of their own growth or development plans as well as a "book building exercise" to get the right number of people into those offices.

Progress around PfG has been generally praised, but the IfG recently questioned whether the energy security department's second HQ in Aberdeen would be able to achieve the goals of driving growth, diversity and new career paths for civil servants given the small numbers of officials located there.

"It's undoubtedly the case that you need a critical mass to create the prospects of getting promoted and have a variety of roles," Chisholm says, and this is harder to achieve in smaller locations.

"It's undoubtedly the case that you need a critical mass to create the prospects of getting promoted and have a variety of roles," Chisholm says, and this is harder to achieve in smaller locations.

But the critical mass, he suggests, doesn't just need to be civil service roles. While Aberdeen is also home to the North Sea Transition Authority which employs lots of civil servants, he suggests that those who chose to work in

these teams are likely to be specialists in things like offshore operations, carbon capture and storage – people who will be working closely with industry "and the industry is very big in Aberdeen".

"So I think the nature of the linkages will vary," he says, "but you're right that people need there is enough critical mass of one kind or another."

## CHISHOLM ON... THE SURGE AND RAPID RESPONSE TEAM

“This is something which I think really shows the best of the civil service. The Surge and Rapid Response Team is over 1,000 people from different departments, jointly sponsored by me and HMRC’s second permanent secretary Angela MacDonald.

“When the ambulance service came under huge pressure, those teams stepped in to do triage to relieve that pressure; when there was a large number of people coming out of Ukraine and trying to get visas in the UK following the invasion by Russia, again, Surge teams leapt into action – 200 people supported the processing of those visas. And they did the same for the EU settlement scheme – 97 members of the SRRT were put into action and they closed 263,000 cases.

“That shows how civil servants rise to the challenge but it also shows the flexibility that we’ve got to flow resource where it’s needed. They actually have contracts which enable them to be deployed in different contexts, and that’s the shape of the future.

“When people picture a civil servant, they might think about somebody in an office, sitting behind a computer, but a huge number of civil servants are frontline-focused, really helping with major public delivery issues. Any member of the public thinking, ‘Do I admire the civil service, would I consider working there myself?’ should think about those people and their lionhearted efforts to help the public in times of need.”



departments would have to use it. But, departments could work out their own rollout plans to suit their circumstances.

Asked specifically whether he thinks the Cabinet Office needs more hard levers, Chisholm responds by pointing out that his approach has actually been to reduce the number of levers the department is using. His teams conducted an audit of the Cabinet Office spend controls – which cover a variety of categories from IT and property through to contingent labour and comms spend – to discover which were really providing value and reducing risk, compared to others that were duplicating perfectly adequate departmental controls. As a result, the Cabinet Office stopped enforcing some controls – focusing its effort on the ones that really made a difference – and evaluated the impact to show that there was no increase in risk or cost as a result.

If he could start again with the benefit of hindsight, would he do anything differently? Chisholm’s answer sounds like a

response to perceived criticism that change hasn’t been fast or extensive enough. “I think the basic answer is no,” he replies, adding that reforms had to be made at a pace, “consistent with the wider situation”.

“If we had said [civil service reform] was the dominant objective at a time of hard deadlines for EU exit, im-

## “The leaders that are most admired here are those who remain very graceful under pressure”

mense, unprecedented pressures on Covid, and the other challenges we’ve had – particularly the knock-on effects of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – that would have been, I think, incorrect.”

He notes again the improvements made in moving civil service jobs out of London, digital reform, interoperability and talent development schemes. “That

sets us up for success in the era ahead. One always wants to go further and faster, but in the vortex of change that we have experienced, the pressures that we faced, it was right to go at the pace we have done, so I don’t have any regrets about that.”

He does, though, add one “area of slight regret”. It relates to a failure to collectively plan and communicate a way to meet pressures on public finances by creating a smaller, but more skilled and better equipped, civil service.

“At various points, the communication from the government has been that we need to have big reductions in the number of civil servants,” he says. “And we haven’t actually been able to match that up with plans that really show that working. It’s been more aspirational, rather than implemented.

“We need to put in place a more realistic and deliverable programme for shifting over time, probably over a number of years, towards having a lower number of people involved in doing administra-



tive work, which hopefully will be done by machines. That will mean the average quality of every civil servant's working life is going to go up. The work they do is more easily done, because they are working proficiently with brilliant technology and data. So we can get a lot more done in our working days, do a better job of helping the citizens that we serve, and we won't need to have as many people as we have today. And *that* will enable the civil service, and the services we support, to be affordable in a very constrained environment for public expenditure."

Why hasn't the civil service been able to develop this plan? Chisholm suggests the challenge is finding the right balance between central and departmental leadership. He points to the shared-services agenda as a comparison.

"I remember in a previous era, the initial aspiration [for shared services] was to move from having hundreds of different systems for HR and finance to one system across government. That was probably too extreme and not very deliverable."

Under Chisholm's watch, the plan was reset so that five clusters of departments would each create a model of shared services that works for them. While the Cabinet Office plays a "supportive and enabling role", the clusters are led by departments that can move at their own pace, recognising that modernisation takes time to be done well.

### CHISHOLM ON... DELEGATED PAY

In 2020, when asked if it was time to reconsider the use of delegated pay in the civil service, Chisholm gave a one word answer: maybe.

In 2024, after several years of bruising pay talks, a summer of strikes over pay and a growing amount of churn which the NAO has attributed at least in part to problems in pay and reward systems, his answer is longer and more emphatic – though he starts with a classic civil servant's caveat.

"We need to relook at the cost and benefits," he says. "The benefit which led to the original delegation was that individual public bodies and departments have got differ-

ent types of workforces, so they should be able to have the pay framework that is most appropriate to those very different workforces.

"But the disadvantages of that means that there are now differences that sometimes are hard to justify between different departments, and which encourage a certain amount of people hopping between roles in order to improve pay."

Pay delegation also leads to complex employment conditions which make it harder to manage change in government, he adds, so there does need to be "a good, hard look" at the question.

The recently-published *People Plan* hopes to do just

that, he says. "I would also say you need to look at the relative balance between pay and pensions and the total reward package, because people's preferences have changed."

The final issue which the reward strategy must consider is the fact that "every single civil service grade bar one – AA – is worth less in real terms today than it was 10 years ago". For all the benefits of flexibility, interesting work and a decent pension, that fact does need to be addressed, he says.

"Otherwise you won't be competitive, and we need to be competitive because the work of government has never been more important in the life of the country."

### CHISHOLM ON... MORALE AND THE IMPACT OF CHANGE

"I'm delighted to say that we saw the biggest increase in overall engagement scores in the 2023 People Survey and were a top performer for leadership and managing change. There was also a 10 percentage point gain in those people who said that the Cabinet Office is a great place to work.

"That shows that we did a great job over the last year in building support and improving lots of different things that were worrisome to people. But it also reflects that the figures were poor [in 2022]. People were in the mode of saying: 'I've just got everything ready for the new person, exactly to their specification, and it's a different person a few weeks later.'

"We're very closely wired to the world of politics and communications, and it becomes hard for people to feel calm and confident and productive in that context. So there can



certainly be too much change, which feels bewildering, but I'm actually very much in favour of change. All of us in the civil service are here because we believe in a better world. We want that change. There are some fundamental issues in this country and around the world which we need to focus on. We need to make

sure that everyone is up to finding the best possible way to pursue those goals, which can be hard to do if the day-to-day friction of surprise becomes too great.

"So the leaders that are most admired here [in the civil service] are those who

remain very graceful under pressure, and even when things are changing fast – with 'lots of incoming', as we say – they remain their best selves to absorb some of that pressure rather than passing it on. It's also those who are able to take what can be quite a noisy environment and find the signal through all that noise which tells us what we need to be acting on to pursue these long term goals."

"That programme is rolling out beautifully," Chisholm says. Externally assured reports estimate the strategy could provide £3.3bn of savings and efficiencies over 15 years – over double the expected annual savings for less than the price

of departments working separately. "All of that has been a very concerted, long-term programme," Chisholm reflects.

The shift to a smaller, higher-performing civil service will need the same kind of programme. "We need to show a coherent, well designed, well consulted plan, and also one where civil servants will respond: 'Good, because not only will my job become more valuable, but I will be better paid,'" he says.

The day before we meet, it's announced that Chisholm's successor as COO will be Treasury second perm sec Cat Little, with whom he says he has worked "hand in glove" to drive change.

What advice does he have for Little as she prepares to step into the role? On a practical note, he advises her to keep focusing on those three important things – a UK-wide service, digital and data, and end-user experience – and to be prepared to invest in the opportunities presented by AI and other new technologies.

Then, he has a more reflective answer. "This period's been quite turbulent. At various times, the partnership between civil service and political leadership, as well as the bonds of trust with the public, have been a bit creaky. Everything that we do as civil service leaders should be to reinforce that partnership, and build those bonds of trust with the public." ■



Higher education courses are almost always enriching and valuable, but what if you want to combine further study with a career in the civil service? **Tim Gibson** investigates

**“T**he civil service is a learning environment. It’s a place where intellectual growth is valued, and staff are given time to pursue it.”

These are the words of Patrick Keenan, a senior policy adviser in the Treasury who recently completed a postgraduate course at King’s College London about the UK’s economic policymaking. His place was funded, with time given to attend weekly

seminars as well as study leave to produce his final essay. Keenan says the support was empowering, bringing advantages for him, his colleagues and his employer.

This speaks of a culture of learning that is embedded across Whitehall. Civil servants are encouraged to deepen their knowledge, enhance their skills and engage in critical enquiry. As Keenan says: “It’s a context where you can circulate a research paper or think tank report and know colleagues will appreciate it

and read it. Particularly in departments like the Treasury, it feels as if we’re in close contact with the academic world.”

A result of this culture is that civil servants have plenty of opportunity to pursue further study. For many, it’s an important part of their career development, helping them grow professionally and retain interest in their role. So how do you make the most of the opportunities available, balancing work, study and life in a way that is sustainable and energising?





# & EARNING

## Choose wisely

“People pursue further study for different reasons,” says Dr Myra Evans, a director in the School of Social Sciences at UWE Bristol and an expert in adult learning. “For some, it is closely tied to career advancement: they need further qualifications to achieve their goals. For others, it’s about the sheer joy of study. They simply love learning and relish any opportunity to do so.”

The important thing, says Evans, is to understand your motivation. That is what will sustain you during the early mornings or late nights when you’re trying to squeeze in coursework around

your other commitments. “If you don’t have a sense of purpose, you’ll definitely struggle to lean in when the going gets tough. It is important to understand why you’re signing up for further study – then choose a course that’s right for you.”

In the context of the civil service, the latter deliberation is usually straightforward. You’re most likely to secure funding for a programme that benefits your employer. So unless you intend to self-fund, your range of options probably won’t include that PhD in Medieval Witchcraft you always fancied after your undergraduate degree.

“You have to be realistic about the

funding set-up,” explains Rushabh Haria, another Treasury policy adviser and KCL alumnus. “You’ll need to build a business case that demonstrates the value of your intended course. If you can do that, you’ll find managers to be very supportive of your plans.”

## Applied learning

It is with this in mind that civil servants like Keenan and Haria looked to KCL, which offers a suite of programmes aimed squarely at those responsible for running the country. Through the Strand Group, the university has long leveraged its central London location to bring politicians >>

and policymakers together for extended critical conversations. Such encounters form the basis of its postgraduate provision, which includes discrete modules in topics including the history of HM Treasury, the history of the civil service, and the inner workings of No.10 Downing Street.

KCL has now launched an MA in Government Studies, which brings together the relevant elements of its provision in a single programme. The course offers students an opportunity to learn from experienced academics, as well as people like Ed Balls, Alastair Campbell and Clare Lombardelli: those who have been at the centre of government and can speak from first-hand experience about the challenges of making and implementing policy.

“Our focus is threefold,” explains Dr Michelle Clement, a lecturer on the programme who is also researcher in residence at No.10. “We consider policy, process and the personalities involved: the three elements that civil servants juggle as they try to improve citizens’ lives.”

Martin Stolliday, manager of the Strand Group, says that feedback suggests the course helps students to appreciate the impact they can have as civil servants. “We’ve developed a blended approach to study, which combines the academic rigour of history with a real-world element. Students love the opportunity to learn from big hitters in their world,” he says.

### A lasting impression

It seems likely that job satisfaction and productivity is enhanced when staff have developed their knowledge, skills and expertise through further study. In the case of Sydney Joyce, from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, that entailed a full MA in History and

## “Unless you intend to self-fund, your range of options probably won’t include that PhD in Medieval Witchcraft you always fancied after your undergraduate degree”

Politics, also from KCL. She self-funded but says her managers were accommodating when it came to balancing the pressures of work and study, because they saw the utility of her qualification.

“My experience of part-time study was that it helped me see the bigger picture in policymaking, and the work of government more generally,” says Joyce. “I learned from amazing guest speakers and talented academics who broadened

my knowledge and helped me think in fresh ways. That was a big gain from the experience, alongside the stimulation of returning to an academic environment.”

For Dr Evans, undertaking further study was a clear step in establishing her professional identity. As a successful broadcast journalist, she was invited to deliver some occasional teaching at UWE Bristol. “I soon realised I wanted to do more of it and would need a postgraduate qualification to secure a permanent post,” she explains. “I returned to the classroom and graduated with a masters at the age of 40. It started a whole new chapter in my career: I’ve worked at the university ever since, and recently completed my doctorate.”

Whatever the end goal, a common theme emerges from those who join a course: it’s a life-giving experience, in which you make connections with your fellow students that last beyond the programme itself. Keenan says his course helped him establish a network in the Treasury after he joined mid-career. Joyce makes a similar point: “I found my people on my MA, and have a strong network of alumni from the programme. This is helpful professionally, but it was also great support when assignments weren’t going well, or I lacked motivation.”

In fact, motivation doesn’t seem to have been in short supply for Joyce any more than it was for Keenan and Haria. And while they’re not unaware of the potential positive impact of their studies on their career, they all agree this wasn’t their main reason for enrolling. “I was interested in learning for learning’s sake,” says Joyce. “I genuinely enjoyed writing my assignments, even though doing them meant having a quieter social life for a couple of years.”

### Making connections

Besides, study can itself have a social element, as Keenan points out. “We’d quite often grab coffee or drinks after a seminar, and continue

the conversation,” he says. “It was nice to be with like-minded people, talking about stuff we all found genuinely fascinating.”

That sense of connection has endured, with the Strand Group offering plenty of events to keep current, former and prospective students engaged. “It does feel like we’re part of a community,” says Haria. “And it’s always nice when people thinking of signing up for a course ask about my

## FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE SIGNING UP FOR FURTHER STUDY

### 1. Do you have time?

Your managers may give you some study leave, but you’ll probably need to work in the evenings or at weekends to get the most from your experience. If that feels unsustainable, could you reduce your hours to make time for study?

### 2. Who’s paying?

If you can’t secure funding from your employer, you’ll need to find another source. Some institutions like KCL offer studentships for people who wouldn’t otherwise be able to undertake postgraduate study, or you could use savings or a loan. You need to be sure you can afford your course – especially if you intend to reduce your working hours to make time for it.

### 3. What do you want to achieve?

A full masters programme is a big commitment. If you want to develop your knowledge or enjoy some intellectual stimulation, but don’t have capacity for one or two years of full-or part-time study, a shorter course may be a good place to start. Many universities offer their masters modules as standalone short courses – something KCL does with its MA modules to facilitate professional development. This gives participants more flexibility.

### 4. Who else is affected?

Your decision to pursue further study will have an impact on other people. Your family and friends will see less of you, and your colleagues may have to take up some slack if you reduce your hours or take study leave. Consider the wider effect of your decision and make sure everyone’s on board. It’ll save difficult conversations further down the line.

### 5. Is it time for a change?

Sometimes, a desire for further study is a sign you want to change direction in your career. If that sounds like you, it may be worth considering a more fundamental lifestyle shift. Could you work part-time while you retrain, or quit and join a course full-time? Who knows? You may end up with that PhD in Medieval Witchcraft, after all.

experience. I tell them to go for it!”

Such is the reality of working for an organisation that values intellectual endeavour. Choose the right course, and it’s clear civil servants can expect to be supported in pursuing further study. “Make your case and get stuck in,” concludes Haria. “It’s a win-win for you and your department.” ■



# I WILL SURVIVE

This no-nonsense guide is a useful reminder that diligent planning must underpin crisis management, writes **Crispian Wilson**

► **How to Survive a Crisis: Lessons in Resilience and Avoiding Disaster**  
 ► David Omand  
 ► Penguin

**H**ow to survive a crisis? I'm guessing that many of us in the civil service feel like we've been doing little else in recent years. Whether it's the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, climate change or cyber disruption, many of us have felt the impact of the crises that have buffeted the UK. Some might argue that we have been thrown into the centre of continuous crises without any training in crisis management.

Sir David Omand's book sets out to provide a manual for crisis management in business and government. He has the credentials to claim authority on this: Omand was a senior civil servant in the MoD during the Bosnian war, then director of GCHQ; he progressed to the role of permanent secretary in the Home Office before becoming the UK's first security and intelligence co-ordinator. Since retiring in 2005 he has worked in academia and business and has frequently been called back to government to assist with crisis planning, including for the 2012 Olympics. Part manual and part autobiography, the book draws on Omand's experience from across his career, incorporating case studies from business and government to bring out some broad lessons in crisis preparedness and management.

Those familiar with UK gov-

ernment crisis management doctrine will find much that is familiar here. But Omand takes dry doctrine and explains why it matters, showing that it can be the difference between success and failure in a crisis situation. At the centre of his argument is the principle that crisis management is like performance art. You have to plan, prepare and rehearse before taking to a well-prepared stage (ideally your properly-equipped crisis management centre), then do your best no matter what happens during the performance. He makes a compelling case for proper, systematic crisis preparedness for businesses and governments, and also addresses the biases that get in the way of that:

group think, short termism, lack of investment in preparation and planning, and an inability to spot (or an unwillingness to grapple with) slow burn crises. The chapters take you through lessons in preparedness, the arc of a crisis from start to finish, and foresight. At the end of each chapter Omand provides a short summary and lists the key lessons. It is a reminder that most of the work of crisis management is not the glamour of tense situation rooms but of careful, long-term (dare I say dull) forecasting and preparation, combined with a refusal to be complacent.

Having worked on various crises, both in London and overseas, and having spent time in the FCDO's crisis man-

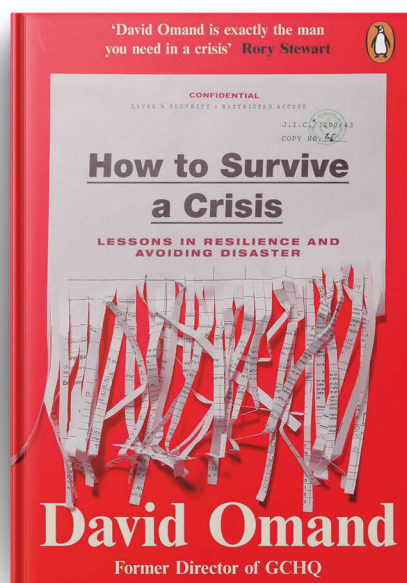
agement department, Omand's recommendations resonated with me. I could see how FCDO had learned many of its lessons the hard way. I was impressed by Omand's ability to package up a lifetime's experiences and UK crisis doctrine into an easily accessible manual. The sections on cyber resilience were particularly useful for me as a primer for a non-IT specialist. Omand's precise and methodical writing style (no doubt honed over a whole career of civil service drafting) while occasionally feeling a little pedantic, also helped to take the drama and mystery out of crisis management and pinpoint the real-life actions that make a decisive difference. As a brigadier responsible for the UK military's crisis deployments once told me: "Crisis management is not strategic or tactical, it's practical."

This book should be required reading for anyone in government, especially in a leadership role, who is responsible for resilience in their organisation or who might come across crisis work. It is quite high level, mostly focusing on whole systems and on policy at national or corporate board level, with less emphasis on the impact of crisis on individuals (although it does touch on this). To see both sides of crisis work I would recommend reading Omand's book alongside Lucy Easthope's *When the Dust Settles*, which deals with the human cost of crisis and disaster.

Omand's call for greater national resilience is an impassioned warning to all of us. When faced with short-termism and wishful thinking in the face of future risks, Omand argues, we must not ignore those risks but do what we do best: make sure our political leaders understand them, and find practical ways to overcome them. ■

**Crispian Wilson is a diplomat, currently serving as political counsellor at the British Embassy in Warsaw**

**"Crisis management is like performance art: You have to plan, prepare and rehearse before taking to a well-prepared stage"**



# WE'VE GOT THE POWER

Technological advances in the past 200 years have relied on a plentiful supply of cheap energy, something we can no longer depend on. **Maria Sharmina** and **Timothy Capper** explore how to strengthen the UK's energy resilience and security

**R**ecent energy supply shortages and high prices have highlighted the importance of energy resilience. Take natural gas. Gas prices throughout Europe have been unprecedentedly high since mid-2021. The initial increase in prices was driven by a rising demand for liquefied natural gas as economies in Europe and Asia reopened after Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. High prices during the summer of 2021 meant that gas storage facilities, which Europe relies on during winter, did not fill up, sustaining high prices throughout winter 2021-22. Later, sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine jeopardised the important gas supply from Russia to Europe. This supply was largely cut off during the summer of 2022, contributing to sustained high gas prices throughout the year.

Insufficient energy supply and high prices are only two of the major risks faced by the UK energy sector. Other risks are emerging from the low-carbon transition, damage from climate-change impacts, and pressures on critical minerals such as cobalt, nickel and lithium. In addition, our increasingly digitised energy systems are becoming more vulnerable to cyber attacks.

The transition away from fossil fuels in particular is leading to a more intermittent and less diversified energy mix. The electricity system will become harder to operate, as more electricity will be generated from less controllable renewable sources. The energy sources people use will become less diverse as heating, cooking and transportation are electrified. Energy systems will become dependent on critical minerals and materials required for electrification, renewables and batteries.

## **“Responsibility for energy security is currently split between government departments and regulators, slowing down decision-making”**

Britain's current energy security process is increasingly unsuitable for managing these new risks. It narrowly focuses on the reliability of the electricity and gas networks. Much less emphasis is put on ensuring that there is a sufficient supply of fuels, such as natural gas, and that there are the materials and skills required for long-term energy security. Responsibility for energy security is currently split

between government departments and regulators, slowing down decision-making.

Further undermining the UK's energy resilience is a predominant policy focus on technological and supply-side decarbonisation measures. The newly formed Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, in its *Powering up Britain* policy paper, reiterates this focus. Support for nuclear, wind and carbon removal technologies is indeed necessary for the low-carbon transition. However, measures to reduce energy demand can rapidly reduce emissions in the short-term. Additionally, cuts in energy demand, resulting in a smaller energy system, would help decarbonisation in the run up to 2050.

### **Mitigating energy security risks**

A more resilient energy system would require reductions in energy demand,

a more flexible electricity system, and domestic low-carbon energy generation. It would also benefit from increased energy storage capacity and a new government body responsible for energy resilience. Risks to the supply of critical minerals and metals need purposeful investment in large-scale, circular economy infrastructure going beyond research funding.

Reducing energy demand is a cheap,



fast and effective way of improving energy security. Almost 60% of homes in England and Wales have an energy performance certificate (EPC) rating below C. Bringing these homes up to an EPC rating of C could save the equivalent of six nuclear power stations' worth of power. Aggregated bill savings are estimated to be £10.6bn per year.

A recent project stress testing the government's net-zero strategy through several future scenarios has shown that relying primarily on technology is risky, and that the strategy might need to be complemented by societal changes reducing energy demand. The Tyndall Centre's research confirms that demand reductions are necessary for meeting the Paris Agreement climate goals and for reducing reliance on expensive engineered carbon removals. Such reductions would be particularly important for the sectors where low-carbon energy supply is technologically challenging, such as aviation, freight and heavy industry.

The ability to store energy and move it back and forth to Europe would give the UK energy system more flexibility to deal with variations in supply and demand over periods ranging from hours to seasons. The UK currently has very little energy storage, so it relies on gas and electricity interconnectors with Europe to take advantage of their large gas storage facilities. The ability to trade energy with Europe also allows both parties to take advantage of differences in demand and supply due to differences in temperature and in renewable generation.

Similarly, diversification is essential to ensure supplies of the materials needed for a low-carbon transition. Here, the government has published its 2022 critical minerals strategy. For example, the UK intends to work more closely with partners such as Saudi Arabia and invest in circular economy measures. Such measures would include a more efficient use of materials and their recovery from waste streams, for example from electric vehicle batteries. As circular economy is a systems approach, the government should acknowledge that many currently locked-in and incumbent practices might need to be uprooted. Non-incremental changes are required to the current infrastructure for collecting and processing waste.

### A path towards resilience

Energy resilience requires an integrated and joined-up cross-departmental strategy to tackle these issues simultaneously. A government body with overall responsibility

for energy security would be able to balance the short-and-long-term energy security considerations, including energy transition risks. This agency would also be able to view the complete energy supply chain and critical materials supply chain, ensuring that there are sufficient fuel and material imports, as well as making sure the infrastructure within the UK is reliable.

Several UK policy reviews published in 2023 concur. The net zero review by Chris Skidmore, former minister for energy and clean growth, and an independent report by Tim Pick, the UK's offshore wind champion, both call for Ofgem's remit to be expanded to include long-term planning for a net zero system. Similarly, the National Audit Office is concerned about the lack of a long-term, systems-wide and joined up approach to decarbonisation by the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. The time is ripe for change. ■

*Maria Sharmina is professor in energy and sustainability at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in the School of Engineering at the University of Manchester*

*Timothy Capper worked in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology as a UKRI policy fellow in 2022 and is currently a PhD researcher modelling electricity markets and demand side response.*

*This article was first published in On Resilience, a publication by UoM's policy engagement unit Policy@Manchester. For more information, contact [policy@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:policy@manchester.ac.uk)*

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage reductions in energy demand, particularly in sectors which are difficult to decarbonise such as aviation and freight
- Incentivise more flexibility in the electrical system, additional energy storage capacity and interconnection with Europe
- Reduce reliance on imported energy by supporting generation of domestic low-carbon energy
- Create an agency responsible for the UK's energy resilience, taking a long-term and systems view on energy supply and demand







# HOMELAND AWAY

**Suzannah Brecknell** talks to **Abu Ahmed**, head of the Joint Security and Resilience Centre, about partnership, innovation and industry-led solutions

**A**bu Ahmed may be a self-described career civil servant, but he is well used to taking his work outside the world of Whitehall and Westminster. Before the pandemic, as head of counter-terrorism engagement and communication in the Home Office's Homeland Security Group, he would travel the country meeting with councillors and members of local communities to bust myths and build public support for the government's work. In 2020 he received an OBE for this work - a moment he describes as the proudest of his career so far.

As well as often requiring him to work late at night or over the weekend, Ahmed tells CSW that these vis-

its "sometimes involved taking a lot of hostile questions from people who weren't really happy with government. I remember one person who said: 'We don't often get to see the whites of the eyes of officials from London.'"

Now, as the head of the Home Office's Joint Security and Resilience Centre, Ahmed's job involves building connections with other groups who might feel they don't get enough chance to engage with Whitehall officials. Established in 2016, JSaRC aims to bring together government, industry and academia to solve the UK's security challenges. Meeting with partners from industry may not elicit the hostile questions that Ahmed faced when discussing counter terrorism in community halls, but civil servants



can still feel reticent about this kind of engagement. Some may be wary of breaching procurement or propriety rules, while others may fear that they won't be able to set clear expectations with peers from another sector. He recalls one senior official who recently shared their anxiety at inadvertently being seen to enter into a financial commitment with industry partners.

Ahmed says he was initially nervous about working with industry, but now enjoys being a part of discussions between the two sectors. In fact, talking to partners outside government is an essential factor in homeland-security work. Whether it's through public engagement to counter radical ideologies, or working with business to procure the detection methods to match ever-more sophisticated security threats, "there are very few challenges for which we don't have to work with organisations outside of government to find solutions," Ahmed says.

JSaRC's original and primary aim is to support "industry-led innovation to meet the challenges faced by government and our partners, such as the police," he continues. It does this by acting as a two-way signpost: communicating to industry the challenges that government faces, but also helping government find and test solutions to those challenges. One early trial involved, for example, technology to screen large crowds quickly and non-intrusively at large events such as major sporting fixtures.

One ongoing piece of work is exploring the best options for biometric self-enrolment, allowing people to submit fingerprints and facial images easily and accurately ahead of travel to the UK.

JSaRC conducted initial public trials in late 2021, involving over 500 members of the public testing the latest biometric fingerprint-capture capability of a range of smartphone app suppliers. These trials found that further development was required to ensure effective delivery against a range of standards, and internal JSaRC-led benchmarking trials were then conducted in 2022 and 2023. The results from the latest round show good market development and better smartphone app performance from a range of industry suppliers.

Another round of public trials was approved by the Home Office Digitise Board in December and JSaRC is now developing a plan to further test the capability of this emerging technology later this year with over 1,000 people. All of this work supports the UK government's ambition to improve security at the border by

requiring everyone who applies for a visa to submit biometric information, but it has also garnered interest beyond the UK.

"There is definite international interest in these trials because we're quite advanced in testing this particular technology," Ahmed says. "The idea that people can, in their own homes, take their own fingerprints and send them off - that could have a variety of different use cases."

JSaRC also has an increasing focus on supporting growth in the security sector. "Ultimately if we have a strong, prosperous, dynamic security sector, then we will have capabilities to tackle the policing challenges, the border challenges, all the security challenges government faces."

There's also a growing focus on exports - so much so that supporting exports is one of the four pillars of JSaRC's most recent strategy, alongside a commitment to improving procurement, supporting innovation and building skills. "Our security exports are second only to the US and China," Ahmed notes, "but globally

there's a lot of fierce competition. There are some sectors, for example the drone and counter-drone industry, where there's not enough of a market for a company to grow just in the UK. Those companies rely on exports and we've got to support those industries to grow, because ultimately that will lead to greater job creation, greater technological advantage and better solutions for our range of partners within and outside of the Home Office."

**A**hmed joined JSaRC in 2022 as head of international engagement - a new role at that point, created to reflect the growing importance of building international connections to meet the unit's strategic goals. A lawyer by training, his first civil service job was acting as an immigration tribunal advocate, representing the Home Office. Keen to work on "big picture stuff", he soon moved into policy roles. After working on the Equality Act when it was still at bill stage, he moved into counter terrorism in the early 2010s.

"It was an interesting time because the threat morphed from Al Qaeda to Daesh to more complex ideologies around extreme right-wing terrorism, and the prevalence of mental-health issues within terrorism as well," Ahmed says. He worked in various posts, including carrying out a review of right-wing terrorism that took him out of Whitehall again - this time to Berlin, where as the British Embassy's first secretary for counterterrorism he supported the relationship between the British and German governments. Just before moving to JSaRC he led another cross-government review, this time looking into how the UK could improve its capabilities to counter the ways in which terror is globally financed.

Shortly after joining JSaRC, Ahmed was appointed head of the unit. Given his background, it's perhaps not surprising that Ahmed says the biggest learning curve in his first nine months leading the team has not been to do with homeland security or international work - both of which are familiar areas to him - but with developing a better understanding of the priorities and challenges faced by his colleagues across the Home Office. One key structure which helps to build this understanding is the annual Security and Policing event - government's official global security show, which has been taking place for over 40 years.

Although JSaRC is the formal host of the event - and organising it is a major focus for the team - the confer-

#### **AHMED ON... GROWING SKILLS**

**"The breadth of the security sector means that there's a broad range of different skill requirements - someone who wants to get into the cyber industry may need to be strong in terms of science and engineering; while people working in private security, providing CCTV monitoring or personal protection, will need a different skillset.**

**"So, given that diversity, we're trying to zone in our support to where it's most needed. Obviously promoting STEM subjects, supporting the prime minister's ambition of the UK becoming a leader in science technology, is something a range of different departments will have an interest in. In those areas, we want to be aware of what's going on across government to make sure industry are aware of it, that we are joining those pieces for them. But we also need to own some pieces [of the skills agenda]. For example, in the private security area we've developed a brochure to encourage young people to get into the security sector. It's gone down really well, and we've worked with a range of different organisations including Skills for Security to promote that particular product so people can join that industry. We've also invited some students to come to Security & Policing to get an idea of the amazing variety of careers they can have with the security sector."**



ence connects many partners across government. The UK Defence and Security Exports team, which sits in the business department, has a strong involvement, as does the transport department. Within the Home Office there's a close involvement with the Science, Technology, Analysis and Research group which runs the "Innovation Zone" at the event.

"They've got a really rich series of panel discussions where they're pulling together those working in science and tech, those in industry and those in government, policing and so on," Ahmed says. The discussions hosted in this zone aim to communicate government's "demand signals" to researchers and businesses, while also informing visitors about the latest innovations which may impact their work.

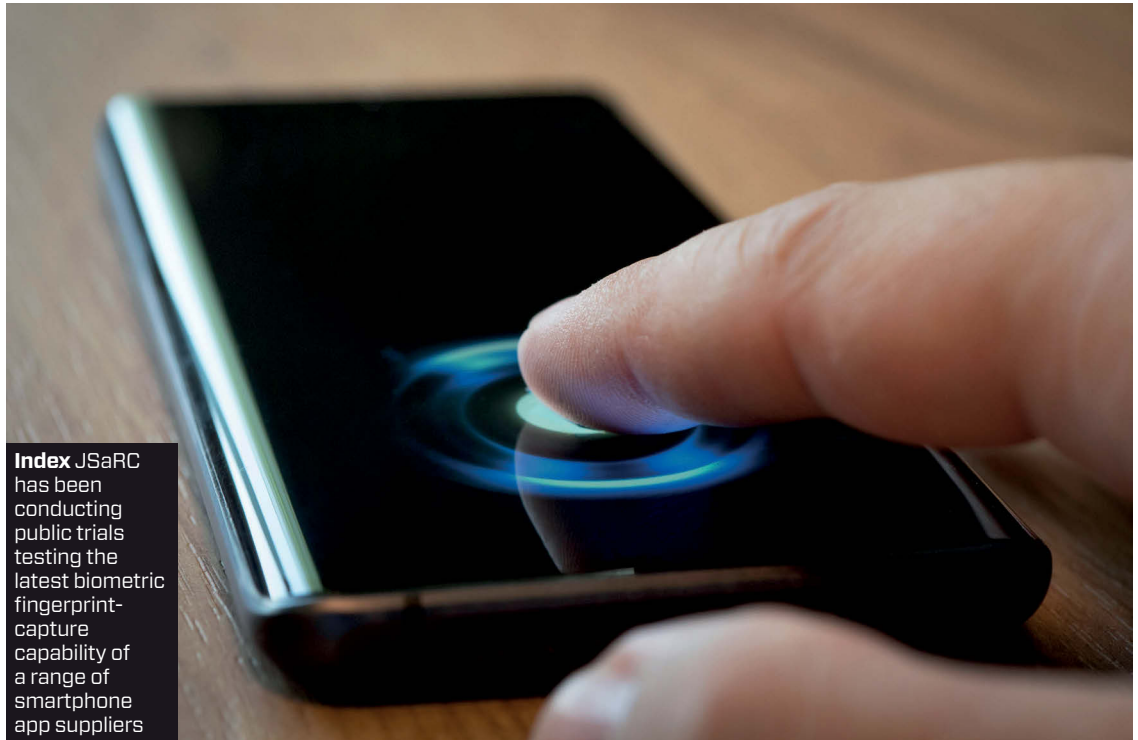
The event also attracts many international visitors, including ministers and senior officials. JSaRC plays a key role in ensuring these important delegates see the event as more than just an exhibition, whether that's through the agenda of speeches and discussions, or by introducing them to relevant officials and partners in the UK.

"I think there's an onus on us to make sure we're creating the right opportunities for people to network, to meet, to ask challenging questions and to have

## **"There's an onus on us to make sure we're creating the right opportunities for people to network, to meet, to have that stimulating intellectual dialogue"**

that stimulating intellectual dialogue," Ahmed says, "so they go away thinking 'that was an amazing event, because I connected with exactly the right kind of person to help me identify what I need to do and where I need to invest'."

He's also keen to better understand the value these events provide in terms of supporting sales and growth. "I am led to believe, reliably so, by some of our trade association partners that these events are invaluable. People don't immediately say, 'I will buy 15 of these or 20 of these,' but in the months after the event those relationships start to come alive. Conversations happen and contracts are signed. What I want to do is try and



**Index** JSaRC has been conducting public trials testing the latest biometric fingerprint-capture capability of a range of smartphone app suppliers

get underneath that. As you know, we're coming up to a spending review and I think the more we can point to the value of these kinds of events and the value of our engagement with industry, the more I think we can invest in this area."

Ahmed himself attends a large number of corporate gatherings through his job, so he speaks from experience when he reflects on the importance of meeting people and building connections. What are his tips for making the most of a big international event like this? "I like to get a diversity of different stakeholder views," he says. "So I'll typically want to speak to the larger primes who are going to be at the event, but also to medium-sized enterprises and the smaller or micro enterprises to get a breadth of different views."

"As a person who's interested in policy," he continues, "I'm keen to understand where there are blockages. We've had really good dialogue with some SMEs, for example, on their experiences of government procurement. We then managed to talk to the right people in the Cabinet Office and surface some of those issues."

**J**SaRC is overseen by the Security and Resilience Growth Partnership – a strategy-level board which meets several times a year and brings together representatives from across government and industry. Jointly chaired by the security minister and the chair of industry body

consortium RISC, the board provides strategic direction for JSaRC as well as an opportunity to connect with important partners in other parts of the Home Office.

One recent attendee at the SRGP, for example, was Phil Douglas, the director general of Border Force. After speaking at the board to set out the challenges his teams face, Douglas invited industry representatives to visit two ports in the UK. JSaRC helped to facilitate those visits, and Ahmed described them as "really eye-opening" for the companies involved. "They had a series of assumptions about how the ports work, but when they visited, they just thought: 'Wow, hang on, you are trying to scan X number of containers within this limited time period and with these logistical constraints? We did not realise this.' As a result of that visit, one industry figure told me they have shut down an area of R&D because they realised that what they were planning wouldn't work. They are now able to invest in the right way, so that visit was really valuable."

As Ahmed nears the end of a year in post as head of JSaRC, his priorities for the team are to continue building structures and systems which support policy objectives without relying on individual relationships. At the moment, he reflects, JSaRC bases a lot of its work on "strong relationships with individual missions" across the Home Office. But driving work around growth, exports and innovation more effectively across the department will take more than just his team and the relationships they can build. ■

# LUNCH WITH... KARIN VON HIPPEL

**Suzannah Brecknell** meets director general of defence and security think tank Rusi **Karin von Hippel** (along with her faithful friend Lulu). Photography by Dinendra Haria

**Who?**  
Karin von Hippel's experience of conflict

zones stretches back more than a quarter of a century, to her time working for the United Nations in Somalia and then Kosovo. She went on to work in senior roles at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Centre for Defence Studies think tanks. A move to the US State Department in 2010 followed, where she spent six years working on counter-terrorism and conflict and stabilisation operations. Von Hippel, who has a doctorate in international relations and national security studies, has been director general at Rusi for almost a decade.

## Where

Rusi's impressive Grade II listed office on Whitehall, built in 1896, which recently underwent a £12.2m renovation.

## We discussed Career highlights

The most interesting work that I've done in the policy sphere was when I worked for the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo. It was all about how local government works, the delivery of services to people and the protection of minorities. But we were actually doing it instead of sitting on the sidelines telling people how to do it better. It was challenging but I enjoyed it

and learned a lot. In terms of my time in think tanks, working at Rusi has been an incredible experience.

## Taking over at Rusi

At the beginning, people were a little surprised at this American woman arriving. I'm the first woman, the second civilian and the first foreigner to lead Rusi. But it's been a privilege, it's a great organisation, we have a lot of fun. I'm really lucky, I get to work with a lot of amazing people, though technically I work for them. My job is to try to make their lives easier.

## What she learnt in Kosovo

It made me understand at first hand how long people hold grievances. I was there after the NATO bombing in 1999, when Milosovic and the Serbs had been driven out of Kosovo, so there were many Albanians returning to the country. They started taking revenge on Serbs who stayed. It gave me a better understanding of how hard it is to protect minorities and how insidious these long standing enmities are. In Kosovo it had got to the point where there were ways of sabotaging access for other people in almost every aspect of services provided by the government.

My time there taught me about the art of the possible and that while foreign and international organisations can help with things like investment, security and training, the work has to be done by locals if it's going to succeed.

## What civil servants can contribute, and need to do more of

We have had many civil servants come and work at Rusi, as well as people from law enforcement and the military. They bring practical government experience, and an understanding of the way the British government works, it's very helpful. Generally, the Brits engage really well with think tanks. In America you're excited if you get some senate staffers at an event, whereas here, we get everyone from junior officials to ministers. There's a lot of interaction here and people in government are very open to interacting, which we all appreciate - we learn a lot from each other. In America there is a revolving door between working in think tanks and the government and the movement is too much. It's almost to the point where it's not always effective because when you're in a think tank, you're afraid to criticise your own party if they're in government, because you want a job. Here in Britain I think there isn't enough of that movement - it does happen but it could happen more.

## The best piece of professional advice she's been given

In every job, no matter how great or bad it is, you learn something about yourself. You learn what you're good at and what you're not good at. What you enjoy and what you don't enjoy. So if you're in a job that you're not desperate to do, don't despair. And when you are starting out, don't put too much

pressure on yourself to know what you want to do. Some people know exactly what they want to do when they're born. But many, many people, like me, are never really sure what they're going to be when they grow up.

## How a lot of humanitarian suffering is not getting the attention it should

There's always this great big spotlight on the conflict of the moment. And then as soon as people move on, or they get bored, they shift to the next one. Part of the reason why some of these conflicts, like Haiti and others, are so persistently challenging is that they don't get the sustained attention that they deserve. Burma has been in the headlines, but not to the degree that the conflicts in Gaza or Ukraine have been. There are a lot of these other conflicts and a lot of places, like the Balkans, where tensions are bubbling beneath the surface.

## The shift towards preventing problems rather than dealing with them

I feel like we've moved on from "post conflict", we've moved on from "countering violent extremism", we've moved on from some of the jargon of the past. Everything now is really about violence prevention, however you define it. And because we're in this global transition, we're not entirely sure what the new world order will be. I think that the bureaucracies haven't figured out how to come together and think about how to spend their money in





**“In every job, no matter how great or bad it is, you learn something about yourself”**

the most effective ways. In this country we had the integrated review of national security and international policy, but I haven't seen too many strategies recently that are looking at how they can be implemented from start to finish.

**How less is more and letting others take the lead in conflict zones**

There's not enough money to do everything well. So it's about focusing on a few places

and doing those properly. And, at least in the first instance, demonstrating that working together does help while making sure that you always have good local people and organisations in the lead. We should provide seed funding and be a catalyst. I don't think it's ever helpful when we try to get in there and do it ourselves like we did in Iraq and Afghanistan. We won't ever prevent all violence, but we can mitigate it and prevent it from spilling over into war.

I think probably we do need a refresh and a new approach and a new focus, given what's happened in Ukraine, and given what's happening in Gaza right now. We need to think in a more creative way than we have in the past, including thinking about working with new partners. It's not just having the traditional Western powers doing more; we need to work with medium-sized states, and think about involving the private sector and organisations like the

Gates Foundation in our planning and our conversations.

**Finding common ground in tackling global issues amid tense and distrustful geopolitical backdrops**

A long time ago, [political theorist] David Mitrany came up with this functional approach, where countries come together for a particular purpose and then when that purpose is over, they disband. My best example of that in



more recent times was in June 2014, when the so-called Islamic State was declared as a caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Mosul. The US brought together a coalition of more than 80 countries and organisations like Interpol to look at how to deal with this threat.

At that time, don't forget, there were 500 people a month travelling to Iraq and Syria to fight from 140 countries around the world. There were attacks all over Europe. So the threat was quite considerable.

Within that coalition we had five or six different groups beyond the military side of the campaign. There was one on foreign fighters, one on terror financing, and one on terror messaging, for example. A number of countries were leading these various subgroups. America was convening and trying to lead but it was not actually running all these committees. And even in these various committees there was a mix. So it would be the UK and Saudi Arabia working on one, and the Netherlands and Jordan on another, for instance.

The benefit of this approach is that you don't need a new building, you don't need to hire new staff, you don't need to worry about bureaucratic stuff. And then when the threat is gone, that coalition doesn't really need to exist in the same way that it did before. Islamic State has been defeated militarily, although it still lives on in many ways, so you can disband the coalition or you can minimise it and integrate it into other work.

### **The prospects of countries working in this more flexible, creative way**

The problem with implementing anything like this is that we have all sorts of competition. So the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries are trying to expand and bring in more countries. You have all sorts of other competing smaller multilateral or international organisations such as the Shanghai Coopera-

tion Organisation. Most of these groups aren't that effective at the moment and it's not entirely clear what's going to shake out at the end of all of this.

But this way of building coalitions around challenges could be a practical way of dealing with the muddling through that's happening right now. The Covid pandemic was an example where we didn't have a coalition. And this is the point I often make about Donald Trump pulling away from America's traditional leadership role – he just got out of the way and he wasn't interested. Any other president – Democratic or Republican – would have pulled countries together, just like Obama did with the Islamic State. Instead, when Covid happened it was just every country for themselves. It was the Swedish model, the Korean model, the Taiwan model. And there was no real attempt by governments to come together to solve it.

### **The role of the UN, whether it is fit for purpose, and the rise of a new world order**

Organisations like the UN were designed for a different era. They were designed by Western countries, the winners of the Second World War, and mostly run by them. That's changing. We're seeing China use all sorts of creative ways to try to control a number of these UN organisations, so they are just not as effective anymore. And we're seeing the Security Council unable to pass resolutions on various conflicts. That's been happening for a while, and of course during the Cold War it wasn't able to do much either. But then there was a short period of time, where we thought, "Oh, it's a post-Cold War order, peace in our time". But the UN isn't really fit for purpose anymore. Its secretary general isn't as much of a great leader as I thought he would be. He seems to spend more time admiring the problem than saying "this is what we're going to do about it, come with me".

### **How trying to do too much can be a pointless exercise**

When I was in the US State Department, I worked on the quadrennial development and diplomacy reviews. It was the first time the non-military side of the house said "we'll have a strategy". But because it was the first time, it kind of looked like a Christmas tree – it had everything on it – and then very little got implemented. Very little of it even made it to the final report, because there are so many battles. For example, where there's one part of the government that does exactly the same as another part, should we get rid of one of them and blend them? No, because they all have their defenders.

### **If governments have had their day**

I sometimes wonder how relevant governments are at all, because there are a lot of people just getting on with things without governments, interacting with people all over the world online, motivating each other and learning from each other online in positive and negative ways. You see cities doing things in creative ways, collaborating with other cities in different countries. So I sometimes wonder how relevant government is anymore. Maybe local government is more relevant to people's lives, but I do sometimes reflect that while parliament or congress have everybody faffing around and arguing, ordinary people are just getting on with their lives and they don't feel like they're touched by government anymore. Yes they pay taxes, and they worry about things like the roads being paved and healthcare, but I do wonder if it's just increasingly less relevant in many people's lives, because most people don't vote.

Many years ago I was working in Somalia, which didn't have a central government for over 20 years. It arguably has one right now, but it's not really a central government; it basically controls the capital and

barely gets outside the capital. So we were having these conversations with Somalis, discussing different options of a decentralised government and they said: "But what do you want a central government to do?" A lot of the things people want a central government to do, you don't need a central government for. Maybe you think about printing currency, but some places have more than one currency in a country, and some countries use both the US dollar and local currencies. A central government might provide security, but you have places that have don't have a military, like Costa Rica, where the local police are providing security. So it is interesting to think about what you actually need a central government to do. What are the minimum things that central government can do? And should everything else be done much more locally?

### **Taking a positive approach in a dangerous world**

I am generally an optimist, even though it's very easy to get pessimistic about the state of the world right now. I think the world is changing in a lot of profound ways that we don't fully understand yet. Some of them aren't so bad. Having the US be the sole superpower isn't really a good thing. The US gets complacent; it doesn't listen and learn enough. The fact that smaller countries are asserting themselves in ways they haven't before is good, because I think the big powers haven't shown others the respect that they should be showing. I think the more we listen to each other and learn from each other the better. There are amazing things we can learn in so many different places. Not all the good ideas come from London or Washington, DC. So being open to listening, rather than bigger powers just being able to bully their way through everything, actually I don't think that's a bad thing. It should be good for the world. ■





**“Not all the good ideas come from London or Washington. So be open to listening”**



# people power

The UK's adversaries won't wait for us to adapt to new threats. A fresh approach is generating excitement across defence, says **Dr Jill Hatcher**, director of strategy, people, change and corporate at DE&S. Interview by **Tevye Markson**

**W**hen Defence Equipment & Support released its four-year strategy in mid-2021, nobody was expecting Russia to invade Ukraine nine months later. As the conflict escalated, top officials at DE&S realised their strategy needed to change.

But they didn't think simply rewriting the strategy was the answer. Instead, DE&S leaders decided to take a new approach.

Since March 2023, the Ministry of Defence's procurement arm has held regular workshops, getting thousands of its people – plus officers in the armed forces, representatives from the wider defence industry and think tanks – involved in redesigning the organisation's operating model, a key part of the strategy implementation.

Dr Jill Hatcher, DE&S's director of strategy, people, change and corporate, is driving forward the reform.

“What I love about what we're doing is the fact that we've genuinely put people at the heart of the change,” Hatcher says. “It hasn't been senior leaders deciding how the new organisation should be. Together, we've been designing the change. And I find that really exciting because it's our people who know what irritates them, what isn't working quite right and how things could be better. So we've been harnessing that. And it's been like cultural change in action because you go into a room, and there's more than 100 people in each workshop, and you have no idea what grade they are, they've just got a badge with their first name on it. Everybody has a voice. We haven't brought hundreds of consultants in to help us; this is genuinely 'by us, for us.'”

With detailed designs for the new operating model drawn up, Hatcher – who is its senior responsible owner – is getting ready to shift towards implementation. But the approach has already “generated genuine excitement across defence,” Hatcher says.

“The whole of defence is now looking at their own operating model, and they've taken the same approach of 'how







**“We haven’t brought hundreds of consultants in to help us; this is genuinely ‘by us for us’”**



can we get everybody in the room?” she says. “So it’s created a real momentum.”

A civil service veteran of more than 20 years and an HR specialist, Hatcher entered the civil service as a fast streamer in 2002, armed with a PhD in chemistry. Her first decade was spent in a variety of defence roles, initially in science-related positions. During her first spell at DE&S, at the organisation’s dawn, she helped to implement the merger of the Defence Procurement Agency with the Defence

portunity to come home,” she says.

Around a year later, DE&S leaders decided a new strategy was needed. Hatcher worked on it alongside the wider executive committee and the then-director of strategy and corporate operations, Jim Higham, who retired upon its completion in June 2023. Hatcher then took on responsibility for implementing the strategy in the expanded role she holds today.

“People joke that as soon as you produce a strategy, you need another one.

being “prepared for tomorrow because the enemy won’t rest”, and acknowledging “that we can’t do that alone”.

To keep up with the UK’s adversaries, it says DE&S must significantly improve the way it operates by reducing duplication, friction and delays, while driving greater pace.

UK defence procurement has regularly come in for criticism for being too ponderous, and the need for speed has only become more acute. “Our enemies



Logistics Agency. She began to specialise in HR, rising up the ranks of the profession in an eight-year spell outside of defence. This included spells at the Cabinet Office, HM Treasury, the Department for Transport and the Home Office, where she developed a people strategy for 35,000 officials.

Hatcher returned to DE&S in September 2021 as HR director, a few months after the organisation published its 2021-25 strategy. This was an “op-

Because nothing ever stays the same,” Hatcher says. “But of course we had the really horrible events of Russia invading Ukraine, which made a fundamental difference. We were back in state-on-state war after a period of relative stability. So that required us to think, are we focusing our energies on the right things?”

The strategy – which was made public in September 2023 – talks about delivering what armed forces “need today”,

aren’t resting, they’re getting faster,” Hatcher says. “We ultimately always need to strive to be better, to be faster.”

The organisation’s aspirations include reducing the time it takes to approve and place its contracts by up to 50%.

Hatcher says she is “really confident” that the new operating model will enable DE&S to keep up with its adversaries, because it is underpinned by mechanisms devised by the agency’s own people. One



of these mechanisms is “the gateway” – a single access point or “front door” – for DE&S’s partners to engage with the agency, which will be the first part of the operating model to be implemented.

Hatcher explains: “At the moment, for example, our armed forces will say: ‘I want a tank.’ In the future, the gateway will work with the armed forces to say: ‘What effect do you want to achieve?’ And then the gateway will work with industry, with allies, to understand the threat picture. They’ll know how much money we’ve got, and our deadline, and they’ll generate options that a decision can then be taken on. So the answer might not be a tank,” Hatcher says. “It’ll be: ‘OK, if you want to achieve that and you’ve got that amount of money and you need it by then, here’s your options.’ By taking that approach, we’ll be able to make better-informed decisions which will mean we can deliver reliably and consistently for our armed forces.”

Another innovation in the strategy is the introduction of “sprints”. These are high-tempo, focused periods of activity that bring together high-performing, multidisciplinary teams of experts to solve problems and deliver specific outcomes. This

**“You can have a representative organisation but if it is not inclusive that won’t last – everybody will just leave because it’s not a very nice place to be”**

way of working is based on so-called Agile methodology – a project-management practice that involves breaking the project into phases and which emphasises continuous collaboration and improvement.

“You might feel like you’ve got a big problem,” Hatcher explains. “But actually, if you break it down into chunks of six weeks, it generates an energy and a momentum and can feel quite empowering.”

**T**alking of big problems, DE&S has hit the headlines repeatedly in the last few years over its troubled Ajax armoured vehicle programme. The decade-long procurement project has been beset by delays and health and safety issues, although it has recently been revived.

The *Ajax Lessons Learned Review*, conducted by Clive Sheldon KC and published last summer, found “sys-

temic and institutional” issues.

“First of all, I’m really pleased that Ajax is back on track,” Hatcher says when asked how lessons from the programme have influenced the new strategy. “But you’re absolutely right about taking the lessons from when things haven’t gone to plan.

“A lot of work has been done to implement the Sheldon recommendations, but we’ve also taken those recommendations and ensured that they were holistically fed into the strategy.”

The Sheldon review found a “marked failure” by officials to escalate information about problems in a clear and timely way, particularly when officers trialling the vehicles experienced hearing loss and other injuries, with some reportedly left with permanent damage. Sheldon said communication failures were also caused by senior officials’ lack of appreciation of diverse and contrary voices, especially from those working on the “shopfloor”, who often had a better understanding of what was going on.

“The approach we’re taking to the operating model is that everybody’s got an equal voice,” Hatcher says. “It’s about creating a space where our people can really speak up, share their views and have their talents harnessed.”

This includes encouraging people to escalate concerns, but also asking simple questions like, “What is everyone worried about? What does everybody think about this? What might I have missed?” she says.

At the time of writing, DE&S’s parent organisation, the Ministry of Defence, is embroiled in a crisis over toxic sexual behaviour, with unions calling for an investigation after 60 senior women at the MoD wrote a letter to permanent secretary David Williams alleging sexual assault, harassment and abuse in the department.

CSW asks Hatcher how DE&S has responded to the reports. She says it is “awful that it has happened”.

“It gives me great pause because no one should ever be made to feel unsafe. It comes back to my connection to the mission, about protecting the nation, helping it prosper – our mission is to make people feel safe.”

But she says she is “pleased to see the way in which leaders within the organisation have stood up and said that that is not acceptable”.

“They’ve been categorical. And I think role modelling what is acceptable

and not acceptable is really important in these sorts of scenarios, as well as creating a psychologically safe space for people to raise a concern when they have it.”

The letter to the permanent secretary refers to issues at the department and not DE&S itself, but Hatcher says it is “only right and proper that when something like this happens, within defence or indeed anywhere, that you look at yourselves and think, could that be happening here? What do we need to do about it?”

“We certainly need to make sure it’s very clear that that is not acceptable nor tolerable, and give people the reassurance that they can speak up,” she adds.

For Hatcher, diversity and inclusion are key to getting this right. “They are two different but mutually reinforcing things,” she says. “We certainly are getting better slowly within Defence, Equipment & Support in terms of our representation levels. But you need to have an inclusive environment for people to want to stay. You can have a representative organisation but if it is not inclusive that won’t last – everybody will just leave because it’s not a very nice place to be.”

**W**hile there are things to work on, Hatcher says she loves working in defence, and DE&S is a “fantastic place to work”.

She adds: “The mission is so powerful, protecting our nation and helping it prosper, and then DE&S’s mission is about giving our armed forces the edge to enable that to happen. I have such a personal affinity to that. And I think that is a really powerful attraction mechanism.”

While strategy is a big part of Hatcher’s role, her focus on people shines through: during our conversation, Hatcher mentions putting “people at the heart” of the organisation eight times.

Her efforts and those of her teams were recognised last year, with DE&S earning accreditation from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development for its “exceptional” commitment to nurturing its workforce. Having already helped the Home Office to gain the certification, Hatcher became the first HR director to win the status for two organisations.

While her job title may lead with strategy, Hatcher’s workforce-focused approach suggests it’s the “people” part of her role that drives her the most.

“Everybody’s heard the statement ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’, haven’t they? But it is true, and we have deliberately placed our people at the heart of change at DE&S,” Hatcher says. ■

# PROFESSIONS PRIMER

In this series, CSW provides a guide to professions and functions across the civil service. Here we take a look at what property professionals do, and how they work with other parts of government

## PROPERTY

**Who are they?** The government property function is made up of around 7,500 civil servants across government. Government property professionals work on the UK's largest estate, which covers around 2% of the land area of the UK, is worth more than £500bn, and costs more than £20bn a year to run.

**What do they do?** The two most common jobs are surveyors, who value-check properties, and facilities management, who do work such as ensuring pumps are working, Lynda Rawsthorne, who heads up the profession, says. Other roles include construction, sustainability, planning, design, and health and safety.

**Where can they be found?** "In every department and every government building," Rawsthorne says.

**What is a typical career path like?** They come in "through all sorts of different routes", with some studying property-related fields and others "coming to it later in life", Rawsthorne says.

Some popular routes into the profession include the Property Fast Stream, apprenticeships, and the property leadership programme at Henley Business School.

**Which professions do they work most closely with?**

Property professionals work most closely with the operational delivery and project management professions because they work on a lot of major infrastructure projects, Rawsthorne says. But they collaborate with all kinds of civil servants. "We interact with everybody; if there was a Venn diagram we'd be right in the middle."



Lynda Rawsthorne

**What are they most likely to say?** "What I always hear people say is, 'There's an opportunity here,'" Rawsthorne says. For Raj Singh, who leads prison-building programmes at the Ministry of Justice, "no" is a word she is used to saying. "Because people want or be-

lieve that they can implement changes" but building prisons is a "huge beast", she says. "It's like a huge freight train... so there are many conversations where you have to explain why certain things are not possible." Another one is "can you put that in an email," she says.



"I'm very much for a spending audit trail. We're spending sh-edloads of public-purse money here. These are mega projects. So we have a responsibility to make sure that we can account for everything that we're doing," she adds. For Mark Chivers, the government chief property officer, a favourite phrase is "follow the money".

**How is the profession being developed?** Created in 2010, the government property profession was originally targeted at just those directly involved in the ongoing management of property portfolios for their particular organisation, but has since expanded greatly. Rawsthorne says it is "really

focused" on becoming more professional, more commercial, and having access to higher quality data. It has set a target of 90% of its core membership having professional accreditation and Rawsthorne says things are "already moving in the right direction".

"The reason for that is that with professional accreditation, you have a commitment to continuous professional development," she says. It also expands the function's credibility, she adds. The function wants to ensure its professionals have the skills to be able to give advice on adapting offices post-Covid. "We expect our professional people to be able to lead and help others un-

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**"Post-Covid, you'll find that a lot of our offices don't look like they did before. That isn't by accident"**  
**Lynda Rawsthorne, head of the Government Property Profession**



## VIEW FROM THE TOP

### MARK CHIVERS GOVERNMENT CHIEF PROPERTY OFFICER

A relative newcomer to the civil service, Mark Chivers joined as government chief property officer two years ago after a 26-year career at Boots, where he managed its estate of around 3,000 shops, offices and warehouses. "I thought that the Boots estate was a really big estate, which it is in comparison to lots of estates. And then you come into government and the estate is 140,000 buildings worth £180bn - and that's before you include the local authority assets."

Chivers is government's chief adviser on property and leads the Office of Government Property in the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for the strategy for the whole government estate, from hospitals to courts to offices. However, the OGP does not look after the buildings - this is done by officials

across the property profession within departments and arm's-length bodies. Instead, the OGP sits in the centre, engaging, encouraging, and motivating the 7,000 professionals who make up the property function.

Curiosity is the key skill Chivers says is needed to do his job well. "I'm eternally curious, always trying to understand how something works and how to make it work better."

One of the biggest challenges is getting all the different property estates teams across government to move together. One way the OGP has tried to do this is through One Public Estate, a 10-year-old programme that brings partners together in one place to kickstart regeneration and transform public service delivery. More recently, the OGP has



launched place pilots - which Chivers describes as putting One Public Estate "on steroids".

Chivers says he ultimately would "love" for his legacy to be "that, in some small way, I have optimised the public estate".

# FRONTLINE VIEW

## RAJ SINGH PRINCIPAL PROJECT SPONSOR, PRISON INFRASTRUCTURE TEAM, MOJ

“Property really is the place to be,” says Raj Singh, who got an OBE in this year’s New Year Honours for her work leading the construction of the Ministry of Justice’s new prison builds. Singh is responsible for cost and quality of new-build prisons, as well as the time taken, and has worked on the construction of three prisons so far. She started her career as a psychometrician, before moving to a job in the Employment Tribunal service, followed by the Home Office and now the MoJ. But she says she has always been interested in facilities management and estates issues. “I’m happier walking around B&Q than I am walking around a handbag shop, put it that way,” she jokes.

The ability to embrace change; resilience; being able to adapt your style to suit the needs of your audience and the desire to succeed are some of the key skills needed in the profession, Singh says. She believes property has an erroneous reputation. “It’s not

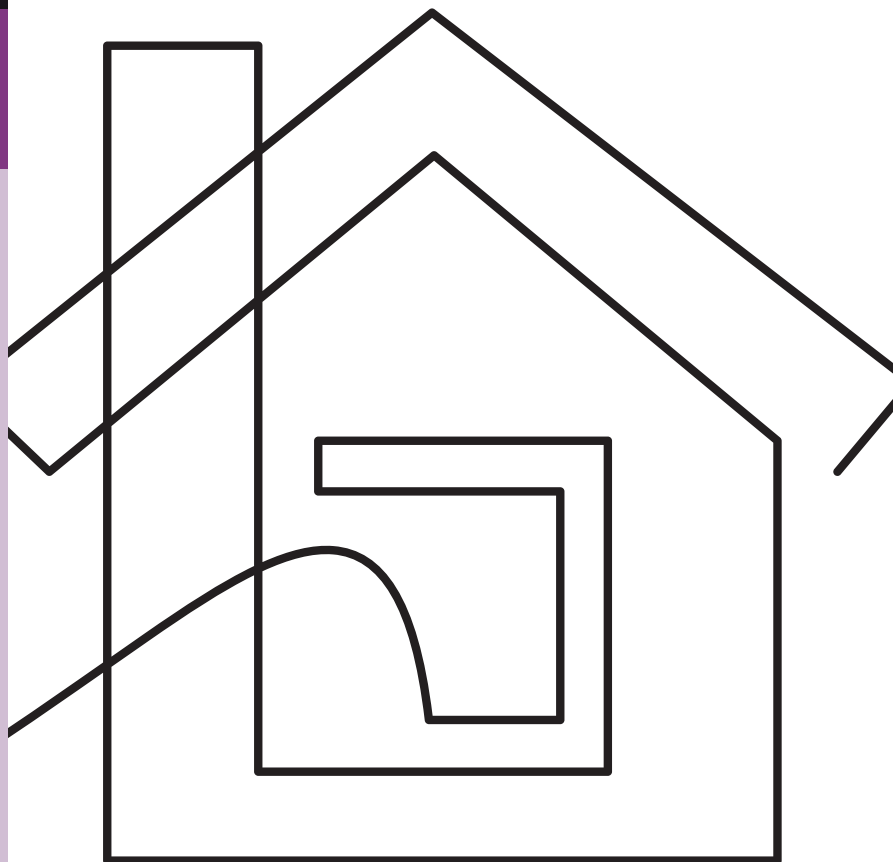
what it used to be. We do a lot of talks in schools... people still believe that working on a construction site is about getting really filthy dirty and carrying bricks. Some of it is, but a lot of it is now digital.

“We are such an important enabler that makes thousands of people able to do their job. What can be more rewarding than that? You’re leaving a lasting legacy. And every day’s a school day, you just learn so much.”

Receiving an OBE in recognition for her work was an “out of this orbit” moment, Singh says. “I was like, ‘is this a wind-up?’. That is just outstanding, to be recognised in that way.” However, she believes more needs to be done to attract women to the profession. “I still go to a lot of meetings where I’m surrounded by men. It absolutely is changing. But I do think we need to look at more opportunities for women to grow within this particular field.”

“It’s just an awesome environment to be in,” Singh says. “I don’t think people really see property as sexy. But I really think it’s something we should be promoting much more across the civil service.”

She also would like to see more Asian women in the profession. “I don’t think there’s enough Asian women because it’s not seen as an acceptable career. It’s still very much seen as you need to be in a medical profession. If you said to your parents, even in this day and age, that you want to be in construction, it still would be frowned upon.”



**“I still go to a lot of meetings where I’m surrounded by men. Women need more opportunities to grow in this field” Raj Singh, MoJ**

derstand what they need from their property,” Rawsthorne says. “As we’ve come back into the office post-Covid, you’ll find that a lot of our offices don’t look like they did before and that isn’t by accident.”

**What are their priorities at the moment?** One of the key priorities in the profession at the moment is using co-location to drive growth by releasing properties that are inappropriate for government use to be used for residential development, Rawsthorne says.

The Places for Growth programme, which seeks to relocate 22,000 civil service roles out of London, is another big priority. The 2030 target was pushed forward to 2027 in

December after the number of jobs moved reached the 16,000 mark just three years in. “It’s really important to us that we have people who understand what’s happening in their areas, and why,” Rawsthorne says. “I’ve had roles which have been focused on, for example, Manchester, being based from London,” she adds.

Another key priority is driving forward a smaller, better and greener public estate, one of the three missions in the function’s property strategy. “We’ve got over 140,000 buildings, valued at over £180bn with annual running costs of £22bn. If we can make savings from that and ensure that people have the right environment, that has to be the right thing to do.” ■





# Charting a smoke-free future

**Duncan Cunningham**, External Affairs Director for the UK & Ireland at Philip Morris International, advocates for science-backed solutions to help adult smokers switch to less harmful alternatives, and calls for collaboration with government to accelerate the transition to a smoke-free nation



**Duncan Cunningham**  
External Affairs Director  
for the UK & Ireland at  
Philip Morris International

**W**hen I took on this role just over a year ago, I was worried that the UK had run out of ideas on how to help the 6.4 million<sup>1</sup> adult smokers leave cigarettes behind. What a difference a year makes. Finally, policymakers, media and the rest of civil society are talking about how to tackle the problem of cigarettes.

You might be asking why Philip Morris International (PMI) has a voice in this national conversation? My answer is very simple: how can we expect to make any real change to behaviours and choices without involving manufacturers like PMI?

We remain the only global tobacco company to have publicly committed to phasing out cigarettes. We support the government's efforts to create a smoke-free nation by its stated aim of 2030. But as it stands, this target will be missed if we do not work together.

This is the moment for the government to be more ambitious and focus on delivering a smoke-free future by using all the science available to encourage adult smokers to abandon cigarettes. A smoke-free future by 2030 will only be achieved by leveraging the potential of the full range of better alternatives and through appropriate regulation.

Firstly, we must work together to ensure that smokers, who do not quit, continue to have access to the full range of less harmful smoke-free alternatives. Vaping has made the UK a world leader in reducing smoking rates, however, this trend is slowing. Research shows that in 2023, whilst 73% of current adult smokers in Great Britain reported having tried vaping, it clearly hasn't worked for all of them as there remain 6.4 million adult smokers.<sup>2</sup>

We are clear that smoke-free products exist to help adult smokers find a better alternative to cigarettes. We agree that these products are not for minors and should never end up in their hands. It is without doubt that disposable vapes with youth-appealing flavours, named, and marketed irresponsibly, have no role to play in the government's plans to achieve a smoke-free society, and it is right that the government is taking action to tackle disposable vapes.

We all agree that securing a better future for the next generation is the right thing to do. We want to work with government to ensure that adult smokers can make informed choices as we progress towards our shared goal of a smoke-free future.



**PHILIP MORRIS  
INTERNATIONAL**

1. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/adultsmokinghabitsingreatbritain/2022>

2. ASH Smokefree GB Adult Surveys 2014-2023. Unweighted base: Adult current smokers (2014-2023)









# THE PEOPLE-REACHER

**Fiona Ryland**, the  
civil service chief  
people officer, meets

**Jess Bowie** and  
**Tevye Markson** to  
talk AI innovations,  
moving jobs out  
of London and the  
role of the centre.

Photography by  
Louise Haywood-  
Schiefer





**A**s dawn broke over Whitehall, the air thick with anticipation and bureaucracy, the civil service's chief people officer, Fiona "CPO" Ryland, walked into her office at 1 Horse Guards Road with the determined stride of a seasoned warrior. Her piercing gaze swept over the bustling hive of activity, taking in every subtle nuance and hidden agenda with the precision of a detective...

At least, that's how Ryland's life might look if it had been written by Lee Child. There are, one imagines, fewer deadly games of cat and mouse in the civil service than in the pile of Jack Reacher novels that Ryland is working her way through at home. There's also rather more jargon. It's hard to imagine Child's roaming ex-military policeman being asked to write a submission.

It was, in fact, the word "submission" – along with some other choice bits of Whitehallelse – that had Ryland scratching her head when she arrived in the civil service 18 months ago. Coming in from the outside, with a series of senior leadership roles in business and higher education under her belt, it took Ryland a while to decipher the unique language of the civil service. A lot of other things, though, were familiar. "I actually think one of the biggest lessons I've learned is that the challenges and opportunities around the people agenda are pretty consistent wherever you are," she says.

Regardless of the sector, the key factor is having the right people with the right skills to deliver effectively, she says. "And actually that's why I love working in HR, because you feel at the heart of any organisational strategy."

Ryland grew up in East London, where her dad regularly took her to Leyton Orient games at the weekend. In retrospect, she thinks this was probably just to give her mum a break, but it engendered a lifelong love of football. She now divides her time between her home in the Chilterns and a small flat in London. She doesn't make it to see the Orient as much as she'd like. And she certainly wouldn't call following them a relaxing hobby, she says with a laugh.

Like many who come into the civil service from elsewhere, Ryland says she was struck by the quality, creativity and resilience of its people. The other thing she noticed, however, was that some of the processes seemed to lag behind the private sector and "didn't support people as well as they should". Among these were government's long and cumbersome recruitment procedures.

In her entry for CSW's annual perm secs roundup in December, Ryland men-

tioned how the civil service has begun using robotic automation in background checks to streamline recruitment, which has not only increased speed by 70% but has also improved accuracy. When asked today what innovations are in the works for the HR function in 2024, Ryland says her team is now looking at other ways of using automation in recruitment, this time by using generative AI.

"We're developing a tool that can help managers write job descriptions because that is quite time consuming and, in terms of making sure you get the right people applying for positions, it really matters," she says. "We're also looking at whether generative AI has a role in helping line managers shortlist, but I think that's where we really need to pilot because there is a lot of concern about whether that could introduce unintended bias. I think if you do it well, it doesn't."

As this burgeoning technology grows in influence across government, there is naturally concern among officials that the robots might be coming for their jobs. Ryland believes automation and AI will mostly have an impact on "some of many people's roles" rather than replacing "whole roles".

However, given ministers are talking about slashing 66,000 government jobs – an aim which forms part of Ryland's recently-launched Civil Service People Plan – isn't it likely AI will drive some of those cuts?

"I don't think there is a cliff edge," she says. "I think we will start to work alongside [Microsoft] Copilot tools,

automation, generative AI, which is why it's really important that we think about what future skills everybody in the workplace needs. And that will free up people's time to focus on moving up the value chain. But that is a process that happens over time. So I think the work we're doing now is making sure that we've got the right training in place and the right workforce planning."

#### Existential ease

Ryland is poised, friendly and – without straying into Lee Child language again – sharp as a tack. So it feels cruel to ask: what is the point of her role? While everyone talks about "the civil service", in reality it is hundreds of different organisations, to which all the key HR decisions are delegated. It's all well and good for the Cabinet Of-

fice to put out best practice strategies, but how will Ryland make sure they are implemented? Take the aforementioned People Plan, published in January. Some Whitehall watchers, including very sympathetic ones, worry that it will disappear without a trace.

Ryland receives the existential question of what she's there for with good grace, saying that she and her team do in fact have a few different roles across the HR function. And one of these roles is indeed to develop model guidance and policies. "Some departments don't have much HR resource, so that's very helpful for them," Ryland points out.

"We also run some services across the civil service where it makes sense to do that once and do it well," she says. "For example, a lot of the Fast Stream activity: although departments manage the fast streamers, a lot of attraction, recruitment and induction is done from the centre. Pensions are another example. And then there's the matter of how we develop the HR function itself, by thinking about what capabilities HR people need going forward. That's something we're all concerned with, and that's how I see my role supporting departments. I make sure I have time with HR directors across government to think through the common challenges we're all grappling with, and then work in a really collaborative way to make sure that what we're doing still fits their needs."

For Ryland, the People Plan is a powerful example of that collaborative working. It came into being after lots of consultation with departments, jobcentres, HMRC staff, permanent secretaries and so on. As

for it disappearing without a trace, Ryland is optimistic this won't happen.

"I am really proud of the People Plan, because I think if we deliver what's in there – things like making recruitment better, along with addressing some of the challenges we've got around reward and improving the employee experience – it will make a really big difference to what the civil service delivers for our citizens, but also to civil servants' own experience of the workplace. And I do think it's achievable, because that's how we've built it. We've got measures in place: the commitments are constructed in such a way that we'll know whether we have delivered it or not. I'm confident we will."

So would an HR director at HMRC or DWP say, "Okay, the People Plan is out now. We're going to change what we're

**"We're developing a tool that can help managers write job descriptions and also looking at whether generative AI has a role in helping them shortlist"**





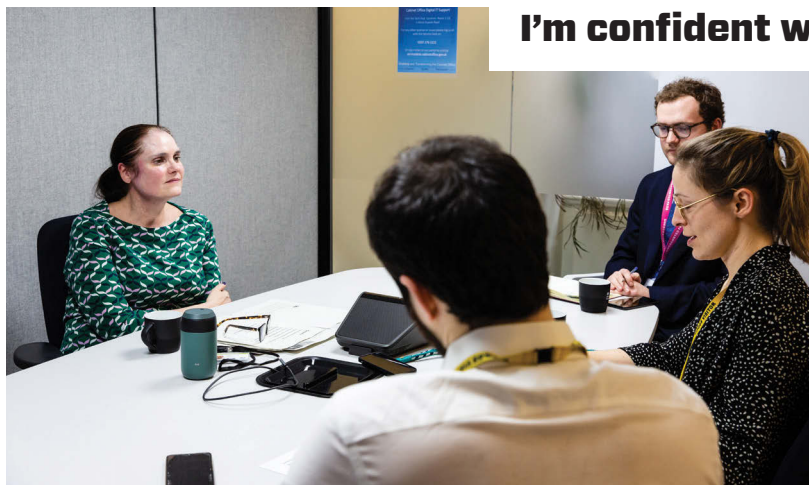


doing”? CSW points out that in the same issue in which Ryland’s interview will appear, we have also spoken to Defence Equipment & Support’s Jill Hatcher (see p.36) who waxes lyrical about that organisation’s own, very specific people plan. How does that tie in with the central one?

“Departments are starting to use the framework of the People Plan, building in the pieces that are relevant to them and then adding on the parts that are specific to that particular department,” she says. “Departments are in different places with their people plans. So as they’re refreshing and reviewing them, they’re building in the structure of this People Plan. But for sure, there’ll be other things that you want to achieve for your department because there are specific challenges or opportunities depending on where you are.”

### Remuneration and relocation

Pay in the civil service is both a delegated matter and something of universal concern, as the wave of strikes last summer demonstrated. Industrial action eventually came to an end after ministers made



several concessions, including offering a £1,500 cost-of-living payment, agreeing a new settlement for fast streamers and accepting the Senior Salaries Review Body’s recommendations in full.

While agreements around pay and strikes are officially between unions and departments, the centre does play a coordinating role. When asked about this, Ryland first reaffirms the importance of departments in the process and then says the central team collates and provides evidence which informs the talks. Insiders close to the process note that the role Ryland’s team played was more important than simply offering evidence, but it’s clear she’s reluctant to take too much credit.

Despite the successes of last summer, the issue of pay is not going anywhere soon.

Longstanding concerns include a lack of capability-based pay progression, pay rises falling behind inflation every year, and low pay at the junior grades.

The People Plan states that the government will publish a new pay and reward strategy this year with the aim of delivering a more coherent, flexible and individualised system by 2030. “I think the work that we need to do here is to understand the challenges that we have with pay at the moment, collect the evidence base for that, and then develop a strategy which seeks to address those challenges,” she says. “So, for example, does the lack of pay progression contribute to people moving on earlier than they otherwise would have?”

While 2030 is some way away, Ryland says she does not see a “quick fix”. “I think we will have a good understanding of the

**“I do think the People Plan is achievable. The commitments are constructed in such a way that we’ll know whether we have delivered it or not. I’m confident we will”**

challenges, the evidence and the solutions this year, but this is something that we’ll be implementing over a period of time.”

Progress on pay may be a marathon not a

sprint, but one reform agenda which is moving faster than initially planned is Places for Growth. The programme has moved more than 16,000 jobs outside of London in its first four years – although this includes newly created roles rather than just London jobs moving away from the capital, Ryland confirms.

With the programme way ahead of schedule in meeting the overall goal of relocating 22,000 jobs by 2030, the government has pushed the target date forward to 2027.

Reform programmes are notoriously difficult to get going, and so this progress is worthy of praise. But the scheme is about much more than numbers. It aims to create a more inclusive approach to working, build better career pathways for civil servants across the whole of the

UK, and open the door to new talent and experiences. This in turn should enrich policymaking and help the government to connect with the communities it serves.

Commentators have raised concerns about whether the programme will meet these objectives. The Institute for Government, for example, has warned that “dishing out roles across the country to hit a target, without thinking carefully about where they are located or what is necessary for them to be successful, will not end well”. Another related concern is whether the government is embedding lessons learned so far – such as the success story of the Darlington Economic Campus – into future schemes.

Ryland is not worried. She explains that the PfG team is supporting departments with analysis of the labour markets in different locations and is, for example, creating a lot of roles in Manchester and the northwest based around digital, data and cyber security. But she adds that government could go further and make more of the opportunity to co-locate roles which are in a similar “skills family”.

“The Darlington Economic campus is a great example of this.

It means that we can go and talk to people and say, ‘We’ve got these kinds of jobs in this kind of area.’ We can build external talent pipelines, but we can also help people build their careers internally because they’ll know there’s going to be a good density of those types of jobs.”

### Making connections

Ryland studied chemical engineering at Bath and later got a BSc in psychology from the Open University. When asked which insight from that second degree she uses most in her working life, she says it’s trying to understand the motivation that lies beneath people’s behaviour.

“Because behaviour is what we can see. We can’t see motivation. So I think we make a lot of assumptions about people’s motivation based on their behaviour. And I always like to think to myself, ‘Well, why might someone be behaving in that way? And how can I explore that with them so that I don’t get annoyed about that behaviour?’”

It’s been said of Jack Reacher that he has a unique ability to connect with people in need in any community he enters. He’s also known for methodically solving problems by patiently sifting through seemingly inconsequential minutiae. If you ask CSW, that sounds rather like being the civil service’s most senior HR professional. Perhaps he and Ryland aren’t so different after all... ■









# STITCH IN TIME

Prevention is an attractive and perennial theme in public policy, but good intentions rarely translate into successful action. In the run-up to the election, a new consensus around prevention is emerging. Could it be different this time? **Vivienne Russell** reports

**W**ait long enough, and everything comes back into fashion. Whether it's flares, fondue or Fleetwood Mac, what once seemed passé could return to the cutting-edge of cool before you can say fidget spinner.

In public policy, too, there are ideas that come around again and again. For example, there's prevention – or intervening early, nipping problems in the bud, nudging citizens towards good and healthy choices. However you describe it, this concept has regularly been talked of as the key to reliev-

ing pressure on over-stretched and under-funded public services and directing us to a more stable and sustainable social compact.

“Prevention is an idea that has its moment every few years – ever since the post-war period,” says Paul Cairney, professor of politics and public policy at the University of Stirling and co-author of the book *Why isn't Government Policy more Preventive?* “It is a phrase that just keeps popping up for good reasons whenever any crisis arises.”

An emphasis on prevention is also politically attractive, appealing to parties on both the right and left. Preventative policy promises reductions in demand for public services, and therefore costs, and so sits well with fiscal conservatives, while the promise of improved life chances ap-

peals to those seeking more radical social transformation and equality of outcome.

Ben Glover, head of social policy at the think tank Demos, says the discussion this time is different as it covers not just why preventative work is good but also why it hasn't happened in the past.

“There's a kind of sophistication to the debate at the moment, which is quite refreshing and relates a lot to wider public service reform conversations such as the need to make public services more relational and more integrated.”

One of the problems for policymakers is how to scale preventative policy across the wider public sector and fund it at a time when budgets are under immense strain. Politicians, of course, are always on the lookout for appealing solutions that deliver quick wins. Preventative approaches need time, long-term evaluation and follow up, running counter to short-term electoral cycles. No one is going to wait 30 years for a policy payoff, Cairney points out.

There is also, Glover says, a need for some honesty about the fairly hefty cost



implications of taking a preventative approach. An unwillingness to be honest about trade-offs and downsides can hold policy agendas back, he argues.

“This has been a problem with prevention. It’s sometimes sold as a policy we can just shift money around [to pay for]. We need to invest more in universal and preventative services, but for the foreseeable future we’re going to need to staff acute services. So if you want to do this stuff it’s not going to come particularly cheaply.”

Cairney agrees that there has in the past been an unwillingness to be honest about costs of prevention. He points out that money set aside to fund preventative activity is often diverted to acute services when a crisis arises.

“People like the word ‘prevention’ but they don’t really know what they mean by it,” he adds.

“It’s an idiom that is ingrained – prevention is better than cure. Once governments realise what it means or how to make sense of it, that then presents them with problems about how that fits in with what they already do. And they tend not to have the willingness or capacity to do it properly.”

One of Demos’s big ideas to make this kind of policy more practical and achievable is the creation of a third category of public spending: Preventive Departmental Expenditure Limits, or PDEL, to sit alongside Revenue (RDEL) and Capital (CDEL). Altering the central government accounting framework in this way puts in place some ring-fencing and accountability around public spending for preventative measures, breaks the addiction to short-term fixes and sends an important signal about government priorities.

“Preventative spending has the greatest potential to deliver transformative results that can not only deliver the highest levels of impact but also make the greatest savings to the exchequer. However, we need to create a system of public spending decision-making that incentivises and supports these long-term investments,” Demos’s *Revenue Capital Prevention* paper, published with the Health Foundation, argues.

It draws an interesting parallel with the creation of capital spending as a category in 1998, which reflected the then-government’s priority of repairing the public realm, saying “PDEL is a simple, but powerful, idea that can lay the platform for reform of public services, bringing them into the 21st century.”

The involvement of the Health Foundation reflects the importance of prevention to health policy. The sector is in many ways the poster child for preventative policy and the most obvious place to look to

see some good examples in action. From vaccination to smoking cessation interventions, preventative approaches have been shown to have profoundly beneficial outcomes for individuals and society.

Yet this sector still has work to do. In her review of integrated care systems (ICSs), published in April last year, former Labour health secretary Patricia Hewitt made the case that the NHS spends too much of its resources on treating acute illness and injury and not enough on prevention and wellbeing.

The go-to analogy is a river. Let health problems fester too long, drift too far downstream, and they become more difficult and expensive to deal with. Shift intervention upstream, then activity is cheaper and outcomes are better.

“Shifting the focus [of health activity] upstream is essential for improving population health and reducing pressure on our health and care system,” Hewitt wrote. “This will require a shift in resources – the share of total NHS budgets at ICS level going towards prevention should be increased by at least 1% over the next five years.”

Not all of what influences health outcomes is in the control of the NHS, of course. Wider quality-of-life factors such as housing, employment and access to green space all influence health. At the other end of the public-spending system, on the local authority front line, research is under way to look further upstream than Hewitt could.

Understanding investment in these social determinants of health is the focus of a two-year project being run by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and the Health Foundation, which launched late last year.

**“If you want to set a budget, you need to know how much you’re currently spending. And that’s the one part of the equation that we don’t have”**  
**Eleanor Roy, CIPFA**

Eleanor Roy, health and integration policy manager at CIPFA, welcomes what she describes as the emerging movement around preventative policy. The ideas being put forward are sensible, she says, and “it’s really hard to disagree with the logic”.

But she adds: “If we want to protect spending on prevention, or rebalance [away from] being reactive [towards] preventative spending, then we need to understand how much we are currently spending.

“To me, that’s a basic public financial-management question. If you want to set a budget, you need to know how much you’re currently spending. And that’s the one

part of the equation that we don’t have.”

Answering that question is the challenge CIPFA and the Health Foundation have set themselves. They will be working with a number of partner local authorities to track spending patterns on what might be called preventative activity, to help councils arrive at a better understanding of what they are doing now.

The researchers’ hope is that a model for tracking and evaluating preventative spending through financial data will be defined and then be applicable to other parts of the public sector. Another outcome of the project may be recommendations for changes to local government financial reporting requirements that seek to classify spending in new ways that better reflect preventative activity.

Cairney agrees that some additional financial reporting to track prevention is “essential”, although he suggests this should be layered on top of current reporting regimes, rather than replacing them. He highlights the conundrum between long-term, cross-party ambitions that enjoy widespread approval and short-term politics and performance management.

“The Scottish Government introduced [long-term targets] but also still contested elections based on short-termism. It’s relatively simple to set up long-term measures of success, but it’s not easy to incorporate or to connect them to short-term performance-management measures.”

Looking to the election, Cairney also points out that governments don’t rise and fall on how well they’re doing on preventative policy, especially at a time when hospitals and schools are failing, and if preventative policy is to enjoy political

support it needs to be framed in a way the electorate can understand and get behind.

At Demos, Glover observes that both parties are talking about prevention in different ways, but it is unlikely to feature as a major plank of manifestos or as part of the political conversation around the election.

“The politics of this is potentially hard,” he says. “Politicians always have to have a particular message and way of engaging with the public. But under the bonnet, more can often be done.”

With some practical ideas underpinning it, maybe this time prevention won’t slip out of fashion. ■

# REPORT IN A STORM

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

## HS2 BAD

HS2 and Euston

**Who?** Public Accounts Committee

**When?** February 2024

**Key quote** “Here we are after over a decade of our warnings on HS2’s management and spiralling costs – locked into the costly completion of a curtailed rump of a project”

**In brief** The PM’s decision to axe phase two of HS2, scrapping extensions to Manchester and the East Midlands, left watchdog MPs “more concerned than ever before” for the multi-billion-pound infrastructure project. Reduced to connecting London with Birmingham, plus a link to the West Coast Main Line, HS2 now represents “very poor value for money for the taxpayer”, they said. They said DfT and its wholly owned project-delivery

company HS2 Ltd did not yet know what the impact of the cancellation of HS2’s northern phases would be, nor how the project would need to adapt to be delivered successfully.

### Key recommendations

- DfT should set out in its revised business case for HS2: how it has sought to maximise benefits from phase one, what benefits will be delivered, and how success will be measured.
- DfT and HS2 Ltd should explain how they will bring overruns and delays “under acceptable and properly accountable control”.
- DfT should explain how it will report and update the list of projects by region that will be funded by money redirected to Network North, their timescales, and how it will ensure value for money. ■

## FRAUD-LOOKING

Tackling fraud and protecting propriety in government spending during an emergency

**Who?** National Audit Office

**When?** February 2024

**Key quote** “By the time an emergency has started, it is usually too late to take all the steps needed”

**In brief** Government must improve how it deals with fraud in emergency situations to protect taxpayers’ money, the National Audit Office said in a report drawing on lessons from the height of the Covid pandemic. The NAO called for more “flexible” counter-fraud capability that can be deployed quickly in an emergency, pointing to its earlier discovery that the amount of fraud in departments nearly quadrupled after the emergence of Covid. The report calls for robust

planning now to lay the groundwork for future crises.

### Key recommendations

- The Public Sector Fraud Authority should come up with a plan so that in an emergency, it can lay out counter-fraud priorities and identify people with the right skills.
- The PSFA should ensure there are “strong bonds” across the government counter-fraud profession to enable it to form effective new teams in an emergency, and that it can influence their deployment
- Government should be “clear on governance and rules” to enable public bodies to streamline their decision-making and governance processes in ways that “allow for robust oversight and are within normal public spending rules.” ■



# TIPPING POINT

Financial distress in local authorities

**Who?** Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

**When?** January 2024

**Key quote** “Local authorities across the country are facing a tipping point with a systemic issue of insufficient funding to meet their statutory duties”

**In brief** Councils in England are facing a £4bn funding gap for 2024-25 despite finance packages set out by ministers worth hundreds of millions of pounds in recent weeks, MPs warned. They said a failure on the part of ministers to fix the situation will put essential services at “severe risk” and raise the prospect of more authorities declaring effective bankruptcy. The report follows eight authorities making so-called Section 114 declarations over the state of their finances, typically indicating they are unable to balance their books. The MPs said issuing a Section 114 notice under the Local Government Finance Act was previously seen as a response

to a specific local problem, but one in five English councils are now bracing for the prospect in the coming months. Increased cost pressures from children’s and adults’ social care, services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and services for homeless people were principal drivers for the predicament faced by councils. Local authorities had seen “significant reductions in their spending power” that coincided with increased demand for services and inflationary pressure in the wider economy.

**Key recommendations**

- The government must use the local government financial settlement to help bridge the £4bn funding gap for 2024-25
- The next government should embark on a programme of reform for council finances to put them on a “sustainable footing”, particularly in relation to locally sourced funding. ■



# BOARDING DELAYS

Non-executive appointments

**Who?** National Audit Office

**When?** February 2024

**Key quote** “Government must do more to address delays in the appointment and reappointment process. Failure to do so poses risks to the quality and diversity of boards as well as good governance”

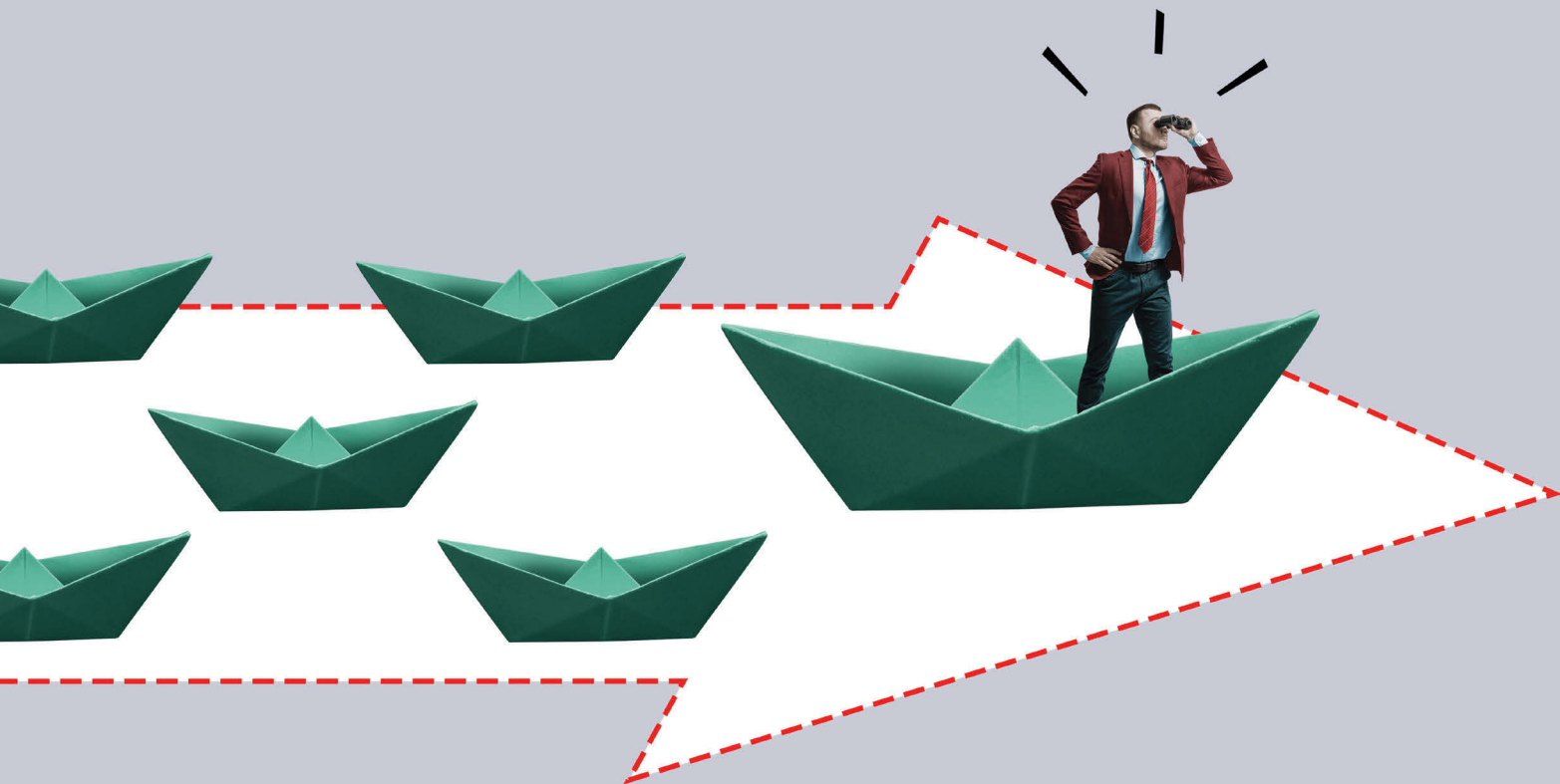
**In brief** Delays in appointing non-executive directors to public posts are leaving gaps on boards and putting off high-quality candidates. Ministerial churn and “cumbersome” processes are both contributing to delays, the National Audit Office report said. Potential appointees are being deterred from applying for positions, while others have dropped out part way through the process because of delays. In 2022-23, there were on average 203 days between a recruitment campaign closing and a public appointment being announced – far outstripping

the 90-day limit set out in the Governance Code for Public Appointments. The NAO said it could not determine the extent of the delays in 2023-24 as the Cabinet Office does not yet hold the relevant data.

**Key recommendations**

- The Cabinet Office should “set out what good looks like for the appointments process”, including how long the process should take and how applicants should be kept informed.
- It should use a new application-tracking system that was introduced last spring to give permanent secretaries regular updates on the progress of appointments and benchmarking information.
- The Cabinet Office should work with departmental appointments teams to understand delays – and use this data to streamline the process – and improve how organisations identify the skills and diversity they need for a particular role. ■





# STRATEGIC SINKING

Can government change its culture of short-termism? **Suzannah Brecknell** talks to **Sir Bernard Jenkin** about the ongoing challenge to strategic thinking

**A**mong the many definitions of “strategy” floating across books and the internet, one in particular feels apt for government officials. It comes from *Stepping Stones*, a 1977 report prepared for Margaret Thatcher as she considered how to get the Conservatives into power – and what to do if they got there.

“Strategy can be defined, for practical purposes,” the report says, as “the careful thinking which we wish we had done two years ago, but don’t have time to do today.”

It might be comforting to think that the challenge of balancing long-term thinking with immediate issues is nothing new. But this insight also demonstrates the uphill struggle faced by those who want to break the cycle of short-term thinking.

Sir Bernard Jenkin has been trying to get government to think and act more strategically for at least 14 years. In 2010, as newly elected chair of the Public Adminis-

tration Select Committee (now the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee), his first act was to launch an inquiry called *Who Does UK National Strategy?* Back then, Jenkin told CSW he thought the report would be “pushing at an open door”. But, sitting down with us in spring 2024 to discuss another inquiry he is chairing into the topic, he recalls that the report was “roundly dismissed” by the new coalition government.

“David Cameron actually said to me, ‘Oh, you’re very keen on strategy, aren’t you? I prefer to remain flexible,’” Jenkin says. “And I said, ‘Well, *that’s* your strategy. Why not write down a concept of how this works? Then we could discuss it.”

In a bid to support such a discussion, PASC published a report two years later considering whether strategy could emerge in government even if it was not being consciously developed. The committee would go on to carry out several more inquiries on the same theme during Jenkin’s near-decade at its helm.

Now chair of the Liaison Committee – which could be described as a “supergroup” of all the other select committee chairs and which can quiz the prime minister – Jenkin’s latest foray into the subject is through a sub-committee launched

last year to consider how select committees can improve the way they scrutinise strategic thinking in government. The sub-committee’s inquiry is ongoing – hearings began on the day CSW went to press, with former cabinet secretary Lord Sedwill and former defence secretary Lord Robertson giving evidence. Its findings will include both recommendations for government and for committees themselves.

Jenkin remains optimistic that things can change, saying: “There is a much, much wider dialogue going on between individuals and groups in the senior civil service about strategic thinking. And there is a much more open mind among ministers and the opposition.

“There is an awareness of the need for more capability and governance to grapple with big, cross-departmental issues which require long-term implementation – not to get completely swamped by the day-to-day political pressures or the short-termism that has affected governments since 2016, for obvious reasons.”

The question that he hopes the Liaison Committee can help to answer is how to embed that approach “institutionally, procedurally and culturally... it’s a far deeper question than just fiddling with some machinery or changing



some procedures, but I'd say we've got a far more open door than we had".

**W**hat are some of the challenges the committee is exploring, and how could they be addressed? One problem PASC identified back in 2010 is a lack of understanding in government about what strategy and strategic thinking actually are.

Many people confuse having a plan with having a strategy, Jenkin suggests, rather than seeing strategy as something that shapes your plans.

While strategy "involves a lot of planning," there is more to it than that, he explains. It is a "process and a mindset", and it cannot be fixed in stone – or PDF. "You might produce a strategic concept, which is a snapshot, but you don't have a strategy unless you keep adapting it."

It is also common for government to produce documents which fail to meet another key element of strategy: matching aspirations to capabilities. In this sense, Jenkin says, government makes it hard for parliament to scrutinise its strategic thinking because it's operating "in a way that sort of obscures strategy".

"Take the *Integrated Review Refresh*," he continues. "It's beautifully written, very comprehensive, but there's about two pages on implementation. And it's all premised on there being money. Well, there ain't no money, so where's the strategy?"

A fundamental step, therefore, would be to improve the understanding of strategic thinking right across government, and to build greater capability to do it. This might be through a formal strategy function, as suggested in written evidence by Catherine Day and Andrew Blick, academics at King's College London's Department of Political Economy.

Other evidence calls for the creation of a school for government. Lord Robertson argues this should train not only

senior officials but also MPs so they "learn the shared language, doctrine and skills of leadership and strategy."

Even with skills in place, many of the structures and processes of government mitigate against a strategic approach, such as siloed departments and a weak centre of government. But there are areas of good practice – the Vaccines Taskforce and National Security Council being cited as two mechanisms which facilitated a more strategic approach. So beneath the structural challenges lies the question of

whether ministers actually want to take a more strategic approach – for if they did, there would be ways to encourage it.

As former national security adviser Lord Ricketts notes: "The prime minister and senior colleagues need to create the climate for civil servants to do genuine strategic thinking. This means ministers making clear that they are interested in longer-term issues, and are open to difficult advice and unfamiliar new ideas."

Since the role of the Liaison Committee is to consider matters relating to the work of select committees, the inquiry will of course also focus on the role of parliament and its committees, as well as including recommendations for government.

"I think one of the things I've learned is that committees have far more influence if they're thinking about forward accountability, rather than retrospective accountability," Jenkin says.

Committees should be looking at what is happening now, rather than just considering what has already happened. "Then you can think about what is going to happen



**"You might produce a strategic concept, which is a snapshot, but you don't have a strategy unless you keep adapting it"**  
**Bernard Jenkin**

next and how any problems could be addressed, as well as considering how the government

will account for that," he says. "Rather than saying, 'Here's what you did wrong, and we'll line you up against the wall for it.'

"It's helpful to ask questions like, 'So, this has clearly not gone as well as hoped, what do we learn from this? And how are you going to implement those lessons?' I've seen the impact those questions have on officials in particular. It suddenly feels like they're being understood and listened to, instead of blamed. Blame is a very disruptive process."

Returning to the topic of scrutinising strategic thinking, he suggests that

government can often "fend off any scrutiny of the longer term", which is frustrating to select committees who usually want to take a long-term view.

As well as exploring structures or systems which would improve long-term thinking in government, the inquiry will consider how scrutiny could be more joined up.

A final challenge for the sub-committee's inquiry will be to ensure select committee scrutiny of strategic thinking reflects the increasingly cross-departmental nature of both the challenges faced by government, and the strategies it creates to address them.

Committees themselves follow departmental structures but there are precedents for joint inquiries, and Jenkin says there are other models that allow for "readier collaboration between committees".

He points to the parliamentary scrutiny which took place after the collapse of construction and managed-services firm Carillion in 2018 as an example. Several committees conducted inquiries on various aspects of the collapse, but there was also a joint evidence session held by the Liaison Committee in which committee chairs could question ministers together.

The role of parliament could be key in helping to open that door, which Jenkin has been pushing at for so long. As Lord Hennessy notes in his evidence to the committee, there have been many attempts to improve strategic thinking over recent decades, but parliament's involvement would be a new ingredient in helping to find that "strategic grip". It would be a "game-raiser and game-changer", he says, if the select committees could acquire "a participatory and stimulating function" in driving a strategic approach in government.

This could be through a parliamentary Committee of the Future such as already exists in Finland, where it has responsibility for scrutinising a *Report on the Future* published by government once each parliamentary term. The report includes not just an outlook based on cross-departmental foresight work, but an exploration of possible solutions to key challenges. The committee tracks how government is responding to these long-term problems.

Or it could be through a new NAO for strategy, as suggested by former permanent secretary Jonathan Slater. This would subject strategy to the same scrutiny as matters of value for money, he says, arguing that: "If parliament wants civil servants to produce long-term, evidence-informed, cross-departmental strategic work, the thing that would make the biggest difference is to subject this work to the cold light of day." ■

# CHAT AND HOUSE RULES



As new guidelines are released to support officials' use of the likes of ChatGPT, **Sam Trendall** reveals that some departments have already moved to ban the popular AI tool

**“Y**ou have meaningful human control at the right stage.” This is perhaps the most eye-catching

of the 10 principles published in January as part of the Generative AI Framework for HM Government. The new guidelines are intended to inform civil servants' use of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Google Bard, and other tools which can autonomously create content to provided specifications.

The guidance, created by the Cabinet Office and its subsidiary the Central Digital and Data Office, and supported by contributions by many government departments, starts from the position that “generative AI has the potential to unlock significant productivity benefits”, according to the foreword written by government chief technology officer David Knott.

“This framework aims to help readers understand generative AI, to guide anyone building generative AI solutions,

and, most importantly, to lay out what must be taken into account to use generative AI safely and responsibly,” he adds.

While the document provides a centralised schema to guide officials' use of large language models and other artificial intelligence tools, the last of the 10 principles instructs that “you use these principles alongside your organisation's policies and have the right assurance in place”.

Several weeks after the release of the framework, one of government's largest organisations – the Department for Work and Pensions, which, with almost 90,000 employees, employs one in six civil servants – has already updated its policies to, effectively, entirely ban the use of ChatGPT and other publicly available systems.

The decision, in accordance with the guidelines, certainly constitutes “meaningful human control” over the automated technology.

The DWP last month made some small, but significant tweaks to its Acceptable Use Policy guidance – which

sets out responsibilities and limitations for anyone accessing the department's technology or data systems.

The rules are applicable to “all DWP employees, agents, contractors, consultants, suppliers and business partners”, and cover the use of “all DWP equipment and information [including] all information systems, hardware, software and channels of communication, including voice-telephony, social media, video, email, instant messaging, internet and intranet”.

Among the amendments made to the policy are additional instructions about the use of different types of AI programs – including a clear and specific ban on the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT platform and any other such tool openly available online.

“Users must not attempt to access public AI applications – such as ChatGPT – when undertaking DWP business, or on DWP-approved devices,” the DWP guidance says.

It is understood that the DWP's decision to implement its own policies to prevent the use of public AI has been informed by



the department's caution concerning the volume and sensitivity of personal data handled by the organisation – which manages payments to more than 20 million citizens.

The department is still experimenting with the use of other forms of artificial intelligence tools in its operations, however, and another update added to the Acceptable Use Policy states that “where accessible, users can use approved private AI applications that sit within DWP systems”.

*PublicTechnology* understands that the DWP is currently experimenting with a potential internal tool based on Microsoft Copilot – a technology which the software vendor describes as “an AI-powered digital assistant that aims to provide personalised assistance to users for a range of tasks and activities [and] combines the power of large language models” with a user's own data.

The department's explorations of this kind of technology form part of a wider “lighthouse programme” intended to enable the exploration of sophisticated AI tech “in a safe and governed environment”.

Following *PublicTechnology's* enquiries about the DWP's decision to prohibit its staff from using ChatGPT and other public AI tools, a government spokesperson says: “The government is committed to seize the potential of AI, and support the experimentation of cutting edge technologies which will boost efficiency and improve public services. We are actively exploring how we can use AI to better support on delivering our services, and our policies will continue to evolve to reflect this approach.”

### Principle skimmer

The first of the 10 principles that, as per the framework, should underpin this approach is that officials should “know what generative AI is and what its limitations are”.

Such limitations, the framework says, include the fact that “LLMs lack personal experiences and emotions and don't inherently possess real-world contextual awareness... [and] generative AI tools are not guaranteed to be accurate as they are generally designed only to produce highly plausible and coherent results, [which] means that they can, and do, make errors”.

The second principle outlines that government should “use generative AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly”.

This means taking into account ethical considerations from the outset, and consulting with the likes of

legal and compliance professionals.

The third principle is that civil servants must “know how to keep generative AI tools secure”, which is likely to include the implementation of measures such as “content filtering to detect malicious activity and validation checks to ensure responses are accurate and do not leak data”.

The fourth principle is the point at which the framework demands “meaningful human control”. The guidance acknowledges that, in many cases – such as a chatbot which produces instant responses – there may not be scope for humans to review content before it becomes public. Such uses must therefore “be confident in the human control at other stages in the product lifecycle”.

“Incorporating end-user feedback is vital,” the framework adds. “Put mechanisms into place that allow end-users to report content and trigger a human review process.”

The fifth principle is that users should “understand how to manage the full generative AI lifecycle”, which includes work “to monitor and mitigate generative AI drift, bias and hallucinations... [via] a robust testing and monitoring process in place to catch these problems”.

An instruction to “use the right tool for the job” is the sixth principle. This advice speaks to the fact that “generative AI is good at many tasks but has a number of limitations and can be expensive to use”, the guidance adds.

The next two principles – to be “open and collaborative” and to “work with commercial colleagues from the start” – are intended to ensure that those deploying generative AI tools work cooperatively with officials and teams from other disciplines.

This will include working to “identify which groups, communities, civil societies, non-governmental organisations, academic organisations and public representative organisations have an interest in your project”.

Commercial professionals, meanwhile, can help “ensure that the expectations around the responsible and ethical use of generative AI are the same between in-house developed AI systems and those procured from a third party”.

The framework adds: “For example, procurement contracts can require transparency from the supplier on the different information categories as set out in the Algo-

## GOVERNMENT-WIDE PRINCIPLES FOR USING GENERATIVE AI

1. Know what generative AI is and what its limitations are
2. Use generative AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly
3. Know how to keep generative AI tools secure
4. Have meaningful human control at the right stage
5. Understand how to manage the full generative AI lifecycle
6. Use the right tool for the job
7. Be open and collaborative
8. Work with commercial colleagues from the start
9. Have the skills and expertise needed to build and use generative AI
10. Use these principles alongside your organisation's policies and have the right assurance in place

rhythmic Transparency Recording Standard.”

The penultimate principle is that those deploying technology should “have the skills and expertise needed to build and use generative AI”.

Such expertise is likely to include new and novel technology skills. Officials are encouraged to take advantage of government training courses dedicated to generative AI, and also to “proactively keep track of developments in the field”.

The final principle's advice that the Whitehall-wide framework should only be used in concert with departments' own guidance reflects that, increasingly, “many government organisations have their own governance structures and policies in place” regarding the use of LLMs and other tools.

And, in a field as fast-moving as this, all such advice is liable to be updated as often as the technology it concerns, according to government CTO Knott's introduction.

“This framework differs from other technology guidance we have produced: it is necessarily incomplete and dynamic,” he writes. “It is incomplete because the field of generative AI is developing rapidly and best practice in many areas has not yet emerged. It is dynamic because we will update it frequently as we learn more from the experience of using generative AI across government, industry and society.” ■

As part of our series of conversations between high-profile government figures, **Cat Little** – who will shortly take over at the helm of the Cabinet Office – discusses leadership, AI and the upcoming spending review with **Megan Lee Devlin**



# A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

**C**at Little joined HM Treasury in 2020 as director general, public spending. Having arrived at the finance department right at the beginning of the Covid crisis, just a few months into her new role Little found herself running a government spending review from home, typically with “a couple of dogs with me, causing chaos in the background”.

Despite such distractions, the public spending chief found “lots of positives” in conducting the process virtually. The experiences of 2020 and 2021 – which brought a full, three-year comprehensive spending review – “turbo-charged” the Treasury’s use of digital tools, according to Little.

She took on the position of acting permanent secretary in September 2022 and the following month was appointed to the post of second perm sec. In this role, she has overseen public spending, as well as international and national security policy, alongside her positions as head of the government finance function and chair of the Finance Leadership Group for Government.

When Alex Chisholm leaves government next month, Little will take over his role as civil service chief operating officer and permanent secretary of the Cabinet Office.

She will depart the Treasury as it prepares to publish a long-term Future of Finance strategy next year. As part of the review, according to Little, the department will continue to seek “innovative ways to deliver more and better outcomes through tech, data, AI and better use of our talented people’s time and energy”.

*PublicTechnology* has been working with the Cabinet Office’s Central Digital and Data Office on our ongoing Digital Leaders’ Download series of interviews, featuring discussions between CDDO leadership and some of government’s most high-profile figures – in the fields of digital, data, technology and beyond.

The most recent interview saw Little talk to recently-departed CDDO executive director Megan Lee Devlin.



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



**Megan Lee Devlin:** Cat, while you are an accountant, senior civil servant and board member, you are also a very active supporter of the digital agenda. What does being a digital leader mean to you?

**Cat Little:** We are all digital leaders in government and we have a number of responsibilities, most importantly around culture and behaviours. Digital is a fundamental part of the way we do business in our day-to-day jobs. It's our responsibility to look after policy, money, operational delivery, and digital is part of that. We don't all need to be experts in digital but we do need to understand the expertise involved and know enough to role model putting digital at the heart of how we do our jobs.

**MLD:** Absolutely – digital has become everyone's business, irrespective of function or profession. I'm often asked how leaders can, in practice, role model digital leadership. How do you think about that? For instance, how do you hear and learn about new developments in technology?

**CL:** One of the great privileges of my job is that I get involved in every single bit of the economy and the public sector. I get to talk to organisations that are delivering innovation every day – that might be private companies, public sector bodies, international government – and I get to talk to leaders who really understand our problems.

I also read a lot in this space, there are great blogs and articles published all the time – exercising that normal civil service curiosity, and using our network and relationships to think differently about the challenges we face. So many people are using digital in different ways.

**MLD:** And we certainly face some of the most intractable challenges here in government. What excites you most about the role of digital and data in addressing some of those?

**CL:** We in the Treasury are grappling with big macroeconomic challenges for the economy as a whole and one of my passions is: how do we go about delivering better services for the public sector overall. How can we be more productive? How can we be more effective? Digital thinking can be a win-win for everyone.

As we think about policy reform in the medium term for the next spending review, one of our core questions is: how can we use data and digital for better service outcomes, what are the

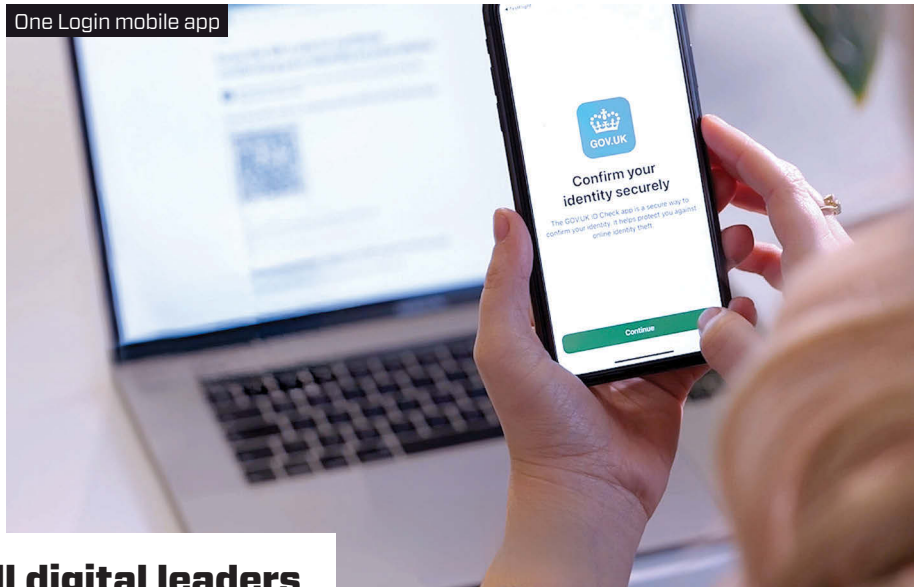
outputs we need to produce and can we do that with less resource? There are lots of ways for digital, data and technology to drive better outcomes for less resource input; that has to be a fundamental part of what we are doing.

The thing that I am most passionate about is the fact that we can radically shift the service outcomes we are seeking to achieve by using policy alongside digital and data transformation – to be more productive and efficient by default. The public sector is so huge. If you take a great innovation in, say, one hospital in the NHS, how do you scale that effectively to all 250 hospitals across England and Wales? We need to be able to scale opportunities as the best ideas happen locally.

**MLD:** The world is very excited about AI at the moment, and we know there are many other exciting developments on the horizon, such as quantum computing. What's your favourite emerging technology?

**CL:** I'm particularly interested at the moment in how we

One Login mobile app



**“We are all digital leaders in government... Digital is a fundamental part of the way we do business in our day-to-day jobs”**

analyse large amounts of complex data for consistent decision making, including generative AI, complex data analysis models and large language models. These help us to give the right tools to decision makers, case workers and operational delivery teams on the ground.

**MLD:** Absolutely, and I know that Treasury has been thinking a lot about how AI can support its own productivity and public sector productivity. What has your department achieved through digital and data that you are especially proud of?

**CL:** The Treasury is really proud of the progress we've made so far, particularly as we are not a big operational team – we are more policy-driven – and it has taken a bit longer to accelerate in this area. One thing we did recently was run our first data hackathon, where 10 departments came together to look at generative AI to support our work on correspondence management. We are now looking at how we apply the solutions further across government collaboration – correspondence is a huge challenge for us and we are going to keep running these hackathons.

**MLD:** If we were to fast forward to 2025, what do you look forward to seeing in the digital and data space?

**CL:** There is so much going on at the moment to look forward to: improving our top

75 government services, improving the quality of data to make better decisions, as well as our promises on One Login and cross-cutting system reform. This is in addition to a strong civil service that has a strong digital and data skill set.

As I've already mentioned, it would also be great to see further integration of digital and data into policymaking – all these things are underway as part of the Digital Transformation Roadmap. ■

**Visit *PublicTechnology.net* for more interviews in the Digital Leaders' Download series, including discussions with national statistician Professor Sir Ian Diamond and former HM Prison and Probation Service head Jo Farrar**

# COUNCIL



The Council House in Birmingham (foreground), home to Birmingham City Council, where the spiralling cost of its Oracle IT system has contributed to the authority's declaration of effective bankruptcy via a Section 114 notice

# CULTURE

Research from *PublicTechnology* reveals that, while many local authorities have clear transformation ambitions, uptake and understanding of digital tools can vary greatly within organisations. **Sam Trendall** reports

**“T**he cost of innovation, and the risk of wasted cash if it does not go well, is enormous for a small local authority... but it is probably our major line of expenditure in the next five years.”

This insight – provided by a senior local councillor, taking part in a recent survey by *PublicTechnology* – shines a light on the current position of many coun-

cils’ digital transformation programmes. Which, in many cases, are located somewhere between a rock and a hard place.

Many local government digital leaders are facing growing interest in and scrutiny of their work – and increased expectations for what it can achieve. At the same time, they are coping with the cumulative impact of years of funding squeezes, shortages of key skills, and the continuing presence of ageing legacy IT systems.

But such challenges have invariably done little to stunt councils’ ambitions. Of the 75 authorities that completed *PublicTechnology*’s study – which will form the backbone of the soon-to-be-published *PublicTechnology Local Government Digital Transformation* report – only 7% said that they have never had a digital strategy, nor have any plans to create and implement one.

These strategic visions also typically have high levels of attention from heads of service and senior managers – with 37% of our research participants, in each case, claiming that these groups were “very engaged” in their council’s digital objectives.

However, the respective proportions of elected members and front-



line delivery staff that are similarly engaged are just 13% and 11%.

A respondent to our survey said that, in their organisation, there is a “huge variation in knowledge of councillors and staff [which] adds to the challenge of change”.

The lack of expertise from officers in some key areas is perhaps explained by the fact that, according to our survey, many councils’ biggest single area of service delivery – social services – is the least digitised. A third of our research participants said that their organisation’s delivery of these services is largely or entirely non-digitised.

This contrasts with the likes of council tax and environmental services, both of which are cited as being significantly digitised or digital-by-default by about 60% of respondents.

One of our research participants suggested that leaders should consult frontline and operational workers much more widely before implementing digital systems.

“The council’s senior managers need to ask staff their opinion of how IT can be developed, rather than making decisions for staff without involving them,” they said. “Just because senior managers use the technology does not mean they are fit people to make these decisions. It is the staff who use the technology to do the same tasks, day in, day out, or week after week – and they know it the best, not managers.”

A number of local government professionals told us that, while it may bring clear benefits, digital transformation is not always demanded or even appreciated by citizens – some of whom continue to “want the personal touch on many things”.

“I think the overuse of digital technology moves us away from the people we serve – especially the poorer and disempowered members of our communities and older people,” one respondent said. “Proper equality impact assessments need to hap-

## “There’s a huge variation in knowledge of councillors and staff, which adds to the challenge”

pen – in a very fast-moving environment.”

Technological transformation is having a significant impact internally – particularly in helping organisations to understand operational issues and allocate resources accordingly. While all authorities we surveyed are conducting some form of

### FOCUS ON: LOCAL DIGITAL

Since 2018, councils’ transformation has been supported by a dedicated Local Digital unit in what is now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The team was launched alongside a multimillion-pound funding programme, a training offering for senior managers, and the Local Digital Declaration – created in unison with the Government Digital Service and 45 councils that were founding signatories.

The document, which has since been signed by more than 300 public bodies, outlines a number of commitments, including a pledge from senior leaders and elected members that they will “make sure that digital expertise is central to our decision-making”, as well as a promise to “try new things, from new digital tools to experiments in collaboration with other organisations”.

The declaration outlines that a delivery team in DLUHC will provide support to all signatory councils in delivering their digital ambitions.

Alongside such assistance, the Local Digital Fund has awarded cumulative funding of more than £16m across 61 tech and transformation projects led by councils.

A number of these initiatives have supported the creation of standards, systems or services that can be reused across the sector.

This includes the LocalGov Drupal project, which has created a single digital publishing platform that aims to reduce the costs of creating a website by up to 80% and is now used by 44 councils.

data analytics, the biggest areas of use are future planning (74%) and measuring the impact of programmes and policies (67%).

Alongside data and analysis, other emerging technology areas that already have significant adoption levels

Some 28 authorities, meanwhile, use the PlanX service, which has been designed to help those filing planning applications ensure their submission is valid. The platform can prevent an estimated 71% of invalid filings – which typically represent as many as one in two applications.

Recent work conducted by the DLUHC unit includes the Future Councils programme, which began with a pilot phase that ran from March to November last year and incorporated eight councils. The pilot exercise, which centred on research intended to shine a light on the systemic barriers that can prevent digital transformation, was followed by the department’s recent publication of the *Future Councils Playbook*. The document features a range of tools to help authorities define, understand and, ultimately, address key problems.

As it passed its fifth anniversary last year, Local Digital commissioned an independent evaluation intended to analyse its work to date, and help shape its priorities for the coming months and years. Details of the outcome are expected to be released shortly.

The Local Digital Declaration summarises the team’s purpose thus: “We want to co-create the conditions for the next generation of local public services, where technology is an enabler rather than a barrier to service improvements, and services are a delight for citizens and officials to use.”

*Look out for the PublicTechnology Local Government Digital Transformation Report, which will be published later this month*

Even with high-end technologies becoming ever-more prevalent, the sector is still experiencing stark skills shortages, with only 7% of our research participants stating that they were very confident that their council currently has the skills in place to get the most out of digital and data.

But, according to the councillor whose comments began this piece, the appetite for transformation will only increase – even among those who may need a little time to get to grips with the possibility.

“Younger staff who use these technologies in their daily lives definitely want to see the change,” they said. “Personally, as a councillor who is older, although my brain is willing to make the changes, I find the concepts difficult to grasp.” ■



**MIND**



**YOUR**



**LANGUAGE**

The civil service has been battling against verbose official-speak for decades. But clarity of language reflects clarity of purpose, something we must continue to strive for, argues **Chris Holme**



It was the year civil servants started minding their language.

*Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers came out in 1948 and both it and later revisions have not been out of print since.

Gowers started at the Inland Revenue in 1904, later served as principal private secretary to chancellor David Lloyd George, and was head of civil defence in London during the Blitz.

In retirement he was asked by Sir Edward Bridges, head of the home civil service, to write a wee book on English usage for civil service training courses.

Bureaucratic “officialese” had long been a bugbear for Gowers who advocated a new style: simple and direct language, friendly in tone and easy to understand.

He rejected a £500 flat fee from the Stationery Office in favour of royalties from each copy. This turned out to be an astute move since it sold more than 150,000 copies in the first year.

Gowers had tapped into wider concerns about the state of the English language already identified by George Orwell, who wrote in 1945: “Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

This excerpt from *Politics and the English Language* was a hint of what was to come, with his novel *1984* completed in the same year as *Plain Words*. Orwell listed six rules for better writing, the last of which helpfully gave permission to break the others if absolutely necessary.

Gowers was also tolerant of the occasional mishap. He explored the different styles required, such as legal language for bill drafting teams and the use of shorthand phrases among specialist groups, but the overriding thrust was for simple English.

There had already been signs of progress. A batch of former journalists became ministers during the war, including the prime minister, Winston Churchill, his private secretary Brendan Bracken and minister for aircraft production Lord Beaverbrook. Tom Johnston, the Scottish secretary, was also a journalist prior to his political career, as was his chief press officer Alastair Dunnnett, later a celebrated editor of *The Scotsman*.

Perhaps surprisingly, the trend for

less stuffy English can be traced back to the public sector of the 1930s, which seized the opportunities of the then new media of radio and cinema, creating a generation of young British filmmakers with the Empire Marketing Board and the General Post Office film units.

The Central Office of Information took this further during the war with documentaries, animations and features showing public policy in an engaging and sometimes entertaining manner.

Newsprint shortages in wartime also forced changes in print journalism: copy had to be much shorter and crisper.

Gowers had clearly struck a chord, but by 1973 parts of his book were inevitably a bit dated. Another seasoned civil servant, Sir Bruce Fraser, revised it as *The Complete Plain Words*, keeping much of the original and adding his own sections.

Fraser had joined the Scottish office in 1933 and later served in the Treasury, health, and education before his final post as comptroller and auditor general.

Former colleagues provided Fraser with examples of awful writing and he offered suggestions to civil servants on how to avoid them:

*Nothing is less likely to appeal to a young woman than the opinions of old men on the pill.*

*People in the South East keep their teeth longer than people in the North.*

*Prices of different models vary, and you should take the advice of an expert on the make.*

He was scathing about pretentious language used by academics and new management speak churned out by business schools.

Like Gowers, Fraser was no fuddy-duddy pedant. He welcomed new words brought in by the computer age: program, software, and hardware (yes, these existed in 1973).

But old habits persisted in the civil service – lazy writing for reports which audiences had to read rather than choosing to read them. Pompous and verbose circumlocution was sufficiently ingrained in the public mind to provide the grist for Sir Humphrey Appleby in *Yes Minister*.

Words mattered to Gowers and Fraser because clarity of expression indicates clarity of thinking. Clear writing is much harder than rehashing tired old phrases. It does, however, reinforce public confidence that officials care about their work and know what they are doing.

So, what’s happened since? Civil servants, following the example of their colleagues eighty years ago, have adapted well to the demands of new media. The

GOV.UK website is a beacon of clarity and ease of use.

In Fraser’s day, “stakeholders” were the angry villagers at the end of a Hammer horror movie confronting Dracula and fellow vampires. “Oversight” then meant a serious error, entirely the opposite of what it means today (keeping a close watch on something). And we all now work in “partnership”

which is convenient in having someone else to blame when policy goes awry.

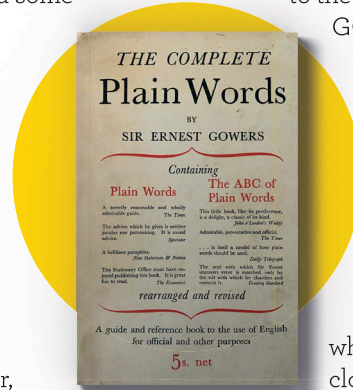
“Delivery”, once the exclusive province of midwives and posties, today means avoiding a commitment to actually providing something. The word has since grown legs, stepping into cluttered delivery landscapes, which opens up the prospect of a new civil service post – a delivery landscape declutterer who will probably work alongside a strategic synergist and granular grain of truth operative.

Fashions come and go. “Step change”, once a favourite of ministers, is now thankfully a rarity, although “standing shoulder to shoulder” – a tired cliché in Orwell’s opinion – remains a favourite.

Every new minister comes in with their own writing habits and foibles: Thérèse Coffey arrived at the Department of Health with a pathological aversion to the Oxford comma, but she only survived a few weeks in the post.

Meanwhile, Ernest Gowers’ passion for wordsmithery lasted for decades. He worked on until the end, completing a major revision of Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* shortly before his death in 1966. The mantle was subsequently taken up by his great-granddaughter, the novelist Rebecca Gowers, who published a revision of *Plain Words* in 2014.

The fight for clear language goes on... ■



**“In Fraser’s day, ‘stakeholders’ were the angry villagers at the end of a Hammer horror movie confronting Dracula and fellow vampires”**

**Chris Holme is a former Reuters Foundation fellow in medical journalism and worked as a communications manager in the Scottish Government until 2011**









# ALL CHANGE PLEASE

One year on from the creation of three new government departments,

**Suzannah Brecknell** talks to perm secs **Gareth Davies, Sarah Munby** and **Jeremy Pocklington** about the challenges and opportunities they have faced.

Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer »



It was February 2023, a record-breakingly cold day in New York. Gareth Davies, visiting the city in his capacity as the relatively new perm sec of the Department for International Trade, received a message to call the cabinet secretary, Simon Case. “That always makes you pause, so I was busy checking Twitter to see what on earth was going on,” he tells CSW one year

on from that cold day in the Big Apple. “I couldn’t find anything which made me suspicious.”

After speaking to the cab sec, Davies – who had only been at DIT for a few weeks – found himself launched into a new role. The prime minister was announcing a major set of machinery of government changes and Davies would be heading the newly-minted Department for Business and Trade.

He was, he recalls, “properly excited” at the prospect. “Of course, if you’re not a bit anxious at that point, something’s wrong, but there was also a sense of the possible. Because what was really nice about this – and I’ve been involved in lots of machinery of government changes – is there was such a compelling logic to it.”

Back home in England, Sarah Munby – then head of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy – was about to become the permanent secretary of a science, innovation and technology department formed from units which had previously been spread over four organisations. She got the call about the news while wrangling (as she puts it) her three children over breakfast.

Sitting in Davies’ office for an exclusive joint interview to mark the creation of three new departments in February 2023, Munby describes experiencing the same mixture of excitement tempered with caution when she considered the opportunities presented by her new department. “There was great logic to the changes, loads of brilliant work, lots of things I’d always wanted to be involved in – a feeling like I was getting my hands on an amazing toolkit,” she says. But at the same time she recognised the need to communicate with staff as soon as

possible to reassure them that the changes were not about cuts (her first message to staff said, “there is a job for everyone in the new departments”) but about working more effectively across government.

Faced with change, she says, most people feel both excitement and anxiety.

out of the country when he got a message to call the cab sec, and he tells CSW that alongside the excitement of a new opportunity he was also sad to be leaving DLUHC – “a department I was very happy in”.

Like Munby, one of Pocklington’s first priorities was thinking about how



“And as leaders we’re trying to build up the first and manage truthfully the second.”

The third new department created last February – covering energy security and net zero – was to be headed up by Jeremy Pocklington, who was at that point perm sec of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. He was also

to support staff through the move. Alongside setting up a transition team, he wanted to make quick and transparent decisions wherever possible, and to explain what the processes would be for decisions that couldn’t yet be made.

Pocklington was also focused on making sure the changes didn’t impact existing



delivery commitments, particularly those related to the *Powering Up Britain* strategy, which the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero went on to launch just a few weeks after its creation. Over at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, there was an extra impetus to hit the ground running, as secretary of state Michelle Donelan would be starting maternity leave in 10 weeks. Munby recalled that this added “rocket boosters” to the pace of their work and made the early weeks of the department an “intense experience”. But on the other hand, she adds, “there’s nothing like real work, and working together on things, to start forging the department”.

For Davies, there were ongoing trade and inward investment negotiations that needed to continue without disruption, and he was conscious of the need to ensure his teams didn’t become too pre-occupied with the process of change. “I’ve been through mergers and takeovers, both in government and in the private sector, and the big risk always is that everyone ends up looking internally,” he says.

While this is understandable, he wanted to offset it by ensuring the team tasked with delivering change was focused just on that – rather than doing it alongside other priorities – while also supporting delivery teams to “crack on, deliver for ministers and deliver for the public”.

The need to create “a small distinct team, whose job it was to build the foundation” is one of the key lessons Davies brought to this process from his previous experiences of organisational change. He wanted to make sure this “wasn’t on the margins of people’s jobs”. With that small team entirely focused on the change, he aimed to encourage everyone else to concentrate on the real reason they joined government.

“We didn’t sign up for organisational change, we signed up, frankly, to make a difference to the country,” Davies says. “The number one thing I brought from previous mergers and takeovers was to keep making sure we really emphasised in our conversations with staff the impact we’re having as individuals and as a department.”

MoG changes are an occupational hazard for any civil servant, but the big ones are often greeted with raised eyebrows both in and out of government, especially from external partners who will share in some of the disruption while teams adjust to new systems and briefs.

Each of the perm secs was keen to minimise the disruption in a number of ways. They kept the organisational change to a minimum, for example, by moving

## YEAR TWO PRIORITIES

After all that change, what are the priorities for each perm sec moving into the second year with their not-so-new departments? Each leader sets out a trio of priorities, and each trio includes the need to keep on embedding and promoting the respective values of each organisation.

Davies and Pocklington also mention skills as an area for focus. For DESNZ this means ensuring it has “the capability to deliver some really big programmes” as well as working with the science depart-

ment to ensure they have access to cutting-edge expertise on science and innovation. At DBT meanwhile, Davies wants to continue deepening the organisation’s expertise on economic growth and productivity.

At DSIT, says Munby, the first priority is to “finish the work to build a single department”, including moving into one building, which they haven’t yet been able to do.

Finally, each perm sec has an outward-facing priority. For Pocklington, it’s about broadening

DESNZ’s geographic reach in connection with the *Places for Growth* agenda. DESNZ has made good progress, he says – with second headquarters in Salford and Aberdeen – but there is more to do to ensure they have teams in all parts of the country where the department is supporting energy security and net zero projects.

Davies wants to keep strengthening links with business to understand “what’s on their mind, what’s getting in the way of them growing and investing”, while Munby reflects on

DSIT’s role as a convener of science and innovation across government: “We’re being asked to lead a system to drive change in science and technology, right across government and beyond. And that’s still quite a new system: we’re still young, and the system of thinking around it is still young. There is lots more to do to make sure we have a strategy that everyone in DSIT, everyone in government, and ultimately everyone across the science and technology community can sign up to.”

whole teams where possible, so people remained in their line management chains.

Davies describes the feeling of going through organisational changes in the past, facing things like “job re-evaluations... all that sort of horror show” alongside an already busy workload. He wanted to minimise that for his teams. “Yes, we were going to change, but we were not trying to completely up-end structures,” he says. “There are always different ways in which you can organise any department, but we wanted to keep the core of what we had.”

Despite this commitment to minimising unnecessary change, putting together the nuts and bolts of a new organisation will never be easy, and all three perm secs recognise that corporate services teams bore a large portion of the burden. “MoG changes don’t affect all members of staff the same,” Pocklington says. “It’s really important to recognise that. Corporate services are at the front end, managing the change, dealing with maximum uncertainty themselves about which department they

will be working with, whether there will be any integrated services. And they did a brilliant job, we’re incredibly grateful.”

The work also takes money – an average of £15m per department, according to the Institute for Government. So while each department had its own transition team, and those teams worked closely together, there were two specific mechanisms to make things as efficient as possible. The first was a cross-government oversight board set up to co-ordinate and approve key decisions. This board, chaired by a senior civil servant from DESNZ, included representatives from all of the affected departments.

“It’s probably the most complicated MoG change in many years, involving the de-merger, the creation of new departments and the changes to DCMS. And we really needed to draw on all of that

expertise,” Pocklington says. The board was disbanded in late 2023 when most of the structural changes had taken place.

The second mechanism was to consider how the new departments could

**“Machinery of government changes are part of life. We know that. And having lots of different set-ups and structures across the system makes them a lot harder than they need to be”**  
**Sarah Munby, perm sec at DBT**

share services as much as possible, reducing the costs of creating new corporate systems for each department. A new integrated corporate services function (ICS) was created, housed in DESNZ. The ICS has provided all aspects of estates, security and digital services, along with some aspects of commercial, finance and HR, to DESNZ and DSIT for nearly 12 months, as well as providing services in a more limited way for DBT.

“That’s working really well. It’s meant we have been able to keep some of the specialist expertise together in a way that’s been efficient,” Pocklington says.

When asked about lessons for MoG changes of the future, Munby points to the importance of the ICS, which she says will make it easier for civil servants to focus on delivery during periods of disruption. “I think we have to make this easier. Machinery of government changes are part of life. We know that. And having lots of different set-ups and structures across the system makes them a lot harder than they need to be.

“So while we’re *not* managing a machinery of government change, now is the time to think about how we collectively, right across the civil service leadership, actually make machinery of government changes easier.”

“We have lived through a lot of change in the last year,” Munby adds. “Because we’ve been doing a real three-way merger of quite different systems, including different fundamental IT systems. And you can never diminish how much work that is for people on a day-to-day basis. It’s just not a particularly fun experience. And you can be as inspired as you want about the fantastic new department, but those practical changes are hard.”

Davies adds a more personal reflection on managing future MoG changes: “I think, get more sleep is definitely the big headline,” he says, explaining that as leader you need to support your own resilience by bringing a strong team together. “Everyone’s busy when we’re going through these processes and you really want to hit the ground running with the new organisation, so it’s just about making sure you’ve got your team all geared up with the right capability, and then making sure it’s a real team sport.”

### Back to school

While corporate service teams were working on the nuts and bolts of the new organisations, all three perm secs also launched cross-departmental processes to explore and define what their

new values and culture should be. And all three say that by autumn they were able to move from this first intense stage into a more forward-looking phase.

“By the summer, we’d stopped talking about the transition and machinery of government,” Pocklington says of DESNZ. “Our focus by then was on creating the department and launching our values: being bold, being collaborative, inclusive, and committed to learn as best as we possibly can.”

Davies had the end of the summer in mind right from the start as the point where he wanted the main changes to be complete, though he stresses that there will always be some element of change in any department. “I think no organisation is ever finished – I’ve never been in an organisation that stopped and said, ‘Oh, this is exactly how we should be,’” he says.

“But I did want, as we hit September, a sense of: we are a new department so, yes, we’ll need to improve. Yes, we must adapt to new challenges. But it will be us as DBT adapting to it, rather than looking backwards.”

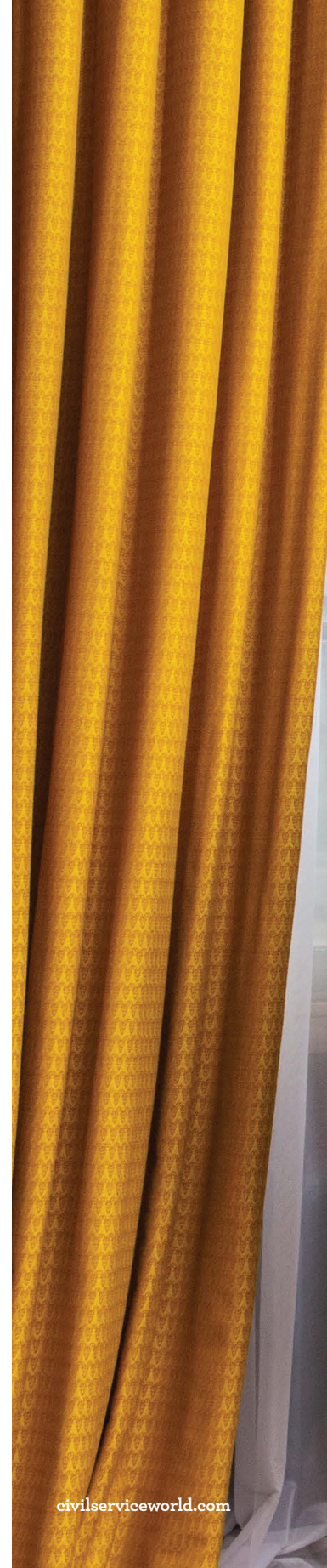
DSIT also had its “back to school moment”, as Munby describes it, running a two-week event called *DSIT Campus* with learning and development opportunities as well as discussions around the department’s values. For this department, however, she suggests that the change still ahead is more fundamental than the continual improvement Davies refers to.

**“No organisation is ever finished. I’ve never been in an organisation that stopped and said, ‘Oh, this is exactly how we should be”**  
***Gareth Davies, perm sec at DBT***

“I still think we’ve got quite big changes to make,” Munby says. “Partly because I don’t think the new DSIT is an average of the things that we inherited. We’re being asked to build a department that is truly more agile, more innovative, more long-term in its outlook than any of our predecessor departments. So what we’ve done in year one is build the foundations and the springboard, but the next step is really embedding those values into a new way of operating. And creating a department that’s fit for the amazing mission that we have. Like any big change, it’s going to be genuinely a multi-year journey.”

Munby sums up the sense from all the perm secs as they celebrate the anniversary of those unexpected phonecalls last year: “I think all three departments have had

very impressive years, while also managing a hell of a lot of change. The whole thing has actually been an example of the civil service at its best, responding to something that ministers asked us to do – not dropping the ball on delivery, and engineering what’s actually really serious and complex change. Hats off to all our teams!” ■





### POCKLINGTON ON... LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND FOR THE FUTURE

“Being people-focused and data-driven is a really important lesson. Whenever you have these big structural changes your people must be absolutely at the heart of the change. Communicating with them is key but so too is working with, and basing your decisions on, the best possible data that you’ve got. Whether it is about your staff, your finances or your programmes, by doing that you are best placed to deliver what it is your department needs to deliver. In terms of the future, I think the Integrated Corporate Services model – learning and developing from that – is something we would like to take forward.”

### MUNBY ON...SUPPORT FOR THE NEW DEPARTMENTS

“We were flooded with supportive and welcoming messages from our stakeholder community. So although we all knew our staff would have to go through something that would not always be easy, and would carry with it burdens and challenges, we were doing it in service of something that had received an overwhelmingly positive reaction in the outside world. People were really wishing for us to be successful. They were on our side from the very beginning – I think that was probably true of all three departments.”

### DAVIES ON...THE IMPORTANCE OF CELEBRATING SUCCESS

“When we were all younger, we used to go into the office every day, which builds organisational culture almost implicitly. Now, we’ve got to be much more explicit about it, much more mindful. I think we need to take more time to celebrate success. We had a DBT day of celebration back in autumn when we talked about the impact we are having in communities around the world. We need to remind people of this because sometimes these jobs are hard, aren’t they? We ask people to do a hell of a lot. Sometimes it feels like it’s just more briefing, more legislation; another select committee, another cabinet committee. So we need to give people the opportunity to stand back and reflect on the difference they’re making; how we’re more than the sum of our parts. We’re not a bunch of individuals. We’re at our best when we work collaboratively. Bringing that to life is really important.”





# WIZARD FROM OZ



The Crown Estate is one of the UK's oldest institutions and contributes hundreds of millions of pounds a year to the national coffers. Its Australian chief executive **Dan Labbad** talks to **Jonathan Owen** and **Jess Bowie** about running this unique organisation – and why his daughter is his inspiration



**M**eet Dan Labbad. He may not be a household name but, as chief executive of the Crown Estate, he is one of the most powerful men in the country. He runs an organisation that is one of the UK's biggest landowners, with a £16bn portfolio of land and property. It owns vast swathes of countryside, not to mention a large slice of central London, including Regent Street, and Windsor Great Park. Oh, and the not-so-small matter of the entire seabed around England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. As if that wasn't enough, the Crown Estate also has the rights to generate electricity from wind, waves and the tides on the continental shelf.

Finding himself at the heart of the British establishment is a world away from the working class part of Sydney where Labbad was brought up by his Italian mother and Egyptian father, whom he describes as “first generation Australians” and “great role models”.

Realising he needed to study “to have a future”, Labbad went to the University of Technology, Sydney, where he graduated with a first-class degree in civil engineering. This led to a career at global developer

**“While I have some influence, I’m passionate about using it to focus on things like the environment, which is a national challenge in the context of an international humanitarian crisis”**

Lendlease – where he held a succession of senior roles before leaving in 2019. The 52-year-old joined the Crown Estate the following year. Leading the organisation during the pandemic that struck just weeks later was not his only challenge.

“I’d never been at the centre of British business and government like I have in this role, even though I’ve lived here for almost 20 years,” he says.

“One of the difficult things culturally, and I’ve learned this by working in businesses around the world, is that often when you speak a different language you’re more culturally consciously aware, because the language creates the juxtaposition. Whereas when you speak the same language, you subconsciously assume that, culturally, everything is the same when in fact it’s not.”

When he first started at the Crown Estate, Labbad encountered an unprecedented lack of dissent. “Everyone would agree more than ever before with what I was saying,” he says. Labbad decided to use humour to create an environment where people “feel comfortable throwing things back at me”.

He reflects: “There is no way in the world that a single individual, regardless of how good they may or may not be, can come up with a better set of longitudinal decisions than if you have the power of diversity around the table challenging things.”

Labbad is speaking to CSW as part of his bid to raise awareness of the work the Crown Estate is doing to create value for the UK.

“What we’re finding now is that, as we’re investing in talking about who we are and

£442.6m, helped by six lucrative offshore wind farm leases agreed in January 2023. This is a 42% rise on the £312.7m profit made in 2021-22. And the Crown Estate is expected to rake in more than £1bn a year in profit in each of the next two years.

The organisation’s core duties are to increase the value of its portfolio and give its net profit to the Treasury, and its strategy is focused on creating financial, environmental and social value for the nation.

Offshore wind power has been one of the most successful aspects of this. The existing offshore wind energy capacity across the Crown Estate is enough to power almost 11 million homes. And new offshore wind farm leases sold by the Crown Estate last year have the potential to power more than seven million more homes.

## A UNIQUE AND HISTORIC INSTITUTION

The Crown Estate dates back to 1760, when George III struck a deal effectively entrusting various royal assets to parliament in return for an annual income: the Civil List. Fast forward to the 20th century and the arrangement was formalised under the 1961 Crown Estate Act.

The Crown Estate dubs itself “a company for the country” and would be in the top 50 companies in the FTSE 100 if it were publicly listed, according to its latest annual report. Although two of its key stakeholders are the government and the Royal Household, the Crown Estate is independent of both.

A non-financial public corporation, it is managed by a board of up to eight Crown Estate commissioners, appointed by the monarch on the advice of the prime minister. The Crown Estate manages a portfolio of investments on behalf of the government. It is not the personal property of the monarch, who receives no income directly from it. Any revenue account profit from the Crown Estate is paid each year to the Treasury, which has received £3.2bn over the past decade and has ultimate oversight.

The Scotland Act 2016 devolved the Crown Estate’s Scottish assets, creating Crown Estate Scotland.

what we’re trying to do, it’s a much more efficient process getting to the real work,” he says. The Crown Estate’s focus is on supporting the UK’s drive towards net zero, as well as promoting biodiversity and nature recovery and wider economic growth.

The personable Labbad is all smiles, and so he should be. The past year has seen him steer the Crown Estate to a record profit of



Regent Street, part of the Crown Estate

Labbad is understandably proud of the Crown Estate’s contribution to the country’s net-zero ambitions. But he’s more guarded when asked whether he’s a monarchist and opts to talk about his pride in the shared “democratic values” of the UK and Australia. “What I’m patriotic to is the human condition,” he says. “And what I’m passionate about is, whilst I have >>



some relative influence, using that influence to focus on things like the environment, which – yes – is a national challenge, but a national challenge in the context of an international humanitarian crisis”.

Labbad has a strong sense of social justice which stems back to childhood memories of his father, who worked on a car production line and spoke with a thick Arabic accent, suffering discrimination. “I don’t stereotype culture,” he says. “People are not that different. People want to be respected. They want to be loved. They want hope. They want purpose.”

He stresses the importance of embracing the “beauty in difference” to help solve problems and “create workplaces where people belong.” Labbad is passionate about diversity and talks about his young daughter who, unlike her parents, speaks with a London accent. “She’s growing up in Hackney and watching her grow up in a place that’s so diverse is just wonderful. It’s one of the big reasons why we’re here,” he says.

Labbad adds with a grin: “She’s our cultural awareness programme. Because as she grows up through the system, we are learning to be really British.”

Hierarchy is another issue he feels strongly about. “I find it difficult to grasp the concept,” he says. “In Australian culture, people give less time to it.” This begs the question of what he makes of the civil service, which some would argue is the epitome of hierarchy.

He responds: “It’s not who’s around the table if we’re going to solve problems, but what’s on the table.”

Labbad recalls a recent exchange he had with a junior colleague where he told them: “I’ve got just as far to go as you do, because I might have experience, but the world’s changing fast and I’m trying to keep up with it. And what you don’t have in experience you have in fresh thinking. And that balances off and the world’s changing for you as much as it’s changing for me.”

The Australian expat recently started a second four-year term as chief executive. Clearly in it for the long haul, he says that his decision to stay on is partly due to the “fantastic” civil servants he works alongside. He professes to have nothing but admiration for the civil service. “It is full of incredibly smart people trying to do the right thing.” Labbad adds: “Everything we do is in partnership and one of our key partners is government...if I didn’t have complete admiration and faith in the British civil service, I don’t think that I’d be here.”

His new role has brought some unwelcome attention. Last year *The Guardian* reported that his remuneration was almost



A veteran oak in Windsor Great Park

£1.6m in 2022-23, three times the £517,000 he received in 2019-20. CSW suggests the story did not frame things in the most flattering light. There’s a pause before Labbad drives off the question with a straight bat. “No,” he says. “But at the end of the day remuneration is a matter for the board.”

Another issue that has brought negative headlines in the past year is the windfall that King Charles will receive from a rise in

the Sovereign Grant, which is linked to the profits made by the Crown Estate and paid out by the Treasury. The grant is set to rise from £86m this year to £125m in 2025-26.

Asked for his opinion, Labbad says he doesn’t have a personal view. “Our remit under the act is to deliver 100% of our net revenue surplus to the Treasury,” he says. “The Sovereign Grant is a separate arrangement altogether.”



And he is not fazed when quizzed over the minutiae of the 1961 Crown Estate Act. CSW cites Section 1.5, which states: “The validity of transactions entered into by the [Crown Estate] commissioners shall not be called into question or any suggestion of their not having acted in accordance with the provisions of this act, regulating the exercise of their power, or of their having otherwise acted in excess of their authority.”

If you cut through the legalese, isn't this essentially saying: “We can do what we like and you're not allowed to question us”? What does that mean for accountability?

Labbad calmly replies that the current legislation is fit for purpose, “broadly speaking”. He argues that what the act does “when you read it in its entirety, is give us a level of independence within a context and that context is ultimately set by parliament”.

In his view, the Crown Estate is “more transparent than most organisations” and “couldn't be more accountable”.

When it comes to his personal outlook, he describes how his five-year-old daughter helps him to hold on to his “youthful idealism”. She is also his muse. “The world our kids are going to grow up in is going to be a lot more chaotic than the world we did. And I think they will hold us to account,” he says. “One of the things that I think about a lot is whether my daughter will say in 30 years from now, she feels that

her mum and dad leant in and tried to do the right thing. And make a difference.”

Labbad confesses: “That drives me a lot because what I care about, probably more than anything else, is how she thinks about me down the track. It drives you to fight a little harder, and to push and get the little breakthroughs that, when you add them up, will make a little bit of a difference.”

He's impatient to achieve more, and is excited at the prospect of the Crown

## **“In Australian culture, people give less time to hierarchy. It's not who's around the table if we're going to solve problems, but what's on the table”**

Estate having greater freedom over where and how it makes investments, under government proposals announced during last year's Autumn Statement.

Labbad sees the Crown Estate as a “catalyst” for outcomes on behalf of the country. “That means not doing what government does and not doing what the private sector does, but playing that role in the middle,” he says.

Referring to offshore wind, he reels off some of the challenges the Crown Estate faces. “How do we create and support the creation of a market?” he asks. “How do we make sure that market can remain sustainable?” Another balance to be struck will be making sure that the private sector is “empowering itself to deliver” and getting

the right return on its capital for the risk it's taking at the same time as “the taxpayer is also getting requisite value”, he says.

But what about concerns that the new seabed economy will be dominated by a small number of oil and gas companies? “We need the grassroots economy supporting this as much as we need the big players,” he says. “What we can't afford to do is continue to roll out technologies on the seabed on a case-by-case basis.” A

strategic approach is needed in the drive to achieve net-zero targets whilst protecting the environment and retaining “the international competitiveness of the sector for inward investment”.

Labbad adds: “It is imperative that we think about the seabed holistically.”

For all his influence as a major player operating between the crown and state, Labbad is unlikely to let it go to his head. His family and friends keep him grounded. “My parents and my brothers are incredibly proud. But I'm just as proud of them as they are of me,” he says. “What's more important to my family is the person that you are rather than what you do.”

He jokes that his daughter “thinks that my job is to press the button on each wind turbine every morning, and after lunch press the same buttons and turn them off.” And as for his friends: “If I was half special because of what I did, I'd be dragged down in a second,” he says with a smile. ■

The Gwynt y Môr offshore wind farm off the coast of north Wales





Former change programme director **Laurence Bates** reflects on what it takes to drive reform in a large organisation

**F**or most of my career in the Department of Work and Pensions, I was delivering technology solutions for employees and citizens. My last role involved leading a complex programme to replace aged, inflexible and expensive technology, processes and outsourced services with modern, cost-effective solutions that provide a great user experience. This was a challenge when not many people are interested in spending money on back-office services.

So, what did I learn in my time in DWP and my last, challenging big role?

**Get trained and train others.** Free learning and development is one of the biggest advantages of being a civil servant, but I've always thought it's a missed opportunity, as there's always something else to do.

You can't be an expert in everything the department does, so I learnt to surround myself with experts by building a talented team of subject-matter experts in business, programme and wider soft skills. Of course, building those capabilities is a never-ending task as skilled people get snapped up.

I strongly believe professional development is as important as technical development; and when DWP offered a leadership development programme, I volunteered for the pilot course. I loved that so much

that I became an accredited leadership coach. Helping people to realise who they are and the positive changes they can bring about in and out of work is one of the most satisfying things I've ever done.

Supporting people to become great leaders, realise their own potential and solve their own problems is hugely empowering and leads to better outcomes for everyone.

**Get involved.** It's human nature to complain about changes that we feel are done to us rather than with us. I know how annoying and distracting that can be. I've learnt through frustration – and some growing up – that the right approach is “don't have things done to you, get involved in doing them”.

It's amazing how many people don't volunteer to help with changes, however big or small, and then feel like they have to live with the consequence.

**Be all in.** As a programme director, you must visibly demonstrate to stakeholders and approvers that you believe in the project and are committed to its outcomes, and you must remain enthusiastic as challenges arise. It's also vital that the team knows you're committed, and not thinking of an escape plan. I saw this early on and the impact it had on everyone, so my philosophy is: if you're not committed, don't be there.

**Have a Plan B.** This might seem a contradiction. However, part of looking after your department is having a costed Plan B in place. We developed one as soon as possible because we knew that new strategies from the centre could delay progress. Yes, Plan B would deliver less and only mature to a point, but it was credible, costed and would deliver stepping stones for the future.

**Form alliances.** To be successful and survive, you need a network of trusted colleagues who support and guide you. Allies also help confirm to others that you know what you're about, are invested in the outcomes and have a plan that you believe in.

Finally, the civil service is full of some of the most talented, authentic people I've ever met, but we often think about people in their immediate role and don't take time to discover the real person and make best use of their skills. If I did it all again, I'd want to get to know our people and their capabilities. Now I've left DWP, I'm still putting some of my own skills to good use, assisting Dods Training in developing the next generation of civil servants, so I hope that proves our skills are transportable too. ■

*Laurence Bates is a director at KT Innovations and an associate trainer with CSW's sister company Dods Training*





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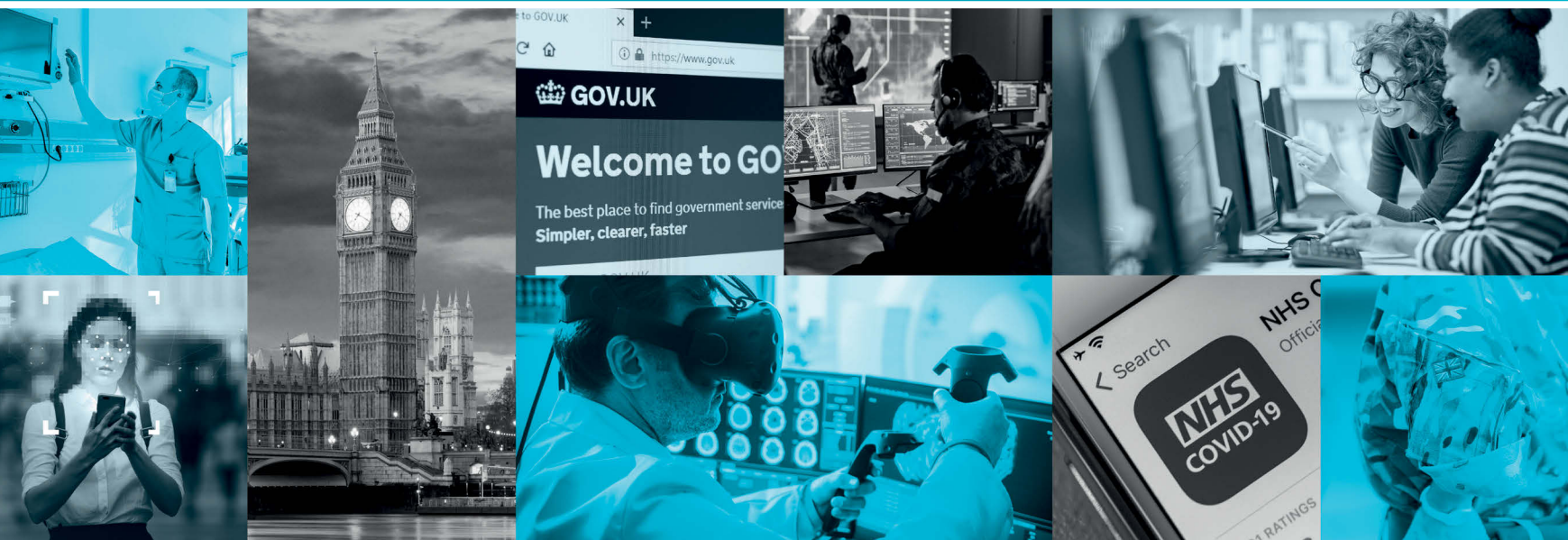
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