

# CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD 

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SPECIAL FOCUS  
**SECURITY & POLICING**

Dr Michelle Haslem interview

What's in the new VAWG strategy?

The role of youth work in violence prevention

What policymakers can learn from evidence-based policing

## JUSTICE 2.0

The MoJ's Megan Lee-Devlin  
on leading reform

## THE YOUNG ONES

How does it feel to be  
decades younger than  
the team you lead?

## ROAD TRIP

CSW travels to  
Swansea to meet  
DVLA boss Tim Moss

## CHARITY IS A VIRTUE

We hear from ex-civil servants  
who are now leading charities

# ANTONIA ROMEO

AN **EXCLUSIVE** INTERVIEW WITH  
THE NEW CABINET SECRETARY



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# FROM THE EDITOR

In my first week as a reporter for CSW, I was sent to Petty France – on what remains to this day the best outing I've been on for work – to meet a group of extremely friendly dogs brought in to help boost civil servants' wellbeing and promote a charity. I spent a happy hour chatting to officials and fussing over a retriever who also couldn't believe his luck (although when writing this, I was unable to find any evidence on CSW's website that this ever happened, and I am beginning to wonder if it was a fever dream).

Over more than seven years of interviewing civil servants since then, I have been introduced to many animal companions – most remotely, regrettably – and I have been delighted every time. This issue's special guest was Charlie, a large, black cat who snoozed through my interview with RSPCA chief exec Joanna Rowland.

That was one of a series of fascinating interviews I did for our feature exploring why so many former senior civil servants seem to end up leading charities (p.14). I heard about funding, governance and what it's like to run an entire organisation without ministerial oversight. Much of what drew Rowland to the RSPCA, as well as her love of animals, was the strong sense of purpose among the charity's staff and volunteers – a common theme among the interviewees, who all drew parallels with the way civil servants are driven by a sense of mission in improving services and citizens' lives.

One of my favourite observations came from Michelle Dyson, who moved from DHSC to Alzheimer's Society last

year and who said her biggest reflection after three months on the job was that "leadership is leadership". So much of her new role – from working with executive teams to conversations about performance – was familiar, she said.

Another theme that emerged during those conversations was the need to react quickly to unexpected challenges – something CSW's editorial team had to do following the shock staffing change at the top of the civil service shortly before we went to press. Sir Chris Wormald's departure was unexpected and highly unusual – as our columnist Prof Jon Davis demonstrates in his potted history of cabinet secretary sackings on page 13. By the time Dame Antonia Romeo was named as his successor, we had already interviewed her to appear – as Home Office permanent secretary – on the cover of this issue, which has a special focus on security and policing.

Always ready to pivot, we went back to the freshly minted cabinet secretary a week into her new job to ask about her plans and her approach to civil service reform (p.28). Like the charity chiefs I spoke to, Romeo said her role as a leader is about supporting people through times of change, "setting the direction with energy and positivity", and embracing innovation. The interview also looks at her priorities at the Home

Office and explores what her leadership there could tell us about how she will approach leading the whole civil service.

We can also take some valuable leadership lessons from our story about younger civil servants managing teams who are much older than them (p.22). Becoming a line manager early in your career might sound like a dream, but the "young bosses" we spoke to shared what it's like to experience pushback from older – but more junior – colleagues, not-so-subtle references to things they're "too young to remember" and hearing through the grapevine that a co-worker has referred to you as a "jumped-up little prick". It's well worth a read to find out how they deal with the pressure in good humour.

And fear not – though our cover star may have moved out of the Home Office, there's still lots to read in our security and policing special. Dr Michelle Haslem shares some of the biggest national security threats the UK faces and how the Homeland Security Group is tackling them; experts take a look at what's in the government's Violence Against Women and Girls strategy and why youth work is an essential part of violence prevention; and we hear about evidence-based innovations in police forces – and what civil service policy professionals can learn from them. ■



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# Why government needs to own its knowledge to deliver lasting digital efficiencies

Government faces almost £14bn in efficiency targets by 2028-29. The test is simple: if your supplier disappeared tomorrow, could you still run the service and change it? Unfortunately, too few programmes are built to pass this test



**Katie Carruthers**  
Managing Director  
Tecknuovo

**G**overnment must own its knowledge, systems, and capability. That principle sits underneath many successful efficiency efforts, yet it is still too often overlooked in digital delivery.

A simple way to test whether a programme has created genuine efficiency is to ask one question at key points in delivery: if the supplier disappeared tomorrow, could the department run and change the service safely? That question can surface important issues. In some cases, documentation exists but is difficult to act on without the supplier's involvement. In others, a straightforward policy change requires significant supplier input because in-house understanding of the architecture is limited. Sometimes support arrangements quietly become a form of retained dependency, because the knowledge needed to manage the service has not fully transferred. The service runs, but genuine ownership remains out of reach.

These patterns are not inevitable, and they are not always the result of poor intent on anyone's part. They tend to emerge when delivery models focus on output without equal attention to capability transfer. When the test is applied honestly, dependency is often structural rather than incidental.

The updated Government Efficiency Framework<sup>1</sup> makes the stakes clear. Under the 2025 Spending Review, departments are expected to deliver almost £14bn of annual efficiency gains by 2028 to 2029<sup>2</sup>. It is explicit about what does not count as progress: cancelling programmes, deferring spend, or shifting costs elsewhere is avoidance, not efficiency. Getting delivery right is not optional.

Ownership is not an abstract idea. It is practical. If the public sector cannot operate what it builds, and evolve it without prohibitive cost and risk, then the programme has not delivered lasting efficiency. It has created future dependency.

For many years, digital programmes have prioritised speed of delivery at the expense of long-term ownership. That is understandable. Departments face live service pressures, shifting policy requirements, and political timelines. Buying in expertise can be the fastest way to get moving. But the outcome is often familiar: critical knowledge remains with external suppliers, teams come to rely on

contractors for day-to-day operation as much as delivery, and when contracts end the choice becomes difficult. Absorb transition cost and operational risk or retain the incumbent at significant expense.

That is not what efficiency looks like.

When knowledge is embedded in the organisation, and capability is transferred as the work progresses, departments are better placed to reduce long-term cost and improve delivery efficiency. They are less exposed to escalating support fees, repeated contract variations, skills churn, and long-term lock-in. External expertise still plays an important role, but it strengthens the organisation rather than replacing it.

The Framework is also clear that efficiency must be sustainable and defensible. That has a direct link to risk. Departments that truly understand their systems are better able to manage cyber threats, modernise legacy platforms, adopt AI safely, and reuse compo-

nents across government. All of those are mentioned as priority drivers of efficiency. None of them are realistic without ownership of the knowledge and capability to define, design, and deliver.

The Efficiency Framework is a genuine opportunity to raise standards on both sides. For suppliers, success should not be measured by contract length or dependency. It should be measured by the strength of the organisation left behind. For government, procurement and delivery should reward transparency, skills transfer, and long-term

value, not just short-term capacity or the type of cost saving that comes from whittling down quality.

Efficiency does not have to mean doing less. It should mean doing things better, with confidence that today's decisions will not become tomorrow's constraints.



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#### References

1. HM Treasury, The Government Efficiency Framework, updated November 2025. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-government-efficiency-framework](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-government-efficiency-framework)
2. HM Treasury / Cabinet Office, Departmental Efficiency Delivery Plans, Spending Review 2025. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/departmental-efficiency-delivery-plans](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/departmental-efficiency-delivery-plans)

If these questions resonate with your programme, we would welcome the conversation.  
Find us at Stand D24 at the Global Government Innovation Forum this March

# MOVERS & SHAKERS



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

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

## O ROMEO



**Dame Antonia Romeo** has moved from the Home Office, where she

had been perm sec since April 2025, to become the first female cabinet secretary in the role's 110-year history. Romeo, who is also head of the civil service, said it was a "huge privilege" to be asked to take on the role.

Keir Starmer said Romeo, who has also been perm sec at the Department of International Trade and the Ministry of Justice, "has shown she is the right person to drive the government to reform".

Romeo was appointed a week after Sir Chris Wormald's departure from the role. The Cabinet Office said in a statement that Wormald had agreed with Starmer that he would stand down. The PM thanked Wormald "for his long and distinguished career of public service, spanning more than 35 years, and for the support that he has given me over the past year".

Before becoming the government's top civil servant in December 2024, Wormald spent eight years as perm sec at the Department of Health and Social Care. He also spent 15 years at the Department for Education and served as head of the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

Wormald said: "It has been an honour and a privilege to serve as a civil servant for the past 35 years, and a particular distinction to lead the service as cabinet secretary."

Simon Ridley, the Home Office's second perm sec, has been appointed as the department's acting perm sec.

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE



Department for Work and Pensions perm sec **Sir Peter Schofield**

will step down in July after 35 years in the civil service.

Schofield said he had not taken the decision to leave lightly, adding: "Having passed my eight-year anniversary, now feels like a good time to pause and reflect on what I want to do next while spending more time with my family."

Schofield became perm sec in 2018, two years after joining DWP as director general for finance. Other departments he has worked in include the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

In a message to staff, Schofield said one of the biggest highlights of his decade at DWP was "the massive achievement of completing the rollout of Universal Credit for our working age customers". He also said he will "always be most proud of the way colleagues

came together during the pandemic, and how we were there for people when they needed us the most".

## CLOSING ARGUMENT



**Susanna McGibbon**, who has been Treasury solicitor and

Government Legal Department perm sec for five years, will step down to "explore pastures new" in spring after helping to find her replacement.

McGibbon, who also leads the government legal profession, has spent 33 years in the civil service. She has been a director general at GLD; DG of the legal group at the Department for Work and Pensions; and director of litigation at GLD, a role in which she was responsible for conducting domestic litigation on behalf of most government departments.

## TREASURED ADVICE



**Prof Brian Bell** became the Treasury's chief economic adviser

and DG economics and fiscal on 9 March.

Bell, who also leads the Government Economic Service and the Treasury's economics

function, replaced Sam Beckett, who retired earlier this year.

Bell has chaired the Migration Advisory Committee since 2018 and is a professor of economics at King's Business School, King's College London. He has previously worked at the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund and hedge funds and investment banks in London.

Treasury perm sec James Bowler said Bell's "extensive experience in economic research and policymaking at leading financial institutions and the financial services sector will be invaluable as we work to deliver the government's economic agenda".

## DRIVING CHANGE



**Beverley Warmington** succeeded Loveday Ryder as chief exec of the

Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency on 5 January.

She will implement the DVSA's plan to cut driving test waiting times, which averaged 22 weeks in September.

Warmington has more than two decades' experience as a civil servant, including 15 years at the Department for International Development. Most recently, she was area director for London, Essex and Eastern England at the Department for Work and Pensions, where she managed more than 12,000

staff delivering services across multiple sites.

Simon Lightwood, minister for roads and buses, said Warmington “brings a wealth of operational leadership experience with her”.

## JUST AROUND THE CORNER



**Nick Goodwin**, who has led HM Courts and Tribunals Service

since March 2022, is moving to an unspecified new role in the Ministry of Justice.

Goodwin will stay in post until his successor is appointed. HMCTS launched a recruitment campaign in February, offering a salary of £150,000 for the next chief exec of the executive agency.

The successful candidate will be responsible for advising lord chancellor David Lammy, lady chief justice Sue Carr and senior president of tribunals James Dingemans, as well as for the delivery of key priorities for the justice system. They will also lead the implementation of court reform following Sir Brian Leveson’s independent review.

## ONWARD, CHRISTIAN



**Christian Turner**, an experienced diplomat and civil servant, assumed

office as British ambassador to the US on 2 February after presenting his credentials to the State Department. The role has been vacant since Peter Mandelson was sacked in September over his links to Jeffrey Epstein.

Turner was most recently political director at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office from January 2024 to September 2025. He previously served as British high commissioner to Pakistan and as the prime minister’s international affairs adviser and deputy national security adviser.

In December, Turner said he was “honoured” to be nominated to serve in the role and looked forward to working with the Trump administration and leaders in Congress “at a pivotal time for the transatlantic relationship”.

## OVER AND OUT



**Tim Allan** resigned as Keir Starmer’s director of communications in February.

tions in February.

Allan, who was an adviser to Tony Blair in the 1990s, was only appointed No.10 executive director of communications in September. “I have decided to stand down and allow a new No.10 team to be built. I wish the PM and his team every success,” he said.

The announcement was made a day after political adviser Morgan McSweeney resigned as the PM’s chief of staff over his role in the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson as US ambassador.

## SERIOUS BUSINESS



The director of the Serious Fraud Office, **Nick Ephgrave**, will

retire at the end of March. Ephgrave, who joined the

SFO in September 2023, will depart at the halfway point of his five-year term.

His retirement comes after 38 years in public service, and a number of senior roles in UK law enforcement including assistant commissioner at the Metropolitan Police. Ephgrave said: “It is with great pride that I reflect on the enormous progress the SFO has made in the last two and a half years. We have achieved more things more quickly than even I thought possible thanks entirely to the enthusiasm, commitment and can-do attitude from everyone at the SFO.”

Attorney general Richard Hermer KC said Ephgrave had “modernised the organisation’s approach to tackling serious fraud, bribery and corruption, strengthened its capabilities, and secured important convictions in complex economic crime cases”. SFO chief operating officer Graham McNulty has been appointed as interim director.

## PERSONAL SPACE



UK Space Agency chief **Paul Bate** announced his departure in

February, following last year’s news that the UKSA would merge into the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology’s Space Directorate by April. The new unit overseeing civil space policy and delivery will retain the UKSA name and brand identity.

“Now is the right time to pass the baton on,” Bate said, adding that his successor will have “one of the best jobs in the civil service”. Recruitment for a director to replace Bate is under way.

UKSA chair David Willetts said Bate “has done an enormous amount not just for the UK Space Agency but more widely for the British space sector as a whole”.

## GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN



Tributes poured in after the death of former Foreign Office

chief mouser Palmerston in February. A post on the cat’s X account read: “Palmerston, Diplocat extraordinaire, passed away peacefully on 12 February. ‘Palmy’ was a special member of the Government House team in Bermuda, and a much loved family member. He was a wonderful companion, with a gentle nature, and will be sorely missed.”

The much-loved moggy joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at King Charles Street in 2016 from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home with a remit to control pests. He retired in 2020, but it was announced in February 2025 that he had been brought out of retirement for a new overseas diplomatic post as “feline relations consultant (semi-retired)” to Andrew Murdoch, the governor of Bermuda.

Leading the tributes, Battersea said Palmerston had “helped show the joy rescue cats bring to people’s lives”, adding: “He will be greatly missed, and his legacy will live on.”

Named after the UK’s longest-serving foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, he served under one permanent secretary, Simon McDonald, and four foreign secretaries: Philip Hammond, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Hunt and Dominic Raab. ■

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# DIRECTORS' CUT

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

## ELISABETH CUTHBERTSON AND LUCY RYAN

Director, rail reform (job-share), Department for Transport



### To do your job well, you need...

To trust your team. We rely on a fantastic team of legal, policy, project and rail experts - we need to focus on what only we can do and empower them to deliver.

### First job in government

**Elisabeth:** Forecasting oil prices during the 2000 fuel crisis - we had to change them a lot!  
**Lucy:** Also in 2000: writing a plan for future introduction of the Euro in the UK. How times change!

### Proudest achievement to date

The introduction of the railways bill on 5 November - we've been working on it for



**Keeping things on track** The introduction of the railways bill was the culmination of five years of work

five years! This generational change will make the railway more customer friendly, efficient and drive growth and connectivity across Britain.

**Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work**

**Lucy:** Being called Elisabeth (this happens vice versa too). Occupational hazard of a job-share, despite looking

nothing like each other.

**Elisabeth:** Driving a remotely operated vehicle in a pond at Sellafield when I was responsible for the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority.

**If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...**

**Elisabeth:** A psychologist – I'm interested in why people behave the way they do.

**Lucy:** An ecologist – I'm fascinated by the idea of nature as a system.

**What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?**

**Lucy:** When you lose, don't lose the lesson – there's always something positive to take from the hard stuff that happens to you.

**Elisabeth:** Sometimes you need to change the system to fix the problem, even though that can be harder.

**If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?**

To be more agile and responsive. With limited resources, you have to stop things to deliver new priorities. ■

# VICKY DAWE

Director, energy development, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero



**What does your job involve?**

Planning decisions for nationally significant energy infrastructure, from offshore wind to power pylons, as well as reforms to speed up energy planning decisions. I also manage devolution issues for DESNZ, North Sea oil and gas policy, fracking and the legacy of coal mining, including coal pensions. All pretty low profile...

**To do your job well, you need...**

To regularly look at things with a fresh perspective and pivot when needed, a strong commercial and political radar, genuine impartiality, and bags of empathy to support my teams, who work incredibly hard on some complex issues. Lately, I've also had to upskill on AI.

**First job in government**

Equipping the Fire and Rescue Service to respond to terrorist attacks after 9/11. I initially came in as a temp HEO.

**Proudest achievement to date**

In the early days of the Russia/Ukraine war, my team sent small power generators to Ukraine to help power hospitals.

**Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work**

I was housebound on crutches,



**Shore thing** Guiding major energy projects with empathy, impartiality and a strong political radar

before we had the tech to work from home, so my overstretched boss sent a car for me. As I drove into Whitehall, a group of Japanese tourists mistook me for a VIP.

**If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...**

I honestly feel it's a privilege to do my job, but film production looks fun.

**What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?**

People only see your actions. They don't see your intentions.

**If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?**

Great leadership comes in many different packages: backgrounds, personal styles,

**"My overstretched boss sent a car for me. A group of Japanese tourists mistook me for a VIP" Vicky Dawe**

working patterns, education. We do tend to have a preferred "type", but I believe a variety of perspectives leads to better cultures and outcomes. ■

# MICHAEL PADFIELD

Director and deputy head, Attorney General's Office



## What does your job involve?

The AGO's mission is to make law and politics work together at the heart of the UK constitution. Together with Doug, the DG, and our executive board, I'm responsible for making sure we're in a position to respond to whatever comes up, advise the law officers, and enable the government lawfully to react. In practice, that means a lot of liaison across government and the criminal justice system.

## To do your job well, you need...

Flexibility. We're a really small team of 70 or so, which means everyone needs to be at the top of their game and

ready to pivot at short notice. And our office can only do its work by relying on a huge network across government.

## First job in government

I joined from commercial litigation, so assumed I would be doing something commercial. I found myself in the immigration litigation team in the Government Legal Department. A full caseload of judicial reviews was a bit of a shock to the system.

## Proudest achievement to date

We can't talk much about a lot of the things we work on. But in terms of the actual

impact on people, my work in a previous role on the Horizon scandal. A small team of us were able to shape a policy that went some small way to repairing a terrible injustice.

## Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work

Being put up at short notice to brief the media lobby in No.10. I can't describe the terror of saying the wrong thing and becoming the story. The feedback afterwards was that the journalists were confused that I kept on giving detailed constitutional law answers to their questions about political issues. I wasn't invited back.

## If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...

Probably a very bored lawyer in the City!

## What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?

Don't take the job home with you. Our jobs can be difficult enough and during a crisis or a period of sustained political pressure, they can be intensely stressful. Being able to do your job to the best of your professional ability but then to go home and see your family, friends, or just switch off and read a book or watch a film, is such a crucial way to survive. ■

# ADRIAN ORCHARD

Director, warhead delivery, Defence Nuclear Organisation



## To do your job well, you need...

Resilience. We are working at pace to recapitalise much of the capability that keeps the UK independent nuclear deterrent at sea, 365 days a year. Our work is vital and the "no fail" element adds a level of focus that can put pressure on me and the teams tasked with maintaining toady's capability and delivering the future.

## First job in government

I spent 35 years flying in the Royal Navy as a Fleet Air Arm Harrier pilot, so my first government job in uniform was as a freshly graduated Sea Harrier pilot flying from the aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal. My first civil service role was on secondment

from Cabinet Office leading major programme delivery at Sellafield, part of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority.



## Proudest achievement to date

I was immensely proud of being part of a team that pulled my major project at Sellafield out of the "red" and set it on a course for success.

## Most bizarre thing that's happened to you at work

I have to use an example of my time in uniform – our aircraft carrier strike group made up of seven ships was heading back from the USA. Nearing the Azores, we all stopped in mid-ocean and deployed a small boat to head over to a Portuguese fisherman who we effectively surrounded. Armed with a bottle of whiskey and 200 cigarettes, our team bartered with a surprised fisherman, who gave us seven swordfish that we brought back to the aircraft carrier and that evening had the best fish supper ever!

## If you weren't a civil servant, you'd be...

Involved in the third sector – mental welfare is an important strand for me and I

have a particular focus on post-combat PTSD.

## What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given?

Always listen more than you speak.

## If you could wave a magic wand over the civil service, what would you change?

Make performance management an area of critical focus. We aren't as brave as we need to be in addressing it. We owe it to those who aren't performing to be honest and help them to improve or to find a way to do something differently. Poor performance is frustrating, but poor performance not addressed drags teams down. ■

# From ambition to impact: Making digital transformation deliver real public value

Digital transformation in government often faces challenges in converting plans into lasting public value. Success depends not just on technology but on addressing real problems, strong leadership focused on outcomes, and cultural and organisational changes



**James Meyjes**  
Regional Sales &  
Account Manager - UK Defence  
Mastek

**A**cross government, digital ambition is abundant. Strategies, spending bids, and business cases frequently promise transformation at scale, data-driven decisions, and citizen-centric services. Yet often, transformation programmes generate activity rather than outcomes, and momentum fades once the initial excitement passes. The challenge is not a lack of technology, but the difficulty of turning transformation into something that sticks.

Three key shifts can help move this dial: anchoring transformation in real problems, aligning leadership around measurable outcomes, and investing as much in culture as in technology.

## Start with the problem, not the solution

Not every problem is a digital problem. Yet, digital transformation can often be seen as a technology problem as opposed to a business need, meaning it can feel easier to jump straight to picking a platform. By starting with a tool and trying to retrofit it into the business, the solution will not land, and you will end up with a system that looks good in a demo but does not move the needle<sup>1</sup>.

By analysing the need, mapping the process, and diagnosing the pain points before you agree on technology, you will better understand the problem that needs resolving and the roadmap to overcoming it. Investing the time to address this upfront will deliver better value-for-money in the long run.

## Leadership that drives outcomes

Impact depends on clarity of purpose. However, many digital transformation initiatives fail due to a common lack of a clearly defined objectives; research from McKinsey tells us that 70% of digital transformations fail, often due to poor strategy and unclear goals<sup>2</sup>.

The key is ensuring every decision is anchored to a clear business need that matters to your teams and leadership<sup>3</sup>. Focus on a small set of objectives that are specific, measurable and outcome focused, as transformation initiatives work best when they are explicitly tied to real value<sup>4</sup>. Avoid measuring activity (number of items delivered) and instead measure impact (reduced response times).

## Looking beyond the technology

Digital transformation rests on three dimensions: technological, organisational, and social<sup>5</sup>. Yet often the focus is on the technology. It is easier to procure a system than to redefine accountability. Easier to fund a platform than to challenge governance structures designed for risk control rather than delivery pace. But, digital ways of working require faster decisions, tolerance for iteration and clear product ownership. In environments shaped by scrutiny, policy and legacy processes this can feel uncomfortable but, without these, technology simply overlays old behaviour.

Focus should be on digital readiness beyond technology. On operating models with clear decision rights, ways of working that empower teams and value innovation, and a digitally literate workforce with leaders who reward learning<sup>6</sup>. Without this foundation, transformation is experienced as a one-off event, not a lasting capability.

## So what?

For government, the prize is significant. When transformation is approached as a capability rather than a programme, it becomes repeatable. Lessons identified are retained, delivery confidence grows, and organisations become better equipped to respond to policy priorities and external shocks. The next phase of public sector transformation will be won by organisations that build the muscle to translate ambition into measurable value.



Trust. Value. Velocity

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## DAVE PENMAN REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

**AFTER WEEKS OF TURMOIL AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT, ROMEO'S APPOINTMENT SIGNALS A CHANCE FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE TO RESET, REGAIN CONFIDENCE AND CHAMPION ITS VALUE**

**W**hen you're a trade union leader, it's difficult to appear positive. Inevitably, what we do means we're clearing up a mess somewhere or being outraged from East Tilbury on the latest government shenanigans. It's why I look the way I do in every photograph the press use of me. At home I couldn't be cheerier or more upbeat, honest.

Occasionally, despite my best intentions, a glimmer of hope shines through and my demeanour changes. This happened last week, fleetingly, but it was noticed. After almost a fortnight of the most self-defeating and damaging conduct of government, from the briefing against the former cabinet secretary, his removal and the vacuum created being filled with misogynist bile, we finally had the appointment of a new cabinet secretary, Antonia Romeo. Rather ridiculously for 2026, she is the first woman to be appointed in the role.

All is not as it should be in government. With a large majority in parliament and a former civil servant as PM, the promise of doing things differently

**“Why should ministers or the public have confidence in the ability of the civil service to deliver if they never hear about it when it does?”**

felt genuine. Yet here we are, once again, amidst the Westminster psychodrama that saps so much energy from government and detracts from the job at hand.

Antonia's appointment provides an opportunity to “move on”, as they say. It's a loaded phrase often used by those who are responsible for the mess they want you to “move on” from. It is also, though, an opportunity for the civil service and its leadership to “reset”, as this government is often fond of saying.

Antonia said in her message to civil servants: “No one will be a stronger advocate of the civil service than I am. I will stand up strongly for the civil service and I will work with you all to maintain and build trust in our institution.” That will be music to the ears of many civil servants. We need the service to be a confident partner in government, demonstrating our values and our value. Championing the successes, efficiency and innovation that leads to better outcomes for citizens and happens every day across every department, agency and arm's-length body.

There are limitations on what the civil service can do to promote its success, particularly if ministers – as they have done in the past – feel it is in their political interests to attack, rather than champion, the service. But that's not where we should be

or indeed – for all the problems of the last two years – where I think we genuinely are with this government. After a decade of being almost infantilised by ministers, we need to get our mojo back. Why should ministers, the public or future ministers, for that matter, have confidence in the ability of the civil service to deliver if they never hear about it when it does?

Governing is tough. No one tackles issues of the scale and complexity that the civil service does, or indeed is subject to the scrutiny and transparency that rightly comes from being the administrative arm of an elected government.

We need a civil service leadership that will stand up for the values of an impartial, permanent civil service – not as part of some woke ideology, but because it delivers better government. That means we need to shout about the results of that better government when it makes a difference and hold our hands up to the mistakes and flaws when it doesn't. Confident,



visible leadership is required. That's no easy task given the complexities of departmental structures and the dual role the cabinet secretary has between supporting the prime minister and leading the civil service. Difficult, but not impossible.

Antonia Romeo, like every cabinet secretary, will have strengths and weaknesses. She is at times untypical of many past civil service leaders and unafraid of profile. That's a challenge when the civil service essentially is meant to have no persona, as it merely represents the elected government of the day. There are strong views on this issue and it's a path fraught with challenges. There is legitimate public interest in public servants who have a huge influence in how government works, but few know more than Antonia the flip side of that, or how women in the public eye are treated by the press.

It is, however, an area where I have felt for some time the civil service needs to improve, including in giving its senior leaders the skills and resource needed to do it well. It is also exactly what we need right now. Hence my uncharacteristic optimism. ■

*Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union*

# INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

## TENSION AT THE TOP OF GOVERNMENT IS NOT UNCOMMON; FIRING A CABINET SECRETARY IS. JON DAVIS LOOKS BACK THROUGH THE YEARS

**“T**he prime minister and the cabinet secretary have agreed that Chris Wormald will stand down as the cabinet secretary and head of the civil service by mutual agreement,” went the 12 February press release.

Mandarines language does not hide the fact that Wormald was fired after only a year, thereby becoming the shortest tenured cabinet secretary. The previous holder of that unenviable title, Mark Sedwill, was dismissed in 2020 after only two years. That came after an unedifying tug-of-war with Dominic Cummings over who effectively was running Boris Johnson’s domestic and security policy (Sedwill also held the national security adviser role). Cummings prevailed, adding another scalp to his war on government.

Tension at the very apex of the political-official interface is not uncommon. Firing a cabinet secretary is. While there have been only 15 secretaries to the cabinet since its creation in December 1916, it is interesting that Tony Blair got through four. That restless premier felt he only got the cabinet secretary he wanted eight years into his decade with the appointment of Gus O’Donnell. Alastair Campbell’s diaries are littered with dissatisfactions on both sides.

But Blair never fired one – Robin Butler, Richard Wilson and Andrew Turnbull all retired at the age of 60. What Blair did do was to work around them, particularly in his second term, with the traditional role of cabinet secretary split four ways. David Omand was the security and intelligence coordinator; responsibility for honours went to the Lord Chancellor’s Department (from 2003, the Department of Constitutional Affairs) and its permanent secretary, Hayden Phillips; and Michael Barber was head of the Delivery Unit, taking on the role of driving progress on prime ministerial priorities. Turnbull wrote the cabinet minutes and kept the central machine turning – indeed, it was remarked how uninvolved he was over the Iraq decision. One’s thoughts turn to Walter Bagehot’s famous efficient-versus-dignified dichotomy – comparing the ceremonial parts of government with the less visible parts that actually perform the work.

Wormald’s role was not just cabinet secretary but also head of the (in earlier days “home”) civil

service. The fusing of the two functions in one person has not historically always been the case.

Throughout much of the mid-20th century, the role was to be found as joint secretary to the Treasury, with Laurence Helsby its last occupier. The practice ended with the creation of the Civil Service Department in 1968 in response to the legendary Fulton Report, and its new permanent secretary, William Armstrong, was named head of the home civil service. Even this only lasted 13 years as Margaret Thatcher abolished the department in 1981 after finding it inefficient and its last permanent secretary, Ian Bancroft, troublesome.

Bancroft was an archetypal Sir Humphrey of the old school: a war hero, strong, clever and cool. It was said he had a frank exchange of views with the PM over her mantra of “advisers advise, ministers decide”, responding that it was indeed his job to advise “and hers was, at least at first, to listen”. It is delicious to imagine her fury! After this and other contretemps, Thatcher abolished the CSD and sent its venerable boss into slightly early retirement, where he continued to rile the prime minister with lines such as: “Conviction politicians, certainly. Conviction civil servants, no.”

Bancroft’s phlegmatic nature lived long in the folk memory of Whitehall and its watchers with his choice lines. Facing a tricky problem, he would say: “I think we’ll have to draft around that one.”

When security staff found a 1970s Cabinet Office minister had failed to secure one of two filing cabinets – one for official work and one for party documents – that had to be locked overnight, the minister was hauled up in front of Bancroft who, on finding it was the political one, exclaimed: “They bowled you out but it was a no-ball!” And perhaps my favourite line, over the naming of a new department: “Ah! Now, there’s something the ministers can decide!”

These are the only effective examples of dismissal in the modern era. Since the two-decades-long stints served by the first cabinet secretary, Maurice Hankey (1916-38) and the head of the home civil service, Warren Fisher (1919-39 who was also permanent secretary to the Treasury), tenures have in recent times been getting shorter. It will be interesting to see if Dame Antonia Romeo bucks this trend. ■

**“Bancroft’s phlegmatic nature lived long in the folk memory of Whitehall. Facing a tricky problem, he would say: ‘I think we’ll have to draft around that one’”**



Rare exit Sir Chris Wormald

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

# THIRD SECTOR'S A CHARM



In recent years, senior civil servants have snagged a number of high-profile jobs as charity chief executives. So what is it about leading charities that is so attractive to top officials looking for a career move?

**Beckie Smith** finds out

**J**oanna Rowland wasn't job hunting when she was approached by a recruiter about becoming the RSPCA's next chief executive. At the time, she was director general for the Home Office's Customer Service Group, overseeing 23,000 people working on visas, asylum and immigration, following multiple DG roles at HM Revenue and Customs.

"It was just one of those opportunities that came up and I couldn't say no," she says. Before becoming its new boss in December, she hadn't been formally involved with the charity, although she had donated. And, she adds, "animals are never very far away from me. All my animals have been rescues". (CSW is introduced to Charlie, a relaxed-looking black cat snoring at her side.)

Rowland says she did "a lot of soul searching" during the application process because taking the job would mean leaving the civil service earlier than she had planned. In particular, she would have liked to have seen through the Home Office's plans to move asylum seekers out of hotels. "That said, as I got deeper into the process, the more excited I got at the prospect of running a charity. And I definitely sleep slightly easier at night not being in the throes of today's politics."

Rowland is one of a handful of people who have left the upper echelons of the civil service to lead a charity in recent months. So why is making the switch so attractive?

Michelle Dyson had been in the civil service for 27 years – the last five as a director general at the Department of Health and Social Care – before becoming

chief executive of Alzheimer’s Society in November. She hadn’t been gunning for a perm sec role – “because you have less direct impact [than in some other roles] and that’s the thing that really motivates me”. She was DG for adult social care at the height of the Covid pandemic – an “absolutely awful” time during which she felt she was making a real difference. “So I was looking for another role like that in terms of that real impact.”

Dementia was an area where she could see this impact: “It’s one of the big problems of our time, I’ve got family experience of it and the sense that things are really moving now from a science perspective makes it quite exciting.” Since joining, Dyson has relished “deploying all the strategic skills” she honed in the civil service: “That’s what I feel I bring to the role.”

Rowland thinks DGs and perm secs make “very credible candidates” to lead charities. “Once you’ve done scale and complexity in government, you can do scale and complexity [anywhere]... and that complexity also is drawn from the fact that trust and reputation is everything.”

For Shona Dunn, who left her job as second perm sec at the Home Office for St John Ambulance in September 2024, scale and complexity were part of the appeal. She had always wanted to lead an organisation outside government and, in early 2024, with an election and her 55th birthday approaching, Dunn felt it was now or never.

“St John is a very, very old, really quite complicated and very large organisation, and post-Covid, it was in a tough spot and needed a bit of a reset. That was a really interesting prospect.” She says large charities are a “recognisable context” for senior civil servants “because you’re working with people who are clearly mission and purpose driven – but it’s a whole new set of relationships and dynamics to work within, and that’s just absolutely fascinating”.

For Dyson, the leap between sectors felt less jarring than she expected. While her career started in the private sector, she was a civil servant for nearly three decades – “so I thought I would feel very counter-cultural and they would find me really strange.

“It really has not felt like that. And my biggest

reflection is that leadership is leadership, and so much feels familiar to me: the way in which I work with my executive team and reach out to an organisation of almost 2,000 people; the things that we talk about – risk, people issues, tech, performance.”

Another familiar part of the role is also one of her favourites: visiting service users. She says it has been “so instructive” joining dementia advisers on home visits, seeing firsthand how they support people and their families. “That has always meant so much to me, right from the beginning of my career,” she says.

**M**adeleine Durie is now in her second charity chief exec role since leaving the then-Department of Business, Innovation and Skills in 2012 for Minstead Trust, a small charity that supports people with learning disabilities. In 2021, she moved to the children and young people’s charity Youth Options.

She was a director when she left BIS – but machinery of government changes meant that to progress in the department, she would need to change policy areas. “There was a lot of discussion – as there is now – around the size of the civil service, and I felt it was time for me to make a positive move,” she says. “I wanted to have that same ethos that people have within the civil service, which is about your public duty and making a difference.”

She says her new workplace was a stark contrast to the civil service, largely because of its small scale. When she joined, it had around 35 staff and a turnover of about £1.5m. Teams shared email accounts, there was no proper HR system and while policies existed, they focused on service delivery rather

than organisational structure. “So there was a whole load of change that needed to happen,” she says.

And there were none of the civil service’s clear hierarchies. Durie took over as chief exec from one of Minstead Trust’s founders and many of the staff “had grown into the roles

because they happened to be in the right place at the right time”, she says. One early mistake she made was assuming she understood job titles she recognised – and only realising after six months that a “team leader” didn’t lead an entire team.

And she no longer has such a wide range of experts to hand. Last year, she oversaw a £1m building refurbishment – “I’m not a facilities expert, but there isn’t anyone else in the organisation who is” – and lately she has been setting Youth Options’ hybrid working policy. “You have to be prepared to put your hand to anything and do the best you can with the skills and

experience you and the rest of your team have got,” she says.

Even much larger charities can be a culture shock. “I thought that a charity would be more similar to the civil service than it turned out to be,” says Clare Moriarty, who



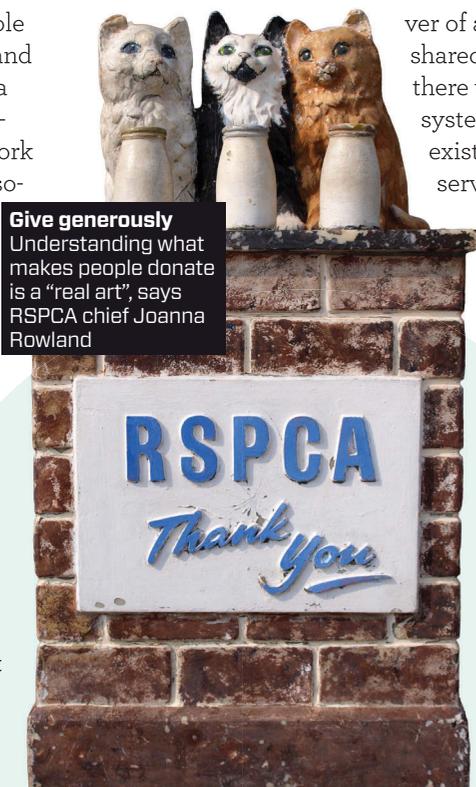
**“My biggest reflection is that leadership is leadership, and so much feels familiar to me”**  
**Michelle Dyson, Alzheimers Society**

became chief exec of Citizens Advice in 2021. She had spent her last year in government leading the Brexit department (her second perm sec role after four years leading the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), leaving when DEXEU closed in 2020.

While there were some “quite fundamental” similarities – she names complexity, people and purpose – she says “you have to be up for a big unlearning and relearning, and a lot of repeated humility... you can’t just come in and say, ‘Well, this is how we used to do things in the civil service, let’s do it like that,’ because the cultures are very different.”

For one, Citizens Advice is a federated charity: the organisation Moriarty runs is the membership body for around 235 local branches, each with its own trustees and strategy. “We don’t have the power to direct them; we provide a lot of the infrastructure and we set direction,” she says.

And if there’s one thing Moriarty misses from her civil service days, it’s “the quality of work that people produce and the smoothness with which things happen”. Like all the chief execs CSW has interviewed, Moriarty speaks glowingly of the staff and volunteers she works with – praising their dedication, innovation and tenacity. But, she adds: “There’s a kind of rigour that you do in the civil service without noticing. And the quality



**Give generously**  
Understanding what makes people donate is a “real art”, says RSPCA chief Joanna Rowland

of process, business planning, risk management and performance management are just baked into how the system works.”

She recalls Keir Starmer telling the Liaison Committee last year that he was “frustrated” with the time it takes between “pulling a lever” in government and delivery. “But in my experience,” she says, “if you pull the levers in a government department, stuff does happen, because of the political environment and the imperative and just the way that the civil service works; whereas within a charity, partly because you don’t have the same number of people at the same level of seniority, and you tend to be very strapped for resources, [it might not].”

Moriarty also found herself facing a new and difficult level of financial precarity. “Sitting in the civil service, I thought we were terribly short of money,” she says. “It was only when I came to the charity sector that I realised what it really means to be very short of money.”

Dunn faced a similar wakeup call. “The civil service is a very cash-constrained environment. But if there is a clear and pretty unarguable business case for investing in

**“The job I now do is probably harder than anything I did in the civil service, and I had quite an array of quite hard jobs”**  
**Clare Moriarty,**  
**Citizens Advice**

core systems that will make a difference to the long-term effectiveness of the department or the services it’s trying to deliver, as a permanent secretary, I would have always argued very strongly for prioritising the investment... You don’t always have that luxury in the third sector,” she says. “It is a much more precarious existence. The margins of error are much, much smaller.”

But “operating always at the margins of doability” means charities are often “much more viscerally commercial than you might think”, Dunn adds. Most of St John’s funding comes from its commercial workplace training, “so if the market changes on commercial workplace training, we have to change with it – or we have to change ahead of it, ideally – because otherwise we won’t continue to succeed”, she explains.

Funding for many charities is complex and short-term. Citizens Advice gets most of its money via local and national government and other charities: “You can go through entire commissioning cycles for just one year’s worth of funding. You have to upend your business model,” Moriarty says.

And because a lot of this funding is tied to specific grants or projects, there is very little flexibility to move resources around. “So you can have a really good conversation, everyone can agree that something is a big priority... but a combination of the culture and the sheer availability of resources means that it doesn’t quite happen.”

Charities like the RSPCA present another challenge: fundraising. “That’s a real art,” Rowland says. “People can be hugely brand aware, really bought

**A**ll the interviewees CSW spoke to said that while they loved their civil service careers, having more agency has been a welcome change. “One of the lovely things about going into the third sector and being a CEO, as opposed to a permanent secretary, is the much greater sense of having your own fate – and the fate of your organisation – fully in your hands,” Dunn says.

Becoming a chief exec means “you’ve got more responsibility, more account-



**Well fed** Citizens Advice is a federated charity with more than 200 branches

into your cause. But translating that into a motivation to actually donate... I’ve loved learning about that.”

However, she draws a parallel with her work on customer experience and digital transformation at HMRC, where she was considering people’s motivations to get their taxes right and how to design services to encourage them to do so. “In fundraising, it’s very similar. What makes somebody a lifelong supporter of the RSPCA? It draws on the same skills and insight techniques.”

The last few years have been especially tough for charities as costs have risen. “It’s not just about maintaining your funding levels,” Rowland says. “You’ve got to get them higher or you have to cut expenditure.” But it’s “exactly that challenge” that drew her to the job: “It doesn’t mean I’m not apprehensive about it... you take a deep breath facing into those challenges. But I wouldn’t have wanted a nice, easy ride.”

ability, but more control”, Rowland says. “In the civil service, you are responsible for some of it, never all of it – especially in the bigger departments. And even if you’re perm sec of a smaller department, there’s still No.10 controlling your grid slots, or the Cabinet Office telling you how you can recruit and how much you can pay people... Sometimes, as a very senior civil servant, all of that can be quite difficult to navigate.”

Dyson shares a recent anecdote in which she wanted some analysis done, so she commissioned it. Alzheimer’s Society then published it and promoted it in the media. “It just felt so easy,” she says.

With greater agency comes fewer constraints on what chief execs can say publicly, now they are not beholden to ministers. “You have your own voice, which is really rather nice,” Moriarty says. In particular, being able to speak out on problems that stem from the implementation of



**Staying alive** Most of St John Ambulance's funding comes from its commercial workplace training

government policies, share what Citizens Advice is seeing on the ground and suggest solutions “is quite liberating”.

This can take some getting used to, however. “The two things you never,

**“One of the lovely things about going into the third sector and being a CEO is the much greater sense of having your fate - and the fate of your organisation - fully in your hands”**  
*Shona Dunn, St John Ambulance*

ever do as a civil servant are media and going to party conferences. Quite quickly after arriving here, I found I needed to do both of those things,” Moriarty says. “Doing media still makes me slightly nervous. But it’s about the opportunity to articulate what’s important.”

Likewise, Rowland says that while it’s “refreshing” to have her own voice, she’s “having to grow into” it. And she is aware that she must still be thoughtful about how she expresses herself, “especially at a mainstream charity that is, I like to think, a bit of a national treasure... you cannot afford to alienate a certain amount of your support base”.

And there are new governance structures to navigate. Governance of UK charities is entirely non executive, while

chief execs advise the board. The chief exec-trustee relationship is “very different from the civil servant-secretary of state relationship, or even civil service NEDs”, Rowland says. “It’s got different rules of engagement and when that runs really well, it bodes well for the success of the charity. So you’ve got to get that right.” That means giving the board all the information they need to make decisions in a way that makes good

use of their time (trustees must be volunteers) and doesn’t overload them with unnecessary operational detail – “because that’s my job”, Rowland says.

**W**hen CSW asks what other advice the charity chiefs would give senior civil servants considering a similar career move, a clear theme emerges: don’t think it’s an easy job. “I do think they’ve got to be passionate about the cause that they’re joining,” Rowland says. “People have asked, ‘Is it about taking a step back from some of the ferocity of the civil service and central government?’ But these are not easy rides. These are big organisations, they’re very complex and it is a full-on job. It’s not a sunset job either.”

Moriarty agrees: “The job I now do is

probably harder than anything I did in the civil service, and I had quite an array of quite hard jobs.” When people tell her they want to move to the charity sector to “make things happen”, she warns them it’s a trade-off. While having the freedom to speak up is refreshing, she says “sitting outside when you have been accustomed to sitting inside the tent” can feel hard. “Some of the time, you get amazing hits and policy is actually changed for the better – but you can have absolutely all of the right answers and all of the evidence and all of the sophisticated techniques and actually, if the policy is not for turning, the policy won’t be turned... it’s tiring.”

Despite these warnings, the move comes highly recommended. “What I’m getting in abundance is loads of energy from that real sense of purpose,” Rowland says.

Ultimately, Dunn says, anyone thinking of applying to a top charity job should make sure it’s the right time for them to make the move: “Don’t leave thinking you’ve got some unfinished business – and run towards something rather than away.

“But if the time is right for you and you are looking for that kind of new challenge, I would absolutely recommend going into the third sector... It’s hugely rewarding, exciting, interesting, different and if you’re ready for a change, it’s a great one to make.” ■

# DRIVING DELIVERY



**Tevye Markson** travels to Swansea to speak to Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency chief exec **Tim Moss** about digital transformation, joined-up services and delivering for citizens

Photos of Tim Moss by DVLA

**I**t's been a while since CSW last travelled to Wales for business. Back in 2013, our reporter went to Cardiff to interview one Tim Moss, who was then chief executive at Companies House.

Twelve-and-a-half years later, we're back to interview – *checks notes* – Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency chief exec Tim Moss. Making my way by train from London Paddington, I wonder: is CSW only willing to travel to Wales to speak to Moss – or is he the only senior official in Wales who has invited us?

Arriving in Swansea, greeted by hailstones, I begin to regret my journey west. The bus arrives, I check for traffic and rush across the road. *I cannot get in a road accident on my way to interview the chief executive of the DVLA, I tell myself. Imagine the headlines.* I buy a return ticket, climb up to the top deck, then accidentally get off four stops too early. The hail has been replaced by soft spits of rain. I take a bridge over a motorway and then another over the River Tawe, crossing roads without traffic lights where cars whizz by. The rain starts to get heavier. I arrive damp and in need of a cup of tea.

In 2013, CSW's correspondent described Moss as a “barely contained bundle of energy, words tumbling out of him at break-neck speed” and said interviewing him was like “trying to engage a machine-gun emplacement with a bolt-action .303”.

His family hasn't let him forget it. “The amount of stick I got from that,” he says with a smile. “They still take the mick out of me.”

The description remains fairly accurate and I'm grateful for the ability to reduce the playback speed on my recording to 0.8 when transcribing it a week later. Moss reckons he has mellowed a bit, but he doesn't want to go too far down that road. “Ultimately, we're here to deliver really good public services,” he says. “That's the bit I love. We all mellow over time, and I probably don't have quite the energy I had back in 2013, but we should never lose that passion.”

Having necked some tea and wolfed down a few Welsh cakes, my tour begins.

The DVLA contact centre, in the Sandringham Park business estate in Swansea Vale, is what would have once been known as a call centre, although phone calls are no longer the only option. Some 800,000 individual customers per month speak to the centre's 1,000-strong cadre of advisers over the phone, while 300,000 get in touch via webchat, where they speak to both advisers and chatbots about

driving licences and vehicle registrations.

There are 150 multitasking advisers who do everything at once: web chat, emails, social media and telephony. “I'd be hopeless at it,” Moss says, as we walk past them. “I'd be hopeless just on the phones. It's not for me.”

To take contact services to the next level, the DVLA is “pushing the boundaries of AI”, Moss says. “When you look at how they're using AI for digital development and some of the agentic AI stuff, to me this is almost black magic,” he adds.

One example is the integration of an LLM with the contact centre knowledge base. This enables ChatGPT-style searches of the 2,500 knowledge articles that help advisers get the information they need to help customers more quickly. The plan is to roll this out over the next few months to all advisers.

DVLA is also working with the Government Digital Service and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology on Gov Voice, an exploration of how AI voice technology can improve citizens' experience of government call centres. Instead of talking to an adviser, for some of the simpler queries, customers could interact with the AI “as if you were talking to a human being and it's answering back to you”, Moss says. “Ultimately, it's about: how do we deliver something better for our customers? But then also it's the learning and the testing to say: how can that be applied across any of the other 90,000 people in government contact centres?”

Moss believes that AI can help with the agency's task of finding 15% efficiency savings over the Spending Review 2025 period, but adds that “the primary focus has to be around the customer experience”.

“For me, it's not about saying: how can we replace people or do things cheaper? It's about saying: how can we use AI to deliver a better customer experience? That's what we're here to do. Once we get to the level of customer experience we want, we can then look at how we make this more efficient, more effective.”

**M**oss grew up in Barnet, North London. His first job was at a manufacturing firm that made copper wire. Initially working at the company's HQ in nearby Enfield, he soon moved to its factory in Llanelli, Wales, and worked his way up to become

site manager. He then almost ended up in China but, having met his wife in Swansea, decided to stay put. “And, hey, it's a brilliant part of the world,” he says.

Taking a year out to do an MBA at Swansea University opened Moss's eyes to a career beyond manufacturing and he got his first job in the public sector in 2002 – an operations role running a paper factory at the Cardiff-based Companies House. By 2012, he had risen through the ranks to become chief executive.

His departure in 2017 to head up the Intellectual Property Office was a somewhat daunting move. On his first day, walking through the doors of IPO's Newport HQ, he recalls thinking: “I'm here as chief exec and I know less than anybody else in the

organisation about intellectual property.’ But actually, it was brilliant. The strategy we developed there was really simple: how do we create an excellent customer experience, how do we create a world-leading IP environment, and how

do we make it a brilliant place to work?”

Moss then spent two-and-a-half years as chief operating officer at the Welsh Government, “really thinking about how we can make that organisation better”. “It's a unique place,” he says. “For an organisation which is about the same size as DVLA, the breadth of what it covers is mind-blowing. But then comes the consequence: things are spread really thinly. So the people there do amazing jobs.”

When the gig at DVLA came up, “that desire to get back to do some front-line service delivery was too good not to think about going there,” he says. “I feel really fortunate to be in this role and I've absolutely loved the nine-and-a-half months I've been here. The really exciting bit for me is the potential.”

**D**VLA has often been used as a test-bed for new technology. “We're big enough and we have a really big reach, but we're also small enough as an organisation,” Moss explains. “We're 6,000 people, but we're actually quite a small management team – our senior leadership team is 40 people. So we can probably be more nimble.”

Moss reckons DVLA interacts with more members of the public than any other organisation in the public sector – it handled 99.4 million individual customer transactions in 2024-25. This means it can be “at the forefront” of public service

**“Once we get to the level of customer experience we want, we can then look at how we make this more efficient, more effective”**

delivery, he says, but also that “even if a fraction of 1% [of transactions] go wrong, that’s still a really big number”.

In his first few weeks as chief exec, Moss received an email from a woman who was a victim of domestic abuse and needed to change her driving licence to protect her identity so that her abuser couldn’t find out where she was. She had to do this before the court documents were filed but, Moss explains, “there was a problem with the documents, and we hadn’t done everything right and had mislaid them.

“But the team did a fantastic job, found the documents, got her a new driving licence, and then hand delivered the document to her to enable that to get done on time. And it reminded me that we can get lost in the numbers but, every time, it comes back to: it’s a human being. We must never forget that every customer interaction counts.”

One area where Moss is keenly aware of the need to improve customer service is the drivers’ medical backlog. DVLA is responsible for determining whether a driving licence holder or applicant meets the medical standards required for driving.

The volume and complexity of these decisions is increasing, partly due to an ageing population. DVLA is also often reliant on information from third parties – including medical professionals – before a licence can be issued. To help, the agency employs 50 doctors and nurses.

“Some of the decisions are simple ones – like if you’ve got diabetes, you have to notify us and you get a decision quickly – right up to complex multi-condition medical things where we need a huge amount

of information to be able to judge,” Moss says. “These are life-changing decisions.”

DVLA processed around 581,000 medical licensing decisions in 2021-22. By 2024-25, that had risen to 830,000, and it expects to receive more than 925,000 medical applications and notifications this financial year.

The rise in casework has coincided with an increase in the number of decisions taking longer than normal. In 2019, 346 decisions took a year or longer. By 2022, this

**“We can get lost in the numbers but, every time, it comes back to: it’s a human being. We must never forget that every customer interaction counts”**

had risen to 14,105, with a Public Accounts Committee report that year warning that DVLA’s system to process applications from customers who have notified it of relevant medical conditions was “slow, inefficient and in need of major improvement”. More recent figures from this February showed there were 3,012 medical cases that were more than a year old in progress.

To address the backlog, DVLA has been moving medical cases over to a new Microsoft Dynamics platform since September to enable more customers to notify, apply and renew their licence online, and bring about quicker and more accurate decisions.

This initially made things worse. Naturally, Moss uses a car analogy to explain: “We’re in the difficult bit where we’ve been running down the old case-work system while we’re driving up the

new one, and one of my operation leads said to me yesterday, ‘it’s a bit like you’re driving a car and changing the wheel at the same time’. Actually, I would go further – you’re driving the car and changing the engine. So our backlog has gone up to a level which we’re not happy with but it’s part of what we forecast. It will probably take until the second half of this year to really get to where we want to.”

All cases have now been migrated over to the new system.

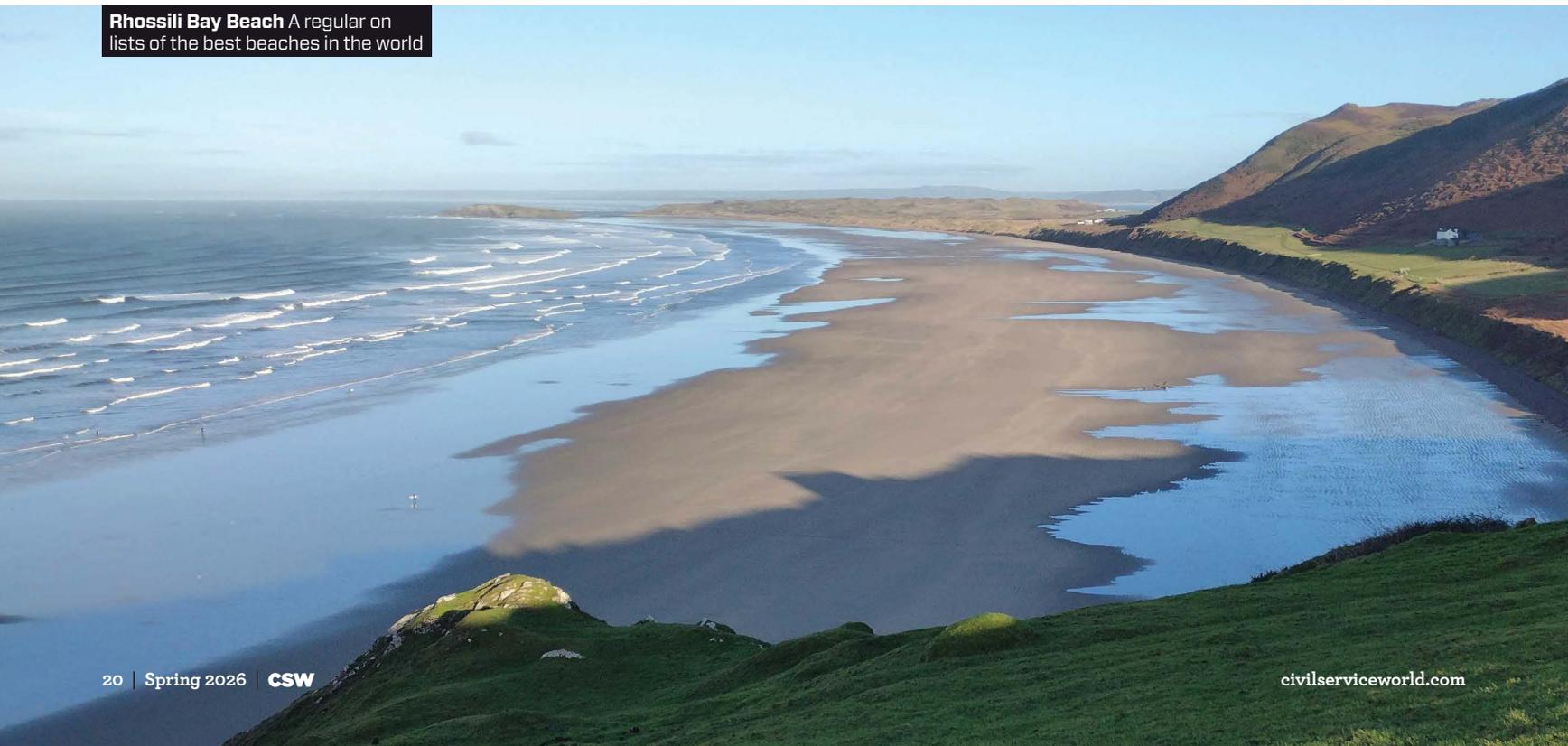
The transformation of the drivers’ medical service also includes a new portal, set to go live this spring, which Moss hopes will be a gamechanger. In the week of the interview, DSIT announced the creation of a new unit, CustomerFirst, to enable the digital transformation of government services, drawing on the expertise of private sector leaders, and said its first partnership would be with DVLA.

Moss says the partnership will focus on taking the drivers’ medical service “to the next level”, which couldn’t happen without the new portal. “At the moment, if we write to the NHS or a GP, it takes at least six weeks for that to come back,” he says. “How can we get that from six weeks down to six days or even six minutes?”

Another big transformation programme at DVLA is the creation of the Driver and Vehicles Account, which allows motorists to view their driving licence and vehicle details in one place.

Since it launched in 2023, 7.5 million of the UK’s 53 million drivers had signed up to the account by mid-January 2026, and Moss says this is growing by about half a million drivers per month.

**Rhossili Bay Beach** A regular on lists of the best beaches in the world



“In the past, DVLA has almost been separate organisations,” Moss says. “You had a drivers bit and a vehicles bit. The systems were all separate and trying to link them up if you were a driver but also had a vehicle was nigh on impossible. Through the account, we can now start to do that.”

The aim is to eventually create “a seamless, end-to-end journey” where drivers can access everything in one place, be it taxing a vehicle, changing a log book or chatting to an adviser – potentially even booking driving tests, normally the domain of sister organisation the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. Moss says the two organisations are working together to explore how integrating their systems could help to tackle the driving test backlog crisis at DVSA, which has seen waiting times grow from five weeks in 2020 to 22 weeks in 2025, in part due to bots buying up test slots and reselling them at inflated prices. “If we could integrate our systems, we could ensure it’s only learner drivers that can come through the Driver and Vehicles Account and book their theory test and practical tests,” Moss says.

Why not merge the two agencies? “You probably don’t need to,” he says. “The world is littered with people trying to merge organisations... it takes an awful lot of time and doesn’t really deliver.”

He says the conversation should be: “How can we develop more end-to-end, joined-up services for citizens? Because why should a public service be of less quality than you get from private sector organisations?”

He later partly answers this, noting that “unlike a private sector business, we



have to deal with all of the customers all of the time. The breadth of what we cover is phenomenal. That means that some things we will do brilliantly and other things – this is quite tricky stuff and it doesn’t always work in the right way.”

In September, the government announced plans for a digital ID. What does this mean for the digital driving licence, another initiative the DVLA is developing, which is currently in private beta and due to launch publicly later this year? “Long-term, we still need a digital driving license,” Moss says. “One of the conversations we’re having with DSIT is: what is the longer-term aim?” He suggests that a decade from now, people could have a digital ID that they could add credentials to, including the digital driving licence.

Moss says the digital driving licence will also help keep people safe. He gives the example of an 18-year-old woman going into Wetherspoons needing to prove her age: “The beauty of that is when they put it on the reader, it will just come back with a photo and ‘this person is over 18’. Unlike the current physical ID, it won’t give your date of birth or your address.”

**M**oss says his leadership style is “to be open and engage with people”. He works on the basis that “very little is secret”, and holds “talk with Tim” coffee sessions with 10-15 members of staff where virtually nothing is off limits.

One of his first commitments when he joined DVLA was to address the issue of hybrid working. “The important bit for me was: how do we make sure it’s as fair as we can make it across the agency?” he says. “I think there were about 2,000 staff who could go hybrid who hadn’t had the opportunity and about 1,000 of them then took

that up. So we now have a fair situation and that’s based on the 60% guideline.”

Moss says he’s also “always worked on the basis that work is work and home is home” and tries to keep the two separate. “I will rarely look at emails at the weekend,” he says. “You work hard during the week and you then have your time off, and that’s always been important to me. There will always be priorities and peaks that come in, but let’s make sure they’re true priorities and not that we just get into a habit of working 24/7.”

Home for Moss is not all leisure though. He has lived on a working farm with his in-laws for the last 24 years. “I should get a medal for that,” he jokes, but adds: “It’s less of a working farm now. We’ve got 21 sheep and 11 cows.”

Does he get stuck into it? “I’m a part-time farm hand. I wouldn’t ever describe myself as a farmer,” he says. “Yesterday lunchtime, I was putting the straw down in the shed for the cattle because they’re in for the winter, and I was sorting the sheep out two weekends ago. I get called on to do all sorts of things.

“So I’m a dab hand at sheep chiropody, and I’ve had to do my fair share of castration as well – maybe that’s not one for the article, but you can add it in if you want. It’s a nice foil to the day job because ultimately when you get home and something needs doing, it’s got to be done.”

When he’s not working on the farm, Moss goes for walks, tames the garden, drives a Land Rover, does a bit of golf, relaxes with friends and family – and, living just one mile from the beach, makes the most of living in “a beautiful part of the world”. Visiting Rhossili the next day, with not a hint of cloud in the sky, I can only agree with the sentiment. ■



# HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU, KID



Taking on challenging leadership roles can be a quick progression route for younger civil servants. But the experience is not always easy. **Susan Allott** asks officials who've been through it: how was that for you?

**“I** was in the box in the House of Commons when I got this message on LinkedIn from a recruiter for HMRC for a deputy director role,”

Nic Crowe recalls. It was early 2021 and he was working in the private office for DWP in a grade 7 post, handling ministerial briefings and parliamentary strategy. He responded to the recruiter saying he didn't think he was right for the job: “I'm only 27 and I wouldn't want to waste your time,” he said, thinking that would be the end of it.

But the recruiter replied, explaining they needed help with some “pretty intensive Brexit stuff”, which meant they needed to “up the headcount” quickly. The hiring director wanted to speak to him.

And so, despite huge reservations,



Like many officials who have experienced being a “younger boss”, Crowe entered the civil service as a fast streamer. He was ambitious for promotion and had expected a career path that would take him to SCS level, although he didn’t anticipate it happening as fast as it did.

“With the benefit of hindsight now, if I’d have been kind to myself, I shouldn’t have taken the job,” he says. “But for whatever reason, I was coded to try and give it a crack.”

**A**s large organisations go, the civil service is not unique in the practice of dropping young leaders into environments where they need to learn fast and where they are managing people much more experienced and, often, much older than them. But it is something that many civil servants recount as a formative, and sometimes uncomfortable, period of their early career.

What are the challenges and the benefits of being plunged into this situation? And what advice would those who have gone through it give to others?

“I’ve always been one of the youngest in the room,” says Darren Jaundrill, who took on his first SCS post at the age of 35, when he became programme director for the census at the Office for National Statistics. He moved departments several times after that and says he never felt out of his depth, partly because of the senior roles he held before he joined, both for Network Rail and for the police.

Did Jaundrill ever pick up on any resistance to him as a young leader? “I certainly felt it in the peer group,” he says, referring to his SCS colleagues, rather than his team. “There was an undertone, I think, in a lot of conversations. At times, I would feel like the boy in short trousers.”

He recalls comments that were made apparently in jest, referring to television or music from before he was born. “The senior person present looked at me and went, ‘Oh, you wouldn’t know any of this, you’re too young.’ It was little things like that but it would happen a lot. And then you think, well, to do it once could be seen as jovial. But to keep on doing it very vocally, making a point of it, you start to go, hang on.”

It was the subtlety of the comments that was hard for Jaundrill to deal with: “You have to reset yourself quickly, otherwise you’re not effective in that meeting and it can become undermining.” This was particularly prevalent in his

Crowe found himself in an SCS post for HMRC, managing a team tasked with establishing post-Brexit border controls. He had eight grade 6s reporting directly to him and 65 members of staff in total, located across the country. He was the youngest person in the team “by a long shot”. The next-youngest of his direct reports was three years older than him. The eldest was in their mid-fifties. “That’s double my age, right?”

Crowe battled with a “massive case of imposter syndrome due to the age gap,” he says. He thinks he did a good job of winning the respect of his team – helped by the fact that he looks older than his age, and perhaps also by his gender: “I think it was easier for me as a man than it would have been for a young woman

in that situation,” he says. “The team was predominantly male, and possibly more inclined to accept a male boss.”

But he describes being aware of resistance from the wider team, which he puts down both to his age and to his face not fitting in a culture that was “quite deferential”. He was trying to deliver a hugely challenging outcome against a hard deadline of January 2022 and that meant pushing people – most of whom had been in post for a long time prior to his arrival – to work very hard. Being deferential was not going to cut it and, inevitably, some people didn’t like that very much: “I was told that someone described me as a jumped-up little prick,” he says.

**“Someone described me as a jumped-up little prick”**  
*Nic Crowe*



last civil service role at Defra, he says. “I couldn’t really do anything about it. I mean, I can’t change my age. And so if anything, it just made me more determined to keep on delivering.”

Looking back, he wishes he’d challenged it overtly, rather than dealing with it privately and being brushed off: “People would say, ‘Oh no, I didn’t mean anything by it.’ So I thought maybe it was me, I was being silly.” But it kept happening, he says.

His advice to other people in this position is to ask: “Is it banter in their mind? In which case, just let them know: The first time is funny. It’s not so funny anymore. It’s becoming quite pointed. Please stop.” And if it doesn’t stop, “you put a grievance into your relevant line manager and you start there. Because otherwise, it eats away at you. You start to doubt yourself and it will affect you and your team if you let that happen.”

**H**annah Keenan at the Institute for Government argues that officials need training and support to deal with these kinds of situations. She cites a July 2025 IfG report into the Fast Stream which recommends that profession heads should match every fast streamer with a mentor at deputy director level for their entire time on the programme.

“I would question the extent to

which the civil service is assessing how effective these types of postings are and what sort of support people are getting,” Keenan says. “You shouldn’t really be leaving it to chance as to whether or not they have the emotional maturity to deal with the situation.”

Keenan’s IfG colleague Alex Thomas recalls a “pet travel role” at Defra in his early 20s, where a rescue dog had been sent out to help with an emergency in Indonesia and was then put into quarantine on return to the UK, as per the rules. “The rescue person thought this was outrageous, got the local MP involved, and got a campaign going: Free Darcy.”

The campaign to free the rescue dog from quarantine gathered ground, with thousands of people pledging their support. The late Colchester MP Bob Russell “took off his shirt in the House of Commons to show the Free Darcy logo on the shirt underneath”, Thomas says.

At the behest of his minister, Thomas went to see the – much more experienced – frontline officials in charge of the quarantine policy and said: “The secretary of state wants to find a solution so we can let this dog out.” He remembers a polite response with a subtext of: “Who the hell are you to say this? We are running a carefully thought-through disease control network, we’re doing our jobs, get lost.”

It was embarrassing, Thomas says,

and a strange dynamic: “Effectively, you are instructing somebody to do something but the authority is transmitted through you from the minister and you don’t own it yourself.”

He likes to think he handled it as well as he could in the circumstances. His message to younger civil servants in similar situations is to show respect: “Meet the more experienced civil servants where they are and properly respect them.”

Early career civil servants have a lot to give, he adds, such as “energy, dynamism, possibly new ideas... But if you elevate that above genuinely recognising the value of the experience of the people who you are managing, then you’ll come a cropper, you’ll hack everybody off and it will be a disaster”.

**M**aria Tennyson\* is a veteran DWP official with a frontline background who has experience of being line-managed by much younger bosses, but who has also mentored a large number of fast streamers over the years. She describes working with younger people who sometimes feel they have been “thrown to the lions” in an environment where they’re having to prove themselves.

She takes a nurturing and supportive approach towards younger bosses, she tells CSW, asking how she can help them understand their new surroundings and get



**HOW OLD IS THE CIVIL SERVICE?**

44

Median age of the civil service 2022-2025

58%

40-59-year-olds in the civil service in 2010

48%

40-59-year-olds in the civil service in 2025

18%

Combined under-30 and over-60 age range in 2012

28%

Combined under-30 and over-60 age range in 2025

13%

Senior civil servants aged under 40 in 2025

41%

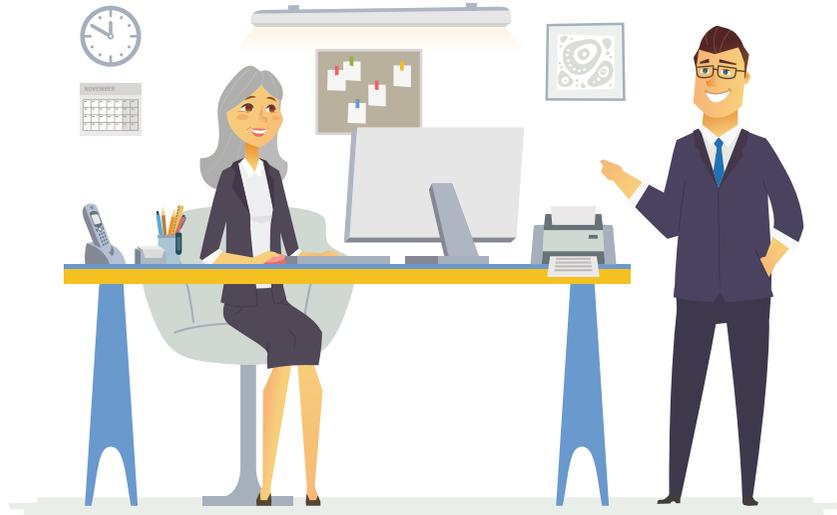
Senior civil servants aged 40-49 in 2025

37%

Senior civil servants aged 50-59 in 2025

**Sources**

Institute for Government *Whitehall Monitor*, January 2026  
Gov.uk data October 2025



the most out of their experience. But, she adds, this “parental” attitude is not necessarily espoused by all her colleagues.

“You may have people who have been there for 20, 30, 40 years that are quite steadfast in what they do and they’re not looking to move on. But when a younger official arrives from the centre and is put into a senior position, they’re the ones that may have an issue. ‘Oh, here we go again, how did they get that job?’ – that type of thing. Sometimes people will hide their own insecurity by targeting someone who’s obviously younger; the view is they’re only in there because they have certain advantages,” she says.

Is there a class tension in the mix here? Tennyson thinks it’s probably a factor in graduate schemes everywhere. “There’s always this issue about people’s social status, educational status, where they’re coming in from,

**“At times, I would feel like the boy in short trousers”**  
**Darren Jaundrill**

what their background is, you know. But I think in the civil service it can be more pronounced.”

The approach she advises younger colleagues to take is “to reach out and be humble and say: ‘Look, I’m new here. I’m the new kid on the block. I’m aware of my age and inexperience, so I really want to learn from you.’”

She takes a more hard-nosed approach to the grumbling old-timers when she notices them pushing back against a wet-behind-the-ears boss. “I call their bluff straight away. I go in and say to them, ‘Ah so this must mean that you really want to get promoted yourself? Do you want to take on extra bits of work so you can get on? Is that where you need help?’ And often the response is: ‘Oh no, I’m quite happy doing what I’m doing.’”

**D**espite the challenges, being a younger boss can be a positive experience. Abigail Baxter\* is now a deputy director for a central department and she fondly recalls her time being “thrown in the deep end” as a “very green” fast streamer in charge of a job centre.

“I loved it,” she says. “It was so stressful. But I learned so much and I found it so satisfying, and it was the role that made me realise that I really like doing delivery stuff rather than just thinking in a box.” She regularly fell asleep on the train home because she was so exhausted at the end of the day. “The biggest challenge was that I was totally inexperienced and quite crap at it. And I knew that. I think the day I gathered the most respect from the team was when the loos flooded and I turned out to be less useless with a mop and a stopcock than people had anticipated,” she recalls with a laugh.

Baxter was an HEO at the time and describes regular meetings convened by her SEO line manager where she and the other HEOs, each of whom had a team of direct reports, would share their ideas and experiences: “Those sessions were possibly the best training I have ever done,” she says.

And Crowe – despite the harsh criticism he received – says the positives of the SCS job at HMRC far outweighed the negatives: “I made friends for life and I learned so, so much. And it’s without a doubt the thing that I am proudest of in my career.”

His advice to younger leaders is to make every effort to show you are not “aloof” or full of yourself, and to muck in: “If we needed to get something done, I was there on the coal face with them,” he says. “I just kind of thought, if I was in this position, how would I want to be treated, really?” ■

*\*Some names have been changed*



# Don't drift from offshore wind leadership

Why offshore wind matters, and why The Crown Estate is developing a “sat nav for the seabed”

**T**he UK is often criticised for struggling with major infrastructure. Yet in one area, we have delivered world-leading success.

In just 25 years, the UK has built an offshore wind industry from scratch – and the benefits for the public are real.

Each new gigawatt (that's about enough power for a million homes) of offshore wind adds an estimated £2-3bn to the economy.<sup>1</sup> Between 2010 and 2023, wind generation helped shield consumers from volatile gas prices, saving households around £104bn.<sup>2</sup>

Today, our seas are home to nearly 3,000 turbines<sup>3</sup> – enough to power over 16 million homes – and the sector supports some 40,000 jobs, set to rise to 94,000 by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

And the momentum continues. The latest Contracts for Difference auction secured a further 8GW of capacity – a major step in reinforcing the UK's clean energy leadership, unlocking billions more in investment and thousands of new jobs across the country.

Yet the UK still imports around 42 per cent

**“Put simply: every extra unit of clean power we generate at home is a unit we no longer have to import – cutting costs, strengthening energy security and insulating consumers from global shocks.”**

***Gus Jaspert, MD of Marine at The Crown Estate***

of its energy.<sup>5</sup> This leaves households exposed to price fluctuations and global shocks from geopolitics to extreme weather.

The most reliable route to stable, affordable power is a clean, home-grown energy system. Scaling offshore wind and other renewables, alongside a smarter grid, can cut exposure to price volatility while supporting economic growth across coastal and industrial communities.

At the centre of this is the stewardship of the seabed. Created by an Act of Parliament, The Crown Estate is a national landowner with a £15bn diverse portfolio of property

and land, including the seabed and much of the coastline around England and Wales. We have a clear mandate to act independently and commercially to deliver long-term value for the nation and return all our profits to HM Treasury for the benefit of public spending.

This enables us to take a strategic approach: working with government and industry, investing in data and evidence to reduce risk, and running transparent leasing rounds that give developers the certainty to invest for decades.

Like any market, there will always be fluctuations in costs and demand, but scaling back our offshore wind ambition now would be a serious error – locking in greater dependence on carbon-intensive imports and weakening our long-term energy security. We should be proud of our world-leading position and not be cowed by detractors. The prize lies in staying the course.

Sustained growth depends on clear, consistent policy direction, sufficient grid capacity, and long-term investment confidence – areas

Credit: The Crown Estate/Ben Barden Photography Ltd



Credit: Kirsty Andrews/UPY 2023



**“The Routemap is intended to become a shared national resource – a tool to support coordinated delivery and enable departments and organisations with a stake in the energy transition and the marine environment to engage with the data and evidence that informs the long-term planning needed to underpin secure, home-grown clean energy.”**  
*Gus Jaspert – MD of Marine at The Crown Estate*

where the Civil Service and regulators play a pivotal role. Effective planning and consenting, robust regulation, as well as well-designed procurement, all underpin delivery at scale.

Progress is already underway. On the grid, government is working with Ofgem and the National Energy System Operator to maximise existing capacity and plan a system fit for the future. The Contracts for Difference scheme is being updated

to strengthen investment incentives and support projects.

The Crown Estate is committed to working with government and industry to create the conditions necessary for the next phase of growth. New powers approved by Parliament last year expand our ability to invest in clean energy and other priority sectors such as science and innovation, housing and regenerative agriculture.

We are using these tools now: unlocking early-stage projects through a £50m Supply Chain Accelerator and committing £350m via our Supply Chain Investment Programme in coordination with Great British Energy and others.<sup>6</sup>

We are improving access to spatial information and providing long-term visibility of opportunities with a new Marine Delivery Routemap – a “sat nav for the seabed” – a unique mapping and planning tool that can help identify how marine industries and nature can grow together. Our seabed is becoming increasingly crowded. Offshore wind must co-exist alongside cables and pipelines, shipping lanes, fisheries, defence activity and marine protected areas. A shared spatial evidence base will help manage these competing demands, leading to smoother delivery, stronger environmental outcomes and faster progress towards a more secure and affordable energy system.

Offshore wind has already transformed what is possible for the UK. The next phase is about delivering faster and in balance with nature and other marine users, so people across the nation continue to see and feel the benefits.

By staying the course, we can ensure the seabed remains a source of national pride, prosperity and security for generations to come.



Scan the QR code to find out more about The Crown Estate



Credit: The Crown Estate/Ben Barden Photography Ltd

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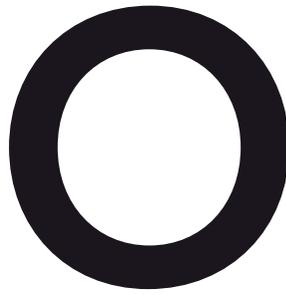
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## > COVER INTERVIEW

Days after meeting CSW at Heathrow to talk about her priorities for the Home Office, **Dame Antonia Romeo** became cabinet secretary. Here, she reflects on both roles and explores how her experience of leading large departments will shape her leadership of the civil service. By **Suzannah Brecknell**. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

# VIEW FROM THE TOP





On a quiet Friday morning in February, a steady flow of passengers moves through passport control at Heathrow's Terminal 5.

At this time of year, some 24,000 people will arrive here each day; up to 40,000 at peak times. Most are moving through a bank of 24 eGates, pausing for just a few seconds while the machines process their information and approve them for entry to the UK. A few yards away, Border Force officials monitor screens to spot and resolve any problems flagged up by the machines, while their colleagues observe the passengers for security concerns or indications of modern slavery. Several more officials are checking passengers' passports manually, and yet more are working in control rooms behind the scenes.

Amid this calm scene of industry, Dame Antonia Romeo is moving between desks and control rooms. She is here, in her final weeks as Home Office permanent secretary, to learn more about the operations at this part of the UK border, and how they will be changing later this year as new technology is rolled out.

Romeo is asking officers a constant stream of questions: "What are you looking for here? What sorts of things would worry you? What is this data telling us?" She's clearly fascinated by the tech, asking for detailed explanations of the e-Gate process, and pointing out a display that shows recent examples of remarkably accurate fake passports that were picked up by the gates.

She's also fascinated by the complexity of their work and the smoothness with which they manage it – remarking on the fact that almost all passengers pass through the border within agreed maximum wait times, even though officials have no control over the flow of arrivals (which is entirely down to airlines and flight scheduling).

At the end of each discussion, the perm sec thanks the officers for their service, often asking how long they've been working for Border Force. Usually, the answer comes back in decades. Romeo jokes with one official that he'll soon receive a card from her to mark 25 years with the organisation.

After our tour of the border control area, as we sit in a quiet meeting room away from the screens of operational updates and passenger flow data, Romeo

describes how important "getting out to the front line" is to her. "The thing that's most energising, I think, about any job in leadership in the civil service, is actually talking to the people who are doing the work," she says. "How are they feeling? What are they worried about? What are they focused on?"

Less than two weeks after this visit to Heathrow, Romeo's own focus will change and broaden dramatically. Her role at the Home Office, where she worked with 51,000 colleagues delivering the home secretary's priorities, will come to an end and she will become the leader of more than 550,000 civil servants across the country, as well as the prime minister's confidante and adviser on the biggest decisions of the day.

Romeo's appointment as the cabinet secretary and head of the civil service marks a number of milestones, including the first woman to hold the role in its 110-year history and the first person to have led three different departments before becoming cabinet secretary. She also steps into the role in circumstances unlike most of her forerunners. Her immediate predecessor, Sir Chris Wormald, left suddenly in the wake of a political crisis that had also threatened to topple the prime minister. His sudden departure sent shock waves through the civil service and was described by FDA union head Dave Penman as a "new low" for the relationship between this government and its officials. Yet writing for this magazine, Penman said Romeo's appointment was cause for optimism, an opportunity "for the government and the prime minister to reset the relationship with the civil service", and for the new cabinet secretary to become a more prominent champion for civil servants (see p.12).

Former cabinet secretary Simon Case – who also stepped into the role at a point of political turmoil – told the *Observer* that he believes Romeo has a "big opportunity" to make a difference in and for the civil service. "People have called her a disruptor or a reformer," he said. "Personally, I hope she will lean into that."

The initial messages the new cabinet secretary has sent out to her workforce – and her answers to a series of questions from CSW after she took on the role – indicate that she will. She speaks of innovation, of curiosity and of driving change to improve delivery for the government and the public.

"I'm fond of saying that leadership is about taking organisations to places where they wouldn't otherwise have got to," she tells CSW a week into her new role. »

**“That’s the role of leadership: to support our people through times of change, setting the direction with energy and positivity”**



“That’s the role of leadership: to support our people through times of change, setting the direction with energy and positivity.”

The direction she is setting is clear: she wants the civil service to become an organisation defined by delivery, driven by purpose, and fuelled by the “pride that comes from performance”. And digital transformation sits at the heart of that ambition. “Innovating to deliver better public services isn’t just a ‘nice to have,’” Romeo says. “It’s incumbent on us to take the whole public service into this new world, and obviously that’s a big challenge. But I see a huge amount of opportunity too.”

**I**ndeed, it was to share the opportunities of digital transformation that Romeo had invited CSW to join her at Heathrow in February. Thanks to the curse of long magazine lead times – and no access to a crystal ball – our February interview focused extensively on her priorities at the Home Office. But though she is no longer personally driving those priorities, her reflections on leading that organisation, and the changes she had already implemented in the 10 months she was at its helm, still offer rich insight into how she might lead – and reform – the civil service at large.

It’s not hard, for instance, to imagine her excitement over those e-Gates extending to any number of innovations across the civil service and wider public sector. Innovations that she is now in a position to champion from the very top of government.

The gates are, she says, “a brilliant example of how you use technology to deliver a more efficient service, which is absolutely the heart of what we’ve got to do”. The UK has some 270 eGates across its air and rail ports, which support 76 million border crossings each year – more than any other country in the world.

The introduction of contactless automation, and several other new capabilities mean the UK border is already one of the most advanced in the world, as the quietly effective operations at Heathrow Terminal 5 show: combining technology, data-led operations and human skills to maximise security, with minimal disruption for legitimate visitors.

The Home Office has committed to take this even further, aiming to have “frictionless UK border crossings with minimal human checking” by 2030. The new technology in Terminal 5’s eGates will combine improved automation, using the information stored in modern passports so that more people can pass through the border without intervention

## ROMEO ON PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

“One of the issues of performance management in big organisations can be the link between what people are actually doing, what they think they’ve been asked to do, what they think good looks like, and how that delivers the [minister’s] priorities and for the citizen... there can be quite a big gap between those things.

“So the first job of a performance framework is to make sure everyone understands what their job is and to incentivise things that will drive delivery of politicians’ priorities and delivery for the public.

“A good performance framework should also incentivise people to flag risks. How do you make sure people are flagging things up that the leadership needs to know? It can be really easy to have cultures where people aren’t rewarded for identifying risk, so it’s crucial that we do have that. So how do you build that into the performance framework?

“But finally, if you’re holding people to account, you’ve got to be helping them build the skills – that’s essential. So show them what good looks like, but also help them get there.”

If proven, it could also extend beyond asylum decisions. Romeo says she sees no reason why the department shouldn’t be “famous” for rolling out the tech on a much wider scale to the numerous other teams whose work involves processing.

To facilitate such changes, one of Romeo’s first moves as perm sec was to appoint a director general for digital and innovation – a step she also took in her previous department, the Ministry of Justice, reflecting the importance she places on making sure organisations are thinking explicitly about, and “leaning into”, digital change.

And all of this, she says, will not only drive efficiency and performance but build pride among staff. “The work those teams are doing – they know it’s world leading,” she says of the e-Gate staff. “They know it’s incredibly difficult. They know they’re implementing technology that is going to help them run an incredibly complex operation, one of the busiest airports in the world. You can hear the pride that they have from doing that.”

“I’m a big believer in pride from excellence, pride from high performance,” she continues. “What makes people proud isn’t just telling them they should be proud. What makes people proud is feeling like they are high-performing.”

# “What makes people proud isn’t just telling them they should be proud. What makes people proud is feeling like they are high-performing”

from a member of Heathrow’s staff.

As one official put it to CSW on our tour: at the moment, officers must see everyone who arrives at the border, but the new technology will allow them only to see the ones who present security or legality concerns. Where there are no such concerns, people will simply move through it. Eventually, they may not even need to pass through an e-Gate but will walk through the space, checked on the way by a combination of advanced technologies and intelligence.

“It is going to be world leading,” Romeo says, before citing a string of other areas where the Home Office is driving innovation, including pilots exploring how AI can be used to support officials making asylum decisions by taking over much of the processing work.

Romeo will restate all of these beliefs in a new context when she becomes cabinet secretary, drawing on her years of leading large departments to write the following in an all-staff memo: “What you have told me is that you want to change the things that get in the way of you doing your jobs. You want us to be more productive, to do things differently. You want to be proud of what you achieve. Civil service modernisation needs to embrace your ideas and have innovation at its core.”

**T**he promise of change is not new to the civil service, and Romeo is the first to acknowledge this. “When a new leader arrives and says, ‘I will make all these changes,’ before they’ve made



**“One of the most important things in delivering change is that people believe you’ll keep going; that how you talk about what you want the department to be is authentic”**



any changes... that's a moment of risk," she reflects during our Heathrow trip. In the Home Office, she chose to mitigate that risk by setting in place a number of reforms to demonstrate that she would drive change, before speaking more broadly about transformation plans.

Those initial reforms included the creation of new posts and structures to improve accountability; the introduction of efficiency controls; and changes to the risk-management process. Since the department had been on limited internal audit for eight years, she knew these changes were essential. She also prioritised a review of performance management and whistleblowing cultures.

The changes began to make an impact, she says. For example, departmental spending on travel expenses between September and December 2025 – the three months after the controls were introduced – was £10m less than it had been in the previous year.

"I'm a big believer that healthy organisations are healthy everywhere," Romeo says. "If you don't feel like expenses are being run in a value-for-money way, that is normally an indication that the department as a whole isn't focusing ruthlessly on value for money. And, obviously, that's our job as public servants."

Those controls, if the balance isn't right, can easily combine with other "hygiene factors" like tech or process problems to get in the way of delivery. And she is determined to enable her team to deliver by removing things that get in their way.

This is one of the aims of the Future Home Office programme, she says. As well as embracing digital innovation and new ways of working, the work is also "essentially about getting the basics right for people". Not fixing those basics makes people feel the leadership isn't listening to them, she says, "so there's a lot you've got to sweep out of the way".

"One of the most important things in delivering change," she says, "is that people believe it will happen. They believe you'll keep going; that how you talk about what you want the department to be is authentic and that you can take the department there."

"Obviously," she adds, "that is about the whole top team, which is also why I focused a lot on the top team, because that team is essential to lead the department into where we're going to get to."

She's referring here to changes she made at the Home Office top team, including creating that digital and innovation DG role, but also other measures aimed at improving accountability in the department. "The thing I've learned

### ROMEO ON HER FIRST DAY AS CABINET SECRETARY

"It was back-to-back!" Romeo says of her first day in post. "The first call I made was to my predecessor, outgoing cabinet secretary Chris Wormald. I then gathered my top team together – the permanent secretary heads of departments, who are the people I will be working with most closely to deliver the government's agenda. We talked about my priorities for the leadership of the civil service: delivery, innovation and productivity."

There were several meetings with ministers, the political team in No.10 and the Cabinet Office top team, and Romeo also kicked off a series of one-on-one calls with each of the permanent secretaries, discussing "the priorities and challenges in each department and how we will work together on them".

She also made some personal touches to her new work space: "First to go up on the wall were two framed photos of all the living female permanent secretaries. The first was taken in 2017, when I had just been appointed to lead a department for the

first time (I was the 35th woman to be appointed to a perm sec role), and the second in 2024, when there were nearly 60 of us."

"At the end of the day," she says, "I wrote my introductory message to the whole civil service, focused on my pride in the remarkable institution for which we work, and some things I would like to change. I've come from running big operational departments, so I know the importance of communicating with the whole team – from the operational front line to policymakers and corporate services."

**Come together** Romeo with female perm secs in 2017 – proudly on display in her office



running three departments is: accountability is king," Romeo says. "So, the thing I always look at in a department is: of the top priorities of the secretary of state, who is the person on the executive committee who is responsible for that? Do they have all the levers they need?"

Getting the top team right, she adds, not only means the department is better set to deliver, but builds personal resilience for leaders. "I often say that your meeting with your top team should be the best meeting of your week. If it isn't, then you've got to ask yourself some questions.

And one of the reasons why I spend a lot of time with my top team is because that is the place where you get organisational resilience as well as personal resilience."

"Leading big, difficult organisations is hard," she continues, "and you've got to have somewhere where you're getting your resilience from. I've got three kids and lots to do outside of work – I get a lot of my resilience from what I'm doing when not at work. But equally with jobs like this, they're not nine-to-five jobs. They are 24/7 jobs. So in order to deliver that resilience, you've got to have people you can lean on >>>

and you've got to have organisational resilience, which can't come from one person."

**I**n Romeo's new role, there are several "top teams" she will be thinking about to take the civil service where it needs to go. The first is the cadre of permanent secretaries who lead government departments. It was this team – "the people I will be working with most closely to deliver the government's agenda" – that she gathered together on her first morning as cabinet secretary to talk through her priorities of delivery, innovation and productivity.

As she tells *CSW* shortly after her appointment, she also set in motion a series of one-to-one calls with each of these perm secs to "discuss the priorities and challenges in each department and how we will work together on them".

Alongside this team of perm secs is the Cabinet Office top team, who will support her responsibilities as head of the civil service, leading cross-government functions as well as whatever change programmes she puts in place. And finally, there is the 7,000-strong senior civil service, with whom she may not meet as often as she does with perm secs, but on whom she is placing clear expectations to support the drive for change.

In her first message to the SCS as cabinet secretary, Romeo described them as "the team that leads the almost half-a-million civil servants charged with delivery of the government's agenda and services to the public".

"We set the tone, the culture, the values and the example," she wrote. "We translate priorities into action and impact. Every day, every single person in the country depends on our leadership."

To support the responsibility of this leadership role, Romeo places great importance on the connection between senior officials across government and the civil servants they are leading. At the Home Office, alongside her regular visits to operational teams around the country, she operated the modern-day, large-organisation equivalent of an open-door policy. Anybody within the department who emailed the perm sec address would get a reply written by Romeo herself.

*CSW* recounts having spoken to a Home Office official who had done just that while Romeo was perm sec: raising a concern and receiving a response that they knew had come directly from her.

"People do actually tell me a lot of stuff," Romeo says, explaining why it's so important to her to maintain that relationship with colleagues. "They are working really hard,

### ROMEO ON RISK REGISTERS

"The biggest risk with risk registers is the register becomes something that sits alongside the actual work.

"When you're running a big operation... you know that managing risk is an essential part of the delivery of the job, and that is really true in the whole of the Home Office.

"There's always a number of red lights going off at any one time, and being able to scan the landscape and spot the red lights which are actually going to turn into something more significant, something you've got to get on top of early... being able to do that is an essential part, I think, of being a senior civil servant.

"It starts with the signals that the executive committee are sending. So if we're not talking about risk and strategic risks, we're not sending the signal that that matters to us.

"There'll be different numbers that matter for different parts of the business. And you have a conversation at the beginning of every executive committee meeting as a discipline about those because that is what you're focused on. I find that if you have a meeting where you're not starting with that, the risk of not framing everything within what you're trying to achieve is quite high."

**"It's an incredible privilege to lead and motivate nearly half a million civil servants to deliver for the government, and I don't take that responsibility lightly"**

in incredibly difficult jobs, and they need to feel that the official leading that team is somebody who they have a direct connection to. Because we're all doing it together."

As cabinet secretary, the scope may change but the principle remains. Her message to the SCS cadre includes the assurance: "We will do this together. I will regularly be in touch with you and you can contact me anytime."

**B**ack in 2015, when she was heading up the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat under David Cameron, Romeo told *CSW* that one of her faults was a failure to career plan. Instead, she said, she had "ended up doing interesting jobs just by spotting things that happen".

The civil service has "the most complex and difficult jobs to do," she said, including the job she was in at the time, and she saw "a lot of road ahead [with] a lot of really great jobs on that road. I'm just hopeful at some point to luck out and get one."

Reflecting on that comment in 2024 – when she was permanent secretary at the Ministry of Justice – Romeo said she still believed the civil service offered some of the most complex and rewarding jobs out there. Two years on, she has made her way into perhaps the most complex and rewarding job in government – but also one of the most demanding – at a time of immense challenge, with a strong imperative for change.

None of this will be easy, but officials who have worked with her tell *CSW* that Romeo is someone who is energised by challenges. And that energy, according to someone who worked with her in the Home Office, remains consistent whether in an early-morning meeting or at the end of a long day. Romeo herself speaks of the importance of leaders having a positive attitude and being conscious of the tone they set for their staff. In our email exchange, *CSW* asks if the move to a new role has changed how she thinks about this aspect of leadership.

"As I said to you that day at Heathrow," she replies, "I'm a huge believer that mindset matters. Positivity is contagious and leadership means being positive and fostering a positive culture of pride that comes from high performance. I've often said that courage, resilience and positivity are the most important characteristics of a great leader. It's an incredible privilege to lead and motivate nearly half a million civil servants to deliver for the government, and I don't take that responsibility lightly. There's a lot to do, and I'm excited to do it." ■



# HOME SAFE

**Dr Michelle Haslem** became director general for homeland security in the Home Office last year after six years as a DG in the Foreign Office, bringing with her 27 years' experience in national security spent in the UK, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. She tells *CSW* about her goals for the Homeland Security Group, how experts are tackling the biggest security threats to the UK and being a woman in national security leadership

**W**hat drew you to this role? A strong sense of mission and purpose is really important to me in any role. And I can't think of many senses of purpose which are more important than keeping our country, our citizens and our way of life safe and protected from threat.

#### **What is the Homeland Security Group?**

We're part of the Home Office and of the broader national security system. I think about our role as providing system leadership around three types of threats: terrorism; state threats and cyber; and economic crime including fraud, which is the single most common crime type in the UK.

The first two – terrorism and state threats – I describe as apex threats, so really high threat, high harm. Economic crime is a bit different because it's a volume threat. I don't think there's any one of us who hasn't been targeted by online fraud, for example.

#### **How do you work with other parts of the Home Office?**

As a department, we're trying to make sure that national security isn't a secret thing that's hidden behind a load of extra doors, but it's embedded across the broader department. Keeping the UK safe requires us to have a strong border, for example. So I'm thinking about how we partner better and differently with the

migration and borders part of the Home Office to deliver our shared objectives.

Our previous permanent secretary, Antonia [see p.28], was driving a culture of DGs being responsible for leading the whole of the department. So, for example, a DG owns a cross-cutting risk for the department, rather than just the risks in their area. One risk I own is the extent to which technology is enabling threat and harm, which is a cross-cutting departmental priority.

I'm also working really closely with Mike McCarthy, our DG for digital and innovation, because some of how you mitigate technology-enabled harm is basically to adopt technology more quickly than your adversaries or criminals. So some of the problems we're facing have a technology solution.

#### **What are some of those problems?**

Fraud accounted for 44% of all crime in the last crime survey of England and Wales and it is being enabled at pace and scale by the online environment – fraudulent advertising, for example. So we're thinking about how, with industry, we might be able to design out some of the harm and criminality. We've seen massive improvements from banking and financial services and our voluntary charter with the telco sector has seen them blocking scam texts before they reach customers. We need to build on that success by engaging the technology sector on the next stage of that journey to get ahead of the threat.

#### **What are your priorities for the coming years and how do they align with the National Security Strategy?**

I'm the system-wide SRO for counter terrorism and one of the challenges that system is facing is the extent to which young people are being drawn into extremism in the online environment. This demonstrates how important it is for national security to be woven through the whole of the government system. It's just as important for me to partner with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care as it is for me to partner with counter-terrorism policing. Leading that whole system, including our response to the Southport Inquiry, will be a really important priority.

We're really trying to harden the UK as an operating environment for state actors. A good example of a recent development is the new National Security Act legislation – that is starting to have a deterrent effect against criminal actors and proxies who might work on behalf of state adversaries. So we'll continue to build that operating system, harden the environment against those threats and work with industry to reduce online harm.

#### **What are some of the biggest homeland security threats facing the UK and how is your team responding to them?**

Terrorism has not gone away. We continue to see threats from international groups



**“The world is more dangerous than it’s ever been and threats sometimes intersect - state actors are using the online environment to recruit criminals to carry out acts of sabotage”**

like Islamic State and Al Qaeda, but there’s also domestic, self-initiated terrorism and violent attacks - last year we saw the terrible attack at the Heaton Park synagogue. Since 2018, 67% of attacks have been from Islamist terrorism.

The geopolitical context really matters to UK homeland security. If you think about the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine, threat is materialising from that conflict on the streets of the UK and Europe in Russian sabotage campaigns against UK targets, for example. I think the world is much more dangerous than it’s ever been and these threats sometimes intersect - by which I mean state actors are using the online environment to recruit criminals to carry out those acts of sabotage. So the line between peace and conflict seems to be becoming increasingly blurred.

**How are you tackling the threat of online harms?**

I’m really interested in the consultation that DSIT is doing on children’s social media use because I worry about the extent to which the online environment exposes young people to really damaging material, to violent or extreme pornographic content - and in a way that is sometimes challenging for parents and educators to identify. So we will be feeding into the consultation.

**What are some of the ways you work with international partners?**

We have extremely strong, well-established partnerships, including with the Five Eyes and with other European partners. The conflict in Ukraine has driven, in my view, a very welcome commitment across Europe to an increase in defence spending and recognition that these threats are transnational in nature so they require a transnational, collaborative response. I also lead, on behalf of the UK system, a counter-ransomware initiative with around 70 countries participating. They’ll come to the UK in April in the margins of CYBERUK [the UK government’s flagship cybersecurity event] to think about how we try to reduce the threat and risk from ransomware.

**What opportunities do you see for supporting UK security exports?**

The UK has a brilliant and growing security industry, including cybersecurity, with exports worth £12.9bn in 2024. The way that the National Cyber Security Centre partners with industry is really pioneering. Part of what we’re trying to achieve at Security & Policing is to give companies the opportunity to demonstrate their latest innovations, how they’re responding >>

to the threat environment, and how we can support them in exporting tools that we hope will equip our allies to tackle threats upstream, helping to keep them, as well as the UK, safe. It also means that through S&P, we play a role in the government's economic growth agenda.

**What are your priorities for this year's Security & Policing event?**

I want the problems that we have in national security and policing to be better articulated and understood by industry so they can help us solve them. So I really want some practical, mission-focused partnership and collaboration to emerge from S&P.

**Are there any particular technologies or innovations that you're excited to see at S&P?**

We should all be thinking about AI, which provides both threat and opportunity. I know policing colleagues will be thinking about how facial recognition might support their mission. I'm also really interested in the lessons Ukraine is teaching us around the importance of drone technology. One of my teams is looking hard at how we might develop counter-drone technologies and counter measures, which is applicable to both aviation and protective security of premises, for example. It's also a real issue for colleagues in HM Prison and Probation Service, given the utilisation of drones in prisons. So it's a good example of a technology and countermeasures with broad applicability across national security, policing and other parts of our system.

**You're one of only a few women in very senior security leadership. What's your experience been like and do you think there are barriers remaining for women in this sector?**

I actually think the UK has a much more gender-balanced national security community than many of our allies, and that's a real strength. Some of the people who have most helped me during my brilliant 26, 27-year career in national security have been male line managers who've encouraged me to put myself forward, step out of my comfort zone and do roles that perhaps I was not confident I could do. I was encouraged and supported to apply and to push myself.

I don't think there are barriers but there are stereotypes and perceptions that might put women off. I think part of my role is to demystify and to debunk those myths – so national security careers do not equal being James Bond. There are



**All in** Immersive experience at S&P 2025



**Fired up** Live fire demonstration at S&P 2025



**Up close** Live demonstration at S&P 2025

tons of jobs in national security that are being done really successfully by women – and by men who don't want to be James Bond either, who have families and caring commitments. So for me, this is not just a question about women. This is about making national security careers really attractive to the diverse talent we have in this country, so that nobody feels that a job in national security isn't for them.

**How are you fostering diversity in your leadership of the Homeland Security Group?**

I think about diversity from a mission-effectiveness perspective. The evidence base shows very clearly that we take better decisions, we achieve better outcomes, if we can have diversity of skill, thought and experience around the table when we're wrestling with really difficult problems. One of the things I want to do, which I've done in previous roles, is to bring technologists and data scientists much closer to some of the operational policy problems.

Civil service structures don't always enable us to do that, but S&P is another really good example of looking at how you can break down barriers and bring people together to work on a problem. The biggest intelligence failures in history have come about because we had groupthink, because we did not have challenge and we didn't have diversity of thought in the room.

**What has been the proudest moment in your career?**

I'm really proud of what the UK government is doing in Ukraine. I think it's the right thing for us to do to support the Ukrainian population in combatting Putin's illegal invasion. Visiting Kyiv and hearing from Ukrainian counterparts how much the partnership matters to them was a high point of my career, humbling and moving.

**And can you share a challenging time in your career?**

In one job that was totally outside of my comfort zone, I was working on a technology programme, which was one of the most difficult but also most developmental jobs I've done. I thought I had to learn and understand all of the technology and to learn and understand all about projects and programmes and agile and waterfall – and I did all of that, and it was really helpful. But fundamentally, I was trying to bring together people from different organisations to do technology in a different way. And ultimately, it wasn't about the technology. All of the objections were very human – and so [it was a good reminder about] not forgetting that the role was actually about people, not technology. In leadership, the challenges are usually about change and people, rather than the technical aspects of the problem.

**Looking ahead, what would success look like for the Homeland Security Group in five years' time?**

We would be more technically literate and tech enabled. That will mean doing more of what we're doing at S&P and partnering differently with industry to solve our problems at pace in a really agile way. We should continue to be bearing down on the threats that I talked about. I would like that fraud figure to be lower than 44% – I'm really passionate about that. More broadly, I'd like to see that the public has confidence in both the Home Office and the broader national security system and understands what we're doing to keep them safe and crucially, what they can do to keep themselves safe, whether that's online or in the real world. ■

# Better regulation will raise the bar of responsibility

Not many people choose to return to their old job, but after five years away working on global issues for Philip Morris International, Peter Nixon returned at the end of last year to serve once again as the managing director of Philip Morris Limited – the UK arm of PMI. He sets out why he has returned

**S**ince I last performed this role, a lot has changed in the tobacco and nicotine world in the interim. When I left the role, the UK was regarded as a global leader in its progressive approach to supporting smokers to switch to better alternatives, smoking was on a rapid decline, and the introduction of smoke-free products enjoyed overwhelming backing from government and civil society. That support instilled confidence in newer alternatives, such as vapes and heated tobacco, which helped many adults turn their backs on cigarettes.

But five years on the picture isn't as rosy. The market I have returned to today is profoundly different – our once enviable decline in smoking rates has stagnated, with more than five million adults still smoking, and our market is being flooded by irresponsible and illegal activity. It is clear we need a step change in our approach to tobacco and nicotine, which is why I have chosen to step back into the market at this critical time.

Well intentioned, but poorly conceived legislation has had serious consequences. The disposable vape ban, introduced last year, was a good idea, but the government ignored clear warnings that it was riddled with loopholes, and now the market is awash with products that meet the letter of the law while brazenly violating its spirit. Our data shows that nine out of 10 customers are still disposing of their vape devices after a single usage. Consumers now find devices with charging ports that do not work and 'replaceable' pods that are nowhere to be found. These are sold at the same price as disposables and consequently are still being littered by consumers in the same way.

Meanwhile, the illicit cigarette market is booming, and the sale of illegal disposable vapes is widespread. Organised criminal gangs, which proliferated during the pandemic, have tightened their grip, exploiting weak border controls and under-resourced enforcement teams. Take our best-known brand, Marlboro. Our estimates show that around two-thirds of what people are buying is illicit in its various guises, and communities are being flooded with poor quality, often contaminated goods with no safety standards. These illegal products are being sold at pocket money prices without excise, denying the Treasury and our country much needed revenue which could be spent on public services.

This is the reality of the market I have returned to: proliferating illegal supply chains, loophole laden regulation, youth targeted illegal vape products, and enforcement stretched too thin. Responsible retailers are losing thousands of pounds a week in sales; consumers are being put at risk; and we're kidding ourselves if we think we've solved the problem of smoking.

Against this challenging environment I believe that the UK tobacco and nicotine market needs an urgent reset. What we need is better,



tighter, evidence-based regulation that prioritises the needs of adults who smoke, protects children and local businesses. While the Tobacco and Vapes Bill goes some way towards this, more needs to be done. The most significant step we could take is the introduction of a comprehensive licensing regime for all tobacco and nicotine sales. To be effective it must be set at a level which raises the bar of responsibility, drives out bad actors, and the proceeds could even be used to raise the revenue needed to fund greater enforcement.

We also need high product standards that protect society from irresponsible manufacturers and our children from harm. No more loophole vapes, strictly enforced nicotine levels, and flavours that only appeal to adults. This must be combined with robust action against anyone circumventing these rules. The UK has unfortunately lost its way, and I see it as a significant part of my job to support the government to get us back on track.

**Peter Nixon**  
Managing Director  
Philip Morris Limited  
UK & Ireland affiliate of Philip Morris International



PHILIP MORRIS LIMITED



# FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE

**Matt Bland** highlights examples of evidence-based innovation on the front line, and what policy professionals across the civil service can learn from this experience

In 2021, Kent Police faced a pressing challenge shared by all forces across the UK: how, in the face of increasing numbers of reports, to provide timely, meaningful support to victims of domestic abuse. The traditional response – sending someone in person – sometimes meant those not in immediate danger waited hours, or even days, to speak to an officer.

Enter Rapid Video Response (RVR), an innovative idea developed

by Stacey Rothwell, a civilian working in Kent Police's Innovation Task Force. (Rothwell won the Government Science and Engineering Award for Best Innovation in 2024, and has also presented at Civil Service Live.)

RVR offered victims the option of an immediate video call with a trained officer – providing fast reassurance, safeguarding advice and the opportunity to capture evidence immediately. But what set RVR apart was not the

technology; it was the method of its introduction. Rather than being rolled out on instinct or precedent, it was tested first through a randomised controlled trial, designed and evaluated in partnership with the University of Cambridge.

The results were compelling: response times dropped from over 30 hours to just three minutes; satisfaction among female victims rose by 11%; anxiety fell by 16%; and officers were able to achieve these results in two-thirds of the time spent on traditional visits.

RVR is not an isolated example – and Stacey is far from alone. Across the UK, police officers, staff, analysts and researchers are quietly reshaping the way policing innovates: testing rather than assuming, measuring impact and learning from what doesn't work as well as what does. They are part of a growing movement supported by the College of Policing, the National Police Chiefs' Council, university partners, and a small but influential grassroots charity: the Society of Evidence-Based Policing.

## What is evidence-based policing?

Evidence-based policing, or EBP, rests on a deceptively simple idea: that police decisions – like those in medicine or education – should be informed by the best available

research evidence. This means evaluating policies and practices to understand what works, for whom and in what context, rather than relying solely on tradition, personal experience or reactive judgement.

At its core, EBP is the scientific method applied to public safety. It's about forming hypotheses, testing them in the real world, measuring impact and adapting practice based on the results. Importantly, it doesn't demand perfection. It demands humility – the willingness to question assumptions – and the discipline to find out what's actually making a difference. Nor does it mean the end of professional judgement and discretion. It's a tool designed to augment those foundations.

Such an approach matters for at least three reasons. First, policing operates in complex, emotionally charged environments. Decisions carry high stakes – not just for public safety, but for legitimacy and trust. Second, resources are limited. With rising demand and flat or shrinking budgets, there's a premium on doing what works and avoiding what doesn't. Third, policing affects everyone – so the quality of its decisions is, ultimately, a public interest issue.

**A bridge between research and practice**

The Society of Evidence-Based Policing was created by police officers who saw that important research wasn't habitually reaching the front line. One of them, Alex Murray – then a superintendent, now direc-

**“Meaningful innovation often starts not with radical reinvention, but with the tools and culture to let practitioners lead”**

tor of threat and leadership at the National Crime Agency – was struck by how little of his policing career had been guided by tested evidence. After a revelatory post-graduate course at Cambridge, he and colleagues launched SEBP to change that.

Today, SEBP is a registered charity that supports more than 6,000 members (a mix of police officers, staff, academics, students, charities, businesses and policy professionals). Through open-access events, regional coordination and digital platforms, it helps practitioners access, generate and apply evidence – not just as users of research, but increasingly as its producers.

SEBP's strength lies in horizontal connections: it brings together people facing similar challenges and gives them the tools to test and share what works.

**Taking root – but still taking shape**

Across UK policing, evidence-based

approaches are taking hold.

Hotspot policing, long supported by experimental studies, is now widely used. Restorative justice, focused deterrence and out-of-court disposals are gaining traction, backed by evaluations on outcomes, cost-effectiveness and legitimacy. National bodies such as the College of Policing, the Home Office and the Youth Endowment Fund are championing evidence-based practice.

Every new constable entering via the degree apprenticeship or Police Now receives training in research methods. The mindset is spreading but barriers remain. Too often, research is locked behind paywalls or clouded by jargon. Time-poor practitioners may struggle to find or apply the evidence – even when they want to; promising pilots risk fading away without long-term support or sharing.

That's where SEBP comes in: not to replace official systems, but to support and energise them with a grassroots network of curiosity, credibility and collaboration.

**Policing with precision and compassion**

In South Yorkshire, police constable John Porter – a seasoned search adviser and the son of a dementia patient – faced another dilemma shared by many forces: repeated high-risk missing person incidents involving people living with dementia.

Motivated by personal experience and professional insight, he trialled the use of GPS trackers for 50 individuals with a known risk of wandering. With advice from a human rights barrister and

funding secured through the force's innovation fund, he launched a one-year pilot.

The impact was extraordinary: high-risk missing episodes fell from 84 to just one. Families were able to respond themselves on 40 occasions, often preventing harm before police involvement was needed.

Porter has had no research training. He partnered with an academic to evaluate

the project and published results in a peer-reviewed journal. His work was undertaken without a single mention of EBP but this is evidence-based policing in action: a frontline officer with an idea, a method to test it and a network to amplify it.

**How to build evidence-based practice**

For policy professionals across the public sector, here are four key questions to ask when considering whether a practice is truly evidence-based:

- Is the problem clearly defined and supported by data? Evidence begins with understanding the issue. Be specific. Who is affected? What's the scale and context?
- Has this approach been tested – or is there relevant research elsewhere? Not everything needs a new study. Look for systematic reviews, What Works Centres or insights from other sectors.
- Is there a way to measure whether it works? Randomised controlled trials are great but not always feasible. Alternatives include before-and-after analysis, comparison groups or time-series data. The key is a reasonable counterfactual.
- What will be done with the findings? Learning, not success, is the goal. Share what worked, what didn't and what might be worth refining.

**A model for the public sector?**

Policing is not the only service under pressure. Health, education and social care face similar demands: growing need, finite resources and urgent calls for legitimacy and trust.

The lesson from evidence-based policing is that meaningful innovation often starts not with radical reinvention but with the tools and culture to let practitioners lead. SEBP's model – of equipping public servants to test, learn and share – is one that could work anywhere.

This is not a finished revolution. But it is a movement gaining ground – and one well worth watching. If you are curious to find out more, why not come and see EBP in action? ■

*Matt Bland is chief operating officer at the Society of Evidence-Based Policing and associate professor in evidence-based policing at the University of Cambridge. This article first appeared in Heywood Quarterly.*

*For more information or to get involved, visit [www.sebp.police.uk](http://www.sebp.police.uk) or connect with the Society on LinkedIn @SocietyEBP*





# THE PROMISE OF FREEDOM

The Home Office published its VAWG strategy at the end of last year, setting out how it plans to meet government's ambition of halving violence against women and girls in a decade. **Dr Becky Rogerson** and **Fiona Sheil** look at what the strategy includes – and what it's missing

**T**he government has followed its ambition to halve violence against women and girls within a decade by publishing a new VAWG strategy, entitled *Freedom from violence and abuse*, at the end of last year. The strategy organises around three pillars: prevention, pursuing perpetrators, and support for victims.

However, responses from the statutory and voluntary services expected to deliver this ambition have been muted. Confidence in the system is low, reflecting low confidence in the system's ability to deliver change. Despite more than 50 years of policy development, outcomes remain poor. Domestic abuse homicide

rates have not fallen; rape conviction rates are extremely low, leading some to describe the offence as effectively decriminalised. In this context the strategy brings almost no new investment. As the continuing Epstein scandal shows, power and money are still not on the side of victims.

So, with the strategy on the table, where do we go from here?

## Modernising the system

With no new resources, we need a rethink about the ones we currently have. The current system of service responses – stretching across frontline public services, from police to education to social services – is bureaucratic, expensive and defensive.

Worse yet, it achieves poor outcomes, frequently depleting the capacity of those seeking help. Over the past quarter-century, complex and costly layers of assessment, referral and compliance have developed that end in very little actual service.

The result is a system that isn't working for victims. Sarah's story illustrates this. Married with two young children, over time she found herself isolated from friends and family by her husband. His control and coercion grew, culminating in a frightening assault late one Saturday night. Suddenly feeling unable to protect herself or her children, Sarah called the police.

But the response wasn't the help Sarah needed. She found herself within a tsunami of agency activity. Despite having sought help because she felt overwhelmed, services wanted more from her. The criminal investigation required statements about her relationship and partner; social services launched an investigation to assess her ability to parent and keep her children safe; and a string of phone calls began from

domestic abuse and other services asking her to attend assessment interviews.

At no point did anyone ask her what she wanted. She returned home – now to a situation made less safe by the ongoing criminal investigation and threat of social services intervention. So Sarah – like so many women – withdrew the charge and downplayed the allegation. Contacting services hadn't brought her anywhere nearer the help she had sought.

Sarah's story shows how hard the system tries to give victims choices; but also how unrealisable these choices are when victims don't have the space and capacity for action. All the services Sarah encountered just created more noise when what she needed was space and support to answer questions in her head about the future, her children, and how she can be safe.

The new VAWG strategy aims to better support victims and, through that, gain the buy-in and evidence to pursue perpetrators. Achieving this will mean shifting the system's design to focus on meeting victims' needs as they present – building, not depleting, victims' capacity. The strategy can do this by giving permission to simplify processes, reward outcomes over activity and compliance, and reinstate trust in professional judgement.

### The question of prevention

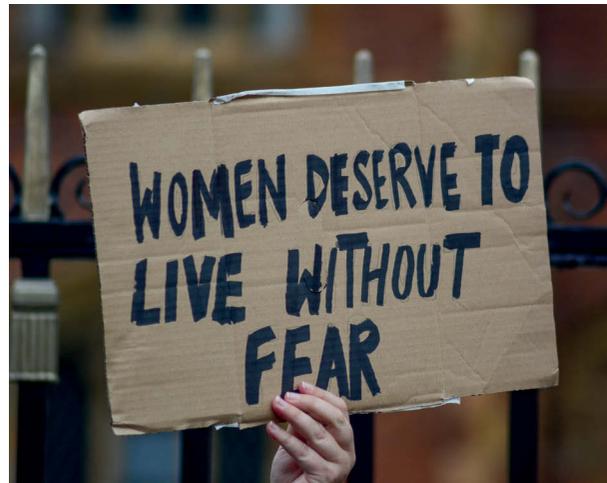
This redesign can also insert a culture of preventing further harm into every contact. The strategy already puts a strong and welcome focus on prevention; however, it doesn't explain what this means. Efforts at prevention have been crowded out of resources by the demands of crisis provision, while a lack of investment in research and development and innovation pipelines has stifled an understanding of what works.

The strategy repeats a common oversight in that it targets prevention at attitudes, not at the gender power inequities that drive and make those attitudes profitable. In this continuing era of Epstein, we see starkly how power created by financial inequality lies at the root of abuse, and how far current prevention strategies stop short of confronting this.

What has existed in prevention in VAWG has taken the form of awareness-raising: occasional Home Office campaigns; fundraising and messaging by large charities like Women's Aid, Refuge and Rape Crisis. The greatest impact has been in the media: storylines in *The Archers* and

*EastEnders* have brought the reality of abuse into people's living rooms. The influence of the Netflix series *Adolescence* can be seen in the strategy's own emphasis.

Beyond the role of messaging and education, however, is the valuable potential of the role of families and communities in prevention. They are the environments in which relational behaviours develop and abuse most often takes shape. It's in families and communities where protections are available and early patterns are visible.



They're the place where norms are set – for good or bad – and power disparities are forged. Unlike statutory and commissioned services, there are no thresholds of entry to communities: this is where preventative and earliest intervention can happen.

Yet the strategy does not fully draw out this potential. Prevention models have looked too readily to services rather than communities for solutions. Yet behaviour change comes through trusted relationships, and it's those closest to situations who notice warning signs first. If the state were to invest in civil society as experts by experience and create clear, accessible routes into early intervention, it may

find many communities ready to act – as its first and most effective line of defence.

### One answer on investment

Clearly, with such a huge goal set by the government, new investment is needed – even if the strategy stops short of naming it. So where can this come from?

One underexplored option – long trailed but rarely applied in VAWG – is social investment. This is the use of third-party investment to fund social outcomes and assets, from which investors are only repaid when agreed outcomes or revenue are achieved. The UK market is worth an estimated £10bn. New government-led

initiatives like the £500m Better Futures Fund show renewed policy appetite for applying social investment.

In Hull, specialist domestic abuse provider Preston Road Women's Centre has shown the potential impact of social investment in VAWG. The centre supports 1,000 victims a year plus their children, and houses over 160 women-led households fleeing abuse. The centre has now built sufficient revenue from social investment-funded housing that it's on the cusp of

becoming entirely independent of commissioned funding: a shift almost unheard of in voluntary sector services. This makes the services sustainable and able to be built around victims' presenting needs and capital – no longer tied down to the costly strictures of commissioning frameworks.

Crucially, this investment has led to a genuine community service remaining sustainable, with a front door in the community that victims can access at any point – including preventative support well

before crisis. This shows just one way in which social investment can support the transition of activity upstream in a way current commissioning models struggle to do. The new strategy can help unpick these barriers, supporting long planning horizons and building skills and confidence in commissioners to draw on forms of third-party resource.

### Conclusion

Government has set itself a huge challenge to halve VAWG within a decade. Achieving this requires brave decision-makers who can see latent opportunity in communities, social investment and, most crucially, in the capacity of victims themselves. ■

**Becky Rogerson MBE has over 20 years' experience as a chief executive in the third sector designing and delivering services for victims and perpetrators, and 10 years as a magistrate in the criminal courts.**

**Fiona Sheil is a researcher, strategist and former commissioner. They are both part of a cross-sector alliance of practitioners setting up the UK's first think tank dedicated to ending violence against women and girls.**

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# PREVENTION IN PRACTICE

Youth work is often treated as a “nice to have” – but it is a core part of the system for stopping violence and keeping children safe, says **Caleb Jackson**

**W**hen you think of the government’s safer streets mission and its ambition to halve knife crime over the next decade, youth workers and youth clubs may not be the first things that come to mind. Yet the youth sector has a vital role to play in reducing crime and keeping children safe, far beyond the remit of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport



**Before harm happens**  
There is a direct link between youth club closures and a rise in violent crime

or the National Youth Strategy alone.

To support the use of evidence in designing and delivering youth services, the Youth Endowment Fund has published new guidance on how youth work can best prevent violence. It aims to help commissioners and policymakers make informed decisions about investing in high-quality provision. While youth work may sit

organisationally in one part of government, the guidance is relevant to all departments whose remits intersect with improving children’s outcomes.

Children and young people most vulnerable to violence often share similar risk indicators. They may have been excluded or severely absent from school, attend alternative provision – arranged by local authorities or schools for pupils who cannot attend mainstream school – be in care or

have had contact with the criminal justice system. These overlapping characteristics cut across departmental boundaries, which raises shared questions for policymakers: how do we reach the children most in need? What support is most likely to make a difference? And how can agencies work more effectively together?

Part of the answer lies in the services and people who already have consistent, voluntary contact with vulnerable children and young people. Youth workers and youth clubs are notable examples. Research from YEF shows that children who have experienced challenges, such as being supported by a social worker, being at risk of criminal exploitation or having been excluded from school, are around twice as likely to attend youth clubs. In high-crime areas, these settings provide accessible spaces where trusted relationships with adults can develop naturally and offer opportunities to divert children and young people away from behaviours that put them at risk.

A recent study found that children in areas of London where all nearby youth clubs had closed became 14% more likely to commit crime, with violent crime rising by around 20% and exam performance declining slightly. Beyond open-access youth clubs, skilled youth workers also deliver interventions with evidence of reducing crime and violence, including long-term

mentoring programmes, sports programmes and hospital-based interventions such as A&E navigator services for young people injured through violence. Together, this evidence shows youth work is a core part of the system for prevention, not a peripheral add-on.

Yet youth work has often been treated as a “nice to have”. Provision is geographically patchy and youth services are not always integrated into local safeguarding

strategies. Since 2010, the number of council-run youth centres has more than halved. In one in eight local authorities, youth workers are involved in formal safeguarding systems only a few times a year or not at all. And in over a third of emergency departments in high-crime areas, A&E navigator programmes are absent. In short, children who could benefit most are not always guaranteed access to youth services that can help keep them safe.

The new YEF guidance responds to these challenges. It brings together global research on the types of youth work that can prevent violence and translates it into practical recommendations for commissioners. By combining this evidence with local insight, commissioners – particularly at the local authority level – can make decisions that ensure children and young people access the support most likely to make a difference, while also using public funds efficiently.

At its heart, the guidance positions youth work as part of the solution, rather than the solution itself. It encourages a more coordinated approach, helping different parts of the system to work together. In doing so, it aims to improve outcomes not only in reducing crime and violence but also across other government priorities. It offers local authorities a practical, evidence-based resource to translate national strategies into action on the ground, with the National Youth Strategy being a timely example.

So what can be done to make youth work as effective as possible at preventing violence? Our guidance highlights eight practical steps:

- Target support where violence risk is highest
- Close the most urgent gaps in youth club access
- Raise the standard and reach of mentoring
- Maximise the protective power of positive activities
- Embed sustained support in high-need A&E departments
- Make multi-year core funding the default
- Equip youth workers to safeguard children and young people
- Prioritise evidence-based strategies and avoid harmful approaches ■

*Caleb Jackson is head of change for the youth sector at the Youth Endowment Fund*

*The new guidance, Youth Work and Violence Prevention, can be found on YEF’s website*

# SELECT FEW

Select committees play a critical role in holding departments to account. Here, the Public Accounts Committee's chair tells us what it takes to do his role well

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Chaired by Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Conservative MP for North Cotswolds



**Current inquiries** 59 open inquiries, including: civil service pensions; job centres; smarter delivery of public services; improving police productivity

### What makes a good select committee chair?

The PAC operates at a relentless pace. We typically hold two evidence sessions and publish two reports a week, often on unrelated topics. The ability to digest large volumes of information in a short time is key, though this is only half the battle. You must know how to use it when you have witnesses in front of you if you are to get to the crux of the issue at hand.

### What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year?

We are often presented with harrowing evidence of the impact that government failings have on people's lives. Clinical

negligence is government's second-largest financial liability, but it is not a typical monetary issue. Our work on this encompasses the justice system, healthcare delivery and the public purse. However, the key challenge is working to secure accountability for victims.

We also felt this keenly during our work on the ECO4 scheme – an utter disaster in which 98% of external and 29% of internal wall insulation installed under a publicly funded scheme was faulty. Households were left in limbo, awaiting reassurance from government that they would not be left to pay for remediation to address the health and safety risks many face.

### How easy have you found it to call witnesses, and how informative have they been?

The PAC is unique in that it doesn't deal with policy but

with the public purse. Because of this, we primarily deal with the most senior civil servants, rather than ministers or experts.

We've had some excellent witnesses. Some, however, are less forthcoming than others.

### How responsive has the government been to reports?

The government has undertaken to respond to each of our reports, so in that sense they've been very responsive. During my tenure as chair, we have published 68 reports and our recommendations have had an acceptance rate of 95%.

A key element of my role is keeping an eye on recommendations accepted by government and its progress implementing them. If we aren't happy with the pace, we can follow up in writing or recall departments for further sessions. We can also bid for debates on

the floor of the house if we feel an issue requires wider parliamentary scrutiny.

### What are your priorities for the next 12 months?

A theme across our work will be the role of local trusts in the health service in the wake of NHSE's abolition and our work on clinical negligence. Defence is also likely to feature heavily as spending looks set to increase. We await the much-delayed Defence Investment Plan with interest.

Laggards such as HS2 and Restoration and Renewal will doubtless feature as we continue to scrutinise their value for money. Many of our inquiries have looked at the adoption and use of digital technologies, including AI and cybersecurity. I would expect this to continue as departments work to bring themselves fully into the digital age. ■

# CUTTING REMARKS

**Josh Newbury MP** introduces the new All-Party Parliamentary Group for Public Sector Efficiency, and explains why cuts alone aren't enough

**O**ur vital public services are under constant strain. Be it Whitehall departments, councils or NHS trusts, the public rightly expect services that are responsive, reliable and high quality, yet those delivering them are often asked to do more year after year within increasingly constrained funding.

designed around organisational boundaries rather than what the public actually want.

The real question is what kind of efficiency we pursue, and whether it strengthens the system or weakens it. Done well, efficiency should be about maximising the impact of public spending on people's lives, supporting better outcomes, reducing friction in delivery and making it easier

for public servants to apply their expertise where it adds the most value. That means moving away from an approach focused solely on headline savings and towards one that is honest about trade-offs, long-term capability and resilience.

This matters for trust as much as it does for delivery. Public services sit at the front line

between teams; decisions being pushed into the short term because stepping back and fixing the underlying issues was not a possibility. Those experiences left me with a strong sense that efficiency as a byword for cuts makes life harder for everyone, but done well, it can genuinely improve services and working lives.

It is with this perspective that I am chairing the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Public Sector Efficiency, which recognises that past approaches have too often been narrowly focused on cost control, without sufficient attention to how work is done or how improvement is sustained.

The APPG's focus is on understanding how better ways of working can strengthen public services and improve outcomes. That means looking seriously at how departments collaborate, how services are commissioned and delivered, and how barriers between organisations can be reduced. We are also committed to learning from what works elsewhere. The APPG has already launched a commission to examine international examples of effective public sector efficiency, with further work planned in areas such as health and education.

A core principle of this work is that reform cannot be designed in the abstract. Those working on the front lines are often best placed to identify where time, money and effort are being wasted, and where small changes could unlock meaningful improvements. Bringing together parliamentarians with practitioners and experts who understand delivery realities is therefore central to the group's approach.

Collaboration matters. Better outcomes are rarely achieved in isolation. Whether between departments, across different tiers of government, or with partners in industry and the voluntary sector, shared learning and joint problem solving are essential if efficiency is to support, rather than undermine, service quality.

If we are serious about renewing the state and restoring confidence in public services, we cannot allow efficiency to remain synonymous with cuts alone. Reclaiming the concept means acknowledging the legacy of austerity,

being honest about where money is still wasted, and working together to build public services that are both effective and resilient. The APPG would value your contribution; take a look at our website at [appgpcse.org.uk](http://appgpcse.org.uk) for more information. ■

**“The real question is what kind of efficiency we pursue, and whether it strengthens the system or weakens it”**

of the relationship between the state and the population. When systems fail, it is often frontline staff who bear the brunt of frustration, even when the underlying causes lie in the way services are designed, commissioned or governed rather than those making them a reality.

Before coming to parliament, I worked in the NHS and served as a councillor on a small district council. In both roles, I saw dedicated staff doing their best for the public, often within systems that made their jobs harder. Budget pressures were always part of the picture, but so were the quieter frustrations: processes that had mushroomed up over time; duplication

That is why the debate about efficiency is often a difficult one. For many, the term still carries the weight of austerity, when it was often used as a byword for cuts rather than a serious attempt by policymakers to transform how services work and spend taxpayers' cash. In some cases, cuts have not only reduced capacity, but actively made the system less efficient as public sector bodies have been forced into making short-term decisions that have simply created more substantial problems down the line.

Yet it is also true that, even after more than a decade and a half of constraint, there remain many opportunities to get better outcomes for every pound of public money spent. In some areas, inefficiency has been reinforced by fragmented structures, duplicated functions and processes

**Hitting the marquee**  
Newbury launches the new APPG in parliament



# Why digital post can help power the UK's national revival

The public sector doesn't need a complete digital reset to thrive. It needs a single trusted system that connects what we already have, delivering savings, enhanced services, and public confidence



**Richard Davies**  
Country Managing Partner  
Netcompany UK

**T**he government's 2025 review of digital services painted a bleak picture: user satisfaction down, productivity falling, and under-digitised critical systems – with fragmented tech and siloed data compounding problems<sup>1</sup>. Many of these issues persist today, with citizens feeling their effects when they interact with the state through clunky processes and analogue communication.

Thankfully, the solution doesn't require ripping everything up and starting again. Instead, the answer may lie in tying existing systems together with digital post.

## Connected systems, connected lives

Denmark gives us a model for getting digital post right. Launched in 2022, the mit.dk platform now serves over 3.2 million people – over half the population – turning static documents into live services, allowing citizens and businesses to sign contracts, update tax details, pay charges and more, all within one interface. For example, when Danes buy an apartment, they exchange documents with agents, lawyers, and banks through one seamless flow. And during Europe's 2022 energy crisis, the government rolled out payment deferrals to millions of households in weeks, using mit.dk. As a result, last year public trust in government digital services reached a recent high of 84%<sup>2</sup>.

Denmark's digital post infrastructure sits above two core data registers covering citizens and businesses. These comply with Denmark's "once-only" principle, meaning information only needs to be sent to the state once, with agencies querying shared sources rather than duplicating data collection. On top of this, the MeMo format enables interactive "letters" that act like supercharged forms, with automated routing, processing, and intelligent follow-on actions.

## The cost of clinging to paper

In the UK, Netcompany is helping the Scottish Government begin this journey (as we did in Denmark), and we'll roll out the first use cases this year. But for the rest of the UK, fragmentation persists. Almost half of central government and 45% of NHS services still lack a digital

pathway, while the DVLA processes around 45,000 letters daily and Defra relies on 500+ paper-based form processes.

Contrast that with Denmark, which saves hundreds of millions of pounds annually on postage and materials alone. Scaled to the UK, the potential savings are massive – even before you consider admin efficiencies. In the UK today, every lost or late letter means an appointment wasted, a benefit delayed, or a caseworker following up.

## Trust, sovereignty and what comes next

With digital post, the most complex life moments – like registering for benefits, moving house, or retiring – become coordinated journeys rather than obstacle courses. This friction-free, information-rich model could help every UK department and agency save money, free up staff, and give citizens time back.

For all this potential, responsible digitalisation that builds trust is key to adoption. The public are rightly wary of systems that centralise data or feel ripe for exploitation by big tech. Any new national digital infrastructure must answer those concerns directly.

Netcompany's AMI, which powers mit.dk, is tried, trusted and European by design. It adheres to strict GDPR rules, with strong identity verification, multi-factor authentication, and transparent audit trails. In addition, it provides a strong foundation for layering in AI integrations and automation, without sacrificing digital sovereignty.

If we want digitised communication to support national revival, three things must happen. First, let's be honest about the opportunity – the money saved, time returned, and frustration removed. Second, let's reuse proven technology and configure it for UK policy, instead of starting from scratch. Third, set a clear UK-wide direction. Scotland has done so. England, Wales and Northern Ireland should now decide how they connect with, and build on, that momentum.

Get this right and digital post becomes more than a cheaper way to send letters. It becomes a digital backbone that supports efficient services, directs money and staff from admin to the frontlines, and provides citizens with a state that feels competent, joined up, trustworthy and on their side.



# Netcompany

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



# WHAT IS THE COST OF DWP'S UC ANTI-FRAUD ALGORITHM?

Since being launched by the benefits department five years ago, an automated tech tool has been subject to criticism and controversy. **Sam Trendall** investigates recent disclosures about its technical operation and financial return

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

**“T**his case is illustrative of the need for departments to be upfront and transparent where machine learning techniques are being used, in order to secure public confidence in these AI tools as, without the public’s trust, government is doomed to fail in this area.”

The case in question – described above by Public Accounts Committee chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown – is that of the Department for Work and Pensions and its use of algorithms to help detect fraud, which began in 2021 with a program intended to tackle false claims for Universal Credit advance payments. Five years on, the technology remains in use. But also still present are the controversy and criticism that have long surrounded the automated tech system.

Such scrutiny seems unlikely to abate after the disclosure of figures that reveal the tool has delivered only minimal financial return, as well an admission by DWP that, after nearly five years in operation, the tool requires retraining as it “is not working as effectively as we would expect” and is disproportionately flagging as high-risk applications by overseas claimants. The department has also freshly released operational details that – although finally made public after years of campaigning – have been heavily redacted in areas related to data collection, processing and sharing.

A recent evidence submission to PAC made by social justice charity the Public Law Project noted “DWP has rarely been proactive in making public information about its use of machine learning to detect and prevent fraud”.

The genesis for this case was a 2020 report from the National Audit Office, which – some 18 months after the DWP opened online applications for advance payments for those awaiting receipt of UC – found that the digital service had proven “vulnerable” to fraud. This was evidenced by a suspected tally during its first year and a half of 100,000 fraudulent claims worth a total of between £98m and £147m, the NAO said.

This prompted the department to “put a range of controls and protections in place”, according to correspondence sent to PAC by DWP permanent secretary Sir Peter Schofield.

This includes the algorithm, which departmental documents describe as

“a supervised machine learning classifier designed to risk assess requests for advances ahead of payment”. Applications that are deemed by the algorithm to present the highest risk of fraud are “referred to a DWP employee, who reviews all available and relevant information, to decide whether to approve or decline the request”.

Before the introduction of the automated assessment tool, all applicants for UC advances – a repayable upfront payment to help citizens pay bills and meet other living costs while awaiting their first regular instalment of UC – were required to attend a face-to-face meeting.

### **“DWP has rarely been proactive in making public information about its use of machine learning to detect and prevent fraud” Public Law Project**

Following the potential £100m-a-year losses cited by the NAO, the algorithm forms part of a suite of measures that have collectively reduced annual fraud to the range of £20m to £85m by 2021-22, and down to between £0 and £60m by 2024-25, the perm sec wrote in his missive to MPs.

But, in the first public disclosure of quantifiable figures concerning the impact of the machine learning tool, Schofield also revealed that only a small fraction of the reduction has come as a result of technology – which has flagged up only a very limited number of fraudulent claims, when compared with the scale of the problem as identified by the NAO.

“Our UC advances machine learning model... has directly saved less than £5m over the last three years, by identifying around 7,000 high-risk advance

requests that were rejected by a DWP agent following a review of the request,” the letter said. “Our overall control improvements have indirectly prevented a considerably larger volume and value of fraudulent advance claims.”

The cost of developing and maintaining the algorithm is not known. DWP did not clarify, when asked by *PublicTechnology* whether the returns delivered – which equate to about £1.6m a year, at most – have exceeded the money spent on the tool to date.

In response, a spokesperson for the department said: “We’re using cutting-edge technology to crack down on fraud, with the UC advances model three times better at identifying fraud risk – and on track to slash fraud rates in half by 2029. Real people always make the final call, with safeguards in place to protect genuine claimants.”

### **‘Raises questions’**

Caroline Selman, senior research fellow at the Public Law Project, told *PublicTechnology* that DWP’s revelation about the limited gains enabled by the platform “raises questions about the proportionality of that tool”.

Such questions are amplified by the fact that the number of claims correctly flagged by the algorithm – which, over a three-year period, equates to 2,300 rejections annually – represents less than 0.2% of all applications made, based on DWP’s own data for 2024-25, which show 1.4m UC advances paid out.

“In the DWP’s fairness analysis, the justification that’s being put forward – in terms of why this tool is viewed as necessary and proportionate – in part points to the concerns about the size of fraud and then the effectiveness of this tool,” she said.

That analysis, published by the department on GOV.UK this summer, perhaps shines a light on another potential cost of the algorithm beyond that which can be quantified in pounds and pence.

The fairness assessment – which outlines DWP’s own analysis of the tool – acknowledges that “the likelihood of non-UK nationals being referred by the model was higher than UK nationals, however the likelihood that the advance was rejected by a human decision-maker following a referral was equivalent to the likelihood for UK nationals”.

The department also admits that for





**Fraud alert** The National Audit Office identified potential losses in the region of £100m per year

claimants aged 35 and upwards, there is “an increased likelihood of being referred by the model [that] is inconsistent with the reduced likelihood of those referrals being correct” on human review.

All of this means that “the evidence suggests the model is not working as effectively as we would expect”.

Moreover, the assessment reiterates that there is “limited availability of protected characteristic data for the high-risk cohort”, with age being the only area where the potential for discrimination against a protected characteristic has been fully measured.

In a recent PAC evidence submission

from Amnesty International, the global human rights charity noted that the algorithm had “identified bias on some characteristics such as age but [was] unable to test for bias on other dimensions, [such as] race or gender, because of the design of the data systems”.

“DWP may have effectively created algorithmic systems that are untestable for discrimination, while claiming this limitation absolves them of their legal duty to ensure equal treatment,” the submission added.

Based on the – limited – evidence

**“DWP may have effectively created algorithmic systems that are untestable for discrimination, while claiming this limitation absolves them of their legal duty to ensure equal treatment”  
Amnesty International**

of discrepancies that is available, the department’s fairness assessment commits to recalibrating the tool and then conducting further analysis.

“To try and reduce measured inconsistencies between referral and outcomes metrics, the model will be re-trained and further fairness analyses conducted to measure the impact of this action on reducing age and nationality related disparities,” the assessment says.

*PublicTechnology* understands that details of the retraining and changes made will be provided in an “effectiveness assessment” of the algorithm to be published by DWP at some point this year.

### Transparency records

Campaign groups had lobbied for the public release of a full fairness assessment for some time before the department eventually published the document in July.

Similarly, there have been longstanding calls for DWP to release operational details of the UC advances anti-fraud model via the government’s Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard (ATRS), a mechanism that was introduced by ministers in 2021. Following a mandatory publication directive implemented across government in 2024, scores of records have since been released by many public bodies in Whitehall and

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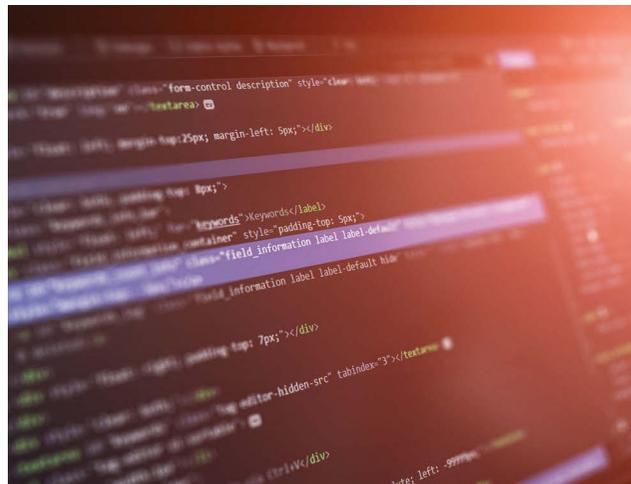
beyond – including 12 published by DWP.

Among these is, finally, a record related to the advances fraud model. But the long-awaited document largely reiterates previously released claims and information. It also redacts detail from 17 of the record's stipulated fields across a wide range of specifications regarding data, including: quantities of data involved in the tool's operation; collection and processing methods; access and storage arrangements; and sharing agreements with third parties.

All of these redactions cite exemptions offered by Section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act, which enables public bodies to withhold data which, if released, could hamper “the prevention or detection of crime”.

*PublicTechnology* understands that DWP's position is that it believes the information it has omitted from transparency releases could be helpful to those wishing to defraud the department – and can thus be withheld from publication under FoI provisions.

Albeit in somewhat diminished form, the submission of the UC advances algorithm has been among many that have contributed to rapid recent growth of



the number of records released under ATRS – a figure that rose significantly in 2025 after more than two years of sitting almost entirely dormant. Of the 125 entries now listed on GOV.UK, all but nine have been released since the start of 2025.

Selman acknowledges this progress – including that made by DWP. But, with use of algorithms and AI becoming ever-more prevalent, the PLP researcher would now like to see public bodies using the development process of automated tools

to “do some of the working out – so that it doesn't need two years of scrutiny to get to the position where they work out what can and cannot be put in the public domain”.

She also called for greater governance of the process by which departments are exempted from releasing ATRS records – which is mandated via government guidance, although is not yet a legal requirement.

“The ATRS is using the same exemptions that the Freedom of Information Act regime uses,” she says. “But if somebody applies an exemption of the Freedom of Information Act, there are complaints and enforcement routes for you to use if you think that it is an unjustified use of that exemption.”

Selman adds: “For the ATRS, you have not got those same routes. So, to an extent, there's a risk that departments are marking their own homework on the use of that exemption.”

For its part, PLP will retain a close interest in the use of algorithms by DWP – and the wider public sector.

“The way that certain automated tools are being adopted – including ones that use aspects of artificial intelligence – is potentially having a fundamental impact and causing a shift in terms of how decisions are taken about us,” Selman says. “What we want to make sure is that, first of all, these things are being informed by existing public law principles about fair, lawful and non-discriminatory decision-making. But we also think the law itself needs to evolve – because it was developed with human decision-makers in mind. And some of its existing concepts and principles do not always translate perfectly across to this new world of decision-making.”

In the months ahead, PLP's aim will be to “support and advocate for improved compliance with ATRS – but also [consider] what is actually being published and shared: is the right information being shared in the right way, and what are the levers” available if it is not, according to Selman. The charity will also look to better help citizens whose rights have been bolstered by the Data Use and Access Act that passed into law last year.

“We also have a focus on improved information that's given to individuals who are decision subjects,” she adds. “If you're a decision subject, you should know if automated decision-making tools are being used in some way in a decision that's about you – and you need to know that information in order to be able to exercise your rights.” ■

**STATS**

£147m

Potential scale of UC advances fraud over an 18-month period, according to a 2020 NAO report

Less than £5m

Amount directly saved by the anti-fraud algorithm over the past three years

100,000

Number of potential fraudulent claims over an 18-month period, according to the NAO

7,000

Number of fraudulent or erroneous claims successfully flagged by the algorithm over the past three years

17

Number of fields redacted in DWP's transparency record for the anti-fraud algorithm



# Four practical steps to help make government systems 'Secure by Design'

Every public service relies on a secure and resilient system, but making 'Secure by Design' a reality can feel out of reach. CSW reports on an event with Palo Alto Networks and IBM where leaders shared practical ways government can build security into culture, procurement and everyday decision-making

**E**veryone agrees that cybersecurity is important: no one wants to be the next organisation that is the victim of an attack or breach. The 'Secure by Design' approach aims to reduce this risk by building security considerations into every product, service and system, ensuring resilience and protection are the default settings.

There are several sources of 'Secure by Design' guidance, including from the National Cyber Security Centre and the Ministry of Defence, though the main one which government departments and arm's-length bodies need to consider is from the Government Security Group. Each set of guidance comes with a slightly different lens, with a focus on products and suppliers, system design, or organisational culture. Across all the guidance, there are several core principles: anticipating threats early; designing processes and technology to minimise overall risk; and finally,

developing an organisational culture where everyone understands their role in keeping systems safe from harm.

Yet public sector organisations have many different priorities, and trying to build cybersecurity into every part of an organisation can be incredibly challenging. Secure by Design can feel aspirational rather than an everyday practice, as resource and operational pressures vie for leadership attention.

At a recent *Civil Service World* roundtable, supported by Palo Alto Networks and IBM, attendees found there is no single path to perfection but that practical progress is possible and urgent. Secure by Design should not just be another compliance exercise but a way of thinking that infuses leadership, procurement, governance and day-to-day decision-making.

Below are four ways public sector organisations can begin putting these principles into practice.

## **1. Leadership and culture: Securing everyone's interest**

The roundtable participants agreed that one of the biggest hurdles is not technology but leadership. Cybersecurity is often seen as a problem for the IT team, but if an organisation wants to be Secure by Design, this must be a shared responsibility across the organisation. Leaders must treat security as a part of the everyday job; it must be a thread intertwined throughout all decision-making processes, not just something thought about at the end.

One way to secure engagement from senior leaders is to translate the issue into the tangible. One attendee suggested Data Protection Impact Assessments, exercises which identify vital weaknesses and how these could be exploited if something goes wrong. Linking these exercises with other priorities, like service delivery, can also help secure more buy-in. Framing the

sector organisations still depend on outdated systems that cannot be easily updated to modern standards. The temptation can be to wait for a replacement before implementing Secure by Design principles; however, the consensus from the roundtable was that even small progress is better than nothing at all.

For systems that are already in place, take a risk-based approach. Identify and prioritise securing the most important services, where failure would cause real-world harm.

To do this, one attendee suggested identifying your organisation's minimum viable operations: looking at what processes must keep running during a cyber incident and how they interact with each other. Mapping those dependencies helps make decisions on where investment would have the best value. Over time, this can allow even teams that are struggling with resources to strengthen their security foundations, one step at a time.

### 3. Assured procurement

As well as discussing legacy challenges, the panel explored the procurement of new platforms and services, which they agreed should have Secure by Design principles built in from the very beginning. One of the key challenges raised was the cost and complexity of verifying suppliers to ensure they adhere to these

principles, especially for smaller organisations. There was support for a more centralised system of assurance. That would create a trusted baseline that buyers can rely on when procuring technology.

Other ideas put forward included a standard or certification that suppliers can use to show that they meet Secure by Design principles, and building stronger checks into existing frameworks run by bodies like the Crown Commercial Service. This would reduce some duplication of effort across departments and provide smaller organisations with confidence that the products or services they are procuring are meeting a consistent standard. The aim, however, is not to completely outsource checking but to help supplement a smaller organisation's procurement process.

### 4. Governance and resilience: make improvement measurable

Creating good governance is what can turn Secure by Design from an aspiration into a habit. Several organisations have started using models to measure their maturity, scoring themselves from early awareness through to embedded practices. These goals are not necessarily about chasing the perfect scorecard but recognising where an organisation is and how it can progress.

Table top exercises that highlight capability gaps are another effective tool. They can help show where there are gaps and also highlight the extent of the risk presented by cybersecurity breaches. They can also help identify gaps in communication and coordination between teams and highlight how standard everyday processes, like payroll or communications, might operate in crisis.

### Building trust and resilience – one step at a time

Secure by Design should not just be about compliance, forms or audits. Instead, it is about protecting public services, and most importantly, maintaining trust. To achieve this, organisations should focus on continual improvement. As one of the roundtable participants said, "don't let perfection be the enemy of improvement". Secure by Design is not just a line in the sand. Little changes, like integrating security checks into projects and their lifecycles or raising cybersecurity risks in leadership meetings, will help to make government more secure and resilient tomorrow than it is today.

conversation around service continuity and the cost of disruption helps move the issue from technical language to tangible impact.

Secure by Design is something that requires buy-in not just from leadership but the whole organisation. Attendees agreed that the goal is to have cybersecurity awareness as part of an organisation's cultural foundation. Training, internal communication, and even shared exercises can help raise awareness about cyber. The more it is done, the more it becomes like putting on a seatbelt – something automatic.

### 2. Addressing legacy systems: one step at a time

Every conversation about cybersecurity in government includes a conversation about the challenge of legacy systems. Many public



Scan the QR code to  
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Secure by Design



# Justice, augmented

**Megan Lee-Devlin** – DG for service transformation at the Ministry of Justice – talks to **Suzannah Brecknell** about quick wins versus long-term reforms, AI adoption, and having a job that makes her jump out of bed in the morning. Photography by Dinendra Haria

Reforming government's large and complex processes is often likened to turning around an oil tanker – it takes time and much effort to change direction. In the Ministry of Justice's service transformation group, they acknowledge the truth of this metaphor but they've added another. While some of the projects in the team's wide-ranging portfolio are like tankers, driving complex, multi-year change, others are speed boats – sent out to solve problems or make improvements quickly while the tankers steadily shift.

It's the job of Megan Lee-Devlin, the ministry's director general for service transformation, to oversee this fleet of reforms, ensuring resources are allocated to keep each part on course. Alongside shaping the overall direction of travel, she also leads teams delivering access to justice services, including legal aid, lasting power of attorney and criminal injuries compensation. The goal of her fleet is to bring together delivery, digital and other transformation capabilities to "achieve a step change in the performance" of the MoJ's services.

To do this, Lee-Devlin relies on a team which – to extend the nautical metaphor

– she describes as similar to a rowing crew: "Each of the different people on the boat has a different role and a different set of capabilities, and it's not on the strength of any one seat on the boat that we succeed, but on how we work together," she explains. "Through integrated teams – for instance, embedding engineers with our frontline staff to automate processes or embedding data scientists with our operational leaders to predict error – we are able to tackle problems creatively and quickly."

Lee-Devlin has spent a career "tackling wicked problems" in private sector organisations such as IBM, PwC and McKinsey. In 2021, inspired by seeing the public sector respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the way in which government moved at pace to roll out new digital, data and operational capabilities, she began a six-month temporary stint in the Cabinet Office.

She was soon hooked, became a permanent director, then a director general, leading the digital and data

function across government. "Suffice it to say that once I started working in the civil service, I discovered how great it is to have a job that you really jump out of bed in the morning to do and where

**"Justice Transcribe has fundamentally changed how frontline colleagues are using their time"**



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you leave each day knowing that you've really done work that matters," she says.

In 2024, Lee-Devlin moved to the Ministry of Justice to get "closer to the coalface", working on services for people who are, as she puts it, "often at the most challenging point in their lives". Whether victims of crime, people navigating a loved one's loss of mental capacity, those beginning a rehabilitative journey after committing an offence, or frontline staff working in complex and challenging environments, these groups "need great services", she reflects. And she is, she says, motivated by "how life-changing it can be for people when we get those services right".

Alongside this, she loves the breadth of the work. "There is a huge amount of opportunity for digital transformation across the justice system," she says. As a result, she is leading "a broad portfolio of transformation projects at different stages of maturity in different corners of justice, including legal

aid, prisons, probation and victims services, and some that span the system more widely, including work to better join up our data, accelerate AI and embed secure-by-design principles into everything we do.

"It is important that these programmes add up to a different quality of experience for the people who interact with our services, and better value for taxpayers. What's really exciting is being able to look across the portfolio and see those benefits being realised."

Part of her job is to ensure that lessons, tools and capabilities are shared across the portfolio rather than reinvented project by project. This is central to any good portfolio management approach but feels particularly relevant to the department's adoption of AI technology. Indeed, sharing lessons and tools is an explicit aim of the department's AI Action Plan for Justice, published in July 2025.

Justice Transcribe is a case in point.

Developed initially for probation, the tool automatically converts spoken interactions between probation officers and people on probation into structured notes. Early pilots showed it could reduce the time spent on notetaking by around 50%.

"The impact of Justice Transcribe is that it's fundamentally changed how frontline colleagues are using their time," Lee-Devlin says. But the impact goes beyond efficiency. One probation officer told the team that, for the first time in her long career, she was able to spend an entire meeting looking at the person in front of her, and really engaging with the ways she could help them, rather than at a screen or scribbling notes.

Despite the excitement around AI, Lee-Devlin is clear that it is not a silver bullet. "We are also investing in our core technology, data and our people, to get the most from more cutting-edge capabilities like AI," she says.

That means digitising paper processes,



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modernising legacy technology and improving data maturity across the department. Without those foundations, AI cannot be deployed safely or effectively.

This focus on fundamentals is the first of three priorities for the ministry's digital-enabled transformation over the current spending review period. It includes ensuring legacy systems are safe, secure and capable of iterative improvement, and that newer systems can connect across organisational boundaries.

"For example, making sure data can flow from the courts to the prison system," Lee-Devlin says. In a system as interconnected as justice, fragmented technology can undermine both efficiency and outcomes, she points out.

The second priority is transforming public-facing services. This includes process redesign, such as simplifying the administration faced by providers of legal aid, or through targeted use of AI, in line with the Government's AI Opportunities Action Plan. This is where the speed boats come in, where MoJ is "using available technologies to solve problems quickly, particularly in areas of focus for ministers". An example of this is a digital rapid response unit, working alongside prison staff, to develop tools that help them to reduce error, while longer term work kicks off to digitise paper administration. These teams allow the MoJ to focus effort and resource on high-priority issues, without losing sight of the long-term reforms – the tankers – that underpin system-wide change.

The third priority is people. Lee-Devlin says the aim here is "to make sure that all of our staff have the skills and expertise they need to be able to use new tools effectively," so that technology ultimately frees them to focus on work that matters most.

The Ministry of Justice has taken a deliberately open approach to AI adoption. The department has enterprise licences for ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, allowing staff to use the tools safely and securely while protecting sensitive data.

This means that for simple use cases, MoJ staff don't have to wait for others to build them tools, but can innovate themselves. This includes using AI to synthesise

## ADVICE FOR SENIOR LEADERS SUPPORTING AI ADOPTION

For senior civil servants navigating this rapidly evolving landscape, Lee-Devlin offers three pieces of advice.

**First: be curious.** Make the most of all the learning resources that exist, she says, and find formats that suit how you learn – whether that is reading, listening or watching.

**Second: be connected.** Leaders should seek out colleagues with expertise, both within their organisations and beyond, and use them as thought partners. One of the civil service's strengths, she argues, is the breadth of shared experience across departments and agencies. "Steal with pride," she advises.

**Third: be a responsible champion.** AI use must be grounded in ethics frameworks,

robust governance and cross-functional input from legal, security, operational and technology teams. Leaders need to be clear with their teams about appropriate use cases and guardrails, while also role-modelling adoption once those conditions are in place.

"Knowing the limitations of the technology is really important," she adds. This applies particularly to the risk of hallucinations. The same rigour and critical thinking applied to human advice must be applied to AI outputs.

At the Ministry of Justice, more than 80 senior civil servants now act as AI champions within their business areas. "They are not AI experts," Lee-Devlin says. "They are experts in a whole multitude of different things. But they're being curious, they're connecting, and they're championing responsible adoption."

large briefing packs or turn handwritten notes from an away day into digital notes.

"What AI is bringing is a democratisation of digital development," Lee-Devlin says. "You don't need to be an expert coder to build a really useful AI tool that helps you to undertake a day-to-day task."

Lee-Devlin herself uses tailored tools that distil documents and meeting packs into key points, drawing on her interests, role and institutional knowledge. She is encouraged by how many colleagues across justice are experimenting within agreed principles and parameters and then sharing what works through the department's prompt-sharing platform.

This local innovation is supported by the Justice AI Unit: a relatively new team with a mission to put AI tools into the hands of staff, build confidence and free up time for higher-value work. The unit leads on AI learning and development, runs prompt-sharing competitions, rolls out enterprise

tools and develops bespoke applications like Justice Transcribe. Over 5,000 staff have joined workshops to identify how their AI training can apply to their roles.

"What's really special about the AI unit is not just the work they're doing, but how they're working," Lee-Devlin says. First and foremost, that means working alongside colleagues and really listening

to the problems they're trying to solve. She adds that the team is also focused on finding smart ways to share good use cases, building platforms for colleagues to learn from each other, and helping them think through practical applications.

She also highlights a fresh approach to AI talent, with internships and fellowships drawing in people from a wide range of backgrounds to support the justice mission.

What excites Lee-Devlin most about the current moment is the shift from pilots to doing things at scale.

Justice Transcribe perfectly illustrates that transition. From a small pilot group, it is now being rolled out to thousands of probation officers, with a commitment made by the deputy prime minister that all relevant staff will have access within a year.

"It is a powerful thing," Lee-Devlin reflects, "to hear probation officers telling us that it's changed the way that they work."

In all of this, she and her team remain focused not just on changing how colleagues work, but on the impact that will have on the citizens needing their support. It's a focus shared by teams across justice who, she says, are constantly thinking about small and large ways to improve citizen experience as well as efficiency.

"One of the things I love about my role is how every day I encounter colleagues who are thinking: 'How do I make something a little bit better for our customers and frontline?'" ■

**"AI is bringing a democratisation of digital development. You don't need to be an expert coder to build a really useful tool that helps you with a day-to-day task"**

# A quick guide to... public design

Public design is an area of growing interest for civil servants and academics alike. To find out more, **Suzannah Brecknell** spoke to **Lucy Kimbell**, professor of contemporary design practices, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London

### What is public design?

Public design is the application of design principles, tools and approaches in pursuit of better government or improved policy outcomes. It includes the use of specialist skills and expertise in things like app design, but also more generalised skills to understand and design systems, strategies and policies.

“All of the things that a citizen interacts with that government has produced have been designed,” explains Lucy Kimbell, professor of contemporary design practices at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London.

These touchpoints might look like anything from a paper form you fill in at a hospital, to your ability to navigate round a school building, to the creation of a policy itself or the organisation that delivers it.

For some of these interactions, there’s an understanding that professional designers are needed – to create an app or a website, for example. But over the last two decades, there has been an increasing understanding that design tools and skills can be brought to bear in a much wider way.

Kimbell describes public design as sitting between two definitions of design. “On the one hand, it’s a specialist expertise and activity associated with some people who went to design school,” she says. “On the other, it’s a generalised capability guiding how you

respond to an issue and develop a new or improved product, service or process.”

The benefits of public design are now being recognised globally. Kimbell says that while the UK “is a leader and has critical mass in this”, there are numerous other examples in governments across the world – from the EU, the Netherlands and Ireland through to Australia, New Zealand and even the US federal government, which set up a design team last summer.

Last summer also saw the publication of the Public Design Evidence Review, a package of eight reports prepared by the Department for Work and Pensions’ Human Centred Design Science team and supported by a range of academics, including Kimbell as well as practitioners across the UK public sector.

The PDER explores the role and value of design in the public sector through a range of academic documents, case studies and in-depth interviews. It describes public design as an iterative process of clarifying problems, exploring options and testing what works using practical, creative and collaborative methods grounded in how people actually experience public services and systems.

### Why is it important?

The PDER suggests that public design can offer an answer to a fundamental question civil servants face: “How do we create better public policies and services

that routinely achieve their intent?”

By starting with the lived experience of citizens and offering tools to bring together perspectives and skills from across professional and organisational boundaries, a public design approach increases the chances of ending up with an accessible, inclusive and effective service. It provides a range of methods that could support thinking and collective decision-making in government – the formal name is “psycho-technologies” – by both expanding the data that is available to support a decision and broadening the range of “frames” that people use to understand the data.

Public design also plays a key role in delivering value for money as well as public value. Since the most expensive time to find out a policy doesn’t work is after implementation, an emphasis on smaller-scale prototyping, testing and learning means public design can reduce the risk of costly, large-scale failures.

When embedded into the live running of a policy or service, an iterative approach can improve its resilience, supporting it to adapt to a changing social, political and technological context through the use of feedback loops.

All of this means government can be more agile, evidence-based and accountable as it tackles complex problems: embedding learning and adaptation into a process means you can adapt as needed while following what works.

However, Kimbell offers two additional thoughts on the importance of public design, pointing first to its potential to address the democratic deficit that arises when citizens’ experiences of government or institutions fall short of their expectations. “Having people’s lived experience made visible and connected to the design of things, as well as outcomes,

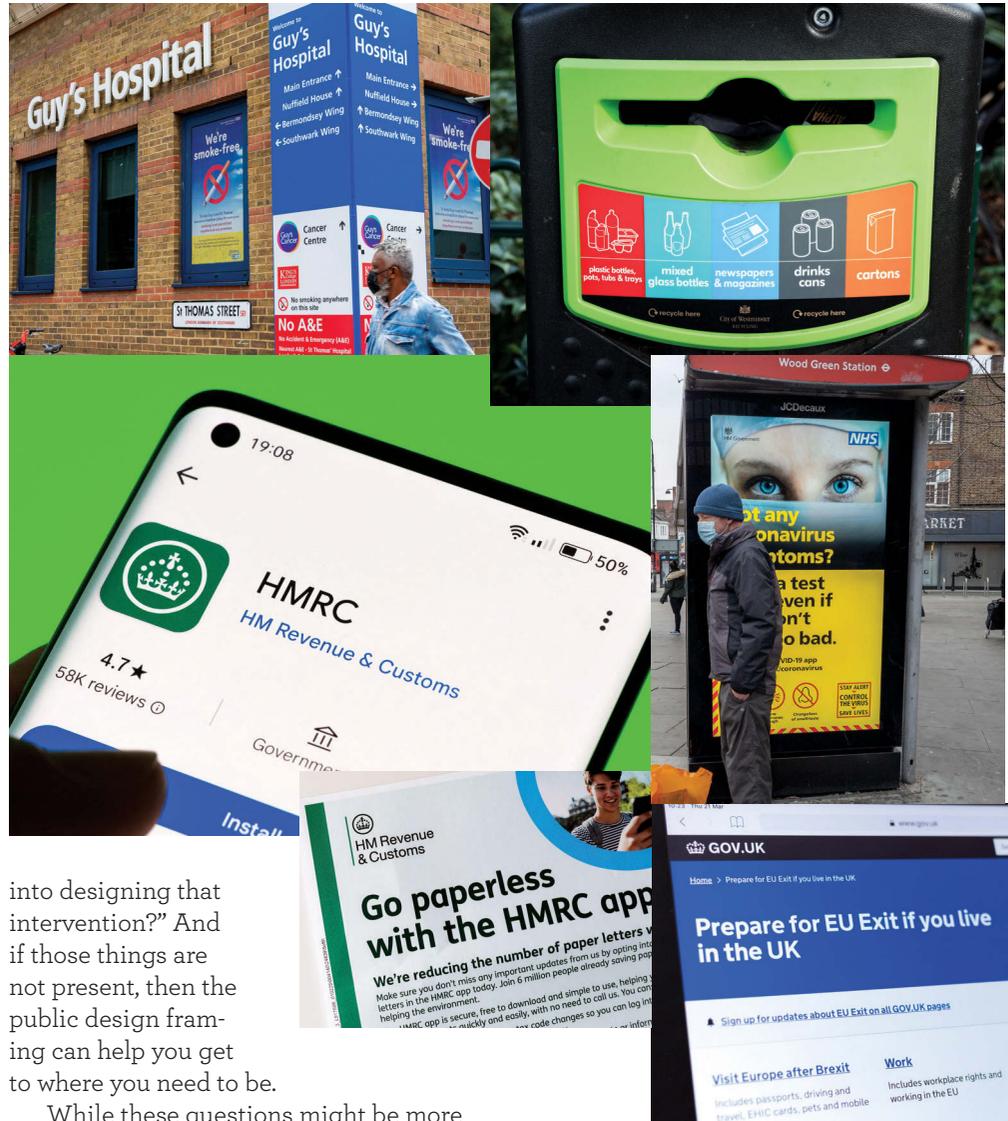
offers a way of addressing some of those democratic challenges,” she says.

She also notes that while design *does* offer a practical, inclusive approach to solving specific problems, it also offers tools for “creativity and visioning, imagining and co-creating [ideas] which might go beyond current frames of reference, current ways of thinking about an issue.”

This more expansive aspect of design practice could help governments to grip some “huge, systemic challenges” facing the world, such as the ecological crisis. Since these challenges are “tied to the design of systems”, a design lens can help governments to think effectively about how to rebuild systems in a more sustainable way.

### What does this mean for my daily work?

The PDER identifies seven characteristic design practices that typify how design is done in public contexts – from understanding people’s experiences and synthesising ideas to prototyping and experimenting with options (see box). For those interested in adopting design practices, Kimbell suggests civil servants start with a question: “Who or what is consciously designing an intervention?” (The “what” is there to take account of the fact that, these days, it might be AI). Then, Kimbell says, officials should ask themselves: “To what extent are lived experience, analysis of a wider system, and iteration built



into designing that intervention?” And if those things are not present, then the public design framing can help you get to where you need to be.

While these questions might be more relevant to an official working on a new policy or addressing a change requirement, even those working on an ongoing service or policy could find value in a design approach. They might do this by considering if a feedback loop could be added to the system, or what would happen if their core assumptions about a policy were to change in the future.

Or you could also start with thinking about design in your own team, for example by designing the way team meetings work to ensure they are focused on user needs; or making time to really think deeply about problems you’re facing, and build hypotheses and ways to test them.

Public design tools and approaches alone may improve outcomes but will not always be sufficient to make a significant difference. As Susan Acland-Hood, head of the policy profession, wrote in her foreword to the PDER, “design is not a silver bullet”. “It works best when supported by the right conditions: leadership that values experimentation, teams with the time and space to understand problems deeply and accountability systems that allow for learning and adaptation,” she wrote.

### HOW TO USE A PUBLIC DESIGN APPROACH

- **Start with real problems, not assumptions.** Using design techniques to analyse people’s lived experience, combine this with other information and enable exploration and (re)framing of issues in ways that allow for deeper and systemic understandings
- **Use iterative methods to de-risk decisions.** Testing in context, learning and adapting reduces the risk of costly mistakes and creates effective, evidence-based services
- **Work across boundaries** – professional and organisational – to build really multidisciplinary teams focused on a shared problem
- **Reflect on your accountability and governance structures** to allow for methods such as rapid prototyping, collaborative co-design and sense-making that often cut across or challenge established ways of thinking and working

In the PDER’s brief guide, DWP’s Human-Centred Design Science team notes that “design can help the public sector think better together and act with greater empathy, precision and impact, but doing it well takes considerable work. Design doesn’t make things easy, it makes things possible.” ■

### Further resources

**Public Design Evidence Review**  
<https://bit.ly/400axQd>

**Public Design Beyond Central Government** <https://bit.ly/40k01DL>

**Design Council** <https://bit.ly/4l1zAw7>

**The Office of Public Sector Innovation’s toolkit navigator** <https://bit.ly/4rFOoD7>

**Government Digital Service’s Service Design Manual** <https://bit.ly/4qZ1XME>

**Policy Design Community**  
<http://bit.ly/3N2lWMx>

# JOLLY GOOD FELLOW



**Changing world** The aim of Bates's Heywood Fellowship is to consider the changing global economic order and how the UK should adapt



How should the UK respond to the changing global economic order?

**Jenny Bates** tells **Beckie Smith** how she's using her Heywood Fellowship to answer that question and propose new "policy tramlines" for government

**I**n 2019, the Heywood Foundation launched its first fellowship in memory of the late cabinet secretary Jeremy Heywood, giving a senior civil servant the opportunity to explore issues relating to public service and policy outside of their day job. Jenny Bates, then a director general in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, became the fourth official to take on the Heywood Fellowship last September.

The aim of Bates's fellowship, which is spent at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government, is to "consider the changing global economic order and seek to develop a refreshed approach – or longer-term strategy – for the UK".

Her project seeks to "diagnose, understand and take account of that shifting global context and the UK's position and to develop an approach that can both respond to the needs and aspirations of the people of the UK and endure through inevitable uncertainty".

Here she tells CSW about the work her team is doing, her goals and the ways she's learned from previous Heywood fellows.

#### **Tell us about your fellowship – what are you working on?**

We're looking at how the world is changing, particularly how globalisation is changing and how the global economy is shifting quite radically. My hook at the moment is [Canadian prime minister] Mark Carney's speech at Davos – he talked about the system facing a rupture, not a transition. That is the context we're facing; the era of globalisation that we've been in is fundamentally shifting. I'm trying to work out how the UK navigates that: what do we need to do to be successful economically in that changing world? That's the really short version.

#### **Why this subject?**

As a government, we've done a lot of really good thinking on how the world is changing from the national security, foreign policy side, such as the integrated review, the

integrated review refresh and the national security strategy. I'm positing that we have done less collective thinking deeply on the economic side, so I'm trying to fill a gap. I say that as someone who's spent 25 years doing international economic policy – I'm slightly talking to myself.

#### **What will success look like at the end of this project?**

There are three parts: the first is I think we need a refreshed strategic framework and a new set of what I call policy tramlines – guiding principles or a strategy for what we're trying to do.

The second thing is specific policies. It's not enough just to have a framework; we know in policymaking that it's helpful to be really specific about what that would mean – say, what would that mean in trade? What would that mean in finance? – so we hope to provide some illustrative, useful and perhaps innovative thoughts in the policy space.

The third thing is capability: if we were to pursue that approach, would we need different capabilities or skills in the civil service? Do we need to be organised differently?

#### **How long have you been thinking about this topic?**

I had the framework for what the project should do before I came to Oxford. It's fair to say that colleagues in government are thinking about this, so I've not got it from nowhere. As the DG on economics and global issues in the Foreign Office, I had started a piece of work internally on it and there is still work going on internally. The fellowship gives me the time and space to focus only on this, whereas in government, I would have been doing it with a little bit of my time alongside loads of other things.

#### **Where have you got to now with the project?**

There are six steps: define the system; talk about how it's changing; scenarios for the future; objectives; new strategies; capability. We've got as far as step four. We've done the diagnosing stage and we've published two documents: the framing anchor paper and a set of scenarios for the future.

We've used scenarios techniques to do that, thinking about how the world might look different and how things might change. We've proposed some objectives for the UK that we think are enduring, then we've put out some initial thoughts on what a different set of UK policies might look like – the policy tramlines or alternative options. They're a bit like Lego bricks: things you could put together as a strategy. The next phase is to turn all of that into a strategy and test that strategy.

The spirit of the Heywood Fellowship is open policymaking, so publishing those papers is like thinking out loud. We don't want to just come up with a strategy and then tell everybody what it is; we want people's input as we're doing it. We've shared the building blocks, but we want a conversation about the building blocks.

#### **How do you go about getting that input?**

We are ruthlessly stealing from-slash-learning from the previous fellow, Lucy Smith, who set out a playbook on how to do national strategy development, which we are using alongside a lot of her techniques. She's got this concept of a "flotilla": if you have a national strategy, it's not just

#### **"The spirit of the Heywood Fellowship is open policymaking, so publishing those papers is like thinking out loud"**

about the national government; it's all of the other actors in the system, and we are considering what that means for our work.

For international economic policy, business is a hugely important part of that flotilla because they do the activity, the trading and investing. It also includes other bits of the policymaking system like regulators and arm's-length bodies; the Bank of England, the Competition and Markets Authority, the British Business Bank. And we need to involve other parts of the UK like the devolved administrations and sub-national governments. We've just had a launch event about our objectives and strategies, where we had representatives of those groups.

During our scenario analysis, we did

workshops with the business community, academia, historians and policymakers, and we've thought about the wider public as well. There's a lot of polling on what British people think about issues that are relevant to our work. Nobody says to them, "What do you think of the global economic order?" but there's lots of information on what they think about trade and climate and Britain's role in the world. And we're hoping to do something more in the deliberative engagement space in the next phase.

Working with historians has been really helpful as well. You sometimes hear people say things like, "We're an open, free-trading nation". That's not really true across all or even much of our history. We've always been broadly trying to achieve a similar goal – pursuing prosperity – but we've really changed how we've gone about doing it. That helps you free up a bit from current frames, and there might be some lessons from that.

**How has that engagement shaped your thinking so far?**

One area where we're trying to think differently is with the business community. The relationship between the government and business in the UK is a bit more distant than in some other countries. Businesses are telling us: "We're either having very brief conversations at very senior level between CEOs and ministers; or we're having very technical conversations about the latest consultation on a piece of legislation, or what clause we want in a trade agreement." But there's not a middle, strategic [conversation happening]. Some of the scenarios that we propose are quite challenging in terms of the economic headwinds that we're facing or the complexity of dealing with countries that are behaving in unhelpful ways. So we are wondering whether we need a different way for business and government to work together to navigate that. For example, do we need a bit more of a "Team GB" approach, and what would that look like?

Then something that comes through in the public opinion data is that British people see our engagement with the world through quite a strong economic lens, as a way of becoming and continuing to be prosperous. That's interesting because it gives us a sense of what the objective should be.

**What are some of the lessons to come out of those conversations?**

One is that when the rules and the international system get too rigid, there's not enough scope for countries to adjust or

flex – then you tend to get real breaks in it. The obvious example is the gold standard: countries went on, then they came off, then went back on and it eventually collapsed. It didn't provide the flexibility they needed so the system collapsed under its own weight. It worked for a while and then didn't.

You're seeing echoes of that in some areas of the trading system now and the rules system around the World Trade Organization. One big debate is that some countries want more flexibility – they're saying: "Bits of this don't work for us any more". It's a really difficult thing to negotiate because countries have different interests, but if you can't find ways to accommodate some of that shifting need and interest, you tend to get a rupture. So there's something about: yes, rules and structures are useful, but we have to think about how you can evolve and adapt them. Otherwise, history shows you might lose more than you were aiming for by thinking the idea is to hold on to everything.

**Who else is on your team for the project?**

I have a team member from the Department for Business and Trade, Martin, who has spent the last few years doing trade negotiations for the UK – he was helping lead the work on negotiating with the US after the tariffs were imposed. I have Catherine, who has a lot of experience doing economic diplomacy in the Foreign Office. I'm also bringing in another team member from the Treasury. The fellowship is very policy focused – we're not just thinking great intellectual thoughts, we're trying to do the "so what?" for the UK – and those are the three departments that matter most for my project.

While the fellowship is a great opportunity for me, it's also a unique oppor-

**"We have had huge amounts of positive engagement with government. Lots of people keep saying: 'So glad you're thinking about this'"**

tunity for the team members from those departments. It's a chance to step out of government for a bit and take that experience back with them into their next job.

Then there is an academic fellow funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Michael. That helps us connect into academia and he brings an understanding of the academic world. He knows some of the interesting professors to talk to and he can give us techniques for doing things that we wouldn't use otherwise.



**Golden rule** Bates is exploring how the UK can shape global trade rules to make them more flexible and sustainable, unlike the now-defunct gold standard

**Do you think this experience will change your approach to your day job at all?**

I don't think it's necessarily going to radically change what I do – I started my career as an economist, I was a director of analysis – but it has really underlined for me that you need to make space to do that kind of analytical work. This is incredibly valuable. We have had huge amounts of really positive engagement with government. Lots of people keep saying to me: "So glad you're thinking about this." We can't just have the Heywood fellowship doing that, right? We need more of government finding the time and the space to do that strategic, options development work. I would want to try and make sure with anything I was doing, I created room for that.

I'm also getting a chance to use some techniques that I have wondered about. The scenarios technique has been really useful and we've also been working with AI. I'd always looked at large language models, but the thing about the generic LLMs is that their data source is everything that's written in English – I worry about that, because you're relying a lot



## JENNY BATES'S CV HIGHLIGHTS

**2024-2025** Director general economics, climate and global issues, FCDO  
**2020-2023** Director general Indo Pacific, FCDO  
**2020** Director general, Europe, FCDO  
**2016-2020** Director EU exit, BEIS  
**2016-2017** Chief economist and director of analysis, BEIS  
**2014-2016** Chief analyst/ chief economist, BIS  
**2014** Head of secretariat, Smith Commission  
**2012-2014** Deputy director, strategy, planning and budget, HMT  
**2009-2012** Deputy director, development finance, climate and energy, HMT  
**2005-2009** Counsellor, economic, FCO  
**2003-2004** Policy adviser, international tax, HMT  
**2001-2003** Economic adviser, global economics, HMT  
**1998-2001** International economist, Progressive Policy Institute  
**1995-1996** Economist, National Farmers' Union

on the algorithm. But you can create your own dataset and run it through an LLM, so then you're in charge of what goes in. This is super useful – this is what we've been doing with some of the polling and when we've been looking at what mayors, devolved governments and business communities have written about what they think the UK's international strategy should look like.

### How will you ensure your work gets used, rather than published and forgotten?

It starts before you start the project – so getting buy-in from the core ministries before I even went to do the fellowship. The three departments I mentioned are kind of sponsoring the fellowship, so they agree this is a question that needs looking at.

The second thing I've done is set up an advisory group with senior representatives from those departments to help challenge us, so they are coming with us on the journey.

Third, in the workshops and the more detailed work we're doing, we're involving not just the DGs, but the analytical

teams, the policy teams in the departments. We're inviting them to Oxford and getting their insight and engagement.

The last piece is having something relevant and useful to say at the end that engages policymakers – a framework and policy ideas – so they can see how that is relevant to what they're trying to do. This is not likely to be a report where I'm saying: "One specific bit of government needs to do this." It's more: "Is there a collective sense that people understand the new sense of direction and some specific ideas?"

It goes back to our measures of success: it's a process and a journey for the civil service as well [as for me]. It's not going to be one of these things where it's like, either they've passed this bit of legislation or they haven't. The signs of success will be: in a couple of years' time, do I see people using the language of the framework? Do I see policies beginning to emerge that are consistent with that? ■

*To read the papers Jenny Bates has published during her fellowship, visit [heywoodfoundation.com/publications](https://www.heywoodfoundation.com/publications)*

# UNITED WE STAND

Policy differences between the UK's nations should be treated as a practical tool for improving policymaking, says **Catherine May**

**T**wenty-five years after parliaments and governments opened in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, a new PolicyWISE report has found that while devolution has delivered policy divergence, there is less systematic learning about what works and what doesn't. At a time of fiscal pressure and growing political divergence, the UK civil service cannot afford to keep solving the same problems in parallel.

Through roundtables held across the UK in 2024-25, PolicyWISE heard a consistent message from policymakers, parliamentarians and researchers: policy differences are still treated as a problem to manage, rather than a practical tool for improving policymaking. Officials are often "devolution aware but not devolution able", aware of alternatives but without the confidence, skills or structures to learn from them.

The result will be familiar to many civil servants. Successful innovations are not recognised, policy failures are repeated across jurisdictions, and intergovernmental relations default to competition rather than collaboration. In practical terms, the system leaves money and policy wins on the table.

This matters now more than ever. Elections in Scotland and Wales, with likely growing political divergence, will raise the stakes for bodies such as the Council of Nations and Regions. Brexit and Covid exposed how fragile cross-nation coordination becomes when it relies on personal relationships rather than systems. Future crises won't wait for reinvention or solutions that already exist elsewhere in the UK.

## The competition trap

Too often, policy difference is framed as a league table. When performance is reduced to "who's up, who's down", learning loses. Participants told us they hesitate to promote success or acknowledge failure for fear of political backlash or hostile headlines.

Scotland's minimum unit pricing on alcohol generated a substantial body of evaluative evidence, which warranted a

more systematic UK-wide appraisal. Wales's Well-being of Future Generations approach has produced practical tools that could travel across contexts, yet weak incentives to do so. Participants in our research described a reluctance to actively promote success. Not because evidence was thin, but because divergence from England still has to be "justified" and success can attract criticism rather than interest. Northern Ireland's experience of consensus-building offers transferable lessons, but these are rarely analysed or shared.

## The data deficit

Officials repeatedly pointed to a basic constraint: we do not count the same things in the same way.



**Devolution (t)able:** roundtables were held across the UK to gather feedback

Indicators are misaligned, definitions drift and statistical geographies fail to reflect how services are actually governed and delivered. That makes meaningful comparison, let alone robust evaluation, difficult.

Without comparable data on outcomes, costs and implementation conditions, it is hard to make an evidence-based case for adopting (or avoiding) a policy from elsewhere.

## The capability gap

Comparative policy analysis remains niche rather than routine. Many teams know alternatives exist but lack time, permission or tools to test whether those approaches could travel. Without dedicated capability, even motivated officials default to familiar sources and inward-looking problem-solving.

Learning is harder because devolution is not a single, settled system. Even

within England, incomplete and asymmetric devolution leaves comparison skewed, with Whitehall often acting simultaneously as an England-specific government and UK representative.

## What's working now

There are bright spots. Greater Manchester's place-based integration shows how devolved governance can coordinate across silos with measurable benefits. On the island of Ireland, regular and institutionalised cross-border exchange has helped normalise adaptation.

## Five actions officials can take now

Practical steps include:

- Embed learning in intergovernmental architecture through well-designed comparative learning
- Fix the data by building timely, comparable datasets across priority policy areas
- Build a culture of comparative learning with comparative analysis part of standard practice and not defaulting to England as the benchmark
- Strengthen accountability for learning, encouraging scrutiny to include consideration of alternatives from other UK nations
- Amplify innovation by documenting and supporting the adaptation of successful reforms

## The payoff

None of this requires reopening constitutional settlements. The barriers to cross-nation learning identified in our roundtables are largely institutional and cultural, and within the civil service's control. Where learning is designed with purpose, supported by comparable data and reinforced through routine practice, differences in approach become an asset.

With political divergence increasing and policy capacity under strain, the cost of not learning is rising. Differing policy agendas across administrations are inevitable and a reflection of distinct mandates. The possibility of three nationalist-led governments post-May, whilst unprecedented, need not be a crisis for positive cross-administration working. It should mean that our leaders and policymakers focus seriously on common challenges, areas of strategic interest and mutual understanding. ■

**Catherine May is head of external affairs at PolicyWISE, a UK and Ireland comparative policy, research and knowledge exchange initiative led by The Open University and funded by Dangoor Education**

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