CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

Issue 336 | Summer 2026 | www.civilserviceworld.com

UP TO THE TASK

Civil Service Pensions Taskforce head Angela MacDonald on the recovery effort

PRIME TIME

PACAC's Simon Hoare on why we need an Office of the Prime Minister

KEEP YOUR OWN COUNCIL

What's it like to lead a local authority?

Emran Mian

Exclusive interview with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology permanent secretary

SPECIAL FOCUS: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

AI in the civil service: a force for good?

We see how the roadmap for digital government is progressing

Is there public support for a National Data Library?

CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

COLLABORATION CONFERENCE

Unlocking Collaboration Across Government

2nd February 2027

The Queen Hotel, Leeds

Bringing together leaders from government, public sector, academia, and industry to enhance cross-sector collaboration.

Gain the knowledge and connections to turn collective aspirations into reality and foster trusted partnerships with leading suppliers.

ATTENDEES WILL

- Explore successful case studies
- Engage in practical workshops
- Develop actionable ideas

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
TO CUSTOMER.SERVICE@TOTALEVENTS.UK | 020 7593 5669

Register your interest at
collaboration.civilserviceworld.com

CONTENTS

Summer 2026

CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

www.civilserviceworld.com

Editorial
editorial@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5500
Advertising
advertising@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5500

Published by
·Total·Politics·

On the cover
An exclusive photo of Emran Mian taken by Louise Haywood-Schiefer in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

FROM THE EDITOR

Over the years, one question has become a staple of *CSW* interviews: what has been the most *Yes Minister* or *Thick of It* moment of your career? My favourite answer to date has come from Emily Miles, now a DG at Defra, who told us she was once working in No.10 during a cabinet reshuffle – while suffering from morning sickness. "There were all these journalists lined up and I was standing knocking on the door of No.10 thinking: 'If I don't get inside in the next few seconds, I'm going to be sick on the steps and then my mum's going to know I'm pregnant' – I hadn't told her yet – 'and the entire nation is going to take this as a commentary on the reshuffle,'" she said.

Page 70 of this issue brings us another classic of the genre. Diplomat Daniel Pruce, now governor of the British Virgin Islands, recalls how, as a young official, he referred to the decision a minister was about to take as "courageous". The phrase – so closely associated with Sir Humphrey – was sufficiently terrifying to the minister that he changed his plans.

This issue's cover star, DSIT perm sec Emran Mian, told me that while most officials have sitcom-worthy stories, "the discipline is knowing which ones are better left untold". "Which is, I appreciate, itself a very Sir Humphrey answer," he added.

Few departments have gone through as much upheaval as DSIT in the last few years. The first machinery of government change announced under the incoming Labour government two years ago was a symbolic but impactful one: DSIT was to absorb the Government Digital Service and become the "digital centre of government". Mian tells us how the integration has gone so far, why it's important to embrace "a degree of risk" to create space for innovation, and about his new "collective leadership model" for the digital, data and technology profession *(p.20)*.

While it was certainly interesting to hear from Mian how DSIT has been evolving, it was his comments on racial diversity that really stayed with me. Mian has written previously for *CSW* about the civil service suffering from the "halo effect": the idea that dedicated civil servants who work to make things better for citizens – in other words, "good people" – can't possibly be racist. Back then, he described the "sharp intake of breath" in the room when Jonathan Slater, then perm sec at DfE, was willing to ask the question: might we be? But he said that led to "better and more open conversations in our senior leadership group" about diversity and how people were being treated.

In this issue, Mian says it is important to "move the conversation away from pipelines and processes and towards what might actually be happening in people's judgements and behaviours". While it is important to address practical barriers to diversity, that alone won't get to the root of the problem. As Mian says, we need to look at people's biases and the way they behave in small, everyday ways too. "Creating the space for those conversations to happen matters," he says, "but so does being prepared to sit with a degree of discomfort when they do, and to take seriously what you hear."

A willingness to sit with discomfort arises elsewhere in this issue too. Pruce says you need "broad shoulders" to withstand feedback in his role – such as when you're introducing a stringent vetting process for police officers who may not universally welcome the idea. "You have to focus on what you're trying to achieve, rather than any personal criticism that may be thrown at you," he says.

And our columnist Prof Jon Davis talks about a different, unexpected kind of discomfort as he chronicles the tense relationship between the Treasury and MoD over the years: that of feeling too cold at work *(p.15)*. He recounts how in the run-up to the 2010 election, when the economic squeeze was so great that HMT had at one point modelled the abolition of the Royal Navy, the MoD reportedly resorted to "black ops" by cutting off the Treasury's heating. Officials had to wear scarves and fingerless gloves as a result.

As pressure to increase defence spending grows, Davis wryly points out that at least the coming heatwave means Treasury staff won't have *that* to worry about this time round. ■

CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Jessica Bowie, Suzannah Brecknell

MANAGING EDITOR
Beckie Smith
beckie.smith@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5687

ONLINE EDITOR
Tevye Markson
tevye.markson@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5582

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

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

HEAD OF CREATIVE & PRODUCTION
Max Dubiel
SENIOR DESIGNERS
Matt Titley
Antonello Sticca
MID-WEIGHT DESIGNER
John Negus

ADVERTISING 020 7593 5669

PHOTOGRAPHY
Alamy, Adobe Stock, unless stated otherwise.
Redesign devised by Antonello Sticca.

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

PUBLISHED BY
·Total·Training·

POSTAL ADDRESS
Total Politics Group
11th Floor, Millbank Tower
21-24 Millbank
SW1P 4QP
TELEPHONE 020 7593 5669

ISSN 2515-0235 (Print)
PPA

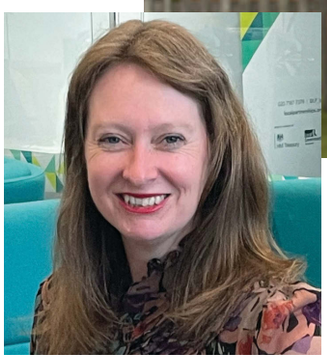
New faces locally, same challenges nationally

When councils change hands, what happens to national delivery? Adele Gritten, Chief Executive of Local Partnerships, looks at how local election results can reset priorities and create both risks and opportunities for government

Newly elected members enter office as councils confront complex challenges and opportunities for reform

As newly elected members take their seats across England, there is a sense of energy and opportunity in local government. New ideas and fresh ambitions will shape the months ahead as new councillors get to grips with delivering for their communities at the intersection between local and national priorities.

But while political leadership changes at a local level, the challenges those councils face, and their implications for central government, remain strikingly familiar. Financial pressures persist, and the demand on services continues to grow. The need to deliver housing, infrastructure and better outcomes for communities has not diminished. If anything, the urgency dial has been turned up, and delivery timelines are tightening.



This year's local election results, with a significant number of councils changing control or leadership, and others seeing shifts in political balance, are likely to accelerate that shift. Notably, no overall control is now the most common form of governance across English councils, with 42% lacking a single-party majority (LGIU, 2026). This points to a more complex and fluid local landscape.

New administrations will be looking to move quickly to turn ambition into action, seeking early wins or revisiting priorities. For civil servants, this creates both opportunity and risk. National policy increasingly depends on local delivery and shifts in leadership can affect the pace, sequencing and emphasis of programmes. In practice, that can mean business cases being revisited, programmes reshaped and timelines adjusted as new priorities are worked through.

This is most visible in areas such as regeneration and infrastructure, where projects can span multiple political cycles. A change in administration can either bring welcome momentum, or introduce delay if schemes are reassessed.

The ambition to build 1.5 million homes this parliament is a pertinent example. Progress depends on sustained local commitment, requiring planning capacity, land availability and the ability of councils to respond to acute pressures, including rising demand for temporary accommodation. These factors are often under increased pressure during periods of leadership change.

Continuity of delivery and the ability to adapt plans without losing pace are essential. Civil servants working on place-based programmes will recognise the challenge: how do you maintain progress while local priorities evolve?

Local Partnerships operates at that interface. We work directly with members and officers to progress key priorities. Whether that is advancing regeneration schemes, strengthening oversight of major projects and contracts or supporting transformation across services, our support is practical and helps councils take the next step with confidence. We can provide capacity where it is stretched and offer practical routes forward when direction shifts.

Local government does not pause after an election, and neither do the outcomes central government is seeking to achieve. Ensuring alignment between national ambition and local delivery will be essential in the months ahead. We stand ready to support that effort.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how Local Partnerships can support your delivery during this period of transition. Please get in touch at lpcomms@localpartnerships.gov.uk

Photo credit: Peter Titmuss | Dreamstime.com

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

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Sir Olly Robbins was removed from his role as permanent under secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in April.

Robbins's departure followed revelations that the department had gone against a UK Security Vetting recommendation not to grant Peter Mandelson security clearance for his appointment as the UK's ambassador to Washington.

Mandelson was sacked in September when new details about his relationship with the convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein emerged.

Appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee after being fired by the prime minister, Robbins said the UKSV had been "leaning against" granting clearance, but that the FCDO security team had assessed that the identified risks – which he was told did not relate to Mandelson's relationship with Epstein – could be mitigated. Former cabinet secretaries and other ex-senior civil servants have raised concerns about Robbins's dismissal, with some calling for his reinstatement.

Ex-cab sec Gus O'Donnell said the move "risks having a serious and sustained chilling effect on serving and prospective civil servants".

In more Washington-related news, **James Roscoe**, the UK's deputy ambassador to the US, has left his role.

The FCDO has given no explanation for his departure. Roscoe had been deputy head of mission at the British Embassy in Washington since July 2022.

He had also stepped in as chargé d'affaires to the US from September to February following Lord Mandelson's dismissal in September.

HOMEWARD BOUND

Gareth Davies has taken over as Home Office permanent secretary, replacing Dame Antonia Romeo, who left the role in February to become cabinet secretary.

Davies, who had been perm sec at the Department for Business and Trade since its creation in 2023, said it is "an honour" to be appointed to "one of the great offices of state".

He added: "There's no more important agenda in government than keeping the country safe and secure.

I'm looking forward to working with the amazing team of civil servants to deliver the home secretary's priorities and build a department that is even more innovative and productive."

NEW ENERGY

Jonathan Brearley has been appointed as permanent secretary at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

Brearley, who has led Ofgem since 2020, takes over from Clive Maxwell, the department's second perm sec, who stepped up as interim perm sec following Jeremy Pocklington's departure in October to become perm sec at the Ministry of Defence.

Brearley said it is "a real privilege" to be appointed to the role "at such a defining moment across UK energy".

TIME TRAVELLER

Jerome Glass was appointed to a newly-created director general post in the Cabinet Office in May to lead work on transforming the civil service.

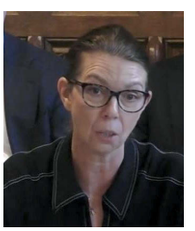
Glass, who was previously chief operating officer at the Home Office, has been appointed as DG, future civil service.

The new role brings together two empty positions in the Cabinet Office: government chief people officer, previously held by Fiona Ryland until her departure in late 2025, and DG for reform and efficiency, held by Janet Hughes until May.

Glass said: "I will be leading the cabinet secretary's agenda on transformation of the civil service, focusing on improving delivery, innovation and productivity, and culture and pride."

He added that he would be working with cabinet secretary Antonia Romeo, civil service chief operating officer Cat Little "and all the permanent secretaries, with a mission to build the civil service of the future".

LAST TASK



HMRC's second permanent secretary **Angela MacDonald** will retire at the end of July.

MacDonald has been second perm sec and deputy chief executive at the department since 2020, and in January she was drafted in by the Cabinet Office to lead the taskforce working on recovery of the civil service pensions backlog crisis.

HMRC said it has "no plans" for a new second perm sec, while the Cabinet Office said it will appoint an operational director to take on MacDonald's role at the department.

MacDonald will be focused on resolving the CSPS crisis until she leaves government.

Speaking to *CSW* (p.12),

MacDonald said she has been "working closely with the Cabinet Office leadership team to ensure we have the people and structures firmly in place" to continue to turn around the crisis.

HMRC permanent secretary JP Marks said: "I am very grateful to Angela for her exceptional leadership of HMRC across the operational delivery profession and Yorkshire region throughout her career.

"Angela has had an outstanding 30-year career, and as second permanent secretary has been central to transforming HMRC's customer service and compliance performance, leading HMRC through the Covid-19 pandemic."

BIRD CALL

Adrian Bird will become the next chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee and head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation. He will replace Dame Madeleine Alessandri, who is stepping down after three years in the role, on 3 July. Bird is currently chief of defence intelligence at the Ministry of Defence and has previously held senior positions at Government Communications Headquarters.

MAN OF LAW

Douglas Wilson has been appointed as the next permanent secretary of the Government Legal Department, a role which also brings with it the titles of Treasury solicitor and HM procurator general.

The former director general at the Attorney General's Office succeeds Susanna McGibbon, who has left the civil service. He took up the top GLD job on 13 April.

NATURAL SELECTION

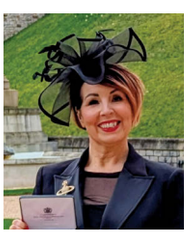
Former Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs permanent secretary **Dame Helen Ghosh** has been appointed as chair of the Office for Environmental Protection.

Ghosh was Defra's perm sec from 2005 to 2010 and also the Home Office's top civil servant from 2010-12.

After leaving government, she held roles as director general of the National Trust and master of Oxford University's Balliol College.

She succeeds Julie Hill, who stepped down at the end of her term as the OEP's interim chair on 30 May.

FRAUD FIRST



Zoe Gascoyne has taken over as director of the Fraud Investigation Service at HM Revenue and Customs, becoming the first woman to hold this position.

Gascoyne, who previously led offshore corporate and wealth operations at the Fraud Investigation Service, will also be the first female chief of the J5 (Joint Chiefs of Global Tax Enforcement), which brings together tax fraud enforcement organisations from Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, the UK and the US.

Her appointment follows the retirement of Richard Las, who worked for HMRC for more than 30 years.

START DEPARTS

Andy Start has retired from the Ministry of Defence, having established the National Armaments Director Group.

Start was tasked with setting up the NAD Group in March 2025 as interim national armaments director, drawing on his experience leading Defence Equipment and Support since 2022.

The group unites the MoD organisations responsible for the UK's national arsenal and defence estate, including DE&S and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory.

With the group now fully established, Start has left to pursue a PhD in defence studies at King's College London.

HIP, HIP, HARRA

Former HM Revenue and Customs permanent secretary **Jim Harra** has been appointed as interim chief executive of National Savings & Investments in a shakeup following the organisation's admission that hundreds of millions of pounds may not have been paid out to the families of customers who died.

He replaces NS&I veteran **Dax Harkins**, who had been the organisation's chief exec since 2023.

Pensions minister Torsten Bell said Harra will serve as NS&I chief exec on an interim basis "to provide a fresh start for NS&I's next phase of development".

NS&I is currently hiring for a permanent chief.

SWIN-COMING

The Ministry of Justice has appointed **Clara Swinson** as second permanent secretary – snapping her up from the Cabinet Office, where she held the same position. In the new role, she is providing leadership across the criminal justice system. MoJ perm sec Jo Farrar, who was second perm sec at the ministry herself from 2021 to 2023, said Swinson "brings a wealth of experience of working across systems". Swinson said she is "very pleased" to be joining the MoJ "at such a critical time and taking forward the government's response to Sir Brian Leveson's important recommendations for the criminal justice system".

AND FINALLY...

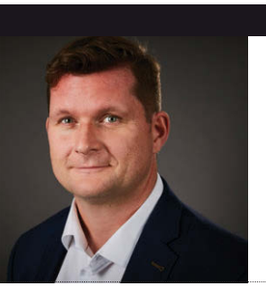
Pioneering civil service jobsharers **Ruth Hannant** and **Polly Payne** are teaming up once again as joint chief executive of the Office for Students. The duo, who have been jobsharing for 16 years and held the first DG-level job-share in the civil service, took the helm of the higher-education regulator on 15 June. Hannant and Payne said it is "a great privilege to be appointed as chief executive of the Office for Students having been part of its journey at the outset". ■

PLACEMAKERS

The government has appointed director-level heads of place across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions to help build and embed thriving civil service communities in the UK and develop strong local partnerships. Here we meet five of them to find out what it takes to do the role and how it complements their day job

WALES

Ross Maude *(left)* and Professor Tom Crick



Rooted in place Tŷ William Morgan in Cardiff is a government hub and a base for HMRC, the Welsh secretary and the Wales Office

Where in Wales are you based and how long have you been heads of place for the country?
We are both based at Tŷ William Morgan in Cardiff and have been joint heads of place since 2024. Being based in Wales matters: it means we can support civil servants here in a way that is rooted in place and alive to the realities of working in a devolved nation.

What does the head of place role involve?
It is a uniquely rewarding role focused on convening, connecting and championing our civil service community. We bring

together departments, professions and local partners to help make Wales an outstanding place to build a career, while ensuring that the UK government benefits from the talent, insight and distinct policy context that Wales offers.

To do the role well, you need...
You need to be collaborative, outward-facing and genuinely interested in "place". In Wales especially, you need to understand the importance of relationships across governments, public services, universities and communities, and to see devolution not as a complication but as a strength.

What is your proudest achievement so far in the role?
A highlight has been strengthening the civil service community in Wales by supporting professional networks, creating cross-government learning opportunities and expanding free Welsh language learning for civil servants. This supports the Welsh Government's goal of one million Welsh speakers by 2050, giving the work a powerful national context.

Who do you work closely with in the role within and outside government?
A strong government presence relies on strong local relationships. We collaborate closely with the Welsh Government, the heads of place network, universities, local authorities, uniformed services, the third sector and other civic partners.

How does it complement your 'day job'?
As the Cabinet Office's chief digital information officer (Ross) and DCMS's chief scientific adviser (Tom), we are both focused on how digital, scientific and analytical leadership can support better decision-making and more effective public services. The head of place role grounds that work in the lived experience of our civil service communities and helps ensure that our work is robust, secure and impactful across the UK.

What makes Wales the place to be?
Wales offers serious career opportunities, including senior roles, without asking people to leave behind community or work-life balance. There is also a strong sense of connection across Wales: professional networks are close, relationships matter and collaboration across organisations is often easier to build and sustain.

Where do you see the biggest untapped potential in the place you represent?
The biggest opportunity is in the synergy between government, research and industry. This is especially powerful in Wales because institutions are well placed to work together and devolution creates space for more joined-up thinking and innovation. ■

SCOTLAND

Craig Ogilvie and Fiona Mettam

Deepening partnerships Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh became a UK government hub in 2019

Where in Scotland are you based and how long have you been heads of place for the country?
We are both based at Queen Elizabeth House in Edinburgh and have served as joint heads of place for Scotland since May 2025.

What does the role involve?
The head of place, supported by permanent secretary place champions, brings together cross-government leaders in every English region, plus Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to create thriving civil service communities, develop our local talent and connect to local partners.

To do the role well, you need...
You must be a credible leader who communicates with clarity and a genuine passion for Scotland's unique strengths and opportunities.

What is your proudest achievement so far in the role?
A highlight has been seeing how the UK government presence has grown here in Scotland and bringing together leaders from both the UK and Scottish governments through our cross-government events to build relationships and work more closely than ever. There is a real feeling of passion and enthusiasm from colleagues who are able to build their careers and deliver for the UK from Scotland.

Who do you work closely with in the role, within and outside government?
We work closely with the Scotland Office and other UK government departments, as well as colleagues across the Scottish Government. Outside of government, we work with universities and local authorities to build strong relationships with local partners.

Delivering for the UK The Scotland Office in London

How does it complement your 'day job'?
Craig: As director of Making Tax Digital, HMRC's flagship digital programme, I oversee a workstream that impacts customers, accountants, bookkeepers and agents across the entire UK. The head of place role helps to root this work in the real communities in Scotland to ensure our programme works for everyone.
Fiona: As head of the Scotland Office, a small department that represents Scottish interests within the UK government and coordinates the delivery of UK government policies across Scotland, serving as head of place strengthens this work, deepening the necessary partnerships to work more effectively across the whole of government.

What makes Scotland the place to be?
It has a vibrant civil service community where officials can benefit from active government networks and tailored development programmes, such as the Cabinet Office's recent cross-government leadership programme developed with the University of Glasgow.

What is the thing nobody knows about the place you represent?
Many people don't realise the extent of Scotland's significant North Sea energy sector. From our longstanding North Sea oil and gas expertise to our massive renewables industry, Scotland is central to the UK's shift toward a "just transition" to net zero. The new Aberdeen Energy Thematic Campus represents a significant opportunity to use this local expertise to expedite the clean energy transition. ■

YORKSHIRE AND HUMBER

Susan Dawson

Where in Yorkshire and the Humber are you based and how long have you been head of place for the region?
I am based in Sheffield and have been head of place for Yorkshire and the Humber since 2021.

To do the role well, you need...
To really care about the place in which you work and live, and the ability to build great connections across the region – as well as a deep understanding of the local strengths and opportunities and what people in the region truly need.

What is your proudest achievement so far in the role?
I am particularly proud of connecting civil servants in the region through our professional networks and bringing together a diverse group of civil servants from across a range of departments to help deliver our strategy for Yorkshire and Humber.

Who do you work closely with in the role, within and outside government?
Inside government, I work with civil servants in a variety of roles, grades and departments across Yorkshire and the Humber. Outside, I build partnerships with our fantastic local partners, from universities to local authority colleagues.

What makes the region the place to be?
As a proud Yorkshire woman, I can attest that the region offers a winning mix of stunning natural scenery and rich history. Crucially, it is also home to a diverse and dedicated community of more than 40,000 civil servants who do amazing work every day across a range of departments and roles.

What is the thing nobody knows about the place you represent?
Yorkshire and the Humber is leading the way in areas such as advanced manufacturing and financial services. Did you know that the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre in South Yorkshire Combined Authority has catalysed a cluster now including Rolls-Royce, Boeing, McLaren and Sheffield Forgemaster?

Is there a common misconception about the place you represent?
The big misconception is that you need to move away from the region to have a successful career. I am an example of the fact that you can have a thriving career right here in Yorkshire and Humber in a variety of professions and roles. I joined the civil service as an admin assistant and I am proud to have built a fulfilling career in the region I call home.

Where do you see the biggest untapped potential in the place you represent?
We have already seen an increase in the number of senior and decision-making roles within the region through Places for Growth. There is massive potential to further grow these roles in Leeds, York and Sheffield and to bring decision-making closer to the communities we serve. ■

Rocking the regions
Yorkshire and Humber is home to more than 40,000 civil servants

Six months on from the disastrous transfer of the Civil Service Pension Scheme to Capita, **Tevye Markson** discusses the recovery effort with **Angela MacDonald**, who was parachuted in to turn the crisis around

TASKMASTER

What was it like stepping into a full-blown crisis? You've had a long civil service career in operations – how did your experience prepare you for this role?

I've had the privilege of working for 17 years in two very big departments, DWP and HMRC, so I've had plenty of chances to tackle major challenges simply because those departments operate at such significant scale. Those have included national crises like tackling Covid. So, I'm approaching this challenge in the same way as I always do. It's about clarity of purpose – understanding the problem you are trying to solve and being laser focused on the outcome you need. In this case that's delivering what pension scheme members need as quickly as possible. It's also vital to ensure I've got the right people around me to help me deliver – establishing the right relationships and trust with everyone involved, from members, employers and unions to ministers and parliament.

You are leaving the civil service in July. What are you doing to ensure the scheme can reach and then remain at proper service levels beyond your departure?

My job from the outset has been to supplement and support the work of the Cabinet Office in its accountability for the pension scheme – so I've been working closely with the Cabinet Office leadership team to ensure we have the people and structures firmly in place for the future. Most importantly, we've already shared the fact that we are appointing a new permanent, full-time director to lead this work going forward. So, there's lots of work going on to ensure we can sustain the effort into the long term and I'm confident we will do so.

The initial recovery action plan outlined in January said bereavements would be prioritised. We've heard from bereaved spouses and other named beneficiaries who said they've had no support and are still awaiting communications. Is there a commitment to deal with these cases by a certain date and what has prevented it happening sooner?

It's always with great sadness that we lose civil servants in service or after retirement. Bereavement is a profoundly difficult time for families and I sympathise completely with those who feel let down by the pension scheme. They deserve that vital support and have every right to expect it, so it's unacceptable it hasn't happened for so many spouses and families.

We've already helped lots of families and real progress has been made, but it's clear that we have not yet managed to help everybody. As you go through any recovery like this, you learn lessons – but we are continually redoubling our efforts to identify cases that have been missed and to unblock them. Very early in our recovery, from the data we could see, we believed we had identified all the relevant cases. As the recovery has progressed and we have a better flow of data, it's become clear there are more cases to be addressed. As we identify outstanding cases, we are continuing to escalate these as quickly as possible to ensure families are taken care of. That's true not only for bereavements but also for ill-health retirements.

I've been communicating updates on the Civil Service Pension Scheme website every couple of weeks. Everyone's circumstances are slightly different, so it can be challenging to communicate sufficient detail to address everyone's individual situation. But regular communication is still the right thing to do, so that people have as much information as possible. At the heart of every one of these data points is a family or a person who is at a really critical point in their life – that's at the forefront of everything we are doing.

Has the Cabinet Office come to a conclusion about what went wrong with the transition and what, in hindsight, could

have been done by the Cabinet Office, Capita and MyCSP to avoid the issues that arose upon the transfer to Capita?
There are lessons to learn and it's really important that we do so. In my view, while some of these are specific to pensions, there are also lessons which are pertinent in moving any contract from one supplier to another. At the right time, we will ensure a full and proper process is undertaken on the lessons learned – but the priority right now is putting things right for the members and families who have been let down.

We're getting close to the end of June deadline to return the service to expected levels. What are the major remaining issues to resolve at this point? And does anything look like it might move beyond that end of June deadline?
The recovery has helped thousands of members so far and I'm proud of all the efforts that have gone into achieving that. I'm grateful to the civil servants from across government, including the Surge and Rapid Response Team and Cabinet Office officials who have stepped up and provided their skills to help tackle this serious problem – it's a testament to our values.

It's worth noting that many parts of the scheme are working as they should. For example, payments for colleagues who were already retired got transferred to Capita without interruption and in April, they got their annual increases and all their P60s went out on time. That's around 730,000 pensioners who have remained firmly, consistently in payment.

But I know that is little comfort for thousands of people who are yet to get what they need. The work will continue until that happens. Capita aims to clear the backlog of quotations by the end of June. However, as I've explained in my regular updates on the CSPS website, quotations are only one step in the retirement process and this doesn't mean members' pensions will be in payment by then. Once people have received their quote, they will need to confirm their retirement decision and return the pack to Capita, who will check the paperwork returned and then put the pension into payment. This means first payments could be around July or August. If the case is more complex, they may be contacted by Capita with further questions.

I understand the distress and frustration at having to wait so long – but we are working as fast as we can with Capita to set things right. Even once the scheme does hit its recovery targets, we also recognise that it will take much longer to rebuild trust with members. This is ultimately about their experience – so we are going to have to deliver a strong experience for a long time in order to convince people that this is a service they can rely on.

What range of skills have surge civil servants brought to turn things around?
We are incredibly fortunate in the civil service to have an amazing Surge and Rapid Response Team. They provide temporary, deployable operational support across government during planned demand peaks, planned surges and national or regional emergencies. They have completed over 700 deployments supporting 65 government organisations since 2025 – including HMRC Self Assessment peaks, the 2021 census, the Thomas Cook repatriation and major cyber and data incidents. So these are experienced and highly skilled colleagues who are very used to being put into a whole variety of circumstances, being trained on something new and then adapting and delivering at pace. In the case of the pension scheme, they have not come in to work in areas that require deep pension knowledge, but in other areas where they can add value by driving forward vital processes.

Capita's Chris Clements told *CSW* in March that he expected the surge team's involvement to gradually reduce from the end of April. Has this happened?
The full surge team remains in place and will continue until we judge that the service has stabilised sufficiently for them to be removed.

Departments have been providing bridging loans for those experiencing hardship due to missed payments, but only to those who had left within 12 months. This has meant many people have been left without financial support. How were the eligibility criteria decided upon?
Firstly, it's obviously unacceptable that people should have to rely on bridging loans in the first place. I can completely understand how uncomfortable and distressing this must be for people who have worked long and hard in public service, who then have to ask their employer for this money because the pension scheme let them down.

Transitional support loans are a form of employer loan that requires members to have an ongoing relationship with their employers. 1 January 2025 was chosen as the start date for loan eligibility because it balanced the need for an active relationship with our desire to support as many members as possible.

There are some pension scheme members who are not in scope for these transitional support loans, including surviving spouses, dependants, pension credit members and deferred members. These groups either have a distant, or no, relationship with employers, and it is therefore not possible for employers to provide them with loans. Those in this category suffering hardship have instead been advised to reach out directly to Capita for prioritisation.

How many people does the Cabinet Office estimate have delayed their retirement due to the crisis and how is it preparing for a potential backlog this could create?
The historical trend is that civil servants retire at the rate of around 1,000 a week, roughly. We know some people have withdrawn or deferred their application for retirement and we know how distressing and unacceptable that is – but overall, the volume of new quote requests has not changed significantly compared to what the usual trends would be. We will ensure we are prepared for any change in that trend but as things stand, we haven't seen this happen.

What impact has the crisis had on the progress of voluntary exit schemes?
We've worked with the departments concerned throughout the last six months to make sure that the life choices and life changes which are happening to those colleagues are respected and considered, just as they are for people who are retiring. That includes working to ensure quotes and payments have arrived as promised, so colleagues can make critical decisions with the full knowledge of their pension options.

Has the crisis impacted progress with the McCloud remedy?
I recognise that many members are still waiting for personal information about what the McCloud remedy means for them, whether they are already retired or still in service. That matters to people and it is understandable that they want clarity. The statutory deadlines for this work fall in 2027 and it remains within scope to resolve it with Capita. But my immediate priority remains the recovery work on the outstanding bereavement and ill-health cases, outstanding pensions quotations and getting the scheme operating back at its expected standard. ■

MacDonald's career will be covered in her upcoming interview for CSW's Trailblazing Women archive. Keep an eye on our website and daily bulletin so as not to miss it

DAVE PENMAN A GIDDY NEW DAWN FOR PAY

MINISTERS' ACCEPTANCE OF THE SENIOR SALARIES REVIEW BODY'S PROPOSALS FOR REFORMING SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE REMUNERATION IS A CRUCIAL STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Pay reform in the civil service shouldn't be that hard. When I first dealt with pay delegation over 30 years ago in what is now the Department for Work and Pensions, one of the objectives of the first pay review was to introduce a simple, understandable pay system.

Too often, pay has been overcomplicated and there are management consultants who are enjoying a much wealthier retirement on the back of 30 years of pay delegation. The fundamentals remain simple but are often skewed by trends in the private sector (usually from a decade previous), obsessions about performance-related pay and, of course, political interference.

No one thinks the current system works but few have got close to the answers, not least because putting the genie back in the bottle on delegation is a legal minefield. But finally, there is some glimmer of hope. It's that moment when you're on holiday and have stayed out all night. With one last swig from the ouzo bottle, you welcome in the new dawn across the horizon. That's a strange analogy for the latest Senior Salaries Review Body recommendations but fitting, nonetheless.

This year's recommendations address a number of issues that have blighted the senior civil service pay system for decades. There is no quick fix and, as Theresa May used to say, there's no magic money tree. So reform will be incremental – but crucial – steps in the right direction, building on a strategy to deliver longer-term change.

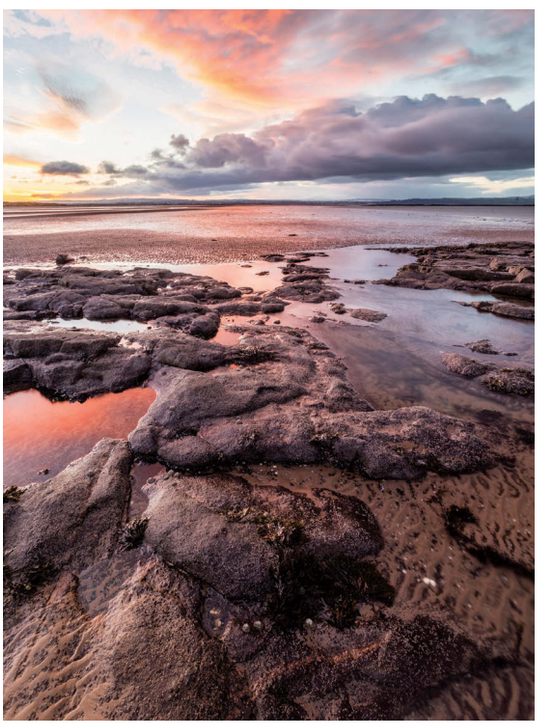
Overly long pay ranges, the lack of pay progression and an overlap between grades are three of the issues that needed addressing. Pressure has been building for years, resulting in devolved governments and departments like the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office starting to do their own thing.

This year and last, the SSRB recommended a £5,000 increase on the minimum of the pay ranges. Those repeated steps in the right direction help address problems of low starting pay, pay range length – which makes progression more difficult to solve – and the overlap between grades. That was particularly prevalent between the maximum of civil service grade 6 and the minimum of SCS pay band 1.

A 2.5% increase to base pay for the SCS has been combined with a dedicated pot worth 1% of the total pay bill for pay progression – the first time in a generation one of the main bugbears in the system is being addressed. It's far from perfect and doesn't provide the guaranteed outcomes we're looking for, but it's a welcome start and the bedrock for further reforms.

The SSRB recommendations have also framed the overall rate for the grades below the SCS. This year's pay remit guidance, the framework for pay settlements across the civil service, includes an increase of 3.5% – as well as measures to address pay compression in the most junior grades, exacerbated by increases to the National Living Wage.

Some streamlining of business cases and encouragement to harmonise pay settlement dates are welcome. Delegated pay arrangements face many of the same pressures as the SCS pay system, particularly the lack of progression. This will be a focus for our negotiations across the service and the SCS reforms will be an added catalyst.



"It's far from perfect and doesn't provide the guaranteed outcomes we're looking for, but it's a welcome start and the bedrock for further reforms"

The work of the SSRB and the meaningful engagement we've had with the pay team in the Cabinet Office have demonstrated the value of a strong, collaborative relationship. The SSRB has been setting the pace, driven by a strong and dynamic chair in Lea Paterson.

That's the approach we want to see across the civil service. In the short term, it will help us focus our negotiations for delegated grades to address the very same issues. Over the longer term, it demonstrates the benefits of an independent pay review body, guided by evidence and focused on strategic reform. We strongly believe that will deliver better outcomes for members and a more cohesive approach to civil service pay.

Pay reform should be at the heart of the government's broader reform agenda for the state. It is intrinsically linked to delivering the right people with the right skills. For too long, it's been a risk-management tool – what can they get away with, rather than a key element of the people strategy. There are signs that this is being recognised both by ministers and the senior leadership of the civil service, demonstrated in the messaging from the cabinet secretary around the announcement.

So we're on the beach and the sun is coming up. There's always hope with a new dawn, but there's always risk of rain. This is, after all, Troon on the Clyde coast. ■

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY OIL AND WATER?

AS PRESSURE GROWS TO INCREASE DEFENCE SPENDING, JON DAVIS LOOKS BACK AT THE OFTEN STRAINED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EXCHEQUER AND THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Are we in the middle of the Cold War Two or the beginnings of the Third World War? Are we already at war with Russia? The world has certainly become much more unstable and dangerous with the concomitant upending of Britain's near century-long US-UK security posture.

As we heard week after week from guest lecturers such as Simon Case, Karen Pierce and George Robertson on our new MA government studies module Prime Ministers and National Security, everything feels worse than it did yesterday. And with that comes inescapable pressure to raise defence spending.

The numbers are already creeping up and will continue to do so against the backdrop of a stagnant economy, a huge welfare burden and the rise of inflation due to the closure of the Straits of Hormuz. But it has to be paid for somehow, sometime. And how much is enough?

When MoD permanent secretary Frank Cooper advised Margaret Thatcher to keep the Treasury off the Falklands war cabinet – because money should not be a consideration – she was able to do so because the operation was clearly going to be limited in nature and there was an overriding need to act forthwith.

Today's situation is so different, with the almost limitless scale of the challenge and there being no imminent invasion threat to the UK or its dependencies. How to gauge the coming rise will be exercising the attention of the Treasury and the security departments, all overseen by the prime minister who needs to balance everything and give clear direction, never easy at the best of times.

Perhaps the worst of times came in 1900, after reversals for Britain in the Boer War and amid the growing global power of the US and Germany. The PM, Lord Salisbury, launched an astonishing attack on the Treasury, saying it had 'gradually acquired a position in regard to the defensive departments very different from that which the finance department occupies abroad, and on the whole I think that, for the purpose of national defence, that is not a satisfactory condition... I think the exaggerated control of the Treasury has done harm'.

The chancellor remonstrated, the permanent secretary to the Treasury offered his resignation and a delicious furore ensued. Salisbury was actually a serial denigrator of Treasury power and made clear his disdain when he rejected the traditional title of first lord of the Treasury, assuming the mantle of foreign secretary instead.

There have been so many choice interactions between the Treasury and Defence over the years. A particular favourite came early in the New Labour years when defence became a battleground between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, with the latter often said to prioritise overseas aid. Not wishing to formally engage with the chief of the defence staff – the often-in-full-military-regalia and always-box-office Charles Guthrie – Brown eventually ran into him. 'You don't think I understand defence, do you?' said Brown. 'No, I bloody well don't,' replied the general.

(Years later, on hearing I was writing a book on the New Labour governments, Guthrie sought me out at a reception. "I wish to place on the record that I've been misquoted," he said. "Where it's been reported that I once told Brown 'I bloody well don't [think you understand defence]', what I actually said was 'I fucking well don't'.")

Serial Treasury denigrator Lord Salisbury

Come the end of the Brown government, following the global financial crisis and the huge deficit that ensued, it was not defence expansion that was on the agenda, but retrenchment. Looking back on his time as Treasury perm sec, Nicholas Macpherson said that in the run-up to the 2010 election, the Treasury had modelled cuts of up to £90bn that involved abolishing the Royal Navy (though he himself would 'never propose' such a thing).

The beginnings of what became George Osborne's austerity programme ruffled feathers, to say the least, right across government and beyond. In fact, as the cuts negotiations got scratchier heading into the winter of 2010, the MoD was said to have resorted to black ops. The hot water that heated much of Whitehall came from their boilers and a fractured water pipe needed attention. In what was described as a 'process of elimination', the Treasury's heating was cut off. As one official observed: 'The Fast Stream recruitment material never mentioned typing while wearing scarves and fingerless gloves.'

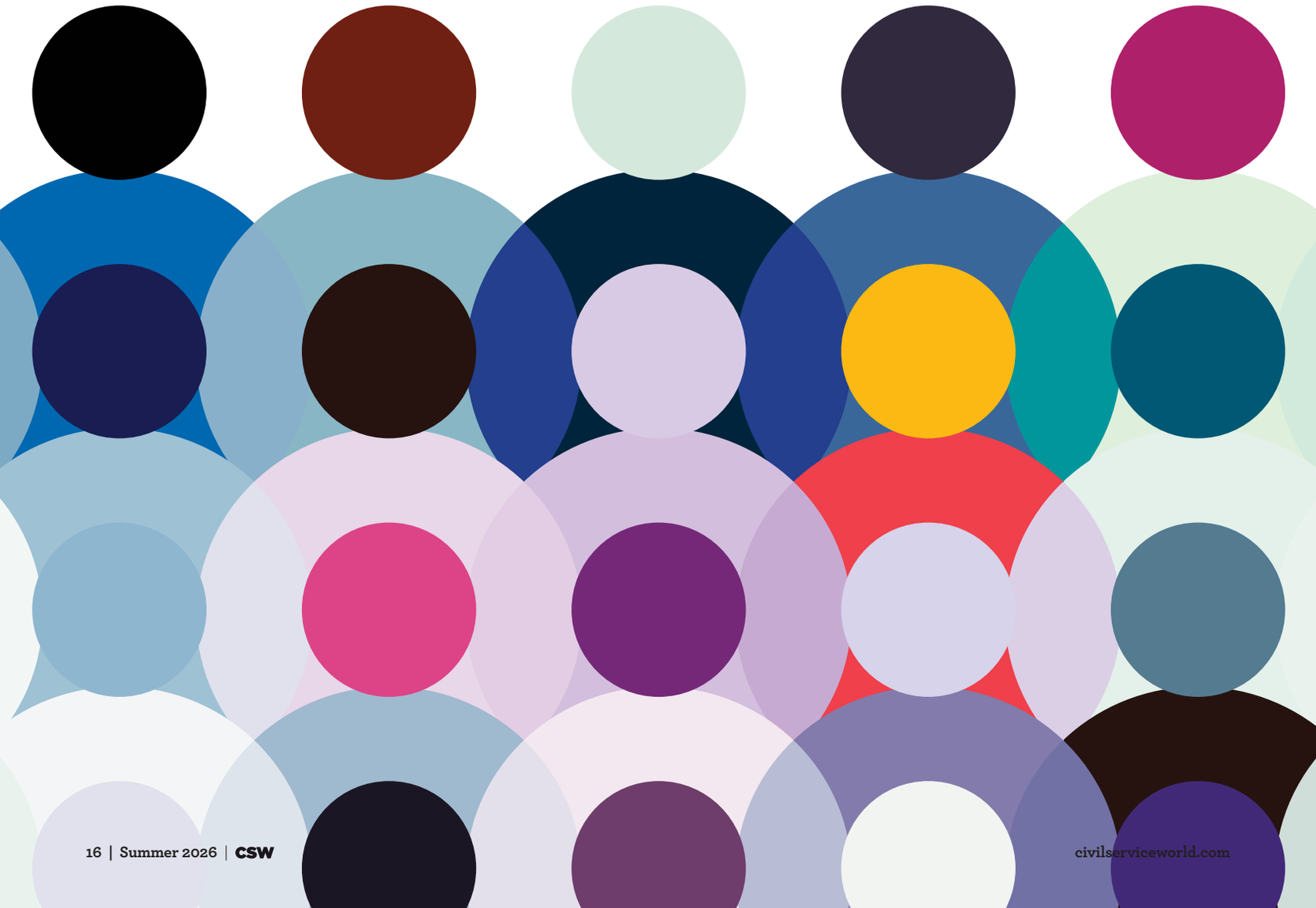
"Nicholas Macpherson said that in the run-up to the 2010 election, the Treasury had modelled cuts of up to £90bn that involved abolishing the Royal Navy"

As defence spending rises in priority, the Treasury can be thankful that we have moved into summer. And we can be sure that funding for essential security is never straightforward. ■

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

Local heroes

A growing number of UK local authorities now have a former senior civil servant as chief executive. **Jim Dunton** talks to several who have made the leap about what appealed to them – and what life is like on the ground



Over the decades, local government has seen a number of trends in recruitment for chief executives. Solicitors were in demand in the 1960s and 70s. More recently, senior finance officers, regeneration experts and social services specialists have all had their day.

In the past few years, senior civil servants have become increasingly desirable candidates for council chief exec roles – which can come with salaries in excess of £200,000 a year at a large metropolitan borough or county.

According to Julie Towers and Dawar Hashmi at Penna Executive Recruitment, moves from local authority executive director to chief exec still make up "the backbone" of appointments to council top jobs. However, they say there is clearly now a "willingness to look outside the classic pipeline" when the context is right.

Graeme McDonald, managing director of the Society of Local Government Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace), says civil servants have also become more interested in opportunities in local government. "Since Covid, there's a little bit more understanding of what the role of local authorities is, and that they can be levers of change," he says. McDonald also thinks devolution is making a difference, contributing to a general sense that local government can be a "positive move".

CSW talked to five former senior civil servants who've been appointed as council chief execs about why they made the switch and the differences they've encountered. Common themes include a desire to shape on-the-ground impacts after working at the Whitehall end of the policy process, markedly different political demands in local government and dealing with far greater transparency.

KATE JOSEPHS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

Kate Josephs has been chief executive of Sheffield City Council since 2021. Her last job in government was director general in the Cabinet Office Covid-19 Taskforce. Earlier roles included deputy director in the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, the Treasury and the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. She also worked for the US Federal Government during the Obama administration.

"When I joined the civil service, I felt like working at national level would be the way I could make the biggest impact on kids growing up in the type of community I grew up in. I felt really proud of what I'd done in the civil service. But after 20 years, I felt like I hadn't fully made the difference I hoped to have in the place I'm from. There's just so much more impact you can have in local places."

Kate Josephs became chief executive of Sheffield City Council in 2021. She describes the move as "a real calling home to South Yorkshire".

"The thing that massively attracted me is that in a local authority, you simply have to be focused on the communities and people that make up that place," she says. "The difference and the messiness that characterises a place, the strengths, the opportunities, the challenges, are specific to that place."

She says that a real, deep understanding of what makes places different is "really critical" to delivering impact and change on the ground.

"I live in the city, I walk past the consequences of the decisions I am part of, and in some cases making on a statutory basis, every single day. I find that incredibly humbling and also motivating," Josephs adds. "Ultimately, you're supporting the politicians, because they're the decision-makers. But there's something about feeling a sense of connection."

Sophie Broadfield, chief executive at Bath and North East Somerset Council, says that after working on policies she never got to see through to fruition in central government, she relishes the focus on delivery in her current role.

"It's a smaller pond, my patch here, but I have a much bigger influence," she says. "I'm drawing together all these different threads from central government and trying to make sense of them in a place in a way that makes a difference to people's lives. It feels much more direct and tangible than anything I did in central government."

"It's a smaller pond, my patch here, but I have a much bigger influence" ***Sophie Broadfield, Bath and North East Somerset Council***

SOPHIE BROADFIELD
CHIEF EXECUTIVE AT BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET COUNCIL

Sophie Broadfield became chief executive at Bath and North East Somerset Council in January. She joined the authority as director of sustainable communities in 2021. She previously held deputy director roles at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Earlier in her career she was head of devolution and public service reform at the Treasury.

"In the civil service, you're often working things up to the point of announcement. You're designing something that's potentially really impactful and covers the whole country but you don't actually see it through."

Ed Whiting, chief executive at Leeds City Council, adds: "You are often able to take a longer-term perspective in local government, looking at what will best benefit your place over a number of years and how you can best put together the potential of the private and public sectors to contribute to the growth and development of your place rather than focus on one policy alone."

Politically, a local authority chief executive will need to work most closely with their council leader or elected mayor. But all the chief execs *CSW* spoke to stressed that their job requires them to work on behalf of every councillor, regardless of whether they are part of the ruling group. Chief execs can also find themselves having to deal with disputes between councillors. Local MPs are also likely to keep in close touch, and then there are devolved government structures, such as mayoral combined authorities.

Towers and Hashmi at Penna say dealing with the necessities of local politics is "probably the biggest shift" for a »

civil servant. "In central government, the political relationship can be intense, but it is structured and mediated through formal roles," they say. "In local government, it is constant and personal."

Laurence Rockey, chief executive at East Lothian Council, agrees that local government's political landscape is complicated to navigate, compared with the relatively straightforward lines of ministerial command in the civil service.

"You've got a nuanced role that requires delicate footwork to make sure you're delivering for the administration, who are held to account for delivery, but also supporting all councillors," he says. "You've got to be a straight shooter and give honest advice consistently. That's probably one of the hardest bits of the job, actually."

Josephs notes that local politics has a "much more diverse range of people" than national politics. She says that while councillors are often highly focused on "hyperlocal" issues, few "only care about one thing".

"In a city like Sheffield, you're constantly rubbing up against interactions – how our work on housing is integral to our work on health and employment," she says. "How our work on transport is a fundamental piece of the jigsaw when it relates to tackling poverty or driving up opportunity."

"I walk past the consequences of the decisions I am part of every day. I find that incredibly humbling and motivating"
Kate Josephs, Sheffield City Council

Josephs does regular half-day "ward walks" with councillors representing particular electoral divisions. They are an opportunity for problems to be raised and for introductions to community groups to be made. "I find that incredibly informative," she says. "It's how we get a sense of what the impact is of the policy or the strategy that you might put into a whole organisation."

Broadfield at Bath and North East Somerset describes markedly different political relationships compared with those she experienced in the civil service. "I have got multiple local politicians WhatsApping me on a regular basis," she says. "It's much more live and immediate than waiting weeks to have a meeting with the minister and giving a submission in central government."

Leeds City Council's Whiting says that while maintaining relationships with MPs and regional government "can look like an extra level of complexity", the reality is different. He says working with counterparts at West Yorkshire Combined Authority has proved to be "a valuable source of peer support and advice". The 10 MPs who cover Leeds are often "a useful bridge" between local issues and the national policy and delivery conversation, he says.

Another major difference between civil service and local government life is the visibility of council officers and their advice to decision-makers – through either the routine publication of papers supporting council meetings or the Freedom of Information Act.

Robert Pollock, chief executive at Cambridge City Council, says civil servants don't have to stand behind their advice in public and be accountable for it in the way that local government officers do. "It's striking that you even get civil servants in MHCLG that aren't aware that when we write stuff down, because they've asked us to do something, it will often go to a political meeting to be debated, and it will get published and anyone can read it," he says.

"I'm certainly a better policymaker for having to put my name to stuff which then gets published and you then have to deliver. You have to be pretty clear and accountable for what you say and what you're recommending."

While accountability and visibility are theoretically a good thing, Solace's McDonald notes that such openness doesn't come without a downside. He says being a council chief exec can be "quite an exposed place".

A high profile in the area where you live and work can just mean residents raising issues if they see a chief exec in the supermarket. But local government officials can also find themselves more open to press and social media scrutiny than most civil servants, and sometimes it's highly problematic.

McDonald says serious cases of abuse have impacted on senior officials' family lives and forced them to move their children to different schools. "If there are things that are going to put people

ROBERT POLLOCK
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

Robert Pollock has been chief executive of Cambridge City Council since April 2021. He was a senior civil servant at the Treasury, spending three years as director of the Public Service Transformation Network. Earlier in his civil service career, he was a policy adviser on a range of issues and worked at the United Nations in New York. He has also been a director at non-profit organisation Social Finance.

"I started off my career doing very international stuff. Working at the local level seemed foreign to me. But once I got into it, I realised the immediacy of the impact was potentially more rewarding, because you could see things through more quicker."

LAURENCE ROCKEY
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF EAST LOTHIAN COUNCIL

Laurence Rockey has been chief executive of East Lothian Council since April 2025. He was previously director of the Scotland Office. Earlier in his career, Rockey held senior posts in the Cabinet Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government – including deputy director of the Cities and Local Growth Unit. His first job in local government was at City of Edinburgh Council, where he was head of strategy from 2017 to 2020.

"I was advising local authorities on city deals, grant deals, devolution from Cornwall to Aberdeen, and I really enjoyed working in the place. I was frustrated by central government's lack of ability to work effectively with local places. Rather than advising local government, there was an opportunity to walk the walk myself."

off, that will be one of them," he says.

Typically, council chief execs are responsible for far more staff than they ever were in the civil service. Many will be professionals such as social workers, town planners, environmental health specialists and accountants – rather than "generalists", all guided by statutory requirements. Nevertheless, *CSW*'s chief execs all felt that their civil service experience was good preparation for local government leadership.

Bath and North East Somerset's Broadfield says she felt a degree of imposter syndrome when she first made the leap, because adverts for senior local government jobs referenced professional qualifications from within the sector. "When I was actually in the job, I did find that the skills I'd learnt as a member of the policy profession in the civil service were very valid and the leadership and management skills I'd learned from being on courses with the civil service absolutely apply," she says.

Sheffield's Josephs adds that having people in local government who understand what makes Whitehall tick, are not "overawed by the unspoken ways of working" and who can land a point in discussions with civil servants or ministers is helpful. "That means we can advocate better," she says.

Broadfield says she was surprised at how compliant council officers can be in the face of central government demands, and how staff don't feel empowered to influence policy. "If policy is badly made or has unintended consequences, we should engage with that and talk to the civil service," she says. "We should be a bit more confident."

Councils typically encounter far lower levels of staff churn than government departments. While *CSW*'s chief execs view the resulting stability, expertise and community connection positively, they also remark that a lack of movement makes it hard to promote talent.

CSW asks what the civil service can teach local government.

Sheffield's Josephs highlights data use and evidence-based policymaking, which she describes as "less well resourced" at the local level. Cambridge's Pollock adds: "Civil servants are naturally good at understanding complex policy landscapes. And they're good at communications and they're strategic. That's something local government can learn about."

Broadfield says local government has lessons to learn from the civil service on leadership training – particularly for directors and future directors. She says development is too focused on professions in councils, which makes sense for professional skills but not for leadership. "The civil service does it much, much better in terms of identifying talent, training up that talent and spreading the talent around," she says.

So, what can local government teach Whitehall?

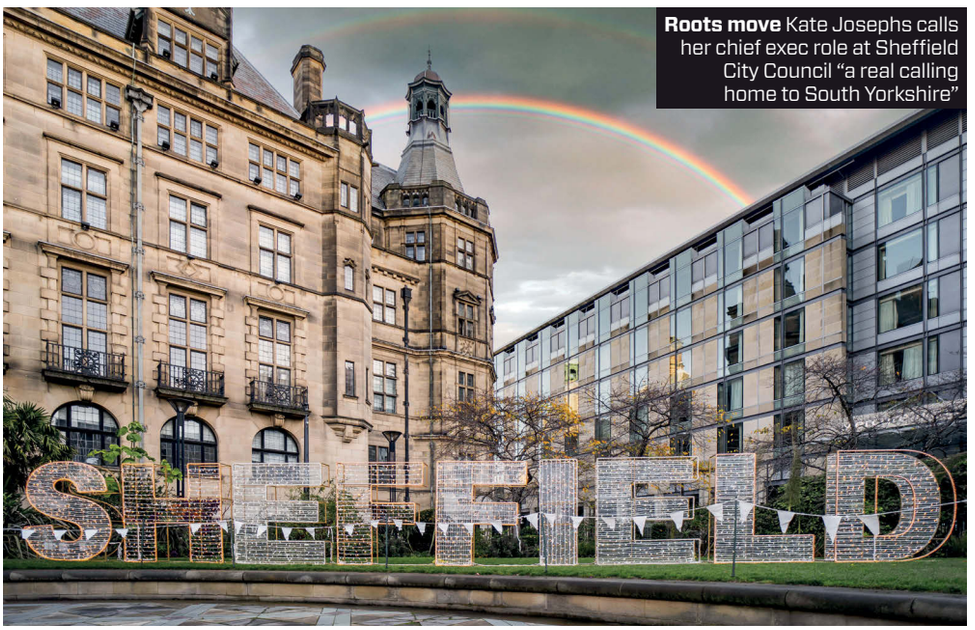
"I think we could teach civil servants about how to engage and sit with the complexity and messiness that is what happens when you're working with people and communities," Sheffield's Josephs says. East Lothian's Rockey says that if civil servants had more experience with the practicalities of delivery – like the financial considerations that affect local government – they would do better policymaking. He cites excessive focus on the creation of low-value funds to further policy goals as one problem area.

CSW's chief execs are broadly supportive of more secondments between central government and local government.

Broadfield says civil service programmes such as the Senior Leadership Scheme and the Future Leaders Scheme should be open to the wider public sector. Rockey adds that a graduate scheme covering both central government and local government would be helpful. "I don't know why people go to Jobcentres as fast streamers but not to local authorities," he says. "More cross-pollination for sure would make a big difference."

Penna's Towers and Hashmi say the calibre of civil servants applying for local government leadership roles is high, due in part to their structured training and development support. Other factors that make for a "credible" civil service candidate are management of high-stakes politics and fluency with central government funding and crisis management.

"Those that combine this with a passion to move into local government, shape place and work closely with communities are now more regularly making longlists and shortlists," they say. ■



Roots move Kate Josephs calls her chief exec role at Sheffield City Council "a real calling home to South Yorkshire"

ED WHITING
CHIEF EXECUTIVE AT LEEDS CITY COUNCIL

Ed Whiting has been chief executive at Leeds City Council since January 2025. Before that, he was director of the Cities and Local Growth Unit, which operates jointly between the Department for Business and Trade and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. He has also worked at the Treasury and No.10, where he was deputy principal private secretary to David Cameron. Between 2016 and 2022, he worked at the Wellcome Trust.

"I've worked with local authorities at a number of points in my career, and have always been taken with the 'place' focus and the sense of local service. So when the chance came up to take a leadership role in the place where I grew up, it felt like the right step."

DIGITAL CURRENCY

Emran Mian's first year as permanent secretary at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has been an eventful one. Here, along with two of his directors general, he tells **Beckie Smith** about absorbing the Government Digital Service, the Roadmap for Digital Government and why the civil service needs to be bolder about tackling racial inequality. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

"This is not a role for someone who wants to preserve traditional Whitehall ways of working," read a recent job ad for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology's new director general for digital products. "It is a role for someone who wants to help change them: working with agility, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, drawing on expertise from inside and outside government, and building coalitions that can deliver real change."

Written by Emran Mian, these words also reflect how the permanent secretary sees his own role. "Government does need to hold on to its strengths: accountability, rigour, stewardship of public money. But if we default to process as the way of managing everything, we slow ourselves down and discourage initiative," he tells *CSW*.

He points to the AI Security Institute – a research organisation that grew out of DSIT's Frontier AI Taskforce – and progress on Sovereign AI, a venture fund for investing in AI startups, as examples of this approach in action. Those initiatives, along with digital products like the GOV.UK app, have "required us to move quickly and trust teams to get on with delivery", he says. "Moving at that speed does involve a degree of risk. But, in my view, that risk is justified where we're confident that the outcomes we're seeking to achieve are sufficiently important."

Mian is speaking to *CSW* after nearly a year as perm sec and nearly two years since it was announced that DSIT would absorb the Government Digital Service and become "the partner and standard bearer for government departments as it supports them to use technology across areas like energy, health, policing and education". The transfer of 1,226 staff was completed last summer – increasing DSIT's headcount by more than half. »

“People are drawn to the mission that we’ve got and they can see that we’re building something quite special here”

EMRAN MIAN ON... ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Writing for *CSW* in 2019 – then a director general at the Department for Education – Mian said he was tired of being the only non-white person in meetings and that the civil service had not been "bold about creating a platform for change".

The perm sec says he still feels that way, seven years on. "The overall picture has improved over time but it isn't yet reflected consistently at the most senior levels," he says. "The number of permanent secretaries and directors general from minority-ethnic backgrounds remains low relative to the wider civil service." Mian is co-race champion for the civil service and says a lot of his focus in that role is on "supporting that progression in a more structured and consistent way".

He is still sometimes the only non-white person in the room. "That experience is part of what keeps the issue live for me," he says.

Ethnic-minority representation is stronger at the entry and mid-levels, but progression "isn't always as even as it needs to be", Mian says. "It's also about being honest that this isn't something that fixes itself. You need sustained attention from senior leaders and you need to be willing to look carefully at how decisions are made and who is in the room when they are."

In his 2019 piece, Mian urged his colleagues to ditch the "halo mentality" around race: thinking that as public servants and "good people", "it can't be that we are racist, can it?" He said he had been surprised when Jonathan Slater, then DfE perm sec, "was willing to challenge the organisation and ask that question".

"What struck me at the time was the willingness to say something that most people would instinctively resist – to move the conversation away from pipelines and processes and towards what might actually be happening in people's judgements and behaviours," he says. "I remember having the same initial reaction as others; a sense that this couldn't really apply to colleagues you respect. But when you then hear the lived experience – the assumptions people make, often without realising – it becomes harder to dismiss.

"That's carried through into how I try to lead. Creating the space for those conversations to happen matters; but so does being prepared to sit with a degree of discomfort when they do, and to take seriously what you hear."

"We've got four years of money ahead of us. That is unusual in government, to have that runway ahead of you to go on and get stuff done"

Mian says all this change was the "main reason why [he] wanted to lead this department and why it feels just a total privilege to have the opportunity to do so".

"We've got such a positive agenda," he says. "We're at this quite special technology inflection point where we are now able to do things digitally for citizens that weren't possible 10 years ago... And then the emerging technologies that other parts of the department work on, such as AI and quantum, are at really exciting points in their development."

Mian had been a director general at DSIT for two years before becoming perm sec. "So I wasn't starting from scratch – but I knew some parts of the organisation much better than others," he says. Over last summer, he and his leadership team asked staff across the department to share their experiences of working there. Feedback from more than 800 officials showed "there was a lot of pride in the mission, but also a clear message about how we work: a desire for more trust in expertise, more room to experiment and more clarity on the impact of what we do".

Out of this "listening summer" grew three values: expert together, inventive and impact driven. "They aren't abstract statements; they're a distillation of what colleagues told us they wanted DSIT to feel like in practice," Mian says. "The real test, of course, is whether they change behaviour day to day. That's the work we're now focused on."

As well as leading the department, Mian is the first perm sec to lead the government digital, data and technology profession – putting it on a par with its policy and operational delivery counterparts. He has pivoted away from previous plans to recruit a government chief digital officer – who would also be DSIT second perm sec and lead GDS – and introduced a "collective leadership model" for the profession. It's important to have "really clear, cross-government leadership of what we're trying to do on digital", he says. "There are big, big digital services being run elsewhere in government, and we need to do this stuff together." While he has a policy rather than technical background, he is exercising his role "in conjunction with a set of directors general" in DSIT and the large operational departments, who form the profession's executive committee.

He says there has been a "really, really positive response from the wider digital profession" to the new leadership model. "I think people looked across that group and saw people like them, and also saw the value of having someone like me who can do a bit more of the translation and can represent the digital profession at the top table."

And digital expertise among DSIT's DGs and directors has grown "very, very significantly" in the last year, Mian says. Joining him for the interview are Christine Bellamy, the former chief exec of GDS who previously led digital transformation and delivery at the BBC, and Emily Middleton, a former partner at Public First who led the design of the London Office of Technology and Innovation. They are directors general for digital products and digital transformation respectively, on an interim basis as the roles are new. "We've got a much broader and much deeper leadership team than we've had before," Mian says.

Attracting the best tech talent is a high priority. "If you talk to any founder in the tech sector, they say: 'Spend as much of your time as possible on talent.' And that's something I've been trying to take to heart," the perm sec says. He rattles off a list of hires that includes government chief data officer Aimee Smith, who joined from the Metropolitan Police last year, and ex-Monzo exec Tristan Thomas, who heads up DSIT's new CustomerFirst unit.

"People are drawn to the mission that we've got and they can see that we're building something quite special here," Mian says. He says GDS's mission in particular "really connects with people". "It's a place in government where you can work a bit differently to other places in government; it has a powerful story behind it. So I think that is really working. And it's working not just in London, but in Manchester."

The department is looking to expand its Manchester office – where Bellamy is based – "really significantly" in the coming years. Bellamy says plans are "less about a single, immediate expansion and more about a deliberate, long-term commitment to Manchester as one of our core digital and technology hubs". The city opens up access to "different talent pools and different ways into the department", Mian adds.

These efforts have been aided by a funding boost in the 2025 Spending Review, which allocated the department £1.2bn for "cross-cutting digital priorities". "We've got four years of money ahead of us. That is unusual in government, to have that runway ahead of you to go on and get stuff done," Mian says.

DSIT also has on its side a "quite unusual combination of real political drive and commitment on digital government", he adds. Last year, Keir Starmer said he wanted 10% of civil servants to be working in the DDaT and cyber professions by 2030 (up from around 5.5% in 2025). Middleton says that "sent a really powerful message" to staff and external specialists that their skills are valued in the civil service.

A "massive push" on training will continue over the next few years in a bid to make working in government as compelling as possible, she adds. DSIT has also been trialling programmes to help digital specialists keep their skills up to date, including the "phenomenally popular" AI Accelerator, which teaches data scientists machine learning engineering skills.

It has also been expanding its early-talent programmes. "We've got some brilliant people that used to be primary school teachers or bank managers... learning how to be tech architects or coders or [develop] other skills that are in shorter supply in government," Middleton says.

And work is continuing with the Treasury on pay frameworks. "We are regularly looking at: what's the median pay for folks within different specialisms in the wider market? How can we make sure that government's competitive? We work with departments on that, which is really important," she says.

Within DSIT, Mian says pay has been "a real constraint" as it competes with the private sector. "If people have to leave in order to progress or be recognised for their skills, we lose both expertise and diversity of background." Addressing that is also "part of the work" to remove barriers to diversity in the department, he says *(see box)*.

CSW asks how the integration of GDS into DSIT has gone so far. "I can't honestly say it's gone 100% smoothly," Mian says. "As with any merger or organisational change, you expect there to be some things to work through and that's true here as well."

But he says there are "good connections between the culture that we want in DSIT and the culture that we've already got in GDS". The "win-win" for GDS – and for the Space Agency and Building Digital UK, which DSIT has also absorbed in the last year – is that "we become... not just a policy and strategy department but a department that builds things", he says. "The GDS culture is massively important for that. That's a really positive thing for the organisation, but there definitely have been some challenges for colleagues."

Bellamy adds that GDS, "at heart, is a dynamic organisation" whose designers, engineers, data scientists and technologists build, test and run live services every day. »

"For that to work, they need an environment that removes friction rather than adding it."

"In the beginning, I think we probably felt like an operational department and a policy department," Bellamy says. "What we've done... is really scratch at that problem to make sure that we've got one DSIT." That has meant aligning expectations for areas such as agile delivery, risk management and assurance, while GDS needed to help DSIT officials understand some of the critical services it runs, such as emergency alerts, GOV.UK and Notify, the text notification service.

She says the department has a "snagging list" – "but a year later, we've made that transition". Today, Bellamy describes DSIT as a "lovely melting pot where you're starting to not see the breaks in the organisation, but you can see the expertise". There are regular "show and tells" and a weekly all-hands meeting. "We really see all of the marks that people are making across government and with services," she says.

"What we get to do now is think about the problem right from the citizen, all the way through to how the UK runs," she continues. One example of this is the launch of the digital driving licence later this year, which will be accessible via the GOV.UK Wallet on people's phones. GDS would never have brought digital driving licences to fruition on its own, Bellamy says, "because it would not have had the policy background to be able to get that across the line".

The roadmap for digital government, published in January, outlined a series of products and initiatives to transform government digital services by 2030, building on last year's blueprint for modern digital government *(see p.26)*. "But we only get to 2030 if every single year, we deliver good outcomes," Bellamy says. The next couple of years "will be transformative for the citizen experience", she adds. "We can already see in our data that's starting to make a difference."

The GOV.UK app, for example, is now in half a million people's pockets and should provide access to more services over the next year – such as benefits updates, thanks to work with DWP. Some 80% of app users have customised their homepage, with over 50% returning to use it multiple times. "There is a strong appetite for what comes next: seeing it as a single front door to government that will make everyday interactions simpler over time," Bellamy says. The day before our interview, DSIT launched GOV.UK Chat, an interface for the app that she says will "fundamentally make it easier for people to get what they need from the state".

Mian says the move to the app represents a new paradigm shift – the last one being the creation of GOV.UK in 2012. "I think a lot of people think 2012 was *the* moment for GDS," he says. "I resist that on one level – GDS has been doing lots of good stuff since 2012 – but... there's a grain of truth in it."

And the changes won't just affect citizens. Behind the "single front door" for citizens, services are often still run on individual departmental systems. The paradigm shift "on the techie side", Mian says, is creating horizontal, cross-departmental systems that serve everyone – such as One Login, the government-wide login system that is now used by more than 120 services.

Middleton says the roadmap is "not a static document". "A digital practitioner knows you need to adapt your plans and your delivery in response to changing user expectations, needs and the environment around you," she says – allowing for "transparent and iterative" progress updates.

One of the "fastest evolving" areas of the roadmap, Middleton says, is AI. "That's probably the area where we are going to see the most change, as the technology evolves rapidly." An update to the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee in April said DSIT was closing some internal AI pilots that had been "superseded by more modern, widely available platforms". It would focus instead on developing "frontline 'big bets'" – namely Consult, which analyses consultation responses, and Extract, which digitises historical planning documents – and tackling "deep-rooted issues in areas like social housing and education".

To this end, DSIT is working with other ministries on "ambitious" test-and-learn AI initiatives, including one with the Department for Education to help close the attainment gap for secondary school pupils, Middleton says. "These are not only demonstrator projects; they're helping us identify the platform capabilities and design patterns and delivery approaches that we'll need right across government to scale AI effectively."

She says DSIT has learned important lessons from the pilots that have ended. "Tools like Redbox, Minute and Parlex... were critical in building government's own AI capabilities and demonstrating the difference that AI can make to everyday working life," she says. Some are being used elsewhere in government, including the parliamentary intelligence tool Parlex, and Minute, a secure AI transcription and summary tool developed by the Incubator for Artificial Intelligence that Middleton says "demonstrated a significant reduction in administrative burden". And since the Ministry of Justice adapted Minute for its "wildly popular" Justice Transcribe tool, note-taking time at the MoJ has halved.

"One important lesson we've learned from these pilots is the importance of co-designing with frontline users," Middleton says. At the MoJ, this meant working closely with probation officers "to make sure tools like Justice Transcribe fit into real operational workflows and produce outputs people can trust and use day to day", she explains. "Here, we've found that the biggest gains have come where AI is used in such a way that it frees up time for staff to focus on professional judgement and direct engagement – ways that also make jobs more rewarding."

These lessons are shared via the AI Knowledge Hub – an online repository of resources to enable public servants to learn from each other.

Alongside the citizen-facing products and tools for public servants, a lot of work is happening to change the operating environment in government to make it easier and faster to deliver. "[That's] something I'm really passionate about because we're only going to keep those talented people, and we're only going to make the progress that we need to make at the pace that we need to, if we can adapt how we fund, procure, govern and assure digital in a way that's fit for the modern era. So you'll see updates on that side of things, too," Middleton says.

Experts *CSW* spoke to for this issue raised concerns about legacy systems and fragmented and inconsistent data being barriers to AI, with one saying there is "an absolute rat's nest of practice across government" *(p.30)*. Middleton acknowledges these are "real challenges... [that] will make it harder to scale some AI tools as quickly or as effectively as we might like".

One of the digital blueprint's five outcomes for GDS is "firmer foundations". "We know we need to make government's tech infrastructure more interoperable, more secure, and more resilient," Middleton says. "While the challenges around data are real, there is now a much stronger, more systematic focus on improving data quality, strengthening governance and making data genuinely usable across government."

This is just one area where DSIT is aiming to provide the "clear, cross-government leadership" Mian is so keen on. As the perm sec says: "We are not doing it all from DSIT; it's really a team effort." ■


“Creating the space for conversations on racism and diversity matters. So does being prepared to sit with a degree of discomfort when they do happen”

STATUS UPDATE

The government published its digital strategy in January this year, promising to transform the operations of the state. **Sam Trendall** sets out how things are progressing six months on

Back in January, technology secretary Liz Kendall launched a digital and tech strategy – *A roadmap for digital government*. Intended to improve services, augment infrastructure, and transform public services, the roadmap committed to a range of actions across six core areas: services; artificial intelligence; infrastructure; talent; funding; and transparency.

These commitments would, as Kendall put it, "put power and control back in your hands, when you use any government service".

As we head into summer, is this aspiration translating into reality? Here's our guide to progress so far against the plan's biggest and boldest proposals, as well as those that may be less conspicuous – but no less critical.

Updates on progress are correct at the time of going to press.

Joining up public sector services

The first section of the roadmap is also its busiest, with plans broken down into 15 areas across two subcategories, respectively covering accessibility and transformation.

The first, and perhaps most significant area addressed by the plan concerns fostering "stronger local and central government collaboration". Leading this work will be the new GDS Local unit established within the Government Digital Service.

Plans to establish leadership structures between central and local government are scheduled for summer 2026, according to a spokesperson for GDS. The first version of the Local Government Architecture Model was shared publicly in April, and the intention is to develop it further, in collaboration with sector representatives.

"The Returnship programme brings in technical colleagues who have been out of work for 18 months or more, the majority of whom are women"

The roadmap also promises to pilot the delivery of some local government services via the GOV.UK App. This pilot was completed in March, and will inform further expansions to the app, a spokesperson confirms.

Also put forward in the roadmap is a commitment to "embedding digital inclusion to make services accessible to all". This work will encompass measurable "inclusion metrics" being enshrined in government's service standard. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology pledged to publish "new inclusive service principles and patterns" this summer. A spokesperson for the department confirms the work to do so is underway.

Another eye-catching ambition is geared towards "transforming how businesses interact with government online". To do so, government hopes to offer "an easy-to-find 'front door' to personalised information, services, and support for businesses".

The roadmap adds: "Working towards the aim of delivering a seamless and personalised experience for businesses, our next phase of work will develop the functionality of business.gov.uk. We'll test solutions to help businesses overcome challenges, using data to anticipate user needs and preferences." A DSIT spokesperson confirmed that more detailed plans will be shared throughout 2026.

The transformation-focused section of the roadmap runs through digital plans in a range of service areas, including: NHS healthcare; child safeguarding; immigration and borders; employment and careers; benefits; driving and vehicle services; tax and customs; and services for prisoners.

It also rubber stamps a new unit within GDS, CustomerFirst, aimed at "improving customer service", which was announced a few days before the roadmap. The team has a remit to "transform up to four priority public services to improve them for citizens by March 2028", with a focus on learning from best practice in private-sector customer service.

"We'll take a radical approach to redesign customer contact and casework away from the constraints of legacy systems," the roadmap says. "This includes making better use of AI and other technologies and will save public money."

Individual upgrades include ongoing implementation of "speech and translation AI for frontline probation staff" and the introduction of new services to the NHS App, including mental-health support and access to "a new home-testing service for HPV screening".

HM Revenue and Customs is also set to launch several major new citizen-facing platforms this year.

"If you're a Pay As You Earn customer, you'll have access to a new online service which will give you direct access and control over your tax position, making it easier and quicker to check and update your income, allowances, reliefs and

expenses," the roadmap says. "If you use self assessment services, you'll have expanded digital services to help you register and improve the process if you no longer need to file. If you're a newly liable employee, you'll also be able to report child benefit through your tax code, avoiding the need to register for self assessment in the first place." A government spokesperson has confirmed that these improvements will continue to be rolled out throughout 2026.

Harnessing the power of AI for the public good

The second core section of the strategy outlines proposals in four areas concerned with the use of artificial intelligence.

This includes "promoting a test-and-learn approach across the public sector through the prime minister's AI exemplars". This encompasses various programmes on which work began last year, including "pilot projects [that] included AI tools to support planning decisions, improve tax compliance, assist probation casework and help NHS staff discharge patients".

"Projects now being scaled more widely include tools to find and understand content on GOV.UK, improve education content and diagnose health conditions," the roadmap adds. "By transforming services in a responsible and considered way, these projects are already showing their potential to deliver wide-scale impact across public services."

These will be complemented by work aimed at "driving public sector productivity with innovation and prototyping" – the centrepiece of which is the Humphrey suite of AI tools. One of these – Extract, which can digitise paper maps and written documents – was scheduled to be available to all local authorities from May onwards. A government spokesperson said that the rollout of Extract is "ongoing".

The roadmap also sets a goal of "using AI and technology in education to improve pupil outcomes and reduce staff workload" and, finally, "creating practical guidance for responsible AI adoption".

Led by GDS, this includes the publication of new procurement guidelines intended to help public bodies invest in AI responsibly.

Other initiatives include a newly convened Responsible AI Advisory Panel, which met for the first time in March, as well as an interactive version of government's data ethics guidance.

A government spokesperson said a decision has been made to "make responsible AI procurement guidance available through the AI Knowledge Hub rather than as a standalone publication", which will bring all relevant guidance together in one place.

Strengthening and extending digital and data public infrastructure

This section of the plan addresses the need for upgrades of outdated systems and processes, as well as outlining ambitions for major new investments in tech architecture.

But first will come work focused on "understanding our digital systems to improve them". GDS has published a new approach for central government organisations, aiming to give "a clearer, fuller view of how and where legacy technology is being used today". This will be followed by the introduction of "stronger standards for maintaining records of digital assets, including legacy technology and critical national infrastructure", as well as tweaks to the GovAssure regime of cyber-resilience assessments.

Towards the end of 2026, GDS will also work with departments across government in a bid to "improve security across government supply chains by mapping them more clearly, setting and enforcing baseline security standards".

The roadmap provides detail on previous and upcoming work on "upgrading outdated legacy systems in key public services". This encompasses remediation of the tech infrastructure of public bodies including the Department for Work and Pensions, Home Office, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A government spokesperson has confirmed that work on a new approach to legacy technology is progressing, with the team "conducting a range of engagements and pilots".

Also outlined in the roadmap is a plan for a new "Secret Community Cloud [that] will offer a secure cloud computing environment to both the national security community and the wider public sector. According to the roadmap, the Cloud is expected to be operational later this year. A government spokesperson has confirmed that "the Ministry of Defence, supported by the National Security Digital Centre, is developing Secret Community Cloud" and that "this is an ongoing piece of work".

GDS will also lead efforts to deliver "joined-up standards and approaches… frameworks for secure, ethical data use… [and] common systems and platforms for all of government to use".

This last area of focus will see the digital unit publish a "national cloud strategy", which aims to build on government's own long-standing 'cloud first' tenet.

"GDS will build on this landmark policy by introducing a new strategy for all sectors to make the most of the cloud as a national asset," the roadmap says. "Through guiding principles, this strategy will help to drive economic growth and innovation and support secure, resilient and sustainable public services."

As part of a commitment to "building the platforms to share and use data effectively", the document provides an update on the National Data Library [*see p.39*] – the flagship government tech policy set out in Labour's manifesto for the 2024 general election.

The delivery of the National Data Library is described in the strategy as being "informed by diverse user needs and expert advice. Early projects will showcase new ways of using public sector data to positively impact people's lives."

Elevating leadership and investing in talent

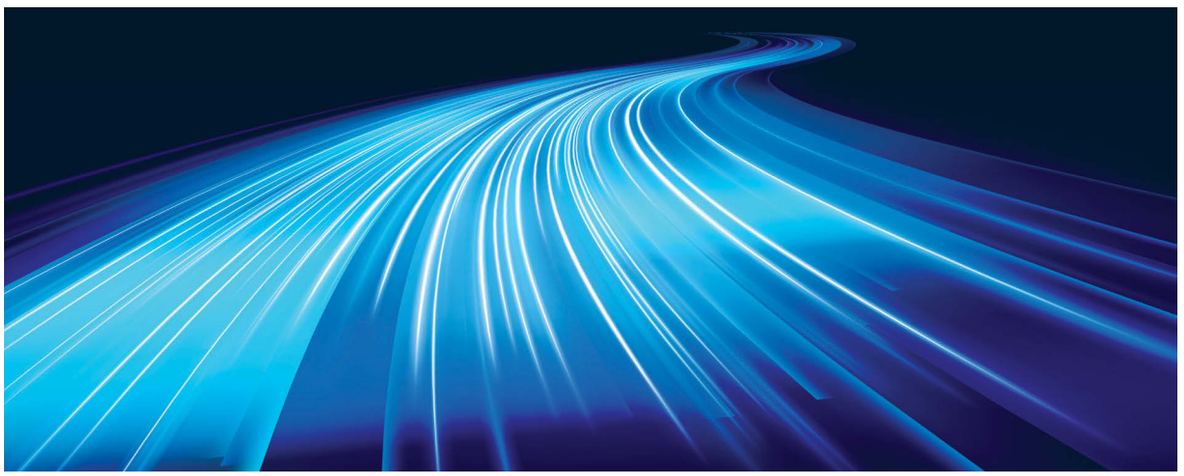
The roadmap dedicates a whole section to people and skills, including a pledge to help "elevate digital leadership" throughout the civil service.

Doing so will involve implementing a new scheme that "will focus on supporting the development of high potential technical leaders and their career progression into the senior civil service and will include topics such as strategic leadership, commercial acumen and system-level thinking".

The roadmap says that applicants for all government jobs at director or director general level will be assessed on "digital and data skills and behaviours, with digital expectations stated in job descriptions and reflected in performance objectives" from April this year. A government spokesperson said that its approach to embedding digital and data skills at the senior level is in development.

The strategy also sets an expectation – although not a mandate – that, from the end of this year onwards, all

"Departments will start sharing annual outcome-based data on the performance of their services with each other, with secretaries of state held accountable in regular reviews"



central and local government entities should "have a digital leader on their executive committee and a digital non-executive director on their board".

This drive to get more specialists in senior roles will be accompanied by initiatives aimed at "building all civil servants' digital, data and AI skills", including a new "core digital curriculum for all civil servants... [that] will give civil servants at every level the tools and knowledge to work in a modern digital government".

The roadmap also recognises the importance of "getting the digital, data and AI specialists government needs".

To help meet the challenge of doing so, government launched a "Returnship programme" in March, meeting its roadmap commitment.

"This programme brings in technical colleagues who have been out of work for 18 months or more, the majority of whom are women," the document says. A government spokesperson added that the AI Accelerator programme has been expanded "with two new learning programmes for data scientists and software engineers."

Government also committed to publish a new "digital workforce 2030 strategy... that supports departments to increase their digital and data workforce and plan for the future". This will be published in 2026, with further details to be shared "in due course".

Funding for outcomes and procuring for growth and innovation

A lot of work has already been undertaken in support of an objective of "changing how we fund digital work to focus on outcomes", with pilots of three new funding models being launched in September 2025. This includes: "staggered funding for innovative technologies; staggered funding for live services; and outcome-based portfolio funding".

The roadmap pledged that in April, GDS would lead an effort to introduce new assurance measures to "enable improved management of digital, data, and technology initiatives, from their inception through to delivery". A spokesperson for GDS said the launch of Government Assurance Services in April has met this commitment.

By October 2028, a newly implemented system will mean that HM Treasury "will be able to access and track departments' finance and performance data in near real-time for the first time". This will enable "better quality analysis and challenge" of spending plans across government.

Alongside this improved analysis will be efforts aimed at "simplifying spending and approval processes to deliver new and improved services faster".

Again, significant progress has already been made here, with the rollout of a new digital *Get approval to spend* service beginning in January last year. This is accompanied by a new Central Digital Platform developed by the government commercial function for the purpose of "publishing, managing and analysing procurement, [and which] will make buying new services and tools much more accessible and transparent".

The roadmap said that in March of this year, GCF would unveil "a single place to store, find and provide supplier information". A spokesperson said the launch of a new Supplier Information and Registration Service in March 2026 has met this commitment. In addition, "consistent structured spending data is now available for [Procurement Act 2023] through the Find a Tender Service".

Around the end of the year, GDS and the Treasury will start to apply new digital assurance measurers to all forms of spending control – not just digital, data and technology.

The roadmap also sets an ambition for "improving the public sector's buying power through the Digital Commercial Centre of Excellence", which was created a year ago and sits within DSIT.

The centre will play a key role in publishing government's first Digital Sourcing Strategy, which was due for release in March. A spokesperson said the strategy is being reviewed to align its delivery with refreshed priorities. A new timeframe will be shared soon.

Around the end of 2026, the aim is to "agree an 'All of Government' central cloud contract".

"The first central contract of its kind, this will create a standardised, marketplace-based framework that maximises government's purchasing power," the roadmap says.

Committing to transparency and driving accountability

The final section of the roadmap begins with a commitment to "working in the open to build better digital services and public trust".

A key element of this objective to date has been engagement work on the part of GDS to encourage departments to release data via government's Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard.

In March, GDS met its commitment to "analyse published records to determine how well ATRS records increase public understanding of, and trust in, government's use of algorithmic tools". The digital unit has also committed to shortly begin "publishing roadmaps for major products" that will be openly available on GOV.UK.

The final goal set out in the roadmap is "creating a consistent approach to measuring how digital services perform".

In support of this, several months ago GDS began pilots of a new "digital performance framework for central government departments". From this August onwards, departments will begin sharing – with each other, although it is unclear whether this will also include public sharing – annual performance data. Alongside this, "secretaries of state [will be] held accountable in regular reviews, [which] will encourage open working and drive evidence-led improvements across digital government". ■

OKCOM

Is AI in the civil service a truly exciting proposition or a solution looking for a problem? **Jess Bowie** investigates

In January last year, ministers promised to "mainline AI into the veins" of the nation. Central to that vision is using artificial intelligence to reshape the work of government itself and save tens of billions of pounds in productivity gains.

Yet while ambition saturates the rhetoric, the picture on the ground is far patchier. And into the gap between political enthusiasm and operational reality has rushed a great deal of expensive technology, questionable procurement, and what one insider describes as a leadership tone of "let's use AI" that is positive, but unfocused.

What's happening on the ground?

The honest answer, according to both Whitehall-watchers interested in AI adoption and civil servants themselves, is: some things, in some places, unevenly.

A survey of more than 2,000 civil service managers carried out by the FDA trade union last year found that nearly two in three have used AI personally. But of those, nine in 10 described using it only for basic administrative tasks like meeting management and communication support. Transformative it is not. Those based outside London, and in more junior grades, were less likely to have used AI at all.

David Black, a senior official who has spent the last few years running AI programmes in various government departments and who asked for his name to be changed for this feature, puts it bluntly. "AI is to some extent a solution looking for a problem," he says. "A lot of it is driven by tech companies that need something to upsell." He is particularly sceptical about the rollout of Microsoft Copilot, which was bundled into existing Office subscriptions at roughly a 6% price increase for UK government customers. "We're lacking good evidence that the productivity benefits justify the cost," he argues. "AI meeting summaries basically signal that nothing very important happened in that meeting. And free, off-the-shelf tools do largely the same job."

But the government's fondness for tools like Copilot is partly about data security – keeping sensitive material within controlled government environments rather than typed into a public chatbot. Black acknowledges this challenge but notes that, in practice, many civil servants simply use ChatGPT on their personal phones anyway.

Heloise Dunlop is a researcher in the Institute for Government's civil service team who has been studying AI adoption and civil servants' attitudes towards it. For her, the gap between what AI is doing now and what people expect it to do soon is striking.

The latest Civil Service People Survey found that only around 26% of civil servants say AI is currently saving them more than an hour a week. Yet 71% expect it to change their job significantly within five years. "There's a mismatch there," she tells *CSW*. "What do they think is going to change?"

She also points out that those departments with the biggest frontline and operational delivery roles are showing the lowest time savings from AI. Human contact and physical tasks are hard to automate, after all. "Where are you going to find the time savings if, as a work coach, for example, you've still got to have back-to-back, in-person appointments with clients in a job centre? Or if your role is to inspect vehicles – AI can't do that for you." Yet even staff in those kinds of roles still expect disruption ahead, Dunlop adds.

"So the big question for me is: is this just hype?"

Where it actually works

None of this is to say AI has no place in government. It absolutely does but, Black argues, it tends to work best in specific, bounded applications, rather than as a general-purpose productivity layer spread thinly across the whole machine.

"There is a lot of 'AI is the future, get on with it' from ministers who haven't thought through what that means in practice" *David Black*

His favourite use-cases are those where AI does something humans simply cannot do at scale. Take the Department for Work and Pensions' Whitemail tool, which scans thousands of incoming letters to flag people who may be at risk of harm. "The cost of a false positive is low," he says. "And the benefit of catching someone in crisis is very high."

IPUTER

We told ChatGPT to "create an image of civil servants using AI to illustrate a feature in the magazine Civil Service World". We were interested in the poster on the wall, with its made-up slogan for the civil service ("Working for everyone") and the inclusion of a *CSW* resting on the table, albeit with an unrealistically drab front cover

When Whitemail received negative coverage in the press, Black disagreed with the framing: in his view, it is exactly the kind of application for which AI is suited.

A second example is Extract, a planning data-extraction tool announced by the prime minister that converts planning documents – PDFs, maps, tree preservation orders, article 4 exclusion zones – into queryable data, freeing planning officers from hours of manual checking. "What I like about it is that you're building a lasting data asset. And you can supervise the AI's accuracy as you go," Black says. "It's AI as infrastructure rather than AI as shortcut, which is an important distinction."

Justice Transcribe, developed under the Ministry of Justice's AI Action Plan for Justice, is another application worth examining. The transcription tool replaces manual note-taking during probation meetings, allowing probation officers to focus on the person in front of them rather than their notepad or laptop. Between October 2025 and February 2026, it was used to summarise more than 150,000 probation meetings, saving over 25,000 hours of staff time. It is also a secure, internally managed system – not a commercial tool bolted on from outside.

The Government Communication Service's Assist tool is, by common consent among those familiar with it, one of the civil service's best AI case studies so far. Dunlop has studied it closely. "It works because it was built by a pre-existing, multidisciplinary team who understood the environment that they were in and the problems they were trying to solve. It was built specifically for their own function, with mandatory training and real attention to the hidden risks – not just hallucinations, but the human errors that creep in around any new tool," she says. Black agrees: "They focused on adoption over speed of building. They embedded themselves with users. There were real feedback loops."

In each of these success stories (and the number of others is growing by the week), AI is doing something people genuinely cannot – processing volume, extracting structure from unstructured data – and thereby freeing attention for tasks that require a human presence. Black likes to compare AI in government to "a really good, fast intern": capable, quick and useful within limits. Not a replacement for judgement, not (yet) a wholesale transformation of the organisation, but valuable when given clarity about the problem it is solving.

The guidance and leadership gap

Clarity, however, is exactly what is missing in too many parts of government when it comes to AI.

The FDA survey found that only 29% of civil servants have been consulted on AI at work. Many also described receiving contradictory signals. "The big first message from seniors was: 'Do not use,'" recalled one focus group participant quoted in the survey.

Eagle-eyed observers will note another made-up slogan on the wall (HMPPS's actual philosophy is "preventing victims by changing lives"); the scrambled writing on the probation officer's lanyard; the fact that Justice Transcribe is facing the offender not the officer; and the declaration on the iPad screen that it is "100% accurate" (is the AI protesting too much?)

But when the messaging changed, the same official said, "it was not really clearly communicated". Another respondent put it more directly: "I do not understand what my department wants to see AI being used for, or what outcomes it expects."

Black says this is a familiar pattern. "There is a lot of 'AI is the future, get on with it' from ministers who haven't thought through what that means in practice," he says. "And beneath that, a lot of people are scrabbling around trying to find something they can point to."

Dunlop's view is that this reflects a structural absence rather than just poor communication. "We're still waiting for the Strategic Workforce Plan from the civil service," she says. "Which means there is no clarity on which skills to keep, which to build and which can be automated. You can't sensibly deploy AI without having thought about that." For her, initiatives like the government's One Big Thing – an annual cross-civil service training programme completed by hundreds of thousands of civil servants, which has most recently had AI as its focus – are fine as far as they go, but are a long way from the profession-by-profession, function-by-function thinking that meaningful transformation requires.

There is also a harder, less-discussed problem lurking beneath the surface: accountability. Generative AI, unlike more traditional algorithmic systems, does not produce outputs that are easily traceable or replicable. "Government needs to be able to explain how and why a decision was made," Dunlop says. "Ministers and MPs have to be accountable. With generative AI, that is generally much harder to guarantee." This is a constitutional concern, which is yet to be resolved.

Are we building this wrong?

Setting aside the guidance gap, there is a more fundamental question about whether the basic architecture of the government's AI approach makes sense.

Jack Perschke founded Great Wave AI in 2021 and has spent more than two decades in technology consulting, mostly with public sector clients. His diagnosis of government's current approach to AI is pointed.

"It's completely the wrong way round. Departments are going use-case by use-case, when actually what they should be doing is building shared infrastructure first and then deploying use-cases on top of it," he says.

The consequence of the current approach, as he describes it, is a "procurement death spiral". A department identifies a problem, writes a business case worth tens of millions of pounds, hands it to procurement, who then commission a major consultancy who, Perschke says, "frankly don't know any more about implementing AI than the people on the ground, because the technology is so new". The result, he argues, is that departments spend millions on procurement, burn through millions more in the first months of a contract to develop impressive-sounding proofs-of-concept – and then require a second funding-round and several years to develop one working use-case, which leaves many use-cases still to address and no budget left to meet them.

His alternative is what he calls an "agent orchestration" layer: shared infrastructure for supplying AI agents, connecting them together, evaluating their outputs, and logging everything. With that in place, deploying a new use-case is fast and relatively

BEFORE THE AI, FIX THE FOUNDATIONS

When it comes to data in the civil service, there is – in the words of one senior figure in the digital and data profession – "an absolute rat's nest of practice across government". Computer systems that are decades old sit alongside newer platforms that can't talk to each other; data is siloed, poorly documented, and of wildly variable quality, and nobody has yet hit on the magic formula to align all these processes and technologies.

This is, according to Ruth Kelly, chief analyst at the National Audit Office, the single biggest barrier to AI adoption in government. "If you've got to manually extract data and you're just building an AI on top, it can be very problematic," she told *CSW* last year. The NAO's core message, she added, is that investment in fixing legacy systems is more important than building AI applications on top of them.

Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, former chief scientific adviser for national security, has made the same point. Writing in the *Heywood Quarterly* earlier this year, he described how AI pilots can perform perfectly well in testing, only to hit a wall when departments discover that their data is spread across multiple systems with no authoritative source of truth, and their workflows are buried in legacy code. "To deploy the AI tool in live operations would have required changes across several interdependent systems," Finkelstein wrote of one pilot. "No one could state with confidence what those changes would break, how long they would take or who ultimately owned the risk... AI revealed the limits of the organisation's systems far more clearly than it delivered immediate benefits."

There is, however, a real opportunity here. Fixing these data foundations is not just a precondition for transformative AI – the ambition of what AI could deliver is itself the best available argument for finally doing it.

cheap. Without it, every use-case is a bespoke, expensive build from scratch.

Black broadly agrees with Perschke's critique of big consultancy contracts. "The best ideas tend to come from grassroots staff," he says. "AI is genuinely democratising in that sense." But he adds another dimension: the UK has no shared framework for negotiating with commercial AI providers. "Every department has to do its own contracts, its own information governance carveouts," he says. "It's wasteful duplication, and it leaves everyone exposed."

Although they are coming at it from different angles, both Black and Perschke express the same concern: the UK's growing dependence on large American AI providers, and what happens if that relationship shifts. Perschke flags the MoJ's memorandum of understanding with OpenAI as an example of exactly the wrong approach. "The question isn't just where the data sits," he says. "It's: can you change it? Can you replace it? What happens if the price spikes? What happens if geopolitics shift?" His proposed solution is an orchestration layer that lets departments swap language models in and out based on cost and performance. Black's is more fundamental: he points to France, which has its own sovereign AI model, Mistral, and a national government AI system, Albert, integrated with public sector IT. "The UK has shown very little interest in doing anything equivalent," he says. "And that's a real missed opportunity."

What's that coming over the hill?

Almost all of the debate about AI in government – this feature included, until now – is about the supply side: how civil servants use AI internally to work more efficiently and better serve the public. Black, however, thinks this framing is missing something important.

"Most of the conversation is about optimising existing government services," he says. "But there's a much bigger problem coming on the demand side, and almost nobody in Whitehall is talking about it."

His argument is as follows: government budgets have always, quietly, relied on a significant degree of citizen ignorance or inertia. Many people who are entitled to benefits don't claim them. Many who have grounds to challenge a decision don't. Many who could access a service don't know it exists. AI could be about to change that – not because government will tell people what they're missing out on, but because private companies will.

He points to parking ticket dispute websites as an early version of this which is already happening: tools that identify grounds for appeal and generate the relevant correspondence automatically, at minimal cost to the user. "What's potentially coming," he says, "is the same thing for the entire benefits system. A startup will offer to get you every entitlement you're eligible for, for a small cut. And government will suddenly be facing demand it never anticipated and never budgeted for."

We asked AI to create an image of a civil servant using a chatbot. We didn't specify where they should be based geographically, but clearly AI shares the common misconception that all civil servants are based in SW1 – or rather in a bizarro SW1 where Parliament and the London Eye are on the same side of the river...

The same dynamic, he notes, applies to public consultations. Automation makes it easier for government to process responses at scale – but it also makes it incredibly easy for individuals and organisations to mass-generate them. The integrity of the consultation process, already under strain, could become harder to defend.

"Government needs to be able to explain how and why a decision was made. With generative AI, that is generally much harder" ***Heloise Dunlop***

Black's conclusion is stark: "Government needs to get ahead of this by proactively offering these kinds of services itself – tools that help citizens understand what they're entitled to, rather than waiting for private intermediaries to do it first." If it doesn't, he argues, it will find itself in a reactive battle against commercial operators, while being simultaneously overwhelmed by a surge in demand it never saw coming.

It is, perhaps, the least comfortable argument to come out of all the conversations that have informed this feature. A civil service focused on using AI to save minutes per day may be preparing for entirely the wrong future.

What should government do?

A thread common to all these discussions is that AI isn't wrong for government, but that the conditions for using it well are not yet in place. Those conditions, according to the experts and insiders *CSW* spoke to, include profession-by-profession skills planning with mandatory training for specific tools; a shared infrastructure put in place at the department level before any individual use cases are dreamed up; and a procurement process fit for a technology that moves faster than any tendering round can keep up with. Finally, they call for leaders to get serious about fixing government's data and legacy tech systems *(see box)*, without which AI's ability to be truly transformative will be severely hampered.

The technology is currently, as Black put it earlier, "a really good, fast intern". If – at the risk of stretching the metaphor – it is going to be offered a permanent and prominent role in the UK civil service, it will need clear direction and leaders who understand the difference between enthusiasm and strategy. ■

Building whole-society resilience

As geopolitical tensions rise and pressure on public services grows, how can the UK build greater resilience? Fiona Walters, CEO of Serco UK & Europe, explains why a whole-society approach will depend on closer collaboration between government, business and the third sector

The world is growing more uncertain and more dangerous. Increasingly, the government must account for this uncertainty, faced with hard spending choices and greater public scrutiny as pressures mount on our critical services: rising geopolitical turmoil is fuelling a need for defence spending; our ageing population is straining the health service and our care system; and stubborn joblessness means tax receipts are shrinking, even as our welfare bill continues to rise.

At the same time, threats to our security mean the need for a whole-society approach to national resilience, or preparedness for conflict, is ever more urgent, encompassing not only the military response but how our society and our public services can continue to function amid times of crisis.

The UK Resilience Academy, run jointly by the Cabinet Office and Serco, lists three pillars which must be developed to achieve resilience: capabilities; practice; and behaviours. All three will need to be built into our critical services to ensure Britain's civil preparedness in a world in flux.

With a clear need for swift action, business can – must – be part of the solution. Government and its private sector partners must work together to deliver the outcomes that will bolster resilience in our critical public services.

Public-private sector partnerships, when done well, are proven to result in faster delivery, greater flexibility, and stronger outcomes for citizens. The most obvious example of this came during the Covid pandemic, when the government rapidly mobilised both its own and the private sector's resources in response to a critical need. Within four weeks, Serco mobilised over 10,000 people and stood up 20 drive-through test centres, with a daily capacity of over 20,000 tests.

"By sharing knowledge and working together, we can build whole-society resilience, rather than contract-by-contract solutions"

Perhaps most famously: as the pandemic unfolded, the government established the Vaccine Task Force, bringing together the best of the public and private sectors. With expertise from government, business, industry and academia, the Task Force led a truly world-leading vaccination campaign: within seven months of Britain becoming the first country in the world to administer a Covid vaccine to the public, over 80% of UK adults had received at least one dose.

The pandemic showed what's possible when we combine the public, private and third sectors, working together to create a solution and respond to an acute need.

But providers like Serco have a duty beyond assisting crisis response: the nature of today's world means societal resilience (resilient capabilities, practice and behaviours) must be built into everything we do, from supporting local skills, communities and economic growth to designing critical services that will support citizens during times of crisis.

Developing capabilities for civil resilience begins with ensuring structures and support are in place for all members of society. For Serco, everyday civil resilience starts with opportunity and prosperity for all. That's the logic behind our Pathways employment programme, dedicated to providing opportunities for disadvantaged groups facing structural barriers to work. Under Pathways, we've supported over 100 people into work since the start of the year, and over 50 people with criminal records. We additionally invest in local economies, workforces and skills: 58% of our suppliers in the UK are SMEs, and roughly 80% of our UK employees live within 25 miles of their workplace.

Capabilities are also critical to the vital work we do with governments, where we partner with our customers to operate at scale, at pace and under pressure. In defence, for instance, Serco's world-leading services in areas such as naval autonomy, military training, and recruitment mean we are key to shoring up Britain's sovereign capabilities in exactly the contested, in-demand domains which will be crucial to future deterrence and warfighting readiness.

But practices, another pillar in building resilience, matter just as much as capabilities. As an organisation, we also understand that the programmes and services we provide

Serco colleagues hold mock interviews with prisoners at HMP Thameside as part of our Pathways employment programme

on behalf of government are crucial to Britain's civil preparedness and cannot be allowed to be disrupted. We're developing comprehensive plans to enhance our own organisational resilience to ensure we are able, in times of crisis, to continue delivering critical programmes and functioning public services which citizens rely on. We're learning much, and we're looking forward to sharing those learnings more widely to help ensure resilience practices are widely embedded across public and private sectors.

Our challenge now is how government and its partners work together to deliver more. Achieving true civil and military readiness across the whole of society will depend on the private and third sectors, stepping up and working with government, to solve societal problems together. This is where behaviours, the third pillar of resilience, comes in: developing a mindset whereby government and business see ourselves and each other as parts of one whole.

If we are to deliver on the government's critical missions and enhance Britain's national resilience and readiness, the public and private sectors need each other. By pooling our resources, expertise and talent, we'll be able to collaborate earlier in policy, use operational insights to build resilience into public service design, and take a more agile approach to piloting new solutions so that

"Public-private sector partnerships, when done well, are proven to result in faster delivery, greater flexibility, and stronger outcomes for citizens"

we can deliver the services citizens need now. By sharing knowledge and working together, we can build whole-society resilience, rather than contract-by-contract solutions.

For those of us in the private sector, this is our moment: to show our government partners we can heed the call and respond, that we're here to support their whole-society approach. The services we provide at Serco are almost unparallelled in their breadth and their scope, but what unites our 30,000-strong team across the UK & Europe is a strong sense of purpose and a commitment to serving our fellow citizens. Public service is the lifeblood of Serco – it's what drives me and drew me to this role, and it's something I know I share with our frontline and with our teams who deliver essential public services – day in and day out – to make our societies safer and more resilient for all.

As we live through a dangerous time, questions over a plan for national, cross-sector resilience will only grow more pressing. I am looking forward to working towards true partnership with government: designing and delivering services that keep the nation safe and building national and civil resilience into all aspects of British life, to ensure we're prepared as a society for what's next.

serco

HARD DATA

The National Data Library was the flagship tech policy in Labour's manifesto before being elected, but government research finds that many have mixed feelings at best on the use of their information. **Sam Trendall** reports

"Benefits were often outweighed by concerns about data privacy and misuse... [and] participants felt uninformed about the legalities and mechanisms of government data-sharing, feeling they had little control."

In creating the UK's National Data Library, government faces a complex and difficult task. But the quote above – from research commissioned by those delivering the NDL – demonstrates that there may be an even bigger challenge ahead in convincing citizens of the advantages of the major new digital facility.

The development of the library – and the word itself may present a significant problem for many, the research found – was perhaps the most eye-catching policy commitment for public sector technology contained in the Labour Party's manifesto ahead of the 2024 general election. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, which is leading work on the NDL, announced in January that it had completed "an extensive discovery phase" and begun work on five so-called kickstarter projects. More detail on the facility would be released in the coming months, the department added. In the meantime, DSIT has revealed the results of some of the explorations it has undertaken in support of the project so far, with the publication of the findings of research that took place in February and March 2025. The exercise saw specialist firm Ipsos retained by the department to run 10 online focus groups and 10 in-depth interviews intended to provide an insight into "public understanding of and attitudes towards government data-sharing, including initial reactions to the concept of a National Data Library".

Public communications

The research, which was based on hypothetical proposals that "do not reflect current government policy", found in the first instance that "transparency was seen as paramount for building trust and acceptance of the NDL" and that "the public should be engaged in ongoing consultations to address concerns".

Research participants advised government that evidence of "tangible, personal benefits was seen as key to securing public support" for the National Data Library. "Participants emphasised the importance of communicating how the NDL will positively impact their individual lives, not just society at large," the research report said.

In particular, citizens of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland wanted clearer insight into "how any benefits reached beyond England".

While there was no dominant consensus on how often public progress updates should be provided, there was clear feedback that government should make a special effort to engage "groups who may need additional support, such as older people, those who are digitally excluded, and schoolchildren".

The report added: "In particular, digitally excluded participants strongly emphasised the need to have information about the NDL in physical spaces. They often suggested partnering with trusted public service broadcasters to

communicate about the NDL through news segments and documentaries."

Data-sharing in general

While those taking part in the study indicated some "recognition of the potential benefit to improve public services" by sharing data across government bodies, the research also found that "participants often struggled to spontaneously identify" these possible upsides – and that "benefits were also often outweighed by concerns about data privacy and misuse".

Indeed, an overall sense of "high distrust in the UK government" emerged.

"Lack of trust and scepticism towards the government underpinned participants' perceptions of government data-sharing and use," the report added. "Participants felt uninformed about the legalities and mechanisms of government data-sharing, feeling they had little control."

People's awareness of issues related to government data-sharing – and how they felt about them – were significantly "shaped by personal experiences... and interactions with public services, especially in relation to health or welfare".

Feelings were also liable to be influenced by "demographic factors... [as] participants from higher social grades tended to be more inquisitive about the extent of government data-sharing, whereas digitally excluded groups drew more on direct experiences of fragmented public services and had limited awareness of current data-sharing practices".

The proposed National Data Library

The findings of the study demonstrate that citizens' concerns regarding government data-sharing in general extend to the NDL specifically – not least because of a name that many citizens may find problematic.

The research write-up said: "Initial associations with the term 'National Data Library' evoked concerns about a central repository of data with public access, shaping participants' scepticism towards the initiative. The use of the word 'library' significantly influenced these concerns."

Such concerns currently persist as there is "limited information and detail about the NDL" – in light of which most people's feelings about the proposed facility are "heavily influenced by broader views".

"Despite recognising potential public service improvements from data-sharing facilitated via the NDL, participants often defaulted to questioning whether the government has undisclosed intentions," the report added.

When participants were given more detail of "the NDL's proposed design as an access facilitator rather than a centralised repository", this helped to allay such fears – to an extent. But even when these explanations were given, "misconceptions persisted about it being a central store of data, with participants often returning to this perception of the NDL, despite being told otherwise".

The only factor that seemed to influence people's "ability to understand the NDL's potential benefits and applications" – cutting across "all social grades and regions" – was whether or not they were directly involved with technology and data-sharing in their professional life.

Governance of the NDL

There was better news for the government in the research's findings in regard to how citizens would like the NDL to be monitored and managed. Suggestions made by participants for the governance regime of the new facility largely "overlapped with the proposed rules for the NDL".

Those taking part in the study also found some reassurance in "hearing that the NDL would strictly adhere to legal requirements and GDPR" – although there "was a desire for greater clarity" about the checks and balances that will apply to the initiative.

Citizens' feedback was that the sharing of any data via the library "should be in the public interest" and should be governed by "rules about who could have access and for what purpose – especially if this involved bodies outside of the public sector".

Participants expressed a preference for the library to primarily work with "anonymised or aggregate data" and said they "wanted the public to have influence over how the NDL would be managed and the mechanisms in place to do this".

There was a clear request for people to have "opportunities to give their consent to opt-in or out".

"Lack of trust and scepticism towards the government underpinned participants' perceptions of government data sharing and use"

Conclusions

Commenting on the rationale for the research and its core findings, a spokesperson for DSIT said: "The National Data Library will transform how public sector data is managed, accessed and used to drive economic growth and improve public services. As this report shows, the participants themselves could see the benefits – like analysing multiple datasets to provide targeted financial support for energy bills or identify the most suitable benefits for a person with a long-term health condition. It was undertaken to better understand public concerns and priorities for government data-sharing and is one part of our engagement before we set out plans for ensuring the NDL is safe and secure."

The report itself picks out two central conclusions, the first of which is that – despite all the evidence presented of their fears and misgivings – "on hearing the proposals for the NDL, participants were generally open to the idea of a platform that could facilitate greater data-sharing across government".

"There was a strong emphasis on the [importance of the] purpose of this being for the public good, with the benefits distributed equitably across UK society," the final section of the report stated.

To ensure these positive outcomes, participants called for limits to be placed on who is granted access to the library – with a recommendation that only "public or non-profit organisations and qualified analysts" are permitted to use the system. Even these users should be subject to "accreditation processes... as well as regular audits and compliance checks", the document added.

The second core finding to emerge is that "transparency was a key theme, with participants wanting to know more about the specifics of how the NDL could work and what this could mean for them".

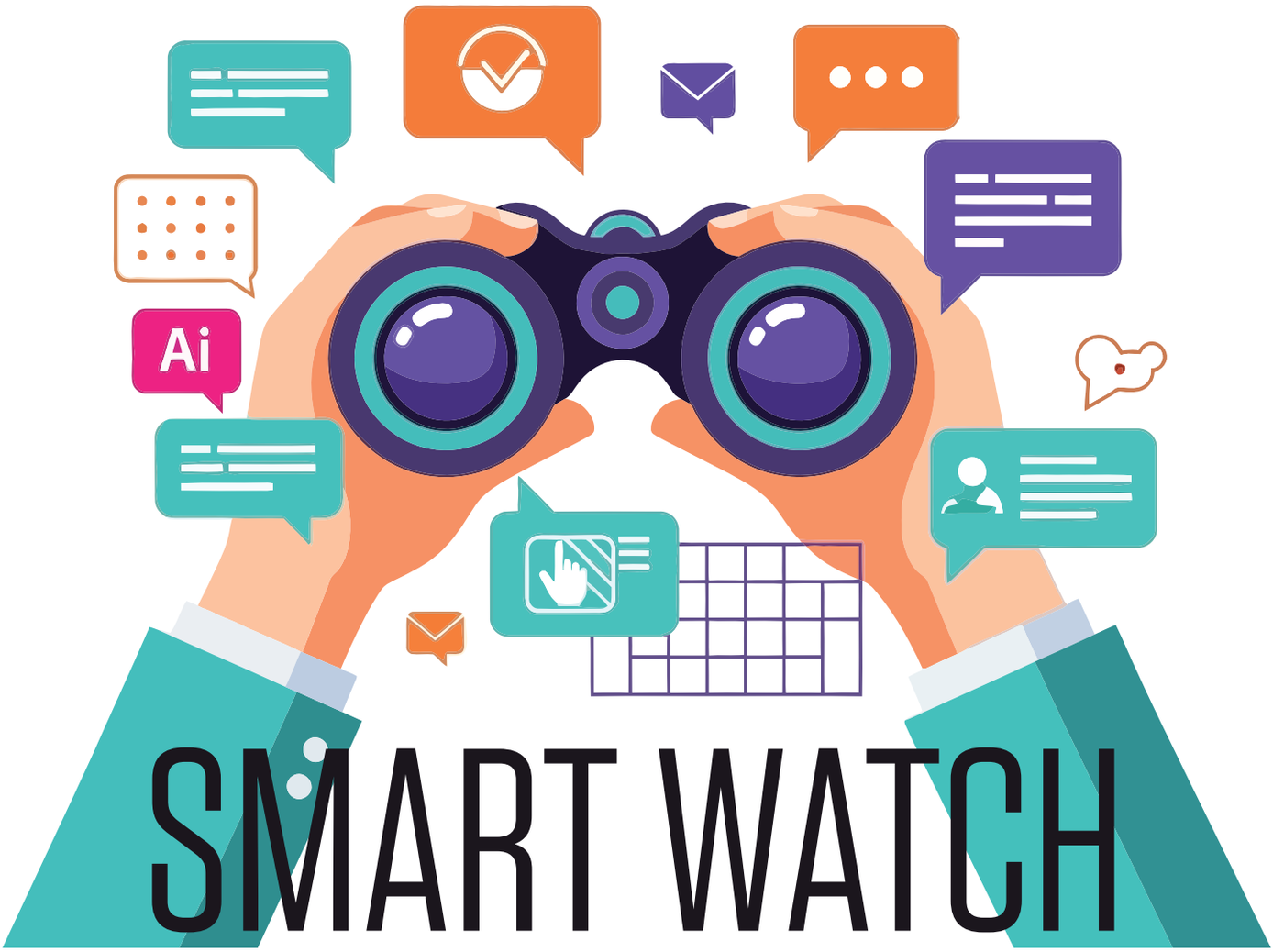
This need for openness is amplified as there is the "potential for the use of 'library' in the name of the NDL to suggest an open access platform or centralised database".

The concluding section said that this has created a "challenge of communicating the distinction between the NDL as facilitating access to data, rather than sharing or collecting additional data" – which is "linked to common misconceptions about the extent of current data-sharing across government".

These "misunderstandings" include, on the part of some participants, "assumptions [that] all government employees or private companies would have unfettered access to personal data".

In outlining its plans for the NDL – and the potential benefits of the facility – there is a further difficulty in "explaining and engaging the public on the NDL without relying on overly technical language, [and] instead bringing the abstract concept to life".

As the concept is brought to life in the coming months, the research makes clear that government should worry not just about the language it uses – but also about what the public is saying. ■



SMART WATCH

Government Digital Service leaders Kalbir Sohi, Sonia Patel and Christine Bellamy were among the speakers sharing views at a recent public-sector tech gathering. **Sam Trendall** went along to find out more

Asked to provide two words to characterise his feelings towards the current public sector artificial intelligence landscape, Kalbir Sohi is very quick to decide on the first of the two.

Six months into his tenure as the UK's first government chief AI officer – a role which sits within the Government Digital Service – Sohi says that "one of my words is overwhelmed, because of the number of [different] things that people are talking about, the number of things that come along, [and] the 100 invites I get in my in my inbox every day".

Speaking at the recent techUK Building the Smarter State conference in London, the second word chosen by the AI leader is a little more abstract: "chasm".

"There's a bit of a chasm between our ambition and where we are – and how we're trying to get there," Sohi explains. "I think it's worth... staring that in the face and being relatively open about [the fact that] there's a long way to go to achieve our ambition."

Of course, a large part of the chief AI officer (CAIO) brief is to help bridge this abyss. There are many challenges in doing so and, according to Sohi, chief among them is "scale – which is probably the word that comes up in most conversations that I'm engaged in".

"[People are] seeing these pockets of something that worked, but then [asking]: how do you share that? We have the problem in central government of moving sideways across departments," he says. "The things that are working from my perspective are those where the idea of scale is built in from the beginning... if you set out and you're a tiny team with a tiny capability, you could take on a tiny problem – and you might do a really good job on that problem. But then you might approach this question of: how do we scale that? And you don't really have any of the mechanisms to go from that initial point to the next one."

The CAIO tells attendees that the government agencies enjoying the most success in adopting AI are those that already have such mechanisms in place, and "can treat AI as an evolution of existing ways that they build and deliver services – with the same discovery methods and then the same scale methods".

> **"Last year we published an AI Playbook; it's really long, and it's got loads of stuff in it – and a lot of that stuff is out of date now"**
> ***Kalbir Sohi***

Risky business

Sohi arrived in government having previously worked for Spotify and Meta – organisations that he acknowledges have "a relatively high risk appetite" when compared with Whitehall departments. But there are still important lessons

government can learn from the tech heavyweights' approach to risk, he adds.

"One of the things I would say that both of those organisations were good at... is articulating where they are taking risks and where they are not taking risks," Sohi says. "Something that I have been advocating a lot for in [GDS] – and then trying to take out across government – is that there will need to be some things where we can safely take greater risk, and there will be some things where we cannot; but we should be transparent [about that], and go in with our eyes open, as much as possible, to the reality of that situation."

In comments prefaced by an acknowledgement that "I struggle to sit on a panel and not say something controversial", the AI leader also suggests that some of government's methods – and the way they are led from the digital centre of GDS and its parent body, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology – could stand to be a little more flexible.

"Right now there is a large amount of change," he says. "And one of the things I [noticed] coming in is that we published an AI Playbook [in February 2025]. It's really long, and it's got loads of stuff in it – and a lot of that stuff is out of date now. So, I'm getting a relatively high amount of pressure to publish a new version. And I'm like: 'Well, we'll do a whole load of work and we'll publish it – and then it'll be wrong again.'

"Actually, in this faster-moving space – where we do have bigger opportunity and bigger ambition, but also much greater speed – I think we need a different set of structures that are a bit more adaptive."

Sohi suggests that, rather than determining best practice to be followed across government, GDS should be highlighting and perpetuating the best of what is already happening in departments.

"We're not necessarily [currently] incentivised to do this, but I actually would love for our central guidance to be whatever the Home Office found to work, [for example], rather than us trying to re-engineer [the guidance]. I would like us to get the stuff that's blooming already to be the exemplar of good. I just feel like we're going to be behind trying to centralise all the time, and it's about [how] do we have some sort of adaptive system that pushes that information out."

Sonia Patel addresses the techUK conference

Kalbir Sohi (centre), on a panel

Conference photography by Hannah MacGregor

Enterprising work

An even more recent arrival at GDS is new interim government chief technology officer Sonia Patel, who joined in April having previously held the same post at NHS England. She replaces David Knott, who left at the end of 2025, and has been appointed to the post on a one-year contract.

Also appearing at the techUK event, the new CTO says that "GDS and DSIT have a critical role to play in convening and shaping cross-government thinking to help shape common standards, shared platforms, [and] architectural patterns".

But, echoing Sohi's sentiments on how centralisation can sometimes stymie progress, the CTO stresses that federated, rather than consolidated IT systems are the way forward – and that the UK could learn from various overseas counterparts.

"We need to learn from other nations in this journey towards an enterprise view of the state... [and] countries like Estonia have shown how clear architectural backbone – not centralisation, but interoperability – can allow many systems to act as one government," Patel says. "In the US [as well], enterprise architecture is not an afterthought: it is a core discipline for reducing duplication, modernisation, driving and aligning investment, and delivering more coherent services. Singapore has also taken a whole-government approach, using enterprise architecture as a common blueprint to align systems, data and, more importantly, services. In Australia, architecture is used as a practical tool to guide investment, improve reuse and accelerate delivery."

The tech chief characterises the infrastructure approach she wants to take as supporting part of a wider move from "digital government to intelligent government".

"As we were just getting to grips with cloud, DevOps and product mindset, we've now got the opportunities that AI brings to us – because AI will not succeed in government if it's simply layered onto the fragmented systems, inconsistent data and ageing infrastructure in front of us," she adds.

There are currently many examples throughout the public sector "where innovation has been stalled or stopped because the foundation is too weak and fragmented".

Bolstering these foundations, and ensuring that government is ready for »

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT IN NUMBERS

563,000

Number of users of GOV.UK App, as of May 2026

700,000

Number of pages of GOV.UK, about one in nine of which are used by GOV.UK Chat

90%

Accuracy achieved by GOV.UK Chat in trials

£1.9bn

Amount to support digital government set aside in 2025 Spending Review, with £1.2bn going to DSIT

More trust, less friction Christine Bellamy

the opportunities of artificial intelligence, will require "converging towards a modern enterprise architecture – and not just architecture that is a technical exercise, but an architecture as a strategic capability, one that helps us as government and public sector connect policy, services, operations, platforms and data into a coherent whole", Patel says.

"We now have an opportunity to develop a shared view of modernisation: a view that aligns technology investment with priority outcomes for citizens and businesses, that enables interoperability rather than duplication, and creates the foundation for trusted, scalable AI adoption," she adds "This is not about centralising everything: it's about better equipping the system to deliver improved outcomes for citizens and businesses, delivering a modern intelligent government. Departments have different missions, different operating contexts and different needs; but there are areas of government where we can, and should, move together, and more deliberately, as one."

Fronting up

A more familiar face from GDS – Christine Bellamy, formerly chief executive, and now interim director general for digital products – tells the event that, throughout the organisation's near-15 years in operation, "what we've done really well is digitise the front end" of citizen services.

She adds: "We make it easier to for you to complete an application through great design patterns. We make it easier for you to find the service that you want through great search engines. And we grab hold of you and we take you to the place that you need to get to. But it's a very siloed journey with lots and lots of dead ends."

The issue facing GDS is "how to find the sweet spot between maintaining trust in services that people love – and they do love GOV.UK... it's really well designed, and they're able to get what they need – but [also] build on that brand, and take it forward".

This progress is being conceived of in three main ways, the first of which is to "make the channels more straightforward, and find people where they are" – in a world where "95% of the population have got a phone".

"They expect to log into it with their face, and they expect to get what they need from government and do that quickly and start to do some quick curation and personalisation," she adds.

Secondly, GDS is thinking about how it uses chat interfaces to enhance user experience, Bellamy explains. A few days after her presentation, the GOV.UK Chat tool is fully incorporated into the GOV.UK App – but the products chief tells attendees that "I don't think even that will make the big step change, although it may take away some friction".

The third area cited by Bellamy – which is one she says is not without danger, but that "all the testing tells us that this is a bet worth exploring" – is greater use of AI agents.

"Countries like Estonia have shown how clear architectural backbone – not centralisation, but interoperability – can allow many systems to act as one government" ***Sonia Patel***

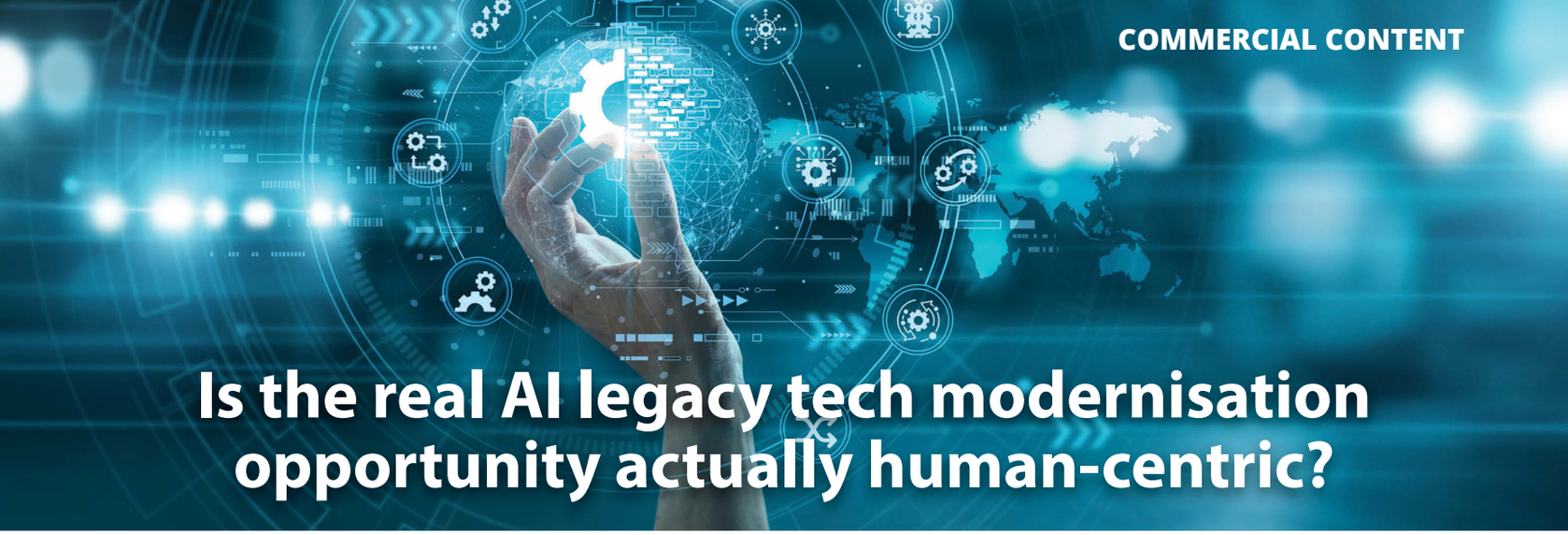
"This is where we've got the biggest work to do – but it has probably got the most potential," she says. "We know that people are using agents in their everyday lives – whether they know they are or not: this technology is just there in the products and services that they use. So, what does government do? Does it opt out? It could, but that's dangerous. Does it opt in? In which case, why? And the key is that it has got to decide where it places its bets, because we haven't got the most money in the world, and we've got to get that right."


Shaping common standards Sonia Patel

Bellamy adds: "I think the sweet spot is... where we can start to think about enhancing trust, maintaining the experience, but taking away friction, and seeing the individual as one person."

It will be important to fully understand the "need states" in which people currently interact with government services, she says.

"We're starting to spend time now thinking about real user cases that are complex, important, everyday-life need states for people in the UK – and they are problems that GOV.UK or individual departments find really hard to solve, and are probably also problems that you wouldn't outsource to a third party," Bellamy says. "In a world of big proliferation [of information and sources] there could be – although this is to be proved – some safety in bringing them back home to the world of GOV.UK, and saying: 'If you come back here, it's more likely to be trusted. We likely know who you are. We can make a connection to other agents. We can make connections to your banks. And we're going to do it in a way that is explained, orderly, and where you feel in charge'." ■



Is the real AI legacy tech modernisation opportunity actually human-centric?

AI helps government teams modernise ageing systems faster. However, successful delivery still requires engineering expertise, governance and operational oversight, says Made Tech, a government transformation specialist with experience modernising complex, large-scale legacy estates

Legacy modernisation has become one of the defining technology challenges facing government departments. Organisations continue to rely on ageing systems built decades ago that are increasingly difficult to maintain, evolve and secure. Expectations around public services continue to rise, creating pressure to modernise faster, more safely and with less disruption.

Large volumes of software built in the late 1990s and through the 2010s are becoming increasingly difficult to support. Many of these systems were never particularly user-centred to begin with, yet they now underpin critical public services.

The difficulty is that replacing legacy systems has never been straightforward. Public sector organisations often become reliant on existing platforms simply because they keep day-to-day operations running. If systems still work, there is often reluctance to change them, particularly when transformation risks disrupting services, even though delaying investment usually means the problem becomes larger and more expensive over time.

This is where AI is beginning to change the conversation.

While much of the public discussion around AI focuses on automation or productivity, one of its most valuable applications in legacy modernisation may be its ability to help teams understand complex systems more quickly.

AI tools are proving effective at analysing applications, extracting behaviours from legacy codebases and generating documentation that would traditionally take months to produce manually, significantly accelerating discovery.

Understanding how older systems work and where dependencies lie has historically required extensive investigation, particularly when documentation is incomplete. AI can dramatically reduce the time needed to build that understanding.

Crucially, AI is also lowering some of the historic barriers that have prevented organisations from tackling legacy modernisation sooner. Activities that were once highly manual, expensive and resource-intensive can now be accelerated significantly, helping to reduce delivery risk, operational costs and reliance on costly workarounds that often build up around ageing systems.

However, the real opportunity for AI in legacy modernisation is not replacing engineering expertise. It is augmenting it.

The complexity of modernising mission-critical government systems still requires experienced teams capable of understanding operational risk, user needs, infrastructure dependencies, and service resilience.

Modernisation programmes rarely involve simply rebuilding systems from scratch. In many cases, organisations must run old and new platforms in parallel, gradually shifting services across while carefully monitoring for issues or inconsistencies. That process remains highly complex and operationally sensitive.

Legacy systems rarely operate exactly as originally designed. Over time, teams often build manual processes and workarounds around ageing technology, meaning the system itself may only reflect part of how a service actually functions. While AI can help analyse code and technical behaviours, understanding those human workarounds and operational realities still requires people. AI may help organisations reach solutions more quickly, but delivering production-ready systems still depends heavily on engineering judgement, governance and oversight.

For public sector leaders, the opportunity now is not simply to ask whether AI can modernise legacy technology, but where it can help unlock stalled transformation programmes. That means identifying services where operational complexity, support costs or user friction have become barriers to improvement, as well as assessing whether AI-assisted discovery and migration approaches can reduce the risk of change.

There has arguably never been a better time to address these challenges. AI is making modernisation more achievable, but organisations still need clear migration strategies, strong governance and delivery partners with experience handling large-scale operational systems safely.

The likely long-term impact of AI on legacy modernisation is therefore evolutionary rather than revolutionary. AI has the potential to accelerate discovery, improve productivity and reduce the effort required to analyse complex systems. However, modernisation itself will still depend on strong engineering disciplines, careful migration strategies and a deep understanding of both technology and user needs.

Made Tech

Explore our legacy modernisation expertise on madetech.com/legacy-modernisation or scan the QR code

SELECT FEW

Select committees play a critical role in holding departments to account. Here, four select committee chairs tell us what it takes to do their job well

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Chaired by Simon Hoare, Conservative MP for North Dorset

Current inquiries Propriety, ethics and the wider standards landscape in the UK; mission government; ministerial statements and the ministerial code; public bodies; the work of the UK Statistics Authority; the work and performance of the PHSO; the PHSO's investigations into the Charity Commission; recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry (stage 1)

What makes a good select committee chair?
The first thing is an ability to get on with people. You're trying to forge a cross-party group and to get the best out of the committee as a collective, you've got to like your colleagues and work alongside them.

I think it's important not to be a showboater, not to be after the "gotcha" moment, but to work out in advance with colleagues what it is you want to achieve from either the inquiry or from the session, and then to ask questions without fear or favour – to know when to push, to know when to stop, and to treat your witnesses with courtesy and respect.

What has been the biggest challenge that you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
None of us foresaw, within our work programme, the crisis with civil service pensions that's now looming. None of us foresaw the problems that we would have with the UK Statistics Authority... and the Bank of England setting up a shadow statistics gathering organisation because they'd lost trust and confidence. So it's trying to respond in real time to things as they arise, which then means that you have to put some of the programme stuff on the back burner.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen witnesses? And how helpful have you found them?
We've had no problems at all. I think broadly, people understand the importance of the work that select committees do, understand the necessity of attendance if requested, and are not unalert to the reputational risks which accrue if people refuse or become difficult.

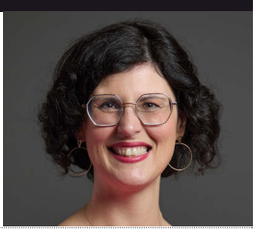
How responsive have you found the government to be to PACAC's reports so far?
I think they are pretty alert to the issues at hand… Do they say yes to everything? No, and one wouldn't expect them to. But I think we have a good relationship with the ministers in the Cabinet Office, and that helps as well. And that's not to say it's cosy, that's not to say it's anything other than professional, but I think there needs to be a respect between the departmental ministers and the members of the select committee which is scrutinising them.

"We will want to find out what the government's vision is for the modernisation of the civil service. Why does the civil service need reform? At what pace can it be reformed?"
Simon Hoare, PACAC chair

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
I think we've got to resolve the civil service pension issue that is now key for so many people. And I think that opens up a wider discussion of: does the market of private provision exist in, for example, the pension sphere? Is the choice out there, when government goes out to contract a service?

And then we will want to find out what the government's vision is for modernisation of the civil service. Why does the civil service need reform? At what pace can it be reformed? We need to understand the purpose of the reform and the beneficial outcomes for citizens and the governance of this country, and how we will feel that in our everyday lives. ■

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE



Chaired by Layla Moran, Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon

Current inquiries

Health bill; delivering the Neighbourhood Health Service: estates; healthy ageing: physical activity in an ageing society; community mental health services; children and young people's mental health; food and weight management; the first 1,000 days: a renewed focus; adult social care reform: the cost of inaction

What makes a good select committee chair?
The role of a select committee and its chair is to scrutinise the government and the wider health and social care sector. We consider ourselves the critical friend. So my job is to be curious, have my ear to the ground, have a healthy dose of scepticism about what we're being told, and crucially, be led by the evidence we hear, not by preconceptions or politics.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
Getting an accurate picture of the way that money is allocated for different purposes across the NHS has been challenging because of the way it is structured. Centralised figures for how much money is being spent across the country on priority areas like prevention or community services isn't published as standard, and that can hinder investigation.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen departmental witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?
Despite our party differences, I have found my interactions with health and social care ministers courteous and forthcoming. I think they understand the value of scrutiny and the role of the committee. I hope the same goes for officials who come too. If you know your stuff and don't obfuscate, you have nothing to fear.

How responsive has your chosen department been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
There have been a number of ideas taken forward from our reports, though sometimes months after an official response has been sent back to us. For example, it was announced in April that new midwives will undertake anti-racism training to address the poor outcomes that black mothers have in maternity care. This idea was rejected by the government when we recommended it last year.

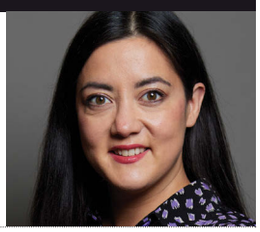
What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
We are driven by a mission of channelling our constituents' voices on the issues that we worry others may forget about. Prevention is the theme that links two of our inquiries which we'll produce reports on this year – healthy ageing and food and weight management. On both counts, the evidence is telling us that eating »

healthily and living an active lifestyle is the way to reduce the risk of serious diseases, improve quality of life and reduce demand on the NHS.

We want to show government how it can apply those principles into practical reforms.

We also await the workforce plan, which should pave the way for how the NHS will shift to neighbourhood delivery of services, and legislation that will see NHS England absorbed into the Department of Health and Social Care. Both will be high-stakes moments that the government will need help from this committee to get right. ■

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE



Chaired by Sarah Owen, Labour MP for Luton North

Current inquiries 11 including: equality at work: flexible working and disability; Black homelessness; egg donation and freezing; misogyny: the manosphere and online content; community cohesion

What makes a good select committee chair?
A willingness to set aside party politics and work with members across the House on even the most sensitive subjects to secure policy change which improves people's lives, and having the tenacity to pursue that change, not taking no for an answer.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
WEC hosted the first select committee meeting to be completely British Sign Language-accessible during our session into the progress made since the passing of the BSL Act. It was a joy to take evidence firsthand from our panel of representatives from the Deaf community but it was hard to make it happen. This should be the norm in parliament but challenges in accessing committee proceedings for disabled people remain and need addressing.

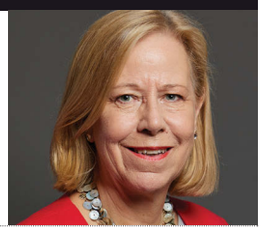
"The government implemented many of our recommendations on tackling non-consensual intimate image abuse – although more can be done"
Sarah Owen, Women & Equalities Committee chair

How easy have you found it to call your chosen departmental witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?
The best departmental witnesses have been open to constructive challenge and feedback from committee members, and it's good to hear honest assessments of trade-offs and decision making. We've questioned lots of witnesses across our inquiries – hearing powerful and at times shocking testimonies.

How responsive has the government been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
We've had good returns from our recommendations so far. On employment, WEC secured overdue change for parents who suffer a miscarriage, following the government's acceptance of our amendment to the employment rights bill, giving a statutory entitlement to bereavement leave for parents who experience pre-24-week pregnancy loss (including IVF failure). The bill also included a ban on non-disclosure agreements in cases of discrimination and abuse, something we and others had been calling for. The government implemented many of our recommendations on tackling non-consensual intimate image abuse – although more can be done – and committed to launch a research call on the merits of reconstructive surgery for victims of female genital mutilation. Women's health and tackling "medical misogyny" has been a big focus for us. It's vital the government's relaunched Women's Health Strategy is given the resource it requires.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
There's lots to come – we're looking at flexible working and disability as part of WEC's equality at work focus, while our new inquiry on routes into sport for girls and women will begin taking evidence. We will also keep the government accountable in areas such as parental leave and women's health. ■

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE



Chaired by Ruth Cadbury, Labour MP for Brentford and Isleworth

Current inquiries Road Safety Strategy; railways bill; skills for transport manufacturing; National Policy Statement for Ports; supercharging the EV transition; joined-up journeys: achieving and measuring transport integration; licensing of taxis and private hire vehicles; rail investment pipelines: ending boom and bust

What makes a good select committee chair?
Being able to work collaboratively and achieve an outcome that the whole committee can support. Also being able to ensure the committee has a balanced programme that responds to concerns of committee members and colleagues in the Commons.

What has been the biggest challenge you've encountered in the last year – or the thing that has surprised you most?
Throughout our inquiry into the railways bill, one big challenge was scrutinising that legislation while the government kept its cards close to its chest and it wasn't clear when key documents would emerge. Deciding when to scrutinise a policy for maximum impact is an art not a science.

How easy have you found it to call your chosen witnesses, and how helpful and informative have you found witnesses during hearings?
We're incredibly grateful to everyone who puts aside time to inform our scrutiny through their evidence at hearings. In general, people are eager to speak to us. Sometimes private sector organisations can be less keen, perhaps because they are concerned about commercial confidentiality. This is a shame because there is no substitute for the committee hearing directly from organisations affected by government policy, and it is an unparalleled opportunity to influence scrutiny of that policy.

How responsive has your chosen department been to your committee's reports and recommendations so far?
DfT has accepted some of our recent recommendations. Last year, it agreed with us that there is a need to review and streamline the legislation on transport accessibility, and it is working with the Law Commission to take that forward. Earlier this year, it agreed to publish more information about the framework for a new regime under Great British Railways, after we called for this in our report on the railways bill.

What are your priorities for the next 12 months?
Beyond the railways bill, we'll be continuing to keep an eye on the progress of rail reform – there is a huge amount for the department to do before Great British Railways is established in 2027. As well as our ongoing inquiries, I will continue to make the case for greater accessibility in transport, and later this year we also expect to be heavily involved in scrutinising the government's planning policy for expansion of Heathrow Airport. ■

The crucial next stage of the Tobacco and Vapes Act

In April, almost a thousand days after it was first announced, the Tobacco and Vapes Act became law. This was the biggest change to tobacco law in almost two decades, and a step forward in how tobacco and nicotine products might finally be effectively regulated in the UK

Peter Nixon
Managing Director UK and Ireland
Philip Morris International

No one wants to see another generation of smokers, and protecting children from taking up nicotine products must remain paramount. But passing this law was only the start of the process. As well as the Generational Sales Ban, the act creates powers and sets up secondary legislation that will determine whether these measures prove workable and these aims are achievable. Britain still has 5.3 million adult smokers[1], so the new laws must be up to the challenge of getting people permanently off cigarettes, as well as protecting children.

Smarter regulation can accelerate the decline of smoking and clamp down on the UK's rampant illicit market. That is why the consultations arising from the act, which are due to be announced soon, are so important. They are the chance to strengthen the framework, not just tidy up the details. Done well, they can protect young people, crack down on illegal and irresponsible operators, and do more to help adult smokers switch. We hope the government will use them to build a regime that is tougher on products that appeal to children, and also on those irresponsible retailers who sell nicotine products to them.

The UK has required alcohol licences for hundreds of years, so it is absurd that anyone can still sell cigarettes and vapes in 2026. One of the consultations will look at licensing for all tobacco and nicotine sales, and it cannot come soon enough. How can anyone argue against only 'fit and proper' retailers selling nicotine products? The generational sales ban, advertising restrictions, and any future rules on flavours, packaging, or product design will ultimately be enforced in shops, so controlling who sells these products is critical. A credible – rigorously enforced – licensing regime would raise the bar for entry, create clear accountability, and give Trading Standards far stronger tools than it has today.

We've all read about organised criminal gangs flooding our communities with illicit tobacco and nicotine products, using 'front' shops to push them onto local high streets, while laundering money from other criminal enterprises such as hard drugs, people smuggling, and knock-off goods. One-in-three cigarettes smoked in the UK is now illicit – the second-biggest illicit market in Europe. However, enforcement remains patchy – according to geographies – and deterrents are minimal.

Recent additional investment is a drop in the ocean compared to what's required to get a grip on this spiralling trade in illicit goods. Our undercover operatives are out week after week, gathering evidence and intelligence, and in 20 years of monitoring, they have never seen the market so out of control. It also denies the Treasury of almost £4.5bn of income per year[2] – several times the total expenditure on Trading Standards.

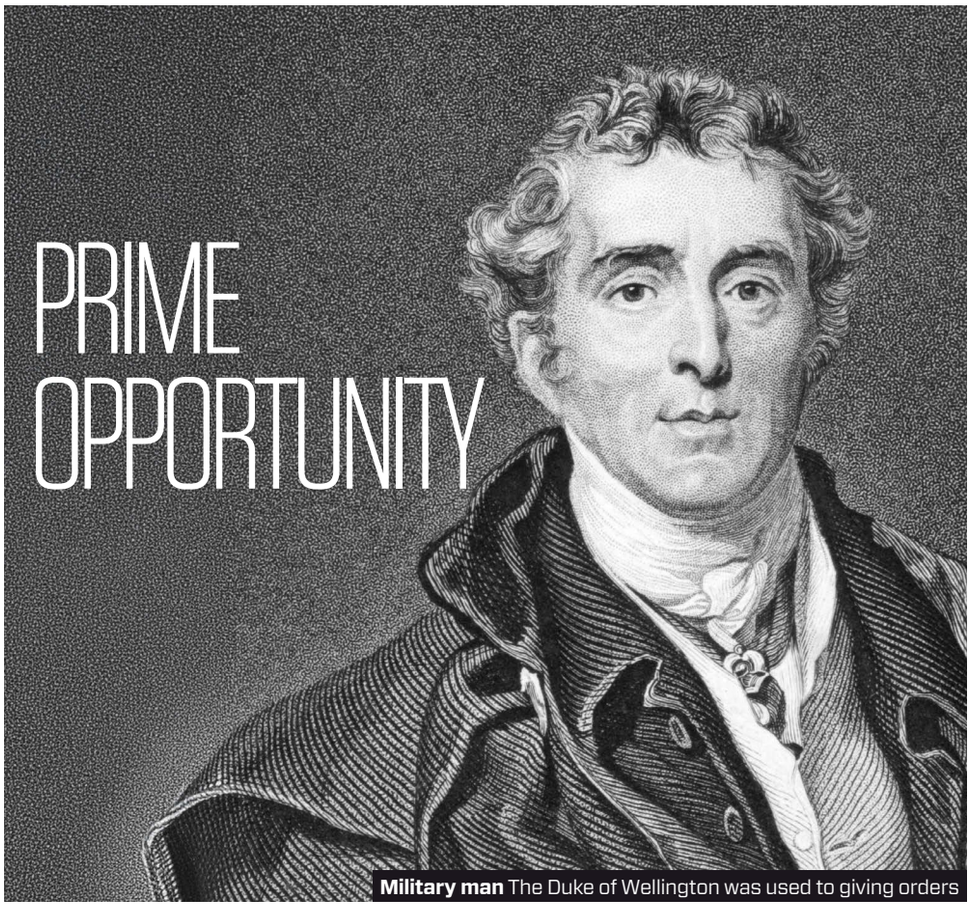
An effective scheme would need to cover all sellers, including online retailers; it would be self-funded through fees (and recovered duty) to support consistent enforcement; it could attach responsibility to individuals as well as premises; and the penalties would need to be strong enough to deter offending and remove irresponsible retailers from the market for good.

We all need to work together to end smoking and protect our high streets. These consultations are the government's chance to prove that its ambition is serious. If ministers create a credible licensing regime, appropriately fund Trading Standards, and help adult smokers move away from cigarettes, the Tobacco and Vapes Act could become more than a symbolic victory. If they do not, illegal products, irresponsible operators, and smoking will continue to fill the void.

PHILIP MORRIS LIMITED

References
1. ONS: Adult smoking habits in the UK: 2024
2. KPMG Report on Illicit Tobacco and Nicotine Consumption in Europe 2025

PRIME OPPORTUNITY



Military man The Duke of Wellington was used to giving orders

The centre of government is trying to drive change with one arm tied behind its back. We need an Office of the Prime Minister, argues **Simon Hoare**

One thing I find counterintuitive and disappointing is that the centre of government – whether the cabinet secretary or the Cabinet Office – can only urge and exhort government departments to do things. A huge amount of time is spent trying to persuade different arms of government to do what the heart of government deems necessary.

We all got terribly excited about mission-led government – and yet, I can't think of the last time I heard a minister talk about it. Like a late spring frost, it just vanished.

I'm not advocating for executive power. But to drive forward these changes, you need somebody at the centre who can say: "I've listened to the competing voices and arguments. This is the decision. This is the road that we're going to go down. Jolly well get on and do it."

"You need somebody at the centre who can say: 'This is the decision. Jolly well get on and do it'"

It's not a new problem. In 1838, the Duke of Wellington – a military man – was asked how he had found his first cabinet meeting as prime minister. He said, "Well, it was all a bit strange. They came in, sat down, I gave them their orders, and then they wanted to sit around and discuss them."

The Office of the Prime Minister has rattled around the corridors of Whitehall as an idea for a good number of years. I must confess I was never terribly convinced that the country would benefit from it – but now I am totally convinced. The government is trying to run a 21st-century country and economy, with all of the attendant national and international problems, without the very heart of government – the prime minister – having a department of his or her own. There are officials and advisers in No.10, and the Cabinet Office is technically an adjunct to No.10 – but the boundaries are quite fuzzy. If people are serious about setting strategies and delivering on them, I cannot see how an OPM could do anything other than help.

We do now have a chief secretary to the prime minister – but nobody knows what the bloody hell that means. I think the intention was that when Darren Jones spoke, it was deemed to be as if the prime minister was speaking. I don't think that's happened and a lot of people are still saying, "I want to hear it directly from the prime minister." Then too much of the prime minister's time and bandwidth is taken up with reassuring cabinet minister X or minister of state Y that this is what they want to happen. Over the time of a parliament, how much prime ministerial time is wasted effectively rubber stamping something which shouldn't have needed a rubber stamp? I think we're running into months.

What might an Office of the Prime Minister look like? I think it probably means a slimmed-down Cabinet Office. It probably means a bit of a shake around in terms of how the civil service is organised and who is recruited into the OPM. It would have to have political direction and senior civil servant direction. The cabinet secretary would have to play a vital part in that to convene the thematic discussions, capture the decisions, distil the arguments and come to a conclusion, and then track through the delivery and implementation. The cab sec should also look at whether the success or change that was hoped for is on the right track, and have the ability to tweak or retune it.

I think the basic stumbling block to an OPM is people thinking it would be hubristic or a constitutional outrage. And I think prime ministers get scared off the idea because they think it's empire building. It's not, it's delivery-improving.

You'd probably have to get the energised buy-in of permanent secretaries and secretaries of state, or they might go, "Oh gosh, does this in any way diminish our department?" And you might have officials arguing against it, saying, "This is not within our constitutional settlement. This won't lead to rapidity of decision-making."

Well, when we get some rapid decision-making, please prod me awake and let me know, because it's passed me by for the last 20 years.

The centre fights the battle for delivery of change in government with an eye patch, an iron boot and one arm tied behind its back in the absence of an OPM. Yes, it needs to be resourced and staffed properly. You need to have the right dynamic and the right foundational explanation as to what is being done and what it's going to do. But I just don't think we can carry on without it. ■

Simon Hoare MP is chair of PACAC. His comments, as told to CSW, have been edited for length and clarity

MIGRATION, UNSPUN

Why does migration policy cause so much division? And what might help to resolve it? **Susan Allott** talks to expert in the field **Dr Madeleine Sumption** about this most challenging issue

Dr Madeleine Sumption has a message for civil servants working on migration policy. "I know how difficult it is. I really want to convey some sympathy for the poor people who are charged with delivering this impossible task that we as citizens give them," she says.

The word "impossible" pops up a number of times in her conversation with *CSW* and, indeed, in her new book, *What is Immigration Policy For?*

Why does Sumption – who is director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, chair of the national statistician's advisory panel on migration statistics and a member of the Migration Advisory Committee – believe it's impossible to get migration policy right?

The crux of the problem lies in the contradictions in our expectations, she says. People want managed migration and a strong economy, and they also want to feel good about it – they want the approach our government takes to migration to be fair and humanitarian. These things can't all be achieved at once.

This leads to "incoherent or apparently contradictory policies", she argues in her book. "Immigration policies often just don't work very well."

There is also a lack of clarity around the terms we use when we discuss migration policy, Sumption says. A 2023 poll asked respondents in the UK who they had in mind when they used the term "migrant". Two-thirds of people singled out the smallest group: people seeking asylum. And just over half of respondents thought of people who were migrating permanently, rather than temporarily. "Migration comes in many other forms," she points out.

And when it comes to deciding which policies are the most ethical, things get even muddier. "As human beings, we tend to be overconfident in our ability to determine what is morally right," she says.

Sumption's book is a call for clarity and a clear-headed debate and acts as a tool for achieving this, with section headings that ask fundamental questions such as: "How did we get here?"; "Is immigration policy justifiable?"; and "What is immigration policy trying to achieve?"

Where else does she think we could benefit from more clarity in the debate around migration?

For starters, Sumption believes there is a misplaced focus on labour migration in policy debates, which assumes that migration policy is "all about economics". If it were, she tells *CSW*, "that would actually be quite easy". If all migration were labour migration, you could make fairly clear-cut decisions based on who is likely to contribute most to the economy.

"The challenge is that actually, most migration is not from people who are the main applicants on work visas," she continues. "It's people who come in for other reasons, particularly if you look at long-term migration." A lot of migrants are family members of work visa applicants, and refugees. And this is where the "trade-off" begins – with humanitarian goals on the one hand and economic concerns on the other.

"The types of migration that the government would most like to reduce for economic reasons are the ones that it struggles to control most," she says. This is because most migrants are unauthorised arrivals seeking asylum, families migrating together or British citizens marrying non-citizens. Ethically, you would want to keep families or married couples together and to be sympathetic to asylum seekers. "But they're not really fulfilling economic goals," Sumption says.

Another area where many would like more clarity is in the wording of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which underpins global policy around refugees, stating that people with a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" should not have to return to a country where they may face persecution. The convention does not require refugees to arrive through legal routes or to claim refugee status in the first safe country they reach. It also does not set out how the settlement of refugees should be shared out between countries.

The result is that high-income countries such as the UK attract more refugees than lower-income countries. A lot of resource then goes into the process of establishing whether an asylum seeker meets the definition of "refugee", and therefore has protection from removal, or not.

Sumption is not convinced there is scope for amending the convention, either for clarity or for greater perceived fairness to those shouldering the highest costs. She makes the point that "the lack of agreement on who's responsible is the source of tension, and the reason that this whole thing has been difficult, but it's also the thing that enabled that global agreement to happen and to last for so many decades".

Expanding on this point, she says that "any formula where you divided out refugees among countries would lead to a country like the UK taking dramatically more refugees than it currently does. And the UK just doesn't have an incentive to do it".

"The Rwanda deal was very controversial, but I think there will be more of that kind of stuff in the future"

She thinks there is potentially more scope for solutions that involve countries like the UK contributing financially instead. The cost of resettling a refugee in the UK is "actually pretty high", she explains. "That amount of money goes a lot further in developing countries. You could imagine setups where higher-income countries effectively finance the hosting of refugees in developing countries, although these sorts of multilateral actions are very difficult."

Reducing the number of refugees might need to happen in controversial ways, Sumption says: "The Rwanda deal was effectively paying money to Rwanda to host refugees there, and it was very controversial. But I think there will be more of that kind of stuff in the future."

In her book, Sumption describes one element of migration policy as the "least sexy of all". That element is the collection of data and the need to address the distinct lack of it in certain key areas. *CSW* begs to differ on the sexiness of data – much to Sumption's delight. "I could talk about this for hours," she says. »

There is a lack of population data broken down by immigration status and by nationality, for starters. "It's five years since the England, Wales and Northern Ireland census and there's been a lot of migration since then so the census data aren't very relevant, and we currently don't really know how many people from each country of origin are in the UK and what their status is".

And we will never have a perfect picture of the number of people who are here without permission, she says. "But even the people who are here with permission, who have gone through all of the relevant processes, it's just very difficult to get a clear picture of that."

Good data matters, Sumption says, because officials need to understand the impacts of the policies they are implementing to know whether they have been successful and where they need to be adapted.

"So, for example, there's a lot of debate now about the benefits system and how and when migrants should get access to benefits," she says. "It's really challenging to understand the impacts, because although we have some data on who's claiming benefits, we don't have a good denominator for any of that. So it's very hard, actually, to calculate rates of benefit claiming in different groups."

There has been "a little bit of movement" towards improving this, she adds. But it remains difficult to understand the baseline number of people in the populations of migrants that claimants come from, what their immigration status is, and which policy they entered the country under – for example, whether they came in on a student visa or as a family member of a citizen.

Crime is another area where the data is lacking. "It looks like asylum seekers are probably over-represented among people in the criminal justice system, but we don't have the denominator for that to work out how rates of crime vary depending on people's status in the UK."

Sumption also points out that the Office for Budget Responsibility "really needs good data" to forecast the impacts of migration on public finances. For example: "How much are migrants earning? What are the employment rates? How does that depend on different policies and so forth? A lot of that is missing."

The data relating to migrants moving through mainstream government systems is "reasonably good", according to Sumption – for example, if someone arrives on a work visa then marries a British citizen, sticking to legal parameters.

"Where we don't have that same picture is outside of those mainstream routes. There are actually quite a lot of people who either who fall out of those mainstream routes, or arrive without permission and then get regularised," she says. She gives an example of someone who overstays their visa – they might remain in the country illegally but become legalised later on because they have a human rights claim.

"There are all of these different systems," she says. "Because the system's not connected up, we really don't have a good sense of the links between them. And this really matters for developing policy, right?"

Deal or no deal
Then-home secretary Priti Patel agrees an ill-fated asylum pact with Rwanda in 2022

The big policy debate around migration at the moment relates to the appeals system. "We know very little" in terms of the nature of those appeals or the immigration history of the people in the system, according to Sumption.

But the second big policy debate, which she believes is only going to grow as an issue, is around the European Court of Human Rights. "We do not know enough about the data on how ECHR and all of these different human rights mechanisms are affecting migration," Sumption says. "And it's going to be a huge problem if this or a future government wants to reform ECHR or pull out. At the present, we just don't have enough information to really understand the impacts of that."

In her book, Sumption concludes that although there is "no single right answer, there are some things that perhaps we can all agree on". One of these, she suggests, is the importance of "good old-fashioned competence". She points out that "inattention to the dull business of competently running the asylum system was a major factor behind the spiralling asylum backlog in the UK between 2018 and 2022".

"Backlogs cause all sorts of problems," she tells *CSW*. For example, when someone's asylum status is not determined, they are usually not permitted to work. "If someone is expected to get a job and become self-sufficient and support themselves here, it's not good for their integration to have this period of uncertainty."

Similarly, if someone is ultimately going to be returned to their country of origin, "the longer they stay here, the more difficult that becomes", Sumption says. "The more likely it is that the government loses track of them or perhaps, if they wait a really long time, they may then start to become eligible to remain on human rights grounds, such as family life.

"Ultimately, it's just a very inefficient and expensive way of running the system."

Now that the asylum backlog has started to clear, there is a backlog in the appeals system – something that Sumption points out should have been predictable: "A lot more people being refused asylum means a lot more people appealing."

And while "good old-fashioned competence" might not be a winning election message, it can offset huge problems that matter to the public. "The appeals backlog is spiralling and that's the reason the government is struggling to meet its pledge to end the use of asylum hotels," Sumption says.

Data mystery The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg

"It's going to be a huge problem if a future government wants to reform ECHR or pull out. We don't have enough information to understand the impacts of that"

"Migration is not monolithic," Sumption says, when asked what key message she would most like the readers of her book to take away. "Sometimes there's an assumption that more migration is economically beneficial and less is economically damaging, for example. And that's just not true, based on the evidence."

Understanding *who* is migrating is more important than understanding the number of migrants coming into the country, she continues. "Some people will have a negative impact on public finances and some will have a positive impact. You absolutely have to know who is migrating and not just treat everyone as interchangeable."

Her plea to policymakers is to be wary of proposals that over-simplify the problem. "It's not only politicians who are susceptible to the charms of symbolic policies – by which I mean policies that sound like they might be a good idea, but aren't actually going to achieve their desired effects," she says.

Can she give an example? "I mean, investor visas, which had a lot of support across government, I think are a classic example," she says, describing the policy as "the biggest discrepancy I've ever seen between what it was supposed to do and what it actually did". Investor visas were envisaged as a way of bringing "exciting, dynamic people like Richard Branson" into the UK to build their business.

"And the thing is that these overseas Richard Bransons are very happy making a lot of money overseas. They don't want to move here. Their wives and children do want to move here. And so the investor visa ended up being a sort of leisure visa for Russian housewives who wanted to send their kids to private school. And I think it was very clear that it was not the original goal of the policy."

She thinks that sometimes, especially outside of the Home Office, there is a tendency to look for an immigration solution without checking whether there is a genuine problem to be addressed. "The solution can come before the problem," she says. "And you might think that's harmless, but these things take time and money to set up and run."

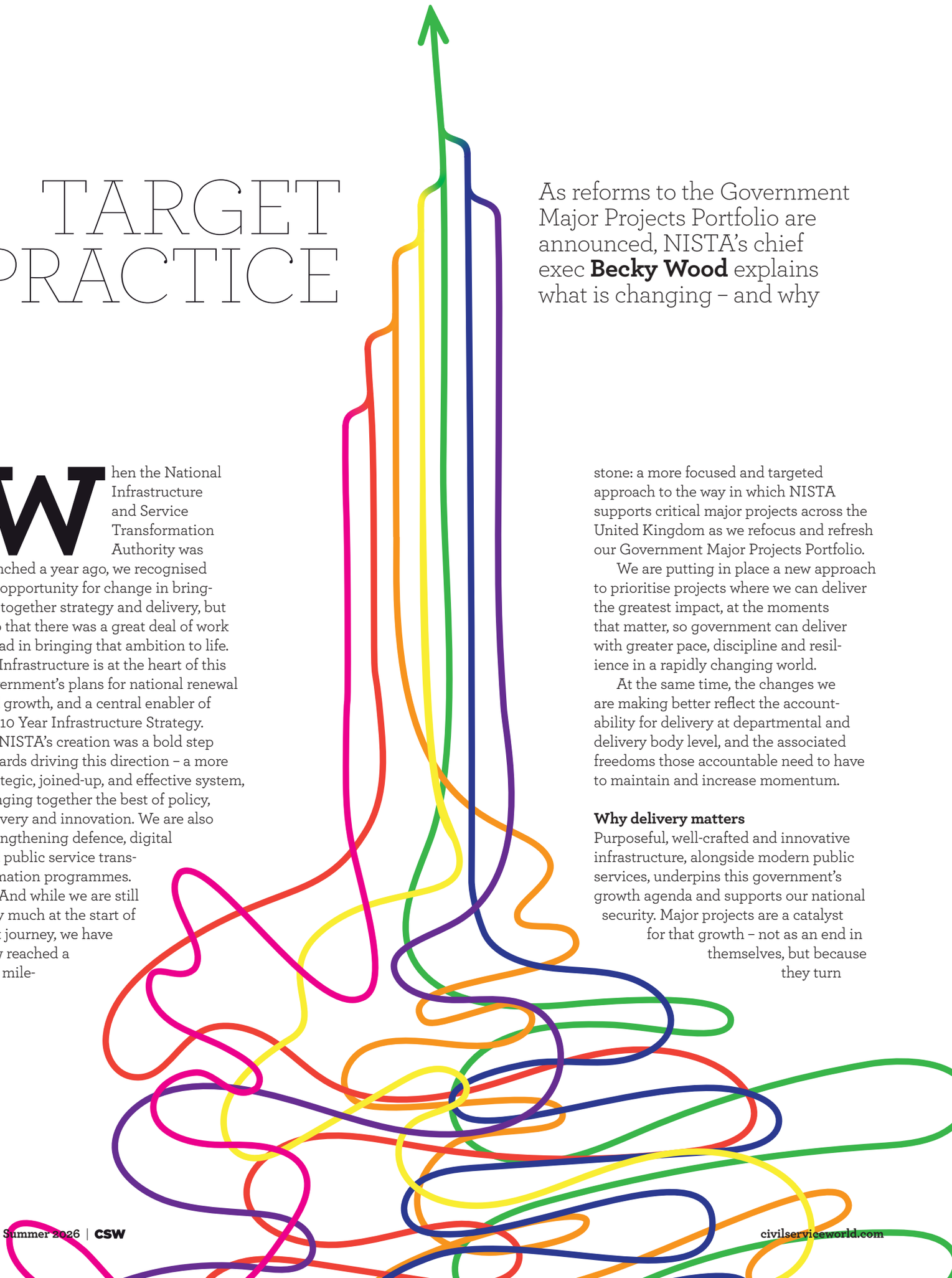
Given how much tension there is around migration policy, and how polarised the public is on the subject, Sumption's final request is for robust evidence – for policies to be properly evaluated. "Ministers want it to be implemented and so there isn't always the time or the resources dedicated to the analytical side of things," she says. "The analytical people aren't necessarily in the room when those decisions are taken."

The evidence would make a difference, she says, in an area where it sometimes seems that solutions are not forthcoming. At least then it might be possible to have an honest, informed debate. ■

What is Immigration Policy For? is published by Bristol University Press

TARGET PRACTICE

As reforms to the Government Major Projects Portfolio are announced, NISTA's chief exec **Becky Wood** explains what is changing – and why



When the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority was launched a year ago, we recognised the opportunity for change in bringing together strategy and delivery, but also that there was a great deal of work ahead in bringing that ambition to life.

Infrastructure is at the heart of this government's plans for national renewal and growth, and a central enabler of the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy.

NISTA's creation was a bold step towards driving this direction – a more strategic, joined-up, and effective system, bringing together the best of policy, delivery and innovation. We are also strengthening defence, digital and public service transformation programmes.

And while we are still very much at the start of that journey, we have now reached a key milestone: a more focused and targeted approach to the way in which NISTA supports critical major projects across the United Kingdom as we refocus and refresh our Government Major Projects Portfolio.

We are putting in place a new approach to prioritise projects where we can deliver the greatest impact, at the moments that matter, so government can deliver with greater pace, discipline and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

At the same time, the changes we are making better reflect the accountability for delivery at departmental and delivery body level, and the associated freedoms those accountable need to have to maintain and increase momentum.

Why delivery matters

Purposeful, well-crafted and innovative infrastructure, alongside modern public services, underpins this government's growth agenda and supports our national security. Major projects are a catalyst for that growth – not as an end in themselves, but because they turn

policy into transformative outcomes across nations and regions.

And it is not simply the scale of what we build that matters. It is the purpose behind it. Every project is part of a wider mission to modernise the nation's infrastructure, strengthen resilience, unlock economic growth, and create systems that are simpler, faster and more reliable for the public to use.

But anyone who has worked on major projects knows this: for too long, systemic weaknesses have made it harder than it should be to deliver.

A more streamlined and targeted Government Major Projects Portfolio

As part of NISTA's role in resetting the system, HM Treasury and NISTA have prioritised strengthening one of the most fundamental levers in government delivery: the GMPP. From 1 April 2026, the refreshed GMPP has reduced from over 200 projects to around 80.

This is not about stepping back from major projects. It's being more disciplined about where central oversight and support adds real value – and where it doesn't. Improving outcomes therefore requires reform across the whole government landscape.

The GMPP has expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting the growing number of large and complex programmes across government. That growth is a sign of ambition, but it brings a practical problem. If the portfolio becomes too broad, we risk spreading expertise too thinly and turning oversight into something that feels generic, compliance-led, and slow.

A smaller, more focused GMPP lets us do what the portfolio is supposed to do: target support and scrutiny at the projects that are most nationally significant, highest impact, and hardest to deliver.

Better collaboration

The broader changes we are continuing to make will require stronger collaboration across government and with industry, create clearer lines of accountability and build an environment that empowers teams to deliver.

They will also strengthen confidence for the public and for business that our biggest commitments are being gripped properly and are recognised as needing close working across the system. We reinforced that this month by publishing the Infrastructure Pipeline, giving the market the long-term visibility it needs to plan and invest. And it underlines a simple truth that government and industry must work in partnership to deliver – they go hand in hand and cannot operate in isolation.

Departmental accountability and capability

Delivery works best when accountability is clear and decisions are taken close to operational reality. Departments understand their policy intent, delivery systems and constraints better than anyone. They should have clear ownership of outcomes and the authority to act.

So, while NISTA will focus the GMPP on the projects where central support and scrutiny add most value, strong departmental leadership remains essential. Effective delivery depends on empowered leaders and strong capability.

NISTA remains committed to strengthening the government project delivery function across the whole system by deepening capability – providing expert advice, targeted training for senior responsible owners, and practical tools and guidance for wider professionals.

We will also work closely with departments to better understand how non-executive roles and the boards of the arm's-length bodies that are essential partners in delivering the nation's infrastructure – particularly across the regulated sectors of energy, water, transport and housing – can support accountable officers and the overall assurance approach to delivery.

At portfolio level, NISTA is also deepening its own capability and what we can offer to projects across the GMPP and beyond, ensuring we harness the data we gather to share insights, better predict challenges in advance, and share lessons in real time through improvements in data, analysis and insights.

Change done well takes time

Ultimately, the public feels that delivery has been a success when infrastructure turns up on time, budgets are managed well, services improve and investment delivers what was promised.

To get there, we need discipline and persistence. We are acting now to put changes in place and tackle the biggest barriers first. But embedding lasting improvement takes sustained effort across sectors as part of a longer programme of work. In other words, change done well takes time.

NISTA has been created to be an enabling partner at the heart of government as well as providing independent oversight where projects are particularly large and complex. We look forward to continuing to work with the many talented colleagues across the project profession, departments and arm's-length bodies, industry and the wider sector to identify issues early, resolve them quickly and keep driving progress until better delivery becomes the norm and better outcomes are felt across the country. ■

Becky Wood is chief executive, National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority

“This is not about stepping back from major projects. It's being more disciplined about where central oversight adds real value”

NEW GMPP CRITERIA

In order to qualify for the GMPP, projects will need to meet the criteria set out in the Treasury Approval Process guidance, and also meet all of the following requirements:

- support a top government priority
- have whole-life costs of more than £1bn
- be a project that would benefit most from central support and scrutiny

Where Treasury approval is required, expenditure will continue to be scrutinised. Projects outside the GMPP will also be expected to share project data with NISTA because transparency and learning across government are essential to improve delivery performance across the system.

In exceptional circumstances, government may add projects to the GMPP where they are of strategic importance, for example, where they underpin critical national infrastructure, or where NISTA's involvement is expected to improve delivery.

How civil servants can get more from Copilot

Copilot is already boosting productivity across government, but real value comes when civil servants combine AI with critical thinking, robust governance, and effective training

David Pool
Data & AI Development Director
QA

Many government workers report using Microsoft Copilot mainly for summarising emails and meetings and supporting report production. In fact, a June 2025 trial of 20,000 government employees by the UK Department for Science, Innovation & Technology revealed that Copilot saved workers an average of 26 minutes[1] a day.

But it's the human qualities of problem solving like curiosity, reflection, and critical thinking that can transform Copilot from tool to innovation driver.

Using human skills to optimise Copilot

Historically, humans defined problems, carried out the work, and interpreted results. Now, we frame a problem, prompt the system, and receive instant answers. The risk is accepting those answers without question. We should be asking: "How could this meeting have been run better?" or "Which workflows are sub-optimal and how can we improve them?".

The most critical skills in this new landscape are not technical, but cognitive: problem framing, critical evaluation, creativity, and curiosity.

From hallucination to the 'lethal trifecta'

Hallucination is no longer Copilot's main risk. Better data and temperature controls – parameters that restrict randomness – and larger context windows for models to work within, mean Copilot is less likely to concoct wrong answers.

The real threat is the 'lethal trifecta'[2], a term coined by AI researcher Simon Willison. It includes:

- Private data access: Government environments have access to large amounts of fine-grained private data, including health, employment, and pension records.
- External communication: Any communication between government workers, the public, and the open internet can result in a data breach or attempted cyberattack.
- Untrusted inputs: Malicious or poorly designed prompts can lead to unintended data access or misuse.

Scan the QR code to find out more about QA's Copilot Learning Pathways, tailored for different teams, bringing together human skills and technical knowledge for truly effective AI adoption.

Safeguarding through technical controls and structured governance

AI systems should operate within clearly defined boundaries.

- Limit what AI can see and do: Access to datasets must be tightly controlled, and agents should be designed to perform only very specific tasks.
- Standardise prompting through a controlled taxonomy: By creating prompt libraries and defining use patterns, organisations ensure consistency, safety, and reliability.
- Introduce structured data access frameworks: Many organisations have green, amber, and red classifications:
  - **Green:** Low-risk, everyday use such as summarisation
  - **Amber:** Restricted use involving sensitive data
  - **Red:** Prohibited scenarios in high-security contexts

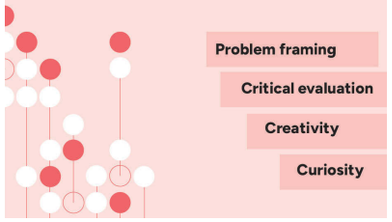
- Human oversight and explainability: Like any other worker, AI requires human leadership and management. Output needs to be interpretable and explainable with performance reviews, objectives, and formal evaluation procedures.

Training is central to success

Effective training programmes should:

- Break roles down into skills, capabilities, and areas of competence rather than treating all users the same.
- Design persona-based pathways tailored to specific job functions.
- Appoint AI ambassadors or champions – AI-savvy and confident Copilot users – can help others to develop their skills.
- Teach practical applications, showing how Copilot supports real tasks in context, across departmental functions.

"The most critical skills in this new landscape are not technical, but cognitive."



Once this foundation is established, learning must continue through:

- Building communities of practice
- Knowledge sharing and innovation coaching
- Hands-on sessions, promptathons, inspiration sessions, and micro-learning updates

This ensures skills are learned and embedded into everyday workflows. Effective training and robust governance make Copilot a trusted digital worker.

QA™

References
1. UK Department for Science, Innovation & Technology
2. Hidden Layer, The Lethal Trifecta and How to Defend Against It

A PROBLEM SHARED

What can the fight against antimicrobial resistance teach us about policy innovation? Former chief medical officer **Professor Dame Sally Davies** shares her experience

In 2024, an off-Broadway Scottish musical called *The Mould That Changed The World* (now renamed *Lifeline*) was performed on the floor of the United Nations, telling the story of Alexander Fleming, the discovery of penicillin and the consequences of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). This was no ordinary drama put on for the entertainment of the representatives of the UN's 193 states, but a highly unusual and unconventional piece of global health diplomacy.

As such, it conveyed a message that diplomatic texts and scientific papers struggle to communicate: AMR is not only a scientific challenge, it is one that affects and demands the attention of the whole of society. It requires governments to break out of traditional policy silos and cycles and to mobilise wider coalitions in the cause of preserving one of medicine's greatest achievements for future generations.

Dose of drama An image from *Lifeline*, a musical inspired by the life of Sir Alexander Fleming

"For a challenge like AMR, there really is no such thing as too much creativity"

AMR has shaped much of my professional life – spent as a doctor, former chief medical officer for England and UK government envoy – over the past 15 years. It has also shaped my understanding of what effective policy looks like when confronting so-called "wicked" problems: complex, long-term, cross-border and socio-technical challenges like AMR that defy traditional solutions.

Why AMR is not just a health issue

Drug-resistant infections – or "superbugs" – represent one of the most pressing global health crises of our time. Modern medicine, after all, from routine surgery and caesarean sections to cancer chemotherapy, transplants and neonatal care, depends on effective antimicrobials – as does our entire food chain.

AMR already causes more than 1.1 million deaths globally each year and contributes to nearly five million others. Across Europe, it is estimated to cause 100 deaths every day. Sadly, one of those deaths two years ago was my own goddaughter. As resistance rises, »

Charlie Flint Photography

the most vulnerable populations – the very young, the elderly and those with chronic conditions – face increasing risk.

The financial burden is severe – and growing. AMR leads to longer hospital stays and poorer outcomes, placing pressure on already-stretched health systems.

But the consequences of the waning effectiveness of antibiotics and other anti-infectives go much further, rippling across food systems, denting economic productivity and even threatening national security. The Center for Global Development estimates that, if not mitigated, it could cost the global economy trillions in annual healthcare costs and economic losses. It is because of these systemic impacts that, as CMO, I argued for AMR to be reflected in the UK's National Risk Register.

Yet AMR rarely generates the urgency of other acute crises. Its impacts are cumulative, long-term and dispersed across sectors. Responsibility for dealing with it spans human and animal health, agriculture, trade, finance and the environment, and cuts across public and private actors. Its reach exposes the limits of traditional policy cycles, institutional and societal incentives and political timeframes.

For governments, AMR therefore provides a test case for innovative policy and regulatory approaches, the use of evidence and expertise, the advantages of working across silos and the benefits of mobilising broad coalitions of actors. The threat it poses challenges us to be more open, more collaborative and more willing to experiment to find policy solutions.

Evidence is necessary but not sufficient

Over the past decade, improved surveillance, economic modelling and scientific analysis have helped AMR onto national and international agendas. The 2016 Review on Antimicrobial Resistance chaired by Jim O'Neill (known as the O'Neill Review) was instrumental in reframing AMR as a threat to global economic prosperity and development.

UK investment through the Fleming Fund, meanwhile, has strengthened laboratory and surveillance capability across human and animal health and the environment in up to 25 low and middle-income countries.

Looking ahead, a key outcome of the 2024 UN high-level meeting on AMR was the agreement to establish an Independent Panel for Evidence for Action. If designed well, such a panel could play a role similar to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – strengthening the link between science and policy and supporting countries to act.

However, my experience at the intersection of clinical practice, government and public policy suggests that data alone does not deliver sustainable change.

Down with the resistance
Sally Davies has devoted decades to tackling AMR

Evidence does not automatically translate into political momentum, different types of behaviour or delivery at scale.

What we need is a clearer pathway from evidence to action, including financing for national action plans, particularly in high-burden, low-resource settings; the sustaining of surveillance systems we have built; better links between data and policy; improved access to antimicrobials and diagnostics; and the rebuilding of fragile innovation systems.

AMR cannot be tackled in isolation. It intersects with climate change, pandemic prevention and preparedness, global conflicts and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Our policy responses must reflect this interconnectedness and involve the whole of society to mitigate the spread of resistance through responsible prescribing, farming, manufacturing and investment.

Innovation beyond technology

When we talk about innovation, we often refer to novel drugs or diagnostic approaches. These are essential – especially as resistance rises and the antimicrobial pipeline remains fragile – but without parallel innovation in policy, regulation and public engagement, scientific and technological advances will not translate into new antimicrobials for the patients who need them.

As things stand, the antibiotic pipeline remains worryingly thin, with too few candidates in development and even fewer targeting the most critical bacterial threats. Investment in novel antimicrobials is widely seen as commercially unattractive, driven by high R&D costs and low expected returns – especially where stewardship measures rightly limit use to preserve effectiveness. Private capital has largely moved away from the sector.

The UK's NHS antimicrobial products subscription model is an example of a policy innovation designed to address this market failure. Co-developed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and NHS England, the NHS "Netflix" subscription model de-links revenue from sales, instead paying participating companies a fixed annual fee based on the value of an antimicrobial to the NHS. This "pull" incentive improves revenue predictability and reduces commercial risk, while rewarding innovation and supporting availability and responsible stewardship. After a successful pilot in 2019, the full-scale model was launched in the UK in 2024.

"AMR's reach exposes the limits of traditional policy cycles, institutional and societal incentives and political timeframes"

The UK was at the forefront of this approach and has shaped international discussions in the G7 and the EU. Raising awareness among investors and pharmaceutical companies about the urgency and portfolio-wide impact of AMR is equally important. We need to become better at communicating the systematic and long-term risk AMR poses to societal and economic resilience.

Embracing AI sensibly and proactively

Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, offer crucial capabilities to strengthen AMR surveillance, accelerate R&D, optimise chemistry, mitigate toxicity, reduce costs and support clinical decision-making.

These benefits are not limited to

high-income countries. Through my work with the Trinity Challenge, I have seen how innovators in high-burden countries are already using big data and AI to support clinical decision-making and to provide farmers with veterinary support even in remote areas, to counter the threat of substandard and falsified drugs and to support early warning and outbreak response. For example, AMRSense provides a One Health, AI-enabled ecosystem that links data capture, analysis and community engagement, bringing high-quality AMR surveillance and stewardship into communities where data and awareness gaps remain acute.

AI is not a silver bullet, but it is a powerful opportunity to use resources beyond drug discovery – whether in early warning systems, outbreak detection, community engagement or operational decision-making.

The policy challenge is not whether to use AI, but to create the conditions for it to be used responsibly, with demonstrable benefit to all communities. Governments need to establish clear but proportionate guardrails. As a doctor, I know there is no such thing as 100% certainty or zero risk. We must not allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good.

Ways of working across government

As our understanding of AMR deepens – and as we learn from other long-term challenges such as climate change – we must continue to broaden our coalitions. The UK has led the way in engaging the private sector, including investors, in recognising AMR as a systemic risk across portfolios.

The UK has also pioneered new forms of public engagement, including transferring *Lifeline* to the Southwark Playhouse in London for a six-week run this spring. The *Lifeline* volunteer chorus brings together healthcare workers, scientists and others on the front line of AMR, performing alongside professional actors, in a production that is not only raising awareness but, crucially, is inspiring performers and the audience to act.

Let's hope this can be a model for many more creative and unconventional approaches to help solve complex, long-term risks. For a challenge like AMR, there really is no such thing as too much creativity. We need to bring in the widest possible mix of people, skills and ideas if we are going to keep making progress.

As public finances tighten and development budgets come under pressure, the UK's influence will rely less on how much we spend and more on how we use what we have. That means making the most of our science, our regulatory expertise, our diplomacy and our ability to convene others. Partnership matters more than ever.

AMR, meanwhile, has a lot in common with other long-term, cross-border challenges such as climate change, pandemics and biosecurity. None of these can be solved by a single department, country or discipline. All require governments to work across silos, over long timeframes and to accept a degree of uncertainty.

Let's face the music

Policy innovation such as the NHS subscription model discussed earlier addresses a failure of our markets; creative productions like *Lifeline* address a different failure – the failure to make long-term risks salient to governments and relatable to the communities they affect.

When people understand a problem, they are more likely to care. When they care, they are more likely to act.

Whole of society challenges require whole of society approaches. That means being willing to work with unconventional partners, to be bold, to experiment and to create spaces for action at all levels, be they local or international.

As we approach the centenary of Fleming's discovery of penicillin in 2028, the question is not only how we preserve one of medicine's greatest achievements, but whether government can adapt its systems to rise to the challenge of wicked problems like AMR. Bold and creative trailblazers have shown me that this is possible, but only if we are prepared to innovate – not just in what we do, but in how we work, who we work with and how we enable action across society. ■

Professor Dame Sally Davies, former chief medical officer, is the UK special envoy on AMR and 40th master of Trinity College, Cambridge. She acknowledges the contribution to this article of Anna Roessing, private secretary to the UK special envoy

This article first appeared in Heywood Quarterly. Read and subscribe at www.heywoodquarterly.com

A different kind of culture
The plate on which Fleming first observed the growth of penicillium notatum in 1928

Efficient case management needs seamless journeys

What are the challenges that can prevent case management systems from delivering sustained efficiency and what can organisations do differently to address them?

With public finances under enormous pressure, and new complexities arriving daily, departments and agencies need their digital services to deliver the best possible return on every pound they invest. Could their case management systems be holding them back?

Ideally, these systems provide simple routes through mazes of complexity. Enquire, apply, praise or complain, they'll show you what to do and how to do it. In many ways, case management systems are the archetypes of digital government efficiency because they were designed to make critical services work at scale for service users.

Designed for users, yes, but always manifested according to that design? No.

Why leaving users behind costs money

"Start with user needs" is the preeminent service design principle. When digital services align to how users live their lives, they work brilliantly. Which in turn means low demand on other resources, no one 'lost in the system' and smooth workflows for busy teams: that's what makes things efficient.

The aim of user-centred design (UCD) is to keep services accessible, inclusive and efficient at all stages of the agile process. In theory, a deep understanding of user needs combined with detailed journey mapping keeps the user front of mind from the initial research stage right through to live operation.

Yet when it comes to the design and evolution of case management systems, the reality is different because the stakes are higher. What seems like 'one system' is actually an ecosystem of platforms, users and data sources that must function seamlessly end to end. Even with the best plans, there are multiple points where users can get left behind, creating inefficiencies.

Six drivers of case management costs

1. **The wrong point of origin**: Some systems start by supporting a single transaction or department. They can evolve, but these narrow foundations often lead to manual workarounds that grow in cost and impact as services expand.
2. **Diverse user communities**: Understanding users and their context is key. Complex case management can involve many agencies and user types, making delivery challenging from the start.
3. **Difficult journeys**: Some users are involved end to end, others only at stages, while some move in and out. This complicates journey mapping and creates multiple pain points.
4. **Complex connections**: Users often interact with multiple systems, requiring careful design. These systems will evolve, sometimes disruptively, particularly with AI and automation.
5. **Infrastructure impacts**: Usage can fluctuate significantly. Systems must handle high volumes while maintaining performance, with security requirements for sensitive data adding complexity.
6. **Frequent changes**: Eligibility criteria and policies shift over time. Combined with long processes, this can disrupt even well designed journeys.

The challenge is not just designing for user needs but ensuring systems continue to support them as complexity and change increase.

A user-first, iterative approach helps manage this complexity and avoids costly lock-ins. However, constraints in later phases can still push users into second place. Proving compliance with service standards may also be difficult, and failure can lead to redesigns.

User needs do not trump business needs like compliance and financial control; they should complement them. Aligning both is a critical part of service design.

Exploring better ways to move forward

From decades of experience, we've seen that user-centred design adds real value – not just at the start of the agile process, but throughout development and into live operation.

More broadly, addressing the cost drivers requires a shift in how services are designed, delivered and evolved over time. Case management is not a single system or phase but an ongoing journey; one that must balance usability, operational performance and adaptability in equal measure.

NEC DIGITALSTUDIO

To find out more about our unique user-centred approach to the development of case management system please scan the QR code to visit our website

Photo credit: AdobeStock

LAB REPORT

The new science and engineering strategy places greater emphasis on how capability is developed and sustained throughout the civil service, says **Dame Angela McLean**

Scientists and engineers play a crucial role in helping to shape policies and improve lives. You only have to remember the Covid-19 pandemic to see how scientific advice and research were at the centre of keeping the UK safe. It demonstrated the real value of science, and I am keen for all civil servants to know more about what scientists and engineers in government can offer.

This is where the government science and engineering profession comes in. We are a community of around 10,000 scientists, engineers, technical specialists and non-specialists across the civil, public and crown services. You'll find us in policy teams, regulators and laboratories, and in operational roles – testing assumptions, weighing risks, setting standards, offering advice and improving services.

And I am excited to say that the profession has hit a major milestone: publication of its new strategy. You may be thinking to yourself: what does it mean for my team and the work we need to deliver?

This strategy will strengthen capability and leadership across departments, building on progress made since the 2021 strategy. It places greater emphasis on how science and engineering capability is developed and sustained across government, with clearer expectations, clearer routes to build skills and clearer ways for teams to access the science, evidence and expertise they need.

The strategy highlights new and strengthened initiatives, including a mid-career leadership scheme for scientists and engineers to explore how their expertise can contribute to national priorities; work to improve skills, recognition and reward; as well as the continued development of existing programmes.

Those programmes include the popular Science and Engineering Fast Stream, which produces future civil service leaders, and the well-established Royal Society Pairing Scheme, which matches civil servants and parliamentarians with researchers for a week to exchange insights about each other's work and to build connections.

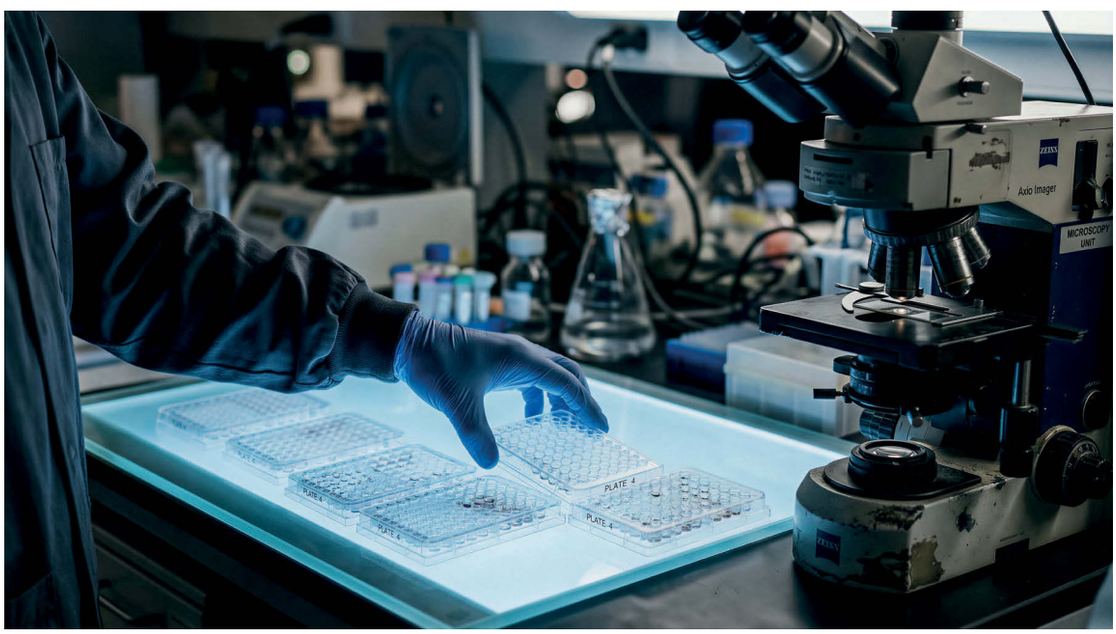
Beyond the strategy, there are tools and systems developed by the Government Office for Science to make it easier to draw on science expertise from outside government. Increasingly, more organisations are publishing their Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) – a short list of areas where evidence is needed. For example, the Department for Business and Trade is keen to learn which intellectual property activities can contribute most to driving economic growth, while the Department for Education is investigating what works best to ensure high levels of school attendance. That openness helps teams attract the right partners quickly and helps researchers focus effort where it can make the biggest difference.

We have also created a directory where you can explore the range of schemes to bring an academic in to your team, or even to experience life from the perspective of an academic. Whether you are looking to engage with researchers for a few months, part-time or during a short placement, you can find the options in one place with contact details.

This sits alongside the advice already available in departments: chief scientific advisers and their teams, analysts, regulators, laboratories and advisory committees. The aim? Bring science and engineering in early – when you are framing the problem, deciding what to measure, as well as for delivery.

Why does this matter? Because policymakers often need their advice here and now, and having dedicated science systems and expertise on hand allows for a timely response. Scientists and engineers help us to handle uncertainty, to spot unintended consequences, and to design approaches that work in practice. They enable all of us to be clearer about what we know, what we do not know yet, and what would change our minds.

The new GSE strategy helps deliver on this goal. It recognises the value of technical expertise and makes career paths clearer, whether people choose deep specialism, leadership, or move between policy, operations and delivery. So, as both a scientist and a civil servant, I urge you to think about how to embed more expertise in your organisation's work. And join the profession while you're at it. ■



"Bring science and engineering in early – when you are framing the problem, deciding what to measure, as well as for delivery"

Professor Dame Angela McLean is the government chief scientific adviser and head of the government science and engineering profession

FORCE OF CHANGE

In 2024, after 10 years in the Home Office's policing directorate, **Rachel Watson** joined the Independent Office for Police Conduct, the watchdog for the police complaints system. **Tevye Markson** speaks to her about transforming the watchdog amid record caseloads and dwindling funds

Whenever politicians want to signal that they are about to shake up the system, one evocative word reliably surfaces: "bonfire" – of the quangos, of red tape, of targets. But it's not often ministers are given the opportunity to literally set fire to years of hard work.

In 2009, at the tail-end of Gordon Brown's premiership, Rachel Watson joined the Identity and Passport Service as chief of staff to the director general, where the key policy was the introduction of ID cards. At that point, the cards were being rolled out to foreign nationals and plans were in place to expand them to all British citizens by 2012.

Watson had spent the first decade of her civil service career in comms, which was "really fun – it's reactive, I'm a bit of an adrenaline junkie, so there's always something going on, some mini-crisis that you have to respond to. But I didn't see it as my forever job". The chief of staff role required someone who could do comms and build relationships – skills Watson had in spades.

"I absolutely loved it," she says. "I loved getting things done, fixing things, and also the media focus – where are the dragons out there that I need to be prepared for?"

A year later came the 2010 general election and with it one of the key moves the new coalition government could agree on right away: scrapping identity cards.

"They actually burnt the database," Watson recalls. "Good for them, by the way, that's fine. That's what governments do. But that's a 180-degree turn [from] 'they're the best thing ever' [to] 'they're terrible' overnight because there's an election, and I guess that's the joy of the civil service."

Naturally, officials had planned for the potential change of government. "Announcements had already been drafted, legislation had been drafted to abolish identity cards, we were all ready to go," Watson recalls. "And it was just a question of putting it in place.

"I'm not sure whose idea it was to burn the database. But the team came up very proactively with: this is how you abolish it, this is how you can announce it, here's the legislation. I think incoming ministers were pleasantly surprised. And certainly when I've talked about my career... for quite a long time, that was a really good example of a massive change to deal with."

"I know public finances are challenging at the moment, so the cavalry is not coming"

Fast forward to 24 July, 2019. It's Watson's first day as policing director at the Home Office after five years as deputy, and she's preparing for another change of prime minister and another big policy shift. "My first day in post was the same day as Boris Johnson's as prime minister," Watson recalls. "We shared our first few hundred days." And although Johnson was only PM for three years, his plans for policing outlasted him. One of Johnson's key policy priorities was recruiting 20,000 extra police officers, and Watson was the senior responsible officer for this programme. "Just over 20,000 ended up being recruited in just over three years, which was great," she says. She also recalls there being a big focus on working closer with policing, whereas it "had been hands off in the early days of the coalition government. There was a big policy shift, and it was really exciting to be part of that".

Now director general of the Independent Office for Police Conduct, Watson is embarking on a transformation programme of her own to improve the watchdog's efficiency in the face of record caseloads and dwindling funding. We meet in April at 10 South Colonnade, the Canary Wharf government hub, the day before her two-year anniversary leading the organisation.

As the police complaints watchdog for England and Wales, the IOPC investigates the most serious and sensitive incidents and allegations involving the police. It receives referrals from police forces of complaints that meet a certain threshold – including serious misconduct, criminality or corruption, or serious injury or discrimination – and decides which it will investigate and which to send back to be investigated by the local police force. In 2018, the IOPC's first year after replacing the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the watchdog received around 4,000 referrals. This year, »

it received more than 7,000 and was only able to investigate 317 of them – about one in 22, compared to one in six in 2018.

The increase in referrals followed high-profile cases such as those of Metropolitan Police officers Wayne Couzens – who murdered Sarah Everard – and serial rapist David Carrick. "I think [forces are] referring cases for the right reasons, they want to make sure we've got oversight," Watson says. "My focus has been: let's do as many investigations as we can while not compromising timeliness or quality. I'd like us to be able to do more, but we're reliant on funding for that, although transformation can help to an extent."

This means some referrals the IOPC would ideally like to investigate don't make the cut, and are instead returned for local investigation. One such example is the case of a man who sustained a chipped tooth/facial injuries after officers used a significant amount of force on him before taking him into custody. He later became unresponsive in his cell and was transferred to hospital. The case was sent back for investigation by the relevant force's professional standards department.

A more straightforward decision, Watson recalls, was the incident in March where Met Police officers accidentally left a bag of weapons outside London mayor Sadiq Khan's house. "We didn't take that [case] because, although it clearly has an impact on public confidence, actually the Met's taking it very seriously," she says. "It doesn't seem like there's any corruption involved or discrimination, it feels like a mess up. So that would be one that wouldn't particularly benefit from having us all over it."

The IOPC also undertakes reviews, which are triggered when a police force deals with a complaint but the complainant is dissatisfied with its outcome. If there's an indication that misconduct could be involved, the IOPC will look into it. Like referrals, reviews have increased significantly, rising from 73 a month in 2020-21 to 290 in 2025-26. In that period, the average time taken to complete reviews soared from an average of 55 working days in 2020-21 to 119 in 2022-23. A backlog of more than a thousand cases built up as a result.

The IOPC expects to achieve its target of completing reviews within an average of 50 working days by March 2027. "We're now closing significantly more cases than come in each month," Watson says. She adds that the watchdog is trialling the use of AI to help tackle the backlog, but notes this will be about "making life slightly easier" for reviewers rather than asking AI to "make decisions or do reviews".

While the numbers of referrals and reviews have climbed, the IOPC's funding has dropped in real terms by nearly 30% since 2018. Watson is under no illusion that any financial boost is on its way any time soon. "I know public finances are challenging at the moment so the cavalry is not coming," she says. "So the question is: what can we do to make ourselves more efficient?"

One area with plenty of room for improvement is the timeliness of the investigations. In October, home secretary Shabana Mahmood announced plans for a review to address "systemic barriers to timeliness in the police misconduct system". In January's policing reform white paper, this was upgraded to a "root and branch review" that would "address more fundamental issues such as how cases are referred to the IOPC and the interaction between the misconduct, courts and coronial systems". The white paper suggested there were opportunities to avoid duplication and "be clearer for the police and public alike".

"I absolutely own that we need to speed up and our big focus is what is within our gift," Watson says. "But there's a lot of other bits of the system that are slow. My focus has been on the processes that we can control," she says. Recently, the IOPC published new witness guidance designed to reduce delays in getting police witness statements and interviews. "That gives us the platform to say, these are the bits that need to speed up."

Watson says the most dramatic step to improve the IOPC's investigations processes since her arrival has been last year's move from a regional to a national model. Under the previous structure, each office would deal with its own investigations. "We've swept that away," she says. The watchdog's Birmingham office may take on a case in Manchester if it has spare capacity, for example. Watson says the

WATSON ON... BEING BOLD AND FORTHRIGHT

The Fairfield review, which came out a few months before Watson was appointed as DG, said the IOPC should be "more forthright and bolder in defending its role in ensuring police accountability, its work and processes when it is justified in doing so".

"I've tried," Watson says. "I tend to find we get a lot more traction when there's a controversial case involving a firearms officer or something. Then everyone's fascinated and wants to know. So actually in terms of being bold on your own terms, it's a constant challenge to find ways. I did an op ed in *The Times* earlier this year. I was on Times Radio talking about the accountability system and what I thought needed to change in it. I once looked at the BBC front page, I think it was last year, and we were in every story on it. So we're out there, but in this world, I think it's quite difficult to set your own agenda completely."

WATSON ON... GETTING THE INDEPENDENCE-ACCOUNTABILITY BALANCE RIGHT

"Actually, [the Home Office] is fine. They want us to be independent. It doesn't help ministers to be making this kind of decision – I've never come across one who particularly wanted to. Where we're less independent is money. We completely rely on the Home Office for that. But our funding isn't conditional on any kind of decision making. We're always going to be making quite difficult decisions that will very often displease either the police officer or the complainant or – in many, many cases – both. So the fact that we tend to get criticism pretty much equally from both sides, I think also shows that we're probably getting that balance of independence pretty much right."

IOPC is now starting to see a month-on-month increase in performance on investigations, "which is really heartening".

These reforms supported accelerated misconduct hearings for Charing Cross Police Station officers caught on camera making racist and misogynist remarks and revelling in the use of force in a BBC *Panorama* documentary that was broadcast in October 2025. The Met referred the case to the IOPC shortly before the programme aired, but the watchdog wasn't able to see any of the footage in advance. "We had to watch *Panorama* with everyone else, but... within a week of the broadcast, we sent all the paperwork to the Met so they could have accelerated misconduct hearings, which is when you know that there's a really clear gross misconduct and rather than going through a full lengthy process, someone can be heard and dismissed. And these were clearly individuals who didn't belong in policing so it was in the public interest that they were out of policing and not being paid by the taxpayer as soon as possible." The hearings began within three weeks of the programme and have so far found 10 serving or former officers guilty of gross misconduct.

The IOPC's vision – set out in big, bold letters on its website – is that "everyone is able to have trust and confidence in the police".

"Often if someone comes into contact with the IOPC it might well be the worst day of their life, either as a complainant because perhaps they've been bereaved, something awful has happened, or they feel upset about treatment by the police; or if you're a police officer, it's blooming scary. And we're acutely aware that that's the case. So it's really important that we give the best possible service to the complainant, and also the officer who's under investigation... the output of that should be that people have confidence in the police system."

For much of the public, their daily dose of policing comes from TV dramas and the news rather than in-person interactions. What impact does Watson think police procedurals and media coverage has on confidence? And does she watch police dramas herself?

"Well, *Line of Duty* is great," Watson says. "I've actually got a mug with AC-12, Rachel on it. It was a leaving gift from the Home Office. So I do watch police dramas. I don't think they have a massive impact." News coverage, on the other hand, "definitely" has an impact on confidence, she says, alongside people's experiences with their local police forces. "The key one is the absolutely tragic murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens. And we saw a big drop [in confidence], particularly in women and girls, as you'd expect after that. Again, David Carrick. People in this country are really fascinated by policing, the dramas, the real life, the reality shows, the news coverage. But what seems to have had a big impact has been the systemic things that have made people question whether they can really trust police officers."

To help police forces overcome the systemic issues these cases raise, the IOPC publishes guidance and toolkits on areas such as race discrimination and violence against women and girls. But Watson says it is ultimately up to police forces to make changes, and she believes they have put in "a lot of work".

WATSON ON... SWITCHING OFF

"I've got a 13-year-old son, and a husband and a rabbit, so spending time with them in various different combinations is how I switch off. One thing about having children is you get home and there is something else to talk about that's not work. I love travelling when I can and reading completely brainless thrillers as well. Nothing intellectual, nothing that's won the Booker Prize, but something that's really fun."

Watson says her decade at the Home Office's policing directorate enabled her to understand the policing landscape and how the IOPC fits into it. One of her big priorities when she arrived was to reset relations with police chiefs. "It's important we're not seen as just on the side of the police, but it's also important we can work with policing in a constructive way. Because we all ultimately want the same thing, which is for officers who shouldn't be in uniform to be out of policing as quickly as they can be, and those who have maybe made a small mistake or possibly no mistake at all to be back doing their jobs as quickly as possible. And I think the relationships are really positive now." Understanding the internal mechanics of the Home Office was also handy, she says, for the part of the job which requires lobbying for new legislation or extra money.

"It's important we're not seen as just on the side of the police, but it's also important we can work with policing in a constructive way"

Understanding the police misconduct legislative landscape is something else altogether. A 2024 independent review of the IOPC by Dr Gillian Fairfield, who chairs the Disclosure and Barring Service, said the legislation underpinning its work is "extremely complex and confusing" and that many stakeholders "do not fully understand how everything fits together or... the IOPC's role and remit".

"It's horrifically complex, I'm afraid," Watson says. The "root and branch" review of the IOPC should help, she adds. "Ideally, we'd simplify the legislation. In the absence of that, we've got to try to make things as simple as possible.

"Through transformation, we're looking at how we can make the initial interaction with us make more sense." But, she cautions, "You can't oversimplify something that's in its nature very, very complex." ■

Ten years ago, the UK public voted to leave the European Union, heaping an almighty challenge on government's shoulders. What lasting effect has the monumental move had on the civil service? **Suzannah Brecknell** reports

OVER AND OUT

In June 2016, on the day after the UK voted to leave the European Union, prominent Brexiteer and veteran select committee chair Sir Bernard Jenkin met the then-cabinet secretary Sir Jeremy Heywood. "I teased him as he bounced in with a big smile, as he always did," Jenkin recalled several years later. "I said: 'I expected to find you miserable and beleaguered, because we're leaving the EU and that's not what you wanted.' And he chirped: 'Well, we've got a new policy and we're going to have a new prime minister. We've got to turn the whole thing on a sixpence – but that's what we do.'"

In the years that followed, the civil service did indeed turn on a sixpence, despite the fact that there was, for some time, no clear political direction about how far to turn and what to do once they'd stopped spinning. A decade later, what lasting marks has Brexit – and its political fallout – left on the institution that delivered it?

Size of government

Perhaps the most obvious impact of EU exit has been the growth of the civil service, as it prepared not only to leave the trading bloc but to operate in a new geopolitical and legal framework, bringing back capabilities and recreating systems that had previously been part of the EU.

Former Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs permanent secretary Dame Clare Moriarty, reflecting in 2021 for the Brexit Witness Archive project (organised by the think tank UK in a Changing Europe, or UKICE), captured the scale of the challenge, saying: "We kept thinking we'd got there and then we realised that Brexit was a size bigger than we had previously imagined."

When Moriarty joined Defra in 2015, it was making plans to reduce headcount by 20% over the next few years. Instead, she said, "for at least two years, we were recruiting at 1,300 a year, to a department that was only 2,000 or so".

Finding people to join Defra was not hard. It had, in Moriarty's words, "become a sexy, exciting Brexit place to be", drawing recruits from the private and voluntary sectors and academia, alongside a cross-government effort to loan staff.

The Treasury was also more willing than in recent years to provide money.

This story was reflected across government. In 2016, the civil service had been shrinking for several years under coalition-and-Cameron-era austerity plans. In every year since then, however, it has grown. Now, with some 520,000 people, it is more than a third bigger than it was just before the EU referendum.

This growth was not uniform. It was concentrated in departments such as the Home Office and Defra, which were heavily affected by EU exit. Nor was all of it driven by Brexit; the biggest spike came during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Ministry of Justice saw the largest absolute increase as it recruited prison and probation staff after 2022.

During the Brexit years, the challenge was not attracting applicants but getting them in fast enough, hence the heavy use of interdepartmental loans. In the Home Office, recruitment processes were revamped to accelerate the hiring of operational staff (*see box, p.67*), and the Civil Service Commission created a specific recruitment exemption for EU exit work.

Some of the growth reflected the need for new capabilities, such as trade negotiating, or to staff up new, more complex operations at the border. Other professions grew too – most notably the policy profession, which more than doubled from 17,000 at the end of 2016 to 36,000 at the end of 2025. This makes it the second fastest growing civil service profession over the last decade, after digital and data.

Stephen Webb, a former senior civil servant who worked most recently in the Home Office and Cabinet Office and is now programme director at the think tank Fix Britain, is strongly critical of the policy profession's growth in general, saying: "You do need yeast to make bread, but doubling the amount of yeast doesn't make your bread taste any nicer."

He is particularly sceptical about the fact that EU exit was used as a justification for some of the growth, since the UK would now need to work up policy in areas that were previously under the EU's competency, when in practice this produced little in the way of wide-scale policy divergence from the EU. Jill Rutter, a senior fellow at the Institute for Government and fellow of UKICE, notes however that the lack of policy divergence often reflects political choices.

Philip Rycroft, perm sec at the Department for Exiting the European Union from 2017 to 2019, tells *CSW* that all of this reflects a fundamental misconception about what Brexit might mean.

Chequers past May addresses her cabinet at a key Brexit meeting

Rather than a reduction in bureaucracy and regulation, he says, it resulted in a "re-importing" of that bureaucracy and "revealed that the British regulator can go toe-to-toe with the European regulator" in terms of quantum and impact of regulation. He recalls pre-Brexit concerns that the UK was "gold-plating" EU regulations, adding that the reason why the UK has not been "more successful" after leaving the EU is that "the problem wasn't the EU, the problem was a non-reformed British state".

Consequences of growth

One consequence of creating so many new roles was to exacerbate an existing challenge in the civil service: high levels of churn, caused in part by a system that incentivises people to move roles often to improve their pay.

These challenges predated the referendum but a 2023 report by former civil servant Amy Gandon found that some officials felt Brexit and the pandemic had made things worse. Interviewees described recruitment protocols being relaxed, with negative effects such as inexperienced staff being promoted or critical posts being filled through contacts rather than merit.

The IfG has also argued that the last decade has seen strong grade inflation, with consequences for pay and effectiveness. "You just don't know what anyone is meant to be doing at any particular grade," says Hannah Keenan, formerly a civil servant in the Cabinet Office, now an associate director at the IfG. "A lot of the actual work gets sucked up [to higher grades]… and there's a whole group of SCS who feel they don't have enough people, because they're not using the people under them."

Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA union, says the evidence for grade inflation is not concrete, but it is clear that the civil service grew rapidly without a clear strategy, caused by the "underlying tension" that politicians were not openly acknowledging the policy and resource implications of Brexit.

"The civil service doesn't decide its own size," he notes, but ministers "kept asking the civil service to do all this stuff, and so it grew. You'd have ministers essentially allowing their departments to grow to deal with the consequences of the policy they supported and then, at the same time, attacking the civil service for growing."

While the number of officials working on Brexit was large – at least 22,000 at the peak of planning for a possible "no-deal" exit – they were still only around 5% of the civil service, according to National Audit Office figures released in 2020. This rose to some 12% in the SCS, but EU exit pulled energy and attention even from those not dealing with it directly.

"You'd have ministers allowing their departments to grow, to deal with the consequences of the policy they supported, and then attacking the civil service for growing"
Dave Penman, FDA

One senior policy professional who worked in domestic-facing departments through the Brexit years recalls how things like weekly updates in SCS meetings, while "really intense and exciting for the [EU exit] team", could pull focus and attention from those who were not involved. "We weren't very good at drawing »

lines," they recall, creating "enormous opportunity costs — all the things that we weren't doing because of [EU exit]".

Although this official was reflecting on public policy changes, there was also an impact on internal-facing reforms. Before 2016, the civil service reform agenda was much as it is now: stronger project management, digital, data and commercial capability; a less London-centric and more diverse workforce; better links between policy and operations; and an overhaul of reward and recruitment. Brexit helped to drive progress on some of these changes, including building more project management capability and developing some central tools to support workforce planning. But it may have held back other areas: one civil servant who has been involved in diversity work for many years said Brexit pushed that down the agenda, stalling the momentum that had been building through the Cameron years. As well as creating a political culture that was sometimes explicitly anti-diversity, they noted, the need to recruit and move people quickly reduced concern for diversity in hiring and weakened challenge culture.

Amid all this, some positive innovations did emerge. In *The Brexit Effect (see review, p.69)*, Simon Case – former cabinet secretary and, during the Brexit years, a senior DExEU official – describes the XS and XO committees established to manage EU exit strategy and operations as "an important and useful innovation" in a "sea of largely unhappy Brexit bureaucracy". Brexit also created space for technological and organisational change, such as that carried out by the Border Force *(see box)*. Moriarty – who went on to be DExEU perm sec after leading Defra – notes that the department developed a sophisticated database for tracking deliverables across government, but it was never fully exploited because central teams in the Cabinet Office preferred a more traditional secretariat approach. "We could have got much more out of it if Brexit had been recognised as a big, mega programme, rather than a big, mega crisis management process," she says.

Political ramifications

The EU referendum split the two main parties and resulted in fundamental challenge for the political system, Rutter tells *CSW*, as it struggled to cope with the fact that the public had made a decision most MPs disagreed with. "The system does not really adapt very well to that," she notes.

Over the next three years, against the backdrop of that systemic challenge, prime minister Theresa May was trying to deliver a Brexit that would keep her government and party together. As her strategy slowly unravelled, the conflict within government, and between government and parliament, grew more heated and complex. Cabinet government floundered, ministerial turnover soared, and parliamentary drama became par for the course. As Penman notes, when you have this level of political chaos, "there is no independent civil service that is going to solve those things. It is a massive political failing."

The political failure had administrative consequences. There was an atmosphere of secrecy, reflecting not only the highly charged political debate and constant leaking, but the personalities of the people at the top of the process. Strategy was developed in close circles and documents were kept closely guarded.

As Moriarty told UKICE: "There wasn't a sense of people, either at secretary of state level or at permanent secretary level, really being invited to be part of the decision process around the big strategy. The big strategy just popped up and then we all tried to react to it."

Table talk Tensions were rife in Theresa May's cabinet

This was not a recipe for good cross-government working and the impact went beyond EU exit work. In evidence to the Covid Inquiry, former deputy cabinet secretary Helen MacNamara wrote that by 2020, Whitehall had become used to "too much control in the centre", with departments disempowered and the cabinet secretariat out of the habit of facilitating debate and fresh perspectives.

A counterpoint to this comes from Rycroft, who notes that departments didn't take kindly to DExEU's work monitoring progress around Brexit preparations because "Whitehall is a very non-compliant place, where permanent secretaries' incentives lie in their relationship with their secretary of state". In an atmosphere where ministers were not setting a clear, unified direction, that non-compliance was exacerbated, but it did not begin with Brexit.

The IfG's Alex Thomas reflects on another consequence of this lack of cabinet unity and political paralysis under Theresa May. "The civil service was receiving contradictory messages rather than a coherent set of objectives from the government," he tells *CSW*. In the face of this, "the learned response from the civil service was to say: '[we] will respond to these individual asks but, because the overall strategic objective of the government is incoherent, we can't lean into that strategy, because we don't know what the safe territory is. We don't know what an impartial civil service should be doing in that instance.'"

While the decision to lean out of strategic work was a choice, it was hard to undo, he suggests, and the Labour administration elected in 2024 would feel the impact of it. This was "a government that didn't have the most compelling vision but did want the civil service to lean in and fill the gaps", he notes, but the civil service, as an institution, had lost the instinct to do this.

Both Keenan and Thomas stress that this instinct to "lean out" did not equate to laziness. "In the passive pose, you're working just as hard and, in some ways, more frustratingly, with less agency and a less satisfying job," says Thomas. Brexit, and then Covid, also pushed workloads to new extremes, with one policy professional saying it shifted "in an unhelpfully permanent way" what politicians and senior leaders thought was reasonable to ask of civil servants.

Nor did the choice to lean out reflect an intention to frustrate ministerial requests. Rather, Keenan suggests the aim was to deliver exactly as asked rather than offering options, and that was "coming from wanting to win the trust of ministers; wanting to show that you're on their side and not trying to obstruct".

This concern about seeming obstructive

‘NEVER WASTE A GOOD CRISIS’: HOME OFFICE BORDER PREPARATIONS

When Paul Lincoln took charge of the UK Border Force in 2017, it was an organisation facing an unprecedented transformation in the context of deep political uncertainty. But it didn’t feel like a crisis, he tells *CSW*. He saw instead an opportunity to transform operations at the border.

His first move was to build a deep understanding of what the existing system was and how it connected with others across government, and then to cut through the political uncertainty with careful scenario planning. Whatever Brexit looked like, certain things would always be needed. “When you do the analysis, at its simplest, it’s pretty clear you need more people, you’re going to have to do more customs work, and you have to do a whole load more communications – both internally within government as well as with the huge range of external stakeholders and customers that Border Force has.”

From this, he and his team built a deal-agnostic core plan that could proceed regardless of the political outcomes, with different branches that could be activated as the final deal became clear. This gave his team a clear sense of direction despite the political change.

Border Force needed thousands more officers and the existing hiring process was too slow. By running some processes concurrently, which would previously have been run sequentially, Lincoln’s team was able to roughly halve the time taken to recruit, while maintaining full security clearance for every new joiner. And, to ease future staffing challenges, all new recruits were dual-skilled in both immigration and customs from the outset, giving Border Force greater flexibility to redeploy people as demands shifted. To support this, every induction course and training programme was redesigned, with technology at its heart.

For example, the organisation introduced Ocelot, a digital decision-support tool, borrowed from HMRC. This distils hundreds of pages of statutory guidance into simple, mobile-accessible decision trees. A Border Force officer encountering a complex case could work through the key questions on their phone in seconds, without needing to locate and interpret the underlying legislation. When guidance changed, the system could be updated quickly, reaching every officer in the country. “Officers loved it,” Lincoln recalls.

Technology also transformed passenger flow with a major expansion of e-gate eligibility, extending access to travellers from the United States and several other countries. This both relieved pressure on staffing and sent a deliberate signal that Britain remained open for business.

And despite the focus on people and recruitment for Brexit, Lincoln is clear that Border Force could not simply recruit its way to a new solution for passenger processing. “It was physically impossible to make that amount of change by just recruiting people to process passengers at the same rate. Even if you could recruit and staff all the immigration desks, airports and ports do not have the capacity – the actual physical space required – to have enough desks in immigration halls.”

The word that comes to Lincoln’s mind when he thinks of the Brexit years is “purpose”. The strong sense of opportunity and positive change was evidently shared by many in Border Force. During that period, engagement scores rose by 14-15%, Lincoln says. “I’m super proud of what the organisation delivered. It was an incredibly big programme – one of the largest Brexit programmes in government. People absolutely stepped up and delivered brilliantly.”

reflected a sense that ministers now viewed challenge as defiance, rather than part of the policy and delivery process. “Good ministers welcome challenge and engage with it but also set direction and know what the red lines are,” Thomas says. “The space for that conversation felt like it narrowed after Brexit.”

One senior policy professional recalls that after the 2017 snap election, their team decided their briefing for incoming ministers could not sound balanced on Brexit: “It had to sound completely pro-Brexit.” Thomas also suggests the civil service lost some of the skills needed for robust conversation: “The meaningful synthesising of policy and the instinct to test stuff with external people, with stakeholders… the responsibility to give the best possible advice and to have kicked the tires on it – that has eroded.”

Rycroft adds a nuance to this narrative, noting that things changed as the political context shifted. “In my time in DExEU, we were under a lot of pressure from ministers to conform to their view of what Brexit would mean,” he says, but the division in the cabinet gave him and the team “space” to resist that. He points to two examples that became public: an impact analysis that showed negative impacts on long-term GDP of every Brexit deal, and a paper produced under Dominic Raab that set out the “unadorned” risks of no deal.

He compares this to the fact that there was no impact analysis of Boris Johnson’s final Brexit deal but, instead, a “benefits of Brexit” document was released, “which was like a parody”.

“I’m not blaming the civil service for that,” he adds, saying the ability “to cleave to the civil service rigour about the evidence in advice to ministers” became “really, really difficult” under the Johnson government.

“I’m pretty sure Home Office staff probably voted 52:48 or even more in favour, but the tone was so much set by the centre” *Stephen Webb*

Multiple people *CSW* spoke to described a sense that expertise was no longer welcome – if it was of the wrong sort. This began right from the start. Ivan Rogers, then the UK’s permanent representative to the EU, said to UKICE in 2016: “The sense is that UKRep people… are ‘contaminated’ by their excessive European expertise.” This would carry on right to the end of the period. One of his successors, Katrina Williams, told UKICE that when she returned to Whitehall in 2020 having overseen the final stages of EU exit from Brussels, it seemed that anybody senior “who had got [EU experience] on their CV felt a little bit suspect”. This was, Williams noted, in the “Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson era” – a nod to the fact that alongside all this, the civil service was subject to increasing, and increasingly public, attacks.

While politicians criticising officials was not new, the tone and scope changed from 2016 onwards. “Before, occasionally it happened, but there was a general acceptance from the party of government that this is unfair, [civil servants] cannot defend themselves, this is not a thing that ministers do,” Penman says. “That just went.”

In the years that followed the EU vote, ministers criticised officials – even from the House of Commons dispatch box – with no discernible consequence since May, as Penman notes, was too busy managing her party to defend her officials. The open season was not just on the civil service and not just from politicians. Judges and remainer MPs were branded enemies of the people, while one permanent secretary – Sir Jon Thompson – received

death threats after discussing challenges around EU exit. Then there was the "hard rain" under Johnson and his top adviser Cummings, which saw the dismissal of six permanent secretaries in one year. These dismissals, Rutter says, "added a layer to the notion that civil servants were getting in the way and had to be terrorised".

Were civil servants getting in the way?

The referendum result was undoubtedly a shock for many civil servants. Several civil service leaders, reflecting on the days immediately after the referendum, have spoken of the need to support staff reeling emotionally or dealing with the uncertainty of the situation. But they have also emphasised that many ambitious civil servants were keen to work on EU exit right through this period – seeing it as the key policy area of the day. In her UKICE interview, Moriarty noted that her staff were thinking of the opportunities ahead even as they processed the implications of the vote. "Right from the start, there was a yoking together of an emotional reaction, an intuitive understanding... of the scale of change that was going to be involved in unpicking 40 years' worth of accumulated legislation and history, and a sense of, 'Yes, but maybe we could do this a bit differently'."

Nevertheless, some former civil servants have reflected that there was, through these years, a general and cultural aversion to EU exit in the civil service. Stephen Webb recalls "complete tumbleweed" in a top leadership meeting after he challenged a colleague who said "everyone" present thought Brexit was nonsense. "That said something about the culture of the place, as it felt to those who'd actually supported [Brexit].

"It was particularly weird, because I was at the Home Office at the time. I'm pretty sure Home Office staff probably voted 52:48 or even more in favour, but the tone was so much set by the centre."

Paul Lincoln, who was director general of the UK Border Force in this period, agrees that if you looked across the civil service overall, you'd see a split similar to that across the country. But he says that right across the board, there was "no lack of drive – irrespective of people's personal opinions, people just wanted to serve the government and deliver what had to be delivered".

Head to head David Davis and Michel Barnier, lead negotiators for the UK and EU, at a press conference

Webb argues that this delivery, however, was not done willingly. "Generally, the civil service ultimately did what it was asked to do, but only after having sort of sulked and set out the adverse consequences as luridly as it possibly could."

He acknowledges some of this reflected civil servants responding to the bidding of their remain-supporting ministers, but says he has "no doubt" that "the civil service, to the extent that we had any weight at all, very much put it on one side of the scale". This, he suggests, "has caused a lasting trust deficit", particularly among Conservative and Reform politicians.

"Good ministers welcome challenge and engage with it. The space for that conversation felt like it narrowed after Brexit" ***Alex Thomas, IfG***

Thomas suggests that the distrust politicians feel towards officials reflects the different cultures in the two professions, and that it is the political turmoil – rather than civil service obstructiveness – that has potentially damaged relations in government. "The political brain thinks: 'well, how can these people really not care which government they're working for, and how can they really be as enthusiastic for this government and my policy as the previous one?" he says.

It takes time, he suggests, for ministers to trust not just individual civil servants but the broader notion of civil service impartiality and the benefits of working with people who really know how to make the system of government work. "If you have a succession of rapid governments or rapid prime ministers, all the reshuffles, there's never time to reach that new equilibrium," he adds. "The speed of ministerial turnover may have broken something fundamental."

The institution that Heywood promised could turn on a sixpence has not had much credit for the scale and complexity of the turn it executed. "Because politicians had expected it to be a walk in the park, and because half the public hate the fact that it happened, it's not something that the civil service can say with pride: look, we delivered all this," Penman says.

Despite the political context, Rycroft is clear that the civil service should remain proud. "I personally have been disparaged by one N. Farage as a blocker of Brexit. Not much annoys me [but] that annoys me, not so much for my own part, but for all the folks in my team, and across Whitehall, who knocked their pan in to make sure we could respect the democratic decision from the British public, and leave in good order." ■

DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS

Before he moved to DExEU, Philip Rycroft was working in the Cabinet Office to improve the civil service's understanding of devolved issues. The momentum to improve that understanding, he says, came from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and was largely carried out through the newly created UK Governance Group to try and improve Whitehall's capability when it comes to devolution issues. In those years, he could make the case to the cabinet secretary and prime minister that this mattered, and be heard. The institutional embodiment of this was a second permanent secretary post in the Cabinet Office, held by Rycroft, dedicated to constitutional and devolution issues.

Brexit, he argues, swept that momentum away. From a wider devolution perspective, he says, the political approach to EU exit "revealed a complete willingness to override Scottish and Welsh interests in the pursuit of Brexit. They crashed through all the conventions of the devolution settlements, ignoring the refusal of legislative consent motions for Brexit legislation, not giving the devolved governments really any line of sight on the negotiations."

Northern Ireland, he says, was the most consequential example. "It revealed deep ignorance about Northern Irish politics [and] the nature of the Good Friday Belfast Agreement and a willingness to prioritise Brexit, essentially, over the United Kingdom."

A decade on, the second perm sec role he once held has been replaced by a director-level post – a clear structural signal about the priority now accorded to devolved matters.

BREXIT REFLECTIONS

Marking the 10-year anniversary of the Brexit referendum, writers from all sides of the debate provide insight and opinion in this collection of essays edited by Anthony Seldon. **Dr Jack Brown** tells us what he thinks

- *The Brexit Effect: 2016-2026*
- Edited by Anthony Seldon
- Cambridge University Press

If a week is a long time in politics, what is a decade in Brexit? It has now been 10 especially long years since Britain voted to leave the European Union, an act that began a process of departure that took several years to formally complete and is arguably still ongoing. The issue's divisiveness is so potent that some may not yet be ready to reflect on it as history. But Anthony Seldon's *The Brexit Effect: 2016-2026*, an edited collection of essays published to mark the 10-year anniversary, is in my view a timely book. For those who can bring themselves to step back into those tumultuous times, it provides an important service.

On the Strand Group's MA government studies at King's College London, I teach the Conservative years (2010-24) as ultra-contemporary history, so perhaps my stance on the book's value is not a surprise. Consisting of 36 chapters written by a broad range of well-placed insiders and expert outsiders, *The Brexit Effect* offers reflections on the referendum and the withdrawal negotiations that followed, as well as analysis of the legacy of the UK's departure from the EU and some ambitions for the future. It features political participants from both the leave and remain sides, as well as the views of senior civil servants and analysis by other impartial observers.

Whilst Britain's relationship with the EU is far from resolved, there is still a great deal to be gained from stepping back and reflecting on the process to date, even at this juncture. There are lessons to be captured and deep questions to be asked about our institutions and our politics. Lord Simon Case's chapter notes that the use of "S" (strategy) and "O" (operations) committees to manage Brexit was a machinery of government technique deemed successful enough to be recreated during the Covid-19 pandemic. There will be many more lessons, whether for campaigning or managing and delivering change through government, that may otherwise be lost but for works of contemporary history such as the practitioner-authored chapters of this book. It may not amount to the final or definitive draft of the history of Brexit, but it will surely be cited in it when the dust finally settles, if it ever does.

The diversity of viewpoints is one strength, but the number of different topics and angles discussed by the expert contributors further reflects just how complex the question of leaving the European Union really was. There are chapters exploring politics, economics, psephology, international relations, science and innovation and neuroscience. Writing styles vary, from Douglas Carswell's short, punchy paragraphs to the slightly more difficult to digest (to this historian) economic modelling in Patrick Minford and Zheyi Zhu's chapter. There is some repetition across chapters, with several contributors providing their version of the pre-history leading up to the referendum, for example. However, it is fascinating to observe how different moments and factors are highlighted by remain and leave-inclined authors, further demonstrating how many contrasting interpretations can exist of what is, in theory, the same shared history. Additionally, whilst the book does work if read cover to cover, the repetition can mean that individual chapters stand alone and can be read independently.

Civil servants will surely be interested to read the chapters written by their former peers. Readers may not expect Simon Case's chapter to open with a quotation from Lenin (on the nature of revolutions), but it goes on to provide a masterful yet detached historical sweep of the Brexit process. Helen MacNamara's chapter is more personal in tone, reflecting on the civil service's "default remain" position and its impacts on impartiality. Simon McDonald's chapter is comparatively bullish, explicitly defending the civil service from the accusation that it should have done more to prepare for a leave vote.

"Simon McDonald's chapter is comparatively bullish, defending the civil service from the accusation that it should have done more to prepare for a leave vote"

But there is also great value in reading the partisan contributions, and particularly those who were on the opposing side to the reader. The benefit of a little distance from events must surely be the potential to better comprehend why others made different choices, and the multitude of ways in which the process following the referendum could have been improved. I would personally hope that we are not seriously considering another referendum on any big issues any time soon. But if we were to do so, or even if not, I would hope that we would heed some of the lessons provided across this book's 36 fascinating chapters. ■

Dr Jack Brown is a lecturer in London studies and is part of the Strand Group in the Policy Institute at King's College London

THE PRUCE IS RIGHT

'Stunningly beautiful' The British Virgin Islands are known for their incredible natural environment, including thousands of pink flamingos

What's it like to be a civil servant in a far-flung territory with its own customs and working practices – and a unique set of challenges? **Beckie Smith** speaks to **Daniel Pruce**, governor of the British Virgin Islands, to find out

In his 36 years as a civil servant and diplomat, Daniel Pruce has worked in many impressive and glamorous venues, from No.10 to embassies in Spain and the Philippines. But after becoming governor of the British Virgin Islands just over two years ago, he discovered a more prosaic venue in which to engage with citizens: the supermarket.

"It's made very clear to you, as you're preparing for the governorship, that you are going to be a very visible and high-profile person within the local environment," Pruce tells *CSW*. "I love the fact that people come up to me in the street and want to have a chat about what's going on – anything from the condition of the roads through to global affairs. But you have to get into a mindset where you're prepared for that any time of the day or night." Recently, a "very nice person" stopped him at the supermarket to invite him to an event. He doesn't seem to mind terribly, but says it can be

disconcerting to find "everyone knows what you had in your shopping trolley".

As governor, Pruce acts as the king's representative in the Virgin Islands – a British overseas territory of roughly 30,000 people in the Caribbean which is known for its natural beauty. The territory is managed by an elected government that sits in its House of Assembly, while the governor's responsibilities, set out in the BVI Constitution, include matters of security and disaster preparedness as well as supporting good governance. The governor is also head of the civil service – called the public service – which consists of around 3,000 "public officers".

While he may not have envisioned these trolley-pushing encounters, they do feel in the spirit of the goals Pruce has set for himself. In his swearing-in speech, he pledged to be "as open and transparent" in his work as possible and "accessible to everyone, including all branches of civil society, public servants and the private sector".

To that end, he spends a lot of time visiting community groups and local charities to learn about their work and help raise their profile, as well as hosting fundraisers at his official residence, Government House. He has also been working with local ministries and community partners to provide more support for young people who are at risk of being recruited by criminal networks.

"Governor roles can all be about pomp and ceremony, and separated from the local community that you're working within. In my experience, being an effective governor... it's about getting your sleeves rolled up, getting stuck in," Pruce says. "I am very privileged to be living here in a very nice house. But I consider it a really important part of my job to get out of the house as much as I can, and be out and about in the community."

At times, "getting stuck in" is taken rather literally, like when Pruce showed up to help with the cleanup after Tropical Storm Ernesto in August 2024. "I did find myself out one afternoon trying to wield a pickaxe to clear a blocked drain," he says. "I didn't equip myself particularly successfully with my pickaxe-wielding skills but I did manage to get most of the dirt and grime and mud over myself rather than clearing a lot of it."

When Pruce first joined the Foreign Office in 1990, he never imagined himself becoming the governor of an overseas territory. But then, that's been the case for much of his career. In the 1990s, he worked primarily on European Union issues, during which he once told a minister – with the best of intentions – that a proposed initiative to bang the drum for the benefits of EU membership at an event with a sceptical audience would be a "courageous decision". "There was this look of terror on his face at the prospect of his taking a courageous decision and I think in the end he didn't do it, or he changed the plan quite dramatically," he recalls, laughing. (Pruce had yet to watch the episode of *Yes Minister* in which Sir Humphrey tells a colleague that to put a minister off a proposal, "you must say the decision is 'courageous'" – "a bit of life replicating art", the governor says.)


Daniel Pruce

"You've got to have quite broad shoulders in a job like this"

His wide-ranging career has included two years as British spokesman on EU issues at the UK's Permanent Representation to the EU and a stint at NATO headquarters in Brussels during the Kosovo War in 1999. He has also worked in the No.10 press office and spent three years as the director of the then-FCO's change programme.

He has since held a number of high-flying diplomatic roles: he was deputy head of mission in Bangkok and Madrid before becoming the UK's ambassador to the Philippines in 2017. "It's been a remarkable privilege... It's fascinating how your career path leads you in directions which you wouldn't have predicted, and which give you incredible opportunities to make a positive difference," he says.

Asked about the proudest moments of his career, he recalls the "leadership and logistical challenge" of extracting UK visitors from the Philippines in spring 2020 after Covid hit. "There were very, very high levels of public criticism that the embassy, the government weren't doing enough. I was enormously proud of my team during that very difficult period," he says.

"The Philippines is a country of 7,000 islands and, understandably, many of the Brits that we were trying to get home were not all sitting together neatly in Manila. They were in these far-flung, remote islands scattered across the entirety of the country," he says. Getting them to an airport sometimes meant organising a tuk tuk, a speedboat, a motorbike and a taxi – "literally working out every little stage of the journey to get people from these locations where they were completely stuck through no fault of their own".

Pruce says he has an "abundance" of opportunities to make a positive impact in his current job too. While there is still a "large amount of diplomacy" involved, he says he found the prospect of having a "high level of accountability" for specific public services a new and compelling challenge.

"Those are all great jobs and I totally loved doing them. But, as you'd expect, in a diplomatic role you're very much focused on understanding and influencing the environment that you're in, the government that's hosting you," he says.

By contrast, Pruce says he has been struck by how quickly his decisions as governor can impact local people. "Previously in my career, the distance between the decision point and the public delivery point felt very lengthy... here, things feel much more compressed," he says. Adjusting traffic patrols, for example, "can have a very visible impact in literally a matter of days" – which is "quite exhilarating". But, he adds: "It also means that you have to be very confident the decisions you're taking are proportionate, balanced and effective. Because if things are going well, that's very visible but equally, if they're going wrong, that's also very visible."

Pruce arrived in office in January 2024, 18 months after the publication of the highly critical Commission of Inquiry report – a major review to investigate corruption and abuse of office that found the people of the BVI had "been badly served in recent years". Led by former Court of Appeal judge Sir Gary Hickinbottom (now president of Welsh Tribunals), the review identified systemic, "endemic" corruption, dishonesty and a disregard for the rule of law in BVI governance. The governance failures were such that the UK government drafted an Order in Council after the inquiry, which would have enabled ministers to temporarily »

Lest we forget Pruce with veterans on Remembrance Day at Government House

suspend the BVI's constitution and implement direct rule had the recommendations of the report not been carried out.

By the time Pruce became governor, he says, progress on tackling the 48 recommendations that arose from the inquiry had lost momentum. For the first few months on the job, he focused on getting the "very challenging schedule of work" back on track.

"You were looking at everything from establishing an integrity commission, to improving the way that appointments to statutory boards were being handled, to making the administration of social support grants more transparent and more effective. The CoI reached right across every dimension of government," he says, "and so it was a very significant body of work for any jurisdiction to take on, particularly a small one."

Over the course of 2024, Pruce and local officials made "real inroads" into some of the main recommendations. The Order in Council was lifted on 13 March this year, which Pruce calls "a significant positive step forwards". "I think the challenge is: we have the legislation, the regulations, the frameworks in place to ensure improved governance. The focus now has to be on effective implementation," he says.

That implementation sits "very much on the locally elected government's shoulders" but Pruce has an important role to play in monitoring progress, reporting to ministers and facilitating support from the UK government where it is needed.

BVI's own Pruce congratulates Dame Janice M. Pereira on her Privy Council appointment

The CoI also led to a thorough review of the territory's justice and security sector by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue in 2023 – including the governor's areas of responsibility, such as the police force and the territory's prison, as well as some areas overseen by the local government, such as immigration and customs. The inspectorate identified serious failings across the territory's nine law enforcement and criminal justice agencies – some "so serious as to endanger the lives of staff and the public" – and a "serious lack of anti-corruption focus". Across two reports, it made more than 500 recommendations for the agencies related to, among other things, standards of behaviour, training and treatment of detainees.

"You have to be very confident the decisions you're taking are proportionate, balanced and effective. If things are going well, that's very visible; if they're going wrong, that's also very visible"

Pruce has been working with the local government to develop a programme of work to deliver those changes over the next decade – beyond his term as governor. "My objective is to ensure that we build as much momentum as we can in these early stages and that we have a good programme framework in place for the work to continue after I've moved on," he says. "If we get it right, the benefits will be very noticeable and very significant. If we get it wrong, they won't be. So it's a really concrete example of the application of some of the core civil service skills you pick up over your career in terms of effecting change to benefit the citizen and delivering in the real world."

The programme includes the introduction of a robust system to vet police officers and, later, prison, immigration and customs officers. The BVI's nearly 300-strong police force is "operating in an environment where the real-world challenges of criminality are becoming more complex and more challenging", Pruce says; organised crime is a significant challenge for the territory, largely driven by financial crime and drug trafficking. The lack of a vetting system and historical funding deficits have hindered its efforts, he says.

The vetting process "will contribute enormously to levels of public confidence and trust in the police officers that

Getting stuck in Assisting with the cleanup after Storm Ernesto

are ensuring the security of the jurisdiction", Pruce says. "So it's a big thing. It's something that we need to put in place as rapidly as we can but it's also something where there is no precedent or local existing capability that we can build upon."

BVI officials are therefore working with the International Policing Assistance Service, which operates under the authority of the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Home Office, to develop the vetting system using a programme-based approach. "We're relying very heavily on Home Office systems," adds Pruce – who is keen throughout the interview to stress how "absolutely critical" cross-government engagement is to the successful governance of the BVI.

There are now regulations and legislation in place to support the programme of work, and Pruce and his colleagues are working to finalise agreements with the agencies involved to enable more information sharing.

The final piece of the puzzle is political communication. "People's responses to the prospect of being vetted will vary," Pruce says. "Some are comfortable with it; some are less comfortable. Some have a good understanding; some not so much. So we've spent a lot of time engaging across the force, across the political spectrum, to try to explain that this is a process which isn't about catching people out. It's actually about giving officers themselves a level of protection [by identifying potential vulnerabilities]... and also providing a level of confidence and trust amongst the general public in terms of how the police are operating."

CSW wonders if Pruce's diplomatic experience has helped here. Absolutely, he says: "A lot of what the governor in this role – in any governance role – is trying to achieve is bound up with the ability to communicate, to influence, to deal with legitimate issues that others may raise, which need solutions. So the whole business of discussion, accommodation,

Picturesque Tortola, the BVI's biggest island

understanding – those core civil service skills you learn as you're delivering results are absolutely critical to this."

That also means being able to withstand feedback when making unpopular decisions. "You have to focus on what you're trying to achieve, rather than any personal criticism that may be thrown at you... You've got to have quite broad shoulders in a job like this," he says.

He also stresses the importance of having humility and an open mind. "I've never supervised a police force before. I've never delivered a vetting programme before. And I think it's really essential to acknowledge as governor that you're moving into areas where you yourself need to learn as well and not to make any assumptions based on your previous experience, and be very mindful that... this is going to require you to learn new things and develop yourself and learn a lot from the people around you."

That humility emerges when *CSW* asks how Pruce winds down from work. He describes himself as a "very bad runner", which he says is as much about enjoying peace and solitude in the early morning as it is about exercise. "I think it is very true on a small island that you do need to just get away [sometimes]. That's not because there's anything unpleasant about being here. But this concept of island fever, I think, is quite real." Visiting the BVI's sister islands or spending a few days further afield "makes a big difference to the ability to recharge [as well as] keeping things in perspective and giving yourself some downtime", he adds.

But he is also quick to extol the territory's virtues: "One of the great joys of being here is it is a stunningly beautiful natural environment. The opportunity to see incredible bird life, plant life, marine life is literally on your doorstep." He has seen thousands of pink flamingos, which inhabit the salt plains of the northernmost island, Anegada, and turtles swimming past him in the sea. "It's just incredible," he says. "You never forget what a precious privilege it is to be working somewhere where you have ready access to very special things like that." ■

Top brass Pruce with HMS Trent's commanding officer. The Royal Navy ship helped with the Storm Ernesto clean-up

DANIEL PRUCE ON... BVI CIVIL SERVANTS

"You've got some fantastic talent within that service – very committed to their roles across the full range of ministries, working within an administrative culture which has developed over time and which has some differences to the way things work in the UK civil service... I'm not saying things are better or worse. They're just different. You need to put the time in to get the hang of that, and to ensure that you're bringing people along with you.

"The population of the territory is less than 30,000 people. The decisions that you make will have a direct impact on a significant proportion of that relatively small population so taking the time to invest in proper discussion, consultation, stakeholder engagement is particularly important in this environment and is hard-wired into the administrative processes."

Mark Rawlinson shares wisdom he gleaned over nearly a decade as lead non-executive director at the MoJ

When I was appointed to be lead NED at the Ministry of Justice in June 2018, I had spent 26 years as a partner at the law firm Freshfields and was halfway through a five-year stint as an investment banker at Morgan Stanley. So I was a novice in the public sector, bringing a private sector perspective, but with no understanding of the challenges presented by a rotating cast of ministers, the constraints faced by an "unprotected" department or the systemic risks.

"Don't become a member of either tribe" (Sir Richard Heaton). This early piece of advice from my first permanent secretary seemed logical at the time but over the years, I gravitated more to the civil servants. Generally, they sought advice and support more than ministers (honourable exceptions included Lucy Frazer in the early days and James Timpson more recently). During my nearly eight-year stint (finally stepping down in March this year) I saw seven lord chancellors, or LCs. They all brought their different policies, priorities, personalities and enthusiasms to what is a huge and difficult role. Each rotation caused a degree of stasis as we waited to understand any new policy priorities or subtle changes of direction. They also differed in the degree to which they applied the political lens: "This change might be in the best interests of the justice system, but how will it play out politically?" And each new face at the top brought the inevitable churn at junior minister level and a reallocation of portfolios, neither of which assisted efficient delivery. That said, each LC was appreciative of the institutional knowledge that the NEDs brought and most were remarkably open to constructive challenge.

"Show me the money" (from the film *Jerry Maguire*). Funding challenges are a fact of life in government departments, particularly if you are "unprotected". Being a massive downstream delivery department, over-reliant on legacy systems, makes you particularly susceptible to demand changes over which you have no control. This is exacerbated by an agency structure that multiplies the layers of management, blurs responsibility and accountability, and complicates delivery. Technology is consistently touted as the solution, but investment to replace legacy systems is often too little or a casualty of the allocations process. Arguably, we have too little tech and too many people – someone like me, schooled in the private sector, will inevitably counsel that it is easier to move to a high-performance culture if you pay your top performers (and I have met many) a lot more and remove the "part performers" (which seems hard or very expensive to do).

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go" (T.S. Eliot). Because of the lack of investment, departments carry a huge amount of risk. Crises are business as usual. Too often, "amber" is seen as good enough and the "path to green" is a route less trodden. When sustaining the day-to-day operation of the system is an achievement in itself, that does not leave much appetite for (even managed) risk-taking or space for innovation. But if the primary focus is always assurance rather than innovation, real change will not happen.

"Be the change you wish to see" (Gandhi). The civil service knows it has to modernise if it is to consistently achieve excellence in delivery. Dame Antonia Romeo – who was awesome to work with for four years at the MoJ – has the vision and "grip" to modernise. She is a high performer with a "can-do" mentality who will lead by example and engender the loyalty of her top team. She needs everyone's support in her massive role. ■

Mark Rawlinson was lead NED at the Ministry of Justice from 2018 to 2026

CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

TRAILBLAZING WOMEN

70 YEARS

CELEBRATING Seven Decades of Female Permanent Secretaries

Discover the stories of women who have shaped leadership across government

***CSW*'s Trailblazing Women Hub brings together profiles, interviews and archival features that celebrate 70 years of progress and highlight the people redefining public service today**

civilserviceworld.com/trailblazing-women

QA™

Supporting Copilot adoption across government

Structured learning pathways for every role

QA's **Copilot Adoption Accelerator Learning Paths** bring together the human skills and technical knowledge needed for truly effective AI adoption.

Microsoft Solutions Partner
Microsoft Cloud
Training Services

Scan to explore QA's Copilot learning pathways

QA.com