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SARAH MUNBY

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permanent secretary

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CSW chews the cud with
FSA chief Emily Miles

WRAGG AGAINST THE MACHINE

William Wragg reflects
on being PACAC chair

ROBO-BUREAUCRACY

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DLUHC's Emran Mian on driving
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Alex Chisholm
Megan Lee Devlin
Mark Thompson

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FROM THE EDITOR

When writing about change in government, we are sometimes reminded of the Martin Luther King quote which former US president Barack Obama had woven into a rug for the Oval Office: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

Change might be slow coming in the civil service, but over time there is progress. The steady growth of gender diversity in the senior civil service is one instance of this, or the momentum building behind Places for Growth, which is seeing a meaningful shift in where and how civil servants work.

The phrase also came to mind when we met the Cabinet Office's Mark Thompson, whose job title (head of data, platforms and interoperability) obscures the fact that his team is supporting fundamental and long-awaited change which will make it easier for civil servants to work together on tricky cross-cutting challenges.

Thompson's team is standing on the shoulders of those who have developed functions across government – bringing together skills and capability from tech, data, HR and property to help the civil service run

better. And the work they do feeds into many other arcs of progress: helping to improve socio-economic diversity, for example, or being more strategic about using skills across government and building new skills for the future.

Yet while some conversations remind us that the civil service *is* changing for the better, this only serves to highlight the areas where the arc of change seems to be bending not towards better government, but towards dysfunction. The Institute for Government has written some excellent reports on how government handled Brexit and responded to Covid. In both instances, the IfG found examples of secrecy between departments, reflecting the breakdown of the processes of cabinet government which have allowed ministerial interests to be balanced and conflicts resolved in the past.

The resignation of Dominic Raab was first and foremost a reflection on his own behaviour. But it also highlighted the problems of a system where ministers on the one hand do not have enough power – feeling they cannot effect meaningful change because the levers of government are



slow or unconnected – and on the other too much, with limited protection for the civil servants who work with them.

The idea of a new statutory basis for the civil service, as set out by the IfG, is attractive because it would allow our elected representatives to debate and perhaps correct some of these longstanding tensions which civil servants alone cannot address.

In America, some liberal activists criticised Obama for placing so much emphasis on Dr King's arc of the moral universe quote – they felt it suggests there is no need for hard, reforming, radical work to bring about change if it will simply happen with the

passage of time. So it is in the civil service: what progress we see – whether in diversity, skills or structures – is thanks to the hard work of officials like Mark Thompson, and politicians who understand what makes good government.

Addressing the underlying problems around power and accountability will also require hard work and – dare we say it – moral conviction. Reforming the civil service isn't easily translated into populist soundbites, and making a case for change requires an honest assessment of both official and political problems. But it is essential if we are to have a government which works for the people it serves. ■

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MOVERS & SHAKERS



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

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

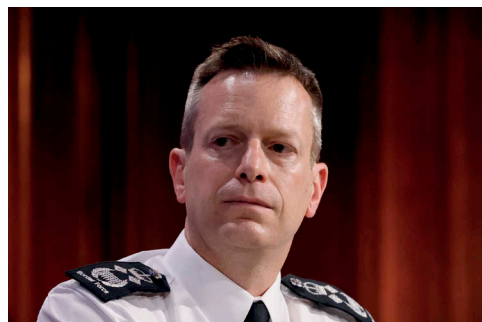
GRAY AREA

Sue Gray controversially quit in March as second permanent secretary at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to join Labour leader Keir Starmer as his chief of staff. At the time of going to press, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments had not formally published its advice on her move, but it was being reported that the committee would recommend that she could start the role in the Autumn after a six-month break. Gray, who became a household name for her Partygate report, leaves after an extensive career in the civil service, including a four-year stint as director general of propriety and ethics at the Cabinet Office.



SECOND PAIR OF HANDS

Three new second permanent secretaries have been appointed in recent months, following departures both within and away from government.



Border Force director general **Paul Lincoln** (above) has replaced Laurence Lee as second perm sec at the Ministry of Defence. His responsibilities include digital transformation; security and resilience (including cyber security); space policy; science and technology; safety; defence strategy; net assessment and challenge; trade and economic security; and strategic relationships with industry.

Jo Shanmugalingam has been appointed second permanent secretary at the Department for Transport, following her predecessor Gareth Davies's move to the Department for Business and Trade. A former director general at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and briefly at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, she will lead on "a number of high-profile areas" at DfT, including decarbonising transport.

Sam Beckett (below) is the next chief



economic adviser to the Treasury, succeeding Clare Lombardelli, who left to head up the OECD in March. Beckett will be head of the Government Economic Service, which she previously jointly led with Lombardelli.

KEYS TO GCHQ



Anne Keast-Butler has become the Government Communications Headquarters' first female chief, joining from MI5, where she was deputy director general. Keast-Butler replaced Sir Jeremy Fleming last month, who had held the same role in MI5 before he was appointed to lead GCHQ six years ago.

20-YEAR ROAD TO THE TOP

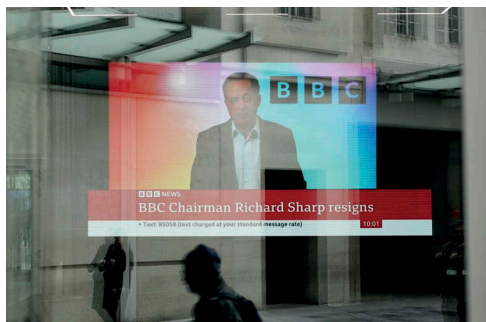
Dax Harkins is the new chief executive of National Savings and Investments. Harkins has worked for the organisation for 20 years and has been acting chief exec since March.

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt appointed him to the role on a permanent basis following an open recruitment process launched after Ian Ackerley – who had spent six years in the role – retired.



BBC-YOU LATER

In another high-profile appointments row, BBC chair **Richard Sharp** resigned after it was found he had breached the code on public appointments as a result of his involvement in helping secure an £800,000 loan to Boris Johnson.



MAXED OUT

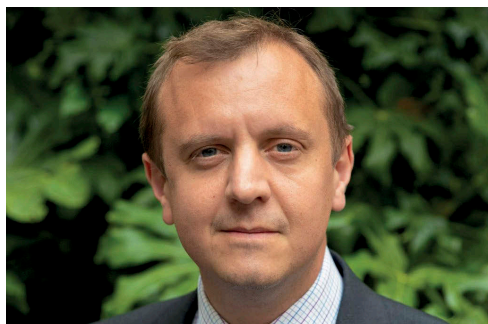
Max Hill KC will stand down as director of public prosecutions at the Crown Prosecution Service. Hill is set to leave his permanent-secretary level role in October after five years in post. The CPS has hired head hunters Gatenby-Sanderson to find his replacement.



ANOTHER WAY OUT

Tim Leunig will leave his current position as a senior policy adviser at the Department of Health and Social Care this summer, ending a 12-year spell working for government. The former economic adviser to Rishi Sunak, who last year said he expected to be made redundant as part of the now-scraped proposals to cut 91,000 jobs, will join the consultancy Public First.

POSITION FILLED



Philip Duffy has been appointed Environment Agency chief executive and is due to start on 1 July. He replaces Sir James Bevan, who left in March. Duffy joins from the Treasury, where he is currently DG for growth and productivity.

JOINT WORKING



Madeleine Alessandri will become chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee and Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation from 1 July, succeeding Simon Gass and moving from her position as permanent secretary of the Northern Ireland Office. Alessandri was previously the deputy national security adviser, a post she held from 2018 to 2020.

GONE FISSION

Justin Kingsford has joined the UK Atomic Energy Authority as chief operating officer. He previously held a number of roles in the Ministry of Defence after serving in The King's Royal Hussars, with deployments in Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Afghanistan. Working alongside him will be **Ruth Elliot**, who joined the agency as chief financial officer and director of corporate services. Elliot has held a number of jobs across the public sector including policy and finance roles at the former Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and, most recently, time at UK Research & Innovation as finance director and then deputy CFO.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

Sir Peter Bazalgette has been appointed as an expert to support the government chief scientific adviser, Dame Angela McLean, with investigating the pro-innovation regulation of the creative industries. McLean took over from Sir Patrick Vallance in April.



Richard Corbridge has joined the Department for Work and Pensions as chief digital and information officer. The former NHS and Boots technology leader has replaced retiring digital chief Simon McKinnon.

Adrian Usher (*right*) has been appointed as the new prisons and probation ombudsman, joining on a three-year contract.

Mark Cheeseman has been appointed permanently as chief executive of the Public Sector Fraud Authority, after filling the position on an interim basis since August.

Gwen Parry-Jones became Great British Nuclear's first CEO, joining on an interim basis in May alongside interim chair **Simon Bowen**. The new body was announced earlier this year to drive a UK "nuclear renaissance".

Paul Douglas has been appointed interim adjudicator by HM Revenue & Customs, taking over from Helen Megarry.

Stephen Lightfoot will stand down as chair of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency on 11 July.

Harjinder Kang was appointed as His Majesty's Trade Commissioner to South Asia and deputy high commissioner for Western India, succeeding Alan Gemmell OBE.

Dipesh Shah will stand down as chair of National Highways at the end of his current term later this year.

Ian Peters has been re-appointed as chair of the UK Health Security Agency for three years from 1 April.

Alan Pickering has been appointed as non-executive chair of the Civil Service Pension Board for three years.

Belinda Black's term as interim chair of Healthwatch England has been extended until 31 July or until a new chair is appointed.

Keith Fraser was re-appointed as chair of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales for two years from 14 April.

Julienne Meyer, a leading expert in care for older people, has been appointed as the chair of the Older People's Housing Taskforce, which will help unlock more housing options for older people. The task-force will run for up to 12 months and will produce an independent report to DLUHC and DHSC ministers, with interim findings available after six months. ■

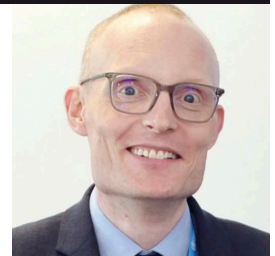


DIRECTORS' CUT

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

DAVID WHINERAY

Director, global health, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office



What does your job involve?

I lead a brilliant team of around 100 people in FCDO's global health directorate. We're responsible for global health security, diplomacy and development - everything from negotiating a global pandemic agreement, reforming the World Health Organization and addressing the impacts of climate change on health, to championing sexual and reproductive rights, healthcare in Ukraine, tackling antimicrobial resistance and supporting UK science and technology. We also oversee approximately £1bn in UK aid programmes to help strengthen countries' health systems; support work on clean water, vaccinations, AIDS, malaria, TB

“The most bizarre thing that's happened? A senior civil servant years ago advising me not to tell people I'm dyslexic”
David Whineray

and malnutrition; and help end preventable deaths of mothers, babies and children.

To do your job well you need...

A great team – and passion for the cause. You also need to be able to work with the US, EU, other allies and global health organisations and funds, such as the Gates Foundation and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance. Multilateral skills are important to work the G7, G20, WHO and UN angles. You also need to make sure UK global health programmes are effective. And work as One Team across Whitehall.

First job in government?

Working in the international and organised

crime directorate in the Home Office.

Proudest achievement to date?

On policy, when I worked for the UK Mission to the UN we negotiated a Security Council resolution – despite Chinese and Russian reluctance – deploying the world's largest peacekeeping force in Darfur. On the corporate side, when I was FCO deputy human resources director we secured HMT's agreement – despite a pay freeze – to a 10% pay rise for some underpaid FCO staff. People thought both weren't possible.

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

A senior civil servant years ago advising

me not to tell people I'm dyslexic because it could damage my job prospects.

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

Looking for a job.

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

Not to spend your whole career in one department but work across Whitehall – and to gain experience in the private sector too. That was from a permanent secretary.

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

Pay. So civil servants aren't paid less each year in real terms. ■

JAMES DOWLER

Director for international, rights and constitutional policy, Ministry of Justice



What does your job involve?

Justice cooperation with partners around the globe, with the Council of Europe and the UN, the Crown Dependencies and the devolved governments.

To do your job well you need...

Success is a team effort – and they are fantastic! We are motivated by the importance of human rights and the rule of law, and a desire to help ministers to grapple with these issues.

First job in government?

Enabling service personnel in Afghanistan to vote in the 2010 general election. Constitutional policy isn't just conceptual, it has a real impact on people's lives.

“The theory of the incomplete leader is empowering. Nobody is the complete package”
James Dowler

Proudest achievement to date?

My team's support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion, to make sure the independent International Criminal Court can investigate war crimes. In March we held the Justice Ministers' Conference at Lancaster House in London (*see pic*), which brought together more than 40 countries to



offer financial and expert help to the ICC prosecutor. President Zelenskyy spoke by video link: so powerful and memorable.

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

In the Middle East we had lunch with a justice minister, a real honour. Mouth-watering food was served. I took several helpings and was completely full as our plates were cleared. Then the main course came out...

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

Involved in public policy in some way. It's what I find most interesting.

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

The theory of the incomplete leader is empowering (and helps with imposter syndrome). Nobody is the complete package, so understand what you're good at, work on the gaps, and draw strength from the team's collective skills.

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

The civil service can get a hard time in the media, unfairly so. I'd use the wand to change those inaccurate perceptions. ■ ➤

BECKY MORRISON AND HANNAH MALIK

Director of civil society and youth (job share),
Department for Culture, Media and Sport



What does your job involve?

We lead a directorate of around 100 brilliant and highly motivated people who have policy responsibility for civil society – charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises – as well as out-of-school youth services. The voluntary and community sector is huge and diverse, and works with policymakers across government – for instance, a large health charity will be plugged into the Department of Health and Social Care. We don't try to cut across those relationships; instead, we steward the sector as a whole and work closely with umbrella sector bodies on pan-sector issues, such as the impact on charities of cost of living issues, on which we recently achieved a Budget announcement of £100m in emergency funding for charities dealing with increased demand from vulnerable people. We also have specific policy responsibility for volunteering, tackling loneliness and youth services such as youth clubs and uniformed youth groups like Scouts. It's the best job in the world!

To do your job well you need...

Passion for helping those people

in our society who most need it, as that's who charities work with.

First job in government?

Hannah came into the Department for Work and Pensions as a fast streamer around 20 years ago and spent much of her career working on pensions policy. Becky worked in other parts of the public sector, in strategic communications, and entered government as a G6 in pen-

“Sometimes it feels like the process can eat the people a bit. We need to guard against that, and not be afraid to question the machine”

Becky Morrison and Hannah Malik

sions comms. We formed our job share in 2013 as programme director for pensions automatic enrolment, then moved to the Treasury and then to DCMS.

Proudest achievement to date?

Ten million people saving into a pension for the first time as a result of automatic enrolment was a great thing to have been part of, as was achieving £100m for chari-

ties in the recent Budget. But really, our proudest achievement is always when people say they've enjoyed working with us. We're all about leading teams of people who are passionate about what they do and kind in the way they do it.

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

I (Becky) once found myself dancing with Nadine Dorries to a soul band in the of-

fice, while watching Hannah kill herself laughing out of the corner of my eye. I needed the trip to the pub that followed.

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

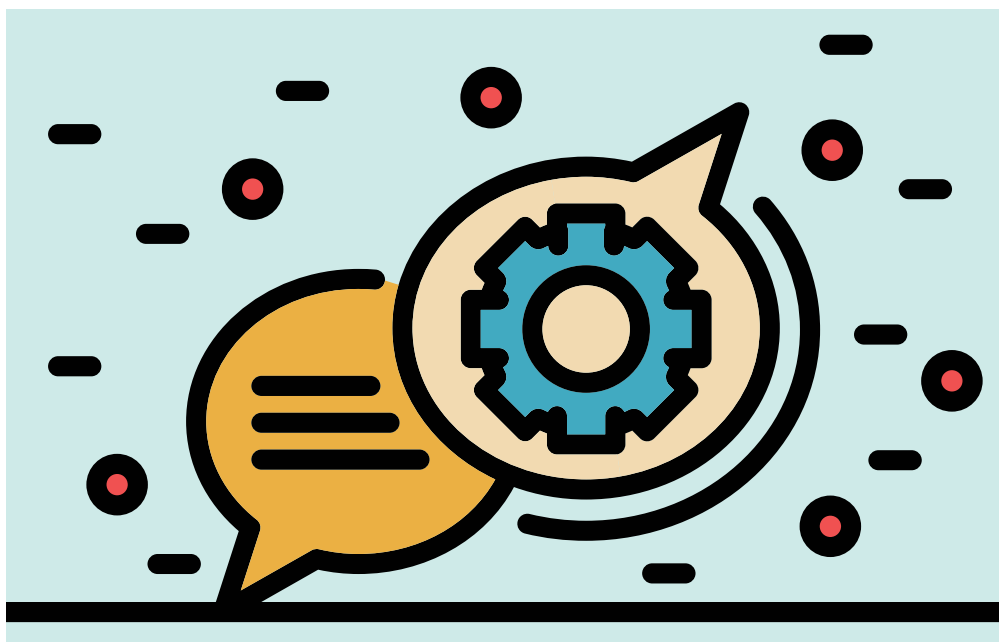
Professional knitter/crocheter (Hannah) and novelist (Becky). Both pretty unrealistic, to be fair. We'll stick to the day job.

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

Be yourself. So easy to forget when you're peppered with other advice about what to do and how to be, and especially when you're in a challenging or unfamiliar environment. But that's when it becomes even more important.

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

Sometimes it feels like the process can eat the people a bit (which probably happens in any big organisation). We need to guard more against that, and not be afraid to question the machine, even if it feels like hard work. The other thing we'd change is the outside world's perception of the civil service, which is so often outdated and downright wrong; and unlike most professions, we aren't able to go out there and defend ourselves publicly. ■



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Surinder, Senior Graphic Designer, DDaT



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Sarah, Assistant Librarian, National Police Library

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Simone, Digital Delivery and Planning Lead, DDaT

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Frank, Policing Standards Manager for Counter Terrorism



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INNOVATOR PITCH

Sarah Munby speaks to **Suzannah Brecknell** about her priorities for her new department, her experience of joining government as a director general, and the importance of not fretting. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

At the heart of what used to be just the Treasury's building in London is an unusual circular court, known as The Drum. The sweeping lines of windows and the classical architecture make for a wonderful photoshoot backdrop, but Sarah Munby is a little worried. Is this archetypal Whitehall building a bit too traditional for the head of a department with innovation and technology at its heart, she wonders, before joking that she should have brought a science-based prop with her. The permanent secretary is only half convinced by *CSW's* reassurance that the courtyard was once used as a location for a James Bond film, and which crown servant has better tech than 007? Munby is not setting out to equip officials with jet packs and exploding pens, however, so perhaps a better argument

would have been that photographing her in The Drum illustrates the increasingly collaborative and location-agnostic work of the civil service. The building - once exclusively home to the Treasury - now houses civil servants from at least five departments, with Munby and her colleagues from the recently created Department for Science, Innovation and Technology among its newest residents.

Munby is in fact so new to the building that she nearly gets lost as we return to her airy, but temporary, office for a discussion covering her priorities for the new department, her optimism about how the civil service has changed and is changing, and the importance of tackling hierarchy to support innovation.

And although she's yet to move into her permanent base at 1 Horse Guards, she's personalised this space with a display of artwork made by her young children - or the "mini-Munbies", as she memorably described them in





an all-staff memo sent on the day the new department was announced.

“Well that was a call I didn’t expect,” the memo began. “One minute it’s packing the mini-Munbies off to school and the next minute, the boss wants to speak.”

As well as reflecting her down-to-earth style and dry humour, the message demonstrated the importance she places on the people she works with, and being as human as possible in the way she leads them. Her own reaction to the creation of a new department was enthusiasm tinged with sadness (see p.16), and she was conscious that her staff would likely have similarly mixed feelings. “Most change is like that, isn’t it? There’s upsides and downsides,” she says. So, while the creation of DSIT has a “compelling logic”, she was keen to acknowledge her staff’s inevitable feelings of uncertainty and to reassure them about their jobs.

The need to be an honest, open leader was starkly apparent when she took up her first perm sec post at the now-disbanded Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Munby had only been a civil servant for a year when she took on that role in the summer of 2020, having joined the department as a director general following a career with the consultancy firm McKinsey.

She would later tell a Women into Leadership conference that new jobs should be like children’s shoes “half a size too big, because you need space to develop”. But even with that wisdom in

mind it must have been a shock to step into the perm sec role while she was still so new to government, and the country was navigating the early stages of Covid.

“It was a bit crazy,” she tells CSW with a smile, but then adds: “It seems weird to say it, but in many ways I think starting in the pandemic was really good for me.” It pushed her and other leaders across all sectors into “an even more open and human style of leadership,” she says.

“It was the homeschooling, the pets, the cooking, the seeing into people’s lives – and seeing into our leaders’ lives. I think it was really healthy to have it brought home to me early on just how important it is to allow everybody in the workplace to bring their whole self to work, to be authentically themselves.”

Taking on the permanent secretary role in a pandemic also highlighted the importance of looking after people in your team. “The challenges that people were going through, combined with what we were asking of them, which was enormous, made you – as a senior leader – constantly think about people, and about how they were feeling, what they needed, how you could support them.

“Of course, that feels obvious and we should have been doing it just as much before the pandemic as we were during the pandemic, but having that made absolutely front and centre from day one as a perm sec, I think it probably did me a lot of good and saved me from mistakes I might have otherwise made.”

Munby says she was drawn to the civil service because of “the impact: the scale and the scope of the problems that we get to work on”, and she certainly got scale and scope when she joined. In less than four years she has worked on problems which she describes as “not even once-in-a-lifetime things, they’re once-in-five-lifetimes things”.

These include supporting businesses during Covid, developing the net-zero strategy – “that is country-changing, world-changing, it feels like you’re holding the future in your hands” – and supporting households through the energy crisis.

“Any one of those would be something you’d look back on and say, ‘Wow, that was the achievement of a career,’” she says. “To be able to just do a sequence, one after another is just... I’m a fangirl of the whole thing. The privilege, the opportunity is, I think, completely unrivalled.”

That privilege and opportunity, though, come with a fair amount of pressure. CSW wonders how Munby unwinds from those once-in-five-lifetimes projects. Her answer returns to the mini-Munbies whose art brightens her office.

“I’ve got three kids under 10. They are not as interested as perhaps they should be in the intricacies of science, innovation and technology policy,” she says. “But they are very interested in practical matters like what’s for tea, and whether they can watch more television. I find that very grounding.”

The ability to switch off at home is also something Munby has developed across her career – she sees it as vital to performing at her best. “One of the things I often talk about is how confidence is a really important enabler of performance: you do your best work when you feel confident. And anxiety is really damaging both to you as an individual and to your ability to have impact,” she says.

“You need to care about things, you need to be committed to things, but fretting and worrying in your downtime, doesn’t help. I have got much better at this. At the end of the day, I stop, I’m done. I don’t play the movies in my brain again and again, nearly as much as I did when I was more junior in the workplace.”

As we talk, Munby gives her answers slowly, weighing up her responses and taking time to find the right phrases and words. It’s not clear if this is a skill she’s built over a career in consultancy and government, or one that she had already developed in a shorter stint as a world-class de-

MUNBY ON... JOINING GOVERNMENT FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

“I joined the civil service for the impact, but I stayed for the people. The talent of the people I get to work with is extraordinary. And it’s a whole combination of different things: it’s the dedication and the commitment to service, and the willingness to go above and beyond. That’s partly to do with the scale of the problems that we’re working on. I mean, it’s hard stuff and people really show up. But also the level of expertise, the skills, the ability to handle complexity... I often say every day’s a school day – the opportunity to learn from people around me is immense.

“Something else that really matters to me is that, by and large, this

is a really positive, inclusive place to work. People are collaborative, fun, nice. So I was drawn in by these really, really big problems. I love a big problem. I want to make a real difference. But then the lived experience is: wow, I get to do that *and* I get to work alongside really incredible people.”

...AND EXPECTATIONS OF GOVERNMENT VS. REALITY

“The biggest surprise is how completely inaccurate a lot of the labels are. I think a really good example is about speed. You often hear chatter from the outside about the civil service being slow. And then you arrive and a lot of the time you think ‘Oh my God, we’re operating at warp speed’. In general, the vast majority of the surprise has been on the upside.”

“We must be the most innovative department in government. Given what we do, it sort of goes without saying”



MUNBY ON... WHETHER THE CIVIL SERVICE IS GOOD AT ACCEPTING OUTSIDERS

“I’ve found the system and the people to be immensely welcoming, interested in me, just as I am interested in them – a kind of two-way curiosity. I felt I was able to get stuck in quickly and I’ve made really strong personal connections across the system.

“So my personal experience has been really positive. But the numbers and the data show that it clearly isn’t always like that. And we’ve got more to do. I’m pretty optimistic about porosity, for a few reasons. One is that I think that Places for Growth is a massive opportunity. It’s forcing the civil service to tap into talent pools that we haven’t gone after, and giving amazing people from outside an opportunity to come and join us that hasn’t existed at that scale before. So that feels like somewhere we’re making really good progress. And it’s completely complementary to the porosity agenda.

“I also think the rise of more functional and more focused roles really helps bring in external talent. People

don’t just want to know that there’s impact in general, they want to know that they personally are going to be able to make a difference and use their skills. And so a greater variety of different types of senior roles is really helpful.”

...AND KEEPING UP THE MOMENTUM AROUND PLACES FOR GROWTH

“In large part, this goes back to culture, just constantly avoiding the gravitational pull of the people who are closest to you in terms of physical proximity. So, for example, it’s every time you find yourself discussing any corporate issues, starting with: ‘What does this mean outside London?’ and ‘Have we thought about your perspectives?’

“And we should be honest, by the way, that this change has been enormously technologically enabled by the fact that people can really participate at the highest level, and that ministers are prepared to participate in conversations over video. That is why I truly believe this change is going to stick, when changes that we’ve made in the past haven’t.”

bater. In 1999 Munby and three school-mates reached the finals of the World School Debating Championships.

When asked if those debating skills come in more handy as a civil servant or as a mother-of-three, Munby is quick to draw a distinction between an orderly government department and a young family. “I’m always a little bit suspicious of the suggestion that the skills that you build in the workplace are helpful at home. I like to think that structure, rationality and respect for personal space are powerful forces in the workplace, but they don’t appear to apply in my chaotic home,” she says.





Structure, reason and respect for personal space seem like a pretty good start for a new department, but Munby's priorities for DSIT extend beyond these basics. Her first priority is around the role and influence the department will wield – she has “high ambitions” that once the new department finds its place in the structure of government its voice will be a strong one. Secondly she's focused on ensuring DSIT can “attract and retain the best [people]” to deliver on ministers' priorities. Finally, she wants it to be the most innovative department in government – “given what we do, it sort of goes without saying”.

The creation of a department which brings together science and technology policy from across government was broadly welcomed – save for a few raised

MUNBY ON... HER REACTION TO THE CREATION OF DSIT

“Probably like most people, I felt a mixture of things. On the one hand, I'd been in BEIS for quite some time, and I really loved that department. So there's a bit of sadness in there. But then also lots of excitement for the change and the new opportunities. Lots of bits of the DSIT portfolio have actually been on my dream list for a while. I'm delighted to get my hands on digital and technology policies – that area is absolutely fascinating and world-shaping, it's exactly the kind of thing I get out of bed for.

“On a practical level I wanted to give people reassurance and positivity as quickly as possible. My brain immediately went to those questions of who to tell what when, and how. Because lots of people were going to be affected by the change, and you want people to find out in the right way.

“Ultimately, machinery of government changes have their challenges, but we know how to do them. And this one, I think, had a pretty compelling logic. But you need to say fast what's going on, and that people's jobs are safe and that their career opportunities are there, and that it's going to be all right. So I think that was top of mind for me.”

...AND HER PRIORITIES FOR DSIT

“I'm really ambitious for DSIT. Perhaps that goes without saying, but it's a new department, and it's got to find its place in the firmament. And I think given the

critical importance of what we're doing to shape tomorrow's economy and people's lives, we need to have a really high aspiration for our influence, our voice, and our role. That's about how we behave, how we work with others, how we lead at a system level, in Whitehall, in the economy at large, with the private sector, and academia, and internationally.

“The second thing is people. In a department like this, you've got one strategic asset, which is your people: their expertise, their ideas, the work that they do. So quite apart from the fact that I want to lead an organisation that's a great place to work, I think if we're going to deliver ministers' priorities, we have to be able to attract and retain the best. So all of the dimensions that go into being a great place to work, our culture of inclusivity, our learning and development, the career opportunities, that is all crucial for me. And I think we've got an opportunity to shape something really special and interesting here.

“The third thing is walking the walk on innovation. And I'm excited to use DSIT as a place where we can encourage experimentation, take a higher risk appetite, really listen to people at every level in the organisation and look for ways to streamline processes, make sure we're really at the very front of the pack in how we use technology in the way that we work. We must be the most innovative department in government. Given what we do, it sort of goes without saying. But it's worth saying I really think that's about building on strength that we already have. So not just here, but in the civil service as a whole.”

eyebrows at the disruption which machinery of government changes always bring – but one observer CSW spoke to did raise a concern about how to ensure these policy areas would retain influence in the centre of government now that the Government Office for Science no longer sits in Cabinet Office. Will DSIT have enough “purchase” to really affect change?

Munby rejects the premise of this concern, noting that “a secretary of state is good purchase”, but she also suggests it’s no longer possible to think of working across government as something only some departments need to worry about. “Almost all of the big challenges that government now faces are entirely cross-departmental, so if our solution [to a problem] is ‘We need more coordination in the Cabinet Office’...well, actually that cannot be the answer to these really substantial problems,” she says. “So I’m quite optimistic about our ability to work with others across the system to deliver change, because that is what modern government requires of us.”

The first policy outputs from DSIT certainly support this – among them was a Science and Technology Framework which is filled with references to cross-government strategies and working groups. In its first three months the department produced several of these ambitious policy documents, such as the blueprint for regulation of AI. This

“Innovation doesn’t come from the top down. It comes from being able to absorb, build on and scale really good ideas, wherever they come from”

is a good start to show the department means business, but how does Munby think about balancing this need for working at pace with longer-term thinking and working? “One of the strengths of creating the department is, while we have lots going on, and it’s very lively, there is – at least if I compare it to BEIS – less immediate short-term crisis handling,” Munby reflects. “That creates more leadership space to really think about long-term issues.”

This capability to think long term is already there in government, she adds, it just needs to be strengthened. Over the last few years, she suggests, “we’ve had a lot of very, very urgent

MUNBY ON... INNOVATION IN GOVERNMENT

“I think too often we start with an assumption that this is a problem to be fixed, when I don’t recognise the portrayal of the civil service as not being innovative. I think if you look at what we have achieved over the last few years collectively, we’ve actually done a pretty incredible amount of innovation. The way civil servants responded to Covid – those major programmes like vaccines or furlough, or the grants and loans that we did in BEIS. Those were really huge interventions delivered at incredible pace.

“You might say, well we’re good at innovation in a crisis, but do we do it enough as business as usual? If I look at what teams in this department have done – we’ve set up Aria, which is a completely different funding model for research with a much higher risk tolerance. We’ve also just come out with a whole new framework for how AI should be regulated – it’s really quite different from what other countries around the world are doing, and we think it’s better. So that’s new policy thinking on cutting-edge issues: that *is* innovation. So we’re building from strength and we should start from that mindset. This is a positive opportunity for people to make even more difference, and for us to embrace even more good ideas: it’s not a deficiency to fix.”

...AND ON HIERARCHY

“Hierarchy is not a friend to innovation. The civil service can be a very hierarchical organisation. That’s partly because it’s large and complex, and large and complex organisations – of many types – have a tendency to become hierarchical. And it’s

partly because of the way decision making is funnelled upwards to secretaries of state. It is completely correct that it is, but it inevitably creates a more centralised decision-making culture than you can get away with in a private sector organisation.

“One of the things that’s really struck me about being a permanent secretary is that hierarchy is really dangerous, because people start to think that you’re right about things. And you know, the more senior you are, the more you find that people agree with you. And that’s not because you get wiser – maybe you do a bit – but it’s the structure helping you. And in the context of innovation and wanting to build innovative organisations, that’s a real risk factor. Because innovation doesn’t come from the top down. It comes from being able to absorb, build on and scale really good ideas, wherever they come from.

“For me, the more senior you are, the more you need to actively fight against hierarchy and also make honesty an important value in both what you say and the way that you receive input. Demonstrate that you are an individual and a human and, like everyone, are fallible.


“To make an environment in which people feel comfortable to speak up and feel heard, you need to actively drive and encourage that. It’s not good enough to say, ‘Of course you can talk to me’. You need to create opportunities. You need to thank people for challenging you. It’s a cultural issue, and it needs role modelling by lots and lots of senior leadership. And doing that isn’t easy in an environment in which we also need to help people speak up to ministers in a way that ministers find hearable.”

challenges, and the right thing to do has been to fix those challenges”.

“That means those muscles [around urgent work] are really well honed and drilled, so in lots of areas of government making more space for long term, strategic thinking is going to be really important,” Munby says. “We know the civil service and government can be really great at that. But it’s not the muscle that we have drilled most heavily in the very recent past.”

This approach – start by looking for strengths we can build on – is apparent right through CSW’s discussion with

Munby, and she sums it up neatly when asked if she has any final thoughts for our readers before we head off to The Drum for her prop-less photoshoot. “We should celebrate and build on the things that make [the civil service] great, as much as we look for weaknesses and try to correct them,” she says. “There’s been a huge amount of research on how people develop based on their strengths, and sometimes we need to apply that to the civil service. We need to value and appreciate – and communicate – what’s great about the civil service as a tool to help us improve.” ■



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UNA O'BRIEN SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

THE “GREAT RESIGNATION” HAS PROMPTED MANY TO CHANGE JOBS. BUT COULD YOU GET MORE SATISFACTION FROM THE JOB YOU ALREADY HAVE? HERE ARE SIX QUESTIONS TO HELP CLARIFY YOUR CAREER PATH

The prediction of a coming “great resignation” seemed to emerge from nowhere in the spring of 2021. The idea was that, dislocated and disrupted by pandemic lockdowns, many people would reassess lifetime priorities, leading exceptional numbers to change job or even give up work for good.

Dropping this prediction into an interview with *Bloomberg News* in February 2021, Professor Anthony Klotz, now at the UCL School of Management, probably didn't imagine it would resonate so widely. But as an expert in organisations and why people quit work, he accurately pinpointed that disruption caused by external forces inevitably throws up questions about our jobs and where work fits into our lives.

Across the UK economy as a whole, we've seen some evidence of the great resignation, with a larger than expected number of people in their 50s and early 60s giving up work for good.

So what's been happening in the civil service? Results from the 2022 Civil Service People Survey, published in March, show turnover is up. It's the highest it's been for a decade – not quite a great resignation, but significant nonetheless.

The top reason given for leaving or moving job was the quest for higher pay. But the second and third reasons – a desire for career progression and ambition for more interesting work – set me thinking. What if these aspirations driving churn in the workforce reflect a wider yearning for more fulfilment in our jobs?

Finding and changing job is no small thing and, even if all goes to plan, evidence suggests it takes at least six months to get to grips with a new role. Instead of scrolling through job adverts, is there yet scope to improve satisfaction with the jobs we already have?

My perspective these days as a coach and mentor is focused on how we can act as individuals. If you're weighing up whether to leave and yet wonder if and how you could get more out of your job by staying, it could help to do a stocktake.

Here's a selection of questions to get the ball rolling. Everybody's different but I've found this sort of exercise works best when writing out my thoughts by hand, or talking them through with a trusted friend or colleague who is, crucially, a good listener!

“Look at what's going well, what gives you energy, and what drains you”

What brought me to this role in the first place and how did I feel when I first got the job?

A reminder of the initial attraction and reason for taking on a job is a useful starting point when calibrating your current situation, and reconnecting with your original purpose and excitement.

When I think about my best days in this job, what actually happens?

“These are the days of our lives,” as the song goes, so look at what's going well, what gives you energy, and what drains you. Where might there be scope to reduce time spent on energy sapping activities and do more of the things you find motivating?

How long have I been in this role, and how will I know when it's enough?

There's no right answer, but this is one where it's important to think ahead to your CV and a future interview; numerous short-term assignments always raise questions about how willing a candidate is to see things through.

Am I making the most of the career pathways available within my department and the civil service professions?

Support for developing your expertise within a profession is the best it's ever been in the civil service.

Taking advantage of these opportunities and being part of a professional network can help restore motivation in your current job and connect you to wider opportunities in the future.

How could I make further contributions, and what's holding me back?

It's worth considering one or two constructive ideas to bring more challenge to your role to discuss with your line manager. For example, is there

scope to mentor or train junior colleagues? Can you suggest practical im-

provements to the way work is done? Is there a cross-departmental project where you'd like to be involved?

What other possibilities do I have for growth and development?

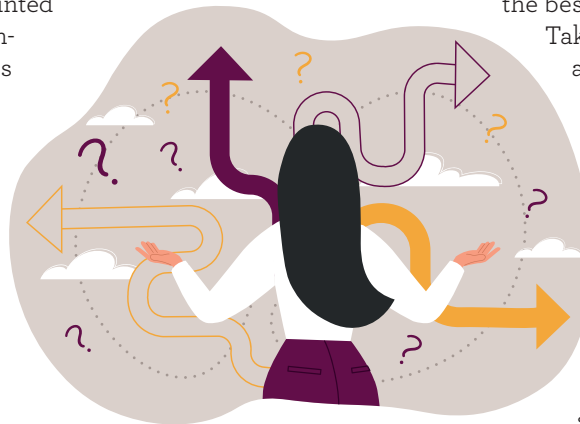
Sometimes the best place to look is beyond the job. Wherever you live, there are opportunities to get involved. Volunteering is a great way to get more stretch, develop new skills and expand your horizons.

Don't let the great resignation turn into the great regret

One of my favourite writers about finding pleasure and purpose in everyday life is Paul Dolan. In his book *Happiness by Design*, he shows it's a lot easier for us to “nudge ourselves happy” in small but effective ways than to try to be a different person or adopt a completely different lifestyle.

What have we got to lose by applying this insight, and taking stock of the jobs we have now before we get too drawn towards the great resignation? ■

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



DAVE PENMAN REALITY CHECK

THE GOVERNMENT'S SHIFT IN APPROACH ON PAY IS A POSITIVE SIGNAL, BUT TO REALLY CHANGE IT MUST FACE UP TO FACTS AND LEAD – RATHER THAN UNDERMINE – ITS OFFICIALS

Daniel Finkelstein wrote a great piece in *The Times* recently on “the blob” as the generic term for, among others, the civil service. One Mr Gove has a lot to answer for, as it was he who introduced the phrase in a UK context to

describe what he considered to be the institutional educational interests opposed to his reforms. As Finkelstein points out, “the blob” has become the excuse for any failing in government policy. It’s also become the lazy trope of client journalists and, of late, it would appear that the FDA has also become synonymous with it. We stand accused of targeting ministers and organising civil servants who wish to undermine the settled will of government.

The “ministers versus the blob” story line is being played out repeatedly, mainly because it suits the interests of those who need an excuse, those who want to divert attention and those whose record is not what they’d hoped for. It’s been repeated so often it now becomes an accepted fact – I’m often asked by respectable journalists about how far spread it is, not whether it actually exists.

For those who’ve abjectly failed to deliver any meaningful change, played to a populist tune for their own political ambitions and found themselves with the hand on the tiller, unable and sometimes unfit to govern in the national interest, it can be quite uncomfortable.

Their policies and integrity have been found wanting because that’s the harsh reality of governing. You can only hide for so long. At some point, what you do, don’t do, or try to hide comes back to bite you in the ass.

There is no agenda, no blob versus elected ministers, no hit list, and no campaign to undermine a democratically elected government. There is only the reality of government and the quality of ministers and policies. Every government finds that out eventually, its just the last few have found it out a lot quicker for obvious reasons.

That’s not to say that there isn’t repair work to be done. No civil servant I’ve met over the last few years has felt anything

other than underappreciated by government, their employer. We’ve seen civil servants as a group constantly attacked and their leadership openly undermined. At our conference in May I pointed out the obvious contradiction in civil servants being told they are lazy, woke, inefficient, remainder, activist snowflakes, but also somehow at the same time Machiavellian geniuses, able to unseat ministers and undermine the settled will of government.

Civil servants have not felt valued for any number of reasons and the initial approach on pay for this year underlined that. Despite assurances of equal treatment, the civil service was used as a pawn to send a message elsewhere in the public sector. Whatever drove that agenda, the decision to reverse it and put a broader package around pay and job protection together, is one that has the opportunity to act as a reset.

Governments are not known for changing their minds, so the decision to introduce for delegated grades an additional £1,500 non-consolidated payment to assist with cost of living pressures, is not one that will have been taken easily. Additional assurances on avoiding compulsory redundancies and no further pre-election changes to the compensation scheme suggest a leadership of the civil service – both at ministerial and official level – that is trying hard to find that reset button. Just as the original decision to single out the civil service for inequitable treatment was rightly condemned, so the decision to not only reverse, but enhance the offer to civil servants should be welcomed and recognised as a significant achievement.

There is more to do, not least for the senior civil service which is not covered by this pay decision. How the government responds to the Senior Salaries Review Body recom-

“There is an obvious contradiction in civil servants being dubbed lazy, woke and inefficient but also somehow able to unseat ministers and undermine the settled will of government”

mendations will be the litmus test for that. Civil service pay arrangements urgently need reform and the cost of living crisis has only brought that in to sharper relief.

But maybe the biggest take away is that a government that leads its civil servants, rather than constantly undermining them, is inevitably going to be more successful one. ■

Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union



ANDREW GREENWAY TEST OF THE BEST



HOW WE DECIDE WHO JOINS THE CIVIL SERVICE HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON THE WORK OF GOVERNMENT. ANDREW GREENWAY REFLECTS ON THE HISTORY, AND FUTURE, OF CIVIL SERVICE ENTRANCE EXAMS

It is hard to imagine a life without exams. The infinite solitude of being sat at a desk, in front of a few sheets of paper. We have all put our pens in a clear plastic case. We've all heard of the person who forgot to turn the page until five minutes remaining, only to find several unanswered questions. The one who claimed to have a secret calculator watch and cheated. The hapless over-sleeper. Exams feel like one of life's theatrical set-pieces. They are plays we've all performed in.

In their earliest form, exams weren't there to torture everyone. They were set to determine who should take part in the business of government. Administrative power was handed out according

to competence rather than connections, cramming rather than circumstance. This idea was the basis of modern bureaucracy. It meant nations would henceforth be run by civil servants, rather than courtiers. Their legitimacy to wield power over others derived from what they knew, not who they knew. As we blunder into an era where machines can outsmart us at the tests we set, perhaps now would be a good time to examine exams more closely.

Britain took a while to get on board with trial by examination. Until well into the 19th century, the standards imposed on those aspiring to officialdom were not exacting. Oxbridge was the pool

from which the country's brains were expected to emerge. Make it through there and you could expect to be poured into moulds within the complexifying machines of government, commerce and academia. But quality assurance by the universities was casual, to say the least. In Cambridge, persons of noble birth were let off from taking the



Meritocrat Thomas Babington Macaulay

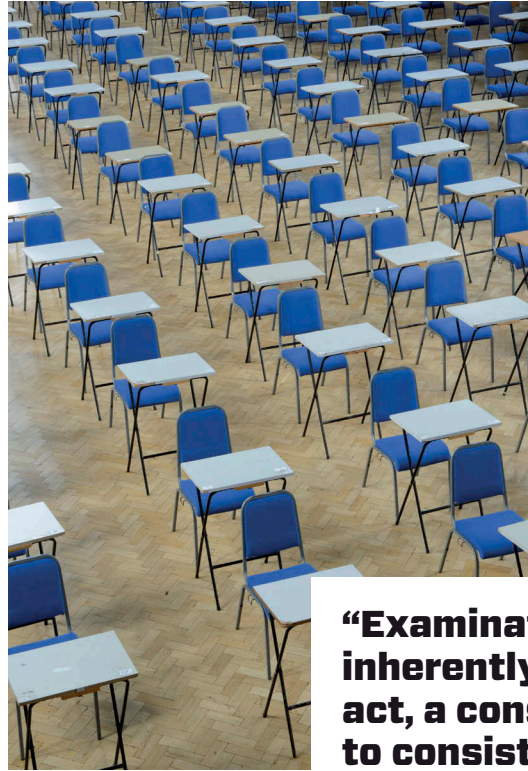
harder papers in philosophy and mathematics, so as not to twist their blue blood. Oxford, meanwhile, had no real degree examinations at all before 1800.

The idea of bringing exams into Westminster came from India, who in turn borrowed it from the Chinese – with homage to that tradition still paid in the term “mandarins”. Ironically, as the brutal, centuries-old practice of imperial examinations was falling apart in Beijing, Thomas Babington Macaulay decided a dose of meritocracy was what the Indian civil service needed. As well as using Delhi as a laboratory, Macaulay played a hand in Whitehall’s own radical reforms. In 1840, shortly after he returned from the subcontinent, Macaulay lobbied hard to secure a job for his brother-in-law at the Treasury. That brother-in-law was Charles Trevelyan, who went on to apply Clever Tom’s ideas at home.

Exams quickly became part of the individual and collective identity of the civil service. Flick through the entries of significant public servants in the Dictionary of National Biography and their (usually stellar) entrance exam performance will be noted in the preamble, alongside their parentage and Oxbridge college. Passing those exams meant entering a club; a *Who’s Who* where all the members were terribly good at passing exams.

The civil service exams were tough; notoriously so. A very kind colleague passed me copies of the exams taken by her mother, an Oxford graduate applying for a post in the Colonial Office in 1953. The “Present Day” paper, “intended to test the general awareness of current affairs of the educated person who follows them intelligently”, is a migraine-inducing challenge. In 90 minutes, candidates were asked to knock off three crisp, cogent mini-essays. Questions included: “What consistent aims do you think should guide British taxation, and how far can they do so at present?” and: “Recent legislation on horror comics suggest that it is hoped that people can be made good by statute. How far is this practicable or desirable?” The Present Day paper was one of the five my friend’s mum had to sit. The rest were even more fiendish. I would love to see Wednesday Morning Colleagues have a bash at these now. Perhaps it could be squeezed into the next away-day.

Squint a little, and even in post-war Britain the demands of entrance didn’t differ all that much from the Confucian wrangling of the mandarins. A solid grounding in the Greats; supreme felicity with a pen in hand; the ability to understand and follow arcane, if not actually unwritten expectations – these were the yardsticks of state-



“Examinations are an inherently discriminatory act, a construct designed to consistently admit some characteristics while excluding others”

gone by rattle through the civil service’s culture. Being thoughtful about who they rule in and out matters, because what Whitehall chooses to test ultimately

defines those whose judgement wields influence. The civil service’s diversity and inclusion challenges are well known, and methods of selection for entry and promotion are pertinent to that.

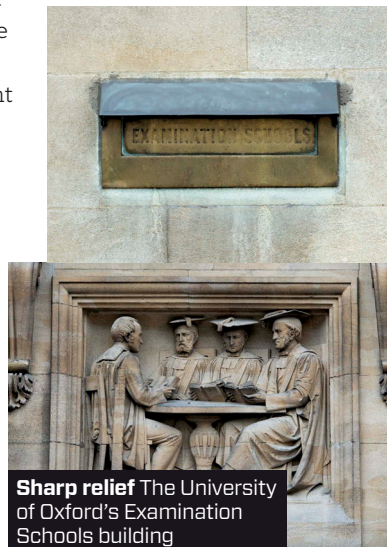
Times are changing: the recently relaunched Fast Stream now aims to recruit more science and technology graduates to its generalist stream, though it’s unclear how effectively the process has been reformed to encourage this. But we are also now facing a world where we will need to make decisions about discriminating

not just between types of people, but between people and machines. Left unchecked, civil service selection procedures will rapidly fall further out of date. If there wasn’t a good reason before to think hard about how we assess and predict human competence – and to consider what human competence means in an era where ChatGPT writes better briefings than you do – there certainly is now.

This article wasn’t written by ChatGPT. The next one might be. So might your next submission to the secretary of state. Why bother testing Whitehall’s next

generation on their ability to prioritise an in-tray or trot out competency-based examples, if technology can do a quicker, better job of both? And if that’s true, how will you select that next generation? Looking for an insatiable curiosity of technology’s promise and perils might be a good place to start. ■

Andrew Greenway is a founding partner at Public Digital, writer and former senior civil servant



Sharp relief The University of Oxford’s Examination Schools building



Divine will Oxford’s first examination room, Divinity School



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Bursting the bubble

This exploration of how our government works – and doesn't – offers a peek into the corridors of power and starts a valuable conversation about the need for reform, says **Samuel Chivers**

› **How Westminster Works...and Why it Doesn't**
› **Ian Dunt (2023)**
› **Orion**

As with a number of recent publications on the political and constitutional arrangements of the UK, Ian Dunt attempts to take a complicated and ill-understood topic and make it digestible for all audiences. His thorough research is evidenced with a short glance at the acknowledgements section which presents a snapshot of the great and the good of Westminster academia and politics.

He has structured his case as a logical journey through the different aspects and institutions which form the 'Westminster bubble', making the content more accessible but also, practically, allowing the reader to pick and choose – if they wish – the areas of most interest to them.

What Dunt has produced is a critical analysis of a Westminster system which is long overdue for review, whilst directing readers away from the commonplace argument that its failings are a result only of laziness or corruption. Reading as a former civil servant, there were moments throughout when I had to remind myself not to take comments personally as the overarching narrative is weighted towards the 'why it doesn't

more than the 'how it works'.

I found myself agreeing with many of the challenges Dunt posed throughout – the pressures on ministers, the organisation of the civil service, and financial pressures to name but a few. However, at times greater counterbalance would have made some of his challenges appear less pointed. The approach is broad-brush and could have used a little more acknowledgement of the parts of the UK system that do stand up to scrutiny and the risks that alternative options also carry, as Dunt fleetingly acknowledges in the epilogue.

Dunt does a good job of drawing attention to parts of the Westminster machinery that operate behind the veil but which perform crucial functions day in day out. Of particular interest to me were his explanations of 'the usual channels' (a term used to describe methods of co-operation between government and opposition whips), the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, who oversee and clear all government legislation, and the committee's supporting officials, who play a crucial role in providing advice on these tricky and political issues.

Whether these systems are themselves the best way to

conduct business is a matter of opinion, but the point Dunt raises is that key processes remain opaque, even amongst parliamentarians, and in many cases this needs to be rectified. He also uses his discussion of the PBL in particular to explore the challenge of how to build and recognise expertise within government.

Dunt speaks positively of two parts of the system in particular – select committees and the House of Lords. Whilst I wasn't entirely convinced by his conclusions about the extent to which the former are free from political interference, I was pleasantly surprised to find him speaking up for the latter.

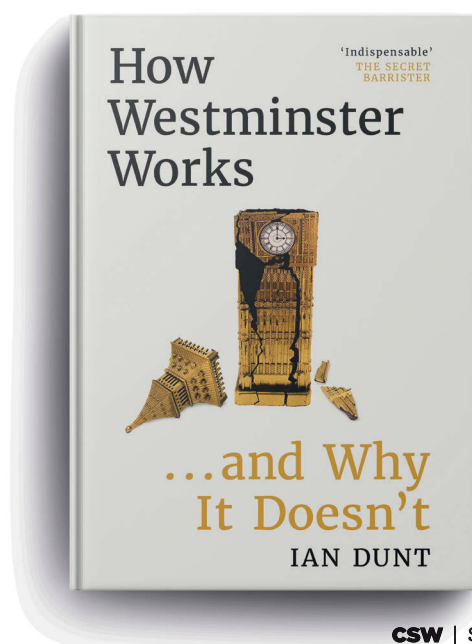
Once again the political class have been sharpening their pitchforks on the issue of Lords reform, so it was encouraging to see support for their scrutinising role while still addressing the issues with its existing constitution.

More of this 'pros and cons' style of analysis throughout would have provided a more

balanced account, though it may also have stunted the message that the author is seeking to deliver – shock to action rather than academic tome.

In writing this book, Dunt has succeeded in producing a catalyst for discussion around an often ignored or misunderstood issue which is crying out for attention. Aside from the specificities of the contents, getting his audience thinking about how our system works and what they would like to see change feels positive in any light. The million dollar question – considered but not answered in these pages – remains how to persuade the politically ambitious that constitutional change is a necessity, not a nice to have. ■

Samuel Chivers is senior consultant at Stonehaven specialising in UK governance and decision making. He spent most of his career as a civil servant in central government including working on Covid procurement



SECOND



NATURE

More and more departments are appointing second permanent secretaries. **Beckie Smith** asks the experts why, and what exactly a second perm sec does

Rarely does a new civil service job get top billing in a ministerial speech. It was unusual, then, that development minister Andrew Mitchell name-checked plans to appoint a second permanent secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in April in an effort to “strengthen the way government addresses all development issues”.

The role – which is intended to help “maximise the benefits” of the 2020 merger of the Department for International Development and the FCO – is not entirely new: Sir Tim Barrow spent six months as second perm sec last year before becoming national security adviser.

This nonetheless marked the FCDO’s participation in a trend – which includes the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Defence among others – of creating or reviving dormant second perm sec roles.

Some appointees – such as at the Foreign Office – are responsible for a specific policy area. DfT joined this camp when it made Gareth Davies (who has subsequently become perm sec of the Department for Business and Trade) responsible for “a number of high-profile areas”, including decarbonising transport; while the Cabinet Office drafted in Sue Gray in 2021 to oversee the union and constitution brief.

Other second perm secs, like at HM Revenue and Customs, are more concerned with what Alex Thomas, programme director at the Institute for Government,

“Even the smallest departments have to worry about IT systems and data... there’s a recognition that different skill sets are required” *Angela MacDonald*

calls “making the department run”.

The third category includes second perm secs brought in to fill a more niche role or address a crisis. In 2020, Susan Acland-Hood joined the Department for Education to help handle a row over A-Level grades; while James Bowler came into the Cabinet Office to coordinate the government’s Covid response.

As the FCDO shake-up illustrates, these roles are not rigid, but are reshaped according to departments’ needs and, often, ministers’ preferences. When Olly Robbins

was appointed the Home Office’s second perm sec in 2015, the portfolio was focused on immigration. But perm sec Sir Matthew Rycroft says he now wants to restructure the job to ensure “coherence” of leadership and to fit with the “One Home Office” transformation programme. “Different times require different models [of leadership],” Rycroft tells CSW. “If the second perm sec did half of it and I did the other half, that wouldn’t feel like coherence to me.”

Instead, Rycroft says he must be “accountable for the totality of the department, not just in the sense of being the accounting officer but also in a genuine, meaningful sense of oversight of what’s going on – but also to have an empowered second perm sec and empowered DGs leading in their own areas”. Work is ongoing to define the scope of the role.

At HMRC, perm sec Jim Harra and his second-in-command Angela MacDonald divide the responsibilities of running the tax agency according to their skill sets. MacDonald tells CSW: “There’s a facet of leading HMRC which is about handling ministers, it’s about technical tax... you’re running an incredibly complicated legal technical environment.

“But you’re also running a department with 65,000 people across the UK, with the largest IT estate, with more data than anybody else, with an international dimension to our work in customs. That is a skill set which is perhaps a little less unique to taxes: running big systems, running big data, running big organisations,” she says.

“Between us, we need to do both facets.

The chances of finding that vested all in one human being are, well, zero – even if you have the time to [do it all].”

MacDonald says some departments have reconsidered their leadership structures as perm secs’ responsibilities have expanded. “Even the smallest departments have to worry about IT systems and data now. There’s a lot more going on than there might historically have been... and there’s a recognition that different skill sets are required,” she says.

The Department for International Trade used a similar division of skills to bolster its leadership. In 2017, it was widely expected that the department’s perm sec would

be a trade specialist, after recruitment was opened up to overseas candidates.

Plans to appoint “an international trade negotiating expert” as second perm sec were unveiled alongside the announcement that the top job would instead go to Whitehall rising star Antonia Romeo. Some months later, dual national Crawford Falconer, a veteran of New Zealand’s Foreign Office, stepped into the role, with the added title of chief trade negotiator.

Five years later, Falconer would go on to say there was “no way” he would want to be perm sec. He dismissed rumours that he had been overlooked for the interim job when Romeo moved to the Ministry of Justice in early 2022, asking: “Why would I want that job?”

Falconer did spend two months as acting perm sec later that year when Romeo’s successor, James Bowler, moved to the Treasury. But his earlier comments suggest the second-rung role has its own attraction. At DIT’s successor, DBAT, he exerts considerable influence over Britain’s trade deals strategy and heads up the government international trade profession.

Some of the expansion of roles comes after Brexit preparations and the Covid pandemic ramped up workloads across the civil service. Recalling Bowler’s appointment to lead the Covid Task Force coordinating the government’s pandemic response in October 2020, the IfG’s Thomas says: “I think one of the difficulties of the Cabinet Office during Covid was that there were too many too-senior people all trying to coordinate with each other. For an enormous coordination job like the Covid Task Force, you can see the value of having someone who was a notch more senior than the other directors general to try and impose some order.”

DHSC also used a second perm sec to bolster its Covid response, naming operations director David Williams to the role in March 2020 “for the duration of the coronavirus situation”. When Williams was picked to lead the MoD the following year, his successor Shona Dunn, was tasked with “leading on all non-coronavirus related work” for the health department – leaving perm sec Sir Chris Wormald more time to devote to its pandemic-focused work.

This move built on the longer-term trend of appointing second perm secs to oversee specific areas while the first



perm sec is the secretary of state’s “point person on high priority issues and helps get them out of crises”, Thomas says.

“I also think these things go in phases,” he adds. “Once a few permanent secretaries persuade the cabinet secretary or head of the civil service that they can recruit a second perm sec, it snowballs a bit because it becomes the answer to a management problem in a way that it wasn’t necessarily before.”

The civil service’s rigid pay and progression structure may also contribute

“You don’t necessarily do ‘the big DG job’ in preparation for your first permanent secretary job, but you might do a second perm sec job” Alex Thomas

to the expansion of the second perm-sec ranks. Recent editions of the IfG’s *Whitehall Monitor* report have shown the civil service becoming more senior, and “some of the grade proliferation is definitely a consequence of pay restraint,” says Jill Rutter, a senior fellow at the think tank.

Thomas says the IfG has observed that “pay pinches most tightly at the bottom and at the top” of the civil service grade structure. “In the middle, some of the pay squeeze has been resolved by promoting people more... at the top, you can’t resolve it [as simply] by promotion. The way that you can resolve it by promotion is by creating an expanded grade of second perm secs,” he says.

But Thomas says ambitious civil

servants are less likely to be influenced by pay than by “the work, progression and status” – all of which a second perm sec title provides.

Both Rutter and Thomas note that in some cases, job roles may be created with specific people in mind. Simply put, Thomas says, “there are people who will do a job if they get the bump up to permanent secretary”.

“You can entirely imagine [in some cases], a permanent secretary or the cabinet secretary wants someone to do a job and

part of the discussion around that is whether it gets permanent secretary rank,” he adds.

While

in many cases this may be warranted, Rutter warns that “what you don’t really want is to have a proliferation which is induced by trying to get around pay restraint or to give somebody a consolation prize for not getting the top job”.

The increase in second-rung jobs is also having a broader effect on top-ranking civil servants’ careers. “The fashion seems to have been recently that you don’t necessarily do ‘the big DG job’ in preparation for your first permanent secretary job, but you might do a second perm sec job,” Thomas says.

One job in particular – Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat DG in the Cabinet Office – has for some time “been the proving ground to move fairly rapidly into first perm sec jobs”, Thomas notes. Serving perm secs Wormald, Romeo and Sarah Healey are all alumni.

James Bowler, a former PPS to the chancellor and then to the PM, was second perm sec at the Cabinet Office and DIT before becoming Treasury perm sec; while Davies spent a year in DfT’s number-two job before being appointed to lead the trade department.

This route has been well-trodden at the Treasury in particular. Sir Tom Scholar had five years as second perm sec under his belt before moving up; while former cabinet secretaries Robin Butler and Andrew Turnbull both spent time in the same role. But the recent creation of new jobs has opened up this career path to more high fliers, and Thomas predicts the trend will be “self-sustaining”.

MacDonald says the job serves as a valuable “growth stepping stone” for prospective heads of government departments. “It’s a big step up to go from being a director general to ‘here’s a department, would you like to be a permanent secretary?’” she says. This route also generates “a good succession pipeline of first permanent secretaries” for when top jobs open up, she adds.

But adding a second perm sec role can create risks too. “It can confuse accountability in departments,” Thomas says. “From the outside, it’s harder to work out exactly who’s responsible for what – and internally, unless you’ve got very clear descriptions of the roles people do... that could create some tensions, confusions, lack of clarity.”

There has also been some concern that the increase in second perm secs could “undermine the authority” of the DGs leading civil service functions, who must sometimes go “toe to toe” with departments, Thomas says.

What is clear is that – for now at least – second perm secs are set to stay in many departments. And, as Rutter points out, “people never get downgraded”. Perm secs – first and second – will keep their rank as long as they stay in government.

MacDonald says the role is now “firmly established” as part of departments’ “structural toolkit”. “As departments ebb and flow, as there are machinery of government changes, as secretaries of state have opinions about how they want to run their departments, I could imagine you might see the format change,” she says.

“I can’t see it retreating because it’s introducing valuable capacity and real added value. I can’t see that going anywhere.” ■



Quite content Crawford Falconer says there is “no way” he’d want to be perm sec

United front Sue Gray took on the union and constitution brief as Cabinet Office second perm sec

TRAINS OF THOUGHT

In the first of a two-part series, **Tina Seth** takes a look at different types of training and how to make the most of them

One of the golden rules for teaching – whether children or adults – is the adage attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand”.

The most important part of learning is not usually a specific training event, but what happens before and after it. Yet commissioners of learning and development – and managers – still

put the greatest focus and invest most on learning events rather than the pre- and post-event actions that will ensure people remember and understand their new skills or knowledge.

This series will look at how managers can make the most of training opportunities for themselves and their teams. But first, here are some general principles to help you build really effective learning and development plans.

Get people out of their comfort zone

I don't think I have ever learned anything without feeling some trepidation. Whether it is the knowledge that you will need to present to a senior panel, do an exam, or be part of a mock scenario, having some skin in the game means people will stay focused.

Be aware of learning styles

We are all individuals and like to learn differently, but as a manager it's easy to suggest courses or learning activities that suit our own style. It's worth asking how team members like to learn. Ask them to complete a learning-styles questionnaire if they are not sure.

Remember the importance of social and peer learning

A really important way of sustaining learning is to “continue the conversation” after the learning intervention. We've all been on courses that are enjoyable but the materials gather dust and we go back to old ways unless there is some support and encouragement to do otherwise.

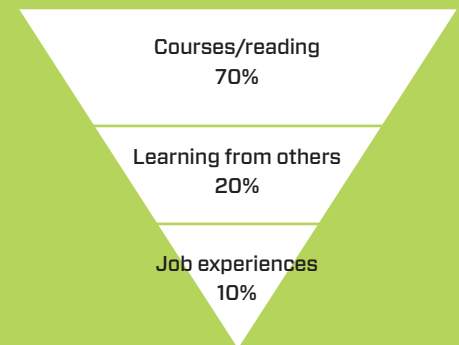
Don't forget benchmarking

If you're sending someone on a management skills course, how will you know they are a better manager afterwards? A quick and easy way to do this could be a 360 review that you revisit a few months after the course.

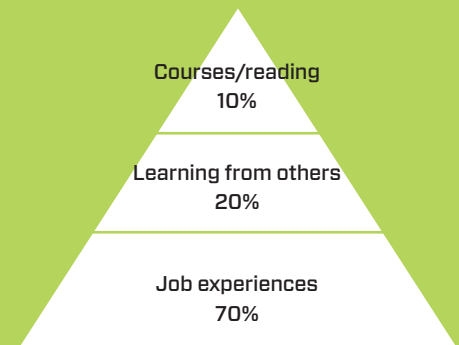
Flip your expectations

Since the pandemic forced us all to adopt new ways of working and learning, it is much more common for people to learn at their own pace from any location. Bringing together people at the same time in one place to look at a set of slides seems a little passé. This has really strengthened the concept of a “flipped classroom”, in which participants look at slides, watch videos and read relevant material before group sessions, which may be virtual or face-to-face. The facilitator can then prompt discussion, manage group tasks and set up activities or action plans to support learning transfer. >>

HOW PEOPLE WRITE DEVELOPMENT PLANS



HOW PEOPLE ACTUALLY DEVELOP





FACE-TO-FACE TRAINING

Face-to-face training remains an important part of any development plan, but you should plan carefully and pick your training wisely to make the most of the opportunities it provides. Let's look at some of the main types of face-to-face training and how to incorporate them into your personal and team development.

IMMERSIVE / EXPERIENTIAL

What is it? People need to practise what they have learned in realistic scenarios to give them confidence to use those skills at work. Examples might include an organisational-development programme that ends with providing a real coaching session for a director, or an interviewing-skills course where participants spend a day interviewing real applicants then watch their performance on video with feedback.

When is it useful? If you need to apply skills straight away and some level of competence has to be assessed by the trainer.

What are the drawbacks? Some people don't like to be thrown in at the deep end, particularly those with a more reflective approach. It's always helpful to pre-warn people about what is included in the training and explain how this will benefit them. Confidence can be undermined if sessions don't go well.

How to make the most of it Continue the practice back at work. Most skills are like exercising a muscle: the more you do it, the more expert you will become. Line managers should be aware of what the course covers and prepare or delegate similar activities back in the workplace.

RESIDENTIAL

What is it? It's essentially a grown-up sleepover! These are usually for people to attend longer programmes, sometimes a week or more in duration, and they are often in lovely, peaceful locations. Generally, they are for senior leaders due to the expense. Social and peer learning will be in full swing, as groups typically work on challenges together and the rapport built over a few days will lead to sustained networks where participants continue meeting and collaborating for years to come.

When is it useful? If you are investing in a residential course, it must be justified. Often these courses are best suited for skills or points in a career when there is a value in building networks and collaborating to resolve complex problems across organisations and sectors.

What are the drawbacks? It can be quite some time away from the office and challenging for managers to cover and delegate work.

How to make the most of it Managers might want to think about how learning is cascaded to others in the team to maximise the investment. This could be done through a lunch-and-learn series or a handbook created by the team members that attended.

ONE-DAY WORKSHOPS

What are they? Probably the most common form of learning pre-pandemic, a one-day event will usually bring together a group of people at around the same level to cover a set of learning objectives with input from a tutor, interspersed with group work and individual reflection. Occasionally there are informal assessments built in, and sometimes a certificate of achievement.

When are they useful? It can be very effective if fairly simple skills have to be learned quickly. Look for well-designed events which factor in different learning styles, get people out of their comfort zones and provide practice.

What are the drawbacks? Post-pandemic, we have woken up to the concept of asynchronous learning: learning in our own time at our own pace. Having to show up at a certain hour to be taught at the same time and pace as everyone else can feel inflexible or old-fashioned.

How to make the most of them Line managers should discuss what team members want to achieve from a course and how they will embed the learning back at work, such as through coaching sessions or delegated activity to practice the new skills. Journaling and action planning also helps: make a note of the key things you learned and what you will do differently, as well as what other learning and development might help.

CONFERENCES

What are they? The boundaries between a work event and a training event are blurred, but a conference can be just as useful to improve performance as formal training. Conferences give people an opportunity to explore areas linked with their work – such as HR, health or defence – or with the sector they operate in. Civil Service Live is perhaps the best example of a conference geared towards civil servants with a focus on learning and development. There is usually a choice of seminars and lectures to attend, a good selection of food and drink and many like-minded professionals to network with.

When are they useful? If there are specific issues the team would like to improve, conferences can support thinking in an area: for example, getting new ideas on how to evaluate training or attending a supplier exhibition for support with procurement.

What are the drawbacks? Not all seminars or exhibition stands will be relevant. Attendees should plan time carefully and consider a cost-benefit analysis to gauge whether it's worth the time away from work.

How to make the most of them While it's easy to relate courses and longer training programmes to work objectives, it requires more effort to demonstrate the value of some conferences, so line managers will need to think through the purpose of team members attending. It's good practice to ask them to report back to the team and make the connections themselves as to how their new knowledge will help performance.

“Face-to-face training remains important, but you should plan carefully to make the most of the opportunities it provides”



COACHING / MENTORING

What is it? A mentor or coach can work with an individual over a number of weeks or months to help them process work challenges, reflect on other learning interventions, try out ideas and come to successful conclusions.

At senior level, there is usually an initial chemistry meeting with a coach or mentor to assess whether the two can work successfully together. Coaches and mentors can set tasks between sessions to provide material for the next session and will usually work out long-term goals at the first session.

When is it useful? Mentoring in particular is useful at the start of a new role or promotion to support successful transition. Career coaching can be useful for progression, as the coach helps to unblock barriers and think through steps that can help an individual navigate a selection process. Coaching or mentoring is also valuable after one-off training sessions linked to behaviour change – such as leadership and management development. It allows for follow-up and reflection on what is working or not working, as well as how to overcome challenges around the desired change.

What are the drawbacks? These activities require a lot of proactivity, reflection and honesty: it is not for everyone to learn in this way and can be frustrating for people who are not prepared or in the right frame of mind. A series of coaching sessions is probably not the right intervention for a problem that needs to be fixed immediately.

How to make the most of it Team members must be engaged with the coaching and have good chemistry with their coach. Specific goals should be set and coachees will need to put the time in between sessions to put ideas into practice and to reflect in enough depth to have the next high-quality coaching conversation. It's also worth carrying out a psychometric assessment beforehand so that the coach has a profile of the individual to form the basis for discussion, especially for career-progression sessions and developing leadership skills.

ACTION LEARNING

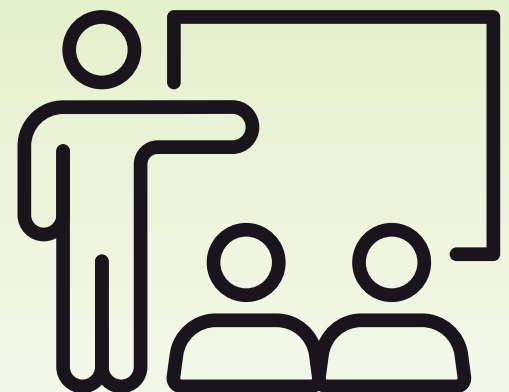
What is it? The premise of action learning is that people are empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, but also active participants with their own experiences and knowledge to bring. An Action Learning Set is a group of people, often from the same workplace or in similar roles, who work together with a facilitator to solve problems relevant to their work.

When is it useful? An ALS is really effective when work needs to be taken forward quickly. For example, Dods Training ran some sets for policy professionals in the Department for Exiting the European Union, where policy decisions had to be made quickly. The groups set their own agenda through establishing common themes and a facilitator took them through pressing in-tray issues in each session, supporting them to come up with effective ways to resolve issues. Action Learning can be a critical component of training programmes that require the delegate to go back to work and behave in a different way.

What are the drawbacks? Action learning requires a very proactive approach. People expecting to be “taught” in a traditional way will be disappointed.

How to make the most of it A self-directed learning culture is key. People need to go into action learning prepared to contribute and share, to support their peers, to be open and honest about challenges they are facing and to accept direct and constructive feedback. They also need courage to take on board the advice from the ALS and try things out back at work that may seem uncomfortable at first. ■

Tina Seth is a former civil servant and business development manager at Dods Training, part of the Total Politics group which also publishes Civil Service World



MILES AHEAD



Jess Bowie meets Food Standards Agency chief executive **Emily Miles** to discuss the safety of what we eat, idealism versus pragmatism, and why a bit of self-doubt is crucial to good leadership. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

During a long career in which Emily Miles has watched the infinite ways that government touches all our lives, she has always returned in her mind to one particular case – that of her twin brother.

As Miles rose through the ranks of departments including the Home Office and Defra on the way to her current role at the top of the Food Standards Agency, her brother's journey has involved a struggle with mental health and time in prison.

"There are all sorts of diagnoses that may or may not apply to my brother, but he has needed to be in hospital quite a lot over the years," Miles says.

There were times when the hospital care her brother needed wasn't available – or the support he received didn't help – and he ended up offending. What followed, in her view, was a poorly managed transition from prison into the mental-health system.

"His version of the story, though, is that it was his fault; that, after 20 years of being in and out of hospital, he just was angry. He was going to end up in prison the second time, whatever happened," Miles says. "So he'd say that my story about poor transitions is wrong. But my story, overall, is he's a very vulnerable person. And the mental-health system is a very important safety net for him."

Miles has shared this story as a way of illustrating her belief that government, when it's working properly, is about care. Not about taking people's agency away, but about making things safe for them. But the very act of sharing it (she checked with her brother before doing so, and prefers not to share the details of his offending) is also indicative of how Miles does leadership: open, accessible and deeply human.

There are few more vital protections than those governing what we eat. And Miles's department, which she has led since 2019, has a straightforward mission: food you can trust. Food safety is certainly not as politically charged as some of her previous briefs like immigration, and the FSA is normally less prone to media

storms than other parts of government.

However, when CSW sits down with Miles in April, it has been a torrid few weeks for the non-ministerial department. A firm that supplied leading supermarkets for years has allegedly been mixing rotten pork with fresh pork and washing ham that was visibly off – and the FSA is in the firing line. So before we delve into her leadership philosophy, or the implications of Brexit on UK food, we begin with mouldy meat.

"I reject the idea that we've somehow been 'hoodwinked' or that we didn't act," she says, after being reminded of some of the negative coverage (including quotes from the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers, which has called the FSA "utterly reprehensible" for apparently not alerting suppliers about "the risk to public health").

The FSA *did* alert suppliers, via two separate methods, Miles adds. She also points out that there is a lot of misunderstanding about who's responsible for what in the system. In the case of the business accused of selling rotten meat, the local authority, not the FSA, was responsible for checking its products.

"I do think that we can only act where we get intelligence. And so there needs to be a concerted effort from the food industry to share information with us or with the local authority if they have concerns about suspected criminality. And people who work in those businesses also need to feel confident to alert us about concerns. So what I'm interested in now is how we can make that easier."

The current system, Miles says, is designed for the food industry to take primary responsibility itself. "If we, or local authorities, were meant to be in much more regularly checking, and doing additional audits and so on, we would need to be funded in a different way and we'd need different powers."

Why blame the FSA then?

"I think it's a bit lazy. It's people not really understanding how the system has been set up and looking for a scapegoat. What gives me heart, though, is that people really care about food that can be trusted."

At one point during its recent *mensis horribilis*, environment secretary Thérèse Coffey said she was thinking about bring-

MILES ON... HER MOST STRESSFUL DAY

"I was a deputy director in the Home Office and we were trying to get the announcement out about setting up the College of Policing, which I was responsible for. A minor adjustment was needed in the advice I had provided, but it meant that the home secretary had to re-sign roughly 15 letters. The private office responded by emailing about 120 people saying something like: 'This hasn't been this policy unit at their best, it's not normally this hard and we've got some lessons to learn.'

"I just crumbled into a pit of shame. I went home and told myself, 'I can't be a senior civil servant in the Home Office. I'm not good enough, and I'm too insecure.' And it was a big moment because after that I actually decided I did want to stay – and I went on to get the director of policing job. But I realised I needed to get some support for dealing with my own insecurity. So I did some therapy and so on and I've been on a big journey since then. I actually think I wouldn't be in this job now if I hadn't had that awful day. I still do lots of practices like journaling, just to make sure I don't melt into a pool of self-doubt."

ing the FSA under Defra's control – as if it were a wayward child. When asked whether that would be welcome, Miles says her advice for anyone making decisions about the organisation's location would be to remember the FSA's birth story.

She recounts how, in the 1990s, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food faced a conflict between the interests of the farming industry and those of the consumer – not least during BSE. The FSA was therefore set up – in 2000 – as a body that would have consumer interests and public health at its heart. Miles is quick to add, however, that the FSA already works very closely with Defra, particularly in relation to the meat industry.

Miles was raised, and remains, a Quaker – a faith with a strong emphasis on equality and direct action. She grew up attending marches and vigils and spent a year working for the Quakers at the UN office in Geneva. By her mid-20s, though, she no longer wanted to hold a placard.

“It's very necessary that some people do that, but I realised I wanted to go into the middle of it and understand the difficulties, the trade-offs and the complexity of the situation and try to make incremental improvements. I think idealism is needed. But it's not me. I'm a pragmatist. So I joined government, because I still wanted to make a difference but I was always interested in the humans and the politics and the realities of how you bring those things together and make shifts.”

While trade-offs, complexity and incremental change characterise many civil service jobs, they feel particularly apposite for Brexit work. One of Miles's senior roles at Defra was coordinating that department's response to leaving the EU, and Brexit is still very much in Miles's in-tray at the FSA.

The UK's food and animal feed rules came almost entirely from the EU and, since the referendum, the FSA has grown by about 50% – to about 1,500 staff. In the early days of Covid it was FSA scientists (instead of EU ones) trying to work out if the virus could be transferred on food packaging, and FSA staff are now the ones advising ministers about novel foods, including methane-reducing animal feed, edible insects and the proliferation of CBD products.

In February this year, a House of Lords committee complained the FSA was “taking forever” to establish British food-safety laws to replace the EU rules. Does Miles think that's fair?

“I think that's wrong,” she says.

“We would love to be reforming some of the rules – particularly ones where we think there's going to be a lot of innovation happening in the food industry, so we can be ahead of that innovation and protect consumers.

“At the moment, though, the effort that we are doing on policymaking in that space has to go on to the retained EU law bill. A key area of reform for us is the food and feed regulatory system. The bill may offer opportunities to improve the approvals process for regulated products but any meaningful reform must include consultation with the food industry, consumers and stakeholders from across the four countries of the UK.”

Even before Covid, the FSA had a very strong home-working culture. This will sound ghastly if you're Jacob Rees-Mogg, but it's something the FSA staff CSW spoke to appear to really value. The regulator is, in fact, “location agnostic” in its hiring for desk-based roles, and over 1,000 members of staff are on remote-working contracts. This has led to a geographically diverse workforce, with employees from all over the country (Miles checks off Cornwall, Pembrokeshire and Norfolk, among others) and high scores on the People Survey from parents and carers. Nor has the organisation seen any dip in productivity as a result of this policy, Miles is keen to add.

One well-publicised downside of remote work is the potential for staff to feel isolated. As a leader, how does she foster a sense of camaraderie? And is there a cultural divide between the FSA's frontline workers, including its 360 meat inspectors, and their desk-based colleagues? It's presumably quite hard to join a virtual coffee if you're in an abattoir checking offal...

“We do have two quite different cultures,” Miles says. “Our field operations also have slightly different demographics: it's much more male, and a lot of staff are in their 50s or 60s. Often they've been working for us, or for one of our predecessor organisations, for a long time.

“So yes, it does feel different. But maintaining a sense of cohesion among field staff themselves is also challenging because they all work shifts. Getting people together off site, meeting people from beyond the abattoir where they work, takes a lot of planning. So we do lots of regional engagement days where we take them off the line for a day. Also, for our field ops, all-staff calls tend to happen in the evenings so they can tune in if they want to.”


For the FSA's desk-based staff, Miles

MILES ON... HER MOST THICK OF IT MOMENT

“When I was 28 and working in Downing Street, I was pregnant with my first child and had really bad morning sickness. It was a reshuffle day – that reshuffle where they'd abolished the Lord Chancellor's Department and then had to re-establish it about five hours later because you couldn't do that in law. I'd got the bus to work, which made me feel really ill. I walked up Downing Street and 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.’”







**“When you’re
in public
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doing”**

says there are lots of virtual coffees – particularly people wanting to introduce themselves to new starters – and most teams also have a regular drum-beat of getting together in person.

“We learned a lot through the pandemic about how to create connection in those informal ways, not just through formal meetings. So for example, with my team of senior directors, who are based all over the country, I do a weekly, virtual check-in: we spend half an hour just saying how we’re feeling and what’s going on at home and so on. We’ve had to teach ourselves ways of staying in touch and getting to know each other virtually.”

There is also an all-staff Teams call each month which Miles tries to make as engaging as possible. Recent examples include inviting someone to share their memories of working on the horsemeat scandal, 10 years on, and a session where staff tried to understand what life is like for their hearing-impaired colleagues by muting the sound and attempting to follow the call solely with closed captions and the instant-message panel. “That was really hard,” Miles says. “We all did it, about 700 of us, for three minutes. And we were like, ‘How do you do this?’ And our hearing-impaired colleagues were like, ‘Yeah, now you know what we’ve been handling.’”

Miles also wants these all-staff calls to be as free and frank as possible.

“We do not filter the chat. And people will sometimes say things they’re frustrated about and complain about things. But it’s always in a respectful, constructive way. They own what they’re saying and I will respond. I want to create that culture where people feel that they can say things and get heard, rather than trying to shut down the conversation.”

The FSA chief exec has clearly thought long and hard about the kind of leader she wants to be, as a glance at some of her past GOV.UK blogs testifies. One, from 2016, reveals her reasons for declaring her diversity on departmental HR systems. “I imagine most people assume I’m heterosexual,” she writes. “I’m very happily married to my husband, Paul, and we have two children. My bisexuality is, I used to think, nothing to do with the people I work with. But I had a painful experience which now makes me wish others before me had been more open.”

Being bisexual was something she only started owning up to – even to herself – after she’d been a civil servant for some



time, Miles writes, before recalling a security clearance interview in the early 2000s where she was asked about “lesbian or other deviant tendencies”. It was just one of many factors behind her decision to start ticking the bisexual box. “The reason why we all need to know the numbers on diversity characteristics – on sexuality, on disability, on ethnicity – is that sometimes it’s only the hard facts that can help create the case for change,” she says. “The facts also reassure people that they are not alone.”

In another blog, Miles shares her experiences with self-doubt – which she calls her “fatal flaw” – admitting that even when applying for her current job, she almost withdrew her application due to feelings of inadequacy. She also reflects on situations where she questioned her place at the table, such as being one of the few women in male-dominated meetings during her time as director of policing at the Home Office.

However, that blog goes on to argue that self-doubt can also be a superpower. Asked to elaborate on this, Miles says: “It’s such a precious thing to doubt your certainty. When you’re in public policymaking, you’ve got to doubt and be curious so that you can really hear and adjust and improve what you’re doing.” She also has a phrase which she uses more than once in our interview to describe incurious leaders who think they’ve got all the answers: “Top-level dumb.”

Top-level dumb couldn’t be further from her own style. Emily Miles is not just leading the Food Standards Agency, but leading by example – giving her staff and others a blueprint of what a modern public sector boss looks like. ■

MILES ON... WHETHER SHE WOULD EAT A FINDUS LASAGNE

“Of course! Although all other brands are available...”



Level best Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt visit Accrington in January to announce recipients of levelling up funding

GOING FOR GROWTH

The government's latest plans for building economic prosperity across the country include investment zones and Levelling Up Partnerships, with "trailblazer deals" and additional regeneration cash thrown in for good measure. **Jim Dunton** helps you navigate the details

There are few things politicians of all hues can agree on, but one of them is the need to drive economic growth and get the nation's finances on a secure footing. Alongside this, they usually agree that this growth must be spread across the country, rebalancing decades of economic imbalance which have seen growth in London and the southeast outpace the rest of the country.

That's why we've seen a number of strategies focussing on regeneration, levelling up or – as the chancellor put it in his Spring Budget this year – realising the “significant untapped growth potential in the UK's cities outside London”,

As strategy after strategy has put in place new schemes, funds and projects, CSW takes a look at the latest blueprint to deliver, as chancellor Jeremy Hunt put it, “long-term, sustainable, healthy growth” that spreads “opportunity everywhere.”

Investment zones

Images of levelling up could hardly be bolder than shimmering towers of prosperity rising from post-industrial wasteland. Hunt minced no words in describing the government's planned investment zones as “12 potential Canary Wharfs” – the Thatcher government's flagship 1980s regeneration project in east London's Docklands – at his Spring Budget.

The zones are each offered £80m of “support” over a five-year period that starts in the next financial year. The support includes tax incentives and is supposed to be split 40:60 between resource and capital spending.

According to the government, each zone should drive the growth of at least one sector that is seen as “key” to the UK's future: the Treasury cited green industries, digital technologies, life sciences, creative industries, and advanced manufacturing as the crucial five sectors.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will get up to four investment zones between them. Details will be worked up in partnership with the devolved nations. However, the Treasury said agreement of any investment zone in Northern Ireland will be subject to the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive.

The government has identified eight candidates to host investment zones in England, selected using a methodology designed to identify economically underperforming areas with innovation potential.

They are the combined authority areas in Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Tees Valley and Liverpool City Region, and the proposed combined authority areas in the East Midlands and the North East.

Each area will need to submit a detailed bid setting out how mayoral combined authorities, universities, councils and businesses intend to work together to drive growth, including how match-funding will be identified.

Proposals will also need to demonstrate how each zone would support the government's commitment to make the UK a net-zero carbon emissions economy by 2050.

A prospectus clearly states that the shortlist for England will be kept “under review” and that other bids to host zones can be added where the areas can demonstrate “clear potential” to deliver in relation to one of the five priority industries. A separate document underpins the methodology under which the eight shortlisted investment zone areas were selected.

Thomas Pope, deputy chief economist at the Institute for Government, and IfG research assistant Maelyne Coggins noted in a blog that the current version of investment zones has been watered down from proposals tabled by Hunt's predecessor as chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, last September.

In his now-infamous “mini-budget”, Kwarteng said investment zones would be able to enjoy tax breaks for 10 years, rather than five, and would also benefit from new planning freedoms – an offer that is absent from the current proposals.

Pope and Coggins also observed that the earlier incarnation of the programme did not seek to limit the number of investment zones to 12. Then-PM Liz Truss had insisted that there should be no cap on the number of zones.

Will Brett-Harding, policy officer at the What Works Centre for Local Growth, says there is evidence that clustering innovative businesses close together and near a university or research centre could provide a boost to output.

“Proximity allows sharing of ideas,

techniques, and resources, and the potential for collaboration on solving different problems,” he says.

However, Brett-Harding also notes that the What Works centre's previous studies of Enterprise Zones – first introduced in the 1980s and then relaunched during the coalition government era – indicated that they can displace jobs from other areas, moving opportunity rather than growing it.

He adds that making direct comparisons between the new investment zones and Canary Wharf may not be appropriate for the missions each zone would seek to accomplish.

“The success of these zones in creating genuinely new activity will come down to ensuring the incentives offered address the development challenges particular to that area,” he says. “Canary Wharf unlocked development that was curtailed by a specific set of land-use barriers; for example, building height restrictions in the City of London at the time.

“As plans are developed for IZs, the crucial question will be whether they do something similar to address the key barriers that local businesses face.”

Zoë Billingham, director of the Institute for Public Policy Research North think tank, also notes that the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the local authority for Canary Wharf, has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK.

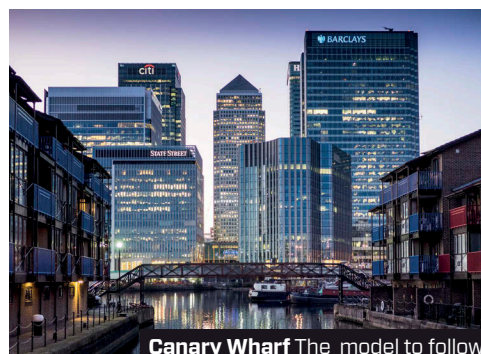
Trailblazer deals

So-called “trailblazer deals” with the Greater Manchester and West Midlands combined authorities that will expand on current levels of devolution were a feature of last year's levelling-up white paper. The Spring Budget restated the government's commitment and presented them as part of the drive for growth.

Under the deals, both sub-regions will get greater control over funding for local transport, skills, employment, housing, innovation and net-zero priorities. They will also get single funding settlements similar to those provided to government departments at the next spending review.

The deals will see both combined authorities get “greater control than ever before over the levers of prosperity”, according to the now-ratified drafts documents. Nevertheless, the deals are not identical.

Labour mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham and his Conservative counterpart in the West Midlands, Andy Street, have been highly supportive of the deals. They told recent events hosted by the Centre for Cities think tank that money is better spent and projects are more



quickly delivered “closer to the ground”.

Details of which funds will be included will be confirmed at the next spending review in 2025. However, the government indicated that if the deals had covered the current spending-review period they would include the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, the Brownfield Housing Fund, the Brownfield Infrastructure and Land Fund, and funding for adults’ skills.

Also included would be city-region sustainable-transport settlements, resource departmental expenditure limit funding for buses, active-travel funds and electric-vehicle funds.

The deals extend business-rates retention pilots for 10 years for both combined authority areas. The West Midlands Combined Authority said the exten-

sion would be worth £45m a year alone to local authorities in the sub-region.

The draft deal documents for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands clearly state that the single budgets will not involve an increase in available funding but “represent a change to the wiring, nature and flexibility of funding from central government rather than the quantum”.

The texts add that the quantum of funding will be “decided by an agreed process” between the government and the combined-authority areas.

The deals also commit Greater Manchester and the West Midlands to new scrutiny arrangements, including publicly broadcast sessions with local MPs and “mayor’s question time” events with members of the public.

Burnham and Street were not the only ones describing the deals as a step forward for devolution. The Resolution Foundation think tank said the deals were a “desirable development” for the way public services are delivered.

However, the foundation framed its comments within the context of Hunt putting off “big decisions” about public sector pay and “implausibly tight” spending plans beyond the current spending review period, rather than in the context of economic growth.

The agreements are being called “trail-blazer” deals because the government stated an ambition for the model to be rolled out to all areas of England with a devolution deal and a directly elected leader “over time”.

The Red Book providing greater detail on Hunt’s Spring Budget contained a pledge to deliver a new wave of devolution deals across England in areas that commit to electing a mayor or other leader. The deals would come with local investment funding.

The book also stated the government’s intention to expand the local retention of business rates to more areas in the next parliament in partnership with interested councils.

LEP of faith

Wider measures to “empower” local leadership include a commitment to bring forward proposals to strengthen the local-government financial landscape in the next parliament and withdrawing central support from England’s 38 Local Enterprise Partnerships – effectively abolishing the business-led groups tasked with driving economic growth.

Hunt framed the demise of LEPs as a positive move, saying that for levelling up to “truly succeed” it would be necessary to “unleash the civic entrepreneurship that is only possible when elected local leaders are able to fund and deliver solutions to their own challenges”.

The chancellor said such a situation would entail giving local leaders “responsibility for local economic growth and the benefit from the upside when it happens”.

LEPs were created as successor organisations to the eight regional development agencies scrapped in 2010 by the coalition government in which both Hunt and levelling up secretary Michael Gove served as cabinet ministers. Over the past decade, LEPs have been allocated billions of pounds from the government’s Local Growth Fund as part of their work. They also had a say in how EU structural funds were spent.

Mark Bretton, chair of sector body the LEP Network, says there is a recogni-



Market research Sunak and Hunt visiting community projects in Lancashire



tion from government that abolishing LEPs will cost money rather than save it.

“Unravelling this with the trailing liabilities and accountability for significant sums of money will not be simple,” he says.

“The importance of the role of business in driving a future enterprise economy has never been more important.

“To say we remain puzzled as to why government wants to put at risk a growth engine that has worked so well for them is an understatement.”

The Local Government Association noted that last year’s levelling up white paper had announced the integration of LEPs and their business boards into mayoral combined authorities and “county deal” areas where they exist, and the Greater London Authority.

It said abolishing LEPs would require a financial commitment from government and a willingness to work with the sector to identify capacity issues some areas could face.

Levelling Up Fund and Levelling Up Partnerships

Just weeks after the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced the successful bidders for the second round of its Levelling Up Fund – worth a combined £2.1bn across 111 projects – Hunt found a further £660m of levelling up cash in the Spring Budget.

So-called Levelling Up Partnerships will offer a combined total of more than £400m in investment to 20 areas determined as being “most in need of levelling up” over the course of this year and 2024-25.

Hunt said the “bespoke” place-based regeneration deals would be agreed in partnership with local council leaders and elected mayors, alongside businesses, community organisations and residents. Among the areas selected are Hull, Middlesbrough, Stoke-on-Trent, Sandwell, Blackburn with Darwen, Hastings, Torbay and Bassetlaw.

A further £211m was earmarked for 16 specific “high-quality regeneration” projects, in some cases in the same boroughs. Sandwell was allocated £20m for the regeneration of Tipton town centre. Blackburn with Darwen was allocated £20m for a new skills and education campus.

DLUHC subsequently acknowledged that all of the 16 schemes had been shortlisted for the second round of the government’s Levelling Up Fund, but had not been selected at the time. It said that since the second-round winners were announced, more than £200m of unallocated departmental funding for use on

levelling up had been “identified” and that it needed to be delivered in 2023-24.

It said opening a new round of bidding would be “disproportionately burdensome” and chose to award support to schemes on the Levelling Up Fund shortlist because the pipeline had been “rigorously assessed” and found to be good value for money and deliverable.

Hunt also confirmed funding for a further three projects in the North West with a combined value of £58m. The schemes “narrowly missed” out in the second round of the Levelling Up Fund, according to DLUHC. Described as “levelling up capital projects” in the Red Book, the schemes are a new community hub in Stockport, the transformation of Bootle town centre and the redevelopment of markets in Rossendale, along with transport improvements.

Measures announced in the Budget to “encourage growth and support communities” also included £200m for councils to repair potholes and improve roads. The Red Book said better roads “enable faster and safer journeys for all users, contributing to productivity gains”. More than £60m was also allocated to help providers of public swimming pools make their facilities more energy efficient.

Paul Swinney, director of policy and

“The approach to growth is swinging towards the prioritisation of a selection of places, and a focus on ‘productivity potential’” Paul Swinney, Centre for Cities

research at the Centre for Cities, says the Spring Budget shone new light on subtle differences between the government’s thinking on levelling up and growth.

“The approach to growth is increasingly swinging towards both a prioritisation of a selection of places and a focus on ‘productivity potential’ – how well places should be doing given their size – as a key measure of how this prioritisation should be done,” he says.

“This recognises that different places make, or rather should be making, different contributions to the national economy.”

Swinney says the language used around most policies explicitly badged as levelling up has been “very different” and speaks about delivering a “fair geographic spread” across the regions. He adds that levelling up policies are more likely to be focused outside of large metropolitan centres. ■

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO WORK

Although it was not flagged explicitly as a growth measure, the headline element of the Spring Budget was the government’s decision to extend the provision of free childcare to cover youngsters aged from nine months to three years. Working parents of children aged three and four are already entitled to 30 hours of free childcare.

The Treasury costs the move at £4.1bn in the years to 2027-28. The offer is being rolled out in stages, starting next April, and will not be available in full until September 2025 – months after the deadline by which the next general election must be held.

The chancellor said that if we could match Dutch levels of female participation in the jobs market, there would be more than a million extra women working. But he also admitted staff shortages and cost pressures that are affecting the childminding sector.

Children’s minister Claire Coutinho told the Education Select Committee this month that the Office for Budget Responsibility had estimated the childcare expansion would allow 60,000 people to return to work or extend their current working hours.

More controversially, Hunt used the Budget to introduce new pensions-related tax breaks for high earners designed to “incentivise highly skilled individuals to remain in the labour market”. Billed as a response to concerns expressed by senior NHS clinicians, the moves will scrap the taxation rules on contributions to pension pots that are already larger than £1m – the so-called “lifetime allowance charge” – and increase the annual tax-free allowance for individuals from £40,000 to £60,000.

The Resolution Foundation said the childcare measures were the biggest increase to support on record and would encourage more parents to work, while making it worthwhile for many more parents to work for longer. However, it said the reforms would cost around £1.2bn but increase employment by just 15,000.





A TRUCKY ISSUE

Three DfE officials explain how they helped address an acute shortage of HGV drivers

In 2021, stories began to circulate about an HGV driver shortage. Retailers were warning that “Christmas was at risk” due to disruption to deliveries and supply chain pressures.

The road haulage industry, meanwhile, estimated that the HGV driver shortage was between 90,000 and 100,000 in 2021 – around double the 45,000 shortfall in 2016.

Costs of training and obtaining a licence can act as a barrier to new recruits who are not funded by an employer. These recruits can include people looking to get into the industry as self-employed or agency workers as well as those in the logistics industry wanting to upskill.

The situation in 2021 was compounded by a testing backlog as a result of Covid. Normally around 41,000 drivers pass their HGV tests each year, but in the 12 months to March 2021 only 16,000 HGV test passes were achieved due to the eight-month suspension of testing.

The pressure was on to come up with solutions quickly.

In response, the UK government put in place 33 interventions to support the sector, including measures to increase HGV driver testing capacity. As part of this package, the Department for Education explored what role the skills system could play and, in particular, how Skills Bootcamps could be scaled up quickly to help.

Skills Bootcamps were launched in 2020, initially to teach digital skills. They were designed to be flexible train-

ing courses for people aged 19 or over – generally lasting up to 16 weeks – to respond to the skills needs of employers and improve people’s job prospects.

The DfE team sought to adapt the Skills Bootcamp model to quickly address the skills deficit in the road haulage industry by providing up to 11,000 additional fully-funded HGV driver training places over two years.

The “Skills Bootcamp in HGV Driving” training allowed individuals with no or limited prior experience to be trained, supported to get a licence and then moved into jobs in the industry. It also allowed qualified HGV drivers to gain additional in-demand HGV qualifications, upgrade their licence or return to driving.

The DfE Skills Bootcamps team – together with commercial business partners, the DfT and DVSA – rapidly swung into action to engage the market, design a procurement and plan out delivery including increasing testing capacity. The aim was to contract providers who could train learners to achieve large truck and articulated lorry licences as well as additional qualifications such as the Petroleum Driver Passport for driving vehicles hauling fuel.

The procurement took around three months and was heavily over-subscribed. We eventually awarded contracts to 21 independent training providers and further-education colleges, to deliver

a full end-to-end service including all training, tests, licences and qualifications and then employer engagement to secure an interview with an employer with relevant vacancies. In summary, each Skills Bootcamp learner needed to be able to work as a fully qualified HGV driver by the end of the bootcamp.

In the first year of the scheme – 2021-22 – we delivered 4,740 HGV driver places. Overall, these Skills Bootcamps have been very popular and are supported by learners, providers, industry bodies and employers. Although we don’t yet have the final numbers of completions and outcomes for Skills Bootcamps in HGV Driving, indications are encouraging. The industry says that the shortage of drivers is being alleviated and has called for bootcamps to continue. The best thing has been hearing the stories of our learners: some had always wanted to go into HGV driving but had been unable to afford it, or were unemployed and secured a career through the Skills Bootcamps.

For the delivery team, this has been an incredibly challenging but rewarding experience. To stand up a new policy solution in a matter of months, get resources in place, understand a new sector and provider base, liaise with DVLA on increasing testing where it was needed, manage contracts effectively and get results, cannot be underestimated. And all while the department was also managing the response to Covid.

This couldn’t have been done without the incredible dedication of the civil servants involved, the strong collaboration across our department and with others – namely Cabinet Office, the Department for Transport and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency – and with the support of DfE senior sponsors and ministers, No.10 and the Treasury. It is another great example of how government can mobilise and deliver at pace when the country needs it to most.

The programme has continued through 2022-23 and is likely to get close to the 11,000 learner places forecast. In response to sector feedback, DfE is extending the programme through 2023-24 to deliver more

places. This is exactly what Skills Bootcamps were designed to do: respond to priority skills needs as required. ■

“The pressure was on to come up with solutions quickly”

Fiona Mee Alvares is Skills Bootcamps policy delivery lead; John Wright is Skills Bootcamps enabling lead; and David Bussey is commercial lead, category manager at DfE



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SAFE AS HOUSES

Ensuring everyone has a decent place to live is no minor undertaking. **Emran Mian** talks to **Beckie Smith** about raising standards in social housing, putting “moral pressure” on landlords, and the importance of partnership working

The day before CSW speaks to Emran Mian, Michael Gove has officially branded the UK’s housing model “broken”. “That change is necessary is undeniable,” the housing secretary wrote, by way of introduction to a series of essays proposing solutions.

As director general for regeneration at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Mian leads the government’s work on housing and planning. Bringing about this change represents what Mian understatedly calls “a big old agenda” – in terms of both delivery and legislation.

That agenda includes three bills on their way through parliament – one to support infrastructure around levelling up; another to raise standards and oversight in social housing; and a third on renters’ reform. Meanwhile, the £11.5bn Affordable Homes Programme is two years into its seven-year span, and billions more are being spent on infrastructure to support housing development.

Potential roadblocks to progress take many forms. Take DLUHC’s priority to improve the supply of housing – or, more simply, to build more houses. Challenges range from local opposition to new developments

– which the department hopes to mitigate in part through focusing on quality as well as quantity of housing – to the pressures of inflation and supply-chain challenges which are, as Mian acknowledges, affecting almost all major projects at the moment.

Another priority is, as Mian puts it, “getting more and more people to a place where the house that they live in is a decent place to live”.

DLUHC oversees and monitors the Decent Homes Standard: a series of minimum requirements for social housing, including providing a “reasonable degree of thermal comfort” and being in a “reasonable state of repair”.

“The positive thing on decency is that the trends have all been in the right direction. The proportion of homes that are not decent has been falling steadily for the past 20 years,” Mian says. But recently, those numbers have plateaued. In 2021, 14% of occupied dwellings in England failed to meet the Decent Homes Standard – 3.4 million in total, just shy of 2020’s 3.5 million.

While the standard is only a regulatory measure for social housing, Mian says the figures show there are “clear and pressing issues” remaining in the private rented sector, where 23% of homes were judged to be “non-decent”.

DLUHC ran a consultation last year on extending regulation of the Decent Homes Standard to private tenancies. The renters’ reform bill that the government introduced in May would pave the way for enforcement.

But in recent months, the spotlight has fallen on social housing, where one in 10 people were living in non-decent homes in 2021. In January, an inquest found that two-year-old Awaab Ishak had died from a respiratory condition caused by exposure to mould in his home. The inquest heard that Rochdale Boroughwide Housing had failed to act despite Ishak’s father repeatedly raising the issue before the boy’s death in 2020.

The following month, Gove tabled an amendment to the social housing bill, known as Awaab’s Law, which would require social landlords to fix hazards such as damp and mould within strict time limits. DLUHC is planning to publish updated guidance on mould and damp health risks for landlords in England this summer.

But Mian says plans to tighten regulations have been “in the works for a while”. The bill covers a number of measures set out in the 2020 social housing white paper, which followed the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, and promises to deliver “transformational change” for residents.

“I think what the Awaab Ishak case has

shown us is that there have been some particular gaps around the rights of recourse that tenants have in relation to damp and mould, and a lack of responsiveness from some social housing landlords to their tenants,” Mian says. He says government must use “all the possible levers we’ve got” to improve things – including upping the “moral pressure on landlords to do more”.

Effecting change in any area of the housing system means getting a host of external partners on side – from landlords to local authorities and developers. “That’s definitely a big challenge: finding the space to describe what our strategy is, to get people who we think are very sympathetic to it actually engage in it,” Mian says.

“I think Michael Gove is more effective at that – conveying to the widest possible range of people what it is we’re trying to do – than most politicians,” he says. Mian says the housing secretary is a “really powerful” force at DLUHC, having returned in October after a three-month exile from cabinet to “finish the job” he started in 2021. In his first stint as secretary of state, Gove scrapped the government’s previous planning reforms, published the levelling up white paper, and steered the building safety bill through parliament.

“He’s somebody who thinks about this as a system,” Mian says. “He’s not just thinking about one target or one thing; he’s thinking about a set of interconnected things... [that] we need to move to get the outcomes that we want.”

“We’re taking through changes to our major programmes to allow our partners to deliver in quite a different environment – that’s good, grown-up policymaking”

“I think it’s really important for us as civil servants to play our part in that as well,” Mian adds. He says when the Covid response took centre stage, the civil service became “a bit less practised at coming out and saying, “These are the things we’re trying to do, these are who our partners are and here’s how we build a coalition for change””.

“I think the pandemic has eaten into our social capital,” he says, explaining that as large swathes of the civil service and its partner organisations have spent much of their time “in firefighting mode” over the last few years, there have been fewer opportunities for connection.

“I think that’s now shifting back... over the past few months, we have been able to get back to rebuilding some of our social



capital,” he says. “But it’s shifting back at a point where we’re quite deep into a parliament and, at least for some of our partner organisations, they’re already beginning to think about what might come next year.”

“In civil service terms, there’s a long while to run in this parliament, so we’ve got to stay focused on the task here,” he says – but he adds that this environment means “everything feels just a bit more fragile than you’d want it to be when you’re trying to do some quite ambitious things together.”

“Ultimately, if I were to rock up in one of the cities or towns where we rely on having a coalition – say, because we’re funding a big set of projects there or because it’s a really important place for housing development – do our partners 100% get what we’re trying to do? Are they 100% with it? No, I think there’s definitely more to do, because we’ve not been talking to each other as regularly as we should have. We’ve not been confident enough about doing stuff together. [And] everybody’s been under the cosh in terms of cost, inflation and so on.”

In the push to strengthen those delicate relationships, Mian says DLUHC has been talking “really openly” to its partners about how to support ongoing projects, which sometimes means shifting pre-Covid parameters.

“We’re taking through some changes to our major programmes right now in order to allow our partners to deliver in quite a different environment to the environment in which programmes were initially conceived of,” he says. “I think that’s good, grown-up policymaking and done in partnership, and it just makes people feel that we get it and that we’re backing them to deliver.”

In the spirit of this “grown-up” approach to partnership, Mian says DLUHC is planning a plenary session at Civil Service Live where local authorities, businesses and universities will discuss what it means for the civil service to be ambitious. “It shouldn’t always be people from within the civil service instructing civil servants on how to be ambitious about their role,” he says. “I think there’s so much that people can get from hearing other partners say, ‘Look, this is what I think you should be doing’. We might not be able to do all of it, but I think that is hugely motivating.”

In his four years at DLUHC, Mian says the thing he has heard most frequently from other organisations is that they want to see better coordination between departments. “The classic case will often be a housing project that depends on a transport

project happening at the right time and in the right way. It might involve land that is owned or controlled by another department being released for use in the development... and on the face of it, everybody agrees that this should happen. But the processes just aren’t aligned. Everybody’s got a different business case process; everybody’s got a slightly different timeline; everybody’s got a slightly different control process.”

As a result, he says, local authorities and other partners sometimes find themselves “defeated by the complexity” of it all.

But Mian says he has “loads and loads of faith” that these problems can be fixed. “I think these things happen not on the whole because people are doing the *wrong* thing. I think it’s because people are trying to do *their* thing,” he says. He adds that it can feel “like a bit of an inconvenience” when another official comes along to ask if a team can do things differently, or in a different sequence – or if a proposal that could save money overall would come at the expense of one department’s budget.

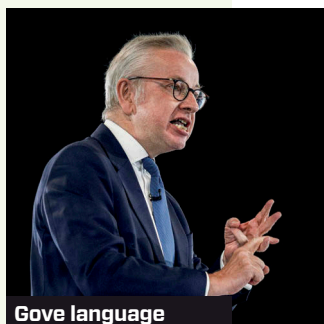
But most tensions – between teams, or between departmental and ministerial objectives – can be resolved, Mian says, by “getting the right people in a room” to understand each other’s processes and perspectives.

Another challenge on Mian’s mind is that staff turnover, especially at the more junior levels, is high. “That always has some positives, but it’s certainly a challenge as well when you’re trying to pull off quite a broad and ambitious agenda,” he says.

One reason, he says, is that people have felt “drawn towards” the urgent projects that have arisen across the civil service in the last couple of years, rather than long-term policy goals. Another is that “pay is quite constrained”, so people seek higher-paid roles either through promotion or outside the civil service.

Public sector pay has always been – as Mian puts it – “different to that in the private sector”. But government has other competitive advantages as an employer – including the social capital that Mian says has taken a hit in recent years. “I think what we’ve always relied on – and these are really powerful things to rely on – is the sense of mission, but also the fact that being in the civil service allows you to work with a set of colleagues that you may not have in another domain, and to gather a coalition of people around you from other organisations too,” he says.

Changing ways of working and the need to tackle immediate priorities has meant “people have gone through a period of



Gove language
The levelling up secretary is good at communicating DLUHC’s mission



Awaab's Law Named after two-year-old Awaab Ishak who died after exposure to mould in social housing, Awaab's Law will force social landlords to fix damp and mould within strict time limits

experiencing less connection” with both colleagues and external partners, he says.

But this too is bouncing back. He has made an effort to travel to DLUHC's offices around the country, both for meetings and informal site visits, while ministers are also meanwhile back on the road “in a big way”, he says.

One symbolic change that Mian has seen since he first joined the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2019 is the department's rebrand. Boris Johnson christened DLUHC in 2021, two years after coining “levelling up” as his administration's flagship agenda. But the phrase now appears less often in ministerial speeches than it once did.

Mian says one reason for the recent lack of explosive announcements is that “a lot of the levelling up stuff is now in ‘proper delivery’ [stage]”. He predicts there will be more fanfare when some of the 200-odd projects backed by the capital funding programmes attached to the policy come to fruition.

“A lot of the media commentary and so on tends to be a bit less interested in the phase of ‘getting on and doing stuff’ – other than reporting on when something isn't working,” he adds wryly. “And so that gives a particular vibe to the deliv-

ery stage which is hard to shake off.”

But he says work continues behind the scenes. The affordable-housing programme, for example, is now “much more mindful of where in the country that investment is going” and how that aligns with the levelling up aims.

“Equally, we're trying to ensure much better coordination between what we're doing and what the government is trying to do on, say, transport,” he says, “because a really big theme of the levelling

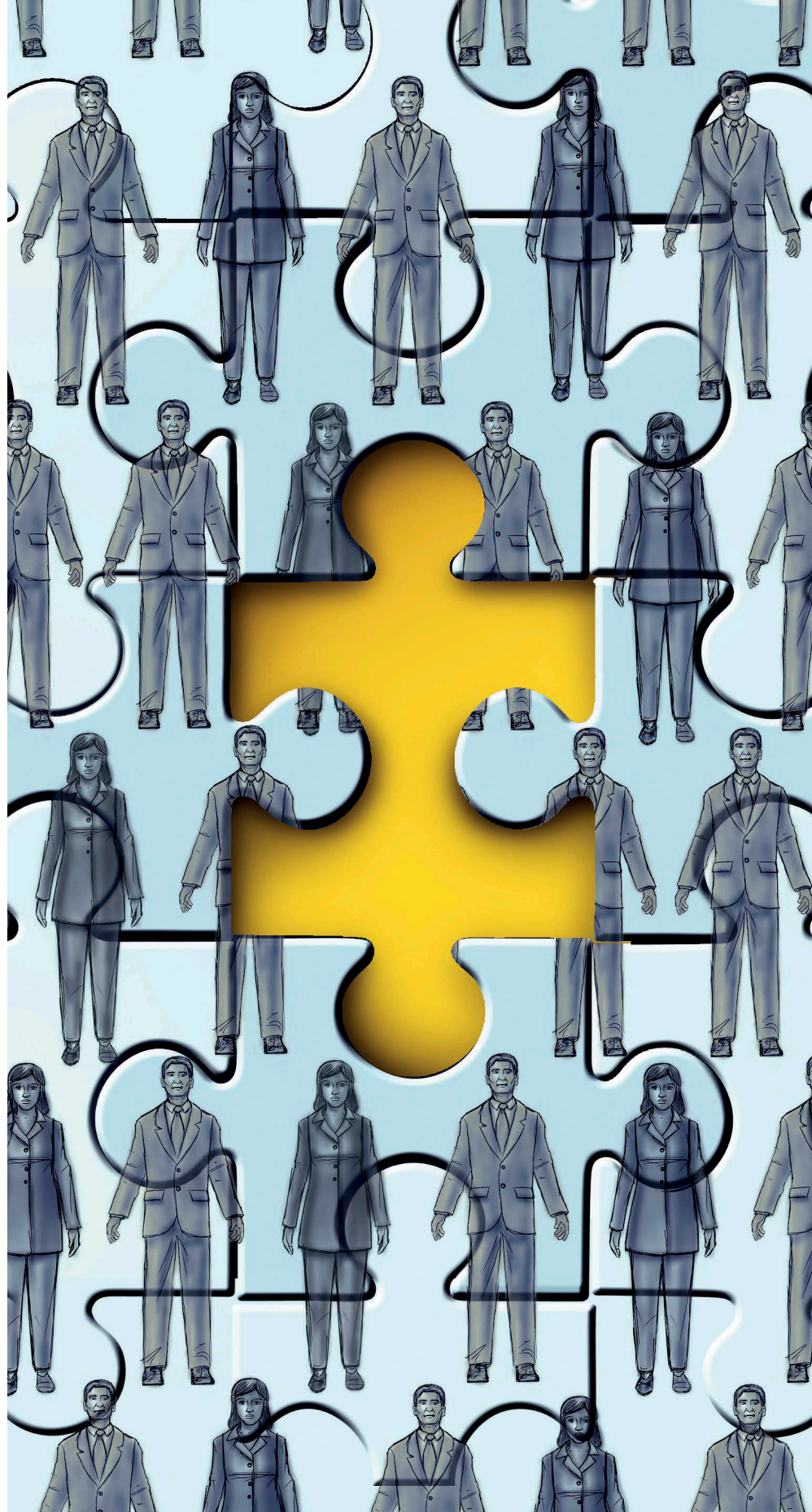
“Turnover always has some positives, but it can be a challenge when you're trying to pull off a broad and ambitious agenda”

up white paper was that levelling up is not about doing one thing in one place.” Add housing improvements to regeneration of the high street and improvements to education and skills, culture and infrastructure “and then suddenly you're getting somewhere”, he adds.

Mian says government is getting better at the “interconnectedness” needed to move the agenda forward. “There's definitely more to do, but in terms of coordinating our activities, we're in a better place than we were at the start of this parliament.” ■

FIXING THE LABOUR MARKET PUZZLE

The shocks of Brexit and the pandemic have led to big changes in the UK's labour market and immigration system. **Tom Sasse** asks if the government's policies add up



The big task Jeremy Hunt set himself in the March Budget was finding Britain's missing workers. Since the pandemic, more than half a million people have left the workforce. The Office for Budget Responsibility has warned that if businesses

cannot recruit, it will be impossible to tackle Britain's sluggish growth.

Most of the missing workers are over 50, though some are younger. Their exact reasons for leaving are something of a mystery. Research so far points to some combination of ill health, poor pay and conditions, increasingly stressful work, a

lack of support to retrain, and relatively generous pensions. The furlough scheme was akin to a forced early retirement; many decided it was not worth coming back.

Other countries have also experienced problems getting workers back after the pandemic, but not on nearly the same scale. "The UK is having one of the worst

labour market recovers from Covid in the developed world,” says Tony Wilson, director of the Institute for Employment Studies. “We are one of the only countries where employment is lower than it was before the pandemic.”

Hunt set out what he called “the biggest-ever employment package” to remedy this. Measures included tightening conditionality on out-of-work benefits, improving training available for over-50s, expanding support for those with disabilities, reforming pensions, and significantly expanding free childcare.

These policies were broadly welcomed but experts do not think they will be enough. The OBR thinks they will make up for only around a fifth of the lost workers (110,000) in five years’ time. “Midlife MOTs” to help older workers understand their options have been used successfully by businesses like Aviva. But it is not clear that the government has a compelling plan for attracting over-50s back into the workforce.

This is not just a post-pandemic challenge, but a demographic one. “Fundamentally, we need to make work better if we want people to stay in the workforce longer,” Wilson says. The UK also lacks high-quality and widely available employment support to help people back into good jobs, with current schemes targeted at a small proportion of those out of work.

However, the OBR documents also contain a second story about Britain’s post-Brexit trajectory that Hunt neglected to mention. By far the biggest increase in the size of the workforce (160,000) will come not from any of the chancellor’s employment measures, but from immigration.

This is not what was predicted. “Pretty much everyone thought Brexit would result in lower immigration, with a lot less EU immigration not made up for by a slight increase in non-EU migration,” says Madeleine Sumption, director of the Migration Observatory.

In fact, the UK recorded its highest-ever level of net migration last year – with 606,000 more people arriving than leaving in the year to June 2022 – a far cry from Theresa May’s pipe dream of reducing migration to the “tens of thousands”. This partly reflected new visa schemes for Ukrainians, Afghans and Hong Kongers. There was also an “artificial blip” in the figures due to a smaller number of students arriving two to three years ago, Sumption notes.

But a big part of the story has been a much larger than expected increase in people coming to the UK on working visas

from others parts of the world, including India, Nigeria and the Philippines. This includes lots of high-skilled workers in areas including IT, finance and business services.

Visas for these workers have been processed more efficiently than many predicted, with few reports of businesses complaining about delays, and some experts offering praise for the Home Office’s administrative efficiency.

Jonathan Portes, professor of economics and public policy at King’s College London, calls it a “rare Brexit success story”. “The biggest shakeup in our immigration system in a generation has taken place remarkably smoothly,” he says.

“Fundamentally we need to make work better if we want people to stay in the workforce longer” Tony Wilson, IES

There have been shortfalls in lower-skilled areas that rely on short-term and flexible labour, including hospitality and construction. But that is a feature, not a bug, of the end of freedom of movement, which some politicians argued was preventing businesses from investing in domestic workers.

The exception to this is public services, particularly the NHS and social care, where the government is still very reliant on a huge number of foreign workers to plug gaps in ever-more creaky systems. Around 15% of nurses are trained abroad, while the government issued around 50,000 nurse visas last year.

Portes argues this is deeply hypocritical: “The government is saying to someone who runs a pub ‘tough if you can’t staff the bar, that’s what happens when you rely on cheap labour from

current approach – a hard-line policy towards asylum seekers creating cover for a much more liberal approach to overall immigration – is reminiscent of New Labour’s policy in the 2000s.

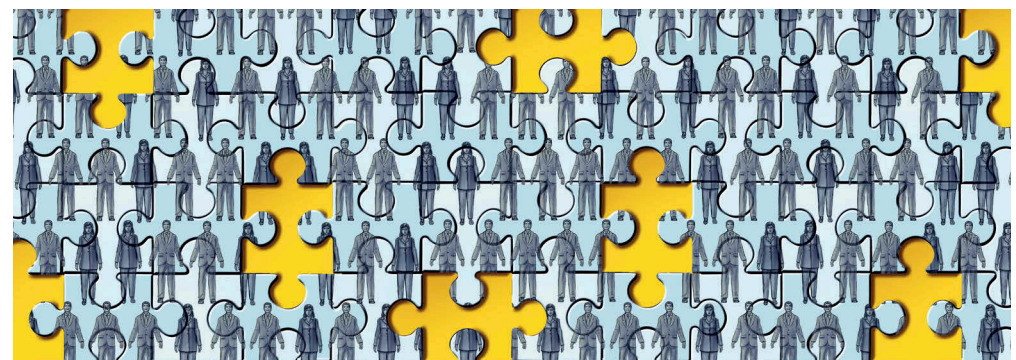
But if that is the plan, the government has not been upfront about it. Its 2019 manifesto promised that “overall numbers will come down”. Suella Braverman, the home secretary, still claims this is her “ultimate aspiration” – an aspiration she previously proved willing to resign over.

Having taken the decision to end freedom of movement, the government may need to be prepared to be more willing to intervene to support employment. “There is always a tension between controlling welfare and ensuring you have an efficient labour market where people can quickly find jobs they are suited to,” Wilson says. But focusing on the former is questionable, he argues, given

there is “huge demand for labour and fewer people competing for more jobs”.

There are also signs of Whitehall dysfunction. Employment and skills is a classic area where “lots of people are responsible but no one is really accountable”, says Wilson. While DWP, DfE, DLUHC, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and local authorities all have a role, it is not clear that anyone has a clear vision for supporting the workforce the UK needs.

Portes describes how short-termism drives decisions about the public sector workforce: “The health department says it needs more nurses or doctors, the Treasury says it won’t provide the money, so the health department has to get the Treasury to overrule the Home Office to agree to lots more visas.” Decisions about higher-education funding similarly drive decision making about student visas.

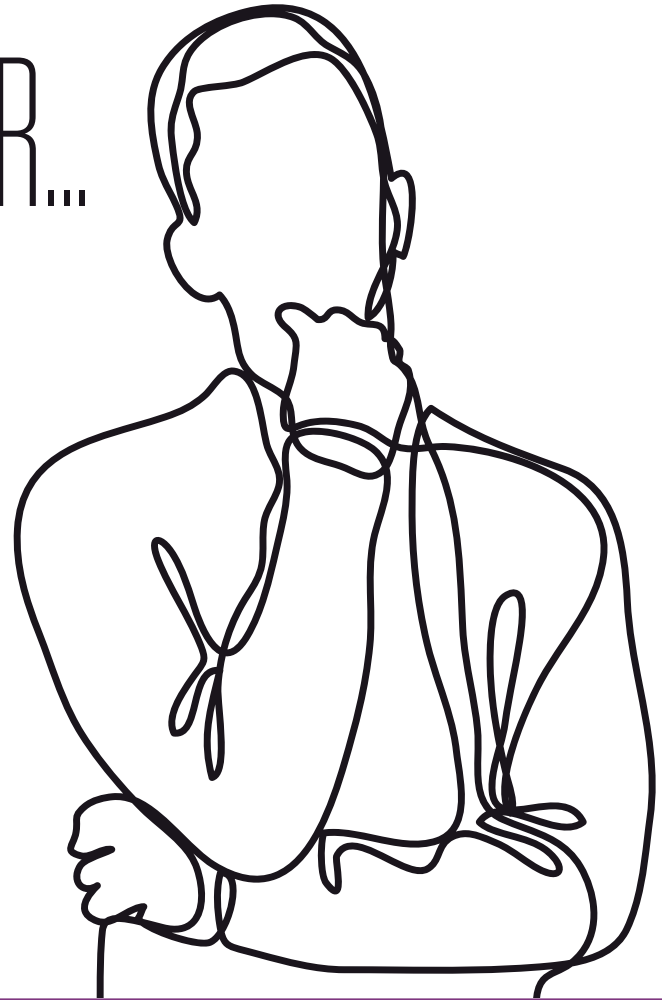


Europe and don’t invest,’ but when it comes to the workforce it’s responsible for, it’s quite happy to rely on other countries to train and supply our workforce.”

Looking ahead, the big question is whether the government has a plan. The

Since freedom of movement ended in 2021, the UK has faced a pandemic, an energy crisis and rampant inflation. But as the government emerges from crisis mode, it will need to settle on a long-term approach to immigration and the workforce. ■

PROFESSIONS PRIMER... KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT



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

Who are they?

The knowledge and information management profession is made up of civil servants across government departments, agencies and arm's-length bodies, led by head of profession David Smith – a deputy director in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

“Core” KIM roles include librarians, information managers, record managers, information rights officers, information architects and knowledge managers. People in these jobs will often have a recognised KIM qualification or be registered with a professional body.

There are also a number of “allied” KIM roles, including archivists, historians, information risk managers and data scientists. Some civil servants in these posts are part of the profession, but this varies between departments.

What do they do?

Described as “custodians of the government’s history”, KIM professionals are responsible for record keeping and curating information in all its forms – thereby ensuring departments are transparent and

VIEW FROM THE TOP...

DAVID SMITH
HEAD OF THE KIM
PROFESSION AND
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
OF KNOWLEDGE
AND INFORMATION
MANAGEMENT, DLUHC

David Smith has been at DLUHC and its predecessor departments, for over a decade. As deputy director of knowledge and information management, Smith and his team are responsible for developing information governance policies; reducing the department’s “digital heap” with IT tools and records management techniques; and providing KIM support for public inquiries such as those looking into the Grenfell Tower fire and the govern-

ment’s response to Covid.

He first joined the department through a month-long secondment to a government department’s KIM team, after completing an MA in political science and a postgraduate qualification in library and information science.

He says the variety of work he encounters has been a highlight – and theme – of his career, which has spanned organisations including the European Parliament, the Department of Health, the Department of the Environment and the Food Standards Agency.

“Over the years, this has ranged from preparing briefing notes on female permanent secretaries for

the late Queen Elizabeth II and demonstrating internet technology to prime minister Tony Blair, to advising another prime minister (this time Boris Johnson) on the General Data Protection Regulation,” he says.

In 2021, Smith received the Information and Records Management Society Special Recognition award for his work on a programme of “KIM Bitesize” sessions to help combat professional isolation during lockdown.

“It was really an award for all those in the KIM profession who have been involved in delivering sessions and arranging the programme – an outstanding corporate effort on behalf of KIM,” he says.

accountable to parliament and the public.

“It’s really about how we use, organise and make sense of information and knowledge... we want to use and exploit what we have as assets to drive improvement – whether that’s a librarian supporting inquiries in the House of Commons or using the knowledge that we’ve got already in government to drive innovation,” says Rebecca Dorsett, deputy head of the digital and information professions in the Ministry of Defence.

Where can they be found?

There are KIM professionals in every department. Under the Freedom of Information Act, each department must have an information management function with a designated manager as part of its organisational capability. The number in each organisation varies, with nearly 900 in the MoD alone.

What is a typical career path like?

KIM offers “among the most varied and interesting career paths of all the civil service professions”, according to profession head David Smith. Some civil servants begin their careers retrieving information to support policy colleagues and move on to working closely with private office teams, while others start out in digital, data and technology roles.

Dorsett – who is also chair of professional body CILIP’s Government Information Group – says information management is a common starting point because of the wide range of jobs on offer, along with IT support roles. “If you’re supporting a lot of frontline IT enquiries, you might start getting more interested in SharePoint and then thinking about how to manage information,” she says.

Another pipeline Dorsett has seen through her work at CILIP, which represents librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers across the UK, is “people making the transition from the more traditional library and records world, who are starting to look at what else they can do with their skills”. This is the route she first took into government.

More senior posts might include data protection officers looking at data flows arising from programmes such as Homes for Ukraine; or heading up a department’s KIM function and acting as departmental records officer.

Which professions do they work most closely with?

KIM professionals work closely with colleagues specialising in data and research-related areas, like the analysis and social research professions. “All of these things rely on knowledge and information – and the better those things are processed, stored and used, the more effective you would hope government would be as a result,” says Gavin Freeguard, a consultant working on data policy and research. There

is also close collaboration with civil servants in several other “allied professions” – including comms staff, economists and scientists, digital and IT specialists, statisticians and programme and project managers. There is a lot of partnership working with the security profession – some of which comes under the mantra of “daring – but caring – sharing”, Smith says. This work is critical, he explains “to ensure an agile, but risk-based, approach to the pragmatic sharing of information – maximising technology to enable the provision of the right information securely and safely to the right people at the right time”.

KIM is “also valuable to the corporate functions [of the civil service],” Freeguard adds. “If you want to run those things, you need to be able to learn properly from what’s gone before; you need to be able to get hold of the right information at the right time. It should be underpinning just about everything else.”

What are they most likely to say?

Dorsett says there are two go-to phrases KIM professionals use frequently: “Have you saved that as a record?” and “Have you tried searching for that?” The latter is “a bit of a joke, but something we’ve got to tackle across government”, she says, noting that “information skills are a bit like digital skills: something everyone really needs to have”.

Another commonly heard phrase is: “If only this department knew what this department knows.” Smith explains: “KIM professionals are heavily involved in capturing, exploiting and appropriately sharing the knowledge held in the heads of departmental staff, which otherwise would be lost when staff leave.” And he says KIM professionals can often be heard referring to the “digital heap” – unorganised collections of digital documents that they work on with the DDaT profession to reduce the amount of redundant, obsolete and trivial information on government servers – and also to the lack of a “Lord of the Rings information retrieval system: one retrieval tool to rule them all”.

How is the profession being developed?

The KIM profession launched a new

skills framework last year to “build capability in the profession and help shape career paths”. The launch included an overhaul of the skills for each of the profession’s “job families”, and introduced a competency management tool called Comaea that enables people to track and record their L&D progress and see what they need to do to develop further.

Once that framework was in place, the profession contracted the Government Online Skills Tool – part of the Government Projects Academy – to examine its capability. “I think we were one of the first professions to really test what skills and capability we’ve actually got,” Dorsett says. That work is enabling the profession to identify skills gaps and where it needs to create new development opportunities.

What are their priorities at the moment?

As well as looking at ways to support development, Dorsett says another major focus is to create more generalised role profiles for KIM jobs. “There’s still quite a lot of disparity across government, so it can be very varied what you might do from department to department – so we want to get a handle on proper job role profiles,” she says.

Priorities also include ensuring KIM professionals are set up for eDiscovery – the process of finding digital information to be used as evidence in legal cases – to support the government’s response to the Covid-19 public inquiry, and that they are working with other professions to manage new forms of information, including social media, and new information generation tools, such as AI.

Besides that, there is an ongoing push to drive “a culture that understands their information policies and recognises the value and risk that derives from good or poor information management – and that this is underpinned by close collaboration with digital colleagues”, Smith says.

Smith is also encouraging collaboration between the so-called communities that make up the profession – including the Association of Departmental Records Officers; the cross-government data protection officers’ committee; and the Committee of Departmental Librarians – to highlight the possibilities of KIM as a career choice. Alongside that, its leaders are working to champion the profession and make people aware of what it does – because, Dorsett says, “if we use KIM professionals in the right way, my God they can help transform things across government”. ■



VIEW FROM THE TOP...

REBECCA DORSETT

DEPUTY HEAD OF DIGITAL AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONS, MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Dorsett began her career working in public libraries, which she says she loved. In 2014, she applied to be an information support officer at Defence Equipment and Support, knowing very little about the field but seeing a number of similarities in the job description with being a librarian.

She joined DE&S’s airworthiness team – “they keep things flying, and look at them when they crash” – after a promotion to information manager. “I absolutely loved that role, because I got to explore the different ways that information and records support the safety of aircraft in the air, and the importance of keeping records where things have gone wrong to make sure it never happens again,” she says. “Having that link between what I did and the huge

aircraft going out was pretty amazing.”

A series of promotions led her to become DE&S’s information management and information technology capability lead, before moving to her current post. That journey was only briefly interrupted by a year spent in the private sector – where, she says, “I got so bored because I really missed the civil service. I really missed that collective feeling of wanting to make a difference”.

Moving to her current job in 2021 brought Dorsett into what she calls the “people space”. “Having seen a lot of the challenges out there, I really want to champion and support the profession. I absolutely loved working in those KIM roles. I loved trying to change people’s minds about KIM to show that you’re not there to just try and build a SharePoint site or help somebody file something in SharePoint. If you really think about the amount of information we sit on in government, that can make a hell of a difference if you use it properly.”

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Paul Clarke

CLOSING ARGUMENTS

After a long and distinguished career, the Crown Prosecution Service's director of legal services **Sue Hemming** – who sees herself as civil servant and lawyer in equal parts – is retiring. **Suzannah Brecknell** meets her

In the mid-1990s, Sue Hemming was in her office at the Cambridgeshire division of the Crown Prosecution Service when she got a call from reception. A man had arrived and wanted to talk to her about a death by dangerous driving. The case was one of Hemming's.

"He's the father of one of the boys who was killed," the receptionist said. "Do you think you should speak to him?"

Hemming had joined the CPS straight from bar school in the late 1980s, attracted in part by the fact she would get lots more court experience there than in a legal chambers. She stayed, she recalls, because she immediately felt at home in the then-new organisation, whose values and purpose inspired her.

By the 1990s, after many years' experience, Hemming was used to supporting victims in court, but meeting a family member there in the office? "It wasn't really the sort of thing that people did," she says. But her response was immediate.

"I said: 'Well, of course I should speak

to him – he's come all this way to speak to me so, yes, bring him up'. We sat and had a cup of coffee, he told me about his son and how he felt about the process – how he didn't understand what was happening."

Hemming is telling CSW this story in the week before she retires after more than three decades at the CPS. She recalls it as a moment when she began to consciously develop the way she worked with victims and families – a thread that would run through her career.

After her encounter with that father she began to meet families and show them around courts before the trials were heard. A few years later, she moved from Cambridge to the central case-work division in London, which deals with complex and specialised cases.

"One of my responsibilities was to deal with corporate and medical manslaughter cases," she says, "and we introduced an initiative to meet bereaved families and explain directly the reasons why we were and weren't prosecuting – although >>

"Hillsborough was legally complex, but knowing that the families had been through those tragic events and had then suffered for many, many years afterwards – that was also hugely challenging"

because of the complexity of those cases, it was generally why we weren't prosecuting."

Throughout her career, Hemming has taken the approach that it's important to be open about how decisions are made and how the criminal justice system works. "I don't think people can trust a system that they don't know very much about," she says. "I have had meetings with victims, or I've been to community events to explain things and it just makes such a big difference to people. There are some people who are always going to feel the same way, whatever you say to them. But when you explain why you're making a decision, so many people are just grateful to understand – even if they have a different perspective."

Her concern for those who interact with the criminal justice system as victims and witnesses was most publicly apparent during her work on the cases which followed publication of the Hillsborough report in October 2012. The Hillsborough Independent Panel Report published some 450,000 pages of material compiled from 85 organisations, and concluded that no Liverpool fans had been responsible in any way for the disaster, which has now claimed 97 lives.

"I've dealt with lots of really difficult, emotive, distressing cases," says Hemming, who also led the CPS's counter-terrorism work from 2002 onwards. But while some of those terrorism cases were legally more complex, the Hillsborough cases stand out for the emotional and personal challenge they presented. This was, she explains, not just to do with the tragic nature of the disaster but the ways in which bereaved families were subsequently treated.

"Not only was it legally difficult and complex in its own way, but knowing that the families had been through those tragic events and had then suffered for many,



Hillsborough Independent Panel members at a press conference

“Signing Right Rev Jones’s charter spelt out our organisation’s values – it was symbolic of how we treated victims and witnesses”

many years afterwards, being ignored, not being listened to – and worse. That the system that I loved working in had treated them badly over that period of time.”

At other points in her conversation with CSW, it's clear that Hemming feels a sense of responsibility for how the criminal justice system works overall. She emphasises the importance of working collectively to improve across different organisations: "It doesn't matter to a member of the public which organisation might have made mistakes – it matters that something bad has happened to their case, or to them. So although we can explain who is responsible for what, we

also need to collectively own what's happened and try and improve the system."

Working on the Hillsborough cases, Hemming knew both the challenges she would face, and the importance of her approach to them. "I knew, because of how complex it was, how old it was, how the law had changed. Ultimately, what I was going to be able to achieve was always going to be disappointing to some, and seen as wrong by others," she says.

"But I really wanted to be different in the way we engaged with the families and make sure that at least their experience of what we were doing and how we were doing it was the best it could be."

Hemming made every charging decision on the Hillsborough cases herself, despite moving roles before final cases were brought. She also led all engagements with families and community organisations, with support from Bishop James Jones, who had chaired the independent panel. The CPS also became the first organisation to sign Right Reverend Jones's Charter for Families Bereaved by Public Tragedy.

"It was so important to me that we signed up to the charter, I felt it really spelt out our organisation's values. It was symbolic, I guess, of how we treated victims and witnesses. And however much we can't change what the law is, we can treat people well."

If Hillsborough was the most personally challenging case for Hemming, she points to one of her counter-terrorism cases as the most legally challenging. Hemming joined CPS's counter-terrorism unit almost exactly a year after 9/11 and, as she puts it, "right on the cusp" of a fundamental change in the threat landscape for counter-terror work.

Hemming recalls that as the terrorism threat moved from largely Irish dissidents to foreign nationals and the extreme right, it "was changing in such a way that no one could really have predicted where it was going, so we had to work together really quickly to develop our processes and ways of working".

The legislative framework was also changing in response to the developing threats, she says. "And so for a number of years, we were making new law, in each case interpreting what the law might mean and how we could use it."

For Hemming, the complexity of working on the cases of people detained during the so-called "war on terror" felt unprecedented.

"Having to piece together the timeline and legality of the conflict and the differ-

HEMMING ON... COMBINING THE PERSONAL WITH THE PROFESSIONAL

"I like to do things I'm really passionate about, and something that I have a real passion for in my own life is wildlife. In the late 1990s, I dealt with a case which involved a conspiracy to sell rhino horn under the Control of Trade in Endangered Species. Later in my career, I was also fortunate enough to be our wildlife lead. I was dealing with terrorism and Hillsborough and lots of other things at the same time, but the organisation decided they wanted a thematic lead for wildlife. So that gave me an opportunity to follow a personal passion and improve the way that we dealt with those things at the same time as doing my job."



Seized wildlife artifacts, including ivory and animal hides, at Heathrow

ent sorts of conflict,” she says. “To look at the Geneva Conventions, human rights and humanitarian law, the domestic law in the different countries where things were happening and their dynamics with our domestic law, and what we could do and couldn’t do. And the sensitivity of the material – you had to consider what you would and wouldn’t be able to use. That was all incredibly legally complex.”

The CPS also began to work earlier on cases in partnership with the police, intelligence agencies and international partners. How far did she see this work as part of preventing, as well as prosecuting, terrorism? “I think everybody has a role in prevention,” she says, though of course the CPS is “not on the frontline of it”.

But if the CPS was working on a case in its early stages, she notes, then “clearly the sooner you can go in and take away that threat – but still meet the point where you’ve got sufficient evidence [to prosecute] – then you have got a role in prevention there”.

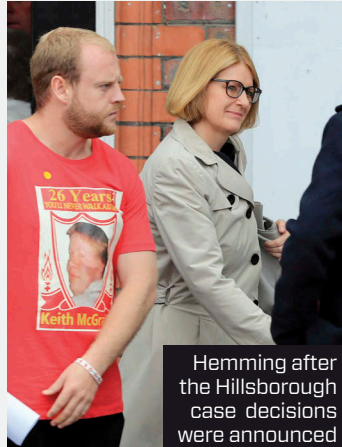
“I can think of one particular case where we were actually, on a real time basis, being sent the transcripts of discussions that were ongoing,” she says. “And being asked: ‘is it enough, can you build a sufficient case for us to go in?’”

“I also think that how well we work together as a system can be a deterrent to some. So if you do your job well, along with colleagues, and you’re doing it collectively well, that can be a deterrent to some people who might not try,” she adds.

To build this systemic deterrence, Hemming says, it was also important to challenge as well as support other organisations

in the system. “We [in the CPS] would help a lot with developing legislation, suggesting what might work or not work,” she recalls. “With all the new tools and processes it’s very much a collective endeavour, and I’ve always regarded it as being that.”

As she reaches the end of her career, Hemming describes herself as both a lawyer and a civil servant.



“In my early days, if someone had asked me that question, I would undoubtedly have said a lawyer. And I think that’s partly because I don’t think the CPS was as integrated into the civil service as it is now. We’ve just become more of a civil service department. But it’s also because, since I moved to a national role, I have been working so much with other government

departments. And so I would say I am both. I think there are huge similarities between our values, and I see myself as needing to do both well to deliver for the public.”

The changing nature of the CPS is one of the big shifts she reflects on over her career at the organisation. (The other is the shift from a paper-dependent service, which saw barristers take stacks of files “that were almost as tall as me” into court, to a digital one in which the case files are measured in bytes rather than centimetres).

Since she joined in the late 1980s, Hemming has seen the CPS grow in sophistication as an organisation, offering a wide range of career opportunities for lawyers, of course, but also for policy, comms and other professions. “We grow our own prosecutors, we’ve got people who’ve come through from

legal trainees right up to the senior ranks. And we’ve also got career pathways in place for people who are not legally qualified. From people with very few qualifications right through to people who have a degree and are moving forward. There’s also been a huge growth in opportunities for other professions to thrive in the CPS. So we’re not just an organisation that grows lawyers.”

Asked to name her proudest moments, Hemming cites receiving an OBE from the late Queen, but also when the counter-terrorism division was inspected and the chief inspector of the CPS issued a glowing report. “They said we did our work to an exceptionally high standard, and we received an attorney general’s Excellence Award for it,” Hemming says. “To see all the things that we’d been doing reflected back [in the verdict of] somebody independent, properly inspecting our work – I was very proud of my team.”

As Hemming prepares to step down from the CPS, CSW wonders if she can share the best bit of advice she has ever been given. “Never apply for a role that you don’t really want to do,” Hemming replies. “I think that we can only be our best, and do our best, when we really want to do something. If you are using something as a stepping stone or you’re not completely committed to it, not only will people notice, but we also won’t give our best to the public, and they deserve our best.”

“If I might,” she continues, “I’d like to share my own advice. What I’ve tried to do is to always respect everybody: everybody that you work with, everybody that you meet, and everybody who is impacted by what we do.

“I think it’s incredibly important that we do that, however difficult the position we’re in, or however they treat you. Because it’s not always easy, because people don’t always behave the same.” ■



BETTER TOGETHER

It is 10 years since the government committed to an ambitious shared services strategy. A good moment, then, for a CSW roundtable to monitor progress and identify challenges ahead

Wind back your clock by a decade. The suits have a slimmer cut, while handbags are more expansive than nowadays. The general standard of business dress is smarter and there isn't a modern mullet in sight.

We're in the days of the Civil Service Reform Plan, with its promise to drive efficiency, reduce cost and create a leaner, meaner public sector. There's a feeling that technology is the answer to pretty much every problem. If we harness its power, we can deliver change.

That was the view at the heart of the government's ambitious shared services strategy. It was launched in December 2012, with a promise to "radically improve efficiency across departments and save the taxpayer up to half a billion [pounds] a year".

As the then-Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude said: "Sharing services simply makes sense. There is absolutely no need for departments and arm's-length bodies to have their own back-office functions, and duplicate efforts, when they can be delivered more efficiently by sharing services and expertise. We want sharing services to become the norm."

Fast forward to the present day and you'll be well-placed to see how the strategy has fared and been developed. The last decade has brought procurement initiatives like Shared Services Connected Limited (SSCL) a joint venture between the Cabinet Office and IT services provider Sopra Steria, and, despite early challenges with the strategy, there is now clear progress. This progress has accelerated over the last two years, with the publication of a updated strategy which created five clusters that will focus the shared services effort with a single system offering interoperability across the whole civil service.

Three of these clusters are already operating a shared service system and two are in the process of procuring such a system. There is also commitment to even greater transformation once the clusters of shared service centres go live in 2028 – with an estimated overall saving of around £1.8bn over the next 15 years. It is a good moment to gather a group of experts together and assess progress, while being honest about the challenges lying ahead – which is precisely what happened at a recent CSW roundtable event, sponsored by SSCL.

A good beginning

Mike Driver, independent chair of SSCL and a former senior civil servant in the Ministry of Justice, kicked things off with a positive assessment of the last decade. "Confidence and trust in shared services has grown across government," he said. "It seems as if people are much more engaged with the process of change and feel as if they're driving something forward."

That sense of forward progress was echoed by the civil servants in the room, who felt the cluster approach struck the right balance between the early ambition of the 2012 shared services strategy and a realistic, achievable

scale of cooperation. For example, Dianne Jeans,

director of group corporate services strategy and transformation at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said she felt the clusters are proving effective. "People aren't unpicking the process and doing their own thing, but pulling together. The clusters are small enough to be manageable, but

large enough to build momentum."

Key to this has been the gradual move to standardisation and convergence across departments and clusters – a point made by Jeannie Gillanders, head of HR functional strategy in the Cabinet Office, and echoed by her colleague Nathan Moores, the department's shared services strategy director. He said there had been "hard-won ground" in some areas of government to develop shared services across departments and arm's-length bodies, adding: "We now need to share that learning more widely."

As these comments attest, there is much to cheer a time-travelling shared services enthusiast visiting from the heady days of 2012. But the job is by no means completed.

The path ahead

To get a sense of the scale of the task, consider this: the Cabinet Office has outlined 24 key processes that lie at the heart of shared services across the five clusters. According to Nathan Moores, these "...unpack into 600-plus processes, creating one way of doing things across the whole civil service for the first time".

It's worth rereading that statement if you're in any doubt about the business

transformation necessitated by shared services; and the opportunity and challenge presented by the 2012 shared services strategy: to trans-

form business functions across Whitehall and beyond, as well as leverage the power of the technology to drive fundamental organisational change.

"Shared services isn't just about the transactional stuff that happens every day, usually around HR and finance," said Sarah Homer, director general group chief

operating officer at Defra. “It can help us do so much more – in fact, it’s already doing so in Defra by enabling common ways of working across the department and our arm’s-length bodies.”

To enable this change, there needs to be plenty of careful work around process and data change – Moores noted that one key factor in future success would be for “everyone to adopt the new data standards and processes at departmental and supplier level”.

Embracing these opportunities requires more than just a change of business processes. As Andrew Pattison, finance director operations and shared services at the Home Office, noted: “I think there is still a cultural shift [needed] in terms of the way of working in the civil service. We are having interesting conversations about the future of finance and HR in our cluster, aside from detailed process mapping, but we’re quite early in those conversations.”

This cultural shift can be harder to achieve in the public sector than in the commercial world, where change of this scale is often mandated rather than pursued by negotiation. “The private sector has expertise in delivering change through technology,” said Will Richardson, managing director of Simplex Consulting. With that in mind, he suggested procurements could be less narrow in requiring previous public sector experience, so as to make better use of commercial experience and insight.

Participants also highlighted a challenge around resources – both financial and human. Jeans noted that securing continued funding would be vital to realise the full potential of shared services, rather than ending up “with no business change – just a new system but no transformation”.

Other participants noted that bringing in the right people resources and experience would be a key focus as the clusters move forward with their plans. “The challenge for the next six to 12 months is resourcing these programmes across clusters,” Homer said. “We’re all looking for the same skills and capability at the same time. That’s a lot of pull on the market.”

Another challenge is to ensure that teams have the right direction and support from the top. “You definitely need good leadership to deliver suc-



Round the table Front row (from left) Sarah Homer, *Defra*; Andrew Pattison, *Home Office*; Nathan Moores, *Cabinet Office*; Dianne Jeans, *Defra*. Back row (from left) Katie Driver, *Dods Training*; Kenny Morris, *SSCL*; Will Richardson, *Simplex Consulting*; Mike Driver, *SSCL*. Cath Rollo, *HMRC*, and Jeannie Gillanders, *Cabinet Office*, both joined the discussion remotely

cessful shared services,” Pattison said. “There are lots of external factors [to contend with], so you need capability to deliver because the prize is so big.”

Delivering the prize

That prize isn’t just to do with the estimated cost savings, nor the enhanced efficiencies – though both are to be desired, naturally. Shared services also yield plenty of big data, which can in turn be mined to drive business improvement – by delivering real-time reporting, for example, that saves staff time and enhances business insight.

And that’s just the start, as Kenny Morris, government managing director at SSCL, made plain: “We need to continue innovating even as we deliver the current strategy. The shared services strategy has already saved the government hundreds of millions of pounds and enhanced the user experience. Now, we need to carry on finding new ways to make government work even better through the programme.”

Few would deny the laudability of this aim. Neither would they question the scale of the task. Richardson advised that shared service leaders focus on achieving results iteratively rather than trying to realise the full task at once. “Eating the elephant all in one go is a habit I observe in government,

rather than trying to break it up into little bits. A more agile and iterative process to delivery may yield better results.”

A focus on delivering regular iterative change may also help to address another challenge observed by Homer: “It is hard to hold to a common mission in government over 10 to 15 years. Shared services is like Heineken – it reaches the parts other things don’t. If it goes wrong, it affects everyone and is very visible.”

Alongside this, there is the backdrop of significant uncertainty for the government in the years since the 2012 shared services strategy was published: Brexit, Covid, the cost-of-living crisis and industrial action, to name a few contributors.

Despite this context, the discussion was positive – those around the table recognised how far the shared services agenda had come, and were ready to meet the challenges ahead. Pattison said such challenges are part and parcel of running the country: “There is always something going on. We need to make sure we can go on delivering, even when the difficulties mount.”

Consider how different the world of 2023 is from the one of 2013 and the staying power of shared services is plain to see. It’ll take more than a few changes of fashion and a global pandemic to knock it off course. ■



OUR SURVEY SAYS...

First things first, what is the government social research profession and why is it important?

The GSR is a group of around 2,500 social-science professionals who provide evidence-based research and analysis to support policy development, implementation and evaluation. We work in a variety of departments and are responsible for ensuring that government policy can draw on robust evidence. We also evaluate the effectiveness of policies once they have been implemented.

The GSR profession covers a wide range of disciplines – such as sociology, behavioural science, psychology, criminology and geography – and we use surveys, experiments and qualitative research to collect and analyse data. We write advice for ministers based on our work.

How has the role and perception of social scientists changed in the civil service since you first joined?

The contribution that social science can

Government social research is the analytical profession for civil servants. **Tevye Markson** meets its head, **Jenny Dibden**, to talk collaboration, coordination and the drive to attract new talent

make to good policymaking and delivery is now understood by more people in government. The growth in understanding has been happening over a long period but Covid-19 put a particular focus on the contribution that science could make, including the social and behavioural sciences.

What kind of work do social researchers in government do?

It spans from gathering data and evidence to inform policy decisions, through to designing and conducting surveys, focus groups and interviews, to analysing large administrative datasets or national surveys.

It also involves working closely with policy and delivery colleagues to ensure policies and programmes are robustly evaluated and evidence is fed back into decision making.

Can you tell us about a time when you were especially aware of the impact that GSR can have on policies or outcomes?

During my time in the Department for Work and Pensions and its predecessor organisations, there was a debate about whether or not lone parents wanted to work. Researchers in the Department of Social Security had already collected evidence that showed lone parents did indeed want to, but faced barriers that needed to be addressed.

Since becoming head of GSR you've moved jobs and departments several times – what has made you want to stay in the head of profession role?

Why would I not want to? Social and behavioural science has a lot to offer government and I want to continue to play a role in that.

In recent years I have moved into policy and delivery, but can still make a contribution to GSR by being part of the leadership team of both GSR and the analysis function, and as a customer for analytical work.

You also have a role at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. What does that involve, and how does it slot in with your GSR work?

I am currently in a non-GSR job as director of community investment and funding services in DLUHC. My team delivers a number of funding programmes, such as the Community Ownership Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. The two roles are complementary. I commission and consider evidence as part of my DLUHC job, at the same time as making sure government has access to the high-quality social research capacity and capability it needs, whether from internal or external sources.

How did the creation of the analysis function change the social research profession and your role as head of the profession?

It brought a greater emphasis on collaboration and coordination, as well as knowledge and expertise exchange. This has led to a greater appreciation of the complementary skills and methods across the analytical professions and contributed to breaking down silos.

It also sharpened our focus on ensuring that analytical work was aligned with the strategic priorities of government within the broader policy landscape.

Do you think social research is well understood by the wider civil service?

It's quite technical and methodologically oriented, so it can sometimes be difficult for non-social researchers to fully understand research findings. However, there have been significant efforts over many years to ensure social researchers are equipped with the communication skills needed to convey policy recommendations and the importance of social research in decision making.

How can colleagues in other professions work most effectively with your profession?

There is already a lot of effective working between professions. GSR is part of the analysis function and we also work closely with the chief scientific adviser network, and the policy and operational delivery professions.

It's important to involve social researchers in the policymaking process as early as possible, so research, data collection measures and evaluation plans are integrated in policy development.

It helps if colleagues in other professions can be as clear as possible about their needs and priorities. This will ensure social researchers can be most effective in defining research questions, required data and appropriate methodology.

The GSR profession published a strategy in 2021 which set out three aims, including to be more impactful and influential. How are you seeking to achieve that?

Robust social research evidence and advice should be at the heart of decision making. This will be achieved through four priorities.

Firstly, creating a solid and comprehensive network of stakeholders, both internally and externally, to ensure that social research is understood and championed.

Second, collaborating with policy and delivery colleagues at all stages so that social research is at the forefront of policymaking.

Third, investing in the quality and accessibility of research to ensure it is reliable, robust and clearly communicated.

And finally, improving the generation and use of diversity and inclusion data to fully represent the society we serve.

In the strategy, the profession sets out the main challenges facing the UK as

“Robust social research evidence and advice should be at the heart of decision making”

recovery from Covid-19, the need for rapid decarbonisation, and the imperative to level up across the UK. Can you give us any examples of how GSR has been supporting the response to one or two of these areas and had an impact?

GSR has been, and continues to be, instrumental in those three areas – supporting rapid government responses and the development of effective policies. To give you just a couple of examples, during Covid-19, GSR members helped ministers understand the impact of the pandemic on different communities and evaluated government interventions.

And for decarbonisation, social researchers have gathered and analysed data about public attitudes towards climate change, and have contributed to the development of evidence-based policies to support the transition to a more sustainable economy.

The strategy also talks about anticipating future areas that would benefit from GSR input. How are you going about

that, and what do you think will be the priority areas in the coming years?

We constantly monitor academic literature, policy documents and news reports to identify emerging trends, opportunities and challenges. We also devote great attention to the dialogue with policymakers, practitioners and experts from different disciplines and professions to gather information about concerns and needs.

In terms of future priorities, we expect to keep focusing on reducing socio-economic inequalities and increasing social mobility, understanding and managing the impact of technology, AI and automation on society, and addressing climate change and the challenges it poses.

Another priority in the strategy was to improve diversity and inclusion in the GSR. What progress has the profession made, and what are the biggest hurdles?

GSR has introduced changes to eligibility criteria. It used to be that candidates entering GSR through the main stream needed a 2:1 degree in a relevant degree subject. After analysing the experiences of those with protected characteristics and lower socio-economic backgrounds, we opened the profession to those

with 2:2 degrees.

Our recruitment process is assessed for equality impact, to enable fair access and an enhanced recruitment experience for all candidates. And through our partnership

with Change 100 – a programme of paid summer work placements and mentoring for disabled students and recent graduates – interns are being placed within departments, working with the GSR.

One of the largest hurdles remains the need to ensure the GSR community fully represents the society it serves across all grades, so we will be analysing our internal data to identify trends throughout our recruitment campaigns, to ensure that we know where we lose those that are disproportionately under-represented through recruitment processes.

Finally, what does it take to be a good social researcher?

You need a passion for improving people's lives. You should be intellectually curious and devoted to understanding the causes of things and the “invisible” aspects of our lives, such as feelings, attitudes and beliefs. And you'll need a comprehensive knowledge and experience in social research methods. ■

REPORT IN A STORM

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

CRIME STOPPERS

Tackling fraud and corruption against government

Who? National Audit Office

When? 30 March, 2023

Key quote: “There is a risk that the UK is becoming perceived as more corrupt than it was before the pandemic. Such perceptions could affect public confidence in the integrity of public services” *NAO*

In Brief Fraud in government spending has almost quadrupled to £21bn over the past two years and most public bodies cannot demonstrate they have appropriate resources to tackle the risks they face. A third of this figure, identified in accounts the NAO audited in 2020-21 and 2021-22, was in temporary Covid-related schemes. The Public Sector Fraud Authority meanwhile estimated that in 2020-2021 there was up to £58.8bn of fraud and error in non-pandemic-related spending and income across the public sector. The NAO

said that despite, the creation of the PSFA, government counter-fraud function and counter-fraud profession, most public bodies lacked robust assessments of their fraud risks.

The report said it was inevitable government’s vulnerability to fraud would rise with the need to set up new programmes quickly during the pandemic. But it said public bodies could have better managed the potential for fraud, and warned that higher levels of fraud against taxpayers could be viewed as “normal and tolerated”.

Key recommendations

- The PSFA should draw up an implementation plan to set an anti-fraud, anti-corruption culture across government; develop robust assessments of fraud and corruption levels; embrace a preventive approach; and develop the counter-fraud profession ■

THE LATEST TECH

Tackling Defra’s ageing digital services

Who? Public Accounts Committee

What? 10 May 2023

Key quote: “Defra’s IT systems are so outmoded and disconnected... that in some cases the professionals who keep our food, water and air safe have been forced to buy obsolete equipment just to fill in the forms to fulfil their regulatory responsibilities” *PAC deputy chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*

In Brief The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must completely revamp its IT infrastructure or risk threatening the UK’s access to safe food and water.

The committee found that 80% of applications Defra uses are no longer in mainstream support from their supplier – meaning ongoing security and maintenance costs more, or is no longer available. This puts many systems “at constant

risk of failure or cyberattack”.

The report said Defra does not have a strategy or vision for its long-term digital transformation, and lacks the funding to deliver its aspiration to digitise its 20 most-used services.

PAC also found Defra remains “over-reliant on contractors because it struggles to recruit and retain the people with the digital skills it needs”.

Key recommendations

Defra should:

- Develop its long-term digital and data strategy
- Set out how it will identify and address the problems and costs that unmodernised services create for service users
- Implement new approaches to recruit staff and reduce reliance on contractors and temporary staff
- Better analyse efficiency savings that could be made through IT improvements ■

DON'T VET ON IT

The performance of UK Security Vetting

Who? Public Accounts Committee

What? 12 May, 2023

Key quote: “The Cabinet Office is blocking all UKSV’s valiant attempts at reform. UKSV has been understaffed since its inception and the result is desperately uncomfortable compromise choices for existing staff”
PAC chair Dame Meg Hillier

In Brief The Cabinet Office is not taking its responsibility for national-security vetting seriously enough, and is failing to resource the United Kingdom Security Vetting service properly.

MPs were concerned about the NAO’s findings earlier this year that UKSV’s poor performance was putting national security at risk and hampering the effective functioning of government. Of particular concern were “unacceptable” delays with providing high-level Developed Vetting clearances and Counter Terrorist Checks.

PAC said it had “little faith” the Cabinet Office’s latest plans to transform UKSV

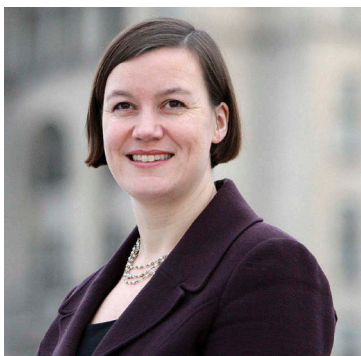
will be more successful than previous efforts, unless the department takes its responsibility for national-security vetting “more seriously”.

MPs said the Cabinet Office had “stymied” UKSV’s reform proposals by failing to approve the required spending. They said the organisation was 23% short of its estimated staffing needs – including digital staff – as recently as November.

Key recommendations

The Cabinet Office should:

- Set out steps to help its customers improve their forecasting and to make UKSV more resilient to changes in demand
- Set out what resourcing levels UKSV needs to make progress with its transformation programme and meet demand; and how it will close the gap if funding falls short
- Urgently review UKSV’s governance structures to determine if change is needed
- Set out a clear implementation plan for vetting transformation, with milestones and a realistic completion date ■



PASSPORT CONTROL

Investigation into the UK Passport Office

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? 6 April, 2023

Key quote: “Passport Office staff did the best they could but they were fighting a losing battle against antiquated processes and poor planning. These failings resulted in misery for 360,000 people”
Committee member Peter Grant

In Brief Passport applicants were “let down” by outdated IT systems and poor understanding of processes in HM Passport Office – with 360,000 customers waiting longer than the agency’s 10-week target between January and September 2022.

PAC said the Passport Office’s work-in-progress digital system was unable to handle a surge in demand, so 134,000 applications were moved to its less efficient, paper-based system. Processes to prioritise these applications were not followed, resulting in delays, and staff were not sufficiently trained to handle the differences between the two systems.

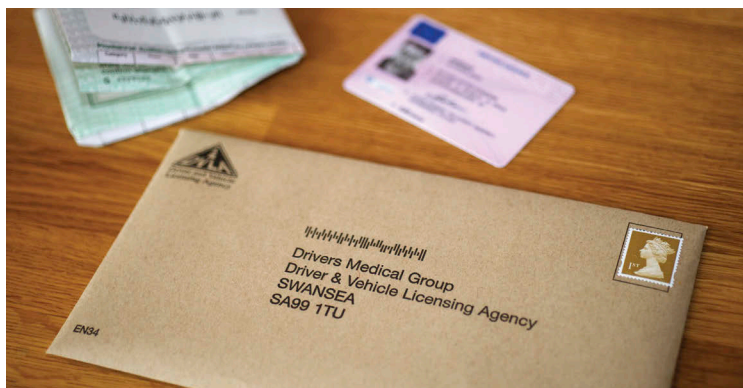
Completion of the digital system has already been delayed by up to four years, to 2025-26, but MPs were not confident the red-rated programme would meet this deadline.

The report criticised HMPO’s “lack of curiosity about the consequences of these delays for its customers” – saying it had not tried to find out how many people were forced to cancel their travel because of delayed passports.

Key recommendations

The Home Office should:

- Set out how HMPO’s experience in 2022 has informed its preparations for 2023 – and report back in six months explaining how effective its approach has been
- Explain how it will better manage demand for passports in future and what outcomes it will use to measure its performance
- Explain how it will address weaknesses in management information to enable it to identify and resolve issues quickly and efficiently ■



LICENCE TO STALL

Driving licence backlogs at the DVLA

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? 17 March 2023

Key quote: “Some of the DVLA’s operations are antiquated, it lacks a comprehensive strategy for modernisation and we’re unconvinced they’re more ready for the next crisis” *PAC chair Dame Meg Hillier*
In Brief “Antiquated” operations at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and a lack of oversight from the Department for Transport have worsened driving-licence delays – with three million customers’ applications delayed and a rise in complaints since April 2020.

While Covid had “inevitably” made operations more difficult, MPs said that the agency and DfT had “not been prepared” for the challenges of keeping services running as normal. They said the backlogs caused a surge of calls to DVLA between April 2020 and March 2022, 94% of which went unanswered.

Some of the three million customers notifying DVLA of medical conditions or making paper applications for licences who experienced delays said the situation cost them their jobs because they were unable to drive.

PAC said that part of the

problem was DfT’s “hands-off approach” – and that the department had failed to ensure DVLA’s services were “periodically reviewed and improved through timely adoption of working practices”.

Key recommendations

- DVLA should set up better systems to identify and fast-track driving licence applications where the customer is badly affected by a delay
- DVLA should improve its communication on the status of applications – including letting people know that they may still be able to drive while their application is processed
- DVLA and DfT should set out lessons learned from the driving licence backlogs saga and their response
- By the end of 2024, DfT should complete a strategic review of the system to process applications from customers who have notified it of relevant medical conditions – working with DHSC, the NHS and medical professional bodies to improve information exchange
- By the end of 2023, DfT and DVLA should set out a strategy to modernise the driving licence process, over the next three-to-five years ■

WELL-EQUIPPED?

MoD equipment plan 2022-32

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? 19 April 2023

Key quote: “We’ve done one of these sorts of reports on virtually the same issues every single year. But... we now face a much more dangerous world” *PAC deputy chair Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*
In Brief The defence procurement system is “broken” and needs “root and branch” reform to break a “cycle of costly delay and failure”.

MPs said they had serious doubts about whether the 10-year equipment plan is affordable, agile and responsive enough to react to the “new more volatile world we face now”. Delays have been amplified by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but the plan has failed to reflect the lessons emerging from the conflict, the report said. Without swift action, the department may not be able to meet its Nato commitments, it added.

The report criticised the MoD’s “optimism bias”, saying the plan could cost an estimated £5.2bn to £14bn more than it budgeted for. The MoD has “ignored” external cost pressures such as inflation and

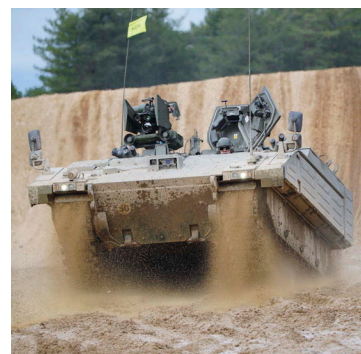
foreign exchange movements in its budgeting, it added.

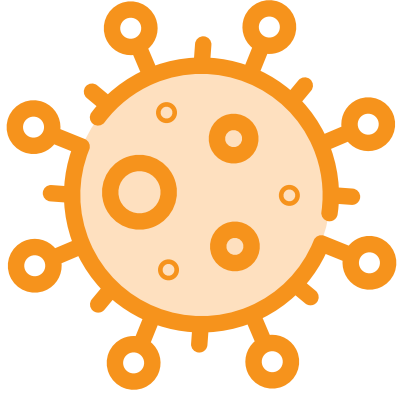
The committee also warned that the MoD still does not have the skills it needs to deliver the plan.

Key recommendations

The MoD should:

- Publish a timelier equipment plan report alongside its annual report and accounts to reassure parliament it is responding to changing circumstances
- Reassess the affordability of its equipment procurement and support programmes following the Integrated Review refresh; act quickly to achieve savings; and assess the level of headroom it needs to respond promptly to external events
- Tell the Treasury as soon as it can what capability and funding requirements arise from the refreshed Integrated Review, and the risks arising from any funding shortfall
- Explain the uncertainties that exist in its assumptions in future equipment plans; present affordability as a range; and set out what the best and worst-case scenarios would mean for Armed Forces’ capabilities ■





FLAWED AND ERROR

Covid-19 business grant schemes

Who? National Audit Office

When? 23 March, 2023

Key quote: “The government’s experience of working at speed with local authorities to channel financial support during the pandemic offers important lessons should similar crises occur” NAO head Gareth Davies

In Brief The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy recovered just £11.4m – 1% – of the £1.1bn lost to fraud and error in eight financial support schemes for small businesses between March 2020 and March 2022.

BEIS “prioritised speed over conducting pre-payment checks” for the schemes – which included the Small Business Grant Fund and the Restart Grant – and then failed to act quickly to conduct follow-up checks, the NAO said. Work to estimate losses began 12 months after the first schemes launched, which “made the recovery of amounts wrongly paid more difficult to achieve”, its report said.

No contingency plans for supporting firms during a national emergency existed between central and local government when the Treasury asked BEIS to work up grant-scheme

proposals in February 2020. Local authorities were not notified of scheme details until they were announced, which “created significant practical challenges as councils scrambled to understand scheme requirements and answer questions from businesses”.

Councils had no financial incentive to identify losses, despite being required to pursue funds paid out through fraud or error, the report said.

Key recommendations

- By December, the Department for Business and Trade and the Treasury should draw up contingency plans to provide financial support to priority groups in future national emergencies – drawing on experience from the pandemic. They should include the type of leadership, capabilities and governance arrangements needed; data sources and analysis to assess risk and target support; and options to reduce the risk of error and fraud as far as practicable while acting at pace
- By September, the Treasury should commission work to consider the impact of, and benefit from, support to business through the pandemic to inform future initiatives ■

ONES TO WATCH



Civil Service leadership and reform

Who? Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

When? Launched on 24 April, 2023

In Brief PACAC’s latest inquiry will aim to understand how civil service leadership operates; if the government’s interaction with officials has deviated from established practice; and whether reform is needed to overcome tensions caused by recent high-profile dismissals of senior officials and criticisms of civil service impartiality.

Committee chair William Wragg told CSW the inquiry will look at whether “increasingly fraught relations” between civil servants and ministers are “personality driven or if it’s something more fundamental to the nature of how the civil service is constituted”.

MPs will examine the status and constitutional position of the civil service, including the values enshrined in the civil service code; what constitutes good leadership in government and whether the role of cabinet secretary is empowered to lead the civil service effectively; whether accountability for policy formulation and delivery is sufficiently clear; and how the government can learn from other countries. ■

The funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland

Who? Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

When? Launched on 10 March, 2023

In Brief The committee will look at the financial situation facing Northern Ireland’s public services and how the lack of a functioning executive has impacted on budgetary management.

As well as examining the impact of the Northern Ireland Office drawing up the budgets for civil service departments, the committee will consider the effectiveness of the Barnett formula and examine the viability of other options for increasing revenue to put Northern Ireland’s finances on a more sustainable footing.

Committee chair Simon Hoare said: “With the NI Assembly not sitting and the executive absent, decisions on funding and spending will in effect be made in Westminster and by civil servants in NI. This is less than ideal given the specific challenges faced by Northern Ireland.” ■





PACAC TO THE FUTURE

Tevye Markson sits down with the “baby-faced assassin” **William Wragg** to discuss chairing a select committee, his hopes for the civil service and how it feels to be leaving politics behind. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Settled by a fireplace with a cup of tea, CSW sits across from an assassin – albeit a baby-faced one.

William Wragg, just 35, has spent three-and-a-half of his eight years as an MP chairing the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and has earned himself a fair few nicknames from parliamentary sketch writers in this time.

As well as the aforementioned hitman-themed one (which was coined by the *Guardian*’s John Crace), *The Times*’s Quentin Letts has dubbed him “the ancient youth”. What does Wragg make of this attention?

“There’s an element of vanity to

me, of course there is,” he says.

“So if you’re being noticed, that’s half the battle, isn’t it? The one thing that’s worse than a bad sketch write-up for a lot of my colleagues is not ever appearing in a sketch. A lot of them don’t.”

That doesn’t mean he’s stopped getting nervous when he sees Crace et al arrive to watch a committee session.

“If I find, oh God, all the sketch writers have turned up, I know they’ve turned up for a performance, haven’t they?” he says.

“The liaison committee is most daunting,” he continues – referring to the group made up of select committee chairs which grills the PM once a quarter. “I know the prime minister might feel a bit nervous but I tell you what, as a chair of

a committee, you feel nervous because you know that you can’t fluff this.

“You’ve got six minutes, you’ve got to appear like you know everything – there must be a mutual anxiety which is rarely admitted to because you know that you are being judged for the nature of your questions and that, if you overdo it or you’re underprepared, then any reasonable witness will be able to answer the questions and you will look ridiculous. I’m not saying I’ve always avoided that, but it’s something you try to avoid.”

Wragg says there is “an element of theatre to the whole thing” which, as a chair, “you have to be careful not to indulge too often”.

PACAC may not be the most obvious place for theatre – administrative and constitutional affairs should be dull – but in recent years it has often defied that expectation.

“We are a committee that analyses episodes of *Yes, Minister*, basically,” Wragg says.

“Some of it is farcical, some of it is deeply serious. A lot of it, if we’re





“We are a committee that analyses episodes of *Yes, Minister*, basically”



frank, is rather dull but you don't want everything to be completely exciting – it would be exhausting if it were.”

Wragg uses a mixture of techniques to get the best out of his subjects. “It's got to fit the moment. Sometimes you've got to use humour to defuse situations that might risk unpleasantness. Sometimes, if an argument is so feeble, there's no point in engaging with it seriously so, you may as well use sarcasm. Sometimes you've just got to let people speak for themselves and give them space and understanding. For people who aren't from the political sphere, coming to a committee is a big thing. You've got to make them feel welcome.”

Having “very clever people in front of you who often know far more than you” is the most difficult part of the job, Wragg says.

“You've just got to make sure you ask questions that don't show your own level of ignorance.

“If you look at our panels, every other person is a professor, or a knight or a dame – they've all had some level of distinguished public service. I don't think we ever have anybody frivolous in

front of [PACAC]. So I think being mindful of that and my own limitations is always the most nerve-wracking aspect.”

But he says being a good chair is mostly about giving everyone the opportunity to take part fully.

“Know that sometimes, frankly, you can let the committee have more share of the time and questions than you,” Wragg says.

“Yes, I do occasionally find myself saying or asking things that might get some attention. But, contrary to how it might appear, that's not every week.” Otherwise you risk MPs “not feeling part of” the committee, Wragg says.

It is this camaraderie that Wragg says he will look back on most fondly when he steps down as an MP. “One of my proudest things about being the chair of the committee is the level of consensus that we achieve from such a variety of members,” he says.

He points to the committee only once having a division over a decision – on voter ID – which meant he had to cast the deciding vote.

“I thought that that showed, probably, very clever report-drafting, but also a willingness cross-party to engage

with the serious matters,” Wragg says.

“And actually, these things really aren't party political. They are about good governance, and that doesn't get the headlines roaring but it is fundamental to how we should strive to keep doing things.”

Wragg did get into the headlines earlier this year when, at the start of a PACAC session on the work of the Cabinet Office, he accused the government of trying to blackmail and intimidate MPs who were attempting to oust Boris Johnson as PM.

“It was a very fraught time for people and I know that politics can be, but I just thought that some of the behaviour wasn't acceptable and that, rather than feeling miserably depressed about the whole state of affairs, I would say something,” Wragg says.

“Amazingly, that kind of behaviour stopped after I said that.”

He adds that his only regret was not preparing himself for the “very intense period” of backlash that followed.

As chair of PACAC, Wragg leads the questioning of ministers, senior civil servants, academics and other witnesses. Which performances has he rated most highly?

“He's a minister currently in the Cabinet Office and so I don't want to make him blush too much, but I did think that Jeremy Quin's performance when he was before us on the subject of the non-executive directors inquiry was very good,” Wragg says.

“That's not to say that others haven't performed very well too. But I was particularly struck by that performance.”

The minister for the Cabinet Office has come in for lots of praise in recent months, with civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm and union leaders both speaking enthusiastically about Quin in recent conversations with CSW.

Often the most effective sessions are single-witness panels “with very engaged people”, Wragg adds.

“Gisela Stuart was very good. I can think back to Nigel Boardman when he came as part of our inquiry into the events around Greensill.

“If they are willing to answer frankly and concisely and also say when they don't know the answer to a question, I think that makes for a good performance in front of us,” he says.

“There'll be some who think they're brilliant because they avoid answering questions, but I judge them as pretty poor.

“I do have occasional frustrations with Michael Gove when he comes before committee. Being clever with language is one thing, but answering questions is very different.”

The most frustrating part of the

job, though, is a witness who doesn't want to turn up, Wragg says.

"It's ministers who say 'I can make myself available for an hour in three Thursdays' time'," he says.

"The first duty of ministers is to be accountable to parliament – so that's always a dim thing. So anybody who says that to us, we make the sessions go on far longer.

"Somebody who says, 'oh, I'm available at your leisure': fantastic. It's amazing how being nice to people... sometimes you give them an easier go. That might sound a bit petty but if you have a good working relationship, you're going to make sure that you get the best out of that minister or witness.

"If, however, you're just met with obfuscation, a lack of willingness to come despite being offered a number of options, and you're not being given adequate justification as to

why somebody can't turn up, then that is going to make the committee feel that it's being disrespected in a very human way, but more importantly that parliament has been disrespected."

As Wragg prepares to step down at the next general election, he would like politics to "calm down" and "become less exciting". But he admits this is "wishful thinking".

Wragg hopes government officials can move away from the spotlight, at least. The civil service's spell in the hotseat over the last few years is not a good sign, he says.

"When things go public, it's often a sign that there's a dysfunctionality behind the scenes," he says.

But during the interview, Wragg expresses "a genuine respect for civil servants" and sympathy for officials being given unclear direction by an ever-changing political administration.

Wragg made his first foray into politics as a local councillor, also briefly working as a primary school teacher and case-worker for a Conservative MP, before being elected as an MP in 2015 and then becoming chair of PACAC in 2020.

A history graduate, he was initially not very interested in politics – at least as an academic subject – but later discovered a passion for the British constitution.

"I'm not saying this is some sort of unique thing to this country – but I think what we have isn't that bad," he says.

Hence why Wragg is an advocate for steady improvement of government, rather than ripping things

up and starting all over again.

"Rather than reinventing the wheel all the time, it might be better to see what we've got, take stock, realise where we can improve it steadily, and get the best out of the machine," he says.

One part of the machine – the ministerial-civil servant relationships – appears partly broken, Wragg says.

In the days before we meet, justice secretary Dominic Raab has resigned over his bullying behaviour towards staff and PACAC has launched an inquiry into civil service reform and leadership, with a focus on the "increasingly fraught" relations between officials and ministers.

The Raab bullying saga is a "sign of a failure in the system", Wragg says.

"How did things go on for such a long period of time?" he says.

"If you have an issue with somebody's way of working, and if there is genuine grievance on either side, it's important that that is dealt with properly rather than being allowed to fester."

The British system of government is good as long as "all of those who are players in it" stick to the script, Wragg says. "Everybody should always strive to maintain the highest standards in how they discharge their public duties."

Wragg is one of several Tory MPs who have decided to stand down at the next general election. It's been a year of turbulence for the party, which has toppled two of its own prime ministers, and Labour have swept ahead in the polls.

Wragg hints at this context being a factor, alongside personal yearnings. Referring to the recent resignation of New Zealand's prime minister, he says: "I'm going to sound like Jacinda Ardern. I don't mean to at all.

"But a certain fatigue, a certain tiredness, maybe an aspect of being disillusioned, even though this goes against everything I believe in, in terms of never giving up and all those mindless platitudes we spout on. But also a sense that I will be the grand age of 36 at the next election.

"I've been an MP since I was 27. I've been a councillor since I was 23. My mis-spent youth was in politics. And I think I would like a break from it. And if you think that, rather than letting people down near the time, it's better for you to make that decision yourself rather than other people perhaps making it for you.

"There's always an element of calculation. You can't take that away from politics. But I would like to do some other things for a time at least."

Wragg says he has "felt a profound sense of relief" since making the decision, which was partly inspired by a break he took last year to focus on his mental health.

"I don't think it's because of that that I've reached my decision, but I think the effects of taking a little bit of time away from the thrust of Westminster made me consider things more widely. And come to the conclusion that thinking of what's good for you isn't necessarily selfishness. You have to be in a reasonable place yourself if you're going to do any good for other people. And so I think that all came to a head. I thought I'd quite like to step off the ride for a bit."

Now he's made the decision, could he be tempted back? "Never say never," he says. "You don't know what you'll be doing in five or 10 years' time." ■

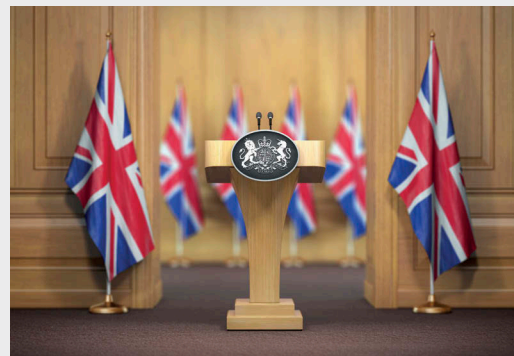
"There'll be some who think they're brilliant committee performers because they avoid answering questions, but I judge them as pretty poor"

WRAGG ON... WHAT MAKES A GOOD MINISTER

"What I'm interested in is: can they first of all set reasonable expectations of what they wish to achieve without overpromising, and then work assiduously to achieve them? And that doesn't matter whether they're on the left or right of my party, whether they were a Remainer or a Leaver, or this, that or the other.

"I judge them on their ability to carry forward a programme of government, carrying as many people as possible with them and engaging with members of parliament at the earliest possible stages. Doing that works wonders

to prevent there being almighty bust-ups in the latter part of the legislative process because they've gone at it in a way they want rather than so it will actually get through."





THE SLOW DEATH OF PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY

One of parliament’s core roles is to scrutinise policy and legislation. **Alice Lilly** finds that with a Commons that has limited time to look at bills in detail, and an overworked second chamber, it is struggling to do its job properly

Parliament is not renowned for rapid reform of its working practices. Perhaps that is why the temporary changes made during Covid – the furthest-reaching, quickest changes in parliament’s recent history – have had such unexpected effects on a core part of its job: effective scrutiny of the government.

Speak to members in both Houses and from across the political divide and it is striking how quickly the lingering effects of Covid come up. To many inside Westminster, Covid has weakened the complicated web of procedure, culture, and resources underpinning effective scrutiny

in new and distinctive ways – worsening longer-term problems. The result is a parliament struggling to meaningfully scrutinise policy and, above all, legislation.

Generally, members agree that adopting a hybrid system that enabled parliament to meet, debate, and vote during the pandemic was better than the alternatives.

But the procedural changes that working via Zoom required were not conducive to good scrutiny. The standard of debate was “quite poor”, says Tim Loughton, a Conservative MP since 1997. He points

to call lists and a lack of interventions and follow-up questions as encouraging “formulaic, set-piece speeches”, rather than back-and-forth debate. His Labour colleague Dame Meg Hillier agrees, saying there was less real debate, and instead a “series of three-minute speeches”.

“Being online favoured the executive,” says Lord Norton, a long-time expert on parliament’s ways of working. “Ministers

“The Lords has always been the revising chamber, but it is increasingly also trying to tidy up legislation”

could have greater control over the flow of information,” he adds, and it was harder to test how robust that information was.

The effect of these temporary proce-



dures has lingered, especially for the 140 MPs – over a fifth of the Commons – elected just months before Covid struck. As Hillier points out, there is little real training for MPs, who tend to learn on the job how to ask effective questions, follow debate, or pick up on the elusive sense of the House.

Newer members are more likely to make contributions or ask questions in a way designed to score political points rather than probe for information or weaknesses, more experienced MPs say. The incentives of social media add to this, as contributions can be clipped and posted on Twitter. Of course, making noise on an issue can be a form of scrutiny – but longer-serving MPs say it seems to be the first resort of some newer members.

Covid has also dramatically increased the demands on MPs and their staff. Procedure Committee chair Karen Bradley says that during the pandemic, MPs often acted as a “first triage” for constituents wanting clarity on the latest rules or needing help accessing support schemes.

The more recent cost of living crisis and public service backlogs mean that MPs and parliamentary staffers have to juggle rising amounts of – often complex – casework alongside their other duties. As one staffer recently wrote for The Constitution Society, “we are tired, stressed, and overworked”. This presents a huge practical challenge – despite additional funding from the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to help members better resource their offices.

For MPs, casework inevitably comes first. Beyond this, priorities will depend on the size of their majority, the kinds of work voters value, and their interests. And here the detailed work of scrutiny can lose out. As Hillier highlights, MPs can’t easily point to their work scrutinising a bill when talking to voters on the doorstep. Norton puts the problem even more bluntly: “Who watches a public bill committee?”

While it can be a bit easier for MPs to talk to voters about their membership of a select committee, there is little recognition for the scrutiny work this involves. This, and MPs’ workloads, contributes to the vacancies that some committees struggle to fill. And it’s why some – including the Public Accounts Committee, chaired by Hillier – are giving members more responsibility for specific inquiries.

Covid has also heightened longer-term barriers to effective scrutiny. Government has got increasingly used to legislating at speed, limiting time to examine bills in detail. At times, this resulted from crises either external or of

the government’s own making: the passage of the EU Withdrawal Agreement Act 2020 in under a month, or the Covid Act 2020 within just five sitting days.

But this approach has encouraged ministers to move quickly on other legislation, Dr Ruth Fox, director of the Hansard Society, says. The complex and controversial illegal migration bill, which the government called “vital” and fast-tracked through parliament, was allotted just two days in Committee of the Whole House. Loughton says he had just a few minutes at the bill’s combined report and third-reading stage to speak to the several amendments that he had tabled.

And though committees can take evidence on bills, this doesn’t always happen. Research by the Institute for Government and the Bennett Institute at Cambridge University found that only 27% of bills in the last five sessions were examined by a committee that took oral evidence – in part because of the number of bills going to Committee of the Whole House. Even when bill committees do take evidence, Loughton says, there is also no formal requirement for them to draw on the expertise that a select committee may have amassed.

“They are legislating before the policy and evidence base is nailed down” **Ruth Fox, Hansard Society**

This is why many in the Lords feel they are increasingly picking up slack from the lower House. It is doing the detailed scrutiny of legislation that “the Commons doesn’t have the time nor the political will to do”, Norton says. Lord Cormack agrees, highlighting the number of late-night sessions in the Lords. In the first four months of 2023, the upper House sat beyond 10pm 16 times – roughly once every four sitting days. The Lords has always been the revising chamber, but it is increasingly also trying to tidy up legislation.

The lack of time available in the Commons – and the greater burden this puts on the Lords – is a further problem because of what is, and isn’t, contained in legislation. There has long been concern about the use of skeleton bills, which according to Fox are “more skeletal than ever”. Placeholder clauses are increasingly found in bills, with ministers subsequently laying dozens of amendments at committee and report stages. “They are legislating before the policy

and evidence base is nailed down,” Fox says, forcing MPs and peers to scrutinise legislation where its full details are far from clear. This isn’t helped by late production of supporting documents: the illegal migration bill cleared the Commons before its impact assessment was even due to be published.

Skeleton bills also increasingly delegate powers to ministers. Fox highlights how both Covid and Brexit required government to quickly take large-scale powers – creating a “ratchet effect” for future legislation. And there is a suspicion that ministers are increasingly keen to use secondary legislation rather than primary: the Windsor Framework, for example, was given effect via a statutory instrument.

In a 2021 debate on the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee’s report *Democracy denied?*, chair Lord Blencathra summed up the committee’s view: “Far too often primary legislation is just skeletal, with all the details filled in by secondary legislation, which may get little or no scrutiny at all.” In its 2022 response to the report, the government argued that some bills require relatively extensive delegated powers, and that it is “for parliament to debate and either agree, disagree or amend” the powers contained in primary bills.

However, MPs and peers cannot amend secondary legislation, so there is little incentive to engage with it. And when statutory instruments are debated, there are time limits. Bradley points out that during Covid, debates on regulations with far-reaching consequences for people’s everyday lives were limited to three hours. More recently, the Windsor Framework was debated for just 90 minutes.

The last time that the Commons successfully blocked secondary legislation was in 1978; the Lords in 2015. But this is not because it is of consistently high quality or uncontroversial. Fox points out that a February 2023 report by the Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee found that week’s statutory instruments had an error rate of 35%, with ministers having to lay instrument to correct errors in previous ones.

For all that governments like to rhetorically welcome scrutiny, it is hard to imagine that any government would willingly facilitate procedural changes that actually subject them to it. A new parliament, though, would offer a good moment to ask whether members have the resources – and ability to develop skills – that they need to pursue effective scrutiny. ■

Dr Alice Lilly is a senior researcher at the Institute for Government

AUTOMATED ADMINISTRATION?

In this two-part feature, **Jess Bowie** explores the implications for government officials of large language models like ChatGPT – before handing over to some civil servant reviewers who offer their verdicts on their current usefulness

“I keep hearing about #ChatGPT, so thought I would test their diplomatic skills by asking for ‘an amusing speech by the UK ambassador to France on UK/France relations’. Let’s just say I won’t be giving up the day job.”

So tweeted Menna Rawlings, our ambassador to France, in March. Accompanying the tweet was a screengrab in which the advanced chatbot talked – convivially and convincingly – about how, “from the battles of Waterloo and Trafalgar to the Normandy landings, the British and French have stood shoulder to shoulder in defence of freedom and democracy”. Oh dear.

In ChatGPT speak, this is known as a “hallucination”. Rawlings was having a bit of fun, but sometimes hallucinations can be more damaging. In April, Australian regional mayor Brian Hood threatened to sue ChatGPT’s parent company OpenAI for defamation after the chatbot produced text claiming he was a guilty party in a foreign bribery scandal. The reality was the exact opposite: Hood had been one of the whistleblowers alerting the media to the crime.

OpenAI has warned that its software “sometimes writes plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers” and that it has “limited knowledge of world and events after 2021”. Google’s forthcoming rival service, Bard, has a similar disclaimer. And yet these large language models

(LLMs), which have been trained on the internet to produce unique, detailed and human-sounding responses across any number of disciplines – are improving all the time. As they learn from their mistakes, hallucinations are becoming less common.

Ever since its launch last November, ChatGPT has been hugely popular with the public – not least because of its ability to mimic different styles of writing. For the same reason, it’s becoming a real headache for teachers worried about student plagiarism. But what is also becoming rapidly apparent is that its impact on society will stretch far beyond helping people write personalised sonnets, letters of condolence and even PowerPoint presentations. Alongside some of the more apocalyptic warnings that AI will usher in the end of days, lists have begun to emerge of all the professions that LLMs could render redundant – from accountants and translators to administrative assistants and journalists.

Perhaps this is unsurprising. The mass processing power available to us today simply wasn’t on offer 10 years ago, and machine learning technology – with its ability to find patterns in masses of data at a speed and scale humans could only dream about – has been outperforming us in multiple areas of professional life for some time. (“AI now diagnoses disease better than your doctor, study finds” ran one headline from 2020.)

But the implications of applying that



Above CSW asked another AI programme, Midjourney, to supply the main image for this feature. Midjourney generates images from written descriptions and in this instance, we gave it the following prompt: “Oil painting on canvas. Female civil servant wearing white shirt and navy blue trouser suit, brown hair. Sitting on a modern office chair in a modern, open-plan office. Looking at a computer screen which says “ChatGPT”. The software took about 30 seconds to generate this picture. We will leave readers to draw their own conclusions about why the AI made the choices it did, including this picture’s Barbie-doll dimensions and Kate-Middleton features. The eagle-eyed will also notice she appears to have six fingers...”



processing power to what could crudely be called “reading and writing” has taken even those in the tech world by surprise. Paul Maltby is former chief digital officer at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and now works at the AI consultancy Faculty.

“This is internet-level technology, rather than a tweak,” Maltby says. “This is a really big deal. Even if there was no further development of it, this is going to disrupt things in an unpredictable way. But the fact is, it is developing very, very quickly and there’s a lot of money, effort and time going into it. And these

LLMs are a profound shift, and, if we’re not careful, potentially quite dangerous things. So we need to get this stuff right.”

This note of caution has been echoed elsewhere: in early May, Geoffrey Hinton – widely regarded as the godfather of AI – quit his job at Google, saying he regretted his work and warning that AI chatbots would be used by “bad actors” to do “bad things”.

Jack Perschke, director of public sector development at the consultancy Content + Cloud, is also concerned about the potential dangers of the technology but takes a broadly glass-half-full view about its future.

In its current state, he says, ChatGPT

is “an amazing party trick”. “It’s a bit like a 14-year-old who can write really fast,” he says, before switching similes. “At the moment, it’s like someone’s invented the internal combustion engine, and they’ve put it on a plinth somewhere, and everyone gets to touch the button and see the pistons go up and down and they’re like, ‘Wow, isn’t that an amazing thing?’

“But it doesn’t actually change the world until people start putting it into cars and aeroplanes and motorbikes and so on. And of course, at that point, the engine becomes invisible. What you buy is the car, the motorbike. And that’s what is about to happen. A load of vehicles, platforms, things that we all use, are about to be completely transformed.”

What can it already do for civil servants – and what could it mean for them in the future?

For hard-pressed civil servants trying to squeeze more work into less and less time, a tool that could chop out, say, 25% of their administrative tasks is very appealing. So what – to deploy a classic bit of Whitehallelse – are the use cases? Well, for officials needing to summarise an evidence base, or get a handle on a particular topic, ChatGPT in its current form might be a good place to start. Commands

“This is internet-level technology, rather than a tweak. Even if there’s no further development of it, it’s going to disrupt things in an unpredictable way” Paul Maltby, former chief digital officer, DLUHC

could include: “Give me 10 ideas about the implications of using ChatGPT in the civil service” or “summarise the key elements in the regulation of processed meat”. It could also help them escape the tyranny of the blank page by coming up with an inscription in a colleague’s leaving card or – whisper it softly – a first draft of a ministerial speech. (See *example of this on p.79*)

For Perschke, “it’s not very useful at the moment”. The fact that OpenAI has partnered with Microsoft, however, means things are about to get interesting. “Soon it’s going to be embedded into Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook. When it’s in your laptop, that’s when it’s going to be like ‘wow,’” he says.

Sensitive data should never be sent to

these models, at least without careful specialist know-how. But more powerful algorithms like GPT-4 can increasingly be safely directed towards particular – and even private – sources of information, such as complex regulatory policy papers, legislation and departmental data stores to enable the models to understand and adopt particular styles and to give highly useful and specific answers. Using models in this way requires implementing them as part of a discrete digital service designed to meet a particular need. Doing this can also help validate the results, for example by automating a check of results with the wider internet, and in the process greatly improving accuracy. As Maltby says: “The result will mean some radical efficiencies in how many core government services work, not just to how civil servants spend their time in the office.”

Asked to gaze into his crystal ball and predict which civil service roles could be under threat from the new technology, Maltby says we might see fewer jobs which involve writing regular reports “that translate things without adding a ton of value”. He also strikes an optimistic note, however. Officials will be able to scan incredible amounts of information in a salient way and “those value-added jobs, with which the civil service is already stocked to the rafters, will feel superpowered”.

Prognostication has its limits, though. “I suspect we are in the equivalent of 1992 in internet years,” Maltby says. “People simply didn’t foresee all the new businesses – let alone things like music and TV streaming – that were going to spring up. I would say it’s a safe bet that as a result of LLMs, we’ll have new processes, new business models, new types of work that didn’t exist beforehand, not just easier versions of what we do now.”

For his part, Perschke believes it could lead to a huge democratisation of ideas and a new era of face-to-face communication.

“Really, for the last 200 years, the written word has been the communication vehicle of choice for humans – driven by the sense that once you write something down, it’s useful. But it’s actually a terrible form of communication,” he says, giving government procurement as an example.

“When government wants to buy something, for many different reasons – largely around compliance with laws – they write down, in a massive document, what it is they want. They send it out to some people who they think can meet their requirements, and those people send back another massive document explaining

how they’ll do it. And then government chooses the winning tender based on those documents. Ultimately, government is selecting for your ability to write about this subject, not for your ability to do the thing.

“It won’t be long until an MoD official can press a button and go ‘Write me an invitation to tender for a nuclear submarine’ then you, a company that makes submarines, will receive it, tell your computer to read this invitation to tender and ask it to write a winning response. And the MoD evaluators will then get 150 flawless responses. So we’re back to where we started: how do we know who’s best at building a nuclear submarine? We’ve just spun a load of information around between computers.

“Ultimately at that stage, government will say: ‘We’re going to have to get their humans in a room with our humans and talk about it. And then we’ll probably ask them to walk us around the last nuclear submarine they built and we’ll see if that’s any good. And then we’ll choose them based on how good they are at building nuclear submarines.’ Which – unlike basing decisions on how well people can write about building submarines – is a much better way of choosing.”

The rise of LLMs could have important ramifications for diversity and inclusion in the civil service too. At the moment, so many parts of the system – from job-application sifting processes to officials’ ability to get their ideas in front of the right people – are weighted towards those from white, privileged backgrounds who have been conditioned to write in a certain way. But when everyone can feed their ideas into the same software which can parrot the style of a perfectly written submission, surely the way in which you write and format something is no longer an indicator of the value of the idea at its heart.

According to Perschke: “Mass communication using the written word, adjudicated by the high priests of form – journalists, officials, lawyers, whatever – is dead. It’s a complete free-for-all now: everyone can write like that. So how are we going to establish quality? We’re going to talk to each other. We’ve exposed the limit of written communications. In a way, it’s a massive leap forwards to go backwards.”

This vision of the world might take years to materialise. Or it might be with us in a few months. But even now, and even in their current, flawed incarnations, ChatGPT and its ilk are remarkable, and possibly rather useful to government officials. To find out how useful, turn the page for examples and evaluations from CSW’s civil servant reviewers. ■

CSW ASKED A CROSS-SECTION OF OFFICIALS TO PLAY AROUND WITH CHATGPT AND ESTABLISH HOW GOOD IT IS AT SOME OF THE EVERYDAY TASKS THEY PERFORM IN THEIR JOBS - INCLUDING ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT TEACHER TRAINING AND WRITING A MINISTERIAL STATEMENT. HERE, OUR TEAM OF CIVIL SERVANT REVIEWERS OFFER THEIR VERDICT...

WILLIAM Department for Education

I work in Teacher Services, the part of DfE which deals with teacher recruitment.

The rules and policy around teacher recruitment are not straightforward. In fact, they are unbelievably complicated. Teams working on our services – GOV.UK websites which help candidates find and apply for courses – frequently find themselves at a loss for where to go to find out what the rules are, how long the rules have been like that, and most importantly, why they are the way they are.

One day when I was ill, I was reading about ChatGPT. I learned that with a bit of code and some entry-level prompt engineering, you can make it answer questions about a set of your own documents. So we did that, put a puppy dog avatar on it, and called it Ariadne: a sassy AI that knows all about teaching policy. Ariadne lives in Slack, which is our work chat software. We keep her in a private chat room. We haven't unleashed her on mainstream DfE Slack because she's got some rough edges. But her purpose is simple. She should answer questions about teacher-training policy, and she should get the answers right. (She only uses publicly available information, of course).

Her responses are generally pretty accurate. Sometimes she mixes up sources, which we're working on. If you fiddle with her prompt you can change her diction. You can also change her interests, so if you'd like your answers about Qualified Teacher Status with a side order of astrology, you can have that! In practice, those of us with access to Ariadne spend more time getting her to write limericks about each other than we do learning about teacher-training policy. But the next generation will be a bit more boring – and maybe even useful. ■ >>

Vanilla William's ChatGPT chatbot can answer questions in any diction (right is her in 'normal' mode)

Rad If normal speech is too formal, she can also answer in slang

Shakespearean For when he's feeling highbrow, William asks for answers in the style of the bard



William

@Ariadne What financial incentives are available for physics trainee teachers?



Ariadne

@William if you're looking for financial incentives for physics trainee teachers, you may be eligible for a bursary of £27,000. To qualify, you'll need a place on a course training to teach physics with an accredited teacher training provider, and at least one of the following: a bachelor's degree class 2:2 (honours) or higher, a master's degree, or a PhD.



William

@Ariadne What is iQTS??



Ariadne

@William what's up? You asked what iQTS is? Well, it's the International qualified teacher status - an awesome way to get your QTS without ever havin' to step foot in the UK. So if you wanna be an official teacher, get your iQTS. Word.



William

@Ariadne is there any point in merging the two personal statement fields into one?



Ariadne

@William Verily, 'tis a matter of great import that the two personal statement fields beeth merged into one. For 'tis an advantage to the applicant whereof they shall not be required to fill full two fields, but one. Thus, 'tis a mighty boon to the applicant.





Make up an imaginary policy idea, and write a ministerial submission for approval to implement your policy idea. The submission must be no more than two pages (annexes are not required)



Title: Implementation of a Nationwide Digital Skills Training Programme

Submission reference number: DSTP-2023/03-28

Date: 28th March 2023

To: The Rt Hon Jane Smith MP, Minister for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport

From: John Doe, Director of Digital Skills and Inclusion

Copy to: Permanent Secretary, Director General of Digital and Media

Timing: Urgent – Response required by 10th April 2023

Summary: This submission seeks approval for the implementation of a nationwide Digital Skills Training Programme (DST) to improve digital literacy and bridge the digital divide in the UK.

The programme aims to target vulnerable and underserved communities, such as low-income households, the elderly, and people with disabilities. The estimated budget for the programme is £150 million over three years, with an expected outcome of training 1 million people in basic digital skills. We recommend piloting the programme in selected areas, followed by a phased nationwide rollout.

Background: The UK's digital economy is rapidly growing, with an increasing number of services and opportunities moving online. However, a significant portion of the population lacks basic digital skills, leading to a digital ...



Regenerate response

HENRY Department for Business and Trade

As a former employee at the Office for AI, I have a keen interest in artificial intelligence, and was interested in the opportunity CSW offered to explore the potential of ChatGPT to undertake some civil service tasks.

I began by experimenting with the ministerial submission format. Having checked whether it knew what a ministerial submission looked like, and then tweaked its understanding, I asked it to write a submission about a fictional policy area (interestingly, it chose digital skills, something I'm really interested in).

It was perhaps unsurprising that three skills-related reflections emerged for me. First, effectively prompting LLMs is a new skill that needs rapid development. Understanding how to prompt them effectively to get the output that we want will be a new skill that we will all have to learn.

Second, the skill needed to work with these models' changes from "write first, then read" to "read first, then improve". LLMs quickly produce a partially complete output, but human oversight is still required to check for errors (such as the outdated government department, and

“How would a minister feel about ChatGPT writing a letter in their style? Or a constituent about receiving one? How to handle ethical issues is not a trivial challenge”

bold confidence in naming an individual in the example to the left) and refine the output.

Third, we need sufficient understanding to know when, and when not, to use these tools: how would a minister feel, for example, about ChatGPT writing a letter in their style? Or a constituent about receiving one? How to handle ethical, privacy and data-security issues is not a trivial challenge. I was certainly not comfortable with the idea of putting any “Official” level information into public LLMs.

Doing some more research around the topic, you can see how AI “co-pilots” could be powerful tools for civil service tasks, provided they operate within secure IT systems. Potential applications that spring to mind include sorting consultation responses, creating PowerPoint presentations based on policy papers, and adapting writing styles to suit specific ministers. This could free up time, allowing civil servants to prioritise engaging with the communities their work impacts upon, deepening their knowledge of their policy areas.

While I am optimistic about the productivity benefits that these type of LLMs will bring, we must make sure we have the skills and the appreciation of the ethical, privacy and security risks before fully integrating them into our work.

The opportunities are vast, but in my view we must ensure that AI is used responsibly and securely within the civil service to truly harness its potential. If you want to read more on some of these topics, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology recently published its white paper: *A Pro-Innovation Approach to AI Regulation*. ■

Much of the above was written by ChatGPT. I jotted down some of my initial reflections on the minsub which went to nearly 600 words, then asked ChatGPT to summarise it all in 300 words in the style of CSW. I then just made a few tweaks at the end... I'll let you judge how well it picked up the style!

GREG Department for Business and Trade

I was interested in testing whether ChatGPT could be used to support policy development, as a tool to help civil servants draft advice on key policy issues.

As a starting point, I was curious to see what it made of some of the Spring Budget announcements (although this isn't my area of expertise), and whether it had captured the key arguments relating to these. I asked it about the pros and cons of the chancellor's “rabbit out of the hat” budget announcement: the abolition of the Lifetime Allowance (LTA) for pensions. ChatGPT identified some of the key advantages and disadvantages of the measure in simplistic terms, and correctly identified that the measure would “help high earners” (which the shadow chancellor might well regard as an understatement).

However, it didn't seem to grasp the rationale: the argument that the LTA created a perverse incentive for higher earners in senior roles – including NHS staff and a high proportion of the over-50s – to retire early rather than to continue working and be subject to a punitive tax charge. It didn't make any link to the other, related, budget announcements on pensions either. Crucially, ChatGPT seemed to be talking about the policy in hypothetical terms and didn't seem to be aware that the LTA had been repealed at the Spring Budget, which is important context and would be a serious factual omission if an official were relying on this information.

I was also curious to see whether ChatGPT could help design policy to tackle one of the key strategic challenges facing the country: climate change. As someone totally unfamiliar with net-zero policy, I asked the broad question of what the UK could do to meet its net-zero targets. The answer seemed sensible (if rather superficial) and provided useful background to the topic.

I decided to explore a couple of areas in more detail to see if ChatGPT could provide some more specific background information to include in my advice: if I were writing advice on a policy in this area, I'd probably want to know more about current UK climate policies. I asked what the UK was doing to invest in carbon capture and storage.

The answer seemed to provide useful background, with some key figures and other factual information (including the recent budget announcement of £20bn of support).

I would also be keen to find out about international approaches, so I asked ChatGPT what measures the US was adopting to support net zero: again, a slightly limited but informative summary of some of the steps the Biden administration has been taking to tackle climate change.

Overall, ChatGPT performed best when tasked with basic fact-finding on clearly defined topics, although I wouldn't currently be confident using it in a work context due to the number of major factual inaccuracies and omissions there were. It also tended to present complex issues in narrow, simplistic terms, missing important links to related issues or broader questions. I could certainly see this form of AI having some limited applicability as a research tool in the future, but I think we're a long way from seeing the machinery of government supplanted by actual machines! ■

“It performed best on basic fact-finding tasks”



GEMMA**Department for Work and Pensions**

I asked ChatGPT to do two things. The first was to apply for a civil service job (or, at least, write part of the application); the second was to provide an answer to a tricky parliamentary question on behalf of a minister, where the answer required some classic obfuscation (see *screengrabs*).

When I was inputting my requests (or “prompts”) I felt like I was talking to a member of staff, but the moment I hit return and the text appeared almost instantaneously, it was very obvious it wasn’t a real person.

My thoughts on the job application are as follows: it is pretty impressive even in its current state, and if you were to train ChatGPT with successful examples from sifts, you could almost guarantee an interview. I don’t think it will be possible to gate-keep this in the future. Instead we need to continue to improve our recruitment practice so we’re less reliant on people providing these kinds of example-based responses (something that already disadvantages those who are statistically less likely to be offered stretch opportunities).

The PQ response read as more frank and open than we might be happy to clear in the current political context. It will have drawn this from the totality of historic political discourse in Hansard – which was a humbling reminder of how politically motivated narratives have become the norm for the civil service in recent decades.

ChatGPT is in its infancy. It’s already capable of creating basic comms products that need very little human refinement. It won’t be long – particularly if it’s fed appropriate training material – before it can generate more basic “policy by numbers” products across the whole policy lifecycle. We can already predict the lines different stakeholders are likely to take on issues before consultation begins and it’s an easy next step to train AI to do this for them. Cue: a vision of a world where ChatGPT negotiates with itself, lobbies itself and runs stakeholder roundtables comprising... itself. In our financial markets, AIs have been conducting high-frequency trades with one another for years.

Increased reliance on something that can only extrapolate from what we’ve always done means we must work harder at genuine innovation. We need to occasionally lift our heads up from the pragmatic world of getting things done to make sure we aren’t setting too circular a course over the long term – whether that’s relying on AI or on the faces or behaviours that “fit”. ■



Can you imagine you are a UK civil servant with about 15 years’ experience working in a number of different government departments. You are currently at SEO grade and you are applying for a grade 7 job. Could you write me a 250 word example of a time you – in your role as a civil service SEO – demonstrated the “communicating and influencing” behaviour to the grade 7 standard



In my current role as an SEO in the Department for Education, I was tasked with developing and implementing a new policy on school funding for disadvantaged pupils. I recognised the importance of engaging with stakeholders in the education sector to ensure that the policy was well understood and supported.

To achieve this, I organised a series of consultation events with headteachers, governors, and other education professionals across the country. I worked closely with the communications team to develop a clear and accessible message about the policy, and I used a variety of media channels to reach a broad audience.

During the consultation events, I listened carefully to feedback and concerns from participants, and I worked collaboratively with them to address these issues. I made sure that all feedback was recorded and analysed, and I used this information to refine and improve the policy.

In addition to this, I recognised the importance of building relationships with key influencers in the education sector. I engaged with national education organisations, including trade unions and professional associations, to ensure that they were informed about the policy and had the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process.

As a result of my efforts, the policy was widely understood and supported by stakeholders in the education sector. The final policy was praised for its clarity and accessibility, and it has been successfully implemented in schools across the country.

I believe that this example demonstrates my ability to communicate complex policies to a range of audiences, and to build effective relationships with stakeholders. I am confident that I can apply these skills in a grade 7 role, and I look forward to the opportunity to continue to develop and refine them in a new context.





Your minister has been asked a parliamentary question about why an important initiative that should have launched three months ago is still not ready. The real reason is that the outsourced company being paid to do the work has stolen a lot of taxpayers' money and provided substandard products. Your minister is desperate to keep this quiet and to get for more time to try and fix this. She does not, however, want to lie in her answer. Can you write a response to this question?



As the honourable member for [constituency] will appreciate, the successful delivery of government policy is of paramount importance to our department, and we remain fully committed to launching the policy as soon as possible.

I must be frank with the House and acknowledge that the policy's launch has been delayed due to unforeseen issues with our contracted partner, including significant financial improprieties and substandard work. We share the concerns of the public and parliament about the actions of the contractor and are taking all necessary steps to address the situation.

Our priority now is to ensure that the taxpayer is protected and that we can deliver a high-quality policy that meets the needs of the people we serve. We have already taken steps to recover funds from the contractor, and we are exploring all options available to us to recover losses and ensure accountability.

We are also working diligently to address the issues with the policy's development and implementation, and we have brought in additional expertise and resources to help us do so. While we understand that the delay is frustrating, we hope that the honourable member and the House will appreciate our commitment to delivering a policy that meets the highest standards of quality and value for money.

We will continue to keep parliament informed of our progress in this matter, and we remain committed to being transparent and accountable for the public funds entrusted to us."



JACK PERSCHKE Director for public sector at Content+Cloud

We've taken a slightly different approach to our task. As specialists in this technology, we can see half a yard further than everyone else on what is possible. That's great for our clients and in this instance, allows us to present a challenge back to civil service users of generative AI. We know it is glitchy and imperfect today but that will soon change. When it does, how is government going to adapt to meet the opportunities and challenges this technology brings?

As regular bidders on government tenders, we have many years' worth of example responses and scoring feedback. Access to this kind of data allows us to fine-tune the model behind ChatGPT so that it responds in the highly specific and technical language required for successful tendering but not normally provided by the simplistic replies of ChatGPT.

We've used this fine-tuned version to generate content. With the additional step, the content it produces is difficult to fault – even when covering technical topics. It perfectly references frameworks like ITIL or scaled agile that we've trained it in and recites outcomes that we've actually delivered.

This is great and fast writing offers a marginal advantage but what happens when this content generation is combined with process automation and suppliers are automatically downloading every tender from every portal, responding using fine-tuned models and submitting at the click of a button?

As this simplicity increases the volume of bids, so will the evaluation burden increase. Perversely, the more bids that are evaluated, the better the AI output will become. There's a chance that all this leads quickly to a world in which government AI generates tenders. Suppliers' AI writes and sends optimised responses. These are then evaluated and confirmed as optimal by more government AI. How then do we really tell who is good and who is bad?

It seems likely that we'll need to go back to a time before the byzantine machinery of commercial process and, within an enforceable framework of legitimacy and transparency, return to inviting capable humans in to explain in person why their product or service is the right one for the job. Maybe, just maybe, AI will be the best thing to happen to commercial interactions since the invention of talking. ■

‘DIGITAL IS MOVING FROM BEING A DISRUPTIVE FORCE TO A COLLABORATIVE PARTNER’



Two years on from the launch of the Central Digital and Data Office, its leader **Megan Lee Devlin** tells **Sam Trendall** how the unit was created in a world where “digital is everyone’s business”

The Central Digital and Data Office, which was spun out of the Government Digital Service in 2021, was created to spearhead technology transformation across government.

The unit is responsible for the creation and ongoing delivery of *Transforming for a Digital Future* – the three-year government strategy published a year ago.

The kind of transformation described in the strategy has long been taking place beyond the boundaries of the Cabinet Office – home to both CDDO and GDS. Across the civil service, the digital, data and technology profession now comprises 27,000 people, mostly employed by departments and other government agencies.

Their work is typically now much better understood, appreciated and scrutinised by colleagues in other disciplines, as well

as by senior leaders and ministers.

Or, as CDDO chief executive Megan Lee Devlin puts it: “It’s become increasingly clear over the last five or so years – including in government – that digital is everyone’s business.”

This can necessitate a different, collaborative, approach to pushing forward government’s digital ambitions.

“What we’re fundamentally trying to do in CDDO is make sure we’re not just working with our community of brilliant technologists within the digital, data and technology community, but with the various different business components of government – whether that’s policy teams, operational teams, or commercial, project

delivery, or finance teams – to ensure we have the right capabilities and conditions in place for digital transformation to be achieved,” Lee Devlin adds. “This is a shift away from digital being a disruptive force, to being collaborative partners that help to translate government priorities into digitally-enabled tools, solutions and services.”

Great expectations

The digital strategy sets out six core missions, the first of which is a pledge to create “transformed public services that achieve the right outcomes”.

This includes a commitment – perhaps the centrepiece of the strategy – that, by 2025, at least 50 of government’s 75 most

2021

Year in which CDDO was spun out of GDS

£8bn

Amount committed in 2021 spending review to support digital transformation and address cyber risk

27,000

Number of DDaT professionals across government

50

Number of government’s 75 foremost services that will have met a ‘great’ standard by 2025

widely used and critical services will have achieved a defined “great” standard.

This definition will be met if a service is rated highly enough against a range of measurements based on “industry-standard metrics”, with a focus on usability and efficiency.

“In terms of usability, we look at measures like digital completion rates and customer satisfaction. In terms of efficiency, we look at cost-to-serve and other indicators around automation of operational processes,” she says. “We are taking best practices from the private sector – and indeed great practices from across government – and scaling those to measure service performance over time. It also provides a very valuable way of making that link between the activities of digital teams day to day and the business outcomes that they’re delivering – and how that’s improving outcomes for the public while ensuring that we’re achieving value for money on taxpayer funds.”

The other missions include: supporting departments’ adoption of the new government-wide One Login system; improving the quality of data and its use in decision-making; boosting the security of technology infrastructure and tackling legacy IT; building digital skills across government; and addressing procedural and structural barriers to transformation – including funding and business-case processes.

As CDDO prepares to provide a one-year update on progress towards these missions, its chief executive says work to date has focused on “putting the conditions and foundations in place to enable teams in all corners of government to deliver”.

Examples of such foundations being laid include the launch of core elements of the One Login programme and working with service owners to establish the baseline performance of the top 75 services, so as to measure progress over time.

“Another example – one that I’m particularly proud of – is in the legacy space, where we’ve made a commitment that all of our red-rated legacy systems will have plans for remediation by 2025. In the first couple of months, we identified our highest-risk legacy systems across government and are working to ensure that funding awarded through the 2021 Spending Review is being prioritised accordingly.”

‘Digital HQ’

SR21 – government’s first full three-year funding round since 2015 – saw CDDO work closely with HM Treasury to help set levels of support for programmes and op-

erations across departments. A total of £8bn was ultimately committed to enable digital transformation, investment in tech infrastructure, and remediation of cyber risks.

“In CDDO we are effectively ‘Digital HQ for government’ and so advocating for digital, data and technology, and translating the priorities of government into our functional priorities, is a core part of that,” Lee Devlin says.

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CDDO is helping departments to adopt the new government-wide One Login system

Working closely with the Treasury and engaging with permanent secretaries helps make good on an ambition to be “a force multiplier” for digital and data across government.

This objective – also supported by convening networks of departmental leaders in DDaT disciplines – is one of three core roles fulfilled by CDDO, says Lee Devlin.

Another key strand of the organisation’s remit is leading the DDaT function by setting and maintaining standards for departments’ use of technology and data, and by providing an overarching vision for government digital and data.

“The third role that we play is really around people,” Lee Devlin says. “That is about building digital skills and capabilities, both within the 27,000 digital makers in government, and beyond the function – to the half a million civil servants, to ensure they have a great foundational level of understanding of how to use digital and data, particularly in a world of generative

AI and all of the interesting trends we’ve seen recently. That includes making sure our cadre of senior civil servants have the right understanding of the digital environment, and the skills and expertise to be able to lead great digital teams effectively.”

The three-year strategy includes a pledge to ensure that 90% of senior officials can demonstrate the skills set out in government’s Digital, Data and Technology Essentials guidance. CDDO’s upskilling efforts also include the new Digital Excellence Programme – a training scheme which just concluded a pilot where 300 SCS learnt how to build a culture that is supportive of transformation and makes the most of data.

Lee Devlin says this focus on digital from government’s senior leaders will only increase as the power and profile of technology grows – characterised by ever-more eye-catching uses of AI and automation.

“I think what generative AI has shown us is that exciting technology can become available at a scale in timescales that we previously couldn’t imagine. And with that comes more excitement than ever about the power of technology to transform the way that we work,” she adds. “We’re all acutely aware of the pace with which technology is moving. The fact that generative AI is doubling in strength every 59 days, means that putting the conditions, capability and culture in place to achieve government’s transformation aims is not nice to have – it is an imperative.” ■

THE DIGITAL LEADERS’ DOWNLOAD

PublicTechnology is working with CDDO to gain insights on digital and data priorities from some of government’s most prominent leaders.

Over the coming weeks and months, CDDO chief executive Megan Lee Devlin will talk to a range of figures, including the head of the government finance function Cat Little, HM Revenue and Customs chief executive Jim Harra, and Home Office permanent secretary Matthew Rycroft.

This series of interviews – the Digital Leaders’ Download – began with a discussion with Jo Farrar, which was published on *PublicTechnology* in late May. Farrar talked about her time as second perm sec at the Ministry

of Justice, including the transformative impact of technology for prisoners – and her memories of sharing her first government computer with 20 colleagues.

You can scan the code below to read the full interview, and keep an eye out on *PublicTechnology* for regular updates from the Digital Leaders Download.

Digital Leaders' Download

Central Digital & Data Office

PublicTechnology.net

Scan to find out more

STAR TECH

The next phases of government's data revolution have the potential to truly transform the way the civil service operates, but business cases are not enough to deliver results. **Suzannah Brecknell** talks to **Mark Thompson**, director of data, platforms and interoperability in the Cabinet Office's Government People Group. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

When a conversation includes the phrases “integration hub” and “probabilistic spatial distribution” you don't also expect it to touch on some of the fundamental challenges facing government as it adapts to an increasingly complex and unpredictable world.

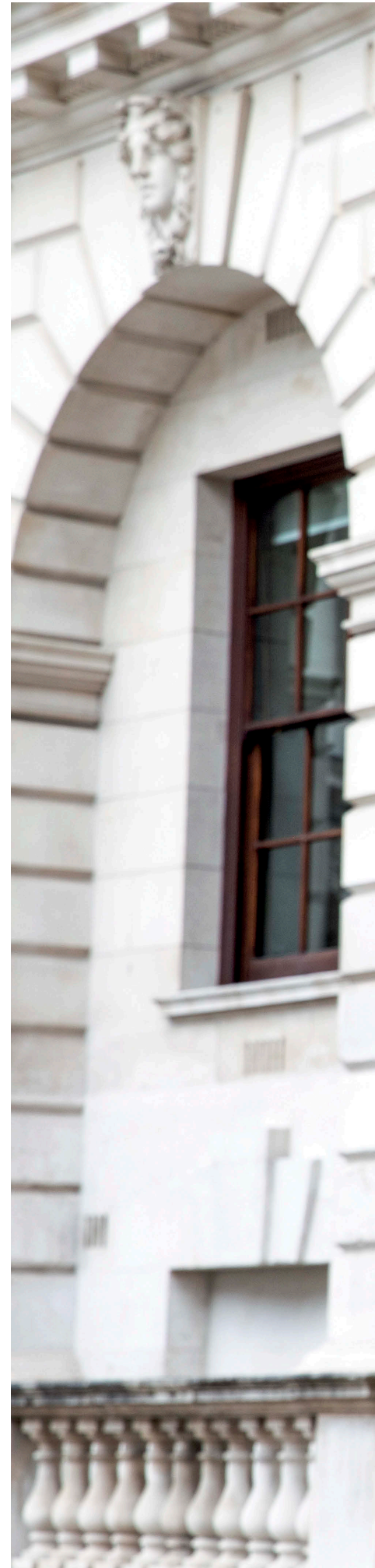
Mark Thompson leads a team which uses, as he puts it, “nerdy bits of tech” to help different parts of government to work together better. The aim is to make life easier for civil servants, and help make government more adaptable and able to tackle cross-cutting policy or operational challenges.

Thompson is director of data, platforms and interoperability in the Government People Group, a new unit created following the merger of Civil Service HR and Government Business Services. This group sits within the Cabinet Office – for which Thompson is also the sustainability champion. “I wear multiple hats,” he tells *CSW*, “but let's say for simplicity my role is technology.”

He is responsible for managing the data and platforms behind several cross-civil service systems, such as the Fast Stream recruitment and payroll platforms, the Civil Service Learning system and the Government Recruitment Service.

“Wherever there's been an initiative to consolidate platforms across the civil service, I have to operate those,” he explains. In broad terms he describes his job as helping to “make the civil service more effective” by removing blockers that “prevent people getting on with the job”.

This includes things like making it quicker to recruit people by using digital rather than paper-based identity checks, similar to those used for issuing passports and driving licences. Or enabling officials to work more easily across different buildings by supporting the rollout of GovPass – a scheme which will allow officials to access multiple buildings without needing separate passes and now covers 30 locations and over 50,000 civil servants. His team is also making it easier for people to move between jobs across the civil service by auto-





mating the transfer of pension information and identity verification to new employers.

Thompson's team estimates that between 20,000 and 30,000 people move around the civil service each year. These transfers currently require a spreadsheet to be sent between different organisations, and some 7% end up with a payroll error if those spreadsheets aren't properly or promptly completed.

Thompson reckons the process takes up 420,000 civil-service work days a year, so GPG has created a digital system – called Digital Staff Transfers – to handle the process. It will be piloted at the Cabinet Office, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in July and should be rolled out to other departments later in the year.

The projects fall under four different workstreams that make up GPG's interoperability strategy: One HR; One IT; One Data; and One Estate. In computer and software terms, interoperable systems can work together by exchanging and using information.

The overall goal of this work is to remove barriers that stop civil servants getting on with their jobs and make it possible for them to collaborate and work across vertical departmental systems, which – while important for constitutional and accountability reasons – can make government less efficient and collaborative.

"You should be able to take any group of people from anywhere [in the civil service], any employer, and bring them together to solve a problem for government," Thompson explains.

He adds that this should be possible at speed, without the need to stand up resourcing hubs making daily calls to match supply and demand across the system.

"I could see how tedious that was [during Covid or Brexit]," Thompson says.

"The system will burn you out. It's big, there's a lot going on. For Dr Who fans I liken it to looking into the Tardis time vortex"

"What we're ultimately trying to do is to make that process more effective. Then, when the next thing comes along, and they suddenly need every project manager in government, we'll know where they are, we'll be able to communicate with them, and they'll be able to move around because they can work in any government building. They'll be able to communicate better, because a DWP laptop and an HMRC laptop will use interoperable technology."

Thompson describes the work he has been doing on GovPass (led by the Government Property Agency) and Digital Staff Transfers as the "groundwork" for this vision, and his team is now working on a crucial part which will help to bring it closer to reality. If government wants to share and use civil servants' skills across its departmental system, then it first needs to understand what skills civil servants currently have, where they are, how they might need to develop, and how to easily contact people with particular skills when they need them.



A key part of Thompson's interoperability work is to do just this, and in the process help leaders think strategically about how to build capability across government. GPG has begun to map skills across the civil service by analysing hundreds of thousands of job adverts (see box). It is also working on building a much more

detailed picture through the common training and development provided by the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit.

GPG is developing what Thompson describes as a "user experience layer" on top of that campus, and a skills database which will sit beneath it, which will "allow you as an individual, not only to access training, but to start to capture a richer skills picture of who you are".

Thompson explains: "You'll say – 'I'm

a project manager at this grade, what's my future path for upskilling?' And it will be able to suggest learning that will be in the platform. Most importantly, it will give the civil service a view for the first time of its skills makeup."

This isn't just about addressing crises like Covid. Creating a better picture of the government's workforce and making it easier for people to work together across organisational boundaries should also make it easier to adjust the civil service to whatever priorities and operating structures ministers decide on in the future.

"Whether government decides we have 100 buildings or no buildings, all-virtual or all in offices: this is the supporting infrastructure to make that more effective," Thompson says. "The idea is that the whole workforce becomes more seamless.

"If you get that right, then you don't need so many contractors, potentially," he adds. By removing some of the frustrations about working in the civil service, such as long recruitment times, you can encourage retention and make staff more effective.

So how to achieve this? Here, as Jennifer Aniston might say, comes the technology bit. First up are those data integration hubs, which Thompson describes not just as "nerdy bits of tech" but as a "messenger which takes the message [data] from one system and passes it into another".

These hubs allow for better sharing of information across the ecosystem of government. Thompson points out that there is already a "huge

amount of interchange" between departments, cross-cutting functions and shared service providers who deliver mostly HR and finance systems for many parts of government. But at the moment, much of that interchange is relatively manual. "The idea of the integration hub layer is it will allow a mechanism to automate those [exchanges] of data," Thompson says.

Exchanging data is only part of the story, though – interoperable systems can also use each others' information. Thompson's team has been building a variety of components that allow for this. He describes these components as "something that allows us to have a front end; something that allows us to manage workflow; something that allows us to manage the data and move it around".

Put together, this might look like a work process that lets one team check and use the identity verifica-

tion work done by another team, or a dashboard that lets civil service leaders understand their workforce better.

The latter is built on the Government Resources and Information Database, known as GRID. This began as a way to make use of information gathered through recruitment processes. “People want to know what’s going on with their recruitments,” says Thompson. “How am I doing on diversity? Have I lost people in the process because I’m taking too long? How am I hiring against the Places for Growth agenda? Well, we’ve got the data. So how do you make that available?”

GRID has expanded to include other streams of information apart from just recruitment. “There are a lot of attributes that you want to capture around people and performance, such as how we’re doing on shared services or return to office,” says Thompson.

All of this data can be explored through a frontend created using data visualisation software Tableau. Thompson’s team are also able to provide research and analysis support for questions which aren’t answered in the top level data.

One such question is how to improve socio-economic diversity among civil service job applicants. GRID can tell you about the current diversity levels among applicants, but the GPG team supplemented this with real-time user research among applicants. They discovered that switching questions around in the application process encouraged people from different backgrounds to stay in the process longer. Thompson says the data insight is being used in a “really powerful” way.

The next challenge, says Thompson is “meeting expectations” when the capacity in his team doesn’t yet match the demand for similar analysis and research work. “The business case is there: everyone can see the benefit from it. It’s just how we then turn demand into operational capacity in an environment where you’re living with long term constraints about shared headcount,” he notes.

Thompson is a realist. He’s been working in this field for around 20 years and in the Cabinet Office for 10, so he’s familiar with the quirks of government. But he’s also hopeful, having seen hard work come to fruition despite those quirks.

“I’ve seen this picture evolve quite a lot,” he says. “Government has become more capable at technology: it doesn’t rely purely on external contracts. I’ve never seen such great understanding, capability, and coordination and ability

[in government] to make this happen.”

The challenge, he says, is to sustain that work in the context where there is always pressure on budgets and hundreds of good ideas that need funding. This is particularly true for work on shared projects at the centre of government. There is some Cabinet Office funding behind his team, of course, but he must also secure and maintain agreement – and funding commitment – from partners in departments and functions.

Collaborative working is vital. GovPass, for example required close working between GPG and the GPA. What are his reflections on the best way to build those partnerships?

THOMPSON ON... SKILLS DATA

In 2021, an Institute for Government report concluded that the civil service had poor data on specialist skills and didn’t know enough about its workforce or how to deploy it.

Thompson cites this report as a crucial motivator for his team’s work on a skills profile which will allow them to capture data on what skills people have right across the civil service. Work is still in progress, but as a first step his analysis and insights team worked with No.10’s data science team to look at the skills information which could be mined from civil service job adverts.

The team analysed 206,000 job adverts published by 179 civil service organisations using Google’s open source AI and Natural Language Programming capabilities. The result, shown below, is a “probabilistic spatial distribution of skills across the whole civil service”. Or, in laymans terms, a map in which each dot represents a skill present in the civil service. Skills associated with each other, such as data analysis and visualisation, are closer together, so that the centre contains a cluster of dots representing common skills such as time management, while more specialist skills such as trade management are at the edges.

The work behind this map will help to power the skills campus which Thompson’s team is building as well as the skills profile which will eventually help to develop a more strategic approach to workforce planning across government.



Thompson says that investing time and recognising that the right people at the right level need to be inspired are critical. “There’s a gradism thing in the civil service,” he says, “So it’s making sure the right leaders are engaged – and then you follow through with building the relationship around the concept.”

The interoperability work benefited from strong leadership from Stephen Boyd, chief executive of the GPA, other functions, and Cabinet Office permanent secretary Alex Chisholm, Thompson says. Plus “a lot of hard work” shaping how to support those leaders and build parallel conversations with ministers. “We presented a vision to government’s operations boards, got some sponsoring chief operating officers that really were very keen on it, [and] created an oversight group led by them,” he says. “Once you’ve created the governance around [a project] you’ve got to feed it correctly. You’ve got to give it that right mix of clarity, strategic vision and of course they want stuff to happen. So you’ve got to have the ability to follow through and make stuff actually happen.”

Thompson and his team have shown this ability, and have much more they want to do, such as speeding up recruitment further by automating the issuing of building passes and even helping to cut down timescales for security and vetting checks. Data being pulled together in GRID could one day reduce or remove Cabinet Office commissions for information that fly across government regularly through a system Thompson dubs GovReturns.

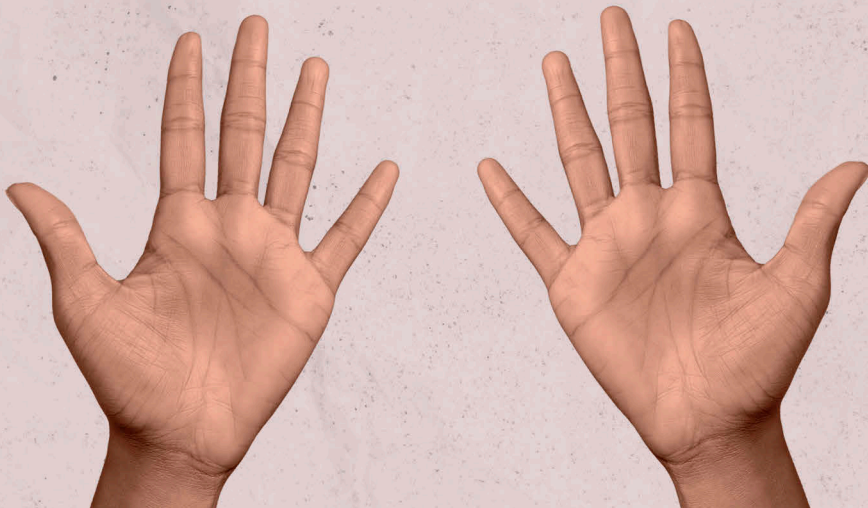
Before any of these new ideas come to fruition, Thompson will need to develop and sustain the business case around them, not to mention maintaining those all important relationships and governance arrangements. Government is not an easy place to make stuff happen.

“To survive in this environment,” Thompson says, “you need certain skills. Tenacity, I suppose; the ability to see the big picture and be resilient.” Yet many people will “get to the point where they’ve reached the end of their tether and they leave the government screaming. It just drives you mad”.

“The advice I give when I hire new directors is the system will burn you out. It’s big, there’s a lot going on. For Dr Who fans I liken it to looking into the Tardis time vortex: it will take as much as you can give, so you’ve got to find your right way to be resilient. If you can get that, if you’ve got those personality traits, and you’ve got some deep skills, then you *will* get stuff done. And you *will* make a difference.” ■



COST EFFECTIVE



Tips on how to make a success of cross-government collaboration, from the award-winning team behind the cost of living payments

In May 2022, then-chancellor Rishi Sunak announced, as part of a wider package of support, that he would make £15bn available to provide cost of living payments for eight million low-income households and six million disabled people. What were the first steps taken to make this happen, and what were the challenges you faced at that point?

It was a brand new policy. It had to be developed from scratch, and there were no existing legal mechanisms for payment, nor any systems to facilitate payment.

During the pandemic, HM Revenue and Customs had delivered a one-off payment to working households receiving tax credits, so they could provide some insights, but the cost of living payments were on a different scale.

We knew we had to keep the policy framework simple if we were going to deliver the payments quickly. This required ministers to accept some hard edges.

Another challenge was that the scale of the project necessitated collaboration across a huge number of government departments. This meant a massive co-ordination effort to ensure everyone knew their roles and responsibilities, and were kept updated with developments.

Ministers set a mid-July deadline for delivery of the first payments which, given the untested nature of the system, was exceptionally challenging. Because of the urgency of the cost of living crisis, the team had to design the policy and deliver primary legislation in just seven and a half weeks.

With everyone located across various sites, the team worked remotely. Did you come together at regular intervals?

The Department for Work and Pensions was the lead department for the payments as it was delivering to the largest cohort. The DWP arranged daily cross-Whitehall morning calls, which provided a forum so everyone was updated on developments and deadlines, and for other government departments to raise any issues. Each department also arranged its internal

governance structures to ensure that it met milestones and monitored risks.

Did you need to expand or change the team as the project developed?

Different aspects of the project came into focus at different times. But because of the challenging delivery timescales, we needed to make sure that teams were brought in as early as possible to start the next stage.

For example, we needed to ensure that operational, IT and delivery/transformation teams were appraised of the policy as it developed. This meant we could get a jump on identifying potential challenges and rethink policy when necessary.

Legislation to enable payments was laid before the House in just a few weeks, and the first payments were made less than two months after the chancellor’s announcements. What were the key factors in helping you move at such pace?

The experience of remote working and delivering innovative policies at pace during the pandemic has meant the civil service has become adept at working flexibly, creatively and at speed with colleagues in multiple locations. This is very resource intensive, however, and requires a lot of dedication and resilience from teams to deliver in this way. Having such a clear and important goal meant people were willing to go the extra mile.

Did you meet any unexpected challenges during the process, and how did you overcome them?

The cost of living payment was designed to be delivered without the need for any interaction from claimants; the payment was passported through their eligibility to DWP and HMRC benefits. However, people naturally wanted to know more about whether they were entitled to the payments and when they would receive them.

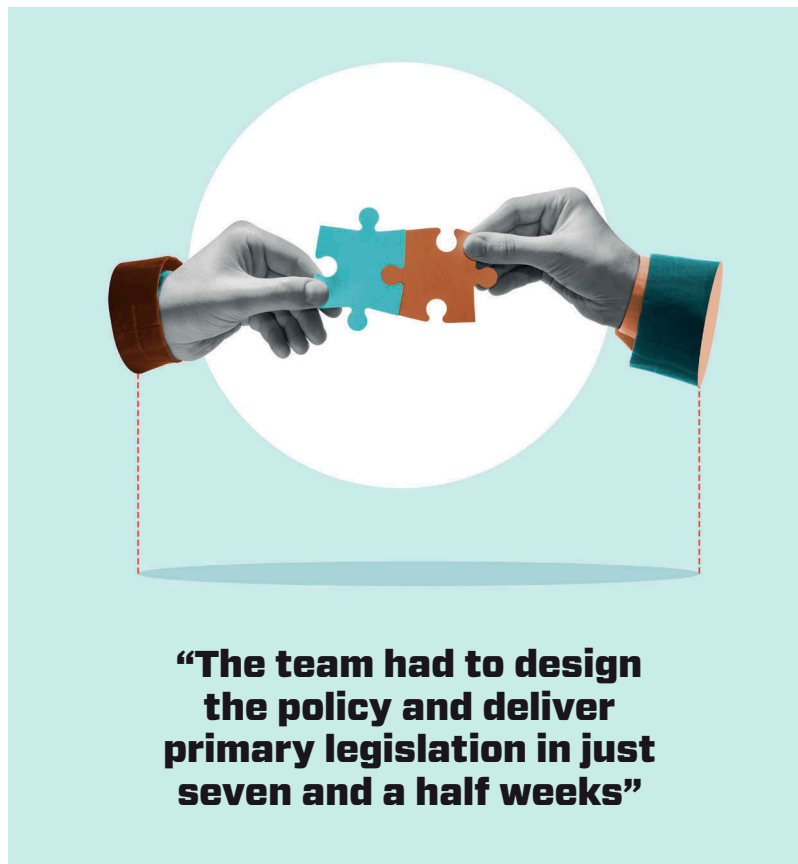
The challenge, then, was to find a way to ensure departments were not inundated with calls which could disrupt their core business. Our solution was proactive communication. We sent out letters and made use of digital channels such as Twitter and GOV.UK to make sure claimants knew what to expect.

The team was among the winners at the 2022 Civil Service Awards, topping the One Civil Service category. The

judges commended your collaborative working. Was there anything you did consciously as a team to build and support that collaboration?

The most important thing for any relationship is to build trust. The only way to do that is by open and honest dialogue at all levels. Everyone involved was cognisant of the challenges we faced. We ensured there was ample opportunity to work through issues with a spirit of willingness to find solutions and compromises that worked for everyone. Strong leadership was also essential – trusting and empowering teams to deliver.

Your work had a big impact, with 7.2 million payments made to 99%



“The team had to design the policy and deliver primary legislation in just seven and a half weeks”

of eligible low-income DWP benefit claimants by July 2022, and 1.2 million HMRC payments made to eligible tax-credit claimants by early September.

Aside from this overall achievement, were there any elements of the work of which you are especially proud?

Beatrice: I am especially proud of how the team collaborated, building and maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders they have not necessarily worked with before.

I am also proud that ministers and MPs from all parties recognised the fantastic work of officials to deliver the cost of living payments during the bill debates.

Our ministers also recognised that

the team deserved to receive the One Civil Service Award: both DWP’s previous secretary of state, Thérèse Coffey, and the previous financial secretary to the Treasury, Lucy Frazer, endorsed the team’s nomination for the award.

Angus: I was so pleased that the team received the One Civil Service Award, and proud to be one of the group who went to the ceremony in London to pick it up. The project showcases the best of the civil service working collaboratively and in lockstep with ministers to deliver vital support to citizens.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

Because we’ve had to deliver further cost of living payments, we’ve had the opportunity to reflect on the first payments and iterate to improve processes. For example, we have a duty to ensure the right people receive the right support. Some claimants receive benefits from both the DWP and HMRC, so this necessitated new data-sharing techniques. Through experience, we have now been able to improve information sharing in order to expedite payments and shorten the gap between payments made by the DWP and HMRC – which is to the benefit of claimants.

What lessons have you taken from this project? And what lesson will you take into your next piece of complex, cross-government work?

Beatrice: Working on the cost of living payments has highlighted for me how the

civil service is constantly innovating and evolving; a few years ago it would not have been possible to deliver such a project. It’s important to maintain an open mind about rethinking policy problems that may have been undeliverable before.

Angus: On a personal level, this project helped me realise the skills I have can be applied in a range of different contexts. This is likely to be true for most of us – so be confident! ■

Dr Beatrice Fannon is head of the error, fraud and legislative assurance welfare policy at HMRC. Angus Gray is director of strategy and governance at DWP

WEATHERING THE STORM

Against a tempestuous backdrop of industrial action and concerns over staff morale, civil service chief operating officer **Alex Chisholm** tells **Tevye Markson** how he is working to make government better and civil servants happier

For a man who quips that his “daily agenda” is to make people happy, civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm is remarkably calm in the face of this year’s People Survey results.

Published in March, the results show dissatisfaction with pay is at its highest level since the survey was launched 14 years ago and falling scores in all themes – results which have been reflected in the biggest wave of civil service strikes in decades.

Despite all this, and a weighty reform agenda to deliver, Chisholm says he does not find his job stressful.

“I like to be in the centre of things. I like to be very busy,” he says.

“Someone once defined stress to me as being asked to do things that you didn’t want to do. Pursuing a modernised, reformed civil service that works really well for ministers, civil servants and the public – that is what I want to do, so I don’t find that stressful.”

Announcing the Civil Service People Survey results internally in December, Chisholm and cabinet secretary Simon Case told officials the worsening scores reflected “a difficult year with significant political turbulence and media commentary, the pressures of international events, a challenging economic climate and, in many areas, change and disruption”. The last year alone has brought two changes in prime minister, a multitude of ministerial shakeups, a shock permanent secretary sacking and relentless attacks in the press on the so-called civil service “blob”.

As well as anger over pay, satisfaction with “leadership and managing change” dropped four percentage points and a higher proportion of respondents said they wanted to leave the civil service. But sitting

in his office at 70 Whitehall, Chisholm says the survey results were “not bad, actually”.

“Overall, 65% of people responded, which is incredibly high. Most public services, not just here but elsewhere, are 30% or lower, so that’s good. And I think the overall engagement score fell by one percentage point – obviously it’s disappointing to go down rather than up, but we have been going up every year up until that.”

He accepts that in some areas, however, the scores are more problematic.

Pay “was particularly painful”, Chisholm says, because inflation shot up between March 2022, when last year’s pay remit was published, and October, when the survey ran.

The mismatch between last year’s average 2-3% pay rises and rocketing inflation has culminated in months of strikes – not just in the civil service but across the public sector.

When we met, the government and unions were in deadlock over pay but Chisholm voiced hope over the situation, saying “the pay environment is improving” for the civil service overall, and expressing the hope that this would lead to better relations with unions.

Improved relations seemed a pretty distant hope at the time of the interview, with the government refusing to renegotiate civil servants’ pay, let alone meet the demands of PCS – the civil service’s biggest union – for a 10% bump. But as CSW’s summer issue goes to press, things do look more promising. The government offered concrete talks with unions and, a few days later, a new 2023-24 pay deal which included a £1,500 one-off payment for all officials under the remit. The three main civil service unions welcomed the offer, which sweetens the 4.5%-5% current-year deal for rank-and-file civil servants

that was tabled in April. But it has not been formally accepted at the time of printing.


The other area where Chisholm says there were “really significant issues” in the People Survey was leadership and managing change. The Cabinet Office, where Chisholm is permanent secretary, scored lower than any other department on this metric. Just 38% of its staff who filled out the survey said they were satisfied with this aspect of their jobs (down from 49% in 2021), compared to the civil service-wide average of 54% (down from 58%).

Just 21% of Cabinet Office respondents said change was managed well in the department, and only 16% felt changes were usually made for the better. These scores were down by 10 and 13 percentage points respectively, compared to the year before. By contrast, most other government organisations saw 3 and 4 percentage-point drops.

Chisholm says the drop, while “obviously disappointing”, is largely due to the amount of change in the last year at the Cabinet Office. “It’s exciting being at the centre of government, at the nerve centre, but sometimes, it can be even more than exciting. So I think that did affect a number of our colleagues,” he says – echoing his recent comments to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee that the “sheer rate of change” in policy focus had “discombobulated” civil servants.

The department also had the highest proportion of respondents who said they wanted to leave the organisation within a year, at 45%.

Chisholm says this is also due to the pace of change at the department, with people moving on quickly once the project they are working on ends. “We had people who were very focused on Brexit – and then we had people who



“Pursuing a modernised, reformed civil service that works really well for ministers, civil servants and the public - that is what I want to do, so I don’t find that stressful”

came in to help with Covid,” he says.

“I think at its peak, the Covid Task Force was 350 people. It doesn’t exist any more.”

To address declining satisfaction levels, the department has put in place a programme called *A Better Cabinet Office*, which is “working on all the things that staff have said they want - better skills, more opportunities for progres-

sion, operating across the UK, tackling respect and inclusion issues, and more scope for innovation,” Chisholm adds.

Major upheaval has been happening beyond the Cabinet Office, too - most notably, Rishi Sunak’s surprise creation of three new departments in February.

But while machinery of government changes are often viewed with apprehen-

sion, Chisholm says the departmental switcheroo has provided a valuable opportunity for reducing replication of support services and building collaboration in areas such as cybersecurity and digital.

Another change in approach was Sunak’s decision to scrap Boris Johnson’s plan to cut





91,000 civil service jobs as a route to improve government efficiency.

Chisholm explains how Sunak has in some ways reverted to the strategy he set out as chancellor in the 2021 Spending Review to reduce the “non-frontline” civil service headcount to pre-pandemic levels by 2024-25.

“If you look at the published data about where we’re adding roles, they are still very much frontline roles. The Ministry of Justice have added some roles, the Home Office have added some roles, whereas some other departments have been able to reduce their net numbers, including the Cabinet Office,” he says.

“We are, more than ever before, a civil service that really operates across the whole of the UK”

“That’s not to say that we don’t value so-called back office roles, because very often they are doing important management or professional activity, which is necessary. But the philosophy of SR21 was to try and put your marginal pound into frontline public services and relieving backlogs and that’s still the philosophy of the government,” he adds.

Chisholm – who last year told *CSW* there were “clearly” too many civil servants relative to what was affordable – sees reducing the number of administrative staff, through automation and more data-sharing, as the key to unlocking a more efficient workforce.

“I think that the sort of trick we need

to try and pull in future is to be able to accelerate some of these transformation programmes where – if you look at DWP, HMRC, the Home Office and other big operational departments – they’ve got a

HIGHER SAVINGS TARGET ‘NOT REALISTIC’

To support Sunak’s goal to “maximise efficiency within budgets”, the chancellor set up an efficiency and savings review in November. Chisholm tells *CSW* the review has now “effectively concluded”, with the government deciding to largely stick to the SR21 status quo. Under the SR21 target, departments were told to cut 5% from their day-to-day budgets by 2024-25 to be “reinvested into priority areas”.

Work to improve efficiency in the last few years has included property sales worth £500m made in 2021-22, with an objective to replicate that annually; and a digital strategy promising £1bn of savings across government over the SR period. Inflation pressures and the need to leave ministers breathing room to implement new ideas has meant departments have had to work harder to find efficiencies, Chisholm says.

Adding to the 5% target would not, therefore, be “realistic” or “deliverable”, he says.

“If we can cope with inflation pressures and do all the extra work that the new administration wants to do, and deliver on all the savings that are already baked into SR21, that would be some doing. And that is basically what we think we can do,” he says.

lot of people still involved in the administration of public services and some of those activities are time consuming and not that rewarding,” he says.

As well as reducing overall numbers, he says redesigning some of these services will free up staff to focus on “higher-value-added work”.

This will require investment in new systems and skills, he says.

There’s plenty in motion, then,

and plenty of challenges ahead, but there are also signs that earlier reform efforts are starting to bear fruit. Take the Places for Growth drive to move officials out of London. This is, he says, what civil servants are most likely to cite when he asks them what reforms have been successful – “the sense in which we are, more than ever before, a civil service that really operates across the whole of the UK”.

Some 11,000 jobs have moved out of the capital since 2020, meaning government is already half way towards its goal of moving 22,000 jobs by 2030. But the agenda “is not just a numbers game”, Chisholm says – what is more important is “who comes and works in the civil service, how they work, and how that’s helping us to change”.

Chisholm has spoken in the past about his memories of the Thatcher and Major-era *Next Steps* reforms, which coincided with his early years as a civil servant and saw the creation of delivery-focused agencies often based outside of London.

In 2020, he told *CSW* this had been an “exciting programme” but the time may be right for “a more ambitious programme of thinking about where, and how work is best done”.

In helping to realise Places for Growth, along with other reforms such as bringing in functional skills and fostering more delivery expertise, Chisholm is at the heart of change that has been building across government for almost all of his career. It’s perhaps no wonder that he finds this especially motivating: “The spirit, particularly the kind of campus-type environment we’ve been able to create in Darlington, is really exciting and energising.” ■



Former SCS **Katie** shares what's worked – the ideas, tips and strategies that can help you overcome the obstacles you may face in private office

My minister had just delivered his New Deal speech for the umpteenth time. As always, he had enthused about how it would help young people to get jobs and employers to fill their vacancies. As always, he turned to me and asked: “Was that OK?”

As his private secretary, I was his eyes and ears. I needed to spot if part of the speech didn't land with the audience and might need revising for next time. I needed to record and follow up any commitments he made when responding to questions. And I needed to notice whether a disgruntled person might need careful navigation later on.

The speech was followed by a networking buffet. With the minister safely talking to some interested parties, I gathered some finger food as I knew he hadn't really eaten that day, taking care to avoid mayo (splurge risk) or flaky pastry (too many crumbs).

Throughout, I needed to keep an eye on the time – there was always somewhere else to be and a call to fit in on the way. On this occasion, we were due at Heathrow for an Edinburgh flight. The minister got deeply engaged in conversation so we ended up running through the departure lounge.

Post-trip, we returned to the routine of calls and meetings, with the minister occasionally dashing over the road for Commons

votes while I shuttled between my desk and his meeting room. I looked forward to the slightly quieter evenings when I could write emails updating colleagues on the day's developments, and prepare notes for the minister on the contents of his overnight box.

A PS has many roles. The mundane: bag carrier and speaking clock. The personal: making sure your minister is fed; telling them if a shirt button has come undone (no-one else will). Occasionally it's glamorous – an overseas visit or meeting a famous person. It nearly always involves keeping track of paperwork moving back and forth physically or electronically.

At heart, the job is about helping the government machine progress smoothly. The PS is the conduit between the minister and the department, and you constantly need to judge whether you're adding value or being a bottleneck. Is it more important to put a poorly-drafted submission into the box because the decision is urgent – or will doing so create more delays? Can you tip off officials about a ministerial idea without wasting time if he was only thinking out loud?

Private office taught me countless lessons which I draw on to this day.

• **People first.** Ministers are human and their work is deeply relational – it is about who they know and what alliances they can bring together to make things happen.

- **Read the room.** A PS must be alert to nuanced speech or shifts in body language and be ready to intervene subtly to keep things moving. Those skills helped me manage all sorts of tricky meetings.
- **Be organised and prepared.** A minister's diary has no logic. Papers need to be findable in an instant, with the relevant section highlighted. And just like the weather, the entire day can shift in moments. I always have a plan B in my back pocket, and am rarely far from a sticky note or highlighter!
- **Clarity is king.** When you have moments to get a message across, it needs to be clear. That's why submissions go through endless drafts before they get near private office and a well-chosen example can often cut through better than a lengthy note. Officials who do this well gain leverage with their minister and leeway on private office deadlines.
- **Talk early and often.** Things go wrong when communication fails. Ministers, just like the rest of us, don't like bad news, but they dislike it even more when people sit on it until it's too late.
- **Look after yourself.** I was a PS before kids, so 14-hour days were doable. But even then, I tried to recharge where I could. I slept the weekends I wasn't on duty, saw friends, and used a brisk walk around the block to clear my head during the day. ■

Melanie Dawes

The chief executive of Ofcom breaks bread with **Jess Bowie**. Photography by John Russell

Who

Melanie Dawes joined the civil service in the late 1980s and rose to become permanent secretary of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now the levelling up department). Her tenure there coincided with the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, which had a profound effect on her outlook. After five years at MHCLG, she left the civil service to become chief executive of the UK's communications regulator, Ofcom.

Where

The Civil Service Club is in Great Scotland Yard, between Whitehall and Northumberland Avenue. It provides a restaurant for members and their guests in comfortable, friendly surroundings.

We discussed

Her first job

I joined the civil service when I was 23, straight out of my master's degree in economics. I joined because I wanted to apply what I'd learned as an economist to real-life problems that were actually about people's lives.

My first job was in the Department of Transport in 1989. I was put to work on appraising the costs and benefits of freight schemes, and also analysing the environmental impact of various modes of transport. There was the occasional computer around, but we would all have to share them, so I had loads of bits of paper on my

desk – physical spreadsheets – and little stickers everywhere, showing me how to transfer kilowatt hours into CO₂ for different modes of transport. It feels unbelievable, looking back, but I got on with it and it was actually really interesting. But it was also incredibly inefficient. Communication was so difficult. Everything was done over the phone, or by letter.

How many junior officials it takes to change a lightbulb

In that first job, there were just two lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling in our room and one day one of them broke. This was on the 16th floor of the old Marsham Street Towers. And I remember getting a lightbulb, standing on the desk and starting to change it when my boss walked in. He was absolutely horrified to find a young economic assistant changing a lightbulb, breaching every health and safety rule known to man. He was quite nice about it, but also quite clear that I should come down off the desk.

Appellations

Of course, I was “Miss Dawes” and he was “Dr Rickard”. “Ms” came along maybe five or six years later. You would never have used someone's first name for a colleague more senior than you, unless you worked very closely with them. I think that all began to change throughout the 1990s. By the time I was a perm sec in MHCLG, if someone – even a junior official – had called me “Miss Dawes”

or “Ms Dawes” rather than “Melanie” to my face I would have found that a bit odd.

Role models

A hugely important figure for me was Lesley Strathie, who sadly died in 2012.

She'd been a teenage mum, and she joined the civil service aged 16. She went to night school, and then just worked her way up. She was extraordinary – a real inspiration. Still to this day, she is the only woman that I've ever had as a boss. I was a director general in my early 40s at HMRC and she was HMRC's perm sec.

When I'd joined in the late '80s it was vanishingly unusual to be a senior woman in the civil service – or anywhere else. So those who were there, like Lesley, I have so much respect for. Yes, I had to push through some barriers along the way. But my generation of female civil servants benefited massively from the support of those women. We were also hugely helped by people like [cabinet secretary] Gus O'Donnell and [Treasury perm sec] Terry Burns. They recognised that things needed to change, and they made sure that you were actually valued – even if you didn't wear a suit, trousers and a tie – and that you didn't find that your career just disappeared when you had a baby.

Juggling the personal with the professional

In my 30s, I faced some really tough times when my husband and I were trying to have a

baby. It took us eight years of fertility treatment before we succeeded with our wonderful daughter Nancy, who is now 19 and at university. I was at the Treasury during that period and received tremendous support from my colleagues, including from Nick Macpherson, my then-director. It was a reminder of what the civil service is truly about: getting the job done for ministers, supporting the government of the day, but in a way that also leads to fantastic teamwork and some amazing friendships.

When I turned 40, and Nancy was two, I realised I needed to get out of my comfort zone. We decided to try for another baby, but I also knew that if it didn't happen, I had to challenge myself in my career in a new way. Unfortunately, the IVF didn't work out so I made a bold move and joined HMRC in a completely different job from the kinds of roles I'd been doing at the Treasury. I led operational teams across the country, overseeing big company accounts. That was a brilliant job. But it was a huge change.

My husband has always been an incredible support in my career, and we have always faced things together. Although those were the days before shared parental leave, we very much shared our days of caring for Nancy, and I also had great childcare. I was very lucky. But it's hard doing a big job with a young child and it's important for people in that

“The idea of regulation may appear dull, but ultimately, these are rules that are designed to save lives, improve outcomes and safeguard citizens”



situation to cut themselves some slack, because those years don't last forever, and things do get easier. It's impossible to do everything when your children are very young.

Her toughest period at work

Professionally, there's no question that leading my depart-

ment in the days and weeks following the Grenfell fire was the most challenging thing I've ever had to do. Above all, because it was a human tragedy on an appalling scale. And it was amazing the way the civil service from multiple departments stepped forward to try to support that community.

We didn't get everything right. But the effort and the commitment from ministers and civil servants was remarkable. What was also really hard was that within a day or two, it became clear that this wasn't the only building that had defective cladding. I remember some of those meetings with Sajid

Javid, who was my secretary of state, and Alok Sharma, who was a junior minister, as we looked at each other and realised quite what an enormous scale of system failure we were going to have to deal with. And that was incredibly hard, particularly because the size of the issue was so unforeseen. »

The importance of regulation

I have a very deep belief in the importance of good, effective, proportionate regulation. And that was one of the reasons why, when the Ofcom job came along, I felt I could make a difference.

I don't think that most Whitehall civil servants are terribly aware of regulation, or really consider careers in regulators. And I was no different: I hadn't thought as deeply about these issues as perhaps I should have done throughout my career before.

But events like Grenfell have shed light on the failures of regulatory oversight that occurred over several decades. There was a flawed approach where rules were formulated at the government level and enforcement was left to local authorities without adequate systems, data, monitoring or industry engagement. This gap meant corners were cut in the industry, resulting in tragic consequences for Grenfell victims, and also a terrible time for numerous leaseholders who have endured years of hardship, having to retrofit safety measures that should have been in place from the start.

The idea of regulation may appear dull and technical, but ultimately, these are rules that are designed to save lives, improve outcomes and safeguard consumers, citizens, businesses up and down the country.



Overseeing such a diverse remit

Managing a diverse organisation starts with assembling a team of exceptional individuals who not only have the neces-

that we are a unified regulator for the communications industries. It's crucial for me as a leader to help everyone see the bigger picture. Companies like

synergy across different sectors and by understanding this interconnectedness, we can effectively regulate and adapt to the changing industry dynamics.

through to economists specialising in economic regulation. I've always approached the diversity question with the belief that, fundamentally, what you're doing this for is to create a healthy organisation, that as many people as possible feel they can be part of.

“In my 30s, I faced some really tough times when I was going through IVF - but the support I got from colleagues was tremendous”

sary expertise and skills but who can also work together seamlessly across the organisation. At Ofcom, I've put a lot of emphasis on the concept of “One Ofcom”, which recognises

Amazon, for example, now offer postal services; make TV shows; run video-sharing platforms; and provide cloud services. The evolving commercial landscape demonstrates the increasing

Reconciling different cultures within Ofcom

Throughout Ofcom's 20-year journey, we have always had a diverse range of functions and staff. Our workforce includes engineers who are out and about checking for interference in our wireless spectrum; experts handling TV complaints, who really understand the media and broadcasting;

Whether Ofcom is too big

I really don't think so. When I joined, Ofcom had around 950 employees, and now we stand at approximately 1,350. While we have expanded, we're still smaller than most government departments. Yes, we do have

a broad remit. But I think it's very coherent and has allowed us to build a robust infrastructure and draw on the wealth of talent available. This has been particularly clear from the way we've been able to mobilise so swiftly to address online safety. We have a dedicated team of lawyers, economists, a strong corporate support network, and individuals with extensive regulatory experience. We've been really successful at drawing people from outside into the mission, too. We've had directors joining us from Meta and Google, for example.

The benefits of being a public corporation

Our recruitment success is influenced by several factors, including our status as a public corporation. People know that if they come to Ofcom, they'll have agency and be able to get things done – in the way that we deliver on the duties that parliament has set us. It is less bureaucratic. There's no escaping the fact that when you're in Whitehall, the systems of controls and approvals are quite onerous. And very few things can happen without going through quite a lot of processes to get approval from the Treasury or the Cabinet Office. But I do personally believe that our independence in how we run ourselves makes us more efficient. We feel accountable for the decisions we make in a way that's quite different to the civil service.

How Ofcom distinguishes between bias and actual lies

We're all about embracing a healthy exchange of views and opinions, which is what our democracy and society thrive on. It just doesn't sit right with us to squash certain perspectives, even if, perhaps, people are saying something that's incorrect. We want TV and radio to be the platforms where people can freely express what they're thinking and engage in proper debates. But we are also all about due impartiality

and due accuracy. It's not about always giving equal airtime to every viewpoint, but rather ensuring that views are properly challenged and presented with the necessary context. We don't just judge based on snippets of a programme you might catch on social media and which often only contain a small part of a larger programme that did actually contain the overall impartiality and due accuracy that we're looking for. If something is contentious or hotly debated, we also make sure to publish a thorough explanation of how we reached our decision.

What she's most proud of

I am actually incredibly proud of what Ofcom is doing right now to get ready to regulate for

online safety. Just the way that people are coming together, the commitment that they're showing, we're having to do an enormous amount of work while the teams are still growing. Everybody's working flat out. But the sense of mission, excitement and purpose is fantastic. And I'm hoping and expecting that we'll look back on it and feel that we achieved some real change for people.

Whether "activist civil servants" are thwarting the will of ministers

I really don't recognise that picture. The vast majority of civil servants have an incredibly strong sense of their responsibility to serve the government of the day and get

things done for their ministers. My own experience is of very constructive working relationships with ministers. As a permanent secretary, I saw it as my job to help them be as successful as they possibly could be in delivering on the government's agenda. But but it's been a really tough few years – particularly with Covid – and the system of government that we have is complicated: civil service, ministers, parliament, media, special advisers, arm's-length bodies. And what civil servants need is for their senior leaders, and ministers, to be constantly building and investing in trusting relationships at the top, so that they can set really clear direction for those who work for them. ■

IN THE CLUB

The Civil Service Club, celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, was established using funds originally raised to celebrate the wedding of then-Princess Elizabeth and Prince Phillip. It opened in 1953 to provide "social facilities in reach of

all", with the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth as its patron.

The club continues to thrive, with more than 13,500 members for whom it provides a varied programme of activities including comedy and quiz nights. Members can also use facilities in the form of the Queen Elizabeth Dining Room, a convivial bar also serving

food, meeting and conference rooms, and 26 ensuite bedrooms.

Membership is available from £50 a year and is open to all serving, former and retired members of the UK civil service, government agencies and NDPBs.

Find out more at: civilserviceclub.org.uk



POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Greater public involvement in shaping, implementing and evaluating policy is a clear goal of open government. **Tim Gibson** examines how it can be done, as well as its potential to help shape better policy and restore trust in the working of democracy

Those involved in running the country, look away now. A recent survey by King's College London found the confidence rate in the government is currently 24%, its lowest

since 2009. Parliament fares even worse, with a confidence rate of 23% – equal to its 2009 nadir. Even the civil service, which gets a confidence rate of 49%, could benefit from a boost: the UK ranks in the bottom half of countries surveyed, coming 14th out of 24.

These figures are concerning for many reasons, not least because trust in government underpins the consent that lies at the heart of a strong democracy – a point made by former *Independent* journalist Richard Askwith, who has some radical ideas about reforming parliament. “It feels as if the trust that people have in our democracy is dwindling,” he says, “because our politicians don’t seem to represent our interests.”

Speaking to CSW shortly before the KCL research is published, on the very day that Boris Johnson gives oral evidence to the Privileges Committee about his accounts to parliament of lockdown-busting events in No.10 Downing Street, Askwith says there is “an urgent need to restore faith in democracy.” His suggestion, set out in his 2018 book *People Power*, is to replace the House of Lords with a chamber of “people’s peers”. These would be ordinary citizens, selected by a similar process to jury service, who sit for a limited term and ensure public scrutiny of the government, its policies and legislation.

Askwith’s remedy may be radical, but



his diagnosis is widely shared. Alan Renwick, professor of democratic politics and deputy director of the Constitution Unit at UCL, offers a similar analysis, even though he doesn't agree with the people's peers proposal. "The state of public confidence in how democracy is working is at rock bottom," he says. "This is harming politicians because they aren't trusted to get on with their jobs, and it is harming the quality of policymaking because it is a barrier to thinking things through in sufficient depth."

Renwick's latter observation will be of pressing concern for CSW's readers, who have a concern for good policy. A groundswell of opinion suggests the solution lies in greater public involvement in policy design, implementation and evaluation, in the form of so-called deliberative democracy. Which begs a question: how is such involvement achieved?

A continuum of deliberation

There is a continuum of possibilities when it comes to establishing greater public involvement in policymaking, with Askwith's people's peers at one end. At the other is a simple form of digital engagement that was favoured by the coalition government of 2010 to 2015, as part of its "digital by default doctrine". In the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan, this was held up as a means of improving "the broader policymaking process, through better engagement and consultation".

In such an approach, citizens are encouraged to offer their opinions about policy via digital platforms. Minimally, this could involve monitoring social media for chat about key policy decisions – a surprisingly fecund area of insight if off-the-record conversations with officials are to be believed. Maximally, it could involve

the deployment of interactive software to help citizens understand the complexities of policy formation and perhaps have some role in shaping decisions.

An example shared with parliament's public administration committee in 2014 comes from the London Borough of Redbridge, where residents were invited to set the council's budget using a series of graphical sliders that enabled them to adjust the value accorded to different priorities while balancing the books. The insight garnered from such experiments then fed into the councillors' deliberations, shaping the final decisions they made.

As this example shows, there is a balance to be struck between giving citizens a meaningful role in policy deliberations while recognising that the buck stops with officials and elected members when it comes to delivery. Different forms of deliberative democracy carefully set out the remit given to participants in influencing and feeding into, rather than making, policy.

Take deliberative polling and citizens' assemblies as two cases in point. The former has garnered great interest, particularly in the US, where there is a lively academic debate about its merits. The latter is growing in popularity in North America and northern Europe, and versions of it are a long-term feature of governance in many developing nations.

According to UK public participation charity Involve, deliberative polling gathers a representative sample of between 100 and 600 people either online or in person. Participants are polled prior to involvement in the process. They are then given information about the issue and put into small groups to discuss their responses. At the end of the process, they answer the same polling questions as at the start. Any changes in judgement are seen as indicative of the likely movement in the general population if given the chance to become better informed.

Citizens' assemblies go further than this, with the hope of generating recommendations that may go on to influence policymakers. They focus on a specific question or issue about which there is known to be a diversity of opinions. Recent examples from the UK include assisted dying, genome testing in newborns, and the very nature of democracy. A panel of experts gives advice and information to the assembly, which the government's Innovation in Democracy Programme suggests should consist of around 50 participants who "reflect the wider public in terms of gender, age, locations of residence, ethnicity and potentially other criteria" (see the »



Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2020 report, *How to run a citizens' assembly*).

The evidence-giving stage is followed by a process of discussion and deliberation, resulting in recommendations from the

legalising abortion in all circumstances," he reports. "After the assembly met – five times over five months, with participants from across the spectrum of views on the issue – it voted by a 64% majority in favour of 'terminations without restrictions'."

The assembly's recommendation was

A healthy democracy

A key benefit of deliberative processes is their symbolic character. They speak of a healthy democracy, and may well enliven engagement in the wider political process, as well as garnering greater trust in elected politicians. It is for this reason that they are valued by the Open Government Partnership, as a sign of an empowered citizenry.

But they are not without risk. For example, a paper shared by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and published in the *American Political Science Review* in 2019 offers an insight into the use of "village assemblies" in rural India. These assemblies are deliberative democracy in action, providing an opportunity for citizens to challenge and hold elected officials to account, and are enshrined in India's democratic process.

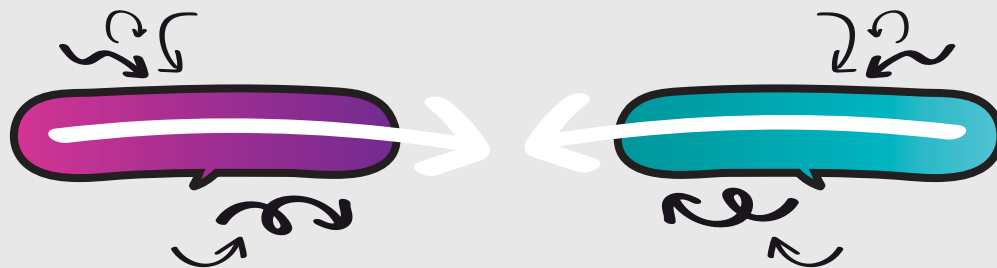
The research paper establishes the significant impact of these assemblies on shaping policy design and delivery in rural communities. But it also highlights the potential disadvantage of female participants, despite quotas to safeguard their involvement. It notes through analysis of transcripts from the assemblies that women speak less than men, but that female chairs tend to result in more prominent contributions to debate from female participants.

The insight for all such assemblies, regardless of context or geographical location, is simple: even with care taken in selecting participants, there will always be social and demographic dynamics to contend with. That is why Green speaks of the need to develop expertise in deliberative democracy as a matter of urgency for the government. "Organisations like Involve have expertise in facilitating processes like citizens' assemblies to overcome some of these dynamics, so the government

doesn't necessarily need to develop its in-house capacity in this area," he says. "But it does need people who know how to procure the right support, and do so at the right stage in the policy cycle, whether that's design, delivery or evaluation."

In other words, to quote Renwick, "the government needs to hardwire public deliberation into its policy processes, and take the outputs of such exercises seriously."

With such hardwiring, there is every hope of attaining a twofold benefit: one, of restoring public confidence in the functioning of democracy and thereby in our core institutions; and two, of improving the quality of policy design, delivery and evaluation. Few would question the value of either. ■



assembly that speak directly to the topic at hand. These can have a role in shaping policy, if given the chance. As Involve's director of advocacy and campaigns, Calum Green, says: "To have bite, citizens' assemblies need to be given the opportunity to inform and influence policy deliberations among elected representatives and officials."

Recovering nuance

While neither deliberative polling nor citizens' assemblies are as bold as Askwith's proposed reform of the Lords in terms of mandating citizen engagement in policymaking, he recognises their capacity to enliven democracy and yield improved policy decisions. "The key thing lacking in much contemporary debate is nuance," he says. "That's why direct democracy hasn't worked terribly well in recent years, despite looking like a good form of citizen empowerment. Referendums typically reduce a big and complex question to something rather simple. Deliberative democracy offers the public greater exposure to the texture of policy discussions."

Indeed, as Green observes: "Some of the best examples of referendums come after a process like a citizens' assembly, because these can influence the information given to the electorate and make sure it is sufficiently nuanced."

Green says a good example of this impact comes in the citizens' assembly called by the Irish parliament in 2016 and 2017 to consider the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, effectively outlawing abortion. "Prior to the citizens' assembly, a 'yes' vote in a referendum on this issue would have seemed unimaginable, with just 23% of the electorate in favour of

taken to the Irish parliament, where it was debated in 2018 and led to the referendum in May 2018 in which 66.4% of the country's population voted in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment. This was "a close parallel to the vote in the citizens' assembly," observes Green, and an "indication of the impact of greater nuance in helping the public reach judgments about contentious issues."

This, says Renwick, is the greatest benefit of deliberative democracy, whatever version is favoured for the circumstances at hand. "So much discussion around policy takes the form of simplistic headlines that provoke kneejerk reactions. By pursuing more deliberative approaches to policymaking, it's possible to generate a richer discussion, which also makes people more engaged and more understanding of the pressures the government faces."

More than that, adds Green, deliberative democracy helps drive equality in

"So much discussion around policy takes the form of simplistic headlines that provoke kneejerk reactions. By pursuing more deliberative approaches, it's possible to generate a richer discussion" Alan Renwick

policymaking, which is crucial to the wider levelling up agenda: "If the levelling up agenda is to be about who makes decisions and how, not just where money is spent, then integration of such processes into decision making is essential: it brings voices to the fore that are otherwise missing. It lets a wider range of experiences and perspectives influence decisions."

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