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MISSION FOCUS
Safer Streets

Mission lead Richard Clarke on setting plans and staying radical

Experts offer their views on tackling violence against women and girls

Exploring the pledge to halve knife crime in a decade

CAN I BE CANDID?
Views on the proposed duty of candour

A QUESTION OF TRUST
The benefits of acting as a charity trustee

JIM HARRA

HMRC's outgoing perm sec on 40 years at the UK's tax authority and why he'd never have worked anywhere else

CASE CLOSED
Lunch with former cabinet secretary Simon Case

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FROM THE EDITOR

What is the primary duty of the civil service?

Speaking last month after an employment tribunal agreed she had been unfairly dismissed, FCDO whistleblower Josie Stewart argued this should not be "to protect their political masters; it should be to serve government but also the public interest. Truth and accountability matters".

The tribunal found that Stewart had been reasonable to believe there was a public interest in disclosing at least some of the information she shared with the BBC about the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. Her case shows it can sometimes be lawful for a civil servant to share unauthorised information directly with the media under whistleblowing protections.

Some 40 years ago, the legal landscape was rather different. In the trial of Clive Ponting (a former official being prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act) the judge directed the jury not to acquit him, arguing that "the public interest is what the government of the day says it is".

Despite this, the jury did acquit Ponting, which led then-cabinet secretary Robert Armstrong to draft a memorandum firmly rebutting the idea that civil servants have any duty to the public interest except indirectly through ministers.

The Armstrong Memorandum famously asserted that the civil service "has no constitutional personality or responsibility separate from the duly elected government of the day" and that the "duty of the individual civil servant is first and foremost to the minister of the crown who is in charge of the department".

The position that officials serve only the government and not the public is the basis of the civil service code, even if many members of the public believe otherwise.

Stewart's case adds nuance to this position. And soon there will be another legal context in which to explore the balance between confidentiality, duty and public interest. The government is soon expected to publish legislation – known as the Hillsborough Law – which will place a duty of candour on government organisations and civil servants, requiring them to be truthful and to proactively cooperate with investigations and inquiries.

Campaigners hope the duty will improve government's ability to learn from mistakes, and prevent the years-long fight for justice which too often follows major disasters and scandals.

As Elizabeth Gardiner, CEO of the whistleblowing charity Protect, argued at a recent IfG event, such a duty may present challenges but the prize of a more open and accountable public life is well worth fighting for.

Yet the duty raises questions about the purpose of the civil service. At the same event Sir Robert Francis, interim chair of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, asked: "Is the civil service there to protect the reputation of a government, or is it there to serve the public?"

Armstrong would have had a clear answer for him, but is it still the right one? The last few years have exposed many cracks in the rules and understandings between ministers and officials. Fixing those cracks need not mean returning to exactly how things were in the past. But we must tread carefully. Change may be needed, but without clarity it will be harder for civil servants already navigating complex ethical and legal questions.

Stewart went to the press because she felt internal whistleblowing procedures in the FCDO were inadequate. She is backing a call by Protect for an independent statutory commissioner for whistleblowing. The FDA is calling for independent ethics tsars who can advise civil servants on sensitive questions around their duties and responsibilities. Both of these would be helpful additions, but to support these independent advisers perhaps it is also time for leaders to clarify and if needed restate exactly what those duties and responsibilities are. ■

For more on this topic, see Gardiner's column on p.52

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Next-gen recruitment: Harnessing AI, skills, and diversity for a future-ready public sector

As AI integrates into the workplace the civil service must harness its potential to enhance, not replace, human roles. Matt Burney, senior talent strategy advisor at Indeed, explores how a skills-first approach, multigenerational collaboration, and ethical AI adoption can drive innovation and inclusion

Matt Burney
Senior talent strategy advisor
Indeed

The rapid advances of artificial intelligence (AI) and the shift towards a skills-based workforce are reshaping the public sector. To navigate these changes, government organisations must ensure that technology enhances, rather than displaces, employees. Matt Burney, senior talent strategy advisor at Indeed, believes that by adopting a skills-first approach, fostering multigenerational collaboration, and implementing AI ethically, public sector organisations can unlock innovation and create a more inclusive workforce.

Burney advocates for using AI as a job enabler, not a job replacement. He argues that as AI can automate repetitive tasks, it allows civil servants to focus on strategic work. "AI-powered recruitment tools reduce administrative burden, allowing recruiters to focus on strategic hiring and candidate engagement. That's not just a cost saving; it's an efficiency breakthrough," he explains.

He recognises that AI adoption raises concerns about job displacement, particularly in administrative roles. "Public sector leaders should ensure transparency in how AI enhances workforce capabilities and supports employees," Burney advises, noting that investing in continuous learning initiatives will help employees adapt and develop skills that complement AI-driven tools.

This technological landscape is also changing traditional job roles and rigid career pathways, giving way to a skills-based approach. "By prioritising skills over qualifications, public sector organisations can access a broader and more diverse talent pool," says Burney. He notes that initiatives like the UK's National Skills Fund support upskilling and reskilling efforts, is exactly the type of initiative the civil service needs more of. "It demonstrates a commitment to adapting to the evolving skills landscape." To Burney, a skills-first approach fosters workforce agility, allowing employees to transition between roles based on competencies rather than tenure.

Leveraging multigenerational teams for innovation

As organisations adopt skills-first recruitment strategies, they open the door to harnessing the untapped potential of multigenerational teams. Recent studies show that up to five generations now coexist within workplaces, bringing distinct experiences, skills, and perspectives to the table. "Experienced employees bring institutional knowledge and strategic thinking, while younger professionals contribute fresh perspectives and digital fluency," he says. To Burney, an inclusive workforce that values contributions across all career stages benefits from institutional knowledge alongside fresh perspectives.

Burney highlights reverse mentoring creates a dynamic learning environment where digital skills and leadership insights are exchanged between generations. "The strength of multigenerational teams lies in combining different approaches to challenges," Burney says. "Encouraging collaboration across age groups fosters innovation and resilience."

AI and inclusion: Balancing technology with fairness

It's important to recognise that although AI can improve inclusivity in the hiring process and automated recruitment tools can effectively identify a diverse range of candidates, these tools may unintentionally reinforce biases if the algorithms are trained on flawed data sets.

"When AI is trained on biased data, it will produce biased results. The bias may even be more challenging to detect because it's buried in complex algorithms," Burney warns, noting that strong governance frameworks are essential in balancing technology with fairness. "AI can help level the playing field, but it can't replace empathy, cultural understanding, or lived experience," he says.

The real challenge isn't whether to adopt AI but how to shape its future; one rooted in fairness, equality, and opportunity for all. To Burney, by embracing technology as an enabler of human potential, the public sector can pave the way for a more inclusive, innovative, and resilient workforce.

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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@totalpolitics.com

ROBBINS RETURNS

Sir Olly Robbins (*below*) has returned to government as permanent secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

The one-time chief Brexit negotiator and boss of the Department for Exiting the European Union left the civil service in 2019. Since then he has done stints at Goldman Sachs and Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government – as its first Heywood Fellow – and, most recently, he was a partner at strategic advisory firm Hakluyt.

Robbins joined the Treasury as a graduate in 1996 and went on to hold a series of senior roles that saw him work closely with a number of prime ministers during his first stretch in the civil service.

RYCROFT EXITS HOME OFFICE

Home Office permanent secretary **Sir Matthew Rycroft** (*above, right*) will leave the department later this month after five years at its helm.

Rycroft joined the Home Office from the now-defunct Department for International Development after the resignation of Sir Philip Rutnam. Rutnam quit the department after a high-profile falling out with then-home secretary Priti Patel.

In a memo to staff announcing his planned departure "for pastures new", Rycroft noted that he had served 10 secretaries of state and four cabinet secretaries during his years as a perm sec.

Home secretary Yvette Cooper thanked Rycroft for his 35 years of "dedicated service to public life" and for his "fulsome support and leadership" in recent months.

JP SET FOR HMRC

Scottish Government permanent secretary **John-Paul Marks** (*above, right*) is set to take the helm at HM Revenue and Customs next month, when current chief **Sir Jim Harra** steps down.

Marks became Scotland's most senior civil servant at the beginning of 2022. Before that he was director general for work and health services at the Department for Work and Pensions. Previous roles include DWP's DG for operations and head of corporate international relations at the UK Pensions Regulator.

Harra's departure from HMRC brings a 40-year career at the tax-collection authority and its predecessor department to an end. He has served as HMRC's top civil servant since autumn 2019.

ELLAM BACK

Michael Ellam has returned to the civil service as second permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office with responsibility for the European Union and international economic affairs.

Ellam served as director of communications at Downing Street under Gordon Brown and as a director general in HM Treasury in his initial 20-year Whitehall career.

The newly-created role Ellam has taken up will see him act as the UK's "sherpa", representing prime minister Keir Starmer and constitution minister Nick Thomas-Symonds in meetings and negotiations with the European Union.

Thomas-Symonds said he was "delighted" that Ellam was "bringing his talents to the heart of government, helping us tackle barriers to trade, keep people safe and take on shared global challenges, like illegal migration".

Ellam left the civil service in 2013 and was most recently chairman of public sector banking at HSBC.

BARROW BOY

Former cabinet secretary **Simon Case** (*below*) has been appointed to lead the board overseeing a £200m regeneration project to make Barrow-in-Furness the home of nuclear submarine-building in the UK.

The board is managing a 10-year, £200m fund to "deepen and develop" the Cumbrian town's "crucial role at the heart of UK national security and nuclear submarine-building".

The board will deliver the Plan for Barrow – a strat-

Louise Haywood-Schiefer

egy set out by Team Barrow, a partnership between central government, Westmorland and Furness Council and BAE Systems, to regenerate the town.

NHS CHIEF STANDS DOWN

NHS England chief executive **Amanda Pritchard** (*below*) is stepping down next month after three years in post.

Pritchard, who previously served as NHSE chief operating officer, will be replaced by **Sir James Mackey** as "transition CEO" for the health service. Mackey's appointment is on an interim basis. He will work on secondment from his current role as chief executive of Newcastle Hospitals NHS Trust.

Health secretary Wes Streeting said Pritchard could be "enormously proud" of the leadership she had given to NHS England throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

"She has led with integrity and unwavering commitment," he said.

Streeting said the government would shortly be setting out its requirements for "a new relationship" between the Department of Health and Social Care and NHSE.

DVLA POLE POSITION

Tim Moss (*above, right*) has been named as the next chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency.

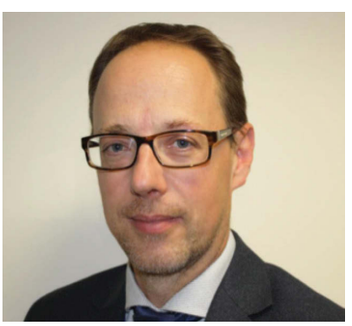
Moss will make the move to Swansea, where DVLA has its headquarters, from the Welsh Government, where he is currently chief operating officer and director general for corporate services and inspectorates. He is due to take up the post at the end of this month.

Moss was previously chief exec at the Intellectual Property Office. He is the permanent replacement for Julie Lennard who left DVLA in November to become director general and chief operating officer at the Crown Prosecution Service.

DVLA director of strategy, policy and communications Lynette Rose has been serving as interim chief executive since Lennard's departure.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

Andrew Forzani (*below*) has taken up post as government chief commercial officer, following the departure of Sir Gareth Rhys Williams in July last year.



Forzani has three decades of experience in procurement and supply-chain work, most recently as director general for commercial at the Ministry of Defence.

Previously he was chief commercial officer at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Cabinet Office permanent secretary Cat Little said Forzani had "a wealth of senior commercial experience both within government and beyond, and will continue to drive excellence and commercial expert advice in everything we do".

Marco Salzedo and Clare Gibbs served as joint interim government chief commercial officers while the search went on for a permanent successor to Rhys Williams.

HARRIES DEPARTS

Prof Dame Jenny Harries *(below)* will leave the UK Health Security Agency this summer after serving as chief executive since the organisation's foundation in 2021.

Harries previously served as deputy chief medical officer for England.

Announcing her plans to leave in early summer, Harries said she was "immensely proud" of what the UKHSA had achieved over the past few years.

"We have created a genuinely unique and world-leading public health agency with strong partnerships across public, private, domestic and international organisations," she said.

Chief medical officer for England Prof Sir Chris Whitty said Harries' "unrelenting commitment to supporting the public" had been "extraordinary".

"I am profoundly thankful for her leadership, advice and proactiveness in tackling the toughest of tasks," he said. "Her contribution to public health has been remarkable."

POWERING UP

Dan McGrail has been appointed interim chief executive of fledgling state-owned clean power company Great British Energy. McGrail will work on secondment from his current post as chief executive of trade body RenewableUK.

He takes up the appointment this month on an initial six-month contract ahead of the launch of a recruitment drive for a permanent chief.

Energy secretary Ed Miliband said McGrail, a former chief executive of Siemens Engines, would be part of a "fantastic" leadership team that includes "start-up" chair Juergen Maier, an ex-chief exec of Siemens UK. Setting up GB Energy was a Labour Party commitment in its 2024 general election campaign. A bill to formalise the company's creation was introduced to parliament in July and is currently at the committee stage in the House of Lords.

WALES GETS NEW CMO

Prof Isabel Oliver has been appointed as the next chief medical officer for Wales following the retirement of **Dr Sir Frank Atherton.**

Oliver is currently director general of science and research – and chief scientific officer – at the UK Health Security Agency.

She led the development of UKHSA's science strategy and the delivery of many of its scientific functions and services – including creating a

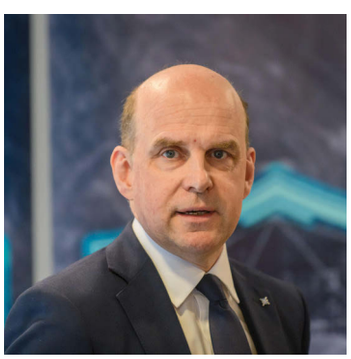
new vaccine development and evaluation centre at the Porton Down campus in Wiltshire.

Oliver is a keen runner and said she is looking forward to taking part in the Newport Marathon as CMO of Wales.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Former senior civil servant **Baroness Louise Casey** (*below*) has been appointed as the government's lead non-executive director.

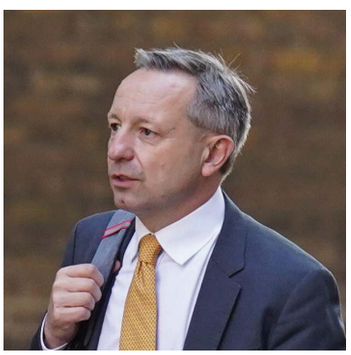
She will oversee non-executives from across government to support the delivery of the government's Plan for Change, setting cross-cutting NED priorities and playing a key role in recruitment of non-execs. In a separate role, she will also lead an independent commission on building a National Care Service to deliver long-awaited reform to adult social care in England.



Angus Lapsley (*above*) has been appointed as the UK's next permanent representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Lapsley, who has more than 30 years of experience in the civil service – including roles at the Ministry of Defence, Foreign Office and Cabinet Office – will start in the role in April. For the last two-and-a-half years, Lapsley has been Nato's assistant secretary general for defence policy and planning. He is also part of the team carrying out the government's strategic defence review and will continue in this role until the review is complete.

Sir Ian Bauckham has been confirmed as Ofqual's chief regulator, having taken up the post on an interim basis in January 2024. He succeeds **Jo Saxton**, who left Ofqual at the end of 2023 to lead the university admissions service UCAS.

Jonathan Brearley (*below*) was re-appointed as chief executive of Ofgem. He took up the role in 2020 and his second term began on 1 February 2025.



Edward Roberts has been appointed His Majesty's ambassador to the Republic of Costa Rica and His Majesty's non-resident ambassador to the Republic of Nicaragua from the autumn, succeeding **Ben Lyster-Binns** who will be transferring to another Diplomatic Service appointment.

Daniel Shepherd is appointed as His Majesty's Ambassador to the Republic of Guinea from April, succeeding **John Marshall** who will be transferring to another Diplomatic Service appointment.

Dean Beale will stand down as chief executive of the Insolvency Service in May, having served in the role since 2019. ■

GOING, GOING, GONG


Tamara Finkelstein

Tamara Finkelstein, the permanent secretary at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, was awarded one of the highest possible honours in the 2025 New Year Honours list.

Finkelstein was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the Bath, in recognition of her contribution to public service.

A summary of the top honours, published by the Cabinet Office, said Finkelstein "dedicated her entire 32-year career to public service".

"She has led Defra's transformation into a major delivery organisation, guiding it through EU exit and Covid", it said. The statement added that Finkelstein has worked in six government departments, and that she holds a number of additional roles including senior sponsor of the Civil Service Jewish Network and head of the government policy profession. She also sits on the Civil Service Board, Government Reform Board, the Senior Leadership Committee, and chairs the Plan for London Board.

A number of senior civil servants were recognised with the Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB) – the next most senior honour after a knighthood or damehood.

Those honoured in recognition of public service include **Amy-Claire Mason**, chief executive of HM Prison and Probation Service; **Jaee Samant**, director general in the Cabinet Office's Business Group – a recent move from the Home Office, where she was director general, public safety; and **Jessica Glover**, a director general at the Treasury.

Paul Monks, chief scientific adviser at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero,


Jess Glover

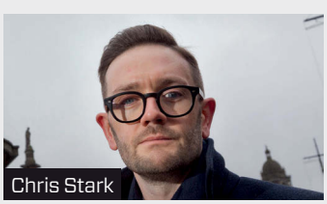
was recognised for services to science in government.

Monks, who is also a professor of atmospheric chemistry and earth observation science at the University of Leicester, said


Professor Paul Monks

in a statement: "I am very much humbled to be recognised for the work of getting science into government. It has been rewarding to see how science can make a real difference to decision making."

Among those who received CBEs are **Louise Smyth**, chief executive of Companies House, who was recognised for services to public life and to the economy; **David Taylor**, now chief executive of the British Business Bank and previously chief exec of UK Export Finance, for services to business and trade; and **Chris Stark**, the former chief exec of the Climate Change Committee – who was appointed to lead the Mission Control for Clean Power 2030 in DESNZ last summer – for services to tackling climate change.


Chris Stark

Illicit trade: On the rise across the UK

Catherine Goger, Illicit Trade Prevention Manager at Philip Morris Limited, discusses the worsening illicit tobacco trade in the UK

Catherine Goger
Illicit Trade Prevention Manager
Philip Morris

The illicit tobacco trade is a growing problem in the UK. What is historically perceived as a handful of shopkeepers selling moderate volumes of product procured from a white van man, is now a sophisticated supply chain coordinated by organised crime gangs that are increasingly encroaching on the UK[1]. Illicit trade underscores violent organised crime, money laundering, and even terrorism and it strips the country of duty revenue[2].

Across the UK, 6.7 billion counterfeit and contraband cigarettes were consumed in 2023[3], meaning that over one in four cigarettes consumed were illicit[4]. While studies show that the proportion of UK smokers decreases year-on-year[5], the most recent KPMG Report on Illicit Cigarette Consumption in Europe[6] – commissioned by Philip Morris International – shows that UK illicit cigarette consumption, as a percentage of total cigarette consumption, accelerated by more than 20% from 2022 to 2023[7]. As a result, the UK is the third-biggest consumer of illicit cigarettes in Europe, by volume – despite falling in the bottom-fifth for smoking prevalence[8].

These tobacco products are produced with no regard for regulations and legislation. Fire-retardant rings are often absent, and illicit cigarettes can be contaminated with rodent droppings and even asbestos, according to lab results.

The growing problem of cheap illicit products undermines progress towards a smoke-free England by 2030, with pocket money-priced illegal disposable vapes and illicit cigarette packets costing as little as £5 each. Conversely, the duty revenue lost from illicit tobacco exceeds an estimated £3bn per annum[9].

At the local level, we work with external consultants on covert operations across Great Britain and Northern Ireland to gather evidence that is shared with Trading Standards and other agencies, both at home and abroad.

The worsening issue of illicit trade in the UK serves as a reminder that we cannot afford to be complacent of its insidious nature – driving crime in our communities and putting adults who smoke at even greater risk.

Protecting retailers and keeping our society safe should be the cornerstone of any strategy to curb the illicit tobacco trade. Governments must be relentless against organised crime profiting from illicit trade in tobacco products. The illicit trade numbers in the UK should serve as an eye-opener: the UK government have a duty towards their constituents and must look into implementing innovative and long-lasting policies that aim to make all cigarettes a thing of the past – both legal and illegal ones.

PHILIP MORRIS LIMITED

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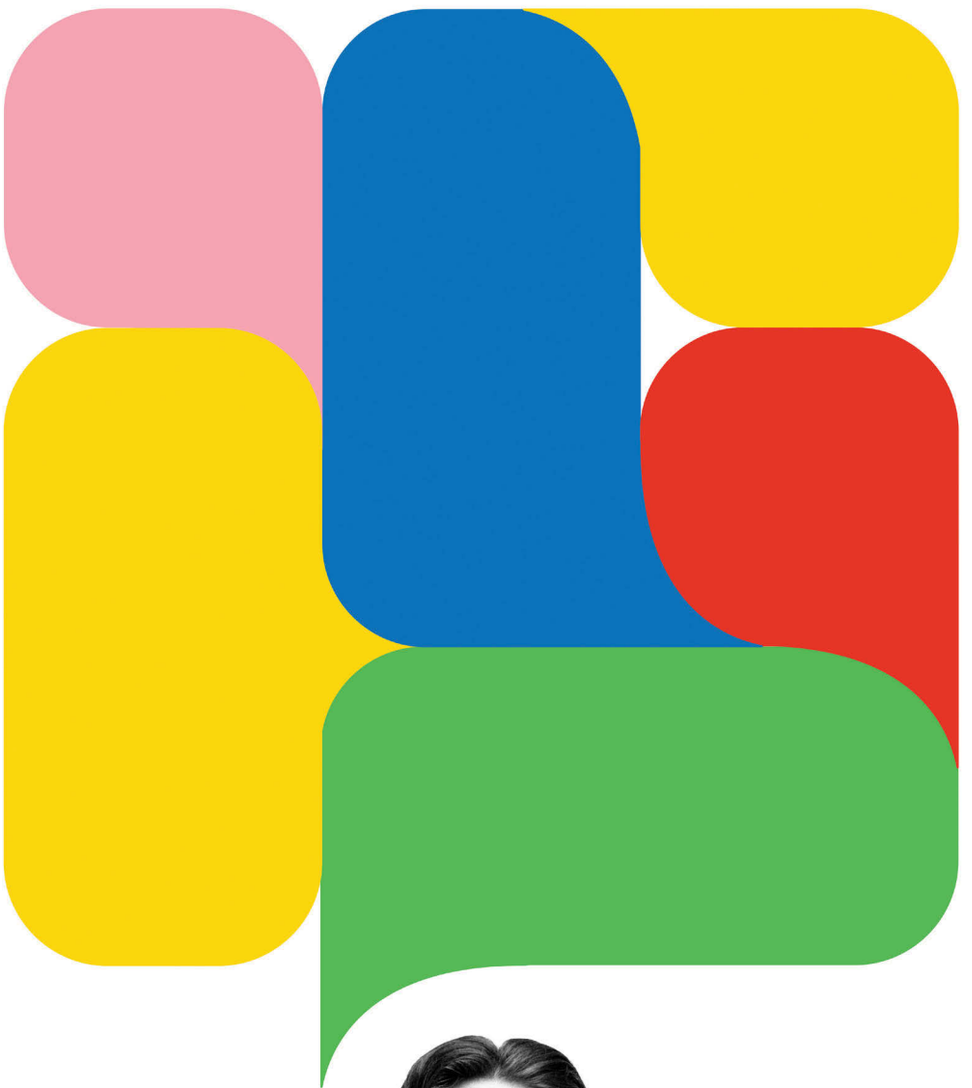
If you would like to discuss this topic further, please send an email to Catherine.Goger@pmi.com

SATISFACTION SNAPSHOT

What we learned from the 2024 Civil Service People Survey



The 2024 Civil Service People Survey, which was conducted just a few months after the new Labour government came to power, contains some telling insights into the workplace satisfaction of civil servants at a time of great change.

CSW has pulled out some headline statistics on key issues, such as pay satisfaction – and whether financial concerns are impacting on officials' ability to carry out the job. We've also looked at whether prime minister Keir Starmer's mission-led approach to government is reflected in officials' views around collaboration and efficiency.

Pay and money worries

The 2024 survey found that 35% of respondents feel their pay adequately reflects their performance – a three percentage-point improvement on 2023's figure. This is the second year in a row in which pay satisfaction has increased, reflecting the second successive year where pay rises have trumped inflation.

The pay satisfaction rates likely reflect the pay rise of roughly 5% set out by the new government last July, but satisfaction is still below the 40% recorded in 2020's survey and the 38% rate in 2021.

While pay satisfaction has not returned to 2020 levels, the 2024 results suggest that money concerns have eased for some civil servants. With the cost of living crisis seeing inflation rise to 11% in 2022, the 2023 survey asked for the first time whether money worries in the previous 12 months had affected officials' ability to do their job. The response in 2023 showed that 56% said money worries "seldom" or "never" affected their ability to do their job. In 2024, 62% of civil servants gave this response.

Flight risk

Alongside a rise in pay satisfaction, civil servants also reported in 2024 that they are more likely to stay where they currently work for some years before moving on to another role. Some 14% of respondents said they want to leave immediately or within the next 12 months, compared to 15% in 2023.

There was also a big drop in the proportion of officials wanting to leave their organisation for a better pay and benefits package in the most recent survey results. In 2024, 44% of respondents cited the lure of better remuneration as a reason for wanting to leave, compared to 50% in 2023.

Alongside this, the proportion of civil servants reporting that they want to stay in their current organisation for at least the next three years has increased from

42% in 2023 to 45% in the latest survey. This figure – whilst being the highest since 2021 – is still some way short of the 55% score recorded in 2009, the first year the exercise was conducted.

Collaboration and efficiency

In light of the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, setting a 2% "productivity, efficiency and savings target" for departments in October last year, the People Survey results give an important – if early – insight into the success of Reeves's request to "focus on the delivery of what matters most".

"For four consecutive years, 7% of officials said they had been discriminated against at work over the previous 12 months"

The results do not bode well. Of the civil servants who responded to the questionnaire, just over half (52%) agreed that efficiency is pursued as a priority in their organisation, down from 55% in 2023 and 57% in 2022. And 65% of respondents told the survey they had been between 90% and 100% productive in the previous month, compared to 66% in 2023 and 69% in 2022.

There are signs of improvement in another key area of civil service reform, however, with 39% of respondents saying they collaborate with civil servants in other government departments and agencies to achieve common goals "often or always" or "some of the time". In 2023, the response to this question was slightly lower at 37%. It was lower still in 2022, at 35%.

Bullying and discrimination

Reported levels of discrimination, bullying and harassment are broadly the same as they were in 2023. This means that for four consecutive years, 7% of officials across all parts of government said they had been discriminated against at work over the previous 12 months.

Of those who said they had experienced discrimination at work in the latest poll, 19% selected disability as one of the reasons, up from 15% in 2023 and 8% in 2009.

The proportion of officials who said they had been the victim of bullying or harassment over the previous 12 months was the same as 2023, at 8%.

There was also an increase in the proportion of civil servants who said they had not reported incidents of bullying or harassment because they did not want to be seen as a troublemaker. This metric has risen from 44% to 47%.

Responding to these results, the Cabinet Office said it is committed to investigating all reports of discrimination, bullying and harassment. It added that the annual "Speak Up" campaign exists to build confidence among officials that they will be taken seriously if they raise concerns.

Among the government departments and devolved administrations in the survey, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has the highest reported rates for both the "discrimination" and "bullying and harassment" categories (13% for each). Meanwhile, the Welsh Government has the lowest reported rates, with 5% for discrimination and 6% for bullying and harassment.

Wellbeing

There was a positive change in three of the categories across the suite of wellbeing indicators included in the People Survey.

Asked to describe their life satisfaction, 68% of officials opted for a score of seven out of 10 or higher, a one percentage-point increase on 2023's results. The proportion of civil servants saying that the things they do in their life are "worthwhile" also increased by one percentage point to 71%.

Continuing the positive trend, 63% of civil servants gave a 7/10 or higher score for "happiness", representing a one percentage-point increase on the previous year.

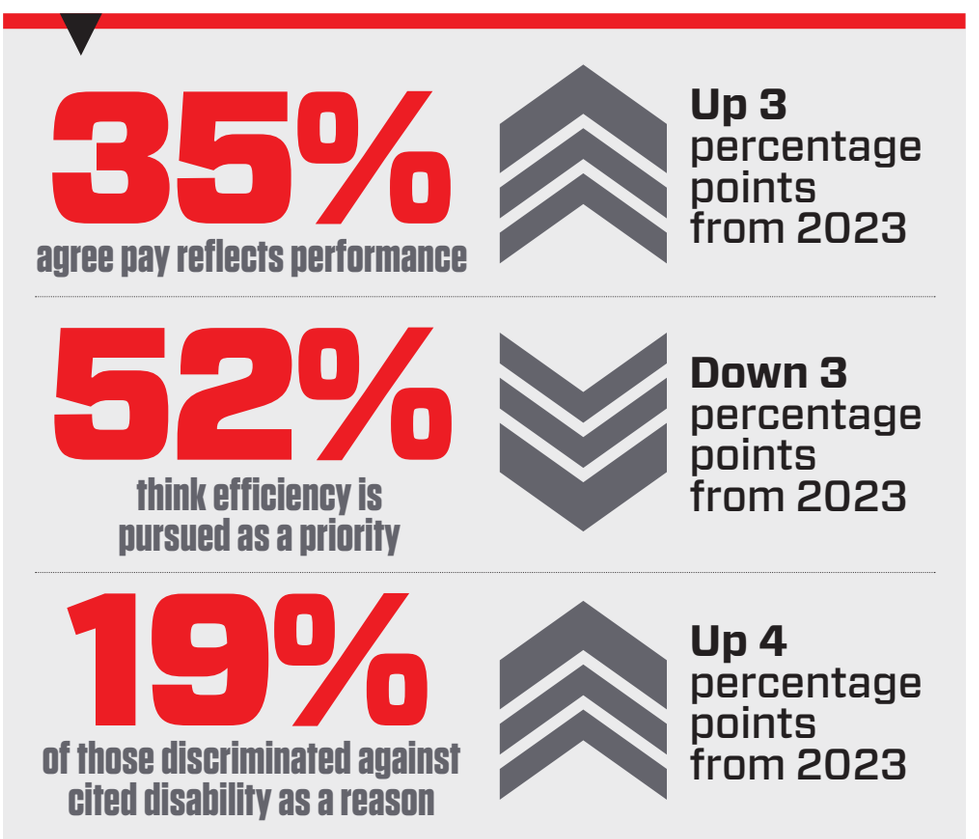
In the "anxiety" category, however, results have remained static, with 35% of respondents reporting a high level of anxiety in 2024 – the same proportion as for the past five years.

Overall findings

The People Survey's benchmark employee engagement index, which is designed to reflect staff motivation and the inclination to recommend the civil service as a good place to work, increased fractionally from 2023's score, but is unchanged at 64% after rounding.

It's worth noting that while the civil service headcount grew to its highest level in nearly two decades last year, fewer of its members responded to the 2024 People Survey than in 2023. According to Cabinet Office figures, 354,962 civil servants took part in 2024's survey, down from 356,715 in the 2023 version. This represents an overall response rate of 61% in 2024, down from 65% the previous year.

Another point to note is that Cabinet Office perm sec Cat Little suggested the People Survey may change in the future. Addressing the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in December, Little said that "most organisations" were moving away from large, comprehensive studies of staff sentiment towards "much faster pulse information to get a sense of how people feel". Little said that in her view, the People Survey should follow such a course. ■



UNA O'BRIEN INQUIRIES: A SYSTEM FAILING TO DELIVER

THERE IS GROWING FRUSTRATION THAT PUBLIC INQUIRIES DO NOT DELIVER LASTING CHANGE. ADDRESSING THIS WON'T BE EASY, BUT THERE ARE CLEAR AREAS WHERE IMPROVEMENT IS NEEDED

This spring marks two decades since the regime governing public inquiries was last reformed and there's already a mounting queue of issues for policymakers in parliament, the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Justice. Unsurprisingly duration and cost of public inquiries, the very issues that mobilised reform back in 2005, are back on the agenda. Yet also on the list is a topic barely mentioned 20 years ago, namely the extent to which inquiry recommendations are carried out and where responsibility lies to get this done. Perceived, real and persistent gaps between the recommendations of public inquiries and their implementation is a mounting source of frustration, particularly amongst families and the public affected by events that justified an inquiry in the first place.

The question of what happens to inquiry recommendations strikes a deep personal chord, since I've been up close helping to draft or implement them twice during my civil service career: first, as secretary to the Bristol Inquiry (1998-2001) and later, as lead sponsor within the Department of Health for the project responding to the Mid-Staffs Inquiry (2013). More recently, when I was a panel member for the Renewable Heat Incentive ("cash for ash") Inquiry in Northern Ireland, we tried an innovative approach to this very issue. For everyone involved, but most especially for the families and members of the public directly affected, a public inquiry is a potentially life changing experience. Yes, people are looking for truth and accountability; but a form of lasting change is equally, if not more, important. This is just as true for a coroner's inquest and for unexplained deaths in custody and it's no surprise that the charity INQUEST, which provides expertise on state-related deaths, is now at the forefront in pressing for a national "mechanism" to bring oversight to all inquiry recommendations.

Reflecting on my experience, there is probably no single or easy answer, but a few observations can perhaps aid the debate.

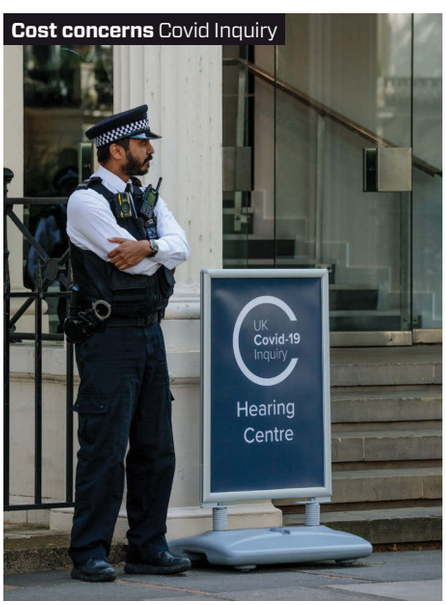
Political will: This is imperative to drive change, and is at its strongest in the first year or two after an inquiry report, yet often fades after that. Ministers move on, priorities change, new topics come to dominate the agenda. The intense effort we led in DH and the NHS to implement (successfully) many of the Mid-Staffs recommendations had, by 2015, been absorbed into business as usual.

Although we published a formal response to the inquiry shortly after its publication, to my knowledge there was no ultimate accounting for what happened to each and every recommendation. With the Bristol Inquiry, while many significant changes were made quite swiftly, it took well over a decade and the unrelenting commitment of a few individuals to bring about the consolidation of children's heart surgery units – probably one of the most important of our recommendations.

Role of the inquiry chair: Even after their role was complete, some chairs like Robert Francis, Michael Bichard and Brian Langstaff voluntarily stayed engaged in publicly pressing for the changes compelled by their findings. In the case of Bristol, the former chair Ian Kennedy wrote his own report – *Bristol, five years on* – in the absence of any government-sponsored long-term follow up. Why? Perhaps because each, in his own way, sensed that political will needs bolstering and judged the families are owed nothing less. While wholly admirable, it is surely a sign of weaknesses in the current system that former inquiry chairs have felt compelled to speak out in this way.

Parliament: There is a deep mismatch between the attention of a packed Commons chamber on the day an inquiry report is published and the occasional follow-up with a sparsely attended debate and possibly a select committee hearing. Most inquiry reports never even get that second look: in 2017, the Institute for Government estimated that of 68 inquiries between 1990 and 2017, only six were followed up by a select committee to examine the implementation of recommendations. Parliament has the power to give select committees a more explicit role in tracking and publicly reporting on progress (or lack thereof) with recommendations.

The National Audit Office: In England, this has no role in overseeing inquiry recommendations, but maybe the experience of its sister organisation in Northern Ireland, the NIAO, has a model to offer. In the RHI Inquiry report in 2020, we said the NIAO should be responsible for tracking implementation of our recommendations and reporting publicly to the Northern Ireland Assembly. In October, the NIAO published its second look at these recommendations. Auditors used their "rights of entry" to departments to great effect in discerning progress. Reportedly, one of the biggest hurdles was to get beyond departments' "marking their own homework" and to press for actual evidence that a recommendation had been implemented. The NIAO team's expertise and doggedness shines through their report.



Cost concerns Covid Inquiry

Ultimately, ministers must be responsible for the commitments they make on inquiry recommendations; yet they and their departments need to be more straightforward about what is feasible and the time needed to deliver change. Parliament can and should play a stronger role; so too can public auditors and regulators in challenging and verifying progress.

We need to remember what's at stake here, putting right what was nearly always a state or public service failure; we owe it to each other to come up with a better system. ■

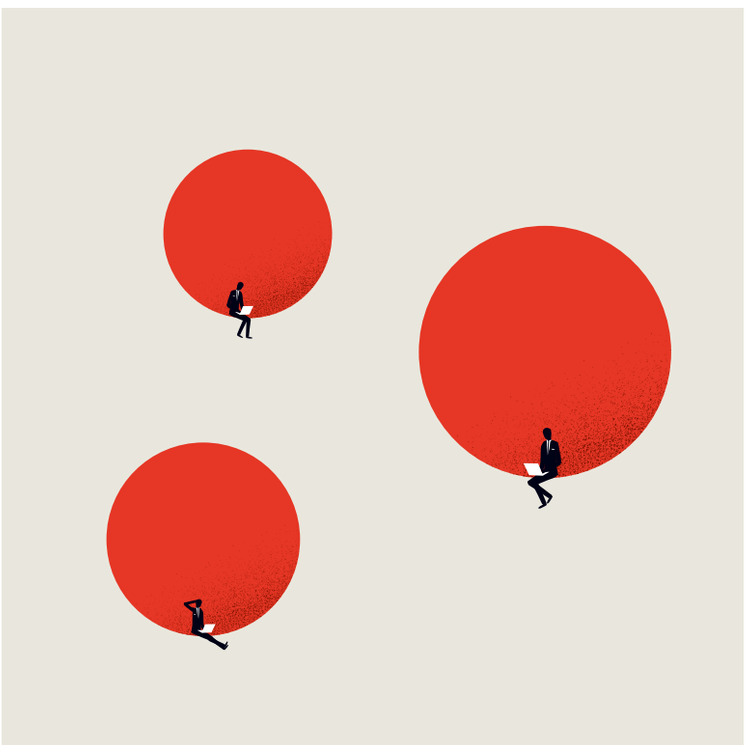
Dame Una O'Brien is a leadership coach with the Praesta partnership and a former perm sec. Read the NIAO's RHI report at bit.ly/NIAOreport

DAVE PENMAN CURRENT WFH POLICY DOESN'T WORK

THERE IS A DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE STATED OBJECTIVES OF THE 60% MANDATE AND THE REALITY

The government's announcement in October that it was maintaining the 60% office-attendance mandate was as disappointing as it was evidence free. There was no consultation with unions, which is a pity, as we were in the middle of analysing our biggest-ever survey of members – over 7,000 – on the issue of hybrid working.

The response rate itself should tell you something about the concerns civil servants have over the approach of successive governments. Labour may have shied away from the rhetoric so favoured by many in the previous Conservative administrations – from Johnson's cheese fascination to Pelotongate to Rees-Mogg's now infamous notes on the backs of chairs. But the political winds are still blowing in that direction and Labour ministers, I suspect, sense an Achilles' heel over "woke from home" headlines. So, without a compelling narrative or evidence to the contrary, it's easy just to maintain the current policy and avoid the difficult headlines.



But in reality, the reasons cited to back up the policy fall flat when examined. In our survey, 78% of respondents say they believe the 60% mandate overall has not been beneficial. Collaboration is one of the most quoted benefits and 69% of respondents indicate a belief that in-person working can bolster better relationship building and networking, with 59% agreeing that it can help create a stronger sense of community and belonging. However, only 37% of respondents feel their office work is "sometimes" purposeful, while 27% say it is "rarely" purposeful.

That's hardly surprising when three-quarters of respondents say they are spending time in the office on virtual meetings. Members also report a lack of appropriate space in offices to do Teams calls or quiet spaces to do more thoughtful work, with a lack of meeting rooms meaning some are having to do Teams meetings for people in the same building. Nearly two-thirds of respondents say ensuring sufficient space and resources in the office is the single most important issue to improve purposeful office work.

Like much of the discussion around hybrid working, there is consensus that a balance between home and office working is ideal, but our survey shows that the 60% mandate policy does not deliver its objectives.

Managers report that the policy creates unnecessary micromanagement, with many forced into monitoring attendance. Our poll includes responses from more than 2,000 managers, with 55% saying they find it challenging to manage attendance under the policy. A whopping 75% of managers disagree that the policy enhances their line management responsibility. The focus on where people work, rather than what they produce, is an inevitable outcome of such a blanket approach to hybrid working – ironic, given the criticisms around productivity. No surprise, therefore, that only 11% of respondents feel the mandate has increased productivity and 40% believe it has made it worse.

It's clear that there is a disconnect from the stated objectives of the 60% mandate and the reality. Civil servants want effective hybrid working arrangements, not a policy that's been determined by headlines in the *Daily Mail*. That means that office attendance has to have a purpose. It hardly fits the bill on productivity to commute for 90 minutes each way to sit in an open-plan office on Teams calls. That's why 44% of respondents in our survey indicate that they want some assurance that office days would be reserved for activities that require being in the office, with 60% supporting the concept of anchored team days.

These are not simple solutions. Anchor days may be unpopular with some, and it puts a greater demand on mangers to ensure that office days are meaningful and different. Not all jobs are as flexible, and many cannot be done in a hybrid way. That's an issue that needs to be addressed. Workforces have always had jobs that have different requirements on timing or location. The solution should not be the lowest common denominator. Getting flexible and hybrid working right should give the civil service a competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining talent when, let's face it, other elements of the package are unlikely to be market leading.

"Civil servants want effective arrangements, not a policy determined by the *Daily Mail*"

Our survey of more than 7,000 civil servants should be a starting point for a meaningful, evidence-based dialogue that is looking to the future, not harking back to rhetoric of the past. ■

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union

THE FINAL HARRA

From a summer job to head honcho – retiring HMRC boss **Sir Jim Harra** tells **Tevye Markson** about his 40 years as "the taxman". Photography by Tom Hampson

When Jim Harra joined the Inland Revenue in 1984, it was only supposed to be a summer job. After all, he would soon be starting a master's in patent law at Queen Mary College in London. Instead, he never left. And 40 years later he is retiring with a knighthood, as the top official at HM Revenue and Customs – the successor to the Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise.

In a large, modern meeting room in the grand corridors of 100 Parliament Street, Whitehall – which has been HMRC's HQ for the last 20 years – Harra recalls the "immense" changes in his four-decade-long career spent entirely at the tax authority.

"Back then, it was a hugely paper-based organisation based in hundreds of little local offices," he says. "Today, we have 14 regional centres and a few specialist sites, and are dealing with a much larger tax system with far fewer staff."

One of the biggest changes has been the development of digital self-service, Harra says. "When I joined the Inland Revenue, as it then was, taxpayers couldn't deal directly with the tax system; they had to deal with civil servants who intermediated between them and the tax system," he says. "Whereas today, they can just go online and do things for themselves."

Harra says the change he particularly could never have anticipated at the start of his career was that people would one day have a tax system on their mobile phones. HMRC's app had more than 100 million sessions last year and is rapidly growing. "The idea that you could do your tax return and pay your tax on your phone, I would never have dreamed in 1984 that you could do that," he says. »

Born and raised in Donaghcloney, a small village in Northern Ireland, Harra began his career in Belfast as an inspector of taxes. Three and a half decades on, still on the payroll of the UK's tax administration, he would become the man in charge, running a workforce of around 70,000 staff. A few months into the top job, he found himself suddenly navigating those staff – and the British public – through a global pandemic.

Harra says the way the department responded to the Covid-19 crisis is the proudest moment of his career. "Very quickly, we established new tax policies to support people. We also put in place the furlough scheme to support jobs and the self-employed support scheme as well, in really, really quick time, as well as keeping the tax system going and all while pivoting to working from home – sending 65,000 people to work from home – which was all done in a week or so.

"So I think I felt at that time: 'I've either put the capabilities and empowered people in place to do this or I haven't.' And I clearly had because it all worked. That was a really proud moment for me."

The most difficult moment came at the midway point in his career. Harra easily recalls the specific day: "6 April 2003, when the system didn't work".

On that day, New Labour's flagship tax credit schemes (child tax credit and working tax credit) went live – but the computer system failed. Hundreds of thousands of claimants were not paid on time, and many were overpaid. Now-defunct American IT firm EDS, which was charged with delivering the system, did not achieve a stable system until after 10 weeks of live operations.

Harra, who was director of tax credit operations at the Inland Revenue at the time, says the failure affected millions of people. "Whilst I was very proud of how we recovered from that crisis and supported the customers, nevertheless, we did not do a good job for people in the way we implemented that, and colleagues had a really tough time when they should have had a time they were really proud of," he says.

With an uninterrupted career at the department, Harra has spent four decades as "the taxman" – a bit of a bogeyman figure in the national imagination. From The Beatles' 1966 song *Taxman* – protesting tax increases under Harold Wilson's Labour government – to *Daily Mail* headlines today which warn that "the taxman" is "set to rake in £1tn", how has it felt to be the figurehead of an institution that people love to hate? And how do people react at parties when he tells them his job?

"That image of a middle-aged guy in a pinstripe suit really does not fit the modern HMRC that we are"

"People probably will always hate paying their taxes, even if they understand that it's something they need to do," Harra says. "The reaction at parties tends to be, first of all, 'oh', a step back, and then, 'I've got a problem with my tax code, can you help me?'"

While Harra understands why people use the nickname, he says it can be a hindrance. "I think the taxman has always been a recognisable shorthand for the tax administration," he says. "And I suspect it will be for a long time, thanks to The Beatles and people like them.

"But that image of a middle-aged guy in a pinstripe suit really does not fit the modern HMRC that we really are," he adds.

"So sometimes I regret that people can't see it's a really diverse place with all different kinds of professional jobs – data analytics, cybersecurity, digital services, customer support, counter-fraud work

– and I certainly want to make sure that young people thinking of careers can see HMRC as an exciting place to work where they can gain skills and also where they'll meet a really diverse workforce of people that reflects the community they serve."

This wasn't always the case. "I can remember when I started, working in an office next to a woman who was just about to retire and she'd had to make a choice between being married or having a job because you weren't allowed to have both," Harra says. "So it's come a huge, huge way over the years."

For a large chunk of his time at HMRC, Harra has been the department's LGBT+ champion, promoting an inclusive workplace for LGBT+ colleagues, inclusive service provision for LGBT+ customers, and sharing good practice across the civil service. It is something he clearly feels strongly about: "It is important for public services to be diverse and reflect the communities they serve, and also if you're diverse, you are able to make sure that the needs of different people are taken into account when you're designing your services, for example," he says. "So whether it is LGBT or disability or age – whatever – I think just championing, making sure you've got that workforce that reflects your community is very important, particularly for a public service."

But it is important to him on a personal level too. "For me, as a gay man, it was also important to be visible as a senior person in the civil service and to show other people that there are no barriers in this organisation to getting to the top," he says.

"Years ago, when I joined in Northern Ireland, homosexuality had only just been decriminalised a few years earlier so lots of people were in the closet. I think, particularly for senior people, there were no out gay people that I was aware of, and I wouldn't want that to be the case today. So I think things have come on leaps and bounds, but you've got to keep working on it all the time." »

PEOPLE SURVEY WOES

In the 2024 Civil Service People Survey results, HMRC came bottom in the headline engagement index among the major departments, with a score of 56%. And just 44% of HMRC officials told the survey that they feel proud when they tell people they work for the tax authority – the lowest among all government organisations.

Harra says he is "disappointed" and "clearly not satisfied" with the results. He says there are some results in the survey "to take comfort from", such as staff's enjoyment of their jobs; while he picks out senior management's ability to deliver change as an area that the department needs to get better at.

CSW asks if the low levels of pride could be related to the taxman's "bogeyman" reputation. Harra doesn't think this is the case. "I think people in HMRC show a very strong connection with the department's purpose," he says. "We're here to raise the money that pays for the UK's public services. I think that is something that our people feel strongly about. I think it's probably more likely to do with: we have not been giving good customer service levels for the last few years and our people want to do a good job – and they're not proud if a caller comes through after they've been hanging on for a long time. We've now got call wait times down 17 minutes and hopefully people will feel prouder about that."

As the government's third-largest department, HMRC is always going to feel the glare of public and political attention. But, for Harra, criticism in a recent report by the Public Accounts Committee of the department's approach to customer service went too far to go unchallenged.

In a fiery exchange of letters with PAC chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, published alongside the report on 22 January, Harra slammed PAC's claim that HMRC had provided a "deliberately poor" level of customer service on its telephone lines as "baseless". The chair responded by defending the committee's "right to raise concerns" and saying "the appropriate way to respond... is in detail through the Treasury minute process".

Explaining to *CSW* why he decided to make a public intervention, Harra says: "Clearly as a public body we're subject to scrutiny and I think that's a really good thing, and our customer service levels have not been where we want them to be, so we can rightly be scrutinised and criticised for that, and I wouldn't have commented on that.

"But there was a claim that we had deliberately degraded our services, which is not the case, and I couldn't let that sit on the record. Obviously, the government does get to respond formally to Public Accounts Committee reports in due course, but a press release was going out that day and I felt I had to refute what it said."

Another occasion Harra went toe-to-toe with MPs was during a Treasury Committee session in April 2024, where he made clear that helpline advisers working from home were no less productive than those working in the office. In a defiant performance, he clashed with then-committee member and former environment secretary Thérèse Coffey, accusing her of making "several gross distortions" over pay, ef-

OUT OF OFFICE

Like most people who work in central London, Harra says he has a fairly long commute. "I like to use my commute to decompress... I don't like working on the tube on the way home," he says. "I like listening to my podcasts and then by the time I get home, I've left the office behind." *The Rest is History* and *Where There's a Will There's a Wake* are among his favourites: "I like some comedy and some history." Until recently he had two dogs, and he hopes to get some more after his retirement. "It's always nice to come home to have a wagging tail at the door greeting you," he says.

ficiency and productivity, which he said needed to be corrected "one by one".

CSW asks Harra how he has navigated the tension that the home working debate brings. "People have strong views about things, but my view is I always need to give the evidence, and I always stand up for our people if I think they're being unfairly criticised," he says.

HMRC is "an office-based organisation" and has "invested a lot of money in recent years in creating really brilliant regional centres that have got great environments in them for people to collaborate in," Harra adds.

"For me, as a gay man, it was important to be visible as a senior person in the civil service"

"So I do want people to come into the office," he says. "But we know that colleagues really value the flexibility of being able to work from home. We know, particularly for the helplines and our correspondence teams, where you can measure people's productivity, that we get as good productivity from those people when they're working from home as when they're in the office. So I'm happy, given that it is a popular policy which helps us to recruit and retain people... to defend it."

One of the "gross distortions" that Harra countered in that committee session was Coffey's comment that HMRC staff have had "considerably higher pay rises than the rest of the civil service on the basis of productivity". Harra pointed out that he'd just given nearly a third of his staff a pay rise to prevent their salaries falling below the National Living Wage. This was "not a position" that he wanted to be in, he said, "just in case people were left with the false impression that we are paying people very high salaries".

How can departments get out of that cycle of needing to use a large proportion of their pay pots to keep salaries at the legal minimum?

"I think it's a challenge for us and it's not a resolved one," Harra says. "In recent years, the National Living Wage has risen faster than civil service pay rises, and that means that people, for example in AA and AO grades, are having to get annual increases to keep up with the National Living Wage." He says an inflation-busting three-year pay deal agreed in 2021, alongside a package of contract reforms, broke that cycle; but subsequent pay adjustments have meant "we're back in that position again after a short time".

This year, HMRC is holding a series of events to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Harra says this will be an opportunity to "celebrate how much we've changed in those 20 years since the old Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue came together. I suspect the majority of people in the organisation weren't here 20 years ago like I was, so they'll be learning something new," he adds.

What made him stay so long?

"HMRC has a vital purpose," he says. "And it is a huge, complex organisation that offers a wide variety of challenging jobs. So it has always given me roles that are rewarding and that develop and stimulate me. Why go anywhere else?"

Looking ahead to HMRC's future beyond his stewardship, Harra expects the department will continue to increase its focus on improving digital services and helping customers to self-serve, and to couple that with having "really skilled advisers who deal with people who need extra help". The department will also be "bearing down all the time" on the tax gap, he adds.

The government is funding 5,000 extra tax compliance officers at HMRC over the next five years, along with 1,800 additional debt-collection officers. Harra says this is a "real opportunity" for the department and that he believes "we can show a very good return on investment for the government".

As for his own future, Harra says he doesn't have any post-government plans yet but adds: "I can't imagine that I'm just going to put on my slippers and relax. I'm sure I'll do something – not full time – but hopefully I'll be able to bring the skills I've learned in the civil service to bear to help organisations, perhaps charities."

His successor, current Scottish Government perm sec JP Marks, will take over as HMRC boss in April. "I really welcome JP's appointment," Harra says. "He's already been engaging with the department ahead of him joining, so hopefully it'll be a warm handover."

With a smile, he adds: "I'll certainly be leaving him a little note telling him the good things and the bad things, but that's between me and him." ■

GIVING BACK

The new boss of Charity for Civil Servants, **Jonathan Freeman**, talks to **Susan Allott** about community, keeping going through tough times, and wanting civil servants to feel loved

Jonathan Freeman was a senior civil servant when he was offered a secondment into the voluntary sector which would change his life. In a civil service career that lasted 16 formative years, he went from the Lord Chancellor's Department – now the Ministry of Justice – where he worked on the front line for the court service, to the Cabinet Office, and then to what's now MHCLG.

He has since worked in senior positions in the third sector, most recently as a founder chief executive of the CareTech Foundation, the leading corporate foundation in the social care sector.

Freeman has been chief executive of Charity for Civil Servants since September, and hopes to use his experience and expertise to establish its place at the heart of the civil service.

What made you decide to pursue a career in the voluntary sector?
It was more the case that the voluntary sector pursued me! I was very happy and fulfilled in the civil service when I got a secondment offer from a charity called Mosaic. It's a youth mentoring charity, which was the inspiration of the Prince of Wales – who's now the King, of course. I eventually helped to merge that charity into the Prince's Trust.

The idea was to spend a year on secondment, doing something a bit different. But I got asked to stay a bit longer, and I discovered I was pretty decent at fundraising, which meant they wanted to keep me on. And then the board encouraged me to apply for the top job.

My wife said, "Are you mad? Why on earth would you give up everything? You're a civil servant." But I loved working in the charity. I felt that I could achieve a huge amount there. And I ended up running it.

Why did you want the chief executive job at Charity for Civil Servants?
I was approached for this job by a headhunter, who said, "We think you were

made for this role." They told me a bit more about it and I had to agree. It brought together everything I'd done in the past and everything I believed in.

Do you think the charity needs a change of focus under your leadership?
I want to put the charity where it deserves to be, which is at the heart of the civil service community. When I joined the civil service back in 1992, it was expected on day one that you signed your contract, you signed the Official Secrets Act and you signed up to donate to the charity with a monthly contribution.

Life is more complicated these days. But the civil service is still a community where we're bound together, with so many shared values, and we've got to look after each other. We know that civil servants will fall on tough times, and life is sometimes hard for them.

It's a particularly challenging time right now, with the cost of living crisis, because people are less able to donate. But it also means that people need us more than ever. It's the perfect storm, really. We urgently need to get our message out there, so we can support individuals right across the organisation.

To do that, we'll need to establish our relevance and increase engagement. My biggest job is to demonstrate that we really are as relevant today as we were in 1886 when civil servants set up the charity.

Is there really an enquiry to the charity every 13 minutes?
Yes, that's true. And I'm sure that in a year's time, we'll see that number has risen. We know there's more demand out there that we're not tapping into yet. Which means we need to be really fleet of foot and say, "How do we manage that demand?" And I'm not going to shy away from it. We need more support from our community so that we'll have the funds to provide the support people need.

What kind of support are people coming to you for?
As an example, we had a young fast streamer who was really struggling because he hadn't realised he had autism, and we were able to help him get a diagnosis and provide the support and the training to help deal with that.

We've also had some cases where people suddenly become carers and we've been able to help them to get the help they need to keep going. And an increasing number of people have really acute mental health issues. These are people who wouldn't have been able to carry on – in work or with life more broadly – without the support we provided.

And, of course, we can provide financial support for individuals to help them when they're struggling. This is obviously way beyond the kind of intervention that an employer is capable of providing for their employees, especially in the civil service, where people are paid with taxpayers' money.


Jonathan Freeman

"Civil servants are up and down the country doing the most extraordinary jobs. And they are not very loved"

So we want people to know that if they donate to us, we will make very good use of their money.

Are you able to forecast what people might need from you?
Yes – we look really carefully at what the data's telling us about the things people are struggling with. We can see an increase in need around financial advice, menopause, and of course there's a huge uptick in mental health problems. We've been able to see what's coming around the corner with all of that, and we aim to make sure we're ready to deal with it.

What do you wish people knew about the charity?
I don't think people realise that we have been around for 139 years. We're as old as Hovis, Coca-Cola and Arsenal Football Club!

But to make a serious point on that – we have been working away in the background for a very long time to make sure civil servants feel supported, and feel that there is a family around them if they fall on hard times. There are people doing difficult jobs who could earn more money in the private sector, and we need to hold on to them and look after them. That's why I'm so proud of what we do.

Do you think civil servants see themselves as part of a larger community?
I genuinely think there's a pride in being a civil servant. I know it's a truism, but people join the civil service because they care about making a difference. They care about society and they want to shape it.

Maybe some of those bonds are weaker than perhaps they were when I joined the civil service. People might feel a stronger bond to their own department than to the entire organisation. And people might not feel recognised in the way they should. It's not often the general public or opinion-formers thank civil servants and recognise what they do. But we are here to help people feel part of that wider family and to feel proud and valued.

What do you do to unwind?
I recently went to the National Theatre with my daughter and we saw *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It was absolutely hilarious. And, of course, the National Theatre is supported massively by government. So are the British Library and the National Portrait Gallery.

The public tends to think very stereotypically about the civil service and about public servants. We don't think about the person working in the National Archives or the bailiffs going out in Tottenham to help people recover funds for their business. Civil servants are up and down the country doing the most extraordinary jobs. And they are not very loved. But I want to be there for them when they hit times where they need some help. And that's a real privilege. ■

REACH OUT TO YOUR CHARITY

If you need help or advice from the Charity for Civil Servants, you can find more information on their website, cfcs.org.uk.

The site also has details of how you can support CfCS, including through a regular payroll donation, entering the community lottery, or helping to raise money for the charity through a range of events. Founded in 1886, the charity helps civil servants, past and present, deal with issues relating to money, stress and anxiety, relationships, mental health, dementia and more. All advice and support offered by CfCS is entirely confidential.

A JOLT TO THE HEART

Is innovation dead in the public sector? Not quite, says **Tony Mears**, but it needs urgent attention

You really don't need me to tell you that our public services face grand societal, economic and technological challenges, from an ageing population and climate change to stagnating economies across the global north. The UN projects a global shortage of 18 million healthcare workers by 2030. Meanwhile, healthy life expectancy is falling in many developed nations – we can expect to live longer than previous generations, but we are going to get sicker earlier and die more expensively than ever. Not an entirely uplifting or even morally sound sentiment, but it is against this backdrop that innovation within our public services isn't just desirable. It's vital.

What does innovation in public services look like? You'd be forgiven for leaping straight to "invention", which is an innovation synonym for most people. Yet time and again, the bigger prize is to create new value through the adoption of proven innovation. That might be about lifting and shifting from another part of your sector, or adapting some process, practice or capability from an entirely different one.

Building innovation capability
Research shows that public sector organisations often struggle with innovation due to risk aversion and entrenched cultures. In the health sector, for example, the Health Foundation's *Spread Challenge* paper highlights that even when beneficial innovations exist, scaling them across the NHS proves difficult, if not impossible.

However, there are several practical steps organisations can take to build their innovation capability.

Establish a clear innovation cycle
Organisations need structured approaches incorporating problem clarification, opportunity scouting, experimentation and evaluation.

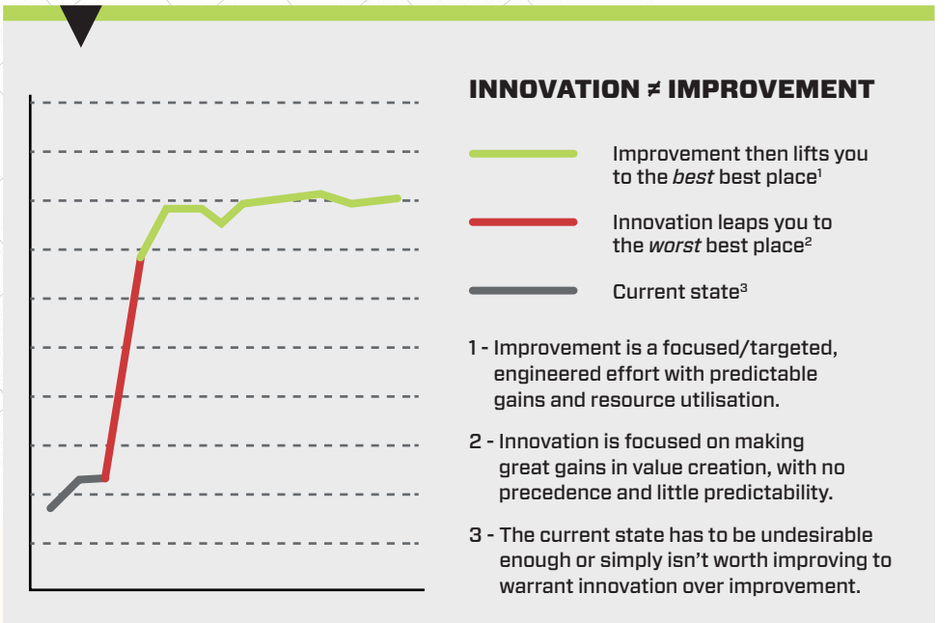
Create safe spaces for testing
Living labs, like those operated by the Catapult Network, provide controlled environments for trialling new approaches without risking core service delivery, allowing innovations to be tested in representative settings before wider deployment.

Build cross-sector partnerships
Some of the most impactful innovations emerge when sectors collide. Collaboration between the UK Space Agency and the NHS through the "future hospitals initiative" is now being expanded in recognition that seemingly unrelated sectors can offer value to one another.

Focus on evaluation
Without robust evaluation of benefits, innovations struggle to spread. It's almost impossible to gain senior buy-in without robust evidence that something has worked elsewhere. Innovation requires faith, but not blind faith.

Having a go
The reality for many of us is that building innovation capability must happen within existing structures and resources. To get this started, aim to identify colleagues who exhibit innovative behaviours. Look for those who are naturally disruptive but constructive; action-oriented "doers"; empathetic "feelers" who understand user needs; and detail-oriented professionals who can ground ideas in reality. These diverse perspectives are crucial for successful innovation teams, and can get you on the way without ripping up your organisational design to bring these skills into the fold.

Consider how your organisation deploys its strategy. Is there space for innovation to be part of the delivery mechanism? Can you secure some modest fiscal resource? Even small innovation budgets can be leveraged effectively by using them to attract external investment and forge partnerships. The key is to start somewhere, learn fast, and build momentum through early wins that demonstrate the value of innovative approaches.



The benefits of innovation
When done well, public sector innovation can deliver remarkable results. The "Wigan Deal" – as described in Hilary Cottam's book *Radical Help* – demonstrates how innovative approaches to public services can improve outcomes while reducing costs.

"It's almost impossible to gain senior buy-in without robust evidence that something has worked elsewhere. Innovation requires faith, but not blind faith"

In healthcare, the Buurtzorg model of community nursing showcases how innovative organisational structures (flatter, in this case) can both empower staff and improve patient care. Behavioural science has driven down bullying in schools through the "Roots" project in the US – now being trialled in the UK – and Alaska's permanent fund dividend has fostered civic ownership over natural resources. None of these are perfect examples; there are moral arguments applicable to them all, but the benefits are worth considering before you make up your mind.

Looking ahead
Thomas Davin, director of innovation at Unicef, says the changes needed to address today's challenges must be radical, not incremental. Public sector organisations that develop their innovation capability now will be better positioned to meet future challenges effectively.

While innovation isn't easy, the alternative of continuing with business as usual is no longer viable. We need public sector organisations to be capable of both adopting proven innovations and developing new solutions to emerging challenges. This requires building innovation capability at all levels.

There's also something to be said for channelling Simon Sinek and working out "why". OK, we're not marketing computers, as Sinek famously articulates in his Ted Talk and book *Start with Why*. But knowing the core purpose of why we are seeking to innovate our public services helps with the last and most essential characteristic of successful innovation: consistency of purpose. It is on us, and no one else, to bring about a better future for public services. Could there be anything more exciting?

I hope the message is clear. Innovation in public services isn't dead, but if it is to thrive, it needs a good jolt from the defibrillator. ■

Tony Mears is deputy director for strategy at Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust and a former civil servant.
His book,* Innovation is Dead: Dispatches from the Front*, is published on 21 April

LUNCH WITH... SIMON CASE

The former cabinet secretary and head of the civil service sits down to lunch with **Suzannah Brecknell**. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Who? Dr Simon Case joined the civil service in 2006, fresh from studying for his PhD under renowned Whitehall historian Prof Peter Hennessy. After posts in the Ministry of Defence, Northern Ireland Office and Cabinet Office – including leading the team overseeing delivery of the 2012 Olympics – he moved to No.10 as private secretary to David Cameron in 2012. In 2016, after stints back in the Cabinet Office and at GCHQ as director of strategy, he became principal private secretary to the prime minister.

In 2017, Case became director general for the UK-EU partnership at the exiting the European Union department, and later went on to become DG for Northern Ireland and Ireland. In 2018, he left the civil service to become Prince William's private secretary, returning on secondment in May 2020 to coordinate the Covid response as a permanent secretary at No.10. Within a few months, he had formally become a civil servant again when he took on the cabinet secretary role, which he held until he stepped down for health reasons at the end of 2024.

Where?

Searcy's Bar and Brasserie at Surveyors House, Westminster. Elegantly done British classics in refined surroundings, a short stroll from Whitehall and the Houses of Parliament.

We ate

Roast pumpkin and beetroot with pine nuts and sultanas; fillet of cod with shellfish sauce and Morecambe Bay shrimp; chicken supreme with brandy sauce and colcannon.

“I still to this day believe there were people better suited and better qualified to do the job. Most of them are now extremely grateful that I ended up with it”

We discussed...

Anthony Seldon’s description of the cabinet secretary as “the nation’s chief worrier”

I would say that’s pretty accurate. As cabinet secretary, people ask you: “What’s at the heart of your job?” Well, the reality is, there will be 10 things going wrong. You’ve only got the time to deal with three of them a day. A good day is when you pick the right three. A bad day is when you pick the wrong three.

His proudest moments as a civil servant

Unfortunately for *CSW* readers, the proudest moments I ever had were on projects that still remain classified. But there are some that I can pick out. One of the very first things I did as a civil servant was to work on the 2006 white paper on the renewal of our nuclear deterrent. I’d not that long before completed a PhD on nuclear matters. It was my first really big project, and I think back with enormous pride on taking home the finalised white paper that Tony Blair, as prime minister, had announced at the dispatch box. Looking at his statement, you could point to parts and say, “Well, I did that bit.” It was that realisation – that as a civil servant I could do things which were of real strategic importance to the country.

It’s not uncommon for civil servants, at some point in their career, to become jaded and disillusioned. I think that often starts to happen when people can’t see the connection between the work they’re doing day in, day out, and real-world outcomes for government or the people of the country. I hadn’t planned to spend long as a civil servant but that project was one of those things that, very early on, got me hooked.

His most enjoyable roles

There are a few times that really stand out because it felt like the whole team was in harness. One was in counter-terrorism: I led a joint US-UK programme mandated by the president and the prime minister to fix a par-

ticular set of problems and risks that had emerged. It was amazing to feel the UK apparatus and then the inter-agency might of the US pulling in the same direction. Being an international team made it really very special.

A second one was when I worked on the Olympics and ended up running, briefly, the Olympic Secretariat. It was the last eight or nine months before the Games. We spent our time managing a whole range of issues, including G4S security guards suddenly disappearing and various bits of the M4/A4 infrastructure that now, every time I drive past them, give me PTSD as I remember the maintenance work that was being done and the worry over whether it would be completed on time.

It was a team made up of private sector, public sector, local government and central government officials, in the bunker under COBR, which ran for months. We had to form the team and create our own culture and ways of working. And in the end, once the Games had started, the most difficult things that we had to deal with were utterly trivial compared to what we'd prepared for. But that was a special time. As a team we felt totally immersed in the Games, but of course we consumed relatively little of them, other than via TV screens in that bunker under 70 Whitehall.

The final time was being in Downing Street from roughly 2012 to 2016. The team was amazing, a great group of civil servants, fantastic special advisers, working with a prime minister who'd set clear direction. I remember that with real pride and sort of fondness, too. I've worked at the official-political interface many times, but that time stands out because it felt like a seamless team between political and official groups. There was a supportive culture: I know what your job is; I know what my job is; I'm going to trust and support you in doing yours; you're going to trust me and support me in doing mine.

His hardest day at work

It would probably have been during the autumn of 2020, just as the second wave of Covid was building. There were many difficult days then. We could see the data about transmission growing, the Covid cases, the hospitalisations beginning to rise. First thing each morning, we would gather with the PM and others to look through the data coming through from the NHS. At the same time, we knew an awful lot more about the damage of full lockdowns, as we were beginning to see the clear evidence of the damage done in society, the economy and in public services. So other meetings in those days would be about how on earth we would deal with unemployment, how we would get businesses back up and running, how we would deal with the rapidly growing backlogs across all of our public services. So facing the grim reality of another wave of Covid, whilst also knowing what further damage we would likely do with another full lockdown, made for some very, very hard days.

Whether the relationship between ministers and officials is broken

This is one I've thought a lot about, and obviously it was one of the key issues that constantly cropped up during my time as cabinet secretary. The first thing I would say is, I think there is a lack of understanding of the history that sits behind some of this. If you talk to serious people who were around in the time of Thatcher, for example, there were moments when it did not feel like those at the very top of politics had much time for the top of officialdom.

And, again, I think people are probably choosing to forget what Gordon Brown did to the Treasury on his arrival in 1997 [sidelining top official Terry Burns, who retired the next year]. Of course, the difference between what's happened more recently and then is that in 1997, changes were made over a few months, but the thing I think you have to reflect on is: is this fundamentally new, or is it the execution that's new?

Of course, the execution is extremely relevant to this debate, but I would still push back on the idea that friction between ministers and officials is new. Read Jock Colville's diaries about Winston Churchill and you'll see it.

And while it's true that the narrative coming from politicians about civil servants feels like it has grown consistently more hostile, I would also observe that the civil service itself, through various actions – many of them unauthorised – has become more vocally critical of ministers. I think that's something else that's not often focused on. There are a whole bunch of reasons for that, including the way the media works today and societal changes around deference and those sorts of things.

So while it's not new, it has become much sharper, which therefore makes dealing with it much more public and much more accusatory than it used to be. Fixing this is something that requires determination from both the political and administrative classes – otherwise it won't get fixed.

Whether the role of cabinet secretary should be split

My view is yes. I've argued it many times, including as part of the interview process for having the job, but I didn't win the argument. It is – particularly in the context of crisis, which seems to have been our permanent state for the best part of a decade – too difficult to be the chief implementer and the chief adviser, and then also to be the person who is spending their whole day worrying about the health and direction of an organisation of half a million people. The two things require quite different skill sets.

Now, of course, those two things must be absolutely and intimately linked, which is always the argument as to why you can't split them: that nobody will listen to the head of the civil service if they're not cheek by jowl with the prime minister. But, of course, there's no reason why the head of the civil service themselves can't be a very senior adviser to the prime minister. That's not difficult to arrange.

There are some of my predecessors who will admit in private that they were mostly head of the civil service and not cabinet secretary, because they didn't have close relationships with prime ministers. They weren't in the room for the big moments of advice or decision. They focused on the head of the civil service job and other people in and around No.10 were the senior advisers.

People talk about it as if – "My God, that would be unconstitutional, historically wrong." But for very large chunks of the existence of this job it was, in fact, split.

Misunderstandings about the cabinet secretary role

The first is the belief that you're head of a partial – as in, the opposite of impartial – organisation. At the moment, that commentary mainly comes from the right, but probably for the majority of our history, it was coming from the left: the idea that the civil service is incapable of impartially implementing the will of the government of the day.

I can see where this comes from. For example – no matter how right and well-meaning you think they are – if you have a civil service trade union launch a judicial review of a decision taken by the democratically elected government on a matter of significant public concern, it's not then surprising that the government starts to think: "These people are obviously blockers and are unwilling."

People always used to say to me, "Isn't the job of the cabinet secretary fundamentally to uphold the civil service code?" Now, the civil service code doesn't say that; neither »

“It is – particularly in the context of crisis – too difficult to be the chief implementer and the chief adviser, and then also to be the person who is spending their whole day worrying about the health and direction of an organisation of half a million people”

does the cabinet manual, but I would ask them what the civil service code was, and they would list the values. They rarely explained to me the civil service code itself, which says that civil servants are there to support the government of the day to develop and implement policy. Often our job is to point out the reasons why something won't work, but a good civil servant will always propose a different way of doing it. And in doing that, you need a good relationship with the prime minister and other ministers to give good advice, both welcome and unwelcome.

The other, more common, assumption is that the civil service are arbiters of matters of legitimate political debate. For example, during an election campaign, there is now a common habit of either the government wanting to push the cabinet secretary or permanent secretary forward to make the government's case in some disputed area, or the opposition writing to the cabinet secretary or permanent secretary and saying, "Won't you agree with me that this is totally outrageous?" Sometimes it may be a point of fact, and you can deal with that. But a lot of the time, it's actually a matter of genuine parliamentary debate. Somehow you're seen as the keeper of the right answer, which of course you're absolutely not.

Whether he regrets taking the cabinet secretary job which, at the time, he said he didn't want

I still to this day believe there were people better suited and better qualified to do the job.

Most of them, and they know who they are, are now extremely grateful that I ended up with it. It was never particularly my ambition to be cabinet secretary, and I still play over the conversations that I had with current and former colleagues at the time when they said, "You really need to put in for this because you're the right person to do this now." I was saying no to start with: "No, what about X? What about Y?" Then after several days of it I said, "All right then." And I still think, "Gosh, how my personal history would have been different if I'd just held out a little bit longer..."

His advice to 2020 Simon Case

There are lots and lots of things that you're aware of after the fact... I have found, in the weeks since I stood down as cabinet secretary, that I have been able to formulate far more answers to the problems of government than I ever seemed to be able to when I was in the job. That is two things. It's time and space to think but secondly, what I've enjoyed is having time to speak to a number of people both within and outside of government, in the private sector and internationally.

The conversations that I've had have been so enlightening and so interesting, but of course it's hard to make time to do those things, especially when you're in the middle of a crisis, because you are just trying to put one foot down in front of the other to make sure you don't fall over.

But even during Covid, it was helpful to make that time. This seems a strange thing to say, but I will be forever grateful that those terrible circumstances nevertheless put me into a world in which I spent so much time talking to Chris [Whitty, chief medical officer] and Patrick [Vallance, the-then chief scientific adviser]. They're both enormously impressive individuals who I would put in charge of anything, anywhere. I have such deep regard for them. So there were times when we would find a moment to think and say, "Hang on, have we missed something here?" We didn't do it enough, but it was great when we did, and I think it's so important.

How he dealt with public criticism

You have to work out what matters and what doesn't. I came from working for the royal family, where one of the many mottos is "never complain, never explain". And the reality of being cabinet secretary is you have a very limited platform for explaining. Occasionally you get your voice – I chose to give a lecture once a year, and there are select committee hearings. But it's difficult because so much criticism is driven by a media narrative. What you know on the inside is: "That's not true, it has come from an inaccurate account." But unfortunately, you just have to accept it. It is frustrating, though, and that was one reason I established the [internal] Civil Service Weekly newsletter – so we could talk to each other about the good things going on.

Whether he could have done more to publicly defend the civil service

I would always ask, "How does that help? How is that going to achieve the outcome that we're looking for?" And that outcome is: getting more regard and support for the civil service from the political classes. How does responding in public deliver that aim? When we're complaining about them taking it public, why would we fight fire with fire?

Our job is to talk to them

in private. One very frustrating instance was the infamous Jacob Rees-Mogg notes [when the then-Cabinet Office minister left notes on empty desks saying, "Sorry I missed you" as part of his campaign against hybrid working]. Of course, that was brought to my attention very quickly. So what you do is, you speak to the prime minister immediately, and the minister. You say, "This is not acceptable, stop it." It never happened again.

That was how you deal with it. How, exactly, does it help to go public and act like a trade union leader? Trade union leaders operate differently and there's a couple of them who do it incredibly well and very thoughtfully. And there are one or two people, like former cabinet secretaries, who can take to the airwaves to give an insight. That, in my view, is a better way of doing it.

We debated it a lot around the permanent secretary table. Three or four times come to mind when we gathered people together and said, "How do you think we should address this?" There were always one or two voices for "attack is the best form of defence", but in the end the majority view was, "If we start behaving differently in quite a fundamental way, effectively making ourselves a separate entity to the government of the day, are we not, in fact, starting to break our own values?"

There were times when I did get very fed up and decided to swing – I think notably once at a select committee. And, actually, the sky didn't fall in. But it was more out of frustration than a considered plan.

Criticisms around his lack of experience running a big department

I have only ever heard that criticism put forward by a very narrow subset of people, and never from anybody who'd been cabinet secretary or worked closely with one.

The overwhelming majority of cabinet secretaries have never run big departments. No prime minister I've ever heard of, including in their memoirs, ever said, "I wish my cabinet secretary had run a big department." I have more commonly heard a criticism, from other permanent secretaries and politicians, of cabinet secretaries who'd never worked in No.10 and therefore had no idea how the centre worked, so they didn't know what their job was.

Changes to the regular "Wednesday Morning Colleagues" meetings of the permanent secretaries, and claims he had a bad relationship with perm secs

I never heard that complaint from inside government. Most of those permanent secretaries I had known for a very long time – we'd been friends and colleagues, including through difficult times. I came into Wednesday Morning Colleagues – in fact, it was my very first one ever – and said, "This is what I do know how to do, this is what I don't know how to do. This is how I would like us to operate." So that's how we operated.

We did 360-degree feedback, which came from permanent secretaries and was gathered anonymously by non-executives. More often than not, the feedback was, "It's fantastic, Wednesday Morning Colleagues is now being used to talk about real issues, rather than it being another version of the Civil Service Board." We were talking about the big challenges to the civil service, rather than a contest between permanent secretaries to demonstrate who could be cleverer.

What I did, at the request of the heads of department, was to create a new regular meeting for just those colleagues, while continuing to have a full group with everyone at permanent secretary rank. The heads of department said, "First of all, there are now so many permanent secretaries it's hard to fit them all in a room, and secondly, we need a space where we can have frank conversations as the leaders of departments." I believe that model is continuing.

Of course, some of the feedback you're describing from the outside would come back to me, and what it proved was that we'd judged this correctly, because if some people were going outside and moaning about it, they were exactly the sort of people you couldn't trust to be in the room. We did actually have a leak from Wednesday Morning Colleagues and we needed to deliver a strong message that it was unacceptable. Chris [Wormald] and Tom [Scholar] delivered that message – they said "we'll lead the charge". We never had a leak from HODs.

His new role as independent chair of the Barrow Delivery Board

Barrow-in-Furness is a special place for a number of reasons. It's the home of production for our nuclear submarines – we built the first-ever British submarine there over 100 years ago. So it's almost a national strategic asset, and personally I've also known it for many years through holidays in the Lake District.

Just over two years ago, as part of more general work on defence and nuclear, I took a team of officials up to look at what more we could do to increase the productivity of the submarine factory and make sure the next fleet of submarines came out on time. That rolled into what we called "levelling up" work, because when we looked at productivity in the factory, inevitably, we started to look at the lives of the people who worked in the factory.

The regional team did a deep dive for us, and through that we discovered what I think were some of the most shocking, and quite frankly shameful, statistics in the United Kingdom. At BAE Systems, you had workers in some of our most highly skilled, highly paid engineering jobs in the country. Yet on all of the deprivation metrics – worklessness, health issues, educational standards, drugs – Barrow was the worst, or nearly the worst, in the country. It made no sense. The major part of the economy in Barrow was, in effect, guaranteed, but it wasn't making a difference to the town.

So I, and all the officials involved, became determined to correct this national wrong and put Barrow back where it belongs. To take all of Barrow's pride and energy and change its fortunes for the future. We founded Team Barrow and got ministers – first under the Conservatives and then under Labour – to sign up for a 10-year, £200m transformation fund. This mattered enormously to me, so it was really nice – as I was going out of the door as cabinet secretary – to be asked by that group of ministers: "You've been at the heart of this, will you carry on doing it in your afterlife?" I was very, very happy to say yes.

Shifting to one key focus after the cabinet secretary's wide-ranging role

I absolutely love it, I have to say. At the heart of it, the methodology is very similar to working in No.10 or being cabinet secretary, which is: you can only achieve what you want to achieve through teamwork. But being able to focus, in a slightly obsessive way, on a single challenge with a 10-year time horizon... I couldn't welcome it more. ■

"While it's true that the narrative coming from politicians feels like it has grown more hostile, I would also observe that the civil service itself has become more vocally critical of ministers"

Smart Local Energy Systems: A blueprint for the UK's energy future

The drive to achieve net zero by 2050 is prompting a shift in the UK's energy landscape, moving away from fossil fuels towards decarbonised energy generation, widespread electrification and energy efficiency. David Aird, Amey's Net Zero and Energy Solutions Director, explains the challenge

David Aird
Net Zero and Energy Solutions Director
Amey

Smart Local Energy Systems (SLES) are emerging as a pioneering approach to address the UK's energy challenge, designed to attract large-scale private sector investment to deliver vital social, economic and environmental benefits. Unlike traditional centralised energy systems, these networks leverage local renewable energy sources, storage and digital technologies to optimise decarbonised energy use and place local community needs at the centre of investment decisions.

The synergistic objectives of clean energy growth and local devolution are at the heart of the government's Great British Energy and Local Power Plan strategies. When combined with the private sector's expertise, innovative approaches and available financial resources, this clean energy ambition can become a reality.

As the cost of renewable energy and storage continue to fall, SLES increasingly offer a viable route towards lower domestic energy bills, enhanced resilience and support for the UK's net zero ambitions – provided policy, regulatory, and community engagement hurdles can be overcome.

Embracing a systems approach

SLES embody a "place-based" Whole System strategy, integrating renewable energy generation, smart grids and advanced storage technologies tailored to local demand – an approach supported by the UK Government's Local Power Plan, which aims to support community-led and locally-owned renewable energy projects.

This bottom-up approach contrasts with traditional energy models that rely on large-scale, centralised fossil fuel generation and distribution systems.

The prize for implementing SLES is significant: reduced energy costs, increased social equity, and community resilience. Utilising real-time data enables accurate demand prediction, avoiding overproduction or shortfalls of supply. A study by the University of Leeds and PwC highlights that place-specific investments in energy systems could generate social benefits of £825bn through local job creation for example, significantly outstripping the returns from the existing centralised strategies.

Smaller-scale "campus SLES" initiatives also demonstrate the adaptability of this approach. By involving public and private stakeholders – such as universities, hospitals, and local businesses – these systems can drive urban-scale energy solutions that deliver targeted economic and environmental benefits.

Policy barriers to overcome

Despite the promise of SLES, existing government policies and regulations often lag behind technological and societal innovations. Historically, UK policies have favoured centralised energy models, leading to today's systemic inefficiencies, including decade-long timescales for grid connections and out-of-control system balancing costs (£2.8bn in 2023).

However, recent policy shifts signal a turning point. The desire for action to tackle climate change has seen policy being reframed to demonstrate that emissions reduction can also deliver lower energy costs and greater energy security from international wholesale markets.

Now, the private sector stands ready to help cut through some of the complexity to fund, coordinate and deliver SLES solutions and give communities the long-awaited and much demanded lower cost, more reliable source of low carbon power.

The UK Government's Local Power Plan intends to put local authorities and communities at the heart of restructuring our energy economy. This plan commits £1bn annually to support community-led renewable energy projects including £600m for local authorities and £400m for community energy organisations. Other key initiatives include:

- Lifting the onshore wind ban through planning policy reforms.
- Establishing a publicly-owned energy company, Great British Energy, to drive renewable developments.
- A National Wealth Fund Task Force with initial £7.3bn funding.
- Addressing grid interconnection issues by prioritising local demand and reducing strain on national transmission systems.

These measures, coupled with a focus on decentralised energy generation, lay the foundation for the rapid scaling of SLES. However, the sector still requires continued regulatory reforms to unlock their full potential.

Rethinking transmission and distribution

For almost two decades whilst great progress has been made with onshore and offshore wind resources, more needs to be done to ensure solutions also cater to regions of greatest demand.

By coordinating the plans for local deployment of distributed energy assets, the need for long-distance transmission, improving overall energy efficiency and reducing waste, will lead to lower costs and more reliable energy supply. SLES can reduce the total number of assets in a local area that need to be connected to the grid as the distributed energy facilities are designed to satisfy local energy demand and build local system resilience.

Digital energy systems provide the tools to deliver locally focused demand management solutions which further reduce the total energy capacity required to be connected to the grid. The result is less strain on the national grid and a reduced urgency in the need for grid expansions.

Local Authority challenges

Local authorities are pivotal to the success of SLES, acting as facilitators and coordinators of place-specific energy transitions. Early adopters such as Bristol and Coventry have showcased the potential of city-scale SLES, but these projects faced significant hurdles, including funding constraints.

The Project LEO (Local Energy Oxfordshire) in Oxford has established a strong evidence base for SLES to support the transition to a clean, secure and affordable energy system with a key focus on community engagement, participation and inclusion.

The recent shift in government strategy has revitalised local authority engagement. With the Local Power Plan providing dedicated funding streams and a clearer policy framework, councils are better positioned to pursue ambitious local energy projects.

One of the key goals for this strategy is to decentralise energy production, allowing local communities to generate, own and benefit from their own energy sources and contribute to the UK's net-zero transition. By streamlining planning processes and addressing critical barriers to local energy projects, such as long wait times for grid connections, SLES offer an accelerated route to achieving this ambition.

It is clear that for SLES to thrive, local authorities must foster partnerships with private sector investors, align with national energy strategies and actively engage their communities to ensure equitable outcomes.

Community engagement

The government's Local Power Plan is intended to democratise energy production and ensure the transition to renewable energy benefits all regions and communities across the UK. The success of SLES hinges on public trust and participation to support and invest in local clean economic growth.

Without active community involvement, even the most well-designed systems risk resistance or underutilisation. Effective engagement can build this trust by highlighting the benefits of SLES:

1. **Access to affordable energy for low-income communities:** Demonstrating how localised energy systems can lower household energy bills.
2. **Energy democracy:** Empowering communities to take control of their energy resources fosters a sense of ownership and accountability.
3. **Energy independence:** Local energy generation reduces reliance on international wholesale energy markets, insulating communities from geopolitical risks and price shocks.

Governments authorities must prioritise transparency, provide accessible opportunities for involvement and learning and engage stakeholders in decision-making. Initiatives like energy cooperatives and community renewables projects can offer low-income households a stake in energy and economic benefits, addressing energy poverty and fostering inclusivity.

The way forward

To realise the full potential of SLES, the UK must adopt a systems-led, coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach which puts the private sector at the heart of change. Key steps include:

1. **Accelerating regulatory reforms:** Further removing barriers to decentralised energy systems, such as outdated grid access rules and planning restrictions.
2. **Scaling investments:** Expanding financial support for local authorities and community organisations to kickstart SLES projects.
3. **Promoting innovation:** Encouraging the development of advanced digital technologies that optimise energy generation, storage and demand management.
4. **Building capacity:** Supporting local authorities and communities with the skills, knowledge and practical engagement and participation approaches to implement and manage SLES.
5. **Enhancing collaboration**: Strengthening partnerships between public, private, and community stakeholders to drive integrated energy solutions.

The UK's journey towards a clean, decarbonised, resilient energy future is at a crucial stage. SLES represent a transformative opportunity to decentralise energy generation, reduce emissions, and deliver socio-economic benefits.

By embracing this systems approach, engaging a highly motivated private sector and addressing the barriers ahead, the UK can lead the way in sustainable energy innovation

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MIKE CLANCY WHY APING MUSK WOULD BE BANANAS

KEIR STARMER SHOULD IGNORE CALLS FOR THE CREATION OF A UK VERSION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY – IT'S LIKELY TO END BADLY FOR THE UNITED STATES

Since his latest inauguration and the subsequent installation of Elon Musk as efficiency tsar, the world has been looking on with fascination as Donald Trump systematically dismantles public services in the United States. For anyone with an interest in good governance and workers' rights, it has been horrifying to watch.

From the aggressive hostility towards DEI, to the arbitrary manner in which job losses have been identified, the headline approach being taken represents the very worst of employment practice. It is also one that will have a long-lasting and catastrophic impact on the country's administrative knowledge and infrastructure. No agency seems to have escaped the attentions of Musk's Department of Government Efficiency – or Doge – with an estimated 75,000 workers already laid off and job losses in every agency you care to name.

Of particular concern is that these roles seem to have been identified entirely by spreadsheet with no consideration of function, expertise or experience. This is entirely the wrong way to do things, but it is also redolent of the strategy playing out in parts of the tech sector where "human resources" are just disposable entries in Excel.

You may think that the UK's regulatory regime is such that this kind of thing couldn't happen here. To a certain extent you would be right, in that our employment laws do not allow for such summary dismissals with no consultation. But the US approach is lauded by many on this side of the Atlantic, exemplified by the attitude of the previous Conservative government to the civil service. Passive-aggressive emails from Musk, asking people to name five things they have done this week, are not a world away from passive-aggressive messages from Jacob Rees-Mogg asking why civil servants are not in the office. More pertinently, the previous government, while asking more of the civil service than ever before, was obsessed with arbitrary numbers as to what size it ought to be. The narrow ideological belief that the state is always "too big" is not confined to one corner of the globe.

Inspired by events in the US, right-wing campaigners and politicians have been quick to call for a similar process here. Numerous "UK Doge" projects have appeared, mainly on X, calling for civil servants to be sacked and for government to do less. Reform MPs have called for the process to be replicated here, directly attacking civil servants for hybrid working while having no clue what these hard-working professionals actually do.

Calls to emulate Musk are not confined to right wing politicians, though. Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar has also called for a government efficiency drive, directly comparing it to Doge. There is always space for things to be done differently, and for government to work better, and Prospect has repeatedly said we are more than willing to work with government on civil service reform. But I would urge politicians of all stripes to think carefully before making such comparisons with Musk's indiscriminate attacks on government. Not only is the approach against all the principles that govern employment practice in this country, but it is unlikely to end well for America. People who want to ape Doge now are unlikely to like the consequences once they start to be revealed.

This brings me to a more general point about the size and efficiency of the civil service and its agencies. The ongoing Spending Review is likely to result in reduced budgets, and cuts to services and jobs. The chancellor must get the balance right. Many vital services are already at breaking point and facing a recruitment and retention crisis. There is no slack left in the system. You only have to go back five years to the start of the pandemic to see what happens when you stress a system that has had all leeway cut away. It is very difficult to recover from – once you lose institutional knowledge, you do not get it back.

"The narrow ideological belief that the state is always 'too big' is not confined to one corner of the globe"

Prospect members have direct private sector comparators, which increasingly make a move out of the public sector an attractive option. These are specialists with a lot to offer, who have spent their careers in the service of their country but who often feel their only option for progression is to leave.

The government is faced with a very difficult situation financially but in seeking cuts it cannot simply look at numbers; it must also look at the services it has to provide and the skills it needs to provide them.

I would urge government to appreciate the depth of expertise that exists within government, particularly in regulatory functions, and the danger of undermining it. When Covid appeared, we saw the specialist scientific knowledge in the civil service was suddenly absolutely critical to all our lives. Public servants in specialisms as diverse as nuclear decommissioning or civil aviation regulation keep thousands of us safe every day. The fiscal situation is clearly extremely challenging, but this expertise is something that will be hard to replace if lost. Government must ignore the Doge fans and tread carefully here, or we may all rue the consequences in the coming years. ■

Musk brandishing a chainsaw at February's Conservative Political Action Conference

Mike Clancy is general secretary of the Prospect union

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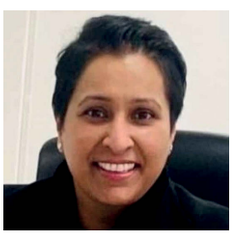

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STREETWISE

As safer streets director general in the Home Office, **Richard Clarke** is the senior responsible officer for the ambitious street safety agenda. He tells *CSW* what it felt like to take on the role, how the mission is working, and what he does to switch off

How did you get the job?
I was approached by Matthew Rycroft, the Home Office permanent secretary and an old boss of mine at the international development department, to see if I would be prepared to be senior responsible officer for the safer streets mission. I'd worked in the Home Office for 13 years earlier in my career, including on police reform, and so was delighted to accept. In January, my role expanded to take on the full range of responsibilities for the Public Safety Group at the Home Office.

This is a new way of working and a really ambitious mission. What was the split between "exciting" and "daunting" when you first took on the role?
Great question. Like all my SRO colleagues, I'm sure, it was a real mix. Exciting to be working on something so important to people up and down the country and so fundamental to the new government's plans, but also daunting to be working on such ambitious targets. With our objective to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, for example, we're attempting something that we think has never been achieved anywhere else in the world.

How has your background and previous roles informed the way you're approaching this job?
From my time working on policing policy and on secondment, I've been able to draw on my network of contacts – Lynne Owens, the deputy commissioner at the Met Police, started at Scotland Yard on the same day as me, for example. And I've also drawn a lot on my two years running a major IT project – Digital Services at the Border – to ensure we are taking a properly programmatic approach to delivery and are on track. And major programmes also teach you a lot about personal resilience, how to switch off at the end of the day, which I've found invaluable in this role.

"As we get more established, it's about ensuring we have a really robust delivery plan, and are holding on to that spirit of early radicalism"

What do you see as the key elements of a mission-based approach? And how do you see those elements helping to tackle this longstanding challenge in a new way?
For me, there are three things that really characterise a mission-based approach: working across government departments in a horizontal way (tackling knife crime will be about prevention in schools and working with tech companies as much as it's about the police); trying things locally in partnership with agencies and the third sector and scaling up fast (which we're really championing through our work to increase resources in neighbourhood policing teams); and treating this as a long term objective, sticking with it when things feel tough.

What were your first priorities when you started the job? And what are your key focuses now as the mission is getting more established?
Like most people early in a new role, I was very focused on building a team fast – I'm grateful to colleagues from across government, and especially the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, who answered the call – and getting to know my delivery partners. Now we're more established, it's about ensuring we have a really robust delivery plan, against which we can assess progress, and are holding on to that spirit of early radicalism so that we don't get sidetracked by bureaucracy.

Who are the key organisations in your mission plan? And who's on the mission board?
We're working in very close partnership with the Ministry of Justice and the law officers, as you'd expect, along with the Department for Education on prevention, the health and social care department on

early intervention (especially on VAWG) and the communities department. But these issues are so broad that we've had great inputs from the Department for Transport, the Department for Work and Pensions – and beyond. The mission board is mainly government departments, but recent meetings have included the police, the domestic abuse commissioner Nicole Jacobs and the director of public prosecutions.

Can you give us an overview of how you're monitoring progress? What's the governance in terms of stocktakes, reporting, etc?
I chair regular stocktakes with lead officials and we have a home secretary-chaired board every month. Every eight weeks, the prime minister holds each mission to account for whether we're making progress. It's great to have that intense interest and support.

How are you working with devolved and local governments?
The home secretary recently chaired a meeting with representatives of all the devolved governments and my team has been working with colleagues at official level. Most of the mission is restricted to England and Wales but that doesn't stop us working closely on shared objectives, especially on domestic abuse, for example, with Scottish and Northern Irish colleagues. And I'm off to Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh in the coming weeks to further the dialogue.

And how are you working with the centre on this? What's your interaction with the Mission Delivery Unit?
The Mission Delivery Unit has been a really important innovation, working with us from day one. They can challenge, corral and encourage, drawing on experience from what other missions are finding tough. And they're focused on the issues – such as mental health – that cut across multiple missions. One of the things I really value is the focus they bring to both short-term delivery and longer-term problem solving. It feels like a true partnership.

Do you meet with/get support from other mission leads?
I do – it's great to be able to compare notes, learn from each other's experiences and pool our thinking. One of my new directors recently spent a day with the opportunity mission team, for example, to get a sense of how they work.

As a former Treasury man, how important do you think getting funding mechanisms and incentives right will be for the success of missions?
I think it's absolutely central. It's been striking in the last few months that it can be in the minutiae of how local grant arrangements work as much as in big, central government announcements that we can make progress. It's really welcome that the Treasury are approaching the forthcoming Spending Review through a mission lens.

How are you supporting your team – and yourself – to manage the impacts of working on what can be a really distressing area?
I'm fortunate to have experienced team members who, in many cases, have worked on sometimes distressing areas of policy for a while. There is a satisfaction that comes from knowing you're making a real difference to people's lives, and can share experience with newer team members. We talk, compare notes, make sure people know where to go to get help, take breaks when needed and look out for each other.

And on that note, how do you unwind? Do you ever watch police dramas or do you blanch at how unrealistic they are?
I find getting outside really helps, so as the weather improves, I'll be out walking in the countryside near my house. I love a good police drama, although I have been known to shout at the TV when a bit of process is wildly out of sync with reality! ■

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Richard Clarke began his career at HM Treasury and has also spent time in the Cabinet Office, where he was part of the team who founded the Office for Civil Society.

The majority of his career so far has been spent at the Home Office, in roles such as international director, programme director for the Digital Services at the Border Programme, the director responsible for the UK's counter-terrorism strategy and head of the Home Office Police Reform Unit.

He also spent two years on secondment to the Metropolitan Police Service as its director of strategy and improvement.

In 2018 he joined the Department for International Development as director general for policy, research and humanitarian, before taking another secondment on national security community, focusing on organisational delivery. He returned to the Home Office in 2024.

A RADICAL RETHINK

Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls is both ambitious and necessary, **Becky Rogerson** and **Fiona Sheil** tell *CSW*. But it will need a new focus on the needs of victims – and much more emphasis on perpetrators

We are, as we always have been, in the midst of an epidemic of violence against women and girls. This cuts across all communities, affecting everyone. The two-million-or-so victims each year are friends, colleagues, neighbours, family – and us. An estimated 2.3 million perpetrators carry out this abuse. They're us too.

The safer streets mission to halve violence against women and girls within 10 years is a bold ambition. Like others working in this space, we applaud it. It's the boldest step yet taken by a UK government. What this will mean for women and girls is transformational. For a nation seeking growth, unlocking safety and capacity for women and girls is game changing.

But what does it take to halve a harm woven into our cultures, families and psychologies? Nothing less than radical action. We know the current system – as much as the fragmented offer can be called that – isn't capable. Many indicators tell us it's broken. In the three months in which this *CSW* edition is current, for example, an estimated 30 women will be killed by men close to them. In the same time period, an estimated 200,000 women will be raped or sexually assaulted.

Radical action requires a radical rethink. The question we pose in this article is: what is to be done about the perpetrators? Specifically, we're thinking about those fathers, sons, partners, ex-partners and others who domestically abuse, using coercion, violence and other oppressions.

With notable exceptions, including the charities Respect and White Ribbon, there has been little leadership around addressing domestic abuse perpetrators. In the UK, we have 50 years of world-leading practice and research on supporting victims within the independent women's sector. Yet for reasons which must be better understood, men have never matched this with equal efforts to address perpetration.

This gap in action is evident. We aren't, for example, good at identifying or preventing perpetration. We don't have ways for men to self-identify and seek help. We use assessment tools that are demonstrably poor at predicting escalating dangerousness. We offer homogenous services because we haven't yet disaggregated the spectrum of perpetration. We are still using exceptionalising narratives of a few "bad apples" (see: Wayne Couzens) rather than acknowledging that perpetration is widespread and engrained.

These gaps mean we've ended up with the criminal justice system as our de facto response to perpetration. This isn't working.

Criminal justice is a blunt instrument with a short reach. Its single-incident focus doesn't deal well with the escalating patterns typical of domestic abuse. It has a high threshold, which many perpetrators can't provably meet. Those that do, typically do so at a later stage when significant harm has been committed and entrenched behaviours are harder to address. Rightly, domestic abuse is taken seriously within policing. However, this means policing doesn't use interventions such as conditional discharge for seemingly "lower-level" incidents. This inhibits the police's ability to act earlier before harm escalates.

Over-reliance on criminal justice responses means we haven't empowered

other agents to act. This leaves a gulf where early action should be. Yet if we designed the system by asking what women and girls want, we'd be focused on earlier action. This would include alternatives for those victims who want the abuse to stop but don't want to criminalise the perpetrator. Many victims have complicated and beloved relationships with those who are harming them. Many others do not trust the criminal justice system. As professionals working on this agenda, our job is to support victims to be safe in whatever choices they make, including the way they want to see justice and accountability.

The starting point is most obviously to prevent perpetration from occurring. We have good data on the link between early-years experiences and later perpetration. This shows we need to reduce exposure to abuse in childhood. Increasingly, this means countering the harm done in the immersive worlds of online misogyny and sexual bullying. It means disrupting ideas of masculinity that dampen empathy and foster entitlement. All young people should have the chance of knowing what a healthy relationship looks like, and how it feels to have the power to create that. We want all our young boys to have the chance to grow into safe and loving men.

Where abuse has already begun, we need to destigmatise help-seeking. We need to give agency to men and those around them to act early. Radical changes in attitudes around seeking help for mental health and for drug and alcohol use have made accessing support easier. We can learn from this without reducing the stigma of the abuse itself. Research shows that early action can unpick the entitlement, beliefs, behaviours and denial of others' rights that underpin abuse. By acting earlier, we disrupt the shame and guilt that otherwise cycles into defensiveness and denial, and the self-justification of abuse.

What's needed are proactive opportunities to intervene early. Research by Sunderland's Findaway project tells us that two-thirds of people tell family and friends about domestic abuse before they tell a professional. Instinctively, this makes sense. Family and friends know things that agencies can't. They are trusted in ways agencies aren't. Wouldn't it be a step forward for government policy to recognise friends and family at the core of efforts to prevent and act early on perpetration? What would this require?

The potential here is for a community safeguarding approach. One in which government asks communities how it can return power to them. This is an important question. Because the truth about who is preventing and managing perpetration is: it's the victims themselves. That's where the weight of the work sits: on victims, in communities. "Bystander" and community champion approaches have modelled this community-level work. If we're going to take the radical step of halving violence against women and girls, we need to build on the skills, resources and resilience at the heart of this. That's in women and girls. We need to honour that.

Let's illustrate this with two examples.

In Rotherham, Apna Haq, the town's service by and for Black and minoritised victims, just celebrated its 30-year anniversary. It hasn't received state funding in the 10 years since the Jay Report, despite the report highlighting the importance of engaging directly with women's groups on gendered abuses. Across its lifetime, Apna Haq has blown the whistle within services and in the community and has been the one constant safe place for survivors to gather and share. When we think about where culture change, accountability and recovery begin, it's in spaces like Apna Haq, right in the heart of communities.

In 2013, Teesside had the highest rates of domestic abuse in England. Funded by a £30,000 public health grant, My Sister's Place – a specialist domestic abuse provider in Middlesbrough – took on the 40 most entrenched and dangerous abuse cases that had cycled in and out of services for years. So dangerous were the perpetrators in this cohort, they had over 500 convictions between them, and one committed a double homicide during the pilot. Despite this, by working in tandem with perpetrators and victims, My Sister's Place created enough space and safety around the victims to enable outcomes worth £1.5m to police and children's social care over five years. This was achieved within a one-year period, presenting a return on investment of 1:50. And yet, this pilot has never been recommissioned.

This is where the system is at: it can't even recognise excellence in its midst, let alone unpick its flaws.

This is why the change that is enacted must be radical. Government needs to do more than legislate and preside over under-funding. The issues need to be reconceptualised. "Test, learn, grow" approaches needed to be carried over from the Cabinet Office's Public Service Reform and Evaluation Unit. And we need a massive upscaling of resources – including a new understanding of the efficacy of current resources, and new money.

There is much to be hopeful for. The ambition is the right one. But is the safer streets mission prepared to be radical? That's the final question. ■

"If we designed the system by asking what women and girls want, we'd be focused on earlier action"

Becky Rogerson MBE has over 20 years' experience as a chief executive in the third sector designing and delivering services for victims and perpetrators, and 10 years as a magistrate in the criminal courts. Fiona Sheil is a researcher, strategist and former commissioner. They are both part of a cross-sector alliance of practitioners setting up the UK's first think tank dedicated to ending violence against women and girls. For more information, contact fiona@heard-consulting.co.uk

MISSION

The government has declared war on knife crime and aims to halve it in a decade as part of its Safer Streets Mission. **Jonathan Owen** looks at whether the new approach could succeed where others have failed

Tackling the spectre of knife crime that has haunted successive prime ministers and their officials is at the heart of Keir Starmer's pledge to make the UK's streets safer. The mission sets out to reduce serious harm and increase public confidence in policing and in the criminal justice system.

It is the latest in a series of attempts over the years to get a grip on a crime that has continued to rise and blight the lives of victims and their communities. Despite various efforts by previous administrations to crack down on knife crime, cases are now almost at record levels.

There were 55,008 knife crime offences in England and Wales in the year to September 2024, a rise of 4%, according to the Office for National Statistics. This was only just below the record level of 55,170 in the year ending March 2020. And it is more than double the 23,945 offences recorded in 2013-14.

The grim picture painted by statistics is amplified by individual cases such as the brutal killing of Kelyan Bokassa earlier this year. The 14-year-old was stabbed 27 times on a London bus on the way home from school in January. Just weeks later, 15-year-old Harvey Willgoose was stabbed to death at school in Sheffield in what Starmer described as a "horrific and senseless" incident.

The prime minister, who has described the issue as a "national crisis", hosted a knife crime summit at Downing Street last year and launched a coalition to take action.

Hollywood star Idris Elba, a longtime anti-knife crime campaigner, is a prominent member of the coalition who has been using his profile to help keep the issue in the media. Elba recently fronted a knife crime documentary on BBC1, in which he described his aim to "get everyone talking about the challenges ahead so that we can all push those in power to take action and find real solutions". The documentary showed Elba at the summit last September. "Talking is good but action is more impor-

IMPOSSIBLE?

tant. We need joined-up thinking," he said.

Taking a mission-led approach to focus the machinery of government on tackling knife crime sounds good in theory, but how plausible is it in practice?

Jon Yates, executive director at the Youth Endowment Fund and a former chief policy adviser at the Department for Education, thinks it is the right way to proceed. Previous attempts to tackle the problem have failed due to not having "an underpinning institutional architecture" and having been temporary, he says. And, he adds, "they failed to recognise that most of the levers to actually reduce knife crime don't sit with the department which is responsible for crime". Youth-offending teams come under the Ministry of Justice, provision for children excluded from school sits in the DfE, while the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is the lead department for youth services.

YEF is the UK's What Works Centre for preventing and reducing youth violence and was founded with a £200m endowment from the Home Office in 2019. It funds trials to provide evidence for the effectiveness of different approaches and Yates stresses the importance of "evidence-led practice" in tackling knife crime. He tells *CSW* that "the mission approach is absolutely the right one to take but that's not the same as saying it's going to work". Yates says: "It will require a clear focus with clear stocktakes led by the prime minister. It will also require that the present Spending Review has a very effective way for the safer streets goal to really pressurise and play into non-Home Office departments. And if you can't do those two things, I don't think you can get the thing to work."

Men on a mission Idris Elba and Keir Starmer meet families of knife crime victims during the general election campaign trail

"Talking is good but action is more important. We need joined-up thinking" ***Idris Elba***

Professor Martin Innes, director of Cardiff University's Crime and Security Research Institute, agrees that the mission-led approach is a sensible one to take for such a complex issue. However, he notes that taking it from a "policy construct" to "something meaningful that delivers results" is easier said than done: "One of the challenges they've got is that many of the frontline street-level workers you would be able to enlist in the activities that »

you need to combat something like knife crime aren't there anymore because local public services have been stripped out."

There needs to be a focus on partnership working and investment into programmes proven to work in tackling knife crime, argues Lib Peck, director of the Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit. The long-term approach is one of the things that makes the latest government attempt to tackle knife crime different to what has gone before, in her view. "I think the notion of a 10-year strategy and the notion of a wider partnership are two hugely important components to managing to do something about this issue," she says.

The Safer Streets Mission Board, attended by ministers from various departments, is chaired by the home secretary, with the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster acting as deputy chair. And a small team of officials working on safer streets is part of a Mission Delivery Unit in the Cabinet Office which is led by second permanent secretary Clara Swinson.

FDA general secretary Dave Penman points out that one difficulty will be ensuring that the mission is prioritised in departments that will have their own separate priorities. "That means someone's got to say, 'This is now your priority, you're now going to spend this money on this rather than the other things that are your ministerial responsibility,'" he says.

As ever, a major stumbling block will be having the resources to execute the best-laid plans. The forthcoming Spending Review will indicate just how much the government is prepared to invest to make mission-driven government a reality.

It will be "an important litmus test", Peck says, while Innes remarks: "If you are going to take something like knife crime on, then you do need to resource it." He adds: "One of the problems that has always bedevilled policing is that ability to sustain focus on something like knife crime, when there are all sorts of other things happening that also demand a response and you need to do something about."

"Previous efforts failed to recognise that most of the levers to actually reduce knife crime don't sit with the department which is responsible for crime" ***Jon Yates, Youth Endowment Fund***

Tiff Lynch, acting national chair of the Police Federation, says that without "sustained and increased long-term funding", there is the risk of an initiative tackling one problem "taking the lion's share of police resources, at the expense of other, equally important policing matters in communities: effectively robbing Peter to pay Paul".

September summit Starmer, Elba and home secretary Yvette Cooper with Yemi Hughes, whose son Andre was fatally stabbed in 2016, at a knife crime summit in 10 Downing Street last year

Funding concerns are echoed by Heather Kidd, chair of the Local Government Association's Safer and Stronger Communities Board. "Ongoing financial pressures have had an impact on councils' ability to provide the necessary services to help address the problem," she says.

Questions also remain over the details of just how knife crime will be reduced. The Safer Streets Mission has only one measurable milestone set for the duration of this parliament, which is to have 13,000 additional police officers, community support officers and special constables in neighbourhood policing roles by 2029.

The ambition of halving knife crime within a decade has been repeatedly stated, but the Home Office did not respond when asked by *CSW* which baseline data will be used to measure this, and from which date.

Ben Bradford, professor of global city policing at University College London, remarks: "I suspect I'm not alone in thinking that's a rather silly target. It's really not clear how police, criminal justice or, indeed, wider government action could produce this outcome."

But Commander Stephen Clayman, knife crime lead at the National Police Chiefs' Council, sees it differently. "The target of halving knife crime is ambitious, but we absolutely need to be ambitious in our fight to keep communities safe," he says. Baroness Longfield, executive chair of the Centre for Young Lives, agrees and says it "will focus minds across Whitehall to prioritise safety on our streets, particularly for our young people".

Police and crime commissioners are fully behind the target, according to Simon Foster and Matthew Barber, joint leads on serious violence at the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. However, they add that "evidence shows poverty and school exclusions are prevalent factors in areas that experience high levels of knife crime, so we cannot expect policing to solve the problem alone".

Foster and Barber argue that "it is vital that the government works across departments to achieve societal change" and claim that a "multi-agency public health approach is the most effective way to drive down violence".

Patrick Green, chief executive of anti-knife crime charity The Ben Kinsella Trust, says that such a target will only be achieved through a "joined-up strategy where different parts of the government and stakeholders with frontline experience of the problem work together, sharing expertise and resources". He adds: "Politicians from all parties need to collaborate and support effec-

Shock and grief Yvette Cooper visits Southport after a knife rampage that left three young girls dead

tive solutions, so they endure longer than a term of office. This ensures consistency and long-term commitment, which are essential for tackling such a complex problem."

There are major challenges for those officials tasked with putting the missions into action. In the government's Plan for Change, published in December, Starmer claimed that the mission-led approach "will demand, from Whitehall and Westminster, a profound cultural shift away from a declinist mentality, which has become so comfortable with failure".

"Politicians from all parties need to collaborate and support effective solutions, so they endure longer than a term of office"
Patrick Green, The Ben Kinsella Trust

Mission-led government will require a "fundamentally different way of working", according to the Institute for Government's latest *Whitehall Monitor* report. The annual assessment of the state of the civil service argues that the missions need "a clear and radical governance structure" if they are to "function in a truly cross-government manner". The report warns that "while mission boards have been established, they have not yet gripped their tasks and have been created alongside existing government structures rather than replacing and directing them."

When it comes to budgets, it will be "essential" that they are "aligned to priority missions, and that mission boards have the authority to direct cross-departmental activity". The report says the forthcoming Spending Review "will be a make-or-break moment for mission-led government".

Putting financial concerns to one side, progress is already under way in several areas. It has been illegal to own or sell zombie-style knives and machetes since September, and the government is in the process of outlawing ninja swords. It has also confirmed that there will be stricter age-verification checks and a ban on doorstep deliveries of knives ordered online, and that senior executives of social media companies could be fined a five-figure sum if they fail to swiftly remove knife crime-related content from their platforms. The measures will be included in the crime and policing bill, which is expected to be introduced to parliament in the coming months.

Meanwhile, the government is under mounting pressure to phase out pointed kitchen knives, in the wake of research by Graham Farrell, professor of crime science, and Toby Davies, associate professor in criminal justice data analytics, at the University of Leeds. In a paper published in the journal *Crime Science* in December, they wrote: "While public debate has centred on zombie and other 'status' knives, the most prevalent homicide weapon is a kitchen knife."

The paper claims that replacing pointed-tip kitchen knives with safer round-tip knives would "cut knife-related homicide in half, reduce other knife crime and criminality, and prevent thousands of non-criminal knife-related injuries".

Elba recently backed the suggestion and in early February, home secretary Yvette Cooper stated: "We are looking at the point that Idris Elba has made... we will look at any issue that might make children safer."

In addition to the efforts already underway, such as the ban on ninja swords, work is needed on education, early intervention, and identifying at-risk individuals. These factors "are critical to breaking the cycle of criminal behaviour and ensuring that no potential offender is overlooked", according to Pooja Kanda, whose son Ronan was fatally stabbed in 2022.

"Creating a better future involves substantial work, dedication and determination from the government and public. I would like to believe that the government is on the right path, but I would like to see actions taken more swiftly," she says.

In a statement, a Home Office spokesperson said the "ambitious aims" of the Safer Streets Mission "will require a dedicated coalition of government, public services, the private sector, charities, and the public themselves, to be successful in achieving them". ■

Empowered with AI

In response to evolving global threats, the Ministry of Defence is re-evaluating its readiness, both on the battlefield and behind the scenes. While AI has the potential to transform everything from logistics to decision-making, challenges around trust, governance, and cultural change remain. At a recent IBM-led forum, defence leaders explored what it will take to move AI from theory to action

Few civil service in-trays are as busy right now as those at the Ministry of Defence. Since the end of the Second World War, peace in Europe has dominated industrial, military and government thought patterns – now the UK and its Western and NATO partners face multiple geopolitical challenges. These challenges have prompted an internal re-assessment of military readiness, from administration to ammunition, from procurement to front line. Amid this realignment, one thing is clear: artificial intelligence (AI) will play a fundamental role in how the MoD functions. IBM cites General Sir Roly Walker KCB DSO, chief of the general staff, who has said that the British Army must exploit advanced technologies, such as AI and autonomous systems, as it prepares for the 'unfair fight' against bad state and other actors.

The game-changing nature of AI in an ever evolving, unpredictable world was the focus of a senior defence leaders' forum hosted by IBM, in partnership with *Civil Service World,* attended by top-tier civil servants. IBM has a longstanding relationship with the MoD, running Guardian – the command-and-control system that helps the RAF defend UK and NATO airspace, and last year, IBM signed a £30m contract with the MoD for various civilian and commercial IT systems. According to Pat McFadden MP, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the UK government is planning the biggest reform of the department in over 50 years.

Last November, the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry, Maria Eagle, announced that the MoD is developing a 'productivity portfolio' to explore the potential of emerging technologies, including AI-driven tools and generative AI to automate and accelerate routine tasks, from operations and policy work through to defence-specific activities driven by data to enhance the speed of decision-making, optimise logistics and increase the availability of military capabilities.

Despite its potential, AI adoption in the MoD is not without challenges. To Paul Macpherson, Senior Partner and VP of the UK Defence team at IBM Consulting, there is an understandable concern regarding whether decision makers can really trust the technology to make critical decisions, and this could be a significant blocker to MoD having a more widespread and consistent application of AI.

Innovating at pace

A recent IBM report, *AI Decision Advantage for Defence,* found that while defence leaders recognised that AI would improve their operational capability and readiness, it also concluded that "AI skill shortages, data governance issues, and ethical challenges continue to be speed bumps.".

The MoD is a huge department, employing more than 248,000 people in the armed forces and civilians combined. IBM believes that for AI to be a catalyst for rapid change, a departmental mindset shift is key. "We need to industrialise AI across the MoD from end to end," says Col Chambers, IBM UK Defence Managing Director for Technology. "If you want to develop a modern radar system to detect hypersonic missiles, you can't wait 10 years for proof of concept. You need it ASAP and you need AI to get you there."

The UK's Ajax armoured vehicle programme took 14 years to reach field trials, whereas in

extremis, Ukraine developed and deployed the Inguar-3 multi-role vehicle within two years. "The MoD was seeking perfection because it had the luxury of time," Chambers says. "Now, it needs to innovate at pace and with nerve. We have always innovated quickly in wartime; radar was a great example of that in WW2 and we need to have that same mindset now – and we have the tools to do that."

The first crucial steps

For now, the immediate AI's potential is in transforming back-office functions, from information management to inventory management, HR, legal and finance. "The government wants departmental leaders to be accountable for efficiency savings," says Macpherson. "In our experience with AI in large organisations, savings can reach 35%-40%."

A key issue for the MoD is its reliance on legacy systems that operate in silos, and Chambers says IBM, in collaboration with MoD, can help identify and address key challenges. "This structure limits integration and interoperability," he explains. "AI requires access to aggregated data from across these silos, enabling a comprehensive synergy and richer strategic view. To prevent additional complexity and duplication, data must remain within its existing structures. This approach effectively provides a multi-dimensional perspective on the data, enhancing efficiency and operational effectiveness."

IBM brings expertise from sectors beyond defence, such as banking and oil and gas, where AI has transformed operations. "There are a lot of shiny AI tools, but strong governance and data management are fundamental," says Macpherson. "You need confidence that AI is telling you the right decision to make. If you put rubbish in the system, you get rubbish out."

AI hallucinations – where models generate misleading results – are a known risk. However, over the years IBM has implemented robust governance frameworks to mitigate such issues. "AI is mature now," says Macpherson. "We know what the bear traps are, and that if governance is in place, then you can trust the data." He notes that small language models, tailored for specific defence applications, can be more effective than large-scale general models. "The real advantage of AI does not lie in the technology itself, but in how it is deployed and made accessible to users to maximise its benefits," Chambers adds.

Another challenge to AI adoption in the MoD is its hierarchical structure, which makes it difficult to implement department-wide strategies. "People often call for change at the end of their careers when they have nothing to lose," says Chambers. "We need to empower internal innovators, those who understand the value of change and can drive transformation."

The future of AI in defence

AI also presents workforce implications. Some civil servants fear automation could lead to redundancies, but Chambers argues that AI will instead alleviate workforce shortages. "The MoD struggles with recruitment and retention," he says. "People sign up for specialised trades but end up doing mundane tasks, leading to attrition. AI can free them from these tasks, allowing them to upskill and find more fulfilling roles."

Concerns about ethical AI use in defence also persist. However, Chambers dismisses the notion that civil servants face insurmountable ethical dilemmas. "Mistakes will inevitably occur – some data may slip through the net – but under the current system, human decision-making introduces even more errors, often with inherent biases. That is simply human nature."

Chambers emphasises that AI governance and ethics tools are already available to ensure a transparent, organisation-wide view of data, models, and decision-making processes. "Civil servants operate within a highly regulated framework; they understand the rules and must apply them while adopting AI in a structured, incremental manner. The best approach is to start with back-office functions, identify productivity gains in low-risk areas, and then scale up to more complex use cases once confidence is established."

Today, the UK government remains in an exploratory phase with AI. "There is a lot of experimentation, but AI needs to be fully industrialised across the MoD to deliver the 'unfair advantage' General Walker seeks," says Chambers. "The UK is far from where it wants to be, but with the right approach, progress can be significantly accelerated."

Col Chambers
IBM UK Defence Managing Director for technology

Paul Macpherson
Senior Partner and VP of the UK Defence team at IBM Consulting

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SOFTWARE UPDATE

After signalling its intention to revamp government's core digital operations, the new administration has now set out detailed plans for doing so – while keeping Whitehall's most recognisable tech brand in play. **Sam Trendall** examines what is new in 'the new GDS'

The new Labour administration had just begun its first week in power when it announced plans for a major shake-up of Whitehall's digital scene.

The overhaul involved the Government Digital Service and sister agency the Central Digital and Data Office – along with the Incubator for Artificial Intelligence (i.AI) – moving from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. The intention was to create a new "digital centre" of government, where delivery and strategy units would be co-located with those making policy for the wider tech economy.

After six months of review and reflection, in January, ministers unveiled their long-term vision for the reimagined civil service tech hub. But, while it has a new home and new décor – and despite some preceding speculation about a likely rebrand – there is a familiar name on the shopfront: that of the Government Digital Service.

Not only will the GDS name remain in play, but the organisation has been expanded to reincorporate CDDO – which was spun off into its own entity in 2021. Also newly housed in GDS is i.AI and the Geospatial Commission.

While the starting point and the first steps of the path ahead have been made clear, some key questions about the future of digital government remain to be answered in the months and years ahead.

When GDS was in the Cabinet Office, the department's remit to administer a range of standards and controls across government empowered the digital team with the ability to mandate transformative measures – and take remedial or enforcement action, where necessary.

At the launch of the new digital structure, *PublicTechnology* asked technology secretary Peter Kyle whether, in its new location, the tech unit could still push through reforms across the Whitehall landscape.

"The answer is yes, but we're doing it a different way," Kyle said. "So, in essence, what we've done is we've moved delivery functions into DSIT – which is now delivering the digital transformation from the digital centre of government. [Alongside that] we have created a new governance arrangement for digital services, called the interministerial group, and what I call the triangle: we have Pat McFadden, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, speaking on behalf of the centre of government; we've got Darren Jones, chief secretary to the Treasury – so we have the voice of the Treasury; and then myself [on behalf of DSIT]. There are three senior cabinet ministers who are responsible for the governing and performance management of what we're doing. So, everything you see here has gone through the interministerial group."

"It is actually a really exciting group to be on," he continued, "because there is such enthusiasm for the direction of travel. But it also has grip; you've got the centre of government, you've got the Treasury, and you've got DSIT."

Kyle also claimed that the relocated and expanded technology hub will have a greater ability to take the lead in shaping government's work with suppliers.

"The other really big thing that is possible because of the digital centre is that, because of the capacity and skills we have within it, we are now finding the experience of negotiating and discussing and engaging with big tech firms is far more fruitful and respectful – simply because we have a degree of skills in there, where we're

Picture by Alecsandra Dragoi / DSIT

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talking much more peer-to-peer. I think we're going to deliver far more from the tech companies, simply because of that."

What's new?

A major DSIT policy paper – dubbed *A blueprint for modern digital government* and issued alongside the announcement of government's future digital plans – set out in detail what "the new Government Digital Service" will look like, and how it will operate.

The organisation's previous interim chief executive, Christine Bellamy, has been moved into a newly established role as government chief product officer, while GDS's longer-term leader will be a soon-to-be-recruited government chief digital officer.

That post is currently filled on a temporary basis by Joanna Davinson, a former Home Office and CDDO leader who came out of retirement to replace Mike Potter when he left the CDDO position in September to focus on his health.

Included in the organisation led by the newly hired digital leader will be a Service Transformation Team, which has been established with a remit to bridge departmental and wider public sector boundaries to help deliver more joined-up citizen services. This team's work will closely align with the five missions of the Labour government.

The policy paper suggests that GDS's engagement with agencies across government will be supported by a more formal "account management structure to enable more strategic partnership with government departments and other partners".

In the coming months, the government-wide digital strategy that concludes in 2025 will be succeeded by a new "overarching vision and strategy for government digital" developed by GDS, "including publishing a new *Government Digital and AI Roadmap* in summer 2025", the policy paper says.

One of the central strands of the previous strategy was a scheme to bring two-thirds of government's top 75 services for citizens up to a defined "great" standard; this will be shut down "in favour of a focus on catalysing deeper service transformation", according to the blueprint.

Other near-term priorities will include a brief to "assess the overall package for digital and data professionals, including remuneration".

GDS will also regain the responsibility – that it held from 2011 to 2021 – for "applying central spend assurance and digital spend controls".

The digital unit will be expected to help "effectively prioritise spend in Spending Review Phase 2 to drive greater efficiency and interoperability" across government. During this process and beyond, this will involve "ensuring close collaboration with the Treasury and the Cabinet Office and with other cross-government priorities, including the national missions and public sector reform", the blueprint says.

In the years to come, the organisation will be tasked with "negotiating whole-of-public-sector commercial agreements" for technology, digital and data services.

The digital hub will retain its role of developing, maintaining and continuously improving common digital platforms and services for government.

This will include the rollout of two major new products that will each launch this year: a central GOV.UK App; and a government digital wallet – with a virtual driving licence one of the first documents to be made available.

The blueprint says: "We'll be responsible for taking a strategic view of national opportunities and risks, developing more strategic relationships with technology companies of all sizes, and proactively monitoring and addressing threats to resilience at a national level." It continues: "There are some things we will stop doing, especially things that are delivered better outside the centre, or where central ownership slows down teams. That will mean radical consolidation of guidance and standards for digital and technology, retiring out-of-date and duplicative things, updating critical ones, streamlining the information teams need and making it easier for them to understand what to do." ■

"Because of the skills we have within the digital centre, we are now finding the experience of engaging with big tech firms is far more fruitful and respectful"
DSIT secretary of state Peter Kyle

Tech figureheads Anne-Marie Imafidon and Martha Lane Fox spoke at the launch

Snapshot DSIT perm sec Sarah Munby and minister Feryal Clark

Appy talk Technology secretary Peter Kyle leads a demonstration of new digital services

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MARTHA LANE FOX TIME FOR A REBOOT

A COMPREHENSIVE UPGRADE OF HOW GOVERNMENT DOES DIGITAL CREATES AN OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE CITIZENS BACK THEIR TIME, AT THE TIMES OF THEIR GREATEST NEED

We all know that losing a loved one is one of the worst things to go through. And piled on top of the grief, the loss, the shock – is the "sadmin". A horrible heap of paperwork that none of us wants to have to do, coming at the worst time possible.

So in 2025, when we can book taxis, do our banking, even apply for a mortgage all from the comfort of our own homes, it's almost unforgiveable that the state requires people in the throes of bereavement to turn up to an office in person to register a death. There are so many better things they could be doing with that time, and losing someone close to you brings into full contrast just how important our time is.

"This is a colossal opportunity to get the public out of thankless queues, and liberate police officers and doctors from drudgerous paperwork"

While they're not all as deeply emotionally affecting, there are scores of similar examples of this across the public sector. Where the machine of the state simply hasn't caught up with today's timesaving technologies, and where we are wasting the public's time – and often their cash too – demanding that they apply for something in person, send off letters by snail mail, or just sit on hold on the phone for hours. The list goes on – and that's before we get onto geriatric IT systems, and even records being held on paper, which slows things down further still.

It's clear we can't go on like this. But the good news is that we don't have to – and that solving this problem doesn't require anyone to reinvent the wheel. It's more than 25 years since I started selling holidays on the web, and 15 since the government launched GOV.UK. Many of us will use an app to buy something, or book travel, every day or every week. The tech is already out there to make good this problem, and AI will only offer more opportunities to do so.

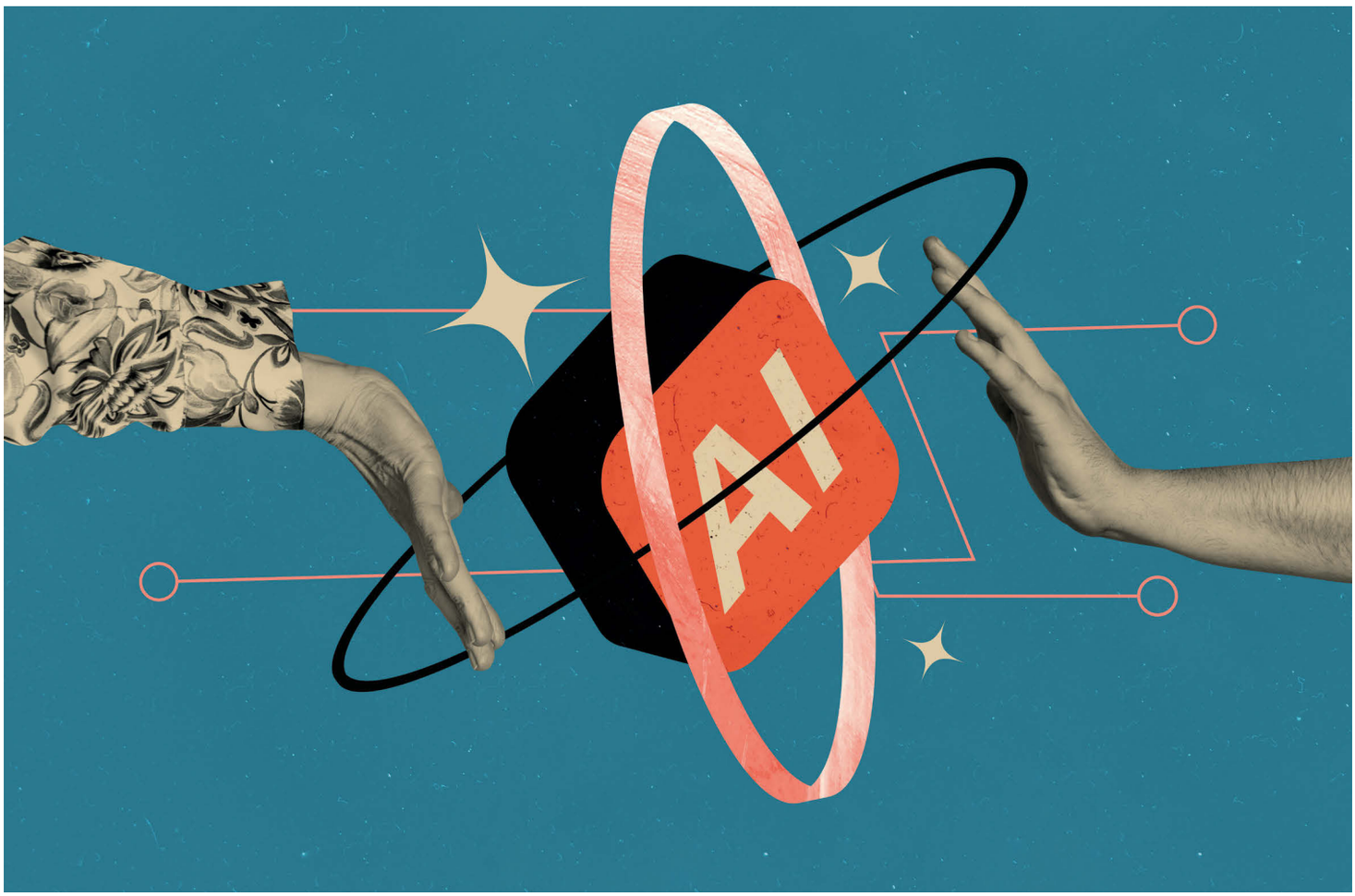
The plans announced by the government in January *(see p.44)* set out the practical steps that will put technology at the centre of how the public sector works and how we all interact with it. It is a comprehensive reboot of how the UK government 'does' tech: from using tools like chatbots more smartly and more often, to overhauling how the tech that underpins our public services is funded and delivered. This is a colossal opportunity to streamline things for the end user – which means we get the public out of thankless queues, we liberate police officers and doctors from drudgerous paperwork, and we replace creaking and expensive infrastructure with tools that are useful, secure and cost effective. It's also a chance to back innovative British businesses to grow and create jobs, by putting their products to work for the public good.

This is not a case of tinkering around the edges. The government has been spending £14.5bn a year on consultants to perform basic tech tasks that our own tools are too weak, or too elderly, to manage. That has to stop.

And the prize that's at hand? A potential £45bn in productivity savings, if we roll out the latest tech to its maximum potential. There is also a growth dividend we can reap from using government procurement in a smart way to back the British firms who are developing this sort of technology. All of this speaks to technology's pivotal role in this government's overall plan for a decade of national renewal, and delivering meaningful change.

The last thing anyone needs when they're in a crisis is to lose precious hours to admin and busywork. We can use tech to put public services just a few clicks or a smartphone swipe away, giving people back one of the most important things they possess: their own time, and the freedom to do what they need to with it. ■

Baroness Martha Lane Fox is a tech entrepreneur, crossbench peer and co-chair of the panel recently created to advise government on its new digital centre. Previously she played a key role in establishing GDS, and served as the government-appointed UK digital champion from 2010 to 2013



ACTION HERO

The government's AI Opportunities Action Plan sets out 50 measures to use technology to transform public services and supercharge the economy. **Sam Trendall** gathers feedback on whether the grand strategy is artifice or intelligence

"The defining opportunity of our generation."

This is how prime minister Keir Starmer characterises artificial intelligence in the UK's major new plan to progress its use of the technology throughout the country.

As the plan makes clear though, this is not just a single opportunity. To begin with, there are at least 50 courses of action for the UK to pursue – as per the recommendations made by tech entrepreneur Matt Clifford, who was commissioned by government shortly after last year's election to compile the AI Opportunities Action Plan. In its response – published in January alongside the plan – government approved all 50 recommendations, covering skills, computing infrastructure, business, the public sector, and legislation.

As Starmer puts it: "In the coming years, there is barely an aspect of our society that will remain untouched by this force of change. But this government will not sit back passively and wait for change to come."

Speaking to *CSW* sister publication *PublicTechnology*, experts have largely welcomed this statement of intent from the very top of government, but some questioned whether it amounted to much more than that.

Dr Richard Whittle, fellow at the University of Salford's Business School, says of the Action Plan: "I do not really see that we can call it a plan.

"AI has strong potential for public ser-

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vices, for example, but it goes from A to C, without telling us about B. It is a statement of intent – which can be useful – but, as a plan itself, it does not tell us how it is going to get there, and it feels a little rushed."

Whittle adds that the elements which might constitute the missing "B" include more specific use cases, and greater insight into the type of AI models to be pursued – whether those developed directly by government based on open-source code, or proprietary systems built by vendors.

Antony Walker, deputy chief executive of techUK, says that the AI plan "demonstrates the government's clear recognition of AI as central to their plan for change, with several well-thought-out initiatives that could significantly boost the UK's AI capabilities".

"However, the critical factor now is implementation pace and clarity," he adds. "While the plan's direction is promising, industry will be looking for more detailed information about how these initiatives will be actioned within the next six months. This is particularly crucial given the growing international competition in AI development. The upcoming Spending Review will be a pivotal moment for turning these ambitions into reality; however, it is essential that the government provides sustained, long-term funding commitments beyond this single review to ensure stability and continued progress."

Dr Martin Wählisch, associate professor of transformative technologies, innovation and global affairs at the University of Birmingham's School of Government, also highlights the importance of continued focus – and sufficient financial support.

"Is the [UK's] infrastructure going to be enough, and is the investment going to come quickly enough?" he says. "There needs to be more investment to make this real, otherwise it is just going to be a placeholder. The first challenge is not just to make this a priority, but to keep it a priority."

Public vs private

Martin Ferguson, policy and research director at Socitm – the membership body for public sector digital, data and IT professionals – tells *PublicTechnology* that "while there are certainly some good points" in the AI plan, there are numerous "missed opportunities", particularly in its proposals for the public sector.

"[Collaboration] is talked about only in terms of cooperation with industry – they don't talk about a collaborative approach with public services, for example, or local government. And that's a shortcoming," he says. "It kind of assumes the private sector will be the source of all innovation."

Salford's Dr Whittle (*pictured, left*) adds that the plan suggests government is expecting rather too much from AI as a panacea to address challenges with public services.

> **"AI has strong potential for public services, but the plan goes from A to C, without telling us about B"**
> ***Dr Richard Whittle, University of Salford***

"There is a very wide perception, one that is being emphasised by the UK government, that after a multi-decade underinvestment in skills and infrastructure, [issues] are going to be solved easily and cheaply by AI," he says. "Deploying AI to help the public sector is seen as a deus ex machina.

"Public sector efficiency and productivity is not going to be solved by using large language models (LLMs) to [process] emails," Whittle adds.

Others are more optimistic about the strategy's potential impact on the public sector.

Walker from techUK says: "The plan shows significant promise for transforming public services. The appointment of »

KEY STATS

500MW

Electricity to be made available for datacentres in designated AI Growth Zones, including one centred on the Oxfordshire HQ of the UK Atomic Energy Authority

10 years

Length of 'compute roadmap' and investment commitment government has pledged to publish this summer

1,900%

Planned growth of UK's sovereign computing capacity by the end of this decade

dedicated AI leads for each government mission is a particularly welcome step, ensuring that AI and technology considerations are embedded in decision-making across public service reform efforts."

Shortly after the publication of the plan, Peter Mason, leader of Ealing Council (*pictured on p.51*), visited 10 Downing Street alongside one of the authority's social workers to showcase an AI-powered note-taking tool being used in the London borough.

Mason says that this visit and the AI plan both speak to a wider trend of Whitehall and councils working closer together – following "the past five years [in which] there has been a bit of a disconnect between local and central government.

"This is quite an exciting time, as the relationship has changed between local government and national government and we have a much more design-centric and solution-centric set of people [in government]," he says.

The council leader says that, while use cases like those demonstrated in Ealing can be a powerful exemplar, it is also useful to have a grand strategic overview as is provided by the Action Plan.

"Like all things, we need to have a big vision as well as the examples of how it can work," he says. "People need to understand in abstract, as well as in practice."

But, according to another expert from Salford's Business School – Dr Gordon Fletcher, associate dean of research and innovation – the plan would benefit from many more practical examples, particularly of operational use cases.

"The challenge really is about having a... level of public awareness of what [AI] is capable of doing," he says. "Often the examples that are used, even within the media, are about [things like] automating email – that are almost trivial examples. It does not help the public awareness of what the real power of the technology is – which is the real thorough automation of processes. There are so many tasks that are highly repetitive, and that consume not just minutes, but hours of a day, or hours of a person's working year."

To illustrate this kind of potential, government needs to do more to perpetuate "very tight, specific examples that can fit into a couple of sentences", Fletcher says.

Sovereign state?

According to several experts quoted in this piece, one of the biggest questions facing government in its delivery of the AI Opportunities Action Plan is the extent to which it pursues development of its own technology

OVERVIEW OF PROPOSALS IN THE PLAN

A RANGE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Government accepted all proposals in the Action Plan, including an ambition to establish AI Growth Zones. These will be "areas with enhanced access to power and support for planning approvals, to accelerate the build out of AI infrastructure on UK soil".

An AI Energy Council will be established to seek out "clean and renewable energy solutions" to power new technology infrastructure. The AI strategy reiterates the Labour manifesto pledge to establish a National Data Library with a remit to "responsibly, securely and ethically unlock the value of public sector data assets to support AI research and innovation".

Other headline ambitions of the plan include "creating a strong talent pipeline and ensuring we address wider skills demands" and "ensuring we have the right regulatory regime that addresses risks and actively supports innovation".

Across the detail of the 50 individual recommendations, there are six measures dedicated to improving national tech infrastructure, including a pledge to provide, by the summer, "a long-term plan for UK's AI infrastructure needs, backed by a 10-year investment commitment".

The next seven recommendations focus on "unlocking data assets in the public and private sector", beginning with efforts to "rapidly identify at least five high-impact public data sets" to be made available to researchers via the National Data Library.

Nine recommendations are committed to "training, attracting and retaining the next generation of AI scientists and founders". This includes initial work to "accurately assess the size of the skills gap", before moving on to "launch a flagship undergraduate and master's AI scholarship programme" and "establish an internal headhunting capability on a par with top AI firms to bring a small number of truly elite individuals to the UK".

"Regulation, safety and assurance" is covered by the next eight recommendations, starting with a call to "continue to support the AI Safety Institute to maintain and expand its research on model evaluations, foundational safety and societal resilience research".

In the weeks since the publication of the plan, the institute – which is based in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology – has been renamed the AI Security Institute and its remit has been slimmed down so that it will no longer carry out work related to the impact of AI on bias and free speech.

The Plan includes two sets of recommendations intended to "enable public and private sectors to reinforce each other" and "address private-sector-user adoption barriers". This section includes a commitment from government to "procure smartly from the AI ecosystem as both its largest customer and as a market shaper", as well a pledge to "drive AI adoption across the whole country".

The final section comprises a single recommendation – which has already been fulfilled – to create a new Sovereign AI Unit within government. This unit will partner with AI firms and, in some cases, invest financially in companies.

The largest set of recommendations, however, cover the intention to "Adopt a 'Scan > Pilot > Scale' approach in government".

This includes the appointment of a dedicated lead to seek out potential roles for AI in each of the government's five missions, as well as a commitment to "build a cross-government technical horizon scanning and market intelligence capability" in the new-look Government Digital Service in DSIT.

GDS will also house a new "rapid prototyping capability that can be drawn on for key projects", while departments will also be given "specific support to hire external AI talent".

DSIT will lead a trial of the "consistent use of a framework for how to source AI – whether to build in-house, buy or run innovation challenges – that evolves over time". This will be supported by the implementation of a "faster, multi-stage gated and scaling AI procurement process that enables easy and quick access to small-scale funding for pilots and only layers bureaucratic controls as the investment-size gets larger".

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– often referred to as "sovereign AI" – or relies on systems created and owned by tech firms.

This choice may be complicated by two significant recent developments. First, the release of the open-source large-language model from Chinese firm DeepSeek, reportedly developed at about one-twentieth of the cost of OpenAI's ChatGPT. Second, Elon Musk's serious interest in acquiring OpenAI – whose technology is the basis for the chatbot tool GOV.UK Chat.

Dr Whittle suggests that organisations' decisions taken about the kind of AI to use will come to be weighted with greater geopolitical significance and complexity and may, ultimately, equate to "picking a side".

While the open availability of the code powering DeepSeek seemingly offers a much cheaper and easier means of developing LLMs from scratch than might otherwise have been thought possible, Dr Fletcher adds that "government's taste for open source represents a challenge" to any potential deployment in Whitehall.

In the short term, the UK government – via its new Sovereign AI unit – recently entered into a memorandum of understanding to collaborate not with one of these market giants but with Anthropic, a Californian start-up established in 2021 as a public benefit corporation. The company has created its own AI assistant, Claude, and also operates an arm dedicated to "generating research about the opportunities and risks of AI".

Its engagement with government in the coming months "will include sharing insights on how AI can transform public services and improve the lives of citizens, as well as using this transformative technology to drive new scientific breakthroughs", according to DSIT.

"We have a much more design-centric and solution-centric set of people in government" ***Peter Mason, leader of Ealing Council***

Whatever and however AI technology is deployed in the coming years, experts cite several core factors that will determine the success of government's grand vision.

Dr Wählisch from Birmingham says that many of the state's ambitions need "a deeper social dialogue about technology in the 21st century", that is "not just limited to the groups that want to contribute, but includes all groups of society".

TechUK's Walker suggests that the achievements of the plan can, in part, be measured against a baseline of a "UK AI industry [that] includes over 3,000 companies, generating £14bn in revenue and contributing £5.8bn gross value added".

"Beyond these headline figures, success should be measured through the tangible delivery of key initiatives," Walker adds. "This includes progress toward the 20-fold expansion in compute capacity, the successful establishment of AI Growth Zones, and the implementation of the National Data Library. The AI Energy Council's effectiveness in addressing the energy challenges of AI deployment will be another crucial indicator."

These may constitute ambitious objectives but, returning to Starmer's foreword to the plan, the prime minister claims that "we start from a position of strength".

"Nonetheless, this race is speeding up and we must continue to move fast," the PM adds. "This is a unique chance to boost growth, raise living standards, transform public services, create the companies of the future in Britain and deliver our Plan for Change. This Action Plan shows we are ready to take it."

There are clearly those that might disagree with this upbeat assessment. But it is equally clear that, ready or not, here AI comes. ■

ELIZABETH GARDINER A QUESTION OF DUTY

MINISTERS HAVE PROMISED TO INTRODUCE A DUTY OF CANDOUR FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS. BUT HOW CAN THEY ENSURE IT IS EFFECTIVE?

The government has set a deadline of the next anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster, in April, to publish legislation creating a legal "duty of candour" requiring all public officials to tell the truth when it comes to court proceedings and public inquiries.

Those who have argued for a Hillsborough Law do so based on the awful experiences of the victims and their families, when 97 football fans died and many more were injured in the stadium disaster. Their grief was compounded by police attempting to shift the blame to the fans, followed by a cover-up and a failure by many public authorities to acknowledge their mistakes.

Separately, further failures and cover-ups have also been highlighted in other inquiries, including the Infected Blood Inquiry, which noted "institutional defensiveness" from both NHS and government.

So how do we encourage greater transparency and accountability? Can legislation deliver a culture change and how will the duty be enforced? If the duty of candour becomes an insistence on speaking up, there are risks: as whistleblowers know all too well, they are rarely thanked for doing so and are often harmed or lose their jobs precisely because they were trying to tell the truth to those reluctant to listen.

From the institution to the person

The current duty of candour in the NHS applies to institutions rather than the individuals at the top of an organisation: it requires NHS trusts and other providers to be open and honest with people when things go wrong. This exists alongside individual professional duties held by doctors, nurses and other clinicians. Sir Rob Behrens, former parliamentary and health ombudsman, said, in evidence to the Thirlwall Inquiry (considering the Lucy Letby case) that an organisational approach was ineffective and the fines issued for breaches were too small, leading to managers continuing to prioritise their reputations, and those of the trust, over being open and honest.

Never forgotten James Jones, the then-bishop of Liverpool, looks through material in the Hillsborough Archive in Sheffield

Similarly in the police service, Bishop James Jones, in his report following the Hillsborough disaster, recommended as a minimum that a duty should be imposed on individual officers to cooperate with investigations and inquiries. So it is individuals holding public office – in the police, health service, local authorities or civil service – who should be held to account by a personal duty of candour.

A significant question is who this will apply to; the suggestion so far is that it would apply to all civil servants. The danger in expanding the duty to encompass everyone is that the search for accountability can become a search for who to blame. Senior civil servants must not be allowed to pass the buck down to junior staff for failing to flag concerns: those at the top of organisations need to remain ultimately accountable for the work of all their staff.

Who does the duty apply to and when?

The duty of candour may only bite during public inquiries or inquests, requiring officials to be honest about mistakes so lessons can be learned for the future. In Protect's view, it would be a shame to limit the law to only improving organisations' responses in the aftermath of disasters.

If we are to change the culture of organisations to really tackle "institutional defensiveness", greater candour operating inside the civil service should try to stop disasters happening in the first place. We would like to see the duty applied to all staff at all times – encouraging all those inside organisations to highlight wrongdoing and small risks before they become disasters. Listening to staff gives the organisation the chance to take remedial action.

To achieve this, whistleblowing is key, and that means fostering a culture where challenge is acceptable. Unfortunately, the current evidence shows this culture is not present. Last year, the Public Accounts Committee said a "cultural change is needed to raise awareness and provide assurance on whistleblowing processes", noting only half (52%) of civil servants surveyed thought it was safe to blow the whistle. Whistleblowers' voices have not always been welcome. For example, DWP whistleblower Enrico La Rocca, who exposed how potentially thousands of carers ended up with unfair debts, has been told he cannot contribute to the final review.

However, this bill could be a starting point for creating a more trusted internal whistleblowing system in government. Speaking up, rather than being seen as challenge, could be seen as meeting a statutory duty. Staff also need an outlet when they identify wrongdoing but feel that no one in the department is listening. The case of FCDO whistleblower Josie Stewart, who lost her job for exposing the chaos and wrongdoing during the British withdrawal from Afghanistan to the press, is a clear example. Whistleblowing arrangements could be improved by the creation of an independent body for civil servants to take their concerns to; without this, whistleblowers will either raise their concerns via the media or, worse, stay silent.

Sanctions and enforcement

To be effective, the law should be enforceable. One approach came in an early version of the bill in 2017 that proposed unlimited fines and imprisonment if an official intentionally or recklessly fails to discharge their duty of candour. This is a blunt tool, and

"The danger in expanding the duty to encompass everyone is that the search for accountability can become a search for who to blame"

Transparency The Hillsborough Independent Panel, formed to review evidence about the disaster, holding a press conference in 2012 to announce its findings

the criminal standard of proof is high, but it may be more effective than the existing system. The Nolan principles – which set the standards expected in public life for all civil servants, and include being honest and open – are not enforceable. The Civil Service Commission only makes non-binding recommendations following breaches of the civil service code, and often simply refers cases back to the department. However, legislation can have a deterrent effect: by analogy, we know that the current whistleblowing legal protections are weak but their existence has led to many employers putting good whistleblowing processes in place.

A culture change?

The duty of candour could herald a culture change in the civil service. The new law should have in its sights the idea that disasters can be prevented at an earlier stage if whistleblowers are listened to and ongoing openness, challenge and speaking up are welcome. Legislative change needs to come with improvements to internal whistleblowing culture in the civil service. The Cabinet Office should ensure every department has effective whistleblowing arrangements. An independent route to raise concerns outside of departments is vital. Good whistleblowing improves accountability, reducing the need for external inquiries when things go seriously wrong. ■

Elizabeth Gardiner is chief executive of whistleblowing charity Protect

For more on the duty of candour, see editors' letter, p.4

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

PRISON BREAK

Asylum accommodation: Home Office acquisition of former HMP Northeye

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? February 2025

Key quote "The Home Office spent £15.4m to purchase the HMP Northeye site, but it failed to deliver the promised 1,400 bed spaces. The site remains contaminated and in need of remediation, and the Home Office now plans to transfer it to another government department or sell it."

In brief As part of its efforts to move asylum seekers out of hotels, the Home Office bought a disused prison in Bexhill-on-Sea in September 2023, despite clear warnings that the HMP Northeye site would require significant remediation work. The purchase price of £15.4m was more than double the amount the site had been purchased for less than a year before.

PAC found the department wasted "unacceptable" levels of public money on the site and questioned how its programme to acquire large sites for asylum accommodation "went drastically wrong". The report accuses the department of bypassing established processes that are in place to protect public money in its haste to be seen to address the problem of insufficient accommodation for asylum seekers.

Key recommendations

- The Home Office should provide a detailed breakdown of how much money it has spent on asylum programmes that have now been cancelled, including additional remediation costs; what benefits these programmes have delivered for asylum seekers and the taxpayer; how much alternative accommodation would have cost; and how much public money has been wasted.
- The Home Office should also set out what changes it has made to ensure future investment decisions are made on a comprehensive range of information, following a full and transparent consultation with a range of stakeholders, even where decisions need to be made at pace. ■

COST OF COMPLIANCE

The administrative cost of the tax system: HM Revenue and Customs

Who? National Audit Office

When? February 2025

Key quote "HMRC staff specifically working on tax administration had increased by 6% between 2019-20 and 2023-24 to 57,514 full-time equivalents, with their real-terms costs increasing by 9%. An increase in the seniority of HMRC's tax and wider workforce added over £100m to salary costs between 2019-20 and 2023-24."

In brief The NAO found that HM Revenue and Customs' costs of administering the tax system increased by 15% in real terms between 2019-20 and 2023-24, with tax revenue rising by a fraction more at 16% over the same period. The report said HMRC spent £4.3bn collecting £829bn in tax in

2023-24, representing just over half a penny in expenditure for every pound raised.

It said staff administering tax cost £3.3bn in 2023-24, around three-quarters of the total cost of tax collection; and that staff costs were up 9% in real terms on 2019-20, in part due to a 6% increase in full-time-equivalent headcount from 57,943 to 61,186.

The increased cost also reflected HMRC's "move towards a more highly skilled, and therefore better paid, workforce".

"Unless HMRC increases levels of compliance yield per caseworker, there is a risk that the expectation of lower compliance yield performance becomes the norm," the NAO said.

Key recommendations

- HMRC should increase the levels of compliance yield per caseworker with the aim of returning to pre-pandemic levels of performance as soon as possible.
- HMRC should ensure that its benchmark for good levels of compliance yield per caseworker takes account of historic levels, inflation, higher returns from relevant upstream activity, increased capability from digital investment, and skills and experience of staff. ■

MONEY TROUBLES

The Office for Value for Money

Who? Treasury Committee

When? January 2025

Key quote "The Office for Value for Money is an understaffed, poorly defined organisation which has been set up with a vague remit and no clear plan to measure its effectiveness" – Dame Meg Hillier, chair of the Treasury Committee

In brief It is doubtful that the Office for Value for Money will have a "meaningful impact on driving efficiencies in departments", the Treasury Committee said, given its limited size and remit and the risk of duplication across existing bodies.

The cost-saving unit championed by chancellor Rachel Reeves has been tasked with an assessment of "where and how to root out waste and inefficiency" ahead of this year's Spending Review.

But the Treasury Committee flagged concerns that the unit's chair, David Goldstone, is only contracted for a year and that, as of December, the unit only had 12 full-time members of staff.

It said there is also a significant risk that OVfM will replicate work already being carried out in other areas of government.

Key recommendations

- The OVfM should explain how it will interact with existing organisations and frameworks in government and the public sector that are already tasked with delivering value for money to avoid unnecessary duplication and to utilise existing expertise.
- The Treasury should clarify publicly which departmental agencies or budgets will be subject to value-for-money studies.
- The Treasury should publish an estimate of how much it will spend on the OVfM – including any use of external consultants. ■

TRANSFORMATION TRIALS

NHS financial sustainability

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? January 2025

Key quote "Truly fresh ideas and radical energy must be generated to meet the scale of what is required – on community healthcare, on prevention, on digital transformation. Given the position of the NHS, forcing this committee to wade through treacle by mouthing the same stale platitudes of incremental change is simply not going to cut it." Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, chair of the Public Accounts Committee

In brief The Public Accounts Committee describes officials in the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England as being "out of ideas and remarkably complacent" in a report on the NHS's financial sustainability.

The PAC report argues that the government's desire to publish a new 10-year plan – the Health Plan for England – is a "golden opportunity to take significant decisions for the longer-term benefit of the nation's health and the sustainability of the NHS". But it says there "seems a lack of readiness amongst senior health officials to take the radical steps needed".

The government has laid out "three big shifts" it wants to deliver in this parliament as part of the NHS mission: from hospital-based to community care; from analogue to digital; and from treating ill health to prevention.

But the PAC report warns that DHSC and NHSE "have not convinced us that they are ready to give the three big shifts desired by government the priority they need". It said this "left the impression that there was no real urgent motivation and readiness to drive the change in the NHS that is needed".

Key recommendations

- On community healthcare, the report recommends NHSE ensure that more funding, year on year, is spent in the community, in line with its own ambitions.
- On prevention, the PAC recommends that a definition be reached for what counts as prevention spending; that officials set out the funding increases required to achieve it; and for local systems to be given the required flexibility and autonomy to direct funds to the right areas.
- On the switch to digital, the report warns of glacially slow progress in parts of the NHS. The report calls for plans to reduce this reliance on paper within 18 months, and a specific deadline to end the use of fax machines. ■

Trust YOURSELF

Volunteering has more benefits than you might realise, from career progression to wellbeing. How can officials reach out and make a difference? **Susan Allott** finds out

Emma Barlow, a policy adviser at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, usually spends the run-up to All Party Parliamentary Groups writing briefings and helping ministers to prepare. But this time was different: in her capacity as a trustee for Reaching Higher, she'd encouraged the young people supported by the Croydon-based youth charity to attend the APPG on youth affairs, and she'd worked with them to get ready. "I helped them think about what questions they wanted to ask, and made sure they backed their points up with statistics," she says. "Bringing those two worlds together was a real moment."

Barlow has also seen progression in her civil service career since becoming a trustee outside of work. "I now work on staff wellbeing, looking at how we capture data on that, how we monitor it, and I don't think I'd have taken it on if I hadn't already done it for the charity," she says. "It gave me the confidence to put myself forward for it." She's also noticed that senior colleagues ask her »

"Being a trustee lets you feel the impact of the work you carry out" ***Marie-Elise Howells, DCMS***

opinion more than they used to: "They trust my judgement, because I can reinforce what I'm saying with experience."

There is a push from the top for more civil servants to form connections with the third sector like the one Barlow describes. The prime minister has made it clear that his administration wants charities to be brought inside the tent, speaking of a "new era of partnership" and a recognition of charities as a core part of the policymaking process. A new civil society covenant is promised in due course, which will set out these expectations in more detail.

What will this mean in practice? Officials might be wondering what the benefits of a partnership with civil society might look like for the job they are doing and the career path they are pursuing. They may also be wondering what their contribution might consist of, and where they should start.

Marie-Elise Howells, deputy director for volunteering and tackling loneliness at DCMS, suggests that becoming a charity trustee is a great way to begin. Howells has been volunteering since she was an HEO, and can testify to its benefits on multiple fronts. "Being a trustee lets you feel the impact of the work you carry out," she says, "since charities tend to be smaller. Whereas in the civil service you are a small cog in a giant machine." And it's likely you'll find yourself taking on organisational responsibilities at an earlier career stage. "There is a massive skills game to volunteering," Howells says. "The first time I got to do organisation-level financial planning or restructuring was in a trustee role."

Writing for *CSW* in October last year, Gus O'Donnell acknowledged a "friction that sometimes exists between the charity sector and the civil service", which is not helped by stubbornly low rates of collaboration between the sectors. Referring to polling by the Law Family Commission in 2021, Lord O'Donnell pointed out that "just 10% of the surveyed civil servants said they had served as a charity trustee in the previous 12 months, compared with 36% of MPs and 46% of local councillors".

Speaking from her desk in the Home Office, where she leads on partnerships in crime and policing, Katie Aston is clear that any friction that might still exist is unjustified. Aston is a trustee for StreetDoctors, a charity that tackles knife crime, and she also leads on criminal justice as a trustee for the Noel Buxton Trust. "Most of our policy work at the Home Office is about protecting the most vulnerable," Aston says, "and there has often been a breakdown of trust between the individual and the state. But they might trust a small charity."

For Aston, the trustee role is helpful in reinforcing the values that sit behind the safer streets agenda. "It's a consistent reminder of the communities that we serve," she says. Although it's not her primary motivator, she agrees that volunteering can also be career enhancing. "If you're not getting leadership experience at work, then joining a charity board is a good way to learn," she says. "I do think civil servants have a lot of the skills that a charity board needs, such as understanding reputational risk. With most charities, reputation is their most valuable asset, and we understand that stuff."

Richard Jones is head of innovation and development at the Department for Education's Schools Commercial Team and a trustee of the Two Counties Trust, a group of nine schools in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. He says that "volunteering has kept me refreshed, interested and challenged". While for him "there's a moral driver to it", he believes that "it also helps with my personal credibility as a leader and influencer in my organisation".

Reflecting on what he's learned in his trustee role, Jones says: "Ideally, I like to take my time giving feedback. But in the live environment of a board discussion, you have to be quicker than that. It's always helpful to put yourself into a

TAMARA FINKELSTEIN, DEFRA PERMANENT SECRETARY AND HEAD OF THE POLICY PROFESSION

"I'm hugely committed to encouraging more civil servants right across government to consider serving as charity trustees. It's a brilliant way of gaining skills and knowledge – and, of course, a great way to have an impact in our own communities. Every government department makes volunteering leave available to its staff and this is a great way to use that time. Getting an understanding of the third sector in this way makes us better policy makers and better deliverers of services to the public. My trustee work is at the heart of my personal development and I have been surprised how useful my knowledge and perspective has been round the board table."

Photo Baldo Sciacca

different context and stretch yourself a bit."

Echoing Aston, Jones says his trustee role "keeps you aware of the realities on the ground". He thinks the relationship between the learning from his trusteeship and the policy direction he takes at work is a subtle one. "We won't completely change direction based on one piece of feedback, but we will feed it into the mix," he says. It helps him to demonstrate that "we are plugged in; we aren't just dreaming up policy from ivory towers and think tanks".

Barlow describes the job of a trustee as being "a critical friend to the organisation, supporting leaders to make the best decisions, offering friendly challenge". The civil service trains you to think in a way that lends itself to the role, she says. "How do we manage risks? How do we gather evidence and make recommendations? How do we weigh it all up? These are the things that are often asked of me as a trustee."

Jones seconds this point, adding that whatever grade you are and wherever you are in your career, you will almost certainly have a helpful contribution to make. "Don't worry about being the new person," he says. "Part of the role is to ask questions – and sometimes a naïve question is the best type of question."

For those who are still unsure about taking the first step, Barlow suggests thinking about the things you care about and where you would most like to see societal change. "What is a charity local to you that moves the dial on that?" she says. "Start by volunteering on the ground and see where it takes you." And if you don't want to take on the longer-term commitment of a trusteeship, you could offer your skills on a short-term project. "For example, an HR official could review a charity's HR policies, so they don't have to pay someone to do that."

"It helps with my personal credibility as a leader and influencer in my organisation" ***Richard Jones, DfE***

Aston agrees. "You could befriend a housebound neighbour and help them with some of their security, or set up a tech hub for elderly residents. Or you could get involved in community scrutiny of police practices," she says. "We have lots of evidence that stronger communities are safer communities. Also, if you are delivering the safer streets mission, you want a happy, healthy workforce. There's loads of evidence that volunteering is good for your mental health."

Will we achieve the meaningful and reciprocal partnership that the prime minister aspires to? One of the ways we might make this high-level ambition a reality is to "de-risk both sides of it", Howells says. "Charities need to learn civil service language and have safe people they can talk to, and vice versa. Being a trustee is a fantastic way to get that started." ■

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING OR BECOMING A TRUSTEE?

- Sign up for an introductory webinar on 29 April at 11am to find out all you need to know: http://bit.ly/csppknowledgeseries
- Reach Volunteering can help you to find trusteeships and short-term charitable projects: reachvolunteering.org.uk
- Governors for Schools can help you to discover school governorship opportunities, and to learn more about the role: http://bit.ly/governorsforschools

Placing a 4G mast at Elgol, on Skye

It's good to talk

How a Scottish Government programme leveraged public and private sector expertise to bring 4G to thousands of residents and businesses in remote locations. By **Jim Dunton**

Fast mobile broadband is something most people take for granted until it's lost. But for thousands of residents and businesses in remote parts of Scotland, 4G coverage has only recently become a reality, thanks to an award-winning programme to deliver connectivity in areas previously shunned by service providers.

The Scottish Government's £28.75m 4G Infill Programme (S4GI) delivered 4G signals to 55 rural and island locations between 2018 and 2023 by working with network service providers, infrastructure partner WHP Telecoms, local communities and the UK government.

As a result of the S4GI programme, which was supported with £10.7m from the European Regional Development Fund, more than 2,200 homes and businesses now have high-speed 4G coverage for calls and data.

The team also used the power of the Home Office to its advantage by agreeing the joint use of some of the new masts for the Emergency Services Network. Its over-arching success was demonstrated by the project's victory in the collaboration category of 2024's Civil Service Awards.

Robbie McGhee, the Scottish Government's deputy director for digital connectivity – and head of the programme – told *Civil Service World*'s recent Collaboration Conference that S4GI's central aim was bringing together diverse interests to enable services the private sector could not deliver on its own.

"Scotland's about a third of the UK land mass, but only 8% of the population. And the population of Scotland tends to be quite concentrated in the central belt," he says. "When you start to go into the Highlands and Islands, and certainly in island communities, there's not really a lot of people there, which means that from a mobile network operator point of view, the commercial drivers to deploy infrastructure just aren't there."

Telecoms is a "reserved" matter, meaning that provision is the responsibility of the UK government rather than being devolved to Scotland. Nevertheless, McGhee says the economic and social implications for remote areas that lack 4G connectivity were "writ large" for Scottish Government ministers. The impact for business creation, employment and depopulation were major areas of concern. Scottish ministers could not legislate to improve things, so funding was the only lever.

"The particular challenge that we faced was to construct a model that the private sector would go for," McGhee says. "Because we could go in and say, 'Well, all these areas need connectivity,' but if that infrastructure is going to run at a loss for those companies, then it's not going to be palatable."

The Scottish Government worked with non-departmental public body Scottish Futures Trust and the mobile industry to develop a significant uplift in 4G coverage. Target areas were identified for new masts based on analysis of coverage data, the absence of plans for future commercial investment, and two public consultations.

A stipulation for each of the proposed locations was that masts would only be built if at least one of the mobile network operators – EE, O2, Vodafone and Three – agreed to be an anchor tenant for each site.

While the infrastructure would be provided for them, the anchor tenant would take on the running costs of the mast, meaning the programme team effectively had to create individual economic cases for each site.

McGhee says bringing the Home Office on board for the programme was "really pivotal", with the department's emergency services communications programme seen from the outset as having the potential to drive lots of efficiencies for S4GI.

"It's one thing to identify that opportunity. It's another to follow through on it," McGhee says. "But we managed to do that, and we got the two programmes working very much in concert.

"When we partnered with the Home Office and brought the emergency services angle, we absolutely got industry doing more than I think they otherwise would have done."

McGhee says the S4GI programme's collaboration brought together three key groupings: industry; the wider public sector; and communities themselves.

He cites WHP Telecoms, which was appointed through a competitive process to acquire sites and design and build the project's masts, as the "key relationship" from the industry side. "They were the company that would build and operate the various masts for us, but it wasn't a case of just giving them a list and them going out and building them," McGhee says.

The individual business case for each mast included a picture of the community it covered, transport routes and tourism sites. WHP worked in tandem with network operators and other industry bodies such as power firms to assemble the studies.

In terms of public sector collaboration, McGhee says that as well as the Home Office, the S4GI team also worked extremely closely with local planning authorities to "build the rationale" for the investment and why it mattered.

However, McGhee says the various communities selected to receive phone masts were probably the most important groups earmarked for collaboration. He says that in addition to liaising with landowners through WHP, the programme team also mapped the kinds of community groups that existed in the area to "proactively engage" with them, offset concerns and talk through benefits.

"Undoubtedly, some of that engagement can move people who were potentially in opposition to the programme to actually being in support over time," he says.

Nineteen of the mast sites were in environmentally protected areas which required sensitive planning around placement. In one location the new mast was made to look like a tree, blending in with existing forestation.

McGhee points to the identification of "tangible shared objectives" and the development of interpersonal and intergovernmental relations as drivers of success in the programme. But he also acknowledges past and present adversity played a part – despite the additional complications of having to work with restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The S4GI team did a big "lessons learned" analysis of a previous mobile infrastructure project, looking specifically at technical factors that had inhibited the earlier scheme. "A big part of what we did was a kind of design piece with the mobile industry around what they would go for and what they wouldn't," McGhee says. "And I think that helped establish the parameters of what would ultimately be viable."

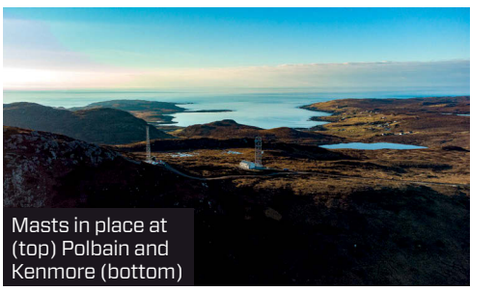
Part way through the programme, 2021's Scottish Parliament elections returned the Scottish National Party to power on a raft of pledges that included activating 14 new phone masts in the first 100 days of government – a timescale that did not align with the S4GI programme's plans.

McGhee says the project team worked with WHP to explore whether they could accelerate elements of the existing plans. Although they didn't quite meet the 100-days target, this did result in a "much-improved" process and more effective deployment in the latter phases of the programme.

"It's interesting the way in which a bit of adversity can actually breed a better way of doing things," he says.

Looking back on the whole programme, McGhee says one of his real takeaways is the synergy that the team managed to develop with WHP and the UK government, underpinned by well-defined milestones and benchmarks – and effective governance at programmeboard level.

"It really felt as if everyone was entirely invested in getting these masts delivered by a certain point within a certain budget," he says. "And I think when everybody felt that they had that kind of stake in it, and we really had the shoulder to the wheel to deliver those ambitions, really good things happened." ■



Masts in place at (top) Polbain and Kenmore (bottom)

"When we partnered with the Home Office and brought the emergency services angle, we absolutely got industry doing more than they otherwise would have done"

Work underway in Burray, on Orkney

DELIVERY DRIVER

A book that draws on the diaries of Sir Michael Barber, head of Tony Blair's Delivery Unit, feels relevant and timely. What can it teach us? **Suzannah Brecknell** speaks to author **Michelle Clement** to find out more

Early in 2002, Tony Blair addressed a small group of officials working on the top 17 delivery priorities for his second term as prime minister. "You've probably got used to the idea that your career depends on me," he told them. "I'm just coming to terms with the idea that my career depends on you."

Less than a year since a general election that he interpreted as an "instruction to deliver" public service reform, Blair was acknowledging the delicate relationship between politicians who must set the goals, and the officials whose job it is to reach them.

His remarks, according to historian Dr Michelle Clement, were an attempt to "embolden" the civil service, through the relatively new team he was speaking to – the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit.

Headed by Michael Barber, a former special adviser in the education department who became a civil servant and then moved to No.10 to create PMDU, the team's role was to track and support progress in four broad areas: health, education, home affairs and transport.

Clement – a lecturer in the Strand Group at King's College London and researcher in residence at No.10 – has spent more than a decade studying the way this unit operated.

"You have to accept that what will be delivered in the next four years will be largely delivered by the system as is, and be very clear minded about the levers that are available to you now and can be created rapidly"

Her study has been informed by 600,000 words of diary entries written by Barber between 2001 and 2005 (*see box*), alongside interviews with other key officials and politicians – required, she says, to offset the fact that a diary inevitably centres its author.

This work is the basis of her first book – *The Art of Delivery: The Inside Story of How the Blair Government Transformed Britain's Public Services* – which explores the "human machinery of government" at the heart of New Labour's reform agenda. It offers new perspectives on Blair's second term, and it feels very timely.

Like New Labour in 2001, the current government has a political imperative to deliver public service reform. And like Blair, prime minister Keir Starmer has turned to Barber for support – appointing him as an unpaid adviser on effective delivery. A Mission Delivery Unit has been established in No.10, headed by Clara Swinson, a former member of PMDU. Meanwhile, in the Department of Health and Social Care, a Secre-

Power trio Tony Blair with Gordon Brown and Alan Milburn at a conference in 2001

tary of State's Delivery Unit is being set up.

Health secretary Wes Streeting has also appointed his one-time predecessor Alan Milburn, who worked closely with Barber, as the department's lead non-executive. Milburn features heavily in Clement's book – through her interviews, we see him move from being somewhat sceptical of the new PMDU – worried in part about confused accounting lines between it and the Treasury – to describing it as "fantastic… a gift". We also gather plenty of insight into his thinking on health reform and his approach to change as a politician – insights which are interesting in themselves, but have particular pertinence given his current role at the department.

HOW BARBER'S DIARIES BECAME HISTORY

Barber wrote his diaries, Clement says, from "the perspective of a historian by training". They formed a valuable way to reflect on events and develop his own thinking, but he was also conscious they could provide deep insight for those who study government.

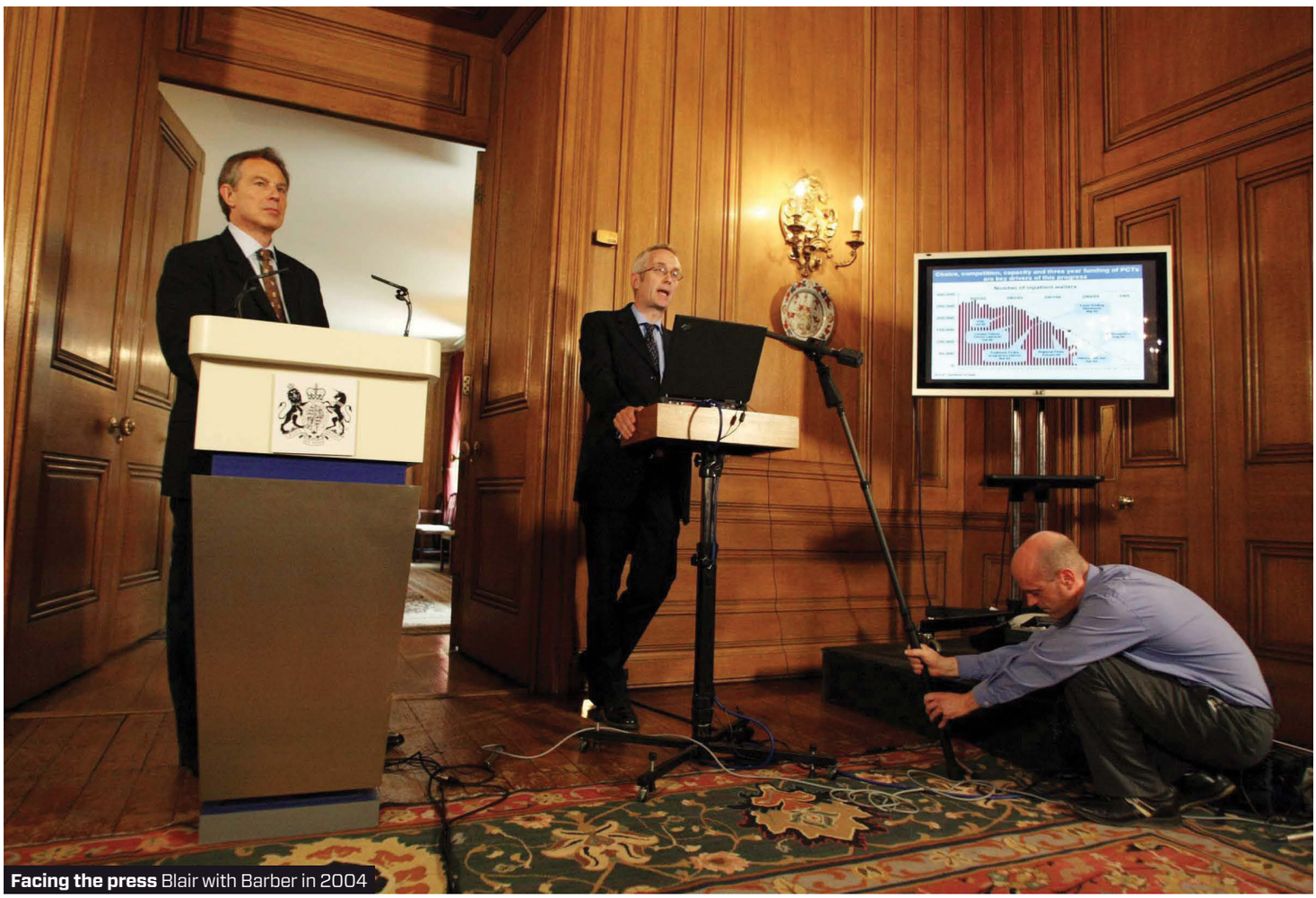
In 2011, he approached Jon Davis – now a professor of government and director of the Strand Group at King's College London – about the possibility of using his diaries as the basis for a PhD. Clement, who had just completed her MA under Davis, was chosen to work on what she describes as an "extraordinary primary source".

Having completed her PhD in 2020, Clement now teaches on the MA in Government Studies at KCL, and is also researcher in residence at No.10. "The main aim of the latter position is demystifying the role of prime minister and the office of No.10 for the public," she says. This includes writing blogs and giving talks and hosting KCL classes at No.10, but she also brings the expertise she has gathered through her academic research to, "wherever possible, help those behind the scenes".

A unifying theme in all of Clement's work is the view that "institutional memory in government is important and lacking", and that understanding how previous administrations approached the challenges of government can bring real benefit to those still facing those challenges today.

Most civil servants are probably familiar with Barber's approach. His science of delivery – named "deliverology" by Treasury grandee Nicholas Macpherson – has been adopted by governments around the world. Broadly, it involves the careful setting of targets linked to real-world outcomes, and the development of plans based on data and the partners required to make change. These are monitored by regular stocktakes which track progress, spot problems, and bring the power of the prime minister to bear in solving problems and pushing for more change.

Clement makes a distinction between this science and the "art" which underpins it. When she began working on the project it was "peak science of delivery", she recalls, and there was a sense of "just follow this list, and you'll get the desired result". »



Facing the press Blair with Barber in 2004

But she had questions. How did Barber navigate the Blair/Brown dynamic which coloured so much of the New Labour period? How involved was Blair, really? "There was this idea that as Blair focused on foreign policy post-9/11 and then with the Iraq War, he became less focused on domestic policy," Clement says. Yet since the domestic reform agenda did carry on, with strong success in key areas, she adds, "that idea didn't quite feel right to me".

As she analysed Barber's diaries and spoke to those who worked with him, she sought to draw out the "human dimension to [deliverology] – the messy uncertainties".

The science of delivery is ineffective without this human dimension, she argues, describing the art of delivery as the "shared history, deep understanding of political context and ability to build cooperative relationships which oils the machinery of government".

The approach of using diaries and interviews of course gives a different insight than studying official announcements or records for this period (many of which are not yet released, so Clement has not used them for her work). Reflecting on a meeting about asylum policy in 2001, for example, Barber writes that from the official minute you would think it was an "ordered, rational event", but "in fact what happened was an unholy row".

It also gets under the skin of how the Delivery Unit really made an impact. Alongside the science, there was a strong focus on building relationships and navigating the conflict inherent in many discussions on the interface of politics and policy.

"It leaves me with the problem (which I relish) of winning the approval of two irreconcilable positions"
Michael Barber, writing in his diary

The whole PMDU team undertook conflict resolution training, for example, and would invest a great deal of time preparing not just data for stocktake meetings but also understanding the incentives and positions of all those present. Swinson reflects that building trust was "completely fundamental" to their approach, as was the need to create a guiding coalition of partners who would deliver change.

Barber's personality played a key role in all this. Swinson describes him as "at heart an educationalist" whose first instinct was to learn from any challenge, while Clement tells *CSW* that "he just didn't rise to aggression".

Clement explains, "It's not that he didn't feel it internally and sometimes reflect on it in his diary, but he had a discipline of mind that would make him focus on how do we get through to a solution." This capacity to reflect on, rather than rise to, conflict was apparent when a critical PMDU memo on the health service was leaked in 2003. Barber wrote at the end of the week that Milburn had been "unhappy but restrained" when discussing the leak.

Milburn, speaking to Clement two decades later, says: "I think that's a very, very kind interpretation of that conversation... I remember swearing at him, along the lines of, 'What the fuck is this? Why have you created this problem?'"

Barber's ability to navigate conflict and build consensus was vital for coping with the increasing tension between Blair and Brown. Clement details how Barber had to manage this right from the start, fending off the risk of the new unit being

squashed by a Treasury suspicious that No.10 was trying to undermine the chancellor's public service reform agenda.

While Jeremy Heywood and Ed Balls played the role of representatives for their principals, brokering deals together before presenting them to Blair and Brown, Barber was trying to build common ground between very different perspectives. In 2003, during a debate over the creation of foundation hospital trusts – Blair was a supporter of the idea but Brown was wary – Barber wrote in his diary: "It leaves me with the problem (which I relish) of reporting in a way which wins the approval of two irreconcilable positions."

Barber developed a good relationship with Brown, bonding over their shared training as historians. Clement says Barber could "see the intellectual and the institutional power of the Treasury and how much progress they had made in the first term. He realised they had to find a way to bring PMDU together with a burgeoning Treasury with a big social fairness agenda".

By giving us a peek at how deliverology unfolded in real time, Clement offers not just historical insights but also practical gems for civil servants ready to learn from the past. We observe how Barber secured sufficient prime-ministerial time as foreign policy loomed large first in 2001 and then in 2003. We learn how he solves both policy and relational problems with patience and the occasional bravura move. And we follow the twists and turns of negotiations around the delivery contracts, spending reviews and policy announcements which PMDU supported.

Are there any broad lessons, *CSW* asks Clement, for officials currently thinking about how to drive delivery? Clement believes the current Labour administration has "come in with a bolder agenda to begin with" than the Blairite government. But she adds a challenge which emerges from studying a significant period of change in government.

"You have to accept that what will be delivered in the next four years will be largely delivered by the system as is. You will be able to make changes that will impact your second term, or even a third term. But you've got to be very clear minded about the levers that are available to you now, that can be created rapidly, and about how you motivate people to make change quickly."

To do this, she suggests, officials should focus on the human elements and build solutions that are mutually beneficial. "Get the right people in the room: the ministers involved, the senior civil servants involved, representatives from the Treasury; do the preparation, agree the data beforehand, work out where the blocks are… and deal with it, using prime-ministerial power to hold civil servants and ministers to account."

Clement says she doesn't think there's a recognition that these things were happening under Blair. "There's so much focus on sofa government or bilaterals – and, of course, that did exist. But there was also a real effort to make government efficient and get the right people in the room."

There's a moment at the start of Blair's third term where Barber observes his approach adapted to something more like a cabinet committee, with Brown present. Rather than focusing on the delivery priorities at hand, Blair and Brown argued over philosophy. Reflecting in his diary later, Barber wrote: "Blair doesn't want to have to defend himself from Brown and Prescott… he wants to drive his programme through."

In 2001, Barber told Heywood – then principal private secretary to Blair – that his "'ambition was to work the Delivery Unit out of a job" by achieving the priorities they had mapped out. In the end, the unit has had a much longer legacy than this.

"It was originally created as a machine for the prime minister, specifically for the length of a parliament," Clement says. "But it became mutually beneficial for many people in the system. As time went on, they realised: this is useful for ministers, this is useful for other departments that aren't directly involved; it's even useful for the chancellor and Treasury."

This shift is evident in a comment made by Home Office official Martin Narey in 2003. During a meeting on drugs strategy, the commissioner for correctional services said: "The disciplines the Delivery Unit had advocated were beginning to work, and it now seemed incredible that we managed for so long without them."

Over its four years, PMDU kicked off a shift in the way Whitehall thought about delivery. Since the late 1980s, delivery capability had largely been focused on "Next Steps Agencies" – named after a report created for Margaret Thatcher which recommended moving responsibility for operational matters into arm's-length bodies rather than delivering through departments. At the start of the period, Barber characterises civil servants in the transport department as "intelligent, urbane officials who believed they were in no position to deliver anything".

By bringing back a culture of delivery around key priorities, Clement argues that Blair and Barber built an "enhanced capacity to deliver within Whitehall".

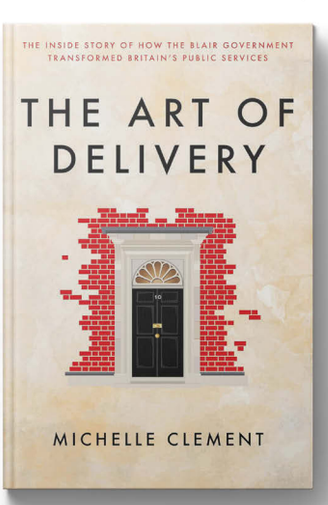
Barber left PMDU in 2005 and it lost some influence, until it was eventually disbanded under David Cameron. Since then, other delivery and implementation units have emerged with different structures. "It is an odd situation that prime ministers find themselves in, without a department," says Clement. "Their home secretary or foreign secretary or chancellor has thousands of civil servants, whereas the centre can often be underpowered. But the expectations on the centre are huge. So it's interesting to see how different prime ministers have adjusted and adapted to that situation."

Ultimately, she says, most come to realise they do need something to track and push through priorities. "A delivery unit can be – as it was [under Blair] – an extension of the prime minister, or you can have [one] that is more like a service – something like the Government Digital Service.

"It's not the same beast," she adds, "but I think that's how we've seen delivery units evolve in the UK – they became de-politicised. And really, to be most effective and sharp, you can't get away from the politics that is involved in governing. That's what PMDU managed, quite skilfully."

In 2005, Blair made another visit to PMDU, just before Barber was about to step down as its leader. Barber, reflecting on the role the staff played in driving Whitehall towards the PM's priorities, said to him: "These people are your street fighters."

"Yes," Blair replied, "but they do it with such charm." The PMDU staff, Barber records in his diary, were "delighted". ■



The Art of Delivery is available to pre-order now, use the QR code below

Sir Simon Fraser on swapping the senior civil service for the private sector

In 2015, I made the unusual move of leaving my position at the very top of the civil service to establish a start-up business – Flint Global. The culture shock was huge. I went from having nine people in my private office to running my own diary. There was a real shift in status, and I had to work that through. And I had to adjust to the pace and immediacy of the private sector.

I set up Flint nine years ago. We've gone from four to 160 employees, bringing together a very gifted group of people, many of whom came from the civil service. We're still growing globally. Here's what I learned.

Be clear what you can bring to the market
If you want to move into the private sector, you need to know what your skill set is and have clarity about what you want to do. I had identified a niche – technocratic advice to businesses from people who have been in government, to help businesspeople understand how decisions are made. I had to think that through in a very clear way before I decided to go for it.

Very few people really understand how government works
That's what we specialise in. We focus exclusively on policy, regulation, politics and competition issues. If you've been in a business-facing department in government or in the centre, such as the Cabinet Office or No.10, you have valuable knowledge that you can use in the private sector.

Motivations are entirely different in the private sector
They are essentially financial. I had to learn how businesses make decisions, how to sell, how to negotiate contracts, how to ensure profitability, and how to be comfortable in a world where things are driven by money. I learned these skills by doing the job, through trial and error. It was fantastically interesting and stimulating.

Civil servants need to cost their time more efficiently
Decisions get made much faster in the private sector – it's a very different pace. In a business environment, you soon learn to say to yourself: "What really matters here?" I would encourage all civil service managers to think about the costing of time much more efficiently, and also to consider how the proliferation of meetings could be streamlined. It's a matter of vigorous prioritisation.

Starting a business from scratch is stressful
The stress of building a start-up business was considerable – a totally different type of stress to anything I'd known in the civil service. I knew every day that if I didn't get out of bed and get the job done, nobody else was going to do it. But I enjoyed the direct personal responsibility of making it happen, having been part of a big machine which delivers things in a slower way. It was rejuvenating.

There is no point in panicking
The civil service – and in particular the Foreign Office – taught me the skill of managing my reaction and the importance of being calm. It wasn't natural to me; I had to learn it. There is no point panicking or overreacting. If you're being yelled at by politicians, you just have to be calm and you have to project a calm front to the people around you. It's a big life lesson.

The things people in the civil service do – such as managing Covid, or the fiscal crisis, for example – are huge challenges. You learn a lot about your own capacity to deal with crises, and you build resilience. Once you have these skills, you can take them with you into other parts of life. ■

Sir Simon Fraser was perm sec at the Foreign Office and head of the Diplomatic Service from 2010-2015 and perm sec at the business department from 2009-2010

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