



Thriving in the workplace

An unofficial guide to building a great
career in the civil service

Foreword



Lee Elliot Major OBE
*Professor of Social Mobility,
University of Exeter*

This guide aims to address one of the trickiest social mobility challenges: how do working class employees negotiate the middle-class norms of professional life? Career progression in the civil service has been compared to navigating a labyrinth: prospects are governed by a set of cultural norms that put those from lower socio-economic backgrounds at a disadvantage. Is talent and hard work enough, or do you need a certain cultural confidence, detached style and neutral accent to succeed?

The report democratises the dark arts of the workplace. This is about learning to advocate for yourself: not being afraid of asking what you want; seeking out informal chats and career conversations; understanding which roles will accelerate your career.

At the same time, it's about finding ways to stay true to your authentic self. Those rightly proud of their regional accents can tread the middle-ground, toning it down when speaking with ministers or seniors, while keeping it true when in the office. The balancing act is to manage the competing goals of challenging the system, while enabling those to prosper in it. A recurring message is that you are not alone in your struggle: don't be afraid to seek out others and create your own support networks.

In producing this guide, the Government Socio-Economic Diversity Network is bringing into the open a taboo topic that far too often stymies talent. It has been crafted by civil servants for civil servants. But the gems of wisdom here will help any employee who 'feels like a fish out of water' to steer a clearer path through their careers.

Introduction

Welcome to our unofficial guide to building a great career in the civil service!

Recognising that civil servants from low socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs) may sometimes find themselves feeling out of place, this guide offers practical tips to increase belonging in the workplace.

Written by civil servants from diverse backgrounds, we hope this guide helps you to know that your experiences are shared by others and that you can build a great career in the civil service.

Terminology

The working group debated the language to use in this guide. We settled on low socio-economic background (LSEB). It's a bit of a mouthful, but it describes the experiences of those who, like us, experienced disadvantage due to social and economic circumstances in childhood. We recognise that the topics expressed in this unofficial guide can be sensitive and all content is shared with respect and the best possible intent.

Who we are

This guide is from the Government Socio-Economic Diversity Network (GSEDN). The network exists to deliver a programme of activity which advocates for, and drives change through the civil service relating to socio-economic diversity.

The working group which created this guide is made up of civil servants from across a range of different departments and Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs). We are all at different stages of our careers, from different professions, with different lengths of time spent in the civil service.

In developing this guide, we have worked with Professor Lee Elliott-Major OBE. Lee is one of the UK's leading voices on social mobility and the first professor of Social Mobility in the UK at the University of Exeter. Lee sparked the idea of providing practical support to help people navigate the Civil Service culture and we are grateful and thankful for his support.

Intersectionality

Before we start, we want to recognise the similarities between the experiences of colleagues from LSEBs and the experiences of colleagues from other backgrounds. As highlighted in academic studies of social mobility, there is a multiplier effect of disadvantage for those who are from LSEBs and who hold other characteristics - such as being a woman or being from an ethnic minority background. Our hope is that the tips in this guide offer ways to support anyone from a LSEB.

Departmental differences

In sharing our experiences with one another, the working group have identified the differences in culture which exist amongst departments and organisations in the civil service and within different regions of the UK. Given these differences, there may be parts of the guide which feel more or less relevant to you and your experiences. Feel free to use the useful parts and ignore the less useful parts.

About Social Mobility

So, what is social mobility?

Social mobility indicates how likely successive generations are to climb up (or fall down) life's social or economic ladder. The closer the link between social classes of income levels from one generation to the next, the less socially mobile a society is. Lower levels of social mobility suggest less equality of opportunity in society: life prospects are down to who are you born to, and where you are born, rather than your individual talent, hard work or luck.

The Social Mobility Commission exists to create a United Kingdom where the **circumstances of birth do not determine outcomes in life**. To measure this, we must be able to define socio-economic status.

There is debate about the most accurate measures to use to measure socio-economic background, but the following questions are the most widely used:

- What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were about aged 14?
- Which type of school did you attend for the most time between the ages of 11 and 16?
- If you finished school after 1980, were you eligible for free school meals at any point during your school years?

Many organisations involved in social mobility recognise the difficulties in assessing socio-economic background, but these questions are seen as being easy to answer, get the highest response rates in testing and provide the best assessment of someone's socio-economic background.

Often, departments across the Civil Service ask colleagues about their socioeconomic background during application processes, in regular cross-government or departmental surveys, or when you are registering for events. Measuring the socio-economic background of civil servants is a critical step to help departments know what needs to be done to improve their socio-economic diversity and inclusion.

Given these difficulties of definition and measurement, we would like to reassure you that this unofficial guide aims to support everyone who might sometimes feel like a fish out of water.

1: Challenges

What challenges do people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds face in the civil service?

Colleagues from LSEBs can experience challenges in building their careers in the civil service. Here we describe how these challenges can manifest and ways to overcome them.

This section will cover:

- **Impostor syndrome**
- **Studied neutrality**
- **Accents**
- **Education**
- **Finances**

Impostor Syndrome

Do you ever feel inferior next to your peers? Do you compare yourself to others and convince yourself that they are better than you? Do you struggle to accept praise and attribute your achievements as a happy coincidence? You are not alone.

[Evidence suggests](#) that up to 70% of people will experience imposter thoughts at some point in our lives. It can affect any one of us at any time regardless of background, education, profession or achievements.

Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes coined the term Imposter Syndrome and suggested it resulted in thinking that people have an exaggerated view of your abilities, along with the fear of being exposed as a fraud, and a tendency to downplay achievements.

Imposter syndrome is defined by [Dr Valerie Young](#) as the persistent *inability* to believe that one's success is *deserved* or has been *legitimately* achieved as a result of your own efforts or skills.

Imposter syndrome can happen when we take on a new role or new responsibilities and the affects can be profound with feelings of self-doubt, anxiety and guilt. If left unaddressed, chronic self-doubt can eventually impact a person emotionally and mentally leading to burn out, anxiety and/or depression.

There are lots of resources for understanding more about imposter syndrome, including hints and tips on how to overcome it which are shared in the resources section at the end of this guide.

Impostor Syndrome



SCS Case Study: Impostor Syndrome

with Jake McClure, Deputy Director Culture, Learning and Development (UK Health Security Agency)

What has been your experience of impostor syndrome in the Civil Service?

Entering the world of work can be daunting. Joining the Civil Service, when you know very little about it – even more so. I'm determined to play my part in speaking authentically and openly about what we all do – to help people realise that no matter what your job title is, what grade you are or what you do, everyone is a human being – with flaws, personal issues and things they will have in common with you.

Joining via a graduate programme like the Fast Stream, as I did (as a 'mature' Fast Streamer) is even more terrifying, as many people seem to have it all planned out. I bumbled in – and was very much myself during the whole process. Whilst I had some confidence, having been working elsewhere, I struggled with networks, people's privilege, the wild ambitions people had and the speed by which they wanted to achieve this.

The Civil Service is a microcosm of the real world. There are opportunities everywhere in the world, in all professions and for all people. You need to find your tribe, not be afraid to speak to anyone, look for a mentor who inspires you and a coach to help you understand yourself and where you want to go. Be kind to people, try to get as much management experience as you can to understand people before you go for promotion (should you choose to) and remember that your career is a marathon, not a sprint – and there's no hurry. You can reach for the stars, but you don't have to do it tomorrow.

How have you dealt with it?

I learned to trust myself, to be myself, to believe in myself, to listen to compliments and believe them – and to learn every day from others regardless of position. The more time you spend with people in more senior positions, or people from privileged backgrounds, you will realise they are all human like you – and you can strike up a connection or a conversation with them about anything.

What's one piece of advice you'd give to someone dealing with impostor syndrome?

No-one knows everything. For every person who understands a policy area inside out, there will be an outstanding manager who connects to the community in a Job Centre. The caseworker in the Home Office is just as important as the Permanent Secretary – perhaps more so – in the eyes of the customer. We are all in the business of customer service – even if some of us may disagree with this sentiment – and if you remember how you want to be treated when you are receiving a service (banking, retail, cafes) – and treat everyone in this way. Be humble. Humility goes a long way and will help you with impostor syndrome, as authenticity always triumphs.

Studied Neutrality

‘Studied neutrality’ is the name given to understated, emotionally detached behaviours within the Civil Service. This neutrality may be linked to our key Civil Service values of ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’. The [Navigating the Labyrinth Report](#) describes ‘studied neutrality’ as having three key dimensions:

- It can seem as if all civil servants speak and sound the same. This can be alienating to people who are not used to this style, or feeling like they need to alter their style of speaking which can feel unnatural.
- Civil servants can appear to be less emotionally involved in specific policy areas due to the often-understated self-presentation style.
- There can be an approach to office small talk which prizes the display of knowledge not directly related to work. Activities in which a particular knowledge base is rewarded/encouraged to be publicly displayed or beginnings of meetings where particular news stories/cultural activities/tweets are discussed. This can be alienating and intimidating for some colleagues.

[This](#) page covers many of the acronyms used across Government. You can also find some common phrases in the ‘words to avoid’ section (under W).

I came in and everyone else spoke the same cultural language and had the same jargon. I was in a main government department and could see how it was used as a steppingstone with a lot of Fast Streamers. As this was a policy department, there was a visible few who had spent time in private office or number 10. Policy was mysterious, it was seen as a dark art, with a lot of intellectual status attached to it. There was definitely an attitude that you have to move to London to progress in bigger departments, although the tide is changing on this with local hubs and the levelling up agenda.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Accents

Ask yourself how many times you have listened to a senior civil servant and heard a strong regional accent? It can feel like Received Pronunciation (sometimes known as ‘Queen’s English’ or ‘BBC English’) is the dominant accent in the civil service. Navigating the Labyrinth draws the link between this style of speech and studied neutrality.

When it seems that everyone sounds the same, you can become more conscious of your own accent or way of communicating. How to tackle this barrier is a very personal one.

We need to make sure that people can be appreciated for the work they do and the value they can add to the Civil Service rather than how they sound.

But we also recognise that some people adapt or soften their accent, or their accent changes naturally over time. If your accent does change, then no-one should criticise you for this.

The Accent Bias in Britain team and their [training for employers](#) offer some useful ways to educate and raise awareness. The Social Mobility Commission’s masterclass on ‘Accents in the Workplace’ is available to watch [here](#).

Personally, I have tried to tread the middle-ground with my accent, toning it down on purpose during interviews or when speaking to large crowds or ministers, but keeping it true when in the office.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Education

Navigating the Labyrinth, reports that 25% of Senior Civil Service attended an independent school, and an analysis in Elitist Britain reveals that this figure rises to 59% among permanent secretaries. This compares to just 7% of the population who attend private school.

Often stemming from education, cultural capital can also be about knowing the 'right' people and gaining access to the 'right' opportunities. You may have never been skiing, but have you found yourself in a group of people that have all gone skiing for example? It becomes a different shared language and experience, which can be inaccessible. Accumulative disadvantage is a real phenomenon and those who are from a low socio-economic background and have other under-represented characteristics may find the feeling of imposter syndrome even greater. It's important to note that if you feel out of place, that it is not just you and you are not alone.

I always felt like I had to overperform and not have anything negative near my name. I felt like no one is going to hire a gobby northern from an immigrant background and there wasn't much understanding what it would feel like to come into a big white academic space. Despite having a PhD, I felt like I had to be overqualified for a Band A job.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Finances

Some colleagues from LSEBs have spoken of feelings of social isolation due to their personal lack of finances now or during their childhood. Examples such as the Christmas Meal, going out for leaving events/birthdays or a collection for a colleague who is leaving can be difficult to navigate when you are in a challenging financial situation.

A different sort of example is that of relocation costs. With more than 1 in 5 civil servants based in London, most will acknowledge that being based in London can be advantageous. This is for a variety of reasons including networking, exposure to Ministers and senior management and the ability to move between government departments without relocating. People from LSEBs may be less able to relocate and so civil servants from LSEBs not based in London sometimes express feelings that their career is held back by the London-centricity of opportunities. However, with hybrid working and the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion strategy supporting departments hiring in new locations, the London bias is changing.

2: Recognising your strengths

In the book *Equity in Education*, Elliot Major and Briant challenge the deficit approach in social mobility, which frames working class children as inferior beings who need to be converted to fit in with the middle-class norms of schools (and by implication the workplace). 'In the world of deficit thinking, education efforts feel like a very one-sided negotiation – we want you to come into our world, change who you are, fit into our culture, and play by our (unwritten) rules'. Instead, the authors argue that dominant cultures need themselves to be challenged, while celebrating the assets that those from working-class backgrounds bring with them. We hope that this guide supports you to do both.

The [Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion strategy](#) expresses how 'a person's background must never be seen as a limiting factor in the Civil Service, rather an asset that can be drawn upon to improve policy making and service delivery'.

Our background and life experiences help us build resilience. Overcoming adversity can lead to development of more skills, keep us motivated to work hard and pay it forward to help others in the future.

Colleagues identifying as being from a LSEB will bring diverse individual perspectives to the workplace. Authenticity and being your true self, whatever your background, leads to the creation of successful collaboration across teams in all Government departments.

As someone from a LSEB you can bring your experience and knowledge to help shape policy and delivery of the service that affect many people from similar backgrounds as yourself.

Building a "personal brand" - the typical stereotype is that all civil servants communicate in the same way / use the same language / are part of the same machine etc., but I think there's value in maintaining an individual style that is authentic so that you can stand out from the crowd and people will remember you.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

3: Building a rewarding career

What are some tips and tricks for building a rewarding career?

This section will cover:

- **Social support**
- **Showcasing your work**
- **Career advancing things no one tells you (until now!)**

Outwardly, there is a very clear path to progression in the civil service. There is a hierarchical grade structure, a culture where people can move roles, and lots of formal opportunities for development through career 'development chats' with line managers, and training on the Civil Service Learning portal.

However, in practice, there is a more detailed and specific set of unwritten rules. Navigating the Labyrinth calls this process the 'velvet drainpipe', where there is a set of tools people can use to progress faster in their careers. Most of these are things that you either pick up over time in a role or are accelerated by being told them by your informal network of friends in the Civil Service, or by mentors and coaches.

Colleagues from LSEBs often feel they don't understand the unspoken rules about how to 'get in and get on' in the civil service. If you haven't ever been told, how do you know? This section is all about shining a light on the career enhancing things which no one tells you (until now!)

Social Support

Mentoring & Coaching

Mentoring and coaching offers a safe space for you to chat through your experiences, any challenges you are facing or offer support through applications and interviews.

Most departments have mentoring programmes which match people looking for a mentor with those offering to be mentors. The Catapult mentoring programme run by Ministry of Justice (but open to all civil servants up to Grade 7) is a fantastic programme with great results in supporting progression.

If there is someone you admire at work, you could ask them to be your mentor. This can feel intimidating, but most people are flattered to be asked. If they don't have time for regular mentoring conversations, you could ask for a one-off session or for them to review an application for you.

Civil service learning has a series of [free learning](#) to help develop mentoring and coaching skills.

When I entered the Civil Service, I felt like I had to be gregarious - if people were laughing with me, they weren't laughing at me. I worked to keep everyone on my good side. In Glasgow, I didn't have to worry about accent bias and with that, the inevitable feeling that you can be yourself. It's nice to have that solidarity and find your people.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

I had a mentor via the Crossing Thresholds programme (aimed at women trying to progress from SEO to G7) and then have also been a mentor via the Catapult programme (aimed at people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). I found both experiences really valuable to get exposure to other government departments, understand different CS 'professions', develop my management skills and expand my network. Mentors can also be useful objective third parties to help with things like interview prep.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Circle of trust

It is incredibly empowering to know that you are not alone, that you are not the only one to experience challenges. Finding like-minded people can be important to ground us, to share experiences and to help give us confidence to try and do new or different things.

It can be harder to make these connections in the virtual world, but joining your departmental Social Mobility network, attending talks or events on social mobility, or joining other networks of interest can offer great networking opportunities and provide a sense of belonging. Some departments host coffee roulette or randomised networking where you get matched to a colleague to have an informal chat as a chance to get to know more people and can be useful ways of building relationships and finding out about different roles and opportunities across the department.

Showcasing your work

Public speaking

Ah the one we all worry about. The one we all think we could be better at. We've all admired from afar that colleague who is slick at presentations and who seems totally calm and confident when delivering. What is their secret?

If you have a larger presentation to do – practice. You could:

- Practice the presentation out loud when you are alone and in a space where you feel safe.
- Ask someone to listen to you practice once you have practiced by yourself and feel confident in your content.
- If delivering a longer presentation, try breaking it down into sections and practicing bit by bit, perhaps asking your line manager to be your audience.
- Write bullet point notes (reading from a script is off putting for the listener).
- Have a go in smaller and safer meeting spaces before presenting to larger audiences.

Promoting your work (and yourself)

How do you show up as your best self everyday? The answer is you simply can't! We are only human and have good days and bad days. The key to showcasing your best self is to be authentic, acknowledge and embrace areas for development and take positive actions to address these.

Contributing to your team and work environment and demonstrating inclusive behaviours, is an effective way to showcase your personality and commitment.

Also, think outside the box. What activities and opportunities can you get involved in outside of your business-as-usual work? What are you passionate about? You will always show up as your best self and foster enhanced personal and professional development when you are passionate about your involvement in a project, work stream or team.

We recommend keeping a live word document and drop in your successes on a regular basis. This could be feedback or a bullet point description of something you have achieved. It will make preparing for reviews easier, will help you identify strong examples to use for applications and interviews and when you are having a difficult day, you can open it and remind yourself how brilliant you are!

Really investing in development chats and career conversations is also very valuable - the Civil Service generally places a lot more focus on this than other employers might do, and if you're lucky to have a line manager who will offer thoughtful challenge and constructive feedback then it can really help to push you out of your comfort zone and stretch your ambition.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Career Advancing Tips

Accelerator roles

Not all roles are created equal. Some jobs lead to a broader depth of knowledge and skills in areas that are helpful for progression. Roles where you regularly work collaboratively across the Department or across Government tend to give more exposure and opportunities. A barrier can form if you don't have a support network in professional jobs who can offer advice to help make decisions, especially before you have managed to develop a personal network of colleagues.

Navigating the Labyrinth talks about the role of accelerator roles which help to fast-track progression. This includes working in private office (Ministerial or SCS), running a bill team and working on a national crisis. Research highlighted that people from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds were more systematic about targeting these types of roles as part of their career plan.

Accelerator roles are beneficial to our careers because they:

- Provide opportunity to display your skills and knowledge to senior civil servants and ministers
- Give you greater insight into senior decision-making processes and thinking
- Enable you to develop transferrable skills such as managing upwards, managing difficult conversations, navigating change, seeing the bigger picture
- Provide specific and tangible examples of deliverables to use at application and interview.

The nature of some accelerator roles can mean they seem less accessible to some groups. For example, roles which require working extended hours and being on call is challenging for people with caring responsibilities.

Although some accelerator roles do provide the benefits listed above, it is completely possible to progress and be successful in the Civil Service without undertaking one. Additionally, they may not be of interest to everyone.

However, if your personal situation allows and the nature of the roles is something you're interested in, exploring these types of roles might be a good move for you.

Start by reaching out to someone in these types of roles and ask them for 30 minutes of their time to talk about their role. This can feel daunting, but people are usually always willing to talk about themselves and often feel flattered to have been asked!

Private offices in some departments run open drop-in sessions, often before launching a recruitment campaign, which you can go along to find out more about working in private office. Or, with the agreement of your line manager, you can sign-up to cover annual leave in private office to give you a taste of the role without commitment.

Career Advancing Tips

Applications

For some people, it is common to move roles and department in the civil service. Coming from a LSEB, often our parents or wider family and friends have been in the same or very similar roles for decades (often with little progression). It can feel unnatural then to move roles and Departments frequently and successively, but the ability to gain new experiences and skills is what makes the civil service such an interesting place to work.

Not all roles are advertised. Temporary promotions or managed moves can be proactively sought through building relationships with other managers across the Department. The same can be said for proactively seeking 'accelerator roles' or exposure to them. For example, you can speculatively approach teams to express an interest in covering roles in the team when people go on leave.

If you are interested in a role, reach out to the hiring manager (this is completely acceptable practice and their name is usually listed in the job description) for an informal chat. This can be a great way to better understand what the role entails and allows you to ask questions which might help you to determine if it is the right role for you.

Mastering the Civil Service interview is key. Understanding the format of Civil Service interviews is crucial, and proactively seeking out opportunities to be an independent panel member on other recruitment panels is a great way to understand the process. Civil Service Learning has a range of learning opportunities to support applications and interview skills.

'Entering the Labyrinth': an unofficial guide to civil service applications is a fantastic resource written by Nathan White and Joe Oakes, civil servants in DfE and HMT. It provides practical support and advice on applying for roles. We won't repeat their advice here, but strongly recommend a read.

Don't be afraid to ask for what you want! Civil Service roles require an interview and are conducted fairly, but that doesn't mean you can't still stick your neck out and let people know what jobs you want, because they can always help you prep for interviews even if they can't guarantee you the job.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Career Advancing Tips

Corporate contributions

It is easy to see corporate contributions as an annoyance. 'My day job is busy enough thanks very much' but getting involved in a corporate priority, either within your direct business area or at departmental or cross-government level can provide networking opportunities, a sense of value and belonging and ultimately be an important springboard for your career. Such opportunities include; coordinating skills sharing sessions, organising volunteering opportunities for your business area, getting involved in a network and leading your business areas response to the People Survey.

Benefits:

- Provide opportunity to meet like-minded people who care about similar things to yourself (see Circle of trust).
- Increases your profile within your Directorate or organisation
- Members of Senior Civil Service are often responsible for championing or sponsoring corporate priorities so getting involved increases your visibility
- Corporate contributions can be a welcome break from the day job and opportunity to feel that you are making a positive contribution
- Provide examples to use at application or interview
- Supports end of year review

Participating in corporate contributions tends to be a great way to "get seen" in the Civil Service, including getting exposure to SCS outside of your line management chain (e.g. when I hosted a Leadership & Management discussion panel). It's also a good way to meet different people and develop competency examples such as leadership, even if you don't have direct line management responsibilities.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

4: Building a Supportive Culture

How can we build a supportive culture?

This section will cover:

- **Starting conversations about class**
- **Allyship**

Starting Conversations

There are likely to be times when there are mismatches between your background and the culture of the Civil Service. Perhaps you may feel uncomfortable or frustrated by culturally specific comments, attitudes and behaviours. This can be termed a 'cultural mismatch'. Aim to clock these mismatches, find routes (i.e. through your mentor) to channel your frustration, and trust that you will navigate these.

The Civil Service is an inclusive employer, and so it is good to challenge non-inclusive behaviours if you feel comfortable to. However, challenging the culture can involve emotional labour, and sometimes it can be beneficial to protect your own energy to recognise this.

One technique sometimes used by those navigating new environments is code switching, which involves temporarily switching your accent, tone, mannerisms or topics of conversation according to the behaviours of your colleagues. We want everyone to be able to bring their full selves to work, but becoming comfortable doing this can be a journey.

Bringing yourself to work can be a delicate process, and allowing yourself to understand and mirror some codes that you are comfortable with can give you the confidence that you need.

The Civil Service champions a diversity of backgrounds, but we recognise that becoming comfortable sharing your story is a journey, and many civil servants from LSEBs do report hiding their background. If you do feel comfortable beginning to talk about your background, consider writing a blog or holding a discussion within your department, to start a conversation. Though this can be uncomfortable, it will often open a conversation with people who share your experiences or enable others to become better allies.

The more people who can understand social mobility and try to give support when they see real talent, the better. I believe that that's the route of success for this; Everyone needs a backer so bring people through with you. We can all do that.

*Anonymous
(2023)*

Allyship

Allyship refers to those who are not a member of a particular group (such as LSEB) but want to support and take action to help others in that group. In social mobility there are some specific ways you can support others:

- One of the most impactful actions you can take is to complete the questions on socioeconomic background on your departmental HR system. This will allow your department to measure the current diversity in socioeconomic background, so that they can put in interventions to make it more representative.
- Encourage others to complete theirs too!
- Help to demystify the hidden rules, shine a light on them and share your advice to overcoming them.
- For hiring managers: use blind recruitment, ensure that you are recruiting to diverse locations, and consider including tips/guidance for how to approach applications in the job advert as well as using clear, every day language which will be understood by all.

Be brave – start a conversation about social mobility in your team, in your department. Some potential prompts you could use are:

1. Since you joined, have you felt a mismatch between your background and the culture of the Civil Service?
2. How have you navigated this and how might you access support in the future?
3. For you, where do you feel most able to find likeminded people?
4. What aspects of your identity feel most key for you, and how can you lean into that at work?

For more tips, there is the Social Mobility Commission webinar on [Talking About Class in the Workplace](#).

Allyship



SCS Case Study: Allyship

with Catherine Bennion, Deputy Director Levelling Up Strategy and Policy (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)

What has been your experience of social mobility in the Civil Service?

So, I've been in the civil service (over) a decade now and on the positive side I think things have changed a lot, and we talk about social mobility and inclusion openly now. BUT, when the 'Navigating the Labyrinth' report came out I recognised so many of the issues, and I myself had had to ask for someone to explain a latin phrase in a senior meeting as I didn't know what was meant - recently. So, I think the discussion is good, positive steps have been made but we need to really focus on driving the change now.

How have you practiced allyship?

I think mentoring is a great thing to do and its all of our responsibility, I try to do this as much as possible. I try and be open and honest about my own background – and I am really proud to have gone to one of the most poorly performing state schools in my area! I also think as an SCS we must always have a focus on diversity in our teams and a strong and supportive culture.

What's one piece of advice you'd give to allies?

Drive the change. Be authentic, be conscious (of your own bias and of others) and be receptive.

Allyship



SCS Case Study: Allyship

with Chris Warner, Deputy Director Transport, Strategy and Policy (Welsh Government)

What has been your experience of social mobility in the Civil Service?

I'm from a privileged background – white, middle class, Home Counties, heterosexual, non-disabled, grammar school, Oxford, son of a Fast Streamer, Fast Streamer myself. And it's slowly dawned on me during my career how the world is designed around people like me and how well placed I am to navigate it...including the labyrinth that is the Civil Service. So although I can't pretend to be a role model for reaching the SCS from a lower socio-economic background, I'm determined to show that whatever your background it is possible – and indeed essential – to be objective about your own experience and privilege.

How have you practiced allyship?

I've helped set up social mobility networks for the Welsh Government and the wider Wales and West of England Civil Service community, to raise awareness, share best practice, influence change and promote the benefits of a public service career, whatever your background.

I persuaded the Welsh Government to join the Catapult mentoring scheme, which is brilliant! I've blogged on the Welsh Government intranet and spoken in various forums about why this is important. Recently, I was really pleased to be able to join a Ministry of Justice Insights Day for school students to talk about what it's like to work in the Civil Service. I should also say, though, that in our Welsh Government social mobility network we don't have members and allies – just a bunch of really great people from all sorts of backgrounds who want to make a difference.

What's one piece of advice you'd give to allies?

Be open about where you are coming from and the things you do and don't understand. Be curious about others' experiences. Look hard for the things about how the world works which make things easier for you but not for others, and call them out.

Key Research & Additional Resources

[The external resources included here may help you to understand more about the topics in this unofficial guide, and to think about what you can do to address it in your own department or work area.](#)

[The list is not exclusive or exhaustive: colleagues may have other resources to share and/or you may identify other material that you consider valuable. The views expressed by the authors of these works are their own and you may of course have different views. Inclusion of a resource on the list does not imply that the views expressed by the author should be attributed to this guide.](#)

General Reading

[Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy: 2022 to 2025](#)

[Elitist Britain 2019: The educational backgrounds of Britain's leading people](#)

[Navigating the labyrinth](#)

[Social Mobility Commission](#)

[The Social Mobility Index](#)

[APPG on Social Mobility Report](#)

Lee Elliot Major & Stephen Machin, 2018. "Social mobility and its enemies," CentrePiece - The magazine for economic performance 541, Centre for Economic Performance, LSE.

Lee Elliott Major & Emily Briant, 2023. "Equity in education: Levelling the playing field of learning - a practical guide for teachers."

Sam Friedman, 2022. "(Not) bringing your whole self to work: The gendered experience of upward mobility in the UK Civil Service," Gender, Work & Organization, 29(2), 502-519.

Topic Specific Reading

Applications

[Style guide - A to Z](#)

[Success Profiles - Civil Service Behaviours](#)

Accent

[Accent Bias Britain](#)

[Accents and social mobility](#)

Key Research & Additional Resources

Imposter Syndrome

[How to Overcome Imposter Syndrome - 10 Steps](#)

[The hidden upside of imposter syndrome](#)

[You're Not an Imposter. You're Actually Pretty Amazing](#)

Allyship

[Recap - Employers Masterclass: How to talk about class in the workplace - Social Mobility Commission](#)

[The building blocks: an employer's guide to improving social mobility in the workplace](#)

Further Support

[If this guide brings up complex issues, you can find further help within your own department.](#)

[This may include:](#)



- [Employee Assistance Programme](#) which provide a confidential and independent service to staff
- [Network of Mental Health Advocates](#).
- [Check your intranet pages for other options available for support](#)
- [Trade Union representatives provide confidential and critical support to their members.](#)

To join the cross-Government Socio-economic diversity network, please email secretariat.xgsedn@dwp.gov.uk

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