

CSW

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

Issue 328 | Summer 2024 | www.civilserviceworld.com

12-page
election
special

POLL POSITION

*with insights on supporting
a new administration from
Jonathan Slater, David Bell,
Lucy Easthope and the IfG*

FLEX APPEAL

*Alexander Evans on
what flexible working
should really mean
for civil servants*

TECH A CHANCE

*Top takeaways from
Public Technology
Live 2024*

WHEN THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL

*The new frontiers
of civil service
impartiality*



MEG HILLIER

Exclusive interview with the outgoing Public Accounts Committee chair



The only independent professional publication providing informed and up-to-date coverage of the civil service.



SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER



CONTENTS

Summer 2024



www.civilserviceworld.com

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

Published by
·Total·Politics·

On the cover
An exclusive photo of Meg Hillier taken by Louise Haywood-Schiefer in the House of Commons

4 EDITOR'S LETTER

Reflections from CSW's co-editors Jess and Suzannah

PEOPLE

6 CHANGING LANES

Civil service moves, appointments and departures

8 YOU'RE NOT 19 FOREVER

To celebrate CSW's 20th anniversary, we look back on some of our most memorable moments and reconnect with past interviewees

LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

12 PRESENCE OF MIND

Tips for developing an influential presence in the workplace, from Una O'Brien and Peter Shaw

14 FLEX SQUADS

Alexander Evans considers flexible working from another angle

15 STRONG AND STABLE

The country and the civil service is crying out for stability and a long-term plan, writes FDA chief Dave Penman

16 MISS IMPARTIALITY?

Attacks on civil service impartiality have left their mark. Benedict Cooper asks: is it too late to turn things around?

POLICY FOCUS

20 PRODUCTIVITY PUZZLE

How are departmental productivity plans coming along?

23 BOOK REVIEW

Is it time for the UK to look beyond Silicon Valley for innovation inspiration?

GENERAL ELECTION

24 GREAT EXPECTATIONS

A panel of experts convened by CSW asks what civil servants can

24



expect from a new administration

28 TAKE IT FROM ME

A former senior official shares advice on preparing for the election

30 UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

Pearls of wisdom on how to manage the transition to a new government, from those who've done it before

32 RECIPE FOR DISASTER

A crisis won't wait for a convenient time to strike. A disaster recovery expert tells you what you need to know

PARLIAMENT & CONSTITUTION

36 SELECT FEW

Warnings and wisdom from recent committee and watchdog reports

39 BOOK REVIEW

Former government chief people officer Rupert McNeil gives the thumbs-up to this "powerful manifesto" on ethics in public life

40 PACWOMAN

Departing Public Accounts Committee chair Meg Hillier looks back on her nine-year stint leading the parliamentary watchdog

DIGITAL & DATA

46 LOGO AGAIN

Why is GOV.UK getting a rebrand and what might it look like?

48 WHERE THERE'S A GILL

New CDDO strategy chief Gina Gill sets out her priorities

48



50 LIVE ACTION REPLAY

Heavy hitters from some of government's biggest departments talk digital leadership at *PublicTechnology Live*

GOVERNMENT IN ACTION

52 THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics suggests three approaches that could help policymakers to embed ethics into decision making

54 CONNECT FLAW

Nineteen-year-old Innes Morgan is on a mission to get government decision-making better connected to communities

56 VET YOUR ACT TOGETHER

How UK Security Vetting turned around its ailing service

58 LATEST DEVELOPMENT

Lessons from a career in organisation development

FROM THE EDITOR

Is it really only five years since the last general election? Think back to December 2019, when Boris Johnson stood in Downing Street and promised to make 2020 a year of “growth and hope”. You’d probably barely heard of a novel virus appearing in China (unless you’re an emergency planner – see p.32).

The pandemic was only the start. It’s becoming clichéd to list the geo-political forces which have shaped the last five years: Russia-Ukraine; soaring inflation; the ever-more apparent impact of climate change; the decline of a rules-based international order. Closer to home, we’ve had the still-unfolding impact of Brexit; Partygate; a war on “woke Whitehall”; strikes; and ministerial churn on a grand scale.

Against this backdrop, individually and collectively, civil servants worked tirelessly to deliver creative new policies, international events, royal ceremonies and under-the-radar reforms. For all their hard work, however, there is a sense across the nation of half a decade where nothing has been done, and everything has got worse.

It’s perhaps no wonder that officials we speak to are excited about the prospect of change

on 5 July. And no, that’s not because they are all Labour stooges. Rather that a new administration brings hope of political stability, clear direction, and – whisper it softly – even some long-term thinking.

Civil servants also enjoy the unique role they play in our democratic process. While we at CSW Towers will have done our duty once we’ve left the polling station, you, dear readers, will be just beginning your duty of welcoming, briefing and supporting the people the electorate have voted into power.

Despite a glut of prime ministers in recent years, it’s been a while since we had what the polls suggest is coming in July: a new party with a new mandate and fresh ideas about how to enact it. Officials are, of course, already thinking hard about how to make a success of such a transition. We hope that our 12-page election special (p.24 onwards) – full of wisdom and practical advice from a range of experts – will further support this process.

And, if 12 pages feels too onerous, the overwhelming message for officials is this: focus on the basics, but seize the chance to make things better. A new administration needs clear briefings and informed advice about how to turn pledges into poli-



cies, and policies into outcomes. These are core civil service skills and getting them right will establish credibility with incoming ministers and help build frank but respectful relationships. As for delivery, take the opportunity of a mission-led government (which Labour says it favours) to embrace a more collaborative, long-term, citizen-centred approach to the design and implementation of policy. And enjoy it: this is, after all, one of the most satisfying ways for civil servants to work.

Should Labour come to power, it’s also worth remembering that many of the incoming ministers will never have been in government. A key task for officials will be to help them understand the levers at their disposal. No doubt an incoming administration will have ideas on how to change those levers, as well as their own ways of

working. Many who were there remember the early months of New Labour’s first term as a time when cultures clashed and officials, advisers and politicians took a long time to properly understand each other.

After July, there may be similar tensions. Amid the mix of new ideas and old processes, a key endeavour for the official and political parts of government will be to work out what’s worth keeping and what’s worth changing; what’s a good idea and what needs to be robustly challenged.

How to decide? Again, go back to basics. Rather than defaulting to established processes, the values of the civil service and the foundations of good government in the purest sense of serving and protecting the public should be the guide for navigating a season of much-anticipated change. ■

CSW
CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

EDITOR
Jessica Bowie
jessica.bowie@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5608

Suzannah Brecknell
suzannah.brecknell@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5587

DEPUTY & ONLINE EDITOR
Beckie Smith
beckie.smith@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5687

SENIOR REPORTER
Tevye Markson
tevyemarkson@civilserviceworld.com
020 7593 5582

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

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

HEAD OF CREATIVE & PRODUCTION
Max Dubiel

SENIOR DESIGNERS
Matt Tittley
Antonello Sticca

ADVERTISING
020 7593 5669

PHOTOGRAPHY
Alamy, Adobe Stock,
unless stated otherwise

Redesign devised by Antonello Sticca

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

DISTRIBUTED BY Magprint

PUBLISHED BY
Total Politics

© Total Politics Group 2024. Reproduction in whole or part of any article is prohibited without prior written consent. Articles written by contributors do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation

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

ISSN 2515-0235 (Print)



Global challenges and the role of public policy

Now is the time to develop the knowledge, skills, and capabilities for a successful and rewarding public policy career

Policymakers face a range of profound and long-standing challenges – climate change, technology, population ageing – and contemporary issues such as the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. All this amidst a backdrop of trying to repair government finances and get their own domestic economies on an even keel following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Crucially, these issues are first order and require officials to have the appropriate multidisciplinary knowledge and skills to navigate these challenges. Only by understanding the issue holistically can effective solutions be designed, implemented, and evaluated.

Public policy at the University of Bath

The Master's in Public Policy (MPP) at the University of Bath provides individuals with the skills to understand why particular decisions are made, especially when one may be part of the policy process itself. This part-time programme, specifically designed for working professionals, brings together an international cohort of students from a variety of backgrounds through a combination of intensive residentials, supported by year-round remote teaching, creating an enriched learning experience.



As globalisation renders public policy issues more complex, collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches are more important than ever. The MSc Public Policy at Bath draws on the knowledge of

leading academics from various departments, including social and public policy, health, economics, and politics – equipping students with practical, transferable, and relevant skills for a career in policymaking.

The programme offers individuals the opportunity to develop a thorough understanding of contemporary public policymaking and politics in the 21st century, how to evaluate conventional policy decisions and the space and freedom to research policy issues from a critical and academic perspective. By doing so, students develop their skillset and refine and implement these skills in their day-to-day work.

A course with real-world relevance

The academics leading the MPP programme inform their teaching from first-hand experience of working at the highest levels of government. They continue to engage with officials and place a strong emphasis on

demonstrating the importance of policy design, development, and evaluation.

Harry Rutter, Professor of Global Public Health at Bath, has a track record of policy engagement. He has co-chaired a SAGE subgroup and attended main SAGE during the Covid-19 pandemic, established and led the National

Obesity Observatory, and was a senior policy advisor to Public Health England. His work has been highly influential with the World Health Organisation at both European and global levels.

"We bring together systems thinking, understanding of complexity, and the outstanding work that my colleague Anna Gilmore and her team have been doing on commercial determinants of health and tobacco control. We want to shape a new way of thinking – new ways of doing research on public health problems and new ways of shaping policy and practice to improve them."

Harry Rutter, Professor of Global Public Health

The programme is led by Dr Ricky Kanabar, who has worked with multiple government departments in the UK on high-profile issues including poverty measurement, social care and informing the design of family support programmes. His research on intergenerational wealth inequality informed the work of the Social Mobility Commission.



Dr Ricky Kanabar.

A unique opportunity

Throughout the course, instructors place equal importance on theory and practice, and assessments are designed to test students' ability to apply their knowledge in a real-world context. "The course gave us the toolkit of practical application and development of skills in a theoretical framework to analyse and develop public policy," says Paul Clements, MSc Public Policy graduate and Director of Incident Management & Resilience at the Environment Agency.

The MPP programme at the University of Bath offers students a unique opportunity to invest in their careers and develop the knowledge, skills, and capabilities for successful and rewarding public policy careers, whether in the UK or beyond – the skills taught have real-world relevance and applicability.

The course structure is particularly suited to professionals who wish to balance their work with high quality postgraduate training, enriching their current jobs while creating new opportunities for their career development.



Course details

- Two years part-time, starting in September 2024
- Taught through interactive online seminars and intensive residentials on campus
- Application deadline: 31 July 2024



Find out more about the course and apply by scanning the QR code.

MOVERS & SHAKERS



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

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

WILD FOR HS2

High-speed rail project HS2 has named its next chief executive: **Mark Wild**, the former head of Crossrail, now the capital's Elizabeth Line.



Wild, whose start date is yet to be confirmed, is currently the chief exec of the UK gas distribution company SGN. He will succeed Mark Thurston, who stood down from the project in September last year. In October, prime minister Rishi Sunak scrapped phases of HS2 that would have taken high-speed services to Manchester and the East Midlands amid rocketing projected costs.

The chief executive of HS2 Ltd, which is wholly owned by the Department for Transport, routinely tops the annual civil service "high earners list".

Thurston's last published salary band was £640,000-£644,999. HS2 Ltd did not give a salary for Wild.

Transport secretary Mark Harper said he had "every confidence" that Wild would "grip costs" on HS2 and "robustly oversee" the project.

SOUND ADVICE

General Gwyn Jenkins has been appointed as the UK's next national security adviser, replacing Sir Tim Barrow in the role from this summer.



Jenkins, who was commissioned as a Royal Marine in 1990, is currently vice chief of the defence staff. The role includes leading top military judgement for the future development of the armed forces, including military capability requirements.

In addition to serving in Afghanistan at the rank of colonel, Jenkins has also been assistant chief of naval staff and spent two years as military assistant to the prime minister when David Cameron was in No.10.

He also served as deputy national security advisor for conflict, stability and defence, before moving back to the military in 2017.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

The Crown Commercial Service has picked **Sam Ulyatt** as its next chief executive, succeeding Simon Tse.



Ulyatt, who is currently chief commercial officer at the Home Office, is due to start at CCS on 8 July for a handover period before Tse retires.

Tse has led the central purchasing body for the government and public sector since 2018. He said he was "really pleased to be handing the baton on to someone who knows and is passionate about CCS and will continue to live the values of the organisation".

Ulyatt was commercial director for buildings at

CCS before she left to join the Home Office in 2020.

KEW CALLING

The National Archives has hired BBC veteran **Saul Nassé** as its next chief executive, replacing Jeff James who has led the organisation since 2014.



Nassé is a fellow of Robinson College at the University of Cambridge and a former group chief executive of Cambridge Assessment, the university's examinations business.

Before joining the university, Nassé had a long career at the BBC, working in both the UK and India. His final role at the corporation was as controller at BBC Learning, where he led the teams that commissioned and produced educational content such as Bitesize and Domesday Reloaded.

Nassé is due to join The National Archives, which is based in Kew, south-west London, in late July.

DIGITAL DEPARTURE

Government Digital Service chief executive **Tom Read** is stepping down from his post this month after three and a half years at the helm of GDS.



Read is moving on to an unspecified “new challenge”. The Cabinet Office has yet to appoint a successor at the digital unit.

“GDS is in very safe hands with the dream team of Natalie Jones OBE, Erin Robinson, Christine Bellamy, Jonathan Mundy and all of our brilliant, diverse teams,” he said.

Read joined the civil service in 2013 as Cabinet Office chief technology officer. He later served as CTO of the then-Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and chief digital and information officer of the Ministry of Justice.

DUNN DEAL

Department of Health and Social Care second permanent secretary **Shona Dunn** will leave government to become chief executive of first-aid charity St John Ambulance from September.

Dunn was previously second perm sec at the Home Office and stepped up as acting perm sec in 2020 when Sir Philip Rutnam quit.



Dunn said she was “thrilled” at the prospect of her new role.

“Through nearly 30 years of public service, I have seen the importance of supporting communities to stay safe and healthy, and the impact it can have when that comes under strain,” she said.

“The role that St John people play, day in day out, in supporting communities up and down the country has never been more important.”

RUN DMO

Jessica Pulay has been chosen as the new chief executive of the UK Debt Management Office. She will be the first woman to hold the role when she takes over from current boss Sir Robert Stheeman at the end of June.



The DMO is an executive agency of the Treasury respon-

sible for debt and cash management for the UK government.

Pulay joined the DMO in 2015 and is currently co-head of policy and markets. She was previously deputy head of funding at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in London. Earlier in her career she worked at Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs.

BOLT BACK

Former independent chief inspector of borders and immigration **David Bolt** has temporarily returned to the role following the sacking of successor David Neal.

Bolt started work at the beginning of June and will serve as interim ICIBI until a permanent replacement can be found.

Neal was dismissed by home secretary James Cleverly in February following comments he made in the press about border security. He had also raised concerns about delays to the publication of his reports.

Bolt, who was ICIBI from 2015 to 2021, has also previously spoken out about the Home Office’s failure to publish reports in a timely way.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Pippa Lambert’s term as interim chair of the Senior Salaries Review Body has been extended by six months while the Cabinet Office continues its search for a permanent chair. The last permanent chair of the pay review body for senior public servants, Martin Read, left the role in May 2022.

Lord Amyas Morse (above right) has stepped down as interim chair of the Office for Local Government because of “unexpected health reasons”. Morse, a former head of the National Audit Office, said his preference would have been to stay on at Oflog – potentially as its permanent chair.



The Civil Service Commission has named three new commissioners. Former Government Legal Department director general **Elizabeth Hambley**, ex-PwC partner **Tony Poulter**, and former Cabinet Office executive director **Neil Wooding** will each serve for five years.

The Northern Ireland Executive has two new permanent secretaries. **Hugh Widdis** took over the top job at the Department of Justice in April, while **Ian Snowden** has been made permanent secretary of the Department for the Economy after serving as interim perm sec since December.



Jenny Stewart (above) has been appointed as interim chief executive of the Animal and Plant Health Agency from the beginning of July. APHA is currently recruiting for a permanent replacement for outgoing chief executive **David Holdsworth**, who takes the helm of the Charity Commission next month. ■

CELEBRATING

Years

CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD

WORLD IN MOTION

As CSW celebrates its 20th anniversary, we look back on our most memorable moments and reflect on how times have changed since we launched

Two decades is a long time in government. When we launched as Whitehall & Westminster World in 2004, Tony Blair's New Labour drove

the policy of the day. Our archives capture vignettes of the high-profile projects civil servants were working on in those early years - from ASBOs and the Euro to the long, tortuous development (and, later, scrapping) of ID cards. Back then, after a period of expansion, officials were grappling with how to do "more with more". Such a dilemma seems inconceivable now.

In our first issue, Oliver Letwin - then shadow chancellor - set out his vision of a smaller, less "interfering" government, saying civil servants had "far too much work to do". But although Letwin and his coalition colleagues would oversee years of downsizing, the work didn't shrink. In 2015, CSW would report on the words of then-civil service chief executive John Manzoni, who said government was doing "30% too much to do it well". Today, headcount reductions - after numbers climbed again thanks to Brexit and Covid - and ruthless prioritisation are both back in vogue as



politicians once again set departments targets for slashing their spending.

Twenty years ago, we could never have anticipated the impact digital advances would have on public services. Nor indeed the effect changing technology would have on the thing CSW cares most about: civil servants' working lives. From the revolution in hybrid working, hastened by the pandemic, to civil servants' in-office attendance somehow becoming a staple of the UK culture wars, we've covered it all. And if you'd told early readers of our fortnightly newspaper that, in 2024, an increasing number of CSW column inches would be devoted to the impact generative AI could have on officials' jobs, they might think you'd been watching too much sci-fi.

As times have changed, so too have we. We set out as a newspaper that helped government leaders communicate across departmental divides. As former cabinet secretary Lord Gus O'Donnell wrote for us in 2012, "I can't remember permanent secretaries ever giving interviews in the newspapers until CSW appeared, but you've managed to tempt them in."

Since our launch we have adopted a more independent stance as a "critical friend" to the civil service. In 2009 we changed our name to *Civil Service World* to better reflect our readership outside London and beyond central government. In 2014, the pink pages gave way to a monthly magazine, as a relaunched website boasting comprehensive daily news and online exclusives made room for a focus on in-depth features and analysis

"Back then officials were grappling with how to do more with more"

detailed explorations of meaty topics like reducing reoffending or net zero along with articles celebrating the wonderfully diverse ways that officials serve the public.

There is a lot for us to celebrate too, which is why, in a special series spanning the next three issues, we reflect on the highlights of two decades of CSW: the interviews with today's top officials and politicians in their salad days, the reports on the crunch issues of the time and the some of the more lighthearted features offering a bit of niche, bureaucrat-based humour to our overworked readers. ■

civilserviceworld.com



HINDSIGHT IS A WONDERFUL THING

To kick off our nostalgia fest, we raided the archive with a view to catching up with officials and politicians we spoke to back in the day. We got in touch to remind them of one or two things they said to us, and asked them to give us some updated thoughts on the same themes

DAME CLARE MORIARTY

What did they do? During a 35-year civil service career, Moriarty worked in seven departments. After serving as Defra permanent secretary from 2015-2019, she became DExEU perm sec and was tasked with shutting that department down when Brexit took effect in early 2020.

What did they say? In her exit interview with CSW in April 2020, Moriarty told us: “I’ve been a civil servant all my career, and a change agent all my life. There is a bit of me that constantly wants to see what more I can do and whether there is something different I can do to change the world. So I had always thought that I might end up taking everything I’ve learned in the civil service and put it into practice in a different environment.”

Where are they now? Moriarty has been chief executive of Citizens Advice since April 2021.

What do they say now? “And so it came to pass! A year after leaving the civil service I



joined Citizens Advice, attracted by its practical focus on the issues that make a difference to people’s lives, their health and wellbeing. As we’re fond of saying, no-one sees as many problems as we do. And as well as helping people individually, we use our data and insights to advocate for policy change in order to stem those problems at source. So yes, still trying to change the world, and everything I learned in the civil service comes in very useful.”

LORD BLUNKETT

What did they do? First elected as an MP in 1987, David Blunkett served as education secretary, home secretary and finally work and pensions secretary under Tony Blair. CSW interviewed him in summer 2010 as he was re-adjusting to life on the opposition benches.

What did they say? Speaking about the Treasury, Blunkett said: "They employ some of the brightest people in Britain, but their experience of life outside the Treasury is extremely limited – and they believe that they're the brightest people in Britain." The department's lack of "humility, and willingness to listen" meant that "we end up with the Treasury second-guessing and over-controlling and making a mess of other people's projects, and then the other department getting the blame."

As an example, Blunkett cited the Individual Learning Accounts scheme – which, he stressed, "went wrong after I left the Department for Education and Employment, in 2002. The Public Accounts Committee hauled the department over the coals, but it should have been the Treasury: they were the ones who completely reshaped the scheme, and created a monolith which was exploitable by fraudsters and lost us £50m. The more we can get the Treasury off day-to-day decision-making and on to the job they're supposed to do, the better."

Where are they now? Blunkett stepped down as an MP in 2015 and was awarded a peerage in the same year.

What do they say now? "Things have moved on since 2010. The Treasury has moved at least a substantial number of staff out of London and an impressive diversity programme has been put in place. "All of this is good news, but the

underlying challenge highlighted back in 2010 remains. Namely, groupthink. Those with any training in economics often use completely outdated models, with something in the DNA that is reminiscent of the catastrophic mistake of sticking to the gold standard between the wars.

"A mindset of 'mild austerity' bedevils creativity, and old ways of thinking and delivering endure. Things might change in the next five years, but pigs might fly."

HILARY SPENCER

What did they do? For most of her civil service career, Spencer worked at the Department of Education in a series of strategy, policy and private office roles. In 2014 she became head of Civil Service Learning, and it was here that CSW interviewed her in 2016.

What did they say? As CSL was preparing to move into its next phase, Spencer's natural optimism shone through. "I honestly think we [in the civil service] do some of the most important work there is. And I think we've got some fantastic people who pour their heart and soul into what we're doing. A big thing which motivates me is being surrounded by some of those people in my working life."



Where are they now? Shortly after speaking to CSW, Spencer became chief executive of the Government Equalities Office. She spent three years in that role before leaving the civil service in 2019 to head up education charity Ambition Institute.

What do they say now? "I'm still naturally optimistic! And I still think public servants do incredibly important work. I'm lucky enough to see that in my current role, where we support teachers and leaders who work with children in the most disadvantaged communities. We've supported nearly 100,000 teachers and leaders with high-quality professional development over the last three years so they can keep improving their skills, and are able to give as many children as

possible a great education. They really do pour their heart and soul into what they're doing, and I'm lucky to be surrounded by amazing people at Ambition Institute who continually strive for excellence in our mission to tackle inequality.

DAME SUE OWEN

What did they do? CSW first interviewed Sue Owen in 2006 when she was a director general in the Department for International Development. Somewhat oddly, given she had another 11 years of government service ahead of her, CSW asked her for her thoughts on life after the civil service.

What did they say? As for her post-retirement plans, Owen said she pictured a "sybaritic life – but I'd also like to keep my hand in as a non-executive director in between – as well as the gardening, travel and cooking".

Where are they now? Owen moved on to hold several DG posts in the Department for Work and Pensions before spending five years as permanent secretary in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. She left the civil service in 2018 – has her retirement worked out as expected?

What do they say now? "Well it's not proved exactly sybaritic, but is more in my own control, which is lovely. Bizarrely, I'm doing everything I said. I have a few non-exec roles ranging from trucks to terrorism insurance to outsourcing, I chair the Royal Ballet Governors and Debt Management Office Advisory Board (a Treasury arm's-length body), and do a bit of consultancy for Flint Global. What I hadn't anticipated was buying back the Porthmadog house my Dad was born in, doing it up, enjoying the walks there and having friends and family use it too." ■



David Blunkett **INTERVIEW** 5

The reformer turns defender

As a minister, David Blunkett was keen to reform the civil service. But now, he tells Matt Ross, much of the public sector faces an existential threat: a danger of destruction at the hands of its own government



The civil service is a shining, burning beacon of excellence, efficiency, integrity and honesty. It is the backbone of the state, the engine room of government, the place where the nation's most talented and dedicated public servants work. It is the only organisation in the world that has the privilege of serving the public interest, and it is the only organisation that has the responsibility of ensuring that the government of the day is able to deliver on its promises to the people.

Reform is a word that has been used many times in the history of the civil service. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more efficient, more effective, and more accountable. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more transparent, more open, and more accessible to the public.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more professional, more skilled, and more motivated. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more diverse, more inclusive, and more representative of the people it serves.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more resilient, more adaptable, and more able to respond to the challenges of the future. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more sustainable, more long-term, and more focused on the common good.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more honest, more ethical, and more committed to the highest standards of integrity. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more accountable, more transparent, and more open to scrutiny.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more effective, more efficient, and more able to deliver on its promises to the people. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more professional, more skilled, and more motivated. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more diverse, more inclusive, and more representative of the people it serves.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more resilient, more adaptable, and more able to respond to the challenges of the future. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more sustainable, more long-term, and more focused on the common good. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more honest, more ethical, and more committed to the highest standards of integrity. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more accountable, more transparent, and more open to scrutiny.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more effective, more efficient, and more able to deliver on its promises to the people. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more professional, more skilled, and more motivated. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more diverse, more inclusive, and more representative of the people it serves. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more resilient, more adaptable, and more able to respond to the challenges of the future. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more sustainable, more long-term, and more focused on the common good.

Reform is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more honest, more ethical, and more committed to the highest standards of integrity. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more accountable, more transparent, and more open to scrutiny. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more effective, more efficient, and more able to deliver on its promises to the people. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more professional, more skilled, and more motivated. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more diverse, more inclusive, and more representative of the people it serves. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more resilient, more adaptable, and more able to respond to the challenges of the future. It is a word that has been used to describe the process of making the civil service more sustainable, more long-term, and more focused on the common good.

The five Ps of presence

Una O'Brien and Peter Shaw set out their advice on developing your influence and impact in a work environment



Do you ever ask yourself, “What can I do to make my presence felt?” Leaders and aspiring leaders looking to develop a more influential presence at work often face a conundrum: how to increase professional impact whilst avoiding pitfalls such as missing the mark or evoking overly negative reactions.

From our wide experience of executive coaching, whatever your work setting – formal or informal, virtual or in person – we observe that people who develop an influential presence think and act intentionally in five domains.

Building a presence depends upon



embracing inclusivity and drawing on shared purposes and values. It also depends upon clarity, consistency and challenge. Sometimes a single intervention can change the direction of a decision or meeting. But true presence develops over time.

So what can you do? It's not about your physical appearance, or how often or quickly you speak. Our thesis is that anyone can build their presence by developing self-awareness, managing their emotions in the moment and making considered changes to how they interact every day at work. Below we offer a selection of questions and reflections that may give you a head start.

PEOPLE WHO DEVELOP AN INFLUENTIAL PRESENCE

- listen with openness and curiosity
- focus on key issues
- are selective and deliberate in how they intervene
- shape expectations and outcomes
- build alliances and followers
- communicate in ways that ensure their voice is heard
- seek regular feedback and keep refining and adapting their approach
- are good at managing their emotions in the moment

Purpose: what are the outcomes you want to see?

Being clear in your own mind about the outcomes that truly matter will affect how you act and what you say. To bring your purpose to life, consider what contribution or impact you most want to make. What are the challenges or issues facing your community, your organisation or your country that you care about and would like to be involved with?

A strong purpose will have sufficient stretch to be motivating, yet not be so unrealistic as to offer little prospect of change or progress. Steps going forward could include a time-out with your team, allowing space to share individual and collective views on purpose. Or it might include a refresh of the team’s purpose, considering how together you can contribute and have a wider impact.

Preparation: taking time to prepare

Preparation suffers when time is tight. Context is key: one meeting might call for hours of detailed thought, while another might need just five minutes of reflection about the core point you want to make. Consider what type of preparation worked well in the past and how that might be useful to you

FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS, INFLUENCE AND PRESENCE IS ENHANCED BY

- tuning in on time
- being fully present and having the camera on
- using the chat function openly and intentionally as a supplement to the meeting’s purpose
- creating opportunities for follow-up one-on-one informal conversations either virtually or in person

in the future. What can you do beforehand to show up for a conversation or a meeting being, looking and feeling fully engaged?

Practice: training your instinct

A packed diary can crowd out your broader influence. Take time to “stand on the balcony” and look with perspective at what needs to shift. Questions you could ask of yourself include:

- how well do I make space for other voices into the room?
- what’s the feedback about my impact on the conversation or meeting?
- what type of contributions keep the focus on the strategic rather than the tactical?

Steps going forward could be to experiment more with trusting and deploying your intuitive reactions and emotional awareness. You could also experiment with being two degrees bolder in your contributions than is your natural inclination.

Feedback from colleagues can help you to guard against potential pitfalls that undermine presence, such as believing too much in your own rhetoric, wanting to be the rescuer or the hero, or over-exerting yourself by talking too loudly or quickly. Be wary too that a negative presence can show up visibly in demeanour and body language, as well as in curt comments, especially if you are over-tired or under stress.

Perseverance: getting the timing right

Judging when to hold back and when to act takes practice, whether in writing, in meetings or participating in a webinar or on a panel. Key questions to reflect upon might include:

- is my instinct to intervene too early or too late?
- what can I learn from those who seem to get the timing of their interventions right?

Sometimes saying nothing is the right approach. Your influence might be coming from your role, your reputation, or your past contributions. Your presence can be felt and your body language observed. Steps going forward could be to apply the “rule of three” to focus the points you make in any intervention. Observe when your heart wants to intervene and your head wants to hold back. Be deliberate in prompting an internal dialogue between head and heart.

Partnership: building a shared way forward

To be successful, any team requires all the players to work together to build a shared way forward with others. Using your presence to build alliances can amplify your influence through joint endeavour and complementary approaches.

Questions to ask yourself might include:

- where might I have a problem with trust?
- what might be holding me back from forming stronger partnerships?
- Potential next steps might be to consider how well and how clearly you communicate the underlying reasons for effective teamwork and/or new partnerships. Look to build a clear acceptance of shared accountability.



Keep learning

Adding to your repertoire is a lifelong endeavour. It can be helpful to reflect on how wise, experienced and authoritative leaders would handle a situation you find yourself in. And it is no less timely to remember what your own life experience has taught you about when to speak, when to compromise, and when to bide your time. Marianne Williamson famously wrote: “As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.” We encourage those we coach to be ready to be surprised about the contributions they can make and the presence they can bring. ■

Peter Shaw CB and Dame Una O’Brien are former civil servants, now executive coaches with Praesta Partners. A fuller version of their work on presence can be found at www.praesta.co.uk

ALEXANDER EVANS FLEXING FOR THE FUTURE?

THE CIVIL SERVICE MUST BECOME BETTER EQUIPPED TO COPE WITH SURPRISES. OUTSOURCING FOR AGILITY IS COSTING BILLIONS

This column should probably begin with a trigger warning: the theme is flexible working. Cue strong views, keenly held, on the merits of whether civil servants should be in the office or working from home. But the debate that is needed on flexible working in the public sector is a different one.

Most of the civil service are doing fixed jobs: roles that carry a grade, job title, defined goals and corporate identities. Officials further segment by categories. Generalist or specialist, department or arms-length body, policy or operational – the list goes on. Yet the business of government is unpredictable as often as it is predictable. For all the core, continuing work that government does, including programme delivery, welfare and national security, there is also a constant array of surprises. Crises emerge with little notice. Prime ministerial or ministerial initiatives demand fresh focus and the rapid repurposing of staffing priorities. As permanent secretaries or senior officials change, so can internal priorities.

Yet the underlying civil service infrastructure is more fixed than variable. Rooting around for staff for crisis work, or for surging into fresh priorities, or to lead ad hoc workstreams is often a challenge. Assembling teams at pace to adapt to changing needs is frequently painful. Directors general or directors may not want to give up good people. Even when staff are identified and available, a temporary project rather than a confirmed slot isn't always a compelling proposition. All too often the result is a fudge, resulting in fewer bodies than needed, and outsized demands on senior official time to beg, borrow and steal the people and resource they need.

Little wonder that government spends a lot of money on external consultants. The good news, as Sir Alex Chisholm set out to parliament earlier this year, is that consultancy spend dropped from £1.596 billion in 2021/22 to £1.187 billion in 2022/23. Much of this was due to the relentless ministerial focus then – not least by Lord Agnew – on reducing consultancy spend. Over time parts of the civil service have become better at emergency staffing, rehearsing for and managing crises, building doctrine, and muscle-memory. Some departments have developed advanced systems and processes. These include surge capabilities, crisis rosters or project/flexible resourcing pools.

It has been a slower journey to shift the dial from fixed positions to flexible resource more consistently across departments. Some innovations have persisted. For example, DExEU's Priority Projects Unit – a flexible policy and operations team that can be surged into high priority work on an internal costed basis. Now in the Cabinet Office, it attracts first-rate staff, is in high demand, and has one of the strongest learning and development offers across government. Others have withered. The Government Consulting Hub, an internal consulting group, was established in May 2021 only to be closed in January 2023. In addition to improving how the government contracted external consultancy services, it was designed to “grow the civil service's internal capability, including delivering work commonly undertaken by consultants”. The former function has since been passed to the Crown Commercial Service.

Looking forward, the civil service has accrued an enormous amount of crisis experience in recent years: from Covid to Ukraine, from Brexit to Bridges. The current cadre of civil servants have

more applied crisis experience than predecessor generations, as well as the scars and the learning that comes with that. This will likely prove valuable in the years to come, particularly as mid-level officials with lived experience rise to senior positions.

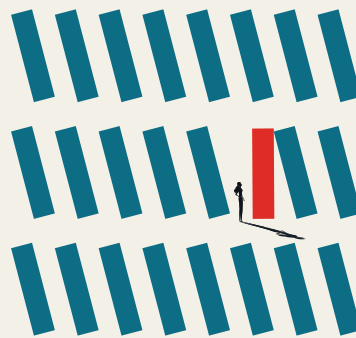
There is a reform agenda that deserves serious and sustained consideration. What could a properly flexible model for the future civil service look like? Should all departments have a flexible “rover” or projects team that can surge into crisis and high priority work, that would be a beacon of excellence rather than a dumping ground for the weakest performing officials? Should the civil service have its own extended internal surge function, as much on policy as on operations? And, most radical of all, should the default for all central policy positions from HEO to Grade 7 be a flexible job role, with only 50% reserved for a specific job description?

There is a balance to be struck between the core, regular busi-

ness of government and framing for crisis, surge and flex. And there's a potential double dividend from a more flexible core civil service. Officials could gain a wider array of diverse experience at pace, build deeper networks within and beyond their core directorates, and boost their own applied learning and development. The government could benefit from a more resilient, crisis and surge-ready civil service – and spend less on (often very well paid) external management consultants. ■

Alexander Evans is a professor in practice in public policy at the London School of Economics and former strategy director in the Cabinet Office

“The civil service has accrued an enormous amount of crisis experience in recent years: from Covid to Ukraine, from Brexit to Bridges”



DAVE PENMAN IT REALLY IS TIME FOR A PLAN

STABILITY, A LONG-TERM VISION FOR THE NATION AND THE RESOURCES FOR CIVIL SERVANTS TO DELIVER IT ARE WHAT WE NEED FROM THIS GENERAL ELECTION

Ask anyone in the FDA and they'll tell you how bad I am at admin and self-organisation. I learned long ago to give up control of my diary to colleagues who are far more adept at time management.

Which is why a couple of weeks ago I ended up visiting all four countries of the UK plus a trip to the Republic of Ireland in just four days. It was, quite literally, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* as I went from London to Llandudno to Belfast to Dublin to London to Oban. I saved the best for last, of course.

The FDA is the only union that has members in all the governments of the UK, and it struck me on my travels how civil servants are simultaneously serving governments of many different colours under different constitutional arrangements. The UK general election was called while I was in the air between Manchester and Belfast. This election, of course, ably demonstrates why a permanent, impartial civil service serves our country so well, being able to continue to serve the current government yet ready to serve the next if there is a change.

The civil service has got quite good at changes of administration of late. Over the last decade alone we've seen five different prime ministers, seven chancellors of the exchequer and then the dozens of secretary of state changes, never mind the junior ministers. Even in simpler times, ministerial changes can mean dramatic changes of policy and direction akin to a change of government.

Without making any assumptions on the outcome, my hope is that this election at least provides the stability that the country and the civil service needs. The political chaos that we have endured since the 2016 Brexit referendum has taken its toll in many ways, but it's also led to some very bad government. Some of that lies squarely at the door of political leaders but another feature of that chaos has been the endless cycle of elections and the jockeying for position for posts from prime minister down.

The result has been a lack of strategic thinking or settled policymaking. The big challenges all governments face require big thinking, but that requires stability. Instead, we've had a series of short-term retail policy initiatives more focused on the polls than the public they're supposed to serve.

In civil service terms just think of that last decade. We've had austerity and drastic reduction in staffing numbers. Brexit blew that apart but we've then had successive governments in denial about the consequences of exiting the EU and

the inevitable demands this would place on the civil service. Covid not only brought its own challenges but demonstrated the consequences of hollowing out many public services.

Government has adopted a "make do and mend" approach, throwing resources at issues that create a political problem, then decrying the increase in the size of the state. Pay in the civil service is the perfect example. Ideologically driven to deny the inevitable consequences of uncompetitive pay, instead of having a strategic approach to reward, ministers create a system that has suppressed pay to a point where we have record turnover. We've got shortages in key skills because we can't compete externally and the system in the senior civil service actively encourages movement between posts as the only real mechanism to get a pay rise. Ministers then complain about

"We've had successive governments in denial about the consequences of exiting the EU and the inevitable demands this would place on the civil service"



the inability to recruit from outside and the churn rates inside the service and wonder quizzically where it all went wrong.

Civil servants know the big challenges the public sector faces because they're living with them every day. Whoever wins the election is going to need a civil service with the right resources, skills and motivation to help transform those services.

That's not going to be easy in a tight fiscal environment, but it's possible with strategic thinking, good engagement and an abandonment of ideological baggage. ■

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union



LINE OF DUTY

The impartiality of the civil service has been tested to its limit in recent years – is the damage irreparable? **Benedict Cooper** reports

In the post-Brexit referendum atmosphere of 2019, a revealing comment by Dominic Cummings made its way into the papers. Any civil servant who, in his view, “snubbed” Brexit should be purged.

Cue a bloody period of resignations and sackings. Cue a “hit list” of officials marked for moving on. Cue the emergence of, in the words of a senior civil servant quoted in the *Guardian*, a “poisonous, horrible atmosphere” in Whitehall, “a feeling that retribution could strike at any time for offering the wrong advice to the wrong person”.

Civil servants aren’t accustomed to suffering “retribution”. Certainly not for offering advice. But a series of contentious policies and generational issues – austerity, Brexit, Rwanda, Gaza – have severely strained the trust on which the civil service-ministerial relationship relies.

Ministers have routinely named and

blamed officials who are supposedly not “on-side” with policy, and have asked questions – or made outright accusations – about the impartiality of the service. In turn, senior officials have been pushed out, or quit. Some have gone public with the reasons why.

What has all this done to the relationship between officials and ministers? And what will it take to restore trust, after so much tension?

Pithy slogans have a way of sticking: “Get Brexit done”; “Build The Wall”. So too do negative epithets like “Woke Whitehall”.

For all its malignance, the latter phrase was well aimed. It suggests – to a certain audience – a civil service working towards its own agenda, rather than upholding the impartiality which underpins its integrity as an institution.

Former civil servant and current fellow at the Institute for Government Jill Rutter says: “You are doing a job where your personal views on political objectives and policy choices are not the thing you’re being paid to pursue.

“Most civil servants realise that if you want to pursue your own agenda then you ought to go into politics. The deal is that you recognise you haven’t chosen to put yourself up for election, so you check your personal political views at the door of your department.”

But deals have two sides. And if officials are to forgo their personal opinions, says Clare Moriarty, former permanent secretary at the environment and exit-

“What happens when an official is ordered to carry out a policy that not only clashes with their own personal views, but also crosses an ethical line?”

ing Europe departments, what they need in exchange is for their impartial advice and expertise to be taken in good faith.

“The question is: is the advice being respected?” she says. “Trust has to be the cornerstone in a relationship which is fundamentally unequal. Ministers can speak out, but civil servants can’t.”

Moriarty left Whitehall in March 2020 and became chief executive of Citizens Advice a year later. Looking back, she says that around the time of her departure, trust and respect between officials and ministers had already begun to break down.

“We saw ministers being more inclined to just say, ‘I’m going to do this.’ That seemed to be shifting in a way that if it went on, you’d start to have problems.

“It’s an uncomfortable space to be in constantly, where you’re giving advice and then receiving a different instruction. If you take away the trust and the respect that makes it workable, you can quickly get into a place where it becomes oppositional.”

To see quite how oppositional that relationship can get, we don’t

have to look back very far.

The three years of rancour that followed Cummings’ edict to purge officials saw the forced departures of major Whitehall figures Mark Sedwill, Simon McDonald and Jonathan Slater. Under Truss, a short, sharp period of almost total dysfunction began with the dismissal of Tom Scholar.

Rutter traces much of this back to the way in which Brexit affected the political debate from 2016 onwards.

“One of the problems with Brexit is that it stopped being a policy choice made on merits,” she says. “It became, in the eyes of some Brexiteers, an article of faith. The question was asked, ‘Do you believe in Brexit?’”

Brexit may have moved down the agenda, at least politically. But many big, divisive issues remain. And they are issues that have brought political and moral questions to the fore: austerity, migration, the ensuing Rwanda policy, and the Windrush scandal before that. And, since October last year, the Middle East and Britain’s relationship with Israel.

FDA general secretary Dave Penman says that these deep paradigm questions have weighed on the civil service-ministerial balance.

“What we’ve seen over the last five to six years are some pretty fundamental philosophical and moral issues about how the government has been dealing with things. Questions about the rule of law, matters of conduct,” Penman says. In turn, he continues, a fundamental- >>



Walking the walk Dominic Cummings reportedly said “a hard rain was coming” for Whitehall, and – as far as some perm secs’ jobs were concerned – it came to pass

ist “You’re with us or against us” attitude has developed among ministers.

“There’s been a kind of infection in some ministers, who reject any challenge to their position. Ministers just want officials to reinforce what they believe. Baiting and stoking civil servants became a strategy. It’s now become fair game.”

Someone who knows about this strategy all too well – who was on the infamous hit list and was ultimately taken out – is Simon, now Lord, McDonald. As permanent under-secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and head of the diplomatic service until August 2020, McDonald felt the full force of the Cummings purge.

His exit sent waves of anger through Whitehall, and marked for many a dangerous departure from the principles which guide ministers’ working relations with their officials. Far from being protected under these principles, McDonald says, officials like him were simply “hung out to dry”.

Speaking to CSW, he says: “In the old days there was ministerial accountability. Ministers were taking the decisions so ministers carried the can because that was where responsibility lay.

“Now, ministers are not willing to take the responsibility when it doesn’t work out and civil servants are routinely blamed. It’s not the decision-taker’s problem, it’s the implementer’s problem. That’s a twisting of the system which is wrong. The briefing against civil servants, which some ministers do routinely, is a disagreeable development of the last few years.”

He notes another change as well, with increased ministerial involvement reaching beyond the top posts of a department: “If a secretary of state does not like a senior civil servant for whatever reason, they just get rid of them. Liz Truss took a very detailed interest not only in the most senior people in the Foreign Office but also in the layers down from that, and she exerted her influence. That division of what’s for the civil service and what’s for the minister has all but disappeared.”

According to Rhys Clyne, an associate director at the IfG, this development hasn’t just created an uncomfortable working environment for officials. It has skewed a founding principle of the civil service-ministerial relationship to the detriment of good government.

“It’s really important that civil servants should be able to test policy pro-

posals, point out delivery problems and challenge assumptions,” he says. “It’s vital that the civil service is given the space to challenge and advise robustly and to speak truth to power.”

McDonald agrees, noting that: “The function of the civil service is not simply to implement the policy of the government. The function of the civil service is to think through those policies, to think of alternative ways of implementing them, and to expose the possible problems.”

The challenge now is that ministers appear to perceive the exposing of problems as insubordination rather than a proper role of the service.

According to the civil service code, officials must not “act in a way that is determined by party-political considerations”, nor “allow your personal political views to determine any advice you give or your actions”. But what happens when an official is ordered to carry out a policy that not only clashes with their own personal political views, but also crosses an ethical line?

We don’t have to look back very far to find examples. When career diplomat Alexandra Hall quit the service in 2019, she was crystal clear about the

reasons. Her resignation letter stated that she was no longer willing to “peddle half-truths on behalf of a government I do not trust”. The issue at stake: Brexit, again. The decision to resign was taken after months of self-critical thinking; a fraught “internal struggle” as Hall put it.

Expounding this struggle, the letter asked profound questions about the conscience of an official “when tasked with implementing a policy with which they do not agree, or that they consider unethical or even illegal”.

“Is our primary duty to the elected government of the day,” Hall asked, “even when it may be breaking the law or wilfully deceiving the public?”

Today, Hall’s bio on X reads: “Free to speak at last”.

To some, this dilemma is a relatively easy one to square. As Clyne says: “Civil servants can reconcile their role in delivering policy that they might not personally agree with by assuring themselves that it’s been reached democratically, it’s within the law, and therefore it’s not their role to adjudicate morally on that policy. That’s why that process really matters.”

But what happens when the process itself may have been subverted? When an official’s conscience drives them to – in the words of Sir Douglas Wass’ 1983 *Government and the Governed* Reith Lecture – “oppose actions which are either unlawful, unconstitutional, or which involve some great affront to human values”.

In 2019, writing for CSW, former senior civil servant Stefan Czerniawski argued that civil servants need to be alert to the possibility of a government crossing a legal or ethical line which could undermine its democratic legitimacy.

“If any civil servant judges that ministers’ democratic legitimacy has broken down, they must accept that their ethical authority has also broken down,” Czerniawski wrote. “Whatever

“The boundaries between personal conscience and public duty have been crossed, if not redrawn”

they do next, they do as an independent moral agent, personally responsible for their decisions and actions. They may choose to continue, accepting that responsibility, or to walk away.

“They won’t be easy choices,” he continued, “but civil servants must recognise their responsibility to bear these issues in mind, and the civil service needs to be much more ready

to support them in doing so.”

Five years later, it is the civil service unions which seem to be taking up this challenge. Both the PCS union and the FDA are fighting for clarity for members over two highly contentious issues: British arms sales to Israel and the Rwanda legislation.

In April, PCS publicly declared that its members must be allowed to “cease work immediately” on any contracts relating to UK arms sales to Israel. To enforce this right, the PCS is now considering legal action.

And at the start of May, the FDA filed an application for a judicial review over concerns that orders under the government’s Safety of Rwanda Act may be breaching both the civil service code and international law.

The searing statement issued by Penman when announcing the decision – accusing the government of being “cowardly” and “reckless” – summed up so many of the issues civil servants must grapple with in the face of questionable legislation.

He said: “We have been clear all along that our challenge is not about the policy itself – that is a matter for parliament. Civil servants know that they have to support the government of the day and implement policy regardless of their political beliefs. But they also know they have a legal obligation to adhere to the civil service code.

“Faced with a government that is prepared to act in this cowardly, reckless way, it is left to the FDA to defend our members and the integrity of the civil service.”

And commenting on the PCS Israel arms campaign, Paul O’Connor, head of bargaining, says: “All of this is bringing us into increasing conflict with interpretations of what should happen with ministerial instructions, what our members’ obligations under the codes are, and what happens in a situation where our members know that something is unlawful. The times have brought the whole thing into sharper focus. It is becoming increasingly a ground of conflict.

“What is the civil service code on political impartiality actually designed to do? I think that needs to be much more clearly defined so that our members know what type of political activity is acceptable and what isn’t. Our view is that the lowest possible bar should be set.”

To some, the traditional pillar of impartiality still stands, and the bar doesn’t

WHOSE GOVERNMENT IS IT ANYWAY?

“The rules seem to be changing before our very eyes, without people really thinking it through before they are changed. When I was the permanent secretary to Boris Johnson, when he was foreign secretary, it worked in the old-fashioned way, in that Boris Johnson was content for me as his permanent secretary to run the diplomatic service, and for me that was a good, clear division of labour. Foreign secretaries since Johnson have been very active in what traditionally would have been permanent secretary business. Liz Truss and Dominic Raab both interfered in ways that Douglas Hurd, Malcolm Rifkind, Geoffrey Howe would never have done.”
Simon McDonald

“You can’t have the civil service either mutinying and saying, ‘We’re not prepared to implement your policy’, or undermining it. I think there can be a perception among ministers that the civil service has got its own agenda and is trying to undermine decisions by ministers. I’ve never seen that happen.”
Clare Moriarty

“At the heart of this, there’s an ambiguity over accountability between ministers and civil servants and how you can disentangle who is responsible for what in practice. One aspect of this is that it is always difficult to distinguish between advice on policy and policy implementation and the exact roles of ministers and civil servants.”
Rhys Clyne

need to move. Civil servants don’t go to work in the high offices of state believing they won’t be involved in some major and, inevitably, controversial policy. Nor do they require all advice – however sound – to be followed into policy.

“If you can’t live with that,” says Moriarty, “then the civil service is probably not the place for you.”

But in the political maelstrom of the past decade, the old principles of impartiality, objectivity, even personal-professional morality, have been tested to new limits. Careers have ended. Bitter disputes have arisen. The boundaries between personal conscience and public duty have been crossed, if not redrawn.

And while era-defining events still unfold globally, the same heat that fired it all remains. The “internal struggle” of the official goes on. ■

BEST



LAI D PLANS

The Spring Budget was underpinned by plans for increased productivity, but will they meet the scale of the challenge? **Jim Dunton** reports on how departmental productivity plans are shaping up

Jeremy Hunt placed much emphasis on driving up public sector productivity in March's Spring Budget, effectively pitching it as the magic money tree that can bridge the gap between current spending plans and departmental needs.

The chancellor pointed to Office for Budget Responsibility figures indicating that the failure of public sector productivity to return to pre-pandemic levels was equivalent to a £20bn-a-year drag on spending power. According to the OBR, productivity is 5.9% below where it was in the months before Covid 19 hit.

Perhaps not by coincidence, the figure of £20bn is broadly in line with think tank

the Institute for Fiscal Studies' projections for the minimum annual shortfall in public spending by 2028-29, based on Spring Budget data and Hunt's reluctance to increase spending beyond 1% a year.

In his budget speech, Hunt announced £4.2bn in funding for productivity-boosting projects, primarily in the NHS, but also covering policing, prisons, courts, schools and councils. But HM Treasury has been clear that productivity plans are required from all ministries.

Hunt's speech put departments on notice that the Treasury will "do things differently" in the next spending review, with priority being given to "proposals that deliver annual savings within five years equivalent

to the total cost of the investment required".

More than 80% of the pump-priming productivity funding that Hunt set out in March is earmarked for the NHS, with £800m targeted at other departments (see box). The chancellor said the health service programme would deliver an annual "labour productivity" boost of 1.9%. The Treasury claimed the NHS programme alone would "help unlock £35bn in cumulative productivity savings from 2025-26 to 2029-30".

The non-NHS elements of the funding target a more modest £1.8bn in savings by 2029. Measures fall into three broad categories: reducing the time frontline workers spend on "unnecessary administrative tasks"; "embracing opportunities" presented by greater use of cutting-edge technology; and strengthening "preventative action" to reduce demand on public services.

As part of the technology push, the Spring Budget pledged to "more than double" the size of i.AI, the artificial

intelligence incubator team, to ensure government has the necessary in-house expertise to “seize the benefits of AI across the public sector and civil service”.

Staff salaries are a significant chunk of operational costs, so increased use of technology is closely connected to the government’s ambition to cut civil service headcount to pre-pandemic levels as part of the Public Sector Productivity Programme. While such targets are changeable and too-often politicised, some reductions in headcount would seem likely.

Productivity plans: what will happen and when

Hunt told members of parliament’s Treasury Select Committee that the Spring Budget is the start of “the biggest ever public sector productivity programme”, with annual productivity gains of around 2% to be sought from all departments.

The chancellor acknowledged that driving up productivity to pre-pandemic levels would be “very challenging” but said delivery would ensure “we do not have to have damaging cuts to services valued by the public”. After the budget, the IFS projected that “unprotected” departments could be looking at cuts of up to 3.5% a year from 2025-26 to 2028-29.

The next spending review, as well as being the first for a new administration, will be a milestone for efforts to improve public-sector productivity. As government departments only have allocations until April 2025, prime minister Rishi Sunak’s decision to call an early July general election will at least allow work to start sooner rather than later – whichever party is in charge. Hunt previously put departments on notice that their productivity plans and proposals for reducing headcount to pre-pandemic levels would be fed into the spending review process.

Ahead of the publication of manifestos, the Conservative Party still appears wedded to the idea of cutting civil service headcount to 2019 levels, which would require a reduction in the region of 80,000 staff based on March figures from the ONS. Labour has not committed to take the same approach. In April, it pledged to boost the size of HM Revenue and Customs by 5,000 officials as part of a plan to raise an additional £5.1bn a year through tax compliance.

Elsewhere in government, the Cabinet Office has been working with departments to finalise “AI adoption plans” to expand automation and AI across a range of priority areas. Those plans, which would clearly have implications for headcount, are also due to feed into the spending review.

What do people think?

There is little disagreement that improving public sector productivity is important in keeping services running and the nation’s finances under control. But the extent to which gains can offset the difference between current spending plans and what will be required by departments in practice is more uncertain.

IFS director Paul Johnson told MPs on the Treasury Committee that productivity improvements in the health service were needed simply to start getting waiting lists down. But he is unconvinced the plan will “massively reduce” pressure for spending on its own. “We know there is quite low-hanging fruit in some of these big areas, and we really ought to be focusing on some of that,” he said, noting that part of the reason the NHS is struggling with productivity is a lack of investment in “half-decent IT systems”, let alone world-leading AI.

Joe Hill, policy director at think tank Reform, tells CSW that HM Treasury’s approach to funding elements of the latest productivity drive is “somewhat refreshing” in comparison to previous patterns of behaviour. “The Treasury are coughing up some transformation funding,” he says. “They’re clearly banking some savings in return and they’re willing to put a number on those.” However, he describes

tives to cut the so-called “tax gap”.

Like Johnson, Hill is not sure about the “size of the prize” in relation to boosting public sector productivity, but he feels quantifying it is irrelevant to a certain extent. “This is the only game in town for the state,” he says. “Unless you fix these chronic productivity problems, you’re throwing good money after bad. You have to do as much of it as is feasible. You need to have a massive great go.”

Hill, who is a former head of Home Office spending at HM Treasury, views reducing civil service headcount and weeding out poor performance as important areas for focus. “The public sector is hugely dependent on people’s time,” he says. “Cost goes up as people cost more and inflation drives up prices. Digitisation and automation are the only way to escape some of these productivity traps, so if this government or the next government cannot find ways to get headcount down then nothing’s going to change.”

He adds: “Everyone is affected by large numbers of people in public services being often quite poor performers, but being unable to remove them because of HR bureaucracy and finding it hard to make redundancy payments.”

Hill also reckons there ought to be a revival of the coalition government era

“red-tape challenge”, but one that focuses specifically on things that are burdensome to the public-sector. “The impact that lots and lots of red tape has on the public sector is huge, but it’s hidden because it doesn’t show up as a cost line, it just shows up in people’s time,” he says. “Public sector productivity is often a death of a thousand cuts. None of these things, individually, are

unreasonable to ask. But the total of them is really unreasonable.”

Capital ideas

Cassia Rowland, a senior researcher at the Institute for Government, notes that the Spring Budget shows retreating capital spending over the coming years. She says the situation will have knock-on effects for productivity. “We have long-term, since the 1970s, invested less in terms of capital in public services than most other wealthy nations,” she says. “I think that is probably part of the picture as to why we’ve had a real slow-down in productivity growth.

“The current hospital maintenance



“Increased use of technology is closely connected to the government’s ambition to cut civil service headcount to pre-pandemic levels”

the identified savings as “pretty small, compared to the scale of the challenge”.

HM Treasury says the proposals as set out are just the start, and that the Public Sector Productivity Programme also includes a range of ongoing work, such as the Department for Work and Pensions’ efforts to reduce benefit fraud and HM Revenue and Customs’ initia-



PUBLIC SECTOR PRODUCTIVITY PROGRAMME: SELECTED CONFIRMED FUNDING

NHS £3.4bn to accelerate technological and digital transformation, including upgrading MRI scanners, rolling out universal electronic patient records and reducing the time frontline workers spend on administrative tasks.

According to HM Treasury, the plan will double investment in technological and digital transformation in the NHS in England. Health secretary Victoria Atkins said digitisation of operating theatres under the package would open up an extra 200,000 operating slots a year.

HOME OFFICE/POLICE £230m to pilot facial-recognition technology, automate triage of 101 calls, use drones as “first responders” to incidents, and establish a Centre for Police Productivity. £75m to expand the Violence Reduction Unit model across police forces in England and Wales. **MINISTRY OF JUSTICE** £100m to support rehabilitative activities in prisons, reducing reoffending. £55m for targeted guidance and earlier legal advice in the family courts. £15m for digital solutions that reduce administrative burdens in the courts.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION £105m towards 15 new special free schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities. £45m in match funding for local authorities to build an additional 200 open children’s home placements. £120m to fund the maintenance of existing secure children’s homes and rebuild two secure children’s homes. Extra capacity is expected to reduce local government reliance on expensive emergency provision and deliver improved outcomes for young people.

PUBLIC SECTOR FRAUD AUTHORITY £34m for deploying AI to help combat fraud across the public sector, saving £100m for the public purse.

DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS £17m to replace paper-based processes with simplified online services, like a new system for the Child Maintenance Service.

backlog is just over £11.6bn. That is significantly more than the £3.4bn that has been allocated for NHS productivity in the Spring Budget. And that money is mostly aimed at technological improvements.”

Rowland says “quite basic stuff around buildings not flooding and being structurally sound” poses real risks. “If you’re having to close a ward because it gets flooded every six months, that’s pretty bad for your productivity,” she says.

In relation to headcount, Rowland points to downsides of the departure of experienced officials, even if they are replaced by new recruits. “If you’ve got more experienced staff, they’re likely to be more productive, so if people are leaving because wages have been held too low for too long, or working conditions are poor, that will potentially reduce productivity,” she says.

“You see this in the police, for instance, where the number of charges per officer has fallen quite substantially. There are a few different reasons for that around crime complexity and so on, but we think one of the

reasons is the influx of new officers. They need time to learn the system and how it works and become productive themselves. And they also place a burden on the more experienced staff who are training them, which in turn reduces their productivity.”

“Numbers will change”

Keen as he is to see public sector productivity benefits materialise, IFS director Johnson told MPs he does not expect current public spending projections to stand, necessitating swingeing cuts across unprotected departments. “Whoever wins the next election, it is most unlikely that they will be imposing 10%-15% cuts across those services,” he told the Treasury Committee.

“It is much more likely that we will either borrow more or tax and spend more, or we will get lucky with growth.”

Reform’s Hill predicts the productivity drive will end up following a well-worn Treasury track. “The most likely thing that will happen to try and drive productivity is that the Treasury, after the election, will just give departments lower settle-

“If you’ve got more experienced staff, they’re likely to be more productive”
Cassia Rowland, IFG

ments than they would want and say, ‘you guys figure it out,’ he says. “Which is what, historically, they’ve always done: Apply some top-down efficiency percentage and say, ‘go away and deal with it.’”

But even if that situation comes to pass, newly-worked-up productivity plans will form part of the solution. ■

SHARING AND DARING

Can we drive innovation and also build greater equality? This solution-focused guide suggests so, writes **Will Lord**

› **Innovation for the Masses:
How to Share the Benefits
of the High-Tech Economy**
› **Neil Lee**
› **University of
California Press**

Innovation policy is increasingly important to British statecraft. The prime minister is on a mission to make the UK a “science and technology superpower” and the destination of choice for artificial intelligence developers. A new Advanced Research and Invention Agency – modelled on the legendary DARPA – has been launched. The chancellor hopes to make the country the “next Silicon Valley”.

If one thing stands out, it’s how American this all sounds. Indeed with its “golden triangle” of universities in London, Oxford and Cambridge; its growing venture capital sector; and its many \$1bn “unicorn” companies, Britain could claim to be a close cousin of the USA’s innovation machine. And yet our economic model also delivers stagnant incomes, punishing house prices, and some of the worst regional disparities in the developed world. Are we looking at the wrong place for inspiration?

Neil Lee’s new book, *Innovation for the Masses: How to Share the Benefits of the High-Tech Economy* is therefore extremely timely. Lee is a professor of economic geography at LSE, and a respected voice on regional policy. His thesis is concise and effective. Technology-driven innovation is critical to improving living standards, he claims. But too many coun-

tries try to emulate a very specific Silicon Valley model of top-tier research universities and disruptive technology giants like Google and Meta. Reading this, I must confess I experienced vivid flashbacks to my time in Whitehall, having to describe a positive but not earth-shattering £100m R&D fund for Manchester, the West Midlands, and Glasgow as “replicating” Silicon Valley and Boston.

Lee argues this model has come with high levels of inequality, spiralling house prices, and divides between “superstar cities” and ex-industrial regions. In his words, “focusing on Silicon Valley alone has led us to conclude that a truly innovative economy comes at the price of high equality”. But governments can shape the contours of the innovation economy and ensure its benefits are more widely felt. To do this, Lee argues we should look beyond Palo Alto to places combining dynamic innovation economies with broad-based prosperity.

After briskly taking the reader through what innovation is and why it matters, *Innovation for the Masses* dives into four

case studies: Switzerland, Austria, Taiwan and Sweden. All are productive, high-wage economies, and yet they have avoided the higher inequality and hollowing-out of the middle class seen by many of their peers.

Each one did this differently. Switzerland combines superb research universities and technology-rich industries with radically de-centralised governance and respected vocational colleges. Austria delivered big increases in private R&D by transforming “traditional” industries like steel. Taiwan fostered translational research institutes that spun out firms like the world-beating Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, but experienced lower inequality than peers like Singapore. And Sweden successfully combined a thriving technology cluster in Stockholm with a redistributive welfare state. At the same time, there are common threads running through each. For example, they all have strong vocational systems, collaboration between unions and employers, knowledge institutions that care just as much about the diffusion of new technology as its genera-

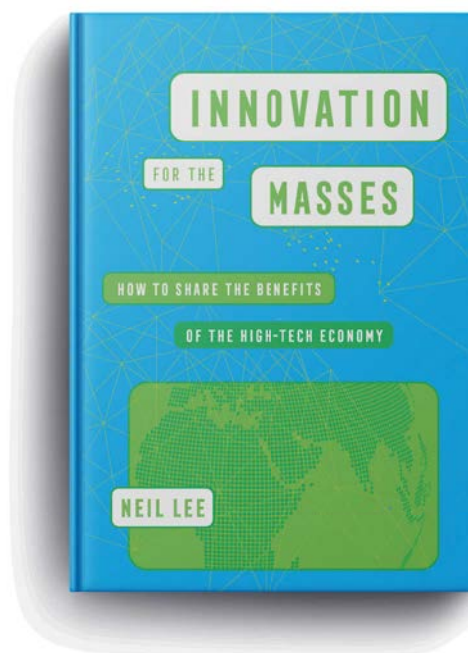
tion, competent officials, and powerful local governments.

Lee is an academic, but this is an ideal book for policymakers. His argument and recommendations are compelling. The prose is crisp and often witty. He expertly explains the economic literature, but also cares about history and geography. He is not rose-tinted about his case studies, accepting that they all have limits and cannot be transplanted wholesale to another country, while setting out their practical lessons. It’s also clear that he has spoken to civil servants in these countries. For example, it turns out Swiss officials have little time for big bold technology “missions” that might grab officials elsewhere in the world, preferring incrementalism and the cultivation of niche industrial strengths.

For all its flaws, the Anglo-American model still generates discoveries – from the internet, to Covid vaccines, to DeepMind’s AlphaFold – that transform the world. I personally wonder if we would sacrifice something if we all decided to be more Austrian. But Lee makes a convincing argument that dynamism and greater equality are not at odds, and indeed are often mutually reinforcing. If Switzerland and Sweden manage it, why can’t we?

There are many pertinent lessons here for British policy makers, whether it is being less queasy about R&D as a tool of regional growth, prioritising the diffusion of innovation, or rebuilding the long-neglected vocational education system. It is exactly the kind of book I wish I’d had when I worked in government, and an excellent guide for those seeking inspiration for a better economic model. ■

Will Lord is head of government relations at the Aerospace Technology Institute. He was previously the lead on R&D policy in the government’s Levelling Up Taskforce, strategy lead at UK Research and Innovation, and a senior policy advisor at the Cities and Local Growth Unit



GETTING TO KNOW YOU



With the general election just weeks away, CSW convenes an expert panel asking what the civil service might expect from a new administration

What's going to happen after the election – and what could we expect from a new administration? These are

the questions civil servants are increasingly asking themselves, which is why CSW – in partnership with consultancy Baringa – decided to convene a webinar on this very topic back in late April. Little did we know that the election would be called one month later, and our discussion would prove even more timely than we'd hoped. The combined expertise of our panel led to an informed discussion, offering attendees pearls of wisdom and practical tips for navigating a change of governing party.

Sharing their insights were Alex Thomas, programme director at the Institute for Government and a former senior civil servant; Jonathan Slater, former permanent secretary at the Department for Education and visiting professor at King's College London; and Kavian Brown, partner in Baringa's government and public sector team.

Given Labour's decisive lead in the polls and the party's recent victories in the local and mayoral elections, most of the conversation was devoted to what a majority Labour government could mean for the civil service. However, the IfG's Alex Thomas also sounded a cautionary note for civil servants, stressing the importance of not appearing to favour one outcome over another for reputational reasons.

Jonathan Slater also pointed out that in the run-up to the 2010 election, officials were largely unprepared for the outcome. Most civil servants were getting on with their jobs, and only a small number of people at senior levels were planning for the election – and “none of them came up with the right answer”. Officials should therefore not make assumptions and need to be ready for unexpected results, the panel agreed.

They also agreed that a change of administration – whatever its political makeup – could provide an opportunity to rethink and improve how the civil service works. For Kavian Brown, the Labour party's focus on missions offered the chance to work in “a quite radically different way” that would ultimately improve outcomes. “To deliver lasting and ambitious change, teams need to unite behind a common purpose that flows from senior policy officials through to working-level operational leads. This helps teams pull together behind shared goals, therefore increasing the chance of delivery success,” he said.

While this potential lies further into a new administration, for Slater, the key opportunity would be to estab-

lish the sort of relationships with new ministers that allow for honest advice to be given and heard. It was to this topic that the discussion turned first.

Establishing new working relationships

The panel began by addressing the question of how officials would cope with political masters who either hadn't been in power for 14 years or – in most cases – had never been in power.

“Generally, and without wishing to depress anybody, not very well,” was Slater's rather downbeat response when this question was posed. Historically, some of the biggest government blunders occur precisely when there is a change of governing party, he said.

“And that's because the politicians in charge haven't ever been in charge. So they're completely new. They've spent quite a lot of time thinking about what they would like to do, but without the benefit of any advice from civil servants. Because that's how the system works.

“And new ministers are very enthusiastic – so how likely are we to say, ‘Well, I'm afraid that's an extremely poor idea’ to people we've never met before? We're trying to build trust.

We're trying to get them to feel like we're on their side. [...] We've spent so long working for the other side, we worry that they might not be that keen on our advice. So we try to be as helpful as possible. Then before you know it, you've engaged in a comprehen-

sive restructuring of the NHS which is a total disaster – to take one example.”

Slater went on to point out that a change in governing party is actually a once-every-15-years event: most officials only get one of these in their careers, so why should they expect to be any good at navigating it?

“Therefore, we need to be on alert,” he said. “Clearly it is your job as civil servants to build the confidence and trust of your new political bosses. And you should be trying to lean in, to encourage them to see you as people who know what you're talking about. But at the same time, do guard against not offering your objective advice. It is your job, and it is in the law. And this is the time when it's needed most of all.

“I don't know Keir Starmer or Rachel Reeves or any of these people, but they

seem like reasonably intelligent, thoughtful people who you could imagine having a conversation with. That's been true of most of the secretaries of state I've worked for. So make the most of that opportunity and don't hold back. Because you'll soon find that if you do, it's too late.”

Thomas agreed with Slater about officials' desire to please incoming ministers, and how important it was to develop trusting relationships. Officials should also not position themselves as naysayers or cynics, he said.

“But at the same time – and this is easy to say but hard to do – you've also got to establish yourself as credible. And being credible doesn't always involve saying ‘yes’. It involves sometimes saying ‘no’, or ‘yes, but’ or ‘I hear the outcome you want to achieve. Have you thought about achieving it in this way instead of that way?’”

It was also worth remembering, Thomas went on, that some in the current shadow cabinet had actually served as ministers. He name checked Hilary Benn, Ed Miliband, Pat McFadden, Yvette Cooper and John Healey. “I don't want to overplay that, because a lot of potential ministers and junior ministers won't have had government

experience. And the civil service and government have changed quite a lot in the last 14 years. But there is some experience around that table,” he said.

Baringa's Kavian Brown, who was a grade seven civil servant in the Department for Communities and Local Government

in 2010, shared his memories of getting a secretary of state from a different party.

“We got an email from Peter Housden – the permanent secretary at the time – saying, ‘Everybody down to the atrium, we're going to clap the minister in as he arrives.’ And an hour or so later, Eric Pickles arrives at the door and we all stand in the atrium and clap him in, half expecting a big rousing speech. To be fair to him, he probably didn't anticipate that there would be a few hundred officials standing waiting for him to give a speech, but he just very simply said, ‘Thank you. Time to get on with it.’ And he got in the lift and went straight up to his ministerial office. And that kind of set the tone for us as a department, actually. And, as a team of officials, we went back to our desks

and thought, 'Right, it's the business.'

Brown then shared his recollections from his time in Whitehall and the frustration that can arise on both sides at the start of the official-ministerial relationship – before civil servants have had time to establish a minister's preferred way of working and understand the particular constraints under which politicians operate. He added that, notwithstanding the need to build relationships, officials had been quite good at telling new ministers that their ideas weren't going to work following the 2010 election. "And this could be perceived by the minister as, 'Well you're just blocking me, aren't you?'" In order to dispel this perception, Brown said it was more important than ever that current civil servants start to think about implementation in a different way and about generating ideas and proposals for how a minister's ideas could be implemented.

A mission-led government

In light of Labour's statements about wanting to take a long-term approach ("a decade of national renewal", as Starmer has frequently put it) and the party's "five missions for Britain", the panel discussed what a mission-led, longer-term approach to government could mean for officials.

Slater welcomed the talk of longer-term thinking as being a "jolly good thing" for civil servants – although he added that it was not something they had much experience of, thanks to the turbulence of the last few years. A mission-led approach would also require a "really quite serious mindset shift" away from "inputs" and towards thinking about long-term outcomes, he said.

"People should be spending a lot of time thinking about: 'Well, if you were going to take 10 or 15 years to do something, rather than before a new prime minister gets elected in 12 months' time, or 49 days' time, what would that mean?' Because it would be quite significantly different," Slater said.

"Now, the good news is that the civil service can do this, and has done it. You know, Universal Credit is quite an interest-

ing example of that. It went badly wrong at first, but then went really quite well."

Slater added that missions would also mean working from the point of view of citizens and the public, not from the perspective of the department. "Now, goodness me, we are really bad at that!" he said. He was quick to point out, however, that it has been done – he cited the Sure Start programme – and said that working towards long-term outcomes instead of inputs was, in fact, the most satisfying work civil servants could do, so they should not waste the opportunity.

Sticking with the theme of a mission-based approach, Brown cited a few key things he thought would have big implications for the civil service, including the need to be "really clear on the purpose and the outcomes being delivered, particularly when you are delivering across multiple teams, multiple departments, in multiple sectors".

This was because things would inevitably change along the way.

"Crises will come along; there will be reshuffles; there will be delivery challenges," Brown said. "And the nuances that you see at the start – for example, one team thinking the purpose and the outcome is one thing and another team thinking something slightly different – they will be small differences today, but they will be very large differences in three-to-five years' time when you are much further down the road on the delivery of that mission."

He also pointed out that there couldn't be a one-size-fits-all approach to missions. Some would have very clear boundaries and stakeholders, but with others – such as the one relating to access to opportunity – there would be a very varied and wide set of citizens impacted by the mission. A huge amount of creativity would therefore be required to find the different ways of approaching their design and their implementation.

"And some of that will be about the skills and capabilities that the civil servants and the broader teams around them have. But some of it is just about the approach to actually developing the

policy and to moving forward. So taking a much more open approach, taking an approach that is much more data-driven and insight-led and open to that challenge from the outset, I think will be really critical to the implementation of missions."

The machinery of government

How the civil service chooses to organise itself around missions also entered into the discussion. Brown said he thought the civil service shouldn't "fall reflexively" into machinery of government changes as these could bake in a lack of flexibility as things change over time.

"How do we start to coalesce and structure ourselves around these missions and work in potentially a quite radically different way, compared to how we have done things in the past?" he asked. "I think there's real opportunity in there... we just need to think quite creatively about it."

When asked whether he thought Labour was actively considering any machinery of government changes, Thomas said he thought senior opposition figures hadn't yet made up their minds about exactly how they might want to organise things.

"So let's not speculate too much when even the principal actors don't know," he said. He added that there was probably "a presumption against too much organisational change", which comes from having a party leader who – thanks to his hinterland as director of public prosecutions – was familiar with the disruption that big organisational changes cause. Rather, Labour in power might tend more towards "under-the-bonnet stuff".

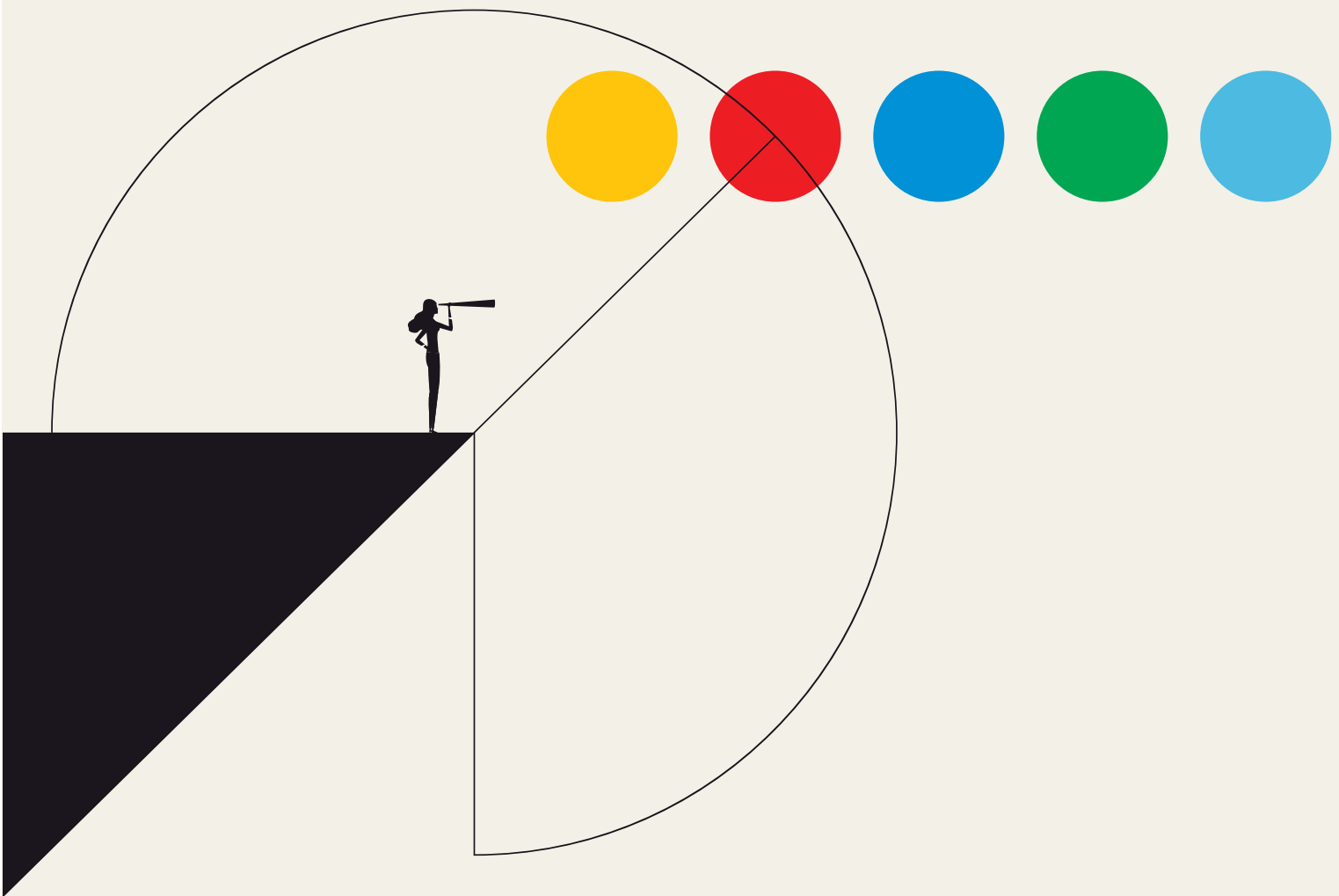
Like Brown, Thomas also discussed how different missions would require different approaches in government. "I think there are some really interesting questions about the mixing of ideas that will come from the civil service about how to use cabinet committees and taskforces or ministerial groups or anything else, and how those could be applied to what are really quite different missions," he said. "Some of them are conducive to a neat cabinet committee. Others really aren't. The other thing I'll be looking out for is accounting officers and whether mission-led government actually changes some of the underpinning wiring in departments about accounting officers, and whether Labour, as they come in, have ideas for resolving some of those internal tensions that inhibit cross-departmental working. Because if you don't look at how the money flows, then I suspect those people pushing mission government will always be swimming against the tide."

Asked for their concluding thoughts, the



Meet the permanents David Cameron holds get-together with perm secs (including Keir Starmer, on the left) and cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell following his appointment as PM in 2010

“A lot of potential ministers and junior ministers won’t have had government experience. And the civil service and government have changed quite a lot in the last 14 years” Alex Thomas, IfG



panel offered a variety of reflections for civil servants to mull as the election approaches.

Thomas warned that while excitement and energy often come from a potential change of government, civil servants should also prepare themselves for a period of inactivity.

“If you don’t happen to be in the area that an incoming minister lights on straight away, the system actually can take quite a long time to get into gear [...] and to get the policy programmes mov-

ing again and so on. So don’t be surprised if in the short term you find things a little bit under-stimulating, even in the immediate aftermath of an election. It will take a while for things to settle down.”

Brown used his closing comments to reiterate his points about how civil servants need to be ready to seize the opportunity presented by a mission-led approach. “There is a chance to think about: how do we, in the civil service, in the broader public sector and the partners who sup-

port them, do this a bit differently so that we can deliver the intended outcomes?”

Meanwhile Slater reiterated his plea that truth must be spoken to power. “Go into your time with new ministers saying what you think. Say so with respect, say so thoughtfully,” he told attendees. “But please, say what you think.” ■

This webinar is available to watch at civilserviceworld.com/events/watch-on-demand

ELECTION



PERFECTION

How can you best prepare for the coming election? Plan for change, examine your language and assume nothing, says **Kate Sturdy**

In my 17 years as a civil service senior leader, I experienced four general elections and was responsible for coordinating my department policy group's preparation for the latter two. There are three principles I would encourage any leader to have in mind as you go through the pre-election period:

- Create a pre-election mindset
- Focus on how to build trust
- Challenge your leadership

Mindset

It is easy for civil servants to get sucked into the content side of preparation – policy briefings, data packs, finance 101, first-day letters. It's equally as important to spend

time creating a pre-election mindset. This election will take place in unique circumstances – any incoming government will face huge expectations as well as major challenges on current international conflicts, tax and spending plans for domestic policy, migration policy and so on. The new government will need to work rapidly to complete its first spending review, and decide on its legislative priorities to secure time in the parliamentary programme. Whatever the outcome, it's possible that the next set of ministers will include some with little experience of government. Equally, it's possible that those coming in will be eager to create their stamp with new policies.

One marker that can demonstrate whether civil servants are in the right mindset for the incoming administration is their language. As a matter of fact, civil servants will have got used to talking in terms built up over the last 14 years of Conservative governments, whether coalition or majority. How we talk is an expression of how we think. Every department needs to be on the lookout for the language they are using, both in that fat bundle of written briefings awaiting their new ministerial team and in initial conversations.

Trust

Another under-estimated pre-election activity is an intentional focus on building trust. As humans we are primed to show and reciprocate trust towards each other, as one of our core survival mechanisms. It uses a lot of our brain's real estate – not only the basic survival brain but also more developed functions, showing how much effort we put into trust in all our interactions. When different groups meet for the first time, however, there will be a strong tendency for like to stick with like, so the first meetings of ministers and senior civil servants may well reinforce an “in group/out group” mentality. In other words: suspicion. Because we can anticipate this as a basic human response, we can also plan for it.

It's perfectly possible that not all new ministers will feel well-disposed towards their civil servants. Depending on the election outcome, they may feel strong disagreement with policies enacted by their predecessors. This is what could lie behind suspicion, or low trust. It's important that in your election preparation you consider the emotional impact of early meetings,

not just the technical content. Where you meet, where you sit around a table, what's visible on the wall, how you come across in your body language: these all influence those critical first impressions from which initial trust can build (or not).

Leadership

I would also encourage all senior leaders who are out front in election preparation to be willing to challenge their own leadership. In such a hierarchical organisation, senior leaders in the civil service can internalise a sense of needing to be right and always knowing what to do. However, it's important to listen and reflect on what you hear from others. Seniority does not mean you have no blind spots. Choosing to model openness to others' ideas and questions, especially from those who have less experience, will help you stay open-minded. Sometimes those who are newer and have less baggage find it easier to see things differently, and this could give you fresh perspective on the department as it might appear to new ministers. Leaders also need to make sure they look after themselves so they can remain focused on delivering existing commitments, as well as setting a clear direction for election preparation.

You might want to consider where your team's work could be stopped – or unexpectedly continued – by a new regime. Up to 2010, the Labour government had been committed to a national indicator framework to oversee performance, for example, for local authorities and health services.

My team in DfE led the design, development and implementation of a new national indicator. It ran twice, before the incoming government abolished the framework altogether. My task was then to manage through the swift and careful undoing of 18 months' hard work. By the same token, the highly visible shift away from Children, Schools and Families to Education in 2010 did not herald major shifts away from children's social care policy. This is not an invitation to over-interpret different parties' manifestos. But when leaders openly work through realistic discussions in advance of what might stay and what might go, it helps their teams manage the unsettling part of anticipating change.

Drawing consciously on these three principles will help you and your teams to get ready for the changes ahead. Here are

some suggestions on how to put them into action, using different scenarios to model a range of possible election outcomes:

- Spend some time in mixed grade and profession groups identifying deep assumptions i.e. are there some existing policy beliefs that have become ingrained as fact in your department?
- Identify the language markers i.e. are there some words associated with the current regime that stem from policy position, but by now will be so commonplace as to sound neutral?

Well-briefed
Ministerial aide with a red box



- Check how these assumptions and language markers are showing up in briefings and information for new ministers: are you inviting or rebuffing trust?
- Decide on the steps you will take to ready yourself, and communicate to your teams, so that you contribute as a leader to successful regime change.

And finally, good luck. There will be any number of twists and turns between now and the new administration being confirmed. Remember to enjoy the experience of this one-off exercise in UK democracy. ■

Kate Sturdy is a former senior civil servant who now works as an executive coach. She is also the election training programme for CSW's sister organisation Dods Training

FOUR THINGS CIVIL SERVANTS SHOULD BE THINKING ABOUT BEFORE THE ELECTION

Tevye Markson reports on an Institute for Government event that took place at the end of May, where former senior officials including ex-perm sec David Bell, who was in post during the 2010 general election, offered advice on managing the transition period

1

Use your own judgement where you can

When the pre-election period of sensitivity is in place, civil servants need to carefully consider what they can and cannot do. How should they go about making those decisions?

David Bell, a former permanent secretary at the Department for Education, told the webinar that one of the key messages he would give to civil servants is to exercise their own judgement on when, for example, an event can go ahead or a tweet can be published.

Asked how restrictions are enforced, he said: “Don’t come at this thinking ‘there is a set of guidance that is going to tell me exactly how I should behave in this situation’. It’s about you, it’s about your individual job. So the first enforcement mechanism is civil servants applying their own judgement and exercising discretion... and holding fast particularly to the civil service value of impartiality. The guidance can’t cover every possible scenario. It is on you to apply your judgement.”

For potentially contentious and controversial judgements, this is when you should talk to your line manager, Bell said. This can then be escalated to the department’s permanent secretary and, if they are unsure, to the cabinet secretary for a final decision. With election campaigns in full swing, “you can expect controversial things to be escalated very, very quickly,” Bell added.

While the cab sec is the last line of enforcement, Bell said that “like so many things in the British constitution, if a minister – and ultimately the prime minister – really wants to do something, there’s not a lot civil servants can do other than point to the guidance”.

One area that can be particularly difficult is deciding whether civil service learning events and roundtable discussions involving senior officials should go ahead. Asked specifically about this, Alex Thomas, the programme director for the Institute for Government’s work on the civil service, says the majority of public-facing events should be postponed, but most private events should still take place, “particularly if they are about the capability of the civil service”.

“I think it is completely reasonable – in fact, essential in some cases – for the civil service to continue with private activity, discussions with particular groups, maybe preparing for what the outcome of the election might look like, as long as it is not a public intervention in the campaign, or a private event that is so sensitive that it might be leaked or cause problems in other circumstances,” he said.

Dr Catherine Haddon, who runs the IfG Academy – which trains civil servants, ministers and special advisers – added that officials also need to pay attention to ensuring that government resources are not used for anything to do with election campaigns, including things like using a government car to get to a campaign event.



Mind your language and think about philosophy

The panellists said civil servants should also put serious thought into what the new government’s philosophy will be, and what language to use.

Giving an example from the 2010 election, Bell said: “It was made very clear to us that the ‘D word’, the ‘delivery’ word, would not be used in the presence of an incoming Conservative government. And so we spent a lot of time as civil servants thinking about which other word can be used. Then, I think we settled on ‘implementation’ rather than ‘delivery’, but it was both a trivial and quite serious point. Because if you had gone in and said, ‘Well, what are your delivery chains going to be, minister?’, you would have immediately generated an allergic reaction.”

With parties in the UK often in power for long periods, Bell said it can be difficult for civil servants to adapt as “you start to intuit how a particular party will talk, how they’ll think, what they will do and so on”.

He said he “underestimated the extent to which we didn’t quite get ourselves into the philosophical mindset that it had shifted” in 2010. “We’d been at a high watermark of government intervention or activity – it was an activist government in education,” Bell said. He said he was “fairly clear” that, under Michael Gove as education secretary, there was going to be a withdrawal from activism in quite a lot of policy areas. He added that “we misjudged the extent to which civil servants would get that.”

Adding to this point, Haddon said that in 2010, she saw examples of ministers getting advice that felt like it would have been given to Labour and that “it clashed for them”. She said she had also heard stories of “a new minister going off to do a scheduled speech that was in the calendar for the previous administration, and being given the speech that was obviously for their predecessor”.



Imagine new ministers’ first impression

“First impressions count,” Bell said. “It’s human nature to make a quick judgement about the people that you meet if you’re a new minister.

“So I think all permanent secretaries and senior colleagues across the civil service will be thinking, ‘How do they create that strong, positive impression with whichever secretary of state, whichever ministers, cross the threshold on the fifth of July?’”

Civil servants should also be aware that “ministers will arrive in the department, provided it’s a clear cut result to the election, absolutely knackered,” Bell added.



Consider the best way to give frank advice

While civil servants will want to make a good first impression, this cannot mean avoiding their duty to provide frank advice, the panellists warned.

“You have to challenge and you have to provide good, frank and open advice to ministers,” Bell said. “If it’s clear that the elected government of the day wants to produce a particular policy, you are duty bound as a civil servant to prepare the necessary materials, but those necessary materials should include the potential pitfalls.”

Bell picked out the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme [to rebuild or refurbish secondary schools] in the early days of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government’s austerity programme as an example from his time at DfE where he has regrets. Gove later described the decision to scrap the programme as one of his worst mistakes in office. Bell said: “I do remember that conversation, ‘we’re going to make a mistake, we’re going to make a mistake’, because everything was happening so quickly. But of course it was all under the George Osborne instruction that £6bn worth of cuts had to be identified before the recess. I couldn’t influence that at the macro level. But I just wonder if we’d said ‘we’re going to make a mistake’ more forcibly, we might have bought ourselves just a few days.”

“I heard stories of a new minister going off to do a speech that was in the calendar for the previous administration, and being given the speech that was obviously for their predecessor”
Catherine Haddon, IfG

Bell said he has always told civil servants to not just say no “because that’s the road to ruin with new ministers”. Instead, officials should give ministers policy options and provide fair and frank advice. If ministers then decide to go ahead with their plan, “that’s absolutely reasonable that they do so,” he added. “But please, please, please... do provide the frankness of advice because actually, if you don’t do it from the beginning, it’s going to be much, much harder as time goes on.”

Thomas said a good way to get the right balance is to “show that you get the objective that the minister is trying to achieve” so that they understand that you are “coming from a good place in saying ‘I don’t think this will work in that way, I think you might consider doing it in another way’”.

But he added that officials should not try to show that they are an “ideological fellow traveller”.

“Ministers find that uncomfortable because that’s not what you’re there to do as a civil servant,” he said. “But they do want [you] to show that you’ve really absorbed the thing that they’re trying to achieve. And then that opens up a whole set of other conversations that you can have.” ■

Crises can strike at any moment – don't assume you have time to prepare, says disaster recovery expert **Lucy Easthope**

IN THE HOT SEAT FROM DAY ONE

There will be a lot of talk and a lot of expectation about any new government's first 100 days. But the assumptions made about those days often blank out any curveballs. Recent history has demonstrated that any new cabinet will need to be ready to lead the country immediately through a crisis. My colleagues and I have some thoughts on that. We are emergency planners, to be found before, during and after the crisis but not always known about. I have become vocal about the fact that for decades there have been plans, planners and planning for emergencies throughout the civil service, and it's time to bring it out from behind the curtains.

I am fiercely independent of government, but the people I spend the most time with are either working in local government or central government departments, readying us for everything from building fires and flooding to cyberattacks and volcanic ash clouds. And these crises can hit as soon as the polling stations close.

On the day Boris Johnson was elected as prime minister, UK emergency planners were already placing pandemic planning meetings into governmental diaries, as news from China became increasingly alarming. Theresa May was returned as PM in the 2017 election six days before a fire tore through Grenfell Tower in London and five days after a terrorist attack in London's Borough Market. Just after the final details of a coalition government were thrashed out in 2010, a plane crashed in Libya with several nationalities on board, including two Britons. Tony Blair's time as PM was peppered with major catastrophes, known in civil service folklore as the 4 Fs: foot and mouth, fire and fuel strikes, flooding; and the fourth F was the profanity uttered in Number 10 when yet another crisis hit.

One of the extra dangers with a crisis that hits early on in the term is that neither new ministers nor their advisers will have had time to attend the disaster training offered by the Cabinet Office.

So my strongest advice would be to prep for crisis on day one. The following are my suggestions for what that prep might look like.

What's the worst that could happen?

Crucially, ministers and their advisers will need to understand the entanglement between emergency response and a changing climate. More floods, more fires, more storms and major disruption are on their way. Equally crucially, many of our risks on a national scale involve disruptions to gas,

water and electricity; but research suggests there are high expectations of how quickly help will come, and of the benefits that might arise from precautions such as registering as vulnerable with power companies. In reality, there will be inevitable disruption that may cause considerable harm.

Domino consequences should also be considered. Volcanic ash quickly becomes a supply chain disaster, for example, if flights are interrupted. Emergency planners must be able to brief you on the worst case scenario, and not be limited to "only good news for the minister".

KEY POINTS FOR BRIEFING MINISTERS

- Feed in current verified information and uncertainties (what is not yet established); explain why things are not fixed, the reasons for uncertainties and the work ongoing with identified experts to plug any data gaps.
- Be honest and direct when requesting resources and finances. Discuss money early on and log decisions in relation to recouping response expenses.
- Re-brief as necessary.

Advisers and ministers will need some knowledge of the terminology. The field of emergency planning and response marines itself in code and jargon, which is not always helpful. But understanding key terms like "local resilience forum" – the geographically located way that we bring together all responders – will be useful. The role of JESIP – Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Programme – is also good to know. If the responders are using jargon, ask them for clarity.

Don't expect too much from the myth of COBR – have faith in the civil servants around you, but it's not a James Bond film. There are no screens with all

things that stuns me – not just with new governments but even with new Cabinets – is that they stubbornly refuse to open the old filing cabinets (or possibly protocols mean they can't). Many of the lessons from the tragedies of the 70s, 80s and 90s are still valid, and the plans are good. Yet we have this habit of constantly reinventing the wheel, which is offensive to the families who went through so much and then worked with us for decades to try and prevent this happening to a new generation.

I would urge you to read up on the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and the supporting documentation. It has been chronically misunderstood. Emergency response at a central government level involves true cross-governmental-department liaison. The idea of a lead government department depending on the type of emergency is really important, but it is also really important to have alignment. You can't learn all this in a few days, so engage with the idea of emergency planning as an area of continuous professional development and know who to ask.

Understand when to and when not to ask for military assistance. New ministers tend to conflate issues like security, resilience, defence of the realm, and preparedness. It is important not to assume that the military are there as a constant backup or to fix everything. There can be substantial downsides to deploying a military response to a civil incident. Understanding who does what is crucial.

Do not expect a situation that massively impacts British citizens only to happen in Britain. Disasters overseas can have serious ramifications, and so can the need to suddenly repatriate large numbers of people. Last summer's wildfires saw a number of holiday companies step up alongside the FCDO. Evacuations from both Sudan and Lebanon in recent years required the same handling as an emergency here.

It's vital to understand what flooding does to households and communities. You will see a lot of it before your first year in power is out. Many places are flooding over and over again, and it's fundamentally affecting our resilience

and our morale as a nation. Community resilience is about so much more than grab bags and three days' worth of tinned food.

Don't be tempted to start from scratch with your own "shit list" – something that Labour was said to have compiled last month. The work that the Cabinet Office does on the National Security Risk Assessment is a great place to start; it is a work- ➤

“Emergency planners must be able to brief you on the worst case scenario, and not be limited to ‘only good news for the minister’”

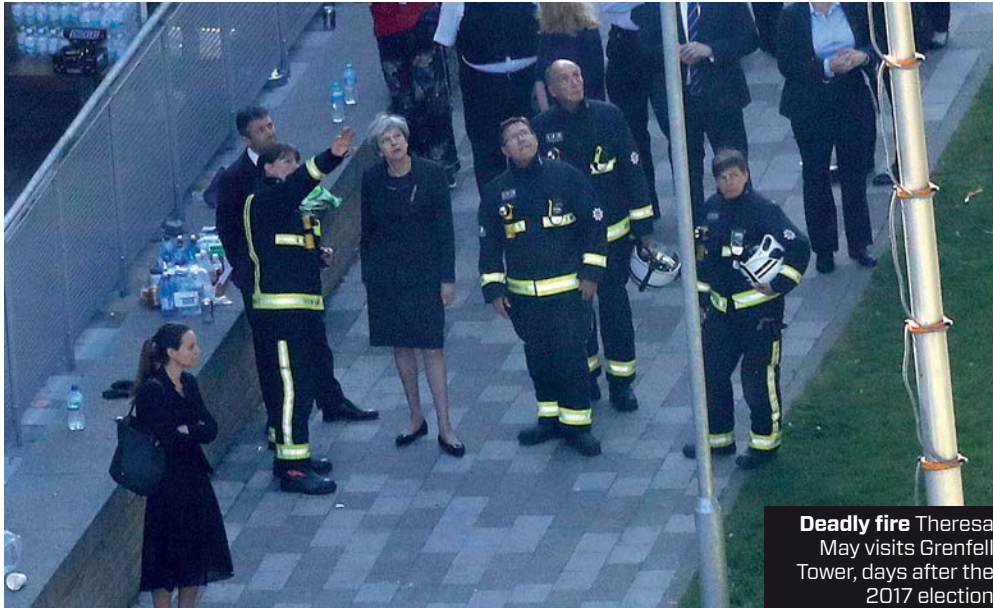
the bad guys on, or cool gadgets. However, if your advisers in COBR say that something is a very bad idea, do listen to them; they know the bear traps. And aim to understand a lot more about the toll your data demands take on local government responders. It is just relentless.

Look backwards. I have now seen several power transitions and one of the



Plane crash The Libyan Afriqiyah Airways plane crash in 2010 took place just after the Coalition government was formed

changed forever in a post-truth, post-trust era, as the world reels from a global pandemic. Keep comms in tragedy authentic and transparent. For example, don't just pledge support for a charter for the bereaved – understand what engagement with it really means. After the emergence of Covid, the window for public trust is short and trust dwindles quickly. Candour is key; establishing credibility is critical. Responding to media and social media claims is an unwinnable dance. The response can't fight negativity but must operate alongside it.



Deadly fire Theresa May visits Grenfell Tower, days after the 2017 election

**KEY DISASTER-
PREPAREDNESS POINTS
FOR NEW MINISTERS
AND THEIR ADVISERS**

- Be wary of initiatives that might seem positive but could prove a hindrance. New ministers are notorious for endorsing “bad help” – things that can actually make a situation much worse, such as the donation of second-hand goods.
- Say yes to the training. As soon as reasonably possible, get yourself booked on to the courses with the Cabinet Office.
- Get ready for another pandemic. It is extremely likely, and it poses a severe national and global risk.
- Understand the complexities of a mass-casualty, mass-fatality tragedy and particularly the science of Disaster Victim Identification – how we scientifically identify the deceased of a major incident.
- Encourage others to raise concerns and anticipate cascading impacts/ domino effects. It needs to be safe for civil servants to speak out.
- Fund emergency planning at all levels of society.



Ash cloud The Iceland volcanic ash cloud brought planes to a standstill and disrupted supply chains

The most important thing to understand is that poverty, inadequate housing and poor health all intersect with a country's ability to respond to any incident. Crises do not create new cracks; they shine an intense light on existing harms and vulnerabilities. Our leaders need to be ready to lantern-bear through anything that happens from day one, and to accept the good help that is all around them. ■

Lucy Easthope is a leading authority on recovering from disaster. Her book *When the Dust Settles* is a *Sunday Times* bestseller. She is a professor in mass fatalities and pandemics at the Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath

ing document, constantly updated as new hazards and geopolitical situations emerge.

Take a brief break from campaigning to hone your crisis management skills. Leading in a crisis is different to leading, and requires a long, hard look at your own skills in advance of any activation. Listen

“Community resilience is about so much more than grab bags and three days’ worth of tinned food”

to *When the Dust Settles* as an audible when you are travelling around the country and snag yourself David Omand's *How to Survive a Crisis*. You must be able to forecast and imagine into the future and look well beyond the immediate picture. Communications in a crisis have

TIM DURRANT DON'T GET MINISTERS' BRIEFS IN A TWIST

PLANNING FOR NEW MINISTERS IS IMPORTANT, INCLUDING STUDYING ALL THE MANIFESTOS. JUST MAKE SURE THOSE PLANS ARE FLEXIBLE, AS YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT THEY WILL ASK WHEN THEY'RE ACTUALLY IN OFFICE

A general election and a possible change of government is a moment of uncertainty for the civil service. Officials will be thinking about how to welcome and brief any new ministers that arrive after 4 July and, with the campaign underway, we are already seeing – and will see many more – policy ideas set out. So civil servants will be considering how these might be implemented, and what they can do to bring new ministers up to speed on their department and their responsibilities.

“The format of the information is important. Ed Vaizey recalled receiving ‘terrible slides and flow charts’ from civil servants that didn’t illuminate anything about his new brief”

Putting together the fabled ‘day one briefing pack’ is an important process for the department, but it may not actually reach its intended audience at all. Former ministers, including Alan Johnson, a member of the last Labour cabinet, told the Institute for Government’s *Ministers Reflect* project how the pack does not always survive the whirlwind of the first few days: “You start reading it and suddenly the job’s on top of you.”

Other ministers have found that the format of the information they receive will affect how useful they find it, with Ed Vaizey (now Lord Vaizey), Conservative culture minister during the coalition, telling us: “I should have got a three-page document that says, ‘This is the Arts Council, this is what it does, these are its issues’”, but that he actually got “terrible slides and flow charts and stuff that I guess the civil service thought was quite funky and modern, but didn’t really illuminate anything.” Chris Huhne, Liberal Democrat energy secretary in the coalition, had a different preference, telling us: “It might have

been sensible to have literally a PowerPoint presentation at the beginning saying, you know, ‘what does the department do’.”

This all points to a need to be flexible and ready to adapt to what ministers actually want. In our *Preparing for Power* podcast, former permanent secretary Sir David Bell told us how ahead of the 2010 election, he got the Department for Education to prepare one-page briefs on every issue they could think of, so that officials could reach for a relevant answer depending on what ministers asked them.

But how can officials know what to focus on in their briefs? While departments will have certain issues that they think are important for new ministers to deal with in the first few days, those new ministers will have plenty of things they want to kickstart immediately as well (particularly if the polls are accurate and 4 July results in a change of government). Knowing what the parties are saying in your policy area is key, as is reading the manifestos when they are published. However, it is also important to know that manifestos in particular are unlikely to present a full picture of ministers’ ambitions. As Tracey Crouch, Conservative minister for sports and gambling, explained: “I’d already been given a massive

brief about the policy areas and the priorities within those policy areas, according to the civil service, but I had some of my own bits.”

When ministers do arrive (or return), their private office teams play an essential role in managing the flow of information. While every official may think their issue is the most important thing for a minister to be thinking about, the private office can take a look across the whole portfolio and work out how to schedule advice, introductory meetings and so on, responding to the minister’s preferences and priorities while also making sure the most important decisions get made first.

So, while the parties are busy campaigning for votes, officials in departments will be busy getting ready for the ministers who will arrive in early July. Preparation is essential but so is the ability to adapt – you don’t know what a minister’s first question will be or how they would like it answered, so it is important to be flexible and ready to respond. As they say, you only get one chance to make a first impression. ■

Tim Durrant is a programme director at the Institute for Government



Pleased to meet you Treasury permanent secretary Terry Burns (above, left) greets new chancellor Gordon Brown in 1997; incoming Tory PM David Cameron and his wife Samantha meet cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell (right) in Downing Street in 2010

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

WHATSAPP-ENING?

Lobbying and influence: post-legislative scrutiny of the Lobbying Act 2014 and related matters

Who? Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

When? May 2024

Key quote “If an appropriate transparency regime cannot be found that can command public confidence...the use of any NCCCs should be blocked on official devices”

In brief The government should block the use of WhatsApp and other instant-messaging platforms on official devices unless it can provide acceptable levels of transparency, MPs have said. The PACAC report says lobbying of ministers and permanent secretaries by WhatsApp and other non-corporate communication

channels (NCCCs) should be subject to the same transparency as face-to-face meetings. Currently an exchange of messages between a minister or perm sec and a third party only constitutes evidence of lobbying if it leads to a subsequent meeting or includes a decision. In contrast, the Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists’ transparency guidance asks consultant lobbyists to publish all communications with ministers or permanent secretaries.

Key recommendations

- If WhatsApp and other NCCCs are to be used in government and, in particular, if they are to be used to communicate with third parties,

then they should be subject to the same disclosure regime as other forms of contact.

- Where exchanges by means of NCCCs are in place of a face-to-face meeting or prompt significant consideration in government, they warrant inclusion in the govern-

ment transparency releases.

- If an appropriate transparency regime cannot be found that can command public confidence, which we consider the current arrangements do not, the use of any NCCCs should be blocked on official devices. ■

SKILLING THE GAP

Delivering value from government investment in major projects

Who? Public Accounts Committee

When? May 2024

Key quote “All too often we see projects and programmes that are poorly managed and delivered late and over budget”

In brief A lack of skills in the civil service has left departments too dependent on suppliers

and weakened their position as a buyer, MPs warned. Departments have been left “in a weak position” because they “cannot act as an intelligent client” without sufficient in-house project-management, technical and engineering skills, the Public Accounts Committee report found. And a lack of cost-estimation capability means government is reliant on suppliers defining how much a

project will cost. Work is under way to build up government's project-management capability through the government's major project leadership academy. But the report warns there is "still a long way to go and there is a particular need for skilled professionals in senior positions". Only 1,000 of the 16,000 professionals who need to gain accreditation have done so thus far, according to the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which provided evidence to PAC's inquiry. It says issues stemming from the skills deficit include there being "numerous projects over the years where cost estimates have increased significantly over the life of the project".

Key recommendations

- The Treasury and IPA should produce an analysis of risks to the government's portfolio of infrastructure projects caused by this lack of skills.
- They should set out how they plan to incentivise departments to populate a new cost-benchmarking hub with "accurate and consistent information on the actual costs and benefits of their projects".
- The Treasury and the Evaluation Task Force should come up with a plan to address the root causes of why evaluations are not routinely carried out and how to incentivise departments to carry out more high-quality and independent evaluations ■

spending review, the Cabinet Office should re-evaluate the metrics it intends to use to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the border for users and the government, and commit to public annual reporting against these.

- By the end of 2024 the Cabinet Office and HMRC should refresh the delivery roadmap for the Single Trade Window programme to ensure its scope, timetable and project management arrangements are appropriate. ■

BLOWING THE WHISTLE



Investigation into whistleblowing in the civil service

TRADE BARRIERS

The UK border: Implementing an effective trade border

Who? National Audit Office

Where? May 2024

Key quote "There are significant implementation challenges that will need to be overcome to deliver the different elements of the strategy"

In brief The timely and effective delivery of the UK's post-Brexit border strategy is at "significant risk" due to competition for resources between departments and insufficient cross-government reporting and accountability mechanisms, warns the National Audit Office. The NAO report says the government will need to overcome "significant implementation challenges" to deliver the different elements of the 2025 UK Border Strategy, including effectively managing interdependencies between programmes and

overcoming legislative barriers to sharing data. "Without strong mechanisms to report on delivery and to hold departments to account for these, and in the face of competing priorities for resources, there is a significant risk that delivery of the underlying programmes will fall well into the future," it adds. The report warns that HMRC's Single Trade Window programme, a flagship scheme of the border strategy, contains objectives and timescales that are "overly optimistic and continue to underestimate the complexity of what is required".

Key recommendations

- Following the next spending review, the Cabinet Office, working with other departments, should confirm the government's plans for taking forward the different elements of its border strategy.
- Also following the next

Who? Public Accounts Committee

Where? May 2024

Key quote "The Cabinet Office has made slow progress on improving data collection on whistleblowing in the civil service"

In brief The Cabinet Office must be more proactive in creating a civil service culture that supports officials who raise concerns, the report warns. The committee said the centre of government is still missing key metrics on whistleblowing in the civil service and lacks assurance over the completeness and consistency of figures reported by departments. PAC said it also wants the Cabinet Office to require all departments to collate feedback from whistleblowers at the end of individual processes. There is a continuing "lack of cross-

government leadership on whistleblowing" that has resulted in varying approaches across departments, the MPs warned. They added that there has been "slow" progress on improving data collection related to whistleblowing since its damning 2016 report on the issue.

Key recommendations

- The Cabinet Office should set out what additional whistleblowing data it intends to collect from departments to better understand challenges and opportunities.
- The Cabinet Office should start conducting "spot checks" on departments' whistleblowing data to ensure figures are being reported accurately.
- The Cabinet Office should set out plans for improved analysis of existing data, such as more granular information on the kinds of fraud whistleblowing concerns are raised about. ■

SHARING IS CARING

Transforming the UK's Evidence Base

Who? Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Where? May 2024

Key quote “Data withers in silos across countless government bodies”

In brief The next government must drive reforms to enable better cross-departmental data-sharing, with costs for the shift borne centrally rather than by individual bodies, the report warned. Departments and public bodies choose not to share data because they are not incentivised to do so, it found. Seven years since the passage of the Digital Economy Act, the UK has failed to bring its “disparate datasets” together to enrich its public evidence base. Instead, “data withers in silos across countless government bodies”. Despite having a statistical system that is highly regarded internationally, broader opportunities to benefit from joined-up data were being missed because of long-standing issues with cross-departmental data sharing. The

MPs found “significant data gaps” on the UK’s different health services and on issues such as school attendance. They added that good evidence is not yet being used effectively in decision-making across government, and found that official communications too frequently disregard evidence, damaging trust in democracy and public support for policies. The Cabinet Office’s existing initiatives for improving data sharing are “self-evidently insufficient”, the report said.

Key recommendations

- The Cabinet Office should work with the ONS to develop a comprehensive new programme aimed at improving data sharing for statistical and research purposes.
- The programme must clearly define deliverables and timelines, and must be owned by a senior responsible officer at an appropriately high level.
- The Treasury should establish mechanisms so that the costs are not borne by individual departments, but rather centrally. ■



Training ground Sunningdale was once the home to the National School for Government

FUTURE THINKING

Promoting national strategy: How select committee scrutiny can improve strategic thinking in Whitehall

Who? Liaison Committee

Where? May 2024

Key quote “Everyone must be persuaded to adopt a sincere understanding of strategy and its language, or culture will remain unchanged”

In brief The government should slim down the Cabinet Office and bring back a national school for government with a physical campus to address issues with cross-government strategy. The report from parliament’s supercommittee says “urgent reform” of Whitehall culture is needed to improve strategic decision-making and make the UK “fit for the future”. It calls for a “profound rethink to break the cycle of siloed, short-term thinking that has come to dominate successive governments’ ways of working”. The report follows a year-long inquiry by the Liaison Committee looking at how select committees can better promote and sustain strategic thinking in government. It

says the next government will need to identify, encourage and reward the “habits of attitude and behaviour in Whitehall that will promote strategic thinking”, while also identifying and discouraging those which undermine it.

Key recommendations

- The next government should provide a binding commitment to a new “National School for Government and Public Services” with a physical campus.
- The next government should set out a clear new national strategy, underpinned by five or six key national strategic priorities, at the start of the next parliament.
- This should be monitored and updated by the National Situation Centre – a Cabinet Office-based data room for national security and crisis management – with an annual report provided to parliament.
- The Cabinet Office should be “slimmed down” to enable it to focus on strategic priorities – and its core tasks. ■



STOP THE SPIRAL

This timely book is a must-read for those who care about ethics in public life, writes **Rupert McNeil**

» **Downward Spiral: Collapsing Public Standards and How to Restore Them**
 » **John Bowers KC**
 » **Manchester University Press**

Downward Spiral is a book which defies categories. Eminent KC John Bowers has written a four-in-one: a trenchant, wry contemporary history of ethical failures in the UK governmental sphere, a polemic for regulation to protect the British Constitution from abuse, and a philippic on recent former prime ministers. In this election year, it's also an eloquent manifesto for specific reforms.

For anyone disturbed by events in the UK government arena in recent years, Bowers' book is cathartic; even therapeutic. It is like listening as a wise and well-informed observer expresses their exasperation and anger at the last decade of UK politics. And despite his tour of past scandals, including the Marconi affair and more recent outrages, he doesn't sink into his chair with a sigh of "it was always thus". He actually proposes practical solutions.

Bowers has a clear set of recommendations. One is establishing a single Ethics Commission to consolidate and streamline the regulation of government standards, while maintaining existing bodies under an overarching commission to

avoid duplicate investigations. The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments should be, he says, transformed into a body with enforcement powers, including the ability to impose fines and conduct investigations. A new Public Appointments Commission could oversee all public appointments with reduced ministerial involvement, requiring ministers to justify any rejections to a select committee. The role of the independent adviser on ministerial interests should be strengthened with statutory powers and greater independence, requiring parliamentary approval for appointments and dismissals. Additionally, Bowers calls for a comprehensive review of standards, advocating a cultural shift towards greater integrity and accountability, emphasising leadership by example and reducing incentives for unethical behaviour.

So, what will the reaction be to these proposals? I am deeply sceptical that anyone ever really believed that relying on "good chaps" was enough, even in the era of starched collars and

top hats. I suspect that many of the system's insiders found the "good chaps" model expedient. The most egregious outrages, when revealed, could be surgically addressed, allowing the convenient flexibility of the status quo to remain untreated.

But like all western democracies, we live under the rule of law and natural justice. Laws

and constitutions are needed to deter those incentivised to do the wrong thing, and they both require segregation of duties, distinct accountabilities, and mean-

ingful consequences when these are breached or fail.

Many other sectors are regulated: financial services, health-care, pharmaceuticals, aviation and many others. Their histories show that effective regulation requires truly independent

(but pragmatic and capable) regulators; clear, fair and transparent processes of investigation and enforcement; and penalties that deter. Through this, professional cultures are created where people understand and adhere to the rules. That is how well-regulated sectors work. This does not mean there will be no ethical failures, but they will be better addressed if these basic components are in place. Effective regulatory systems deter and detect bad actors rather than assuming that "good chaps" will prevail.

The UK political system has a sense of complacency and exceptionalism in its ethical regulation, based around a level of self-regulation that would not be tolerated in the private sector. This may have been convenient for some, just as insider trading was for corporate bad actors of a previous era. Let's stop being surprised that

these abuses occur. Let's follow Bowers' advice and design these types of abuse out of our constitutional system.

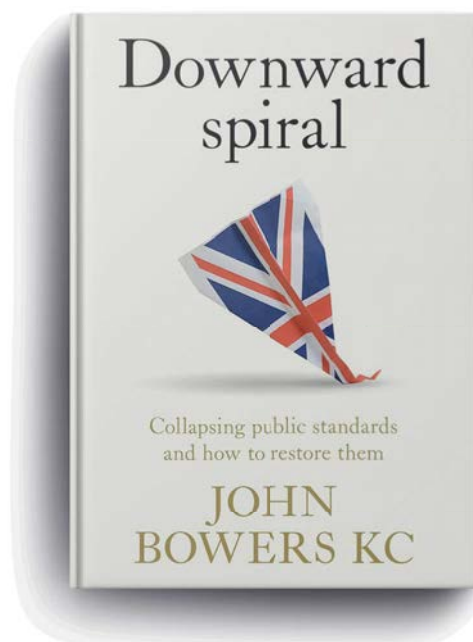
In a recent opinion piece summarising

his recommendations, Bowers used an apt analogy comparing the state of our ethical regulation to the parlous state of the Palace of Westminster. I closed Bowers' book with his metaphor burned in my mind.

The Palace of Westminster's basements and wall cavities mean it is a rodent's bite away from conflagration. But it is apparently more convenient for our parliamentarians to remain in it than move out while proper repairs are done. At least our parliamentarians know that work is needed, even if they are content to have it done around them (for many years and at much extra expense). Bowers' book is a powerful manifesto for the "restoration and renewal" of our regulatory estate. It is even more necessary than restoring the physical one. ■

Rupert McNeil was the government's chief people officer until 2022. He currently lives and works in Riyadh

"I am deeply sceptical that anyone ever really believed that relying on 'good chaps' was enough, even in the era of starched collars and top hats"





LEADER OF THE PAC

Meg Hillier has spent nearly a decade investigating the ins and outs of government delivery in her role as chair of the Public Accounts Committee. What wisdom can she share with officials and future ministers? **Jess Bowie** sits down with her to find out. Photography by Louise Heywood-Schiefer





When Dame Meg Hillier was a minister in the Home Office, she used to say to officials: “If anything goes wrong at all, I want you to tell me straight away.” She did not need all the answers immediately, she assured them, she just needed to know if something bad had happened.

“Famously, there was one time when they came to me early one morning and said: ‘We just need to let you know that a vanload of blank passports has been hijacked and stolen on the way to the airport.’ I said: ‘Right, okay...’ And they said, ‘But don’t worry, minister, it’s not our fault. It was the Foreign Office!’”

As the minister responsible for pass-

ports – a role she held under Gordon Brown from 2007 to 2010 – Hillier knew that passing the buck to the FCO, tempting as it was, probably wouldn’t wash.

She uses the anecdote as a way of illustrating why a culture of openness is so important to her – among her own employees and in organisations more generally. She has, she says, always encouraged her staff to bring problems (and potential solutions) forward as soon as possible. As she puts it: “I build teams, I don’t bollock people.” Later she adds: “Don’t surprise a politician!”

Hillier is speaking to CSW in the wood-panelled Westminster office of the chair of the Public Accounts Committee. The Labour MP for Hackney South and Shoreditch has been at the helm of PAC since 2015 and a member of the committee since

2013. While expounding her thoughts on organisational culture with her trademark velocity (“I think, because I’m so busy, I just have to talk at double-speed,” she jokes), she describes a visit PAC made to Washington, DC earlier this year. While over there, Hillier insisted that the committee meet NASA. At first her colleagues didn’t understand why. But then, she says, “they completely got it”.

For Hillier, NASA’s approach to managing risk and “the way they get staff to call things out” without fear of reprisal is a model worth emulating, not least in the civil service. She wants to see workplaces where issues never escalate to the point of whistleblowing – a topic the committee has been looking at – where disagreements are openly discussed, concerns are addressed effectively, and bad mistakes are precluded.

of what works and what doesn't. Without this, my successors as chair of the PAC will be doomed to a cycle of broken promises and wasted cash in perpetuity."

Although Hillier hasn't confirmed her plans, it is likely she won't stand again for PAC chair. Indeed, according to parliamentary rules, she wouldn't be able to if Labour wins the next election. It's not surprising, then, that the tone of her report is valedictory. Before we move onto what the future might hold for Hillier, and how a Labour government might use her ideas for breaking that cycle of wasted cash, CSW asks what her biggest bugbear as PAC chair has been.

or the project manager, or the person delivering the actual service can be really good witnesses. They will tell us they're proud of what they're achieving, but they're also usually realistic about what's not working."

But might some of the mealy-mouthed answers from the so-called mandarins be the product of a situation where civil servants are increasingly being thrown under the bus by politicians who are failing to keep up their side of the ministerial-accountability bargain?

The environment has indeed been "horrendous", Hillier says, before expressing her regret over what she calls a "torrid time" in the treatment of perm secs. She cites

"We need the accounting officer at our hearings, but the senior responsible owner, or the person delivering the actual service, can be really good witnesses"

"It doesn't happen so much now, but when you're not getting a straight answer from a witness," she says. "It's frustrating because we've done the work, they've done the work. Sometimes there's a reason, they can't stray into policy [...] and we recognise they've got to reflect ministers' views up to a point. But actually, they have a direct responsibility as an accounting officer to parliament through us. So when we ask for something, we just expect to get it.

"There's one memorable time - and [MoD perm sec] David Williams still laughs about this - but he said: 'There's only so many ways I can not answer that question.' I still collect those *Yes, Minister* moments."

Hillier goes on to recall how, a few years ago, one of her children found *Yes, Minister*. "We watched it together. And I was going, 'Oh my word. That's exactly what they said in committee...'"

What does she think is driving officials to obfuscate? "We have accounting officers who have got to be accountable, but they're also the mandarins who are there to manage the challenge of the political with the delivery, with the policy, and everything else going on in the department, with the minister at the top.

"So there's a kind of alchemy and a set of skills that are pretty admirable. But what we are looking at is often multi-million, sometimes multi-billion, pound projects, and the people who are actually running them are the people we quite like to have as witnesses now. We need the accounting officer there too. But the senior responsible owner,

the sackings of Tom Scholar and Jonathan Slater from the Treasury and the Department for Education respectively, as well as the abrupt departure of Richard Heaton from the Ministry of Justice, as examples.

However, she adds: "You can worry about the current political situation, but the long term future of the civil service is about retaining that impartiality and that accountability line."

"Ministers and indeed prime ministers - as we have seen recently - come and go pretty fast. And the civil service is supposed to be there keeping that honest strain while, of course, delivering for the government of the day. And there will be times when they might be uncomfortable with policy, but that's beyond what we would look at. We're looking at whether they're delivering it in the proper and appropriate way." >>

NEW LABOUR'S ID CARD SCHEME

"I think we sort of lost the storyline on it. We were getting it back. But then we weren't in power long enough to actually get enough [of them] issued for it to be embedded. And that's another message for a future government: the things you really want to be retained by the next government have to be so well embedded that they can't turn around. Universal Credit is now definitely here to stay, for example - there are no old systems to put people back onto."

And bad mistakes - she's seen a few, as Freddie Mercury almost sang. During her 13 years on PAC, Hillier has forensically picked over the same government cock-ups time and again. Her annual chair's report, published a few days after she sits down for this interview, pulls no punches. In a section entitled 'Lasting Lesson', she writes:

"All too often, we have seen money misdirected or squandered, not because of corruption, but because of group-think, intransigence, inertia, and cultures which discourage whistleblowing. On occasion, the scale of failure has been seismic, such as HS2 or Horizon in the Post Office, or the procurement of PPE during Covid [...]. Any incoming government must learn from these failures, and have people within their ranks who have experience

If the polls are to be believed, Hillier's party could form the next government. How could a future Labour administration make use of her encyclopaedic knowledge of Whitehall?

"Well, that's for them," she says. "It's for Keir [Starmer] to decide how or if he wants to use me." Right now, though, she is available to talk to frontbenchers if they've got questions – not least about what government is already doing in numerous areas. "I know the architecture a bit," she says (which feels like something of an understatement).

Speaking before the general election has been called, she also points out that between the Labour front bench and the leader's office, there is "some serious preparation going on for government". Even before access talks with the civil service started, there was detailed work under way to ensure her party was "on the money, on the structures, on the organisations" that they would have to manage from day one. "So I can, and have been, contributing a bit to that."

Amid the whirlwind of manifesto writing, leaflet printing and reinforcing of shoe-leather for the ground campaign, the area where Hillier says she can be of most help is delivery. "Because I've seen good ideas and policies – whether I agree with them or not – fail. And I know, in many cases, why that's been the case."

At one point during our conversation, Hillier says that she sometimes thinks that "practical reality" is her middle name. Just imagine, then, the potential to do things differently if she were running a department... What would her dream cabinet job be?

"I would love to answer that. But they [the shadow roles] have all got people in them, so it would be a bit invidious, wouldn't it? I mean, I've got an abiding interest in the Home Office, because I was a minister there. But Yvette's doing a fantastic job. And she and I talk quite a lot because PAC covers Home Office matters as well. I'm very clear that those

THE IMPORTANCE OF PILOTING

"On the committee, we've looked at piloting and evaluation quite a bit. Both are important. So if you've got an idea, pilot it, and then you'll find out what's going wrong. You save potentially millions of pounds, because one mistake replicated can be really expensive. [...] It means things can go a bit slower. We're all impatient for change. But going too fast, and getting it wrong, is worse than going a bit steadier and delivering right."

"My advice to any new minister would be: your civil servants are a fantastic resource – as long as you've got an open and honest relationship with them"

shadows will be in government. I mean, it's been made very clear that they will be."

One thing Hillier has learnt from studying the civil service up close is that governments – of any stripe – should not fall into the trap of trying to do too much.

"With my delivery hat on, you just can't do that many big things all at once. Look at the Ministry of Justice. So they've got a prison building programme; probation has been backwards and forwards; court reform; digital transformation; barristers on strike... Show me a bit of the Ministry of Justice that's just going 'Oh, yes, it's all fine. We're just steady-as-she-goes.'

"So that's one department alone where there's a hell of a lot going on. If you tried to do it across the whole government, the bandwidth of Whitehall, however extraordinary it can be, would not cope. That's just a reality."

Talking of doing too much, does one of parliament's busiest women practise what she preaches in her own life? Does she ever

spend time not doing much of anything?

"I try not to work seven days if I can, I try to take some time off one day a week," she says. "One of the reasons I sometimes get five and a half hours' sleep a night is that I'm determined to do something unwinding."

"My new year's resolution was to read more, so I've been reading more detective stories. I was trying to alternate detective fiction with 'government thinking' kind of things – but the government tracts are a little dense to read late at night on the tube on the way home. I love John le Carré, Mick Herron, that fast-paced stuff, because it completely takes my brain out of it. And with my teenage daughter, we do watch junk TV together. I don't remember it the next day, but it takes me out of myself."

She also uses sewing as a way to decompress. During the Covid lockdowns it was face masks for friends and family, but now it's little drawstring bags that can be used instead of wrapping paper.

"There's a satisfaction to being able to say: 'There's something I've made today,'" she says. "Because in politics, mostly it's not I've achieved, it's usually we: we the committee, for example. Usually you're creating coalitions of interest. And so sometimes it's just nice to have that thing that you've physically produced."

Towards the end of her conversation with CSW, Hillier is recalling an occasion when she attended the regular 'Colleagues' gathering of permanent secretaries. "Yes, I sometimes get my foot in the door of those meetings," she says with a smile. She describes how she told the assembled company that if they were doing 90% of things well 90% of the time, it meant they were doing a pretty good job.

"And so they're all beaming round the table. But then I said: 'Unfortunately for you, I look at the 10%.'"

Despite – or perhaps because of – her exhaustive knowledge of that 10%, and her nine-year ringside seat watching good intentions morph into government blunders, it's clear that Hillier has a respect for officials that is rare among the political class. As the interview draws to a close she says, by way of conclusion:

"My advice to any new minister would be: your civil servants are a fantastic resource – as long as you've got an open and honest relationship with them. You might disagree at times, but you can disagree well with them. And you need to be clear that they're giving you the best advice that they can. But, you know, there is a really, really good will in Whitehall to deliver for the British public." ■



WHY GOVERNMENT SHOULD HAVE A CHIEF RISK OFFICER

“We had a session on risk and resilience the other week. And, while there’s some important work going on, we feel very strongly you need a more senior figure. In a bank, you can’t operate if your risk officer says to do something and you don’t do it. It sounds trite, but the first job of the government is the security of the country – to protect people. And one of those protections is to look at what risks are coming up. And we’ve had a tendency, partly because of turmoil in politics, to think, ‘The music won’t stop on my watch’. So the House of Commons could burn down. But we’ll put it off for another decade. How long have we been doing that? Forty years we’ve been discussing that. It’s a miracle that no one has actually been killed by falling masonry or fire.”

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



BRAND: NEW

The familiar face of online government may be getting a new look. **Sam Trendall** finds out more

Anyone walking down a UK high street in January 2012 might still have had the opportunity to do a spot of shopping at Comet, Athena, BHS, or Phones4U – before popping into Blockbuster on the way home to rent a DVD.

Invoking the memory of such once-familiar names might also serve as a reminder that no brand is bulletproof, and that those that cannot move with the times are liable to be left behind by consumers whose needs are no longer being met.

One brand that was introduced to the UK public during the first month of 2012 has had rather more success since then than the names above: engaging with almost 30 million citizens on a regular basis.

But, unlike video rental and poster shops, those that do business with the government – through its GOV.UK website – do not really have the option to vote with their wallet, and move to another provider of taxes and benefits that better suits their tastes or lifestyle.

Even so: GOV.UK would surely be judged by most to have been a branding success – having replaced a varied patchwork of previous sites and online services created by individual agencies with a single, consistent platform that has long been firm-

ly established in the national consciousness.

But, since its launch, the world around GOV.UK has changed profoundly – and nowhere more so than in the relationship between people and technology. The government website was unveiled when WhatsApp had about 50 million users, a figure which is expected to pass three billion by next year. Others – such as TikTok and ChatGPT – have gone from non-existence to near ubiquity.

Against this backdrop, *PublicTechnology*

“GOV.UK is essential to life and work in the UK, and it is important that the brand keeps pace with technological change and appeals to the widest possible audience”
Government spokesperson

recently revealed that the Government Digital Service has begun work in earnest on a significant revamp of the “brand identity” of GOV.UK. A major aim of the overhaul is to better reach users that do not currently engage with government’s online platform.

GDS’s plan to grow GOV.UK and take the platform in a “new, ambitious and exciting direction” was first trailed

last year – shortly before the launch of a new-look homepage for the site. A ‘growth strategy’ published by the unit included a nine-point plan for ongoing work, covering the development of the pending GOV.UK app, as well as expanding government’s reach into social-media platforms and, finally, an intent to “expand and update GOV.UK brand guidelines”.

It is understood that government expects that the wider GOV.UK refresh is likely to result in a “different look and feel” to users’ experiences – both on the website itself, and via the planned GOV.UK app and external channels, such as social media sites.

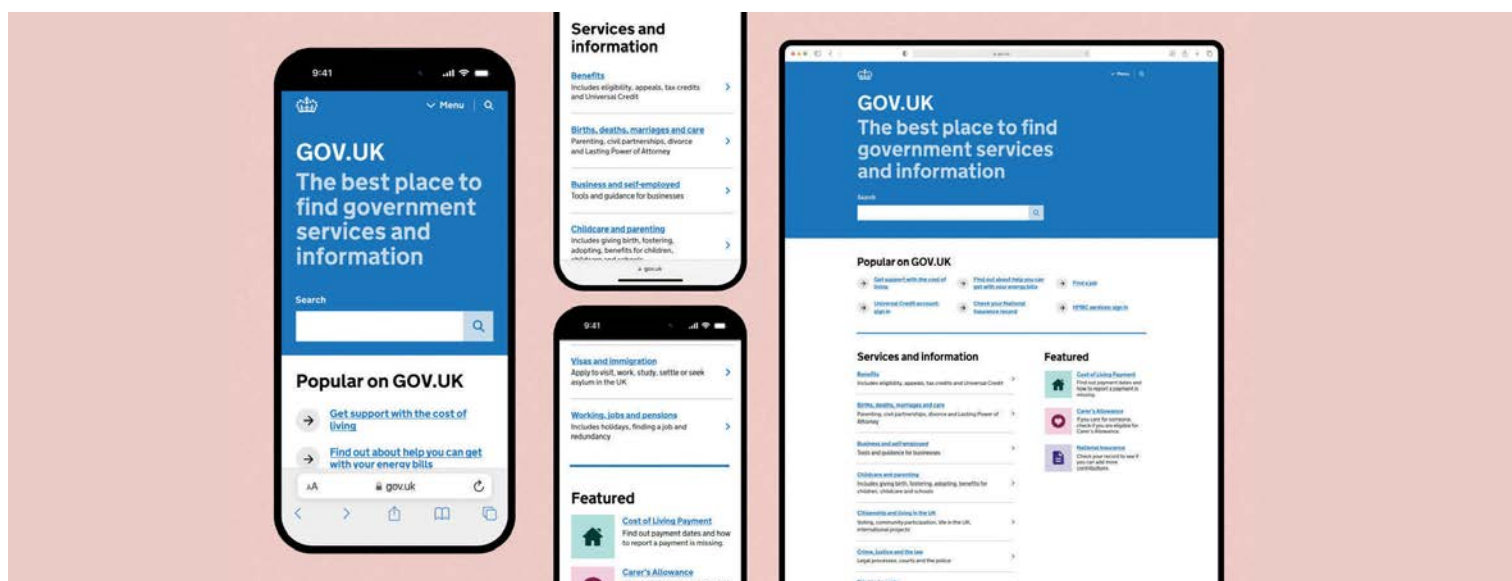
Although targeted research to support the revamp is now underway, it is likely to be some time before citizens see any

tangible changes, as the Cabinet Office – which houses GDS – intends to conduct “rigorous” testing of proposed updates, with a particular focus on issues of accessibility and inclusion.

Good associations

On 20 March, GDS entered into a one-year £100,000 contract with specialist digital user-experience research firm Lnet, which has been retained to support the government tech unit with “research and insight that will inform the development of a new brand identity for GOV.UK”.

This research process will explore both users’ emotional or intellectual “associations” with possible new designs, as well



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



as their experience of accessing services and information via an updated GOV.UK.

“This new brand identity must appeal to the broadest possible audience, and enable the brand to expand into new channels and services,” the procurement notice says.

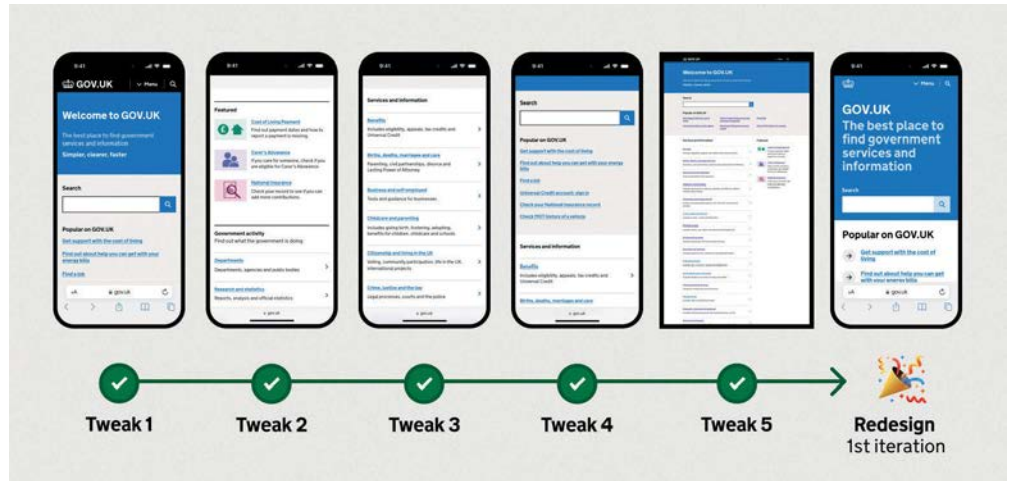
It is understood that the costs of fulfilling this engagement is covered under the umbrella of GOV.UK’s existing operating costs.

The text of the contract reveals that the research process will begin with “implicit association testing”. To support this, Lnet will be tasked with the “recruitment of GOV.UK users and non-users” and then designing “experiments to test and optimise a range of new brand designs against a set of target associations” that GDS would like the designs to engender in users.

This experimentation may cover “implicit or semi-implicit association testing as well as conscious qualitative discussion of designs with test subjects”, the contract says. Following the completion of these initial tests, the supplier is expected to provide GDS with “feedback and recommendations for optimising across and within design routes” going forward.

Also included in the contract is the delivery of testing various user journeys on proposed new versions of GOV.UK against specified benchmarks. Once again, Lnet will be tasked with recruiting participants that currently use GOV.UK, as well as those who do not.

These people will then be asked to take part in “experiments to measure and compare user experiences between [two] variants of equivalent



service journey prototypes”.

As well as asking for verbal or written feedback, this process will include “biometric tracking that can capture and measure physical emotional responses that test subjects themselves may not mention or notice”, according to the contract.

‘Keeping pace with technological change’

Across both the association and user-journey testing initiatives, the supplier will be expected to “involve GDS user researchers in the experiment design and delivery as far as is practical, such that they develop knowledge and skills that can be shared with the broader user research community”.

The contract adds that the firm will “present experiment design and results to the GOV.UK leadership team... [and] ensure team and relevant stakeholders are involved throughout the research process”.

In response to enquiries from *PublicTechnology*, a Cabinet Office spokesperson

said: “GOV.UK is essential to life and work in the UK, and it is important that the brand keeps pace with technological change [and] changing user needs and appeals to the widest possible audience.

“To improve user experience, we are looking at ways to refresh the GOV.UK brand, to make it quicker and easier for all users to access services and to reach underserved audiences. The Government Digital Service is also working to deliver information in the formats users want by expanding the GOV.UK brand onto new channels, such as apps and social media.

“Rigorous testing will take place with users ahead of any changes being made public, to ensure they have a positive impact on users’ experience and that trust in GOV.UK is maintained”.

If government wants to understand the risks of a decline in users’ trust, there are a few former retail executives that could perhaps help shed some light. ■

REFORM'S COOL



In her first public appearance as the new figurehead for government-wide digital strategy, **Gina Gill** outlined the need to shake up systems that block technological progress. **Sam Trendall** reports. Photography by Tom Hampson

“**P**eople expect government services to be as good as the best online experiences in the private sector.

Rising to meet these expectations will require change on a scale that government has never undertaken before.”

This objective – as described by Paul Willmott, executive chair of government’s Central Digital and Data Office – may sound like a pretty tall order.

But Willmott’s words came in the introduction to a three-year roadmap, published in 2022, setting out a plan for how to achieve the kind of unprecedented change he describes.

Almost two thirds of the way through its oversight of that journey, CDDO recently recruited Gina Gill as chief strategy officer. Arriving from her previous role as digital leader of the Ministry of Justice, Gill takes on a brief to provide strategic direction to the ongoing rollout of the digital and data roadmap, which is due to conclude delivery next year.

The transformation plan is centred on six core missions, respectively covering: transformed services; the implementation of One Login; improved data usage; modernised tech infrastructure; digital skills; and a system that better supports transformation.

In her first public appearance in her new role – delivering a keynote presentation at the *PublicTechnology Live* conference hosted last month in London by CSW’s sister publication – Gill told attendees that the use of data and systemic reform are the two missions where she would like to see an acceleration of progress in the coming months.

While acknowledging that some progress has been made in data-sharing, some key barriers remain, including “legislative challenges, which we can look at – but also partly cultural challenges

Gina Gill at *PT Live* 2024

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

and [concerns about] who owns the data, and what is the risk of using it" – particularly to support the delivery of more proactive services, according to Gill.

"I think that we need to be giving people choice at the point that they're using a service," she said. "I think that is when people will choose to make their lives easier and say: 'Yes, you can go and pull that data together to tell me whether I'm eligible for this thing, or how much tax I owe'... I think that we need to think differently about how we offer users choice at the point that they are receiving a service – and we do have some really good examples of that, in parts."

The other of the roadmap's key objectives where Gill would like to make advances in the coming months is the final mission, which aims to deliver "a system that unlocks digital transformation".

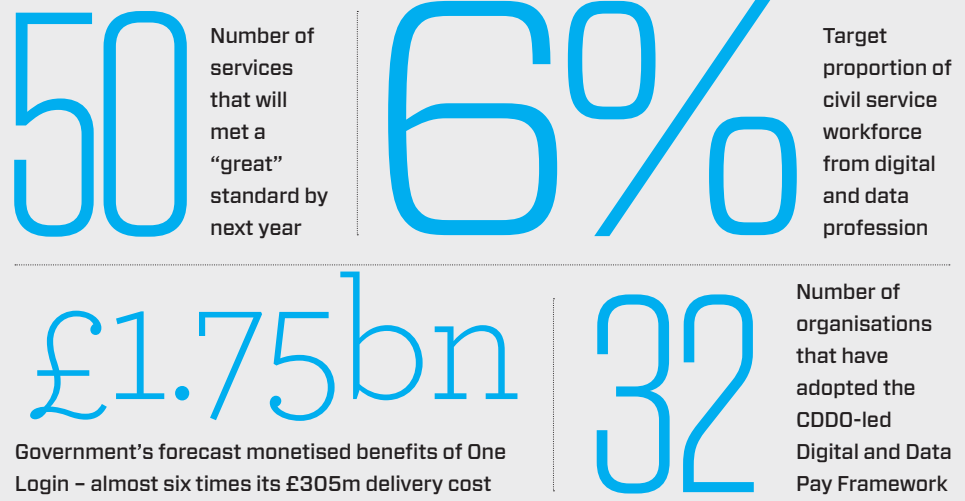
The CDDO strategy chief said that progress in this regard will partly be concerned with growing the number of senior leaders across departments that "understand, are interested in, and can talk about digital". Ensuring that financing models and processes effectively support transformation is another key consideration, Gill said.

"I don't think that we will ever be in a situation where we don't have any legacy technology. But we should be funding services – and therefore funding ongoing maintenance and continuous improvement"

"There's definitely more work to do on funding," she told *PublicTechnology Live*. "I don't think that we will ever be in a situation where we don't have any legacy technology. But we should be in a situation where we are funding services – and therefore funding its ongoing maintenance and continuous improvement. Rather than [taking the approach of] 'let's make this big investment, and then let's let it atrophy'."

'A different conversation'

Elsewhere, significant inroads have already been made, with Gill highlighting strong progress on the roadmap's first two missions, dedicated to service transformation and the deployment of One Login.



CDDO has been working with departments on implementing a model of single service owners – named individuals to assume ultimate oversight for the delivery and performance of the service in question, across all applicable channels. Gill picked out the Home Office as a particular example of a department that has adopted and is seeing the benefits of this model, which is a "really, really important step" for the wider mission of improving services.

Such improvements are ultimately intended to ensure that, by next year, at least 50 of government's 75 most critical or widely used services are rated as "great", based on a set of common standards covering digital adoption, successful completion and user-satisfaction metrics.

Gill said: "The services [mission] will leave us with 50 great services, hopefully by the middle of next year – but what it will also leave us with is the start of a different conversation and a framework for how we actually start to properly measure more and more of the services that we provide to the public and businesses."

Work so far on delivering One Login – the new government-wide sign-in platform – was also picked out as a highlight by the CDDO strategy head.

The most recently published figures indicate that the new government-wide login system has already been implemented across 30 discrete government services while registering almost four million citizens as verified users – clocking up 200,000 identity verifications each month.

With major departments – chiefly

HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions – implementing the system in the coming months, CDDO has previously forecast that the number of users could skyrocket to 30 million by the end of 2024.

One Login is ultimately intended to replace a patchwork of 191 accounts platforms across government, incorporating 44 different sign-in methods. The service will also bring significant benefits for citizens, according to Gill.

"One Login... [provides] the ability for a user to be able to log in to multiple government services with one front-end – but it's more than that, and it can be more than that," she told delegates. "As well as being able to authenticate, there is a part of the service that also allows you to verify your identity and that, for me is really important; partly because of the number of times that I hear a friend say: 'Why can't I just log in once – why do I need to have this thing over here for tax, and this thing over here for something else, and this thing over here for something else again?' So, it addresses a real need, and a real question that people have."

Gill added: "But it also starts to put us on a different path in terms of a user being able to see all of their interactions with government in one place. I think that's really important that people can do that, as it starts us on the journey of putting users in control of their own data, and it gives us the beginnings of the ability to be able to, ultimately, provide more proactive services to our users – it gives us the building blocks to do that." ■

'ASK GOOD QUESTIONS, BUILD GREAT TEAMS'



TIPS ON LEADING DIGITAL FROM THE FRONT

At the *PublicTechnology Live* conference on 21 May, a panel of permanent secretaries and chief executives from key departments explored why tech knowledge has become so crucial for senior leaders. **Sam Trendall** and **Tevye Markson** report. Photography by Tom Hampson

The leaders of some of government's biggest departments have highlighted the critical importance of senior managers developing sufficient digital expertise to enable them to "lead from the front".

Permanent secretaries representing five departments and agencies - HM Revenue and Customs; the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency; the Department for Education; and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology - dis-

cussed the role of leaders in supporting the use of digital and data across government in a panel discussion at the *PublicTechnology Live* conference in London in May.

Angela MacDonald, second permanent secretary at HMRC, said that digital and data "used to be a thing that kind of happened at the back" but is now something all civil servants need to be tuned into.

"No matter your profession these days, unless you are able to be coherent and able to discuss and have enough knowledge around digital and data, I don't think you can do any topic - whether that's policy or

operational delivery or finance," she said.

Explaining how she has embraced this approach, MacDonald said: "I'm directly accountable for our digital and data. I understand the technology architectures. I've worked really hard to educate myself because I think this is a topic which, increasingly, we've got to lead from the front."

She compared this to a yesteryear when "your data protection officer was some person you've probably never heard of, your digital and data architecture was not something which the senior team particularly paid attention to".

But she warned: "If the most senior people are not driving it forward, then it will recede back into just being the really clever people who kind of sit in a room somewhere at the back."

DfE permanent secretary Susan Acland-Hood - who told attendees she had experience of computer programming using

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

the BBC BASIC language – said it is also necessary to understand “what you don’t know – and that you aren’t ever going to be the most expert person in the room”.

She added: “I think this is an area where a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and, if I overrated my BBC BASIC coding experience as a foundation for understanding the detail of what my technology teams were doing, I probably wouldn’t lead them very well.”

Instead of trying to be the expert, “you need to know how to ask good questions and build great teams,” she said.

The DfE perm sec said it is also very important for senior leaders to set clear priorities, as “there are always more things that people across the department want digital and data colleagues to do than they could possibly do even if there were eight times as many of them and they worked eight times as hard”.

She also championed the value of taking a “really good, positive approach to the management of risk”, by giving people permission “to test and try things that might not work” within a clear framework that “gives people the safety and comfort to do that” while setting appropriate boundaries.

DSIT has a remit to promote the UK’s tech sector, as well as the

country’s standing on the world stage as a technology leader. According to the department’s permanent secretary Sarah Munby, a digitally skilled and equipped public sector is a key part of the wider tech economy.

Asked if government’s effective use of digital was simply an enabler for other outcomes – or had its own intrinsic value – she responded that “it is an end, in and of itself, for us”.

Munby said: “Because, ultimately, if we don’t equip the public sector as a customer of fantastic technology, as an investor in fantastic technology, as a builder of skills in fantastic technology – we are always delighted to bring skills in from the outside, but we are also a big engine of skill-development ourselves – if we don’t get that right, the chances of having a thriving sector here in the UK are very much diminished.”

She added: “We spend a huge amount of time with the technology sector, thinking about what government can do to help this utterly critical part of our nation thrive. And

there are a series of reasons [why this is important]. It is a huge economic opportunity for the UK – we are only the third country in the world to build a trillion-dollar technology sector. It is vital for delivering for the public – delivering better life experiences, not just via the public sector, but right across the economy. And it is also a critical part of our future security as a nation.”

‘A different perspective’

With about 50 million people making use of its services, the DVLA is surely one of the parts of government that is most familiar to citizens.

As a growing number of these citizens are bringing with them expectations shaped by the consumer world, chief executive Julie Lennard explained that the DVLA’s delivery of services is informed by considering people as customers, rather than just service users.

“Even though people are legally obliged to transact with us, we have the mindset that people could vote with their feet and go elsewhere – and that brings a different perspective, when you’re developing

“You need to understand what you don’t know – and that you aren’t ever going to be the most expert person in the room” *Susan Acland-Hood, DfE*

digital services for the consumer. You are very much looking at it from [their] point of view, rather than as a government department looking at it and saying: ‘What makes it easier for us?’ That is not the way that we can approach our services – because they are customer-facing.”

The creation of the agency’s services is supported by “a state-of-the-art UX (user experience) lab which we use extensively”, according to Lennard – who echoed Acland-Hood’s point in speaking of the importance of “not making that assumption that, as senior leaders, you have the answers”.

She added: “There are many times with services when something comes through to our boards – and we might have an opinion on it. But it will always come down to: what’s the evidence from user testing? That is what will drive it.”

Nick Joicey, second permanent secretary at Defra, told attendees about the way in which some common digital principles and practices – including user

research, as well as teams comprised of differing disciplines – have informed the department’s delivery of some major schemes. This includes the Future Farming and Countryside Programme, which has overseen the implementation of the country’s post-Brexit agricultural regime.

“The way in which we have led that really has been by bringing together – in a way that I don’t think we had done previously – policy, operational and digital teams,” Joicey said. “If you talk to anyone who has been involved in that programme, they would say upfront that it has been challenging – to drive those changes in ways of working. One of the things I’m really proud of is the way in which we have changed how we have engaged with farmers and other users in the process of developing and rolling out that change. Some of the things that flow from that are the importance of the clarity of the outcome.”

He added: “We have also been really bringing service ownership to the fore – in that you have a clear owner for the service, who looks at it end-to-end, and what the experience is. And also championing mul-



tidisciplinary teams and ways of working, really encouraging people to come together in that new way and do that right at the start. As a leader in Defra, I really see my role as championing that, helping break down some of those barriers, and really enabling those different ways of working.” ■

POLICY PRINCIPLES

It takes time to embed ethics into policymaking. **Danielle Hamm** from the Nuffield Council on Bioethics suggests three approaches that could help

The UK government has stated its commitment to making our country a science and technology superpower, a hub for industry and an ecosystem for innovation. We have increased life sciences finance twelvefold since 2012 and £250m has recently been dedicated to research in artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and engineering biology. All of this is aimed at securing the UK's place as a global leader in these three areas. While these advances in research and technology present great opportunities for the health and wellbeing of our nation, they can also raise significant social and wellbeing implications. They can exacerbate health inequalities and widen economic divides.

For a policymaker grappling with complex trade-offs, surveying ethical implications can offer a way to make choices that will create a better and more equitable experience for all. This is why the Nuffield Council on Bioethics is working alongside a cross-section of experts in our sector and a handful of civil servants to co-design tools to help policymakers embed ethics into their decision-making processes.

Anticipating techno-social trends through a process of horizon scanning (HS) and foresight is important for policymakers aiming to promote innovation in a responsible, sustainable, inclusive and fair way. Civil servants are well supported through the Government Office for Sci-

ence, who offer training and resources to help teams understand and use the methodologies that underpin future thinking. However, the methodologies for foresight that are currently available don't offer a systematic anticipation of ethical issues linked to emerging technologies. In-depth application of these approaches has often only been used in academic settings. They need to be adapted for a policymaking context.

For several months we have been speaking to civil servants who either lead on the foresight function for their team or are the customers of the insights it generates. We wanted to better understand the methods they commonly use, the time they dedicate and whether they experience any barriers, perceived or otherwise. Our conversations told us that while there was a desire to include ethical considerations, there was also an assumption that it would take more time than they had. There was also some disagreement as to where in the process ethical reflection would be of most benefit. Some believed ethics could help to frame their work from the start, while others felt they should have ethics as a filter at the end.

Alongside our conversations across Whitehall, we have consulted with HS and foresight experts working in think tanks, lobbying groups and research institutions to assess the current thinking around how ethical considerations could be better woven into foresight methods. This confirmed that it is complex, messy and cannot be a



simple tick-box exercise. Diversity of voice is key, and it does take time if you want to be thorough and robust in your analysis.

Bringing all of this together, it's clear to us that the constraint of time is something we need to confront and explore further. As such, we have identified three foresight approaches that vary in their time demands, are commonly used by policymakers, and could be adapted to become more ethically centred.

The first builds upon Health Impact Assessments (HIAs). HIAs are designed to evaluate the potential public health effects – both positive and negative – of a policy before it is finalised and implemented. They are common practice and generally, our insights suggest, well regarded. There are multiple ways to approach an HIA, but they are usually concise and there are examples that are not hugely time consuming. As such, we believe there would be benefits for us to develop an HIA template that considers the ethical impacts



of innovation policies in more depth.

The second approach is specific to the use of ethical considerations in the development and future-proofing of regulation. A “regulatory sandbox” is a tool that assesses how a new product is likely to perform and what regulatory concerns could be considered before it reaches the marketplace. A sandbox can come in a myriad of shapes and sizes, but there is some common ground shared between

“While there was a desire to include ethical considerations, there was also an assumption that it would take more time than they had”

them. Also, the time it takes to use them appears to be workable within current system pressures. This is why we have decided to work on creating an “ethically sensitive” sandbox for use by regulators.

The third approach seeks to spark moral imagination in future thinking. We

have been working with associate professor Federica Lucivero who has previously published work showing the insights from using bespoke techno-ethical scenarios to assess emerging technologies. We are working with Federica and colleagues in the Ada Lovelace Institute to expand upon her work and translate it into tools that support moral deliberation within scenario workshops. This is likely to be the most time-consuming approach, but

as scenarios are a recognised way to work we think there is benefit to us providing guidance on how to build more ethical reflections into this process.

We must all recognise that HS and foresight do not give us the ability to predict the future or find a definite answer. There

will always be uncertainties. But currently, with ethical considerations not being the focus of available methodologies, we believe policymakers are at a disadvantage when they need to balance the difficult trade-offs that new innovations can induce. If they had HS and foresight approaches that enabled deeper exploration of ethical challenges and opportunities, we think the optimal choices could be easier to spot.

We hope the ethically centred horizon scanning and foresight tools and approaches we develop will be of value to people working both within the UK government and outside it. Because at the end of the day, if we can find ways to better embed ethics into our decision-making, we all stand to benefit. ■

Danielle Hamm is director of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. She was previously associate director of campaigns and policy at the charity Rethink Mental Illness



LISTEN AND CONNECT

Nineteen-year-old **Innes Morgan** makes a plea for government to end Whitehall-centric policymaking

A 689-mile drive from Whitehall could take you to many places. You could venture across Europe and reach the wonders of Bern or the bustle of Berlin. Alternatively, you could visit the place I call home: Dunnet Head, mainland Britain's most northerly point.

It may be hard for some to imagine what life is like so far north. Indeed, it might be easier to imagine life in Bern or Berlin. In the past, I've used proximity to the nearest McDonald's to demonstrate the level of socio-economic seclusion my community faces. Despite there being over 1,300 McDonald's restaurants in the UK, my pilgrimage to get a Big Mac involves driving the equivalent distance of London to Birmingham. It's fair to say that my Deliveroo orders rarely arrive warm.

“Your work is only as good as the information you have - so get out there and find the people behind the data”

Cold Big Macs aside, there is a deeper issue here. This same distance separates me and my community from the things that really matter. If you live in my part of the country, you will have to make a 200-mile trip to access basic services and opportunities, whether that's attending a routine hospital appointment or accessing basic sports facilities or a college course. While some of this is part and parcel of our geography, some of it is down to the structures of government, which weren't built to listen to people in remote communities or to tackle the issues that matter to us.

In my fragile community, I grew up watching a demographic collapse as the local economy endured a downturn and levels of depopulation rose. I felt a deep sense of injustice watching my loved ones move miles away, and was saddened to think that I too would one day need to leave the place I called home. What was more frustrating was feeling unheard by the system that stood to represent my community. I saw how, increasingly, decisions were being made far away by people who couldn't even place my region on a map, let alone understand its needs.

So I did what all rational primary

school kids do: I invited a local government delegation around for coffee to express my feelings. In hindsight, I probably should have told my parents first. But it helped me to understand the situation more clearly. For the first time, I understood that the players in our government weren't bad people but that they worked in a structure that inhibited meaningful, systemic change. What's more, they seemed to be completely devoid of hope. They were lost in a system that not only wasn't fit for purpose but lacked any sense of accountability, yet alone responsibility. Their outlook was somewhat harrowing.

Meanwhile, I felt something quite different: a fusion of heightened hope and anger. If I didn't have hope and if I didn't act, who would? So, I pulled on every lever I had at my disposal. At 15 years of age, I became (probably?) the UK's youngest adviser to government organisations. I spent most of my spare time advocating to ministers and civil servants about the need to restructure decision-making and listen to communities. This meant doing whatever I could to contribute to the future of government: sitting on advisory boards, talking a lot, attending events and trying to build links between grassroots groups and decision makers by supporting the likes of the Rural Parliament. When I wasn't doing this, you'd find me talking to the MoD about estate strategies, supporting economic development bids or talking levelling up with the Cabinet Office. After all, it wasn't just my community that was on the periphery of government. Many places and demographics experience this same issue.

Now 19, I'm leading Act with Purpose, a non-profit that supports organisations to become more purposeful and builds cross-sectoral coalitions for social change. In my view, purpose is the precious lubricant in our systems that either makes things tick over harmoniously or - if it's not there - grind to a halt. At a Cabinet Office away day, I used social value in procurement as an example of where we get purpose wrong. The directive had good intentions, but in reality it pushed out SMEs who lacked the capacity to demonstrate social value. As a result, we saw large, centrally based

companies win contracts, which led to the offshoring of any social value created.

But increasingly, government is getting it right when it comes to purpose. Places for Growth is a good example of this. I have also been really inspired by leaders like David Foley (director of public bodies, Cabinet Office) who are changing the way government interacts with its stakeholders. The bottom line is that government is messy, and it often lacks purpose. As a result, it often doesn't deliver meaningful change, and it doesn't hear



what our communities have to say. My simple plea to you is this: have purpose in what you do. Your work, the decisions you make and the advice you give as a civil servant is only as good as the information you have. So, get out there and find the people behind the data. Get into communities across our country, dissect emerging issues, test your policies, and most of all, listen and connect.

As I embark on my journey home from a government meeting, with a pretty grim Big Mac slumped next to my laptop, I still cling on to my child-like hope. We might not be able to bring McDonald's closer to me, but we can bring the things that really matter closer to me, and closer to everyone else in this nation. We can connect the forces of tangible decision making to communities. We can do better. ■

Innes Morgan is the founder of Act with Purpose, a community of organisations committed to acting as a force for good. To find out more email hello@actwithpurpose.org

VETTING BETTER

Turning UKSV around from a failing, beleaguered service has been arduous but inspirational, says **Trish Dreghorn**

When I took over the leadership of UK Security Vetting in 2021, I heard plenty of negative comments about it: the performance of the service, the perceived intrusiveness, the lack of focus on diversity and inclusion within the process, and the outdated IT. However, I also heard one common message: “UKSV has struggled since its inception, but one thing it does have is great, talented, passionate people.” Our turnaround over the last 12 months can be entirely attributed to these hard-working and committed colleagues.

Just over a year ago, we were in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. UKSV, the largest government provider of national security clearances, was failing to meet any of its service-level agreements. Following a critical National Audit Office report, I faced questioning from the Public Accounts Committee alongside government chief security officer Vincent Devine and Sir Alex Chisholm, then Cabinet Office permanent secretary. Holding a security clearance is a requirement across many roles and professions, so the speed and quality of our work impacts a vast range of public services.

I am delighted to say that today, processing times for all national security clearances

are back within agreed levels and backlogs have been cleared without compromising on assurance. We are making headway with longer-term reform to create a world-class, modernised, digitally-enabled service for the future. Behind this turnaround is a story of 12 months of incredible hard work, engagement and adaptability by our people.

The NAO report acknowledged a history of under-resourcing and legacy issues since UKSV was formed in 2017 from the MoD and FCO Services. In 2019, consultants McKinsey & Company described vetting as the “worst government shared service” and Deloitte even recommended closing UKSV down.

To drive reform, UKSV moved out of the MoD into the Cabinet Office’s Government Security Group in 2020, just as Covid hit. We emerged from the pandemic into a changed security landscape. Demand for security vetting soared by around

“Some of the most passionate and committed colleagues I have ever worked with were feeling abandoned and frustrated”

60%, while staffing levels had fallen to 32% below the required headcount – just as we faced a recruitment freeze. Some of the most passionate and committed colleagues I have ever worked with were feeling abandoned, frustrated and constrained.

Despite successfully operating priority services for urgent issues such as the Ukraine crisis, and launching a new fully digital accreditation check for airside staff, turnaround times for routine cases had become unacceptable. The pressure was mounting for immediate action.

In response, in April 2023 we launched our Delivery Stabilisation Programme and com-

mitted to recovering performance in three areas: new Developed Vetting cases (DV Initials); Counter Terrorism Checks (CTC) and Security Checks (SC); and Developed Vetting Renewals (DVR). All this was to be achieved within the financial year.

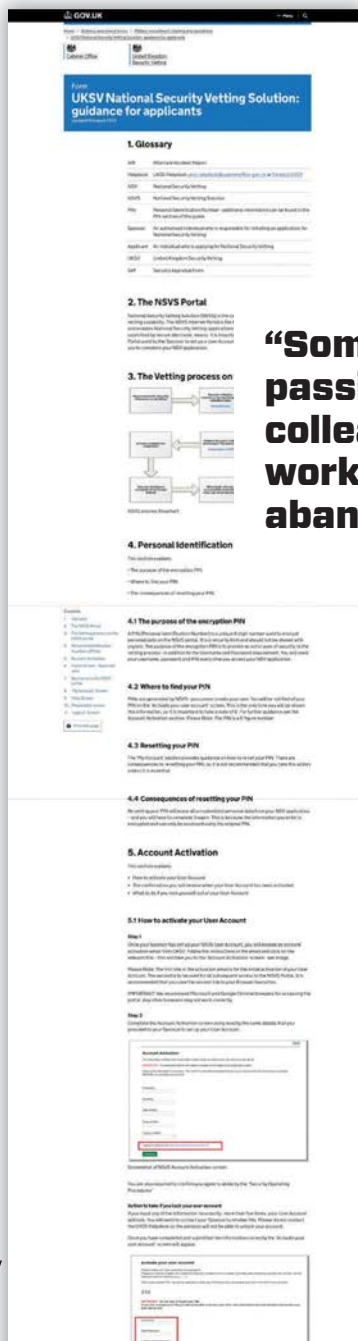
We mobilised the programme with four workstreams: people, process, technology and performance. Our first challenge was to align staffing levels to demand. Engaging stakeholders and securing customer support was vital. We won approval to greatly increase our headcount and gained additional support from the HMRC Rapid Response Unit. This posed a significant challenge for our experienced staff, who needed to vet, induct, train and mentor their new colleagues. We centralised admin functions such as interview booking and collation of applicants’ documents, made greater use of digital solutions for written testimonies, and worked closely with policy teams in support of streamlined ways of working.

In June 2023 we had a huge morale boost when we achieved our first milestone: the recovery of DV Initials, which was particularly important to key customers such as the MoD and the FCDO. CTC and SC represent the vast majority of vetting cases by volume, and with our increased headcount and process improvements really making an impact, we saw these queues rapidly reduce and stabilise by November. Our final milestone was DV Renewals. Every team within UKSV supported this final push, adapting to streamlined, risk-

focused processes and achieving record throughputs in January and February. We’re now in a position, for the first time in years, where all new DVR cases can be processed within the agreed timeframe.

There have been many lessons from DSP, not least the resilience of the UKSV team. We’ve reformed our governance and are much more joined up with our stakeholders, which should let us maintain what we have achieved and build on it. I look forward to taking this collaborative culture forward as we now move to the next phase in co-creating the future of vetting. ■

Trish Dreghorn has been chief executive of UKSV since 2021. She was previously a managing director at Ofgem. This piece was written and published online before the pre-election period began



Exclusive interviews

In-depth features

Expert analysis



PRINTED QUARTERLY
Civil Service World is free to all senior civil servants.

NEVER MISS AN ISSUE

Free subscriptions are also available for other civil servants on request - please contact csw.editor@civilserviceworld.com for more information

For all other subscription enquiries please contact customer.service@totalpolitics.com

Standard subscription rate is £99 per year.



ABOUT ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT

Collette Stone on keeping an open mind when seeking to resolve issues

I'm a chameleon by profession. Otherwise known as an organisation development consultant. I left the civil service two years ago and can see, in hindsight, just how much the cross-department working I did shaped who I am and the portfolio consultancy career I have now. I started in the civil service as an immigration officer at Heathrow – surrounded by smart, knowledgeable colleagues and a strong team ethos. But a long-term posting to the Training Unit – the first woman in that role – helped me find my calling as a developer of people, and I moved into learning and development and then organisation development.

In several Whitehall-based roles I supported hundreds of teams and leaders in many functions and all levels in their search for greater effectiveness and capability, and then resilience – and learned something of great value from each of them.

What did I learn? Overall, of most value was learning to see above and below an organisation's waterline – getting to the heart of a business issue to help resolve it, by tuning in to what is said, and what is not said.

I rarely took anything at face value. When a manager said, 'the problem is 'x' I knew that on investigation it was much more likely to be 'y'.

'The processes are wrong.' Maybe. But

let's have a quiet look at leadership style and team cohesion on the way past, just in case.

'It's all the leader's/team's fault.' Sometimes, but if we stand back and look at it from over here – any clunky processes, an uncomfortable office environment, under-equipped, noisy... could be clues to why the deliverables aren't getting delivered. Seeing below the surface saved time and effort.

I learned to be whatever someone needed me to be: over my civil service career my job title changed almost annually, to suit the mood of the department and the needs of the budget holder. 'Assistant' this. 'Head of' that. Deputy. Trainer. Facilitator. Coach. Mentor. Adviser. Manager. Designer. Consultant. Co-ordinator. Change lead.

Irrespective of organisational function or location, the job and the purpose was always essentially the same – organisation development (OD). But OD is a label that doesn't always open career doors. I learned to shift mindset, eventually – and be comfortable with my labels.

In time I developed more strategic muscle and learned it was OK to mentally step across the tramlines and think creatively about an issue, to contribute what was needed, as well as what was asked for. But this shift came with a deeper awareness of the importance of psychological safety: if I don't feel safe, I won't deliver. Simple. This new

sensitivity found its way into my consultancy work now – coaching for staff at a career crossroads and also experiencing burnout.

I found I was suited to spotting the nuances of human emotion and enjoyed adding value by being the oil in the machinery through playing these different roles:

Sounding board: the person you can talk to in confidence when there's nobody else – knowing you can trust me with anything, and feel safe, not judged.

Puzzle solver: when you know something's not right for the team, or the objectives, I'll find out what that is and give you some options for what to do about it.

Fixer: I can go behind the scenes, initiate conversations, broker better relationships and hand an issue back to you to publicly resolve.

Noticer: the person in the corner of the meeting, an observer, or perhaps note taker, but the real job is noticing – to shape a view for you of what is really going on.

Voice unifier: when the team cares about its work but individual disconnections or misunderstandings disrupt it, I'll find where the breaks are and help you mend them by advocating for those who feel unheard. ■

Collette Stone works as an organisation mindset and culture change consultant



TRAINING

Dods Training is a renowned provider of learning and development courses in governance, policy making and communications skills. We ensure our clients have access to learning the core skills required when working in or with government.

Our courses utilise the wealth of experience of our trainers coupled with outside experts including Parliamentarians, Ministers, Private Office staff and industry specialists from across government and the private sector.

Specialist training areas



Leadership and Management



Governance and Policy Making



Self-development and Resilience



International Training



Finance and Commercial Skills



Communications Skills



Coaching and Community Learning

Contact us to find out how Dods Training can benefit your organisation

customer.service@totalpolitics.com

For more information
visit www.dods-training.com

Women into
Leadership 

Get set for our online **Women into Leadership conference**

Over 10,000 female civil service staff
are already benefitting from our
bespoke leadership training to date.

**Join us for a special
online edition.**

For more information
and to register your
team, scan the QR code:



Organised by:



Supported by:

