CSW

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

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You say goodbye, I say hello

Outgoing cabinet secretary Simon Case's final lecture and a profile of Sir Chris Wormald

Far from DfID-ent

Sir Mark Lowcock pulls no punches about the fate of his old department

20 years of MoG changes

What's worked – and what's been a waste of time and money

SARAH HEALEY

Exclusive interview with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government permanent secretary

+ A full list of 2024's Civil Service Award winners

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On the cover
An exclusive photo of Sarah Healey taken by Louise Haywood-Schiefer in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

PLUS

Read the full Civil Service Awards winners list in our special supplement, p.79

FROM THE EDITOR

Optimism bias is a powerful thing. Studies have shown that around 80% of the global population tend to make overly positive assumptions about the future – though their willingness to admit to being an optimist depends in part on the culture they live in, and things like stress or depression will affect how optimistic individuals feel at any given moment.

In the world of government, we usually associate optimism bias with unrealistic project costs and timelines. Officials are instructed to take steps to counter it. But it's not always a bad thing – biologists suggest that an optimistic tendency is an evolutionary advantage. It helps us imagine new possibilities and then have the courage to make them happen.

All of this came to mind as *CSW* caught up with officials taking a well-earned break at the end of 2024. In public, there's optimism about change already under way, and the possibility of further positive change under a new government. In private, there's exhaustion and a sense of shock that relations with a new set of ministers already seem strained.

One civil servant, looking back on the ups and downs of the last year, summarised their feelings concisely: "We were too optimistic."

After years of public attacks on colleagues both named and unnamed, civil servants told themselves a new administration would bring a return to normal relations with ministers.

It took two years for Tony Blair to bemoan the "scars on his back" from trying to force change through Whitehall. Keir Starmer took about five months to pre-emptively complain about civil servants avoiding change by resting in a "tepid bath of managed decline".

One senior civil servant who contacted *CSW* after those now-infamous comments spoke for many when they said: "Thanks Keir. I feel so much better about the gruelling job I do now. We were all ready to deliver for the new government, but he's going to have pissed off a huge number of people."

While there was some belated back-pedalling on Starmer's remarks, they convey a sense that ministers are increasingly frustrated, impatient and spooked by falling poll numbers. It is inevitable that change will take time, but politicians would do well to listen to the honest, private opinions of those who know the civil service as it really is now. In the run-up to last summer's election, much was made of Starmer's own hinterland as a member of the SCS, and what it might mean for government. We asked one senior official – who recently returned to the civil service after a period away – what they think the PM will make of the civil service in 2025. He'll be surprised, they replied, at how demoralised and exhausted they are – and how much talent has bled away.

We all know that in a government context, unchecked optimism can create drastic problems – like a project careering way over-budget and behind schedule. But a bit of hope and a positive attitude are also essential to creating much-needed change. An exhausted civil service needs leaders who can inspire a sense of possibility to drive not just positive thinking but action.

Equally, officials need their leaders to be realistic. Because if ministers are already complaining about civil servants, it might tell us something about the pressures of the context they are working in – and indeed about how the civil service needs to change to reflect that context.

We end up, then, facing the Stockdale paradox – named after an American admiral who spent over seven years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He survived, he later said, by embracing the need for optimism ("you must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties") with realism ("you must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be"). Perhaps this is what Starmer thought he was doing through his tepid bath speech, but it was sorely misjudged. ■

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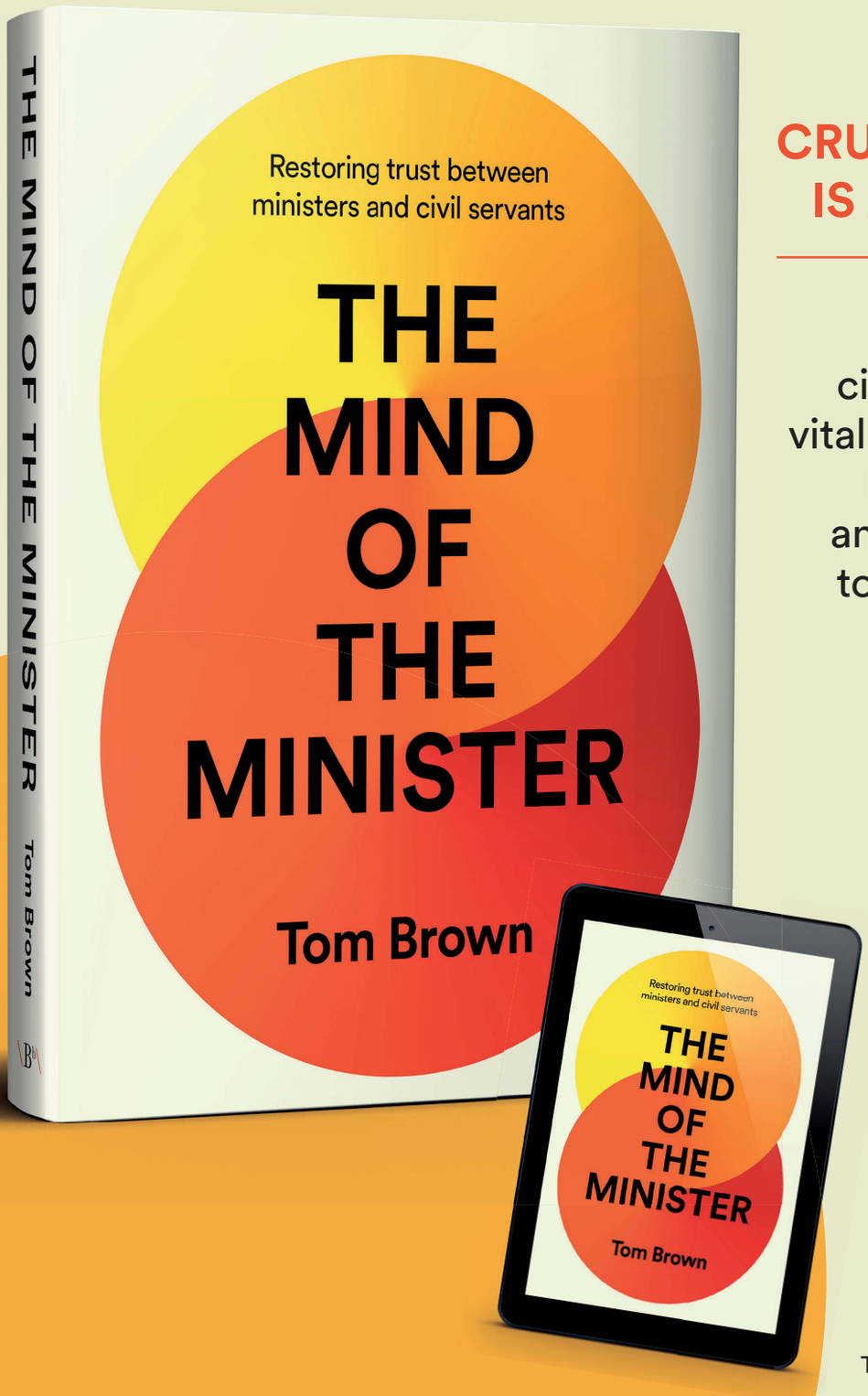
OUT NOW

The Mind of the Minister

Restoring trust between ministers and civil servants



BRITAIN'S MOST CRUCIAL RELATIONSHIP IS AT BREAKING POINT

The trust between civil servants and ministers, vital for effective government, has reached a historic low and urgent action is needed to restore this critical bond.

Featuring interviews with ***Vince Cable, Caroline Flint, Rory Stewart, Philip Rutnam, Simon McDonald*** *and* ***Una O'Brien*** *offering guidance to improve this essential relationship.*

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Meet the BOSS

The prime minister's appointment of **Sir Chris Wormald** as the new cabinet secretary took some commentators and civil servants by surprise. But those who have worked with the Whitehall veteran tell **Jess Bowie** and **Jim Dunton** why, with hindsight, he was the obvious choice

Sir Chris Wormald's appointment as cabinet secretary shot holes in most predictions for the runners and riders vying to succeed Simon Case as the nation's top civil servant. But perhaps that says more about pundits and personality-driven stories than it does about Wormald.

The 56-year-old son of a former senior civil servant was a permanent secretary for well over a decade, firstly at the education department from 2012, then at the health department from 2016 to 2024. "Cometh the hour, cometh the man" was the tone of much of the feedback *CSW* heard during our on and off-the-record conversations for this piece about Britain's 14th cabinet secretary. Many of those we spoke to talked of a fierce intellect, a gift for "getting under the skin of delivery" and someone whose astute understanding of politics in no way compromised his exemplary impartiality.

Matt Hancock, who as health secretary from 2018 to 2021 spent years working cheek by jowl with Wormald, told us that he was "one of the finest civil servants of his generation".

Why, then, did his appointment take so many by surprise?

An unexpected appointment

The role of cabinet secretary was created in 1916, with original postholder Sir Maurice Hankey serving for 22 years. By contrast, the past 22 years have seen five cab secs. Famously, or infamously, no woman has ever held the job. It was on this theme that some Whitehall watchers expressed their disappointment on social media at Wormald's appointment. This sentiment was also echoed privately to *CSW* by a number of senior civil servants. "Seriously?" one said via Whatsapp. "The best we could do was another middle-aged white man? On the plus side, Kemi [Badenoch] can hardly accuse us of wokery now."

Others were surprised by Wormald's elevation on account of his reputation for being rather introverted: he is someone who rarely seeks the limelight, preferring to keep a low profile. How would this translate into the rallying-the-troops part of the cabinet secretary role; into being the figurehead for a workforce of half a million officials?

"Chris knows there is always scope for improvement, he's impatient for change and I think he's demonstrated he will do the long, hard yards to bring that about"
Dame Una O'Brien

Similar questions were asked when the late Jeremy Heywood took on the head of the civil service role in addition to his job as cabinet secretary. "For most of his career, Heywood has been the Kate Moss of government: you'd see him, you knew he was a big deal, but you never heard him speak," we wrote in these pages in early 2015.

Presumably Wormald – like Heywood before him – will now have to be both seen and heard. Does the introvert thing matter?

"No," said one ex-minister who has worked with him closely. "And, actually, I think the word 'modest' is more apt. Jeremy was modest, but Chris is more so because that is just absolutely central to his being and way of working. He's very happy to delegate success, give others credit and bring other people on, and all of the good things that come with his sort of modest leadership. People can lead in different ways. He is not bombastic and he's simply not gossipy. And that's a good thing."

Another former colleague of Wormald's – this time on the civil service side – told us: "He has led two hugely complex organisations, and he does it in his way. They say about leaders: you can't be like someone else. You've got to be more fully yourself. And Chris isn't trying to copy anyone else. He's not trying to be someone else."

This former senior official also pointed to the hypocrisy of the discourse around leaders where "on the one hand people say: 'We live in a celebrity world now, so we have expectations about people being particularly polished'. But, at the same time, we talk about the importance of being 'fully who you are at work'."

"So, if you're more of a reflective person," they added, "that should be fine."

The former minister agreed.

"The job isn't to do the performing arts. If you're a minister, the performative side of a public service job is obviously essential. I tend to think of these things in four categories: one-on-one; small groups; large groups; and then essentially public-facing and broadcast. And Chris is very good at one and two. He's perfectly good at three, and he is at his least comfortable in category four. But, as a permanent secretary and as cabinet secretary, it's the least important by quite a long way."

Creature of Whitehall or iconoclast?

Wormald grew up in south London and was a pupil at boys' comprehensive Rutlish School in Merton, which counts former prime minister Sir John Major and illustrator Raymond Briggs among its alumni.

The cab sec subsequently graduated with a degree in history from Oxford University's St John's College and joined the Fast Stream. He studied for an MBA at Imperial College London in the late 1990s.

Wormald spent 15 years at the education department – including stints as principal private secretary to secretaries of state Estelle Morris and Charles Clarke. He also earned the respect of then-junior minister Lord Andrew Adonis, who has praised him as someone who "combines engaging wide-boy charm with bureaucratic mastery".

In 2006, Wormald became director general of local government and regeneration in the newly formed Department for Communities and Local Government. He moved to the Cabinet Office in 2009, where he was head of the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat – a role that has often been a stepping stone on the path of future perm secs. In the first couple of years of the coalition government, he served as director general in the Deputy Prime Minister's Office, building a system to help DPM Nick Clegg keep an eye on policymaking across government.

Someone who worked with Wormald during this period pointed to that DG job, telling *CSW* that its significance has been downplayed in the coverage of Wormald's appointment as cab sec.

"That shows that he will be able to do the diplomatic and 'courtier' element of the job with enormous experience," they said. "Managing Nick Clegg's operations was novel and challenging, and making a coalition work was a once-in-a-generation thing, and he did it brilliantly. One of the reasons that the coalition got off to such a good start was that Chris Wormald was the official responsible for Clegg's operations. And *then* he goes all the way to the opposite extreme, which is implementing the [Michael] Gove reforms in DfE, which he did brilliantly."

Changing the system from within

Announcing Wormald's appointment, which took effect on 16 December, prime minister Sir Keir Starmer said his plans for mission-driven government would "require nothing less than the complete rewiring of the British state to deliver bold and ambitious long-term reform". He added: "There could be no-one better placed to drive forward our Plan For Change than Chris."

The statement prompted chatter about whether a career civil servant like Wormald – a mandarin's mandarin – was really the best person to undertake the sweeping transformation of public services that "rewiring the state" implied.

However, those *CSW* spoke to said it was precisely Wormald's understanding of the machine that would enable him to help bring about radical reform.

"He understands the system, and he can work the system, but he isn't entrapped in the system or shackled by it," Matt Hancock said.

Dame Una O'Brien, Wormald's predecessor at the health department, went further – observing in Wormald "an element of iconoclasm for the way he routinely questions fixed ways of doing things". »

"If you lift the lid on some of the things he's done in the policy profession [of which Wormald was head from 2012 to 2020], really changing the way people think about evidence, creating a framework whereby the so-called generalist can actually do their work in a modern way, to a set of measurable standards... That is hard work. That is not saying, 'oh, everything's fine'," O'Brien told *CSW*.

"Chris challenges things in order to build them up, not to destroy them; he knows there is always scope for improvement, he's impatient for change and I think he's demonstrated he will do the long, hard yards to bring that about."

O'Brien also told us that Wormald clearly has "extraordinary experience" of leading big systems of public service "through the most challenging circumstances imaginable".

However, she added that a top-level run-through of Wormald's CV only spotlights some of the qualities that make him the right pick as cab sec. In addition to his years leading the policy profession, she argued that his lesser-known job as editor of the *Civil Service Quarterly* is significant too. Both of these roles "really brought him into contact with all the different issues and challenges that sit at the centre of government," she said.

"He understands the system, and he can work the system, but he isn't entrapped in the system or shackled by it" *Matt Hancock*

O'Brien said "confident", "humble" and "fearless" are three words that neatly sum up Wormald. "He's very willing to speak openly about what he doesn't know or what he might get wrong. He's confident in doing that," she said. "He's got a rigorous framework for how he thinks about complex problems, which is not something that you necessarily see from the outside."

Meanwhile, Hancock told *CSW*: "The thing that he is best at is finding a way to understand what, as a minister, you're trying to achieve and even if your first route to it is blocked, finding an alternative – which is a consummate civil service capability. He does that very, very well."

The task ahead

Alex Thomas, programme director at the Institute for Government – and former principal private secretary to Jeremy Heywood – has pointed out that Wormald will bring a "different kind of experience to the role" from most of his cab sec predecessors. Choosing Wormald suggests Starmer really does want to take public service reform seriously, Thomas argued in a blog on the day the announcement was made.

"Wormald is not from the traditional Treasury or (more recently) securocrat mould of cabinet secretaries," he wrote. "Instead, his career has been grounded in social policy, with a CV that suggests public service reform will be Starmer's top priority."

According to Thomas, such reform will start with the machinery at the centre of government. "Labour's missions have not yet been properly gripped and Wormald needs to improve how No.10 and the Cabinet Office are organised to make the government's priorities for change happen – and how they work with the Treasury, a department which fills the vacuum when the centre does not set a strong direction," he said.

"The system must feel the jolt of clarity and strategic direction that can come from a new leader, and one who has been set the task – presumably – of driving improvements in performance across public services, especially in health and education."

O'Brien said she believes Wormald's experience and insight will be "massively influential" for turning the missions vision into reality. "Bridging the role of the civil service into those mission ambitions will be very important," she said. "But more than that, it's how the civil service as a whole will be able to identify with that work and be able to contribute to it. I think he will be in a very good place to be able to bring that argument to the top leadership of the civil service, but also to people on the front line of many of these departments."

She added that the departments where Wormald has spent the majority of his time – education, local government and housing, and health – are responsible for "large, complex systems" that are highly relevant for the government's reform plans.

Covid legacy

Wormald's role at the helm of the Department of Health and Social Care during the coronavirus pandemic has arguably made him the most exposed permanent secretary at the ongoing Covid Inquiry. His appearances in front of the panel, chaired by Baroness Heather Hallett, have attracted much scrutiny and the situation is unlikely to change. Detailed reports on core decision-making related to the pandemic and its impact on the UK's healthcare systems are yet to be published, with nine of the inquiry's 10 modules still "active".

One government insider told *CSW* there is "no skirting around" the extent to which the reports will be "challenging" for senior officials still in post.

But they added that Wormald's personal experience of the chaos at the heart of government in the early months of the pandemic could be a "huge strength" in the civil service's top job.

"One of the cabinet secretary's key responsibilities is oversight of the whole setup of the Cobra infrastructure, emergency preparedness, resilience in the civil service," they said. "Chris Wormald will have learnt in spades where things go wrong. Who better to put things right than someone who has actually walked through each and every day of that?"

Whatever difficult questions the inquiry may yet present to Wormald, his main task is to demonstrate how his deep knowledge of government – combined with his public service-facing perspective – can help to deliver the rewiring of the state that No.10 demands.

Given the current state of both public services and the economy, this might require superhuman powers – something one former colleague indeed attributed to the new cabinet secretary. In response to Wormald's promotion, Lord Jim Bethell, who served as a health minister throughout the most acute phase of the pandemic, wrote the following on X: "When the killer zombies invade, I'd like Chris Wormald at my back". ■

THE KIND OF GUY YOU'D HAVE A BEER WITH?

Outside of work, Wormald is keen on cricket, rugby and going to Cornwall. He is "definitely" the kind of guy you could go for a drink with, though he'd be happier with a pint of bitter than a glass of wine, according to someone who knows him well.

"Personally, I've always liked him," said one civil servant who, as a junior official, worked closely with Wormald when the latter was a perm sec. They added that the new cab sec is "very down to earth and normal in lots of ways" but also has a knack for dazzling politicians with his capacity to be "all over" policy.

"He's always impressed ministers – of all parties and types – by being someone who knows the answers to lots of stuff, can think strategically, gets politics and can therefore get things done," they recalled.

ALL CHANGE

CSW's perm secs round-up for 2024 provided insight from leaders across government looking back on a year of historic change. The full round-up is well worth a visit – see our QR code on the right – but over the next three pages we share a flavour of some of the themes and highlights

SCAN THE QR CODE TO GO TO OUR FULL 2024 PERM SECS ROUND-UP

LEADERSHIP IN 2024

"Being a HR leader in 2024 is very different from when I joined the profession in the '90s. I have now given my age away! The expectation of people from their work has evolved dramatically and the civil service has to continue to adapt to recruit talent, retain those already in the service and ensure we are a great place to work for everyone."

Fiona Ryland, chief people officer

"I feel incredibly privileged every day to have taken on this role in 2024. We are at a unique point in time, with a huge opportunity to shape the future of the civil service and deliver for our new government. I have loved working with colleagues in this new role to support delivery and change."

Cat Little, Cabinet Office

MISSIONS

"I've been really proud of all we've done to start work on the Opportunity mission, and to set really clear goals to help break the link between background and success – it couldn't be more important, and touches on something at the heart of good public service, which is to make sure our services work best for those that need them most."

Susan Acland-Hood, DfE

"By prioritising missions, we have saved 20% in the cost of cross-government comms this year while increasing spending on priority campaigns by nearly 40%."

Simon Baugh, Government Communications

"The vision for the civil service is clear – working collectively as one behind shared missions. Using a mixture of core skills, we can ensure successful delivery while staying true to the values that define the civil service."

Sam Ulyatt, CCS

CHALLENGES FOR 2025

"We've done the easy bit of missions – getting people enthused – and now we have to build really big relationships that can endure through hard choices and the tests that come with practical delivery."

Susan Acland-Hood, DfE

"Delivery and implementation has to be at the heart of 2025... whether it is delivering change for the civil service or better outcomes for citizens, we have to translate government ambition into practical reality and sustain our efforts into the medium term."

Cat Little, Cabinet Office

"Equality issues are seldom out of the public eye and receive vast amounts of media attention. So it's a racing certainty that some issues on which we will need to focus over the next year will be things we had not predicted!"

Marcus Bell, Office for Equality and Opportunity

"I want to do more to attract the best skills from every region in the UK to deliver on the government's priorities. I recognise this will mean changing the way we recruit, as well as ensuring the civil service brand is strong to continue to attract external talent and retain the brilliant people already working here. This is not easy, but with a fantastic team we are already exploring what more we can do on apprenticeships and speeding up recruitment to make positive changes."

Fiona Ryland, chief people officer

A WELCOME BREAK FROM CRISES

"2024 offered modest respite from the sequence of crises of recent years, all of which have affected the NAO's work in significant ways. So, the biggest challenge was the more familiar one to all public service leaders: achieving the high performance standards expected of us within the resources available and helping our colleagues navigate the inevitable operational challenges. In our case, this year's curveball was the timing of the general election squarely in our busiest season for auditing government accounts."

Gareth Davies, NAO

TRANSITION TO A NEW GOVERNMENT

"Just as a change of government is an exciting thing to be part of, it can also really test the resilience of staff who are adapting to new policy and new ways of working. Some of that was tough for people but I am happy to say MHCLG was very professional throughout."

Sarah Healey, MHCLG

"In our system, changes of government don't happen very often! In quite a long career, I have only experienced them on two occasions – in 1997 and 2010. While experiences like that can help you understand some of what is required, there are always surprises... Psychologically, you need to be ready to abandon quite a lot of the work you were doing before, which is not always easy. Policies, personalities, priorities and language can all change at the drop of a hat, but my team managed the changes and also the inevitable uncertainties very well."

Marcus Bell, OEO

"The way in which I saw civil servants and lawyers across Whitehall working right up to the wire to do their best for the last government, then demonstrate their impartiality and capability by immediately pivoting to give their all for a newly elected government of a different political stripe. This is the way mature democracies under the rule of law behave. Having lived and worked in other countries and seen things done differently, I no longer ever take it for granted – and think our political leaders from all sides ought to be given more credit for it too."

Douglas Wilson, AGO

"The election saw a significant addition to our responsibilities, with colleagues in the Cabinet Office leading work on digital, data and AI across government joining the department. Even though machinery of government changes can mean a lot of work, this one has been a massive highlight for me. This means we are now at the forefront of shaping the digital future of government, bringing together expertise and resources to create a centralised Digital Centre of Government. I love the work we are doing and the chance to work with digital and data professionals across HMG. Difficult problems and brilliant teams to work with are what get me up in the morning, so I am happy!"

Sarah Munby, DSIT

COLLABORATION

"The next year will require us to continue our transformation of data. Using new methods and data and excellent collaboration both within and outside of ONS will be critical."

Sir Ian Diamond, national statistician

"It is hard to select one highlight – but ensuring the return of the Northern Ireland Executive was by far the most pressing objective and one that, happily, was met in February. I was proud not just of the excellent work of the NIO, but of the genuine collaboration and team effort across Whitehall. We can do great things when we work together."

Julie Harrison, NIO ■

Combining human and machine intelligence for a stronger future

AI holds the key to revolutionising the UK public sector, empowering workers, improving services, and driving societal impact. QA explores how to lead the transformation

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing industries worldwide, and the UK public sector has immense potential to harness its capabilities to improve outcomes for citizens. From automating repetitive tasks to providing data-driven insights, AI has the power to reshape public services and amplify their societal impact.

However, the journey to AI adoption is not without its challenges. Despite its promise, adoption rates within UK government organisations remain slow, and without decisive action, the UK risks falling behind its international counterparts. It's time to reimagine the public sector – starting with its people.

Why does the public sector lag in AI adoption?

Let's start by understanding the challenge at hand. While AI adoption is accelerating globally, the public sector faces a unique set of barriers.

The National Audit Office reported that only 37% of government organisations have deployed AI[1], with a further 37% piloting solutions. Yet 70% identify a lack of skills as a critical barrier to progress.

This hesitation stems from several key challenges:

- **The skills gap:** Public sector staff are often unprepared for AI-driven changes. Many organisations rely heavily on contractors, leading to high costs and limited in-house expertise.
- **Legacy systems:** Outdated infrastructure is incompatible with modern AI tools, increasing the complexity and cost of implementation.
- **Budget pressures:** Tight finances force organisations to prioritise immediate needs over future investments, stalling AI adoption.
- **Data silos:** Fragmented data limits the ability to derive meaningful insights, hindering the effectiveness of AI solutions. AI output is only as good as the data input, making data quality itself a critical priority.

Despite these obstacles, AI offers unparalleled opportunities to transform public services and save billions. If the UK addresses these challenges head-on, it can set a global standard for AI-enabled governance.

Applying AI within public services

AI is not just a theoretical tool – it's already transforming public sector delivery. Let's examine some real-life examples. Tools like Microsoft Copilot for Microsoft 365, a generative AI assistant that integrates seamlessly with existing systems, demonstrate AI's ability to support workers, enhancing productivity.

Copilot showcases how AI can address real challenges in healthcare, education, and local government:

- **Healthcare:** Copilot reduces administrative tasks, such as transcribing clinical notes and summarising consultations, enabling NHS staff to focus on patient care. By alleviating burnout and cutting backlogs, this technology is poised to revolutionise the sector. AI's capabilities extend to critical

diagnostics too, with AI detecting 12% more breast cancers[2] in UK screening programmes than routine standard practice.
- **Education:** AI supports teachers by personalising learning, automating grading, and offering real-time feedback. These tools free up educators' time to focus on teaching and ultimately lead to improved educational outcomes for students.
- **Local government:** Barnsley Council demonstrates Copilot's power[3], automating meeting minutes, summarising reports, and improving productivity. With more than 50% staff adoption, it's setting the pace for other local authorities.

These successes underline AI's potential to deliver better services and significant savings – estimated at up to £17 billion by 2035, according to Public First[4] research for Microsoft.

Sustainable transformation demands an empowered workforce

We believe AI adoption is not just about technology – it's about equipping people with the skills and confidence to use it responsibly.

Addressing the fear factor is crucial. AI is not here to replace jobs but to redefine work; complementing human expertise, and enabling employees to focus on strategic, impactful work.

Upskilling and reskilling the public sector workforce is vital. It's not just about teaching technical teams how to build and manage AI systems; all staff need a baseline understanding of AI's potential and risks, as well as practical training on using tools like Copilot effectively.

Why in-house upskilling is the solution

The public sector often turns to contractors to fill skill gaps. This approach is expensive and unsustainable. We want to put the knowledge back in the public sector's hands to build something better for the future.

Investing in in-house talent not only reduces costs but also fosters organisational resilience and long-term capability.

At QA, we offer end-to-end learning solutions tailored to the public sector's unique needs. Our solutions are:
- **Integrated:** Combining assessments, custom learning paths, and hands-on labs to ensure practical, applicable knowledge.
- **Collaborative:** Supporting cohort-based learning that fosters connection and knowledge-sharing across teams.
- **Scalable:** Designed to meet the needs of large, complex organisations, ensuring consistent outcomes at every level.

By prioritising in-house training, organisations can create a confident, capable workforce equipped to harness AI responsibly and effectively.

Leading the way

The UK has the potential to lead the world in AI-driven public service. This can only happen if its leaders act decisively. We believe the time to act is now. Here's how senior civil servants can take the lead:

1. **Focus on vision and goals:** Connect key stakeholders to understand what your AI strategy should offer the organisations, and how you will achieve it. You can then ensure collaboration and a cohesive understanding from leadership through to operational teams.
2. **Prioritise workforce development:** Invest in upskilling programmes to close the skills gap and empower staff at all levels to embrace AI with confidence.
3. **Foster a culture of innovation:** Encourage experimentation, celebrate successes, and create a safe space for teams to explore AI's potential.

AI is not just about technology; it's about people. By building a skilled, innovative workforce and skilfully deploying solutions like Microsoft Copilot, the UK public sector can deliver better services, build public trust, and set a global benchmark for AI-enabled governance.

We believe in creating lasting change through learning.

Scan the QR code or head over to www.qa.com/publicsector_csw/ to explore how QA's AI training solutions can empower your workforce to lead the way.

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BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

Machinery of government changes – what are they good for? **Jim Dunton** looks back on 20 years of what some Whitehall watchers affectionately call "rearranging the deckchairs" to see what's worked, and what's been a waste of time and money

Few phrases strike fear into the hearts of civil servants quite as comprehensively as "machinery of government change". Like earthquakes, departmental reorganisations vary in magnitude and disruption. Some will affect a far-flung bit of the map with little impact on anyone else and no reported casualties. Others condemn cherished empires to the history books and create problems that take years to unravel.

Civil Service World's two decades of existence have seen scores of MoG changes. Some have drifted quietly under the radar, others not so much.

For those without direct personal experience, it's easy to forget that institutions like the Ministry of Justice, HM Revenue and Customs, and the Department for Work and Pensions are positively "Generation Z" in government terms. Some departments created in the past 20 years have had lifespans more in line with the average hamster's.

Chopping and changing the way government delivers is never easy, and effort expended on reorganisation is by definition not directed to other – more fruitful – tasks. The Institute for Government has previously estimated that the upfront cost of setting up a new Whitehall policy department or delivering a mid-sized merger is around £15m. However in a 2019 report it said MoG changes tended to come with a 20% productivity hit from 20% of staff for a period of 10 months, equating to additional costs of up to £34m. Plus, in reality, completing MoG changes can take a lot longer than 10 months.

IfG programme director Tim Durrant says standing the test of time is one sign of a worthy MoG change. Examples include 2001's creation of the DWP by joining up the Department of Social Security and bits of the then Department for Education and Employment, or 2007's fashioning of the Ministry of Justice from the Department for Constitutional Affairs and elements of the Home Office portfolio.

Another example is the 2005 formation of HMRC from the merger of Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise. It had been a government goal for well over a century. In 2011, *Civil Service World* reported that then cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell had a photo of former PM William Gladstone on his wall, accompanied by a quote on the desirability of bringing revenue and customs together. Gladstone died 106 years before it happened – on O'Donnell's watch as Treasury perm sec.

For Durrant, who was co-author of the IfG's 2019 paper *Creating and Dismantling Government Departments*, unsuccessful MoG changes are typically ones that have been poorly thought out or conducted for the "wrong reasons".

"Obviously prime ministers are politicians; they have political drivers and all the rest of it. And they will want to please their allies and supporters," he says. "But if you are moving things around because it's the right thing for pleasing a minister or a faction of your party it's not really on because of the disruption it causes."

Durrant considers 2007's creation of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills as a prime example. The department was formed from parts of the Department for Trade and Industry and the DfEE – and launched at the time the education department was rebranded the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The rump of DTI was rebranded as the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform.

According to the IfG, a prime motivator for DIUS' existence was then-PM Gordon Brown's desire to get John Denham back into the cabinet – without having to remove other cabinet members from their roles.

However, DIUS and BERR didn't even make it to the end of Brown's premiership as they were largely recombined

as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in June 2009. "He realised it didn't work, which I think is illustrative," Durrant says of Brown.

Dave Penman, general secretary of civil service leaders' union the FDA, said the existence of DIUS was so brief that it was disbanded before work to align the terms, conditions, and pay of its newly-united staff had been completed.

"That felt like the absolute worst," he says. "The longevity of it, the rationale for why it was done. When it was undone, it wasn't undone well."

According to Penman, HR tangles from the creation and break-up of DIUS "took years to resolve" because the global financial crisis meant no new money was available to rebalance inequalities between newly-thrust-together staff. This is one of the recurring themes of MoG changes. "Treasury essentially said: 'We're not giving you extra money for this.' So it was almost impossible to resolve it in the short term," Penman says. "Then there was austerity. You had departments literally given no mechanism with which to try and resolve these issues."

Few MoG changes took place during the coalition government years, with then Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude wary of their benefit. Much was to change in the wake of the UK's 2016 decision to leave the European Union, however, which forced David Cameron to resign as PM and saw Theresa May installed in No.10.

May quickly announced the creation of the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the European Union in response to the pressing tasks of delivering Brexit. Meanwhile, the Department for Energy and Climate Change and BIS were merged to create the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Constructing BEIS was seen as necessary to comply with the requirements of the Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1975, which dictates that there can only be 21 secretaries of state at any given time. Setting up two new departments, each with a secretary of state, meant one existing department would have to go – and DECC was "it".

Launching DExEU had been one of May's Conservative Party leadership commitments. But the IfG's Durrant says the move was a failure on multiple levels, principally because in the summer of 2016 the then-PM failed to understand how all-encompassing delivering Brexit would be.

"Anything that affects everything in government needs to be run from the centre – it needs to be run from No.10 and the Cabinet Office," he says. "Carving Brexit out and trying to put it to one side was part of the problem why Brexit became so complicated.

"[DExEU] didn't work on a political level, but it also didn't work on an official level. Because a lot of departments were like, 'Who are these upstart people telling us what to look into? We know our areas'. Whitehall is used to being corralled by the Cabinet Office and by the Treasury to a certain extent. But having a line department trying to manage across all other departments is a very difficult way of setting things up. It's not the normal way."

Durrant acknowledges that May was in a uniquely difficult position, and that any PM would have struggled to deliver a good structural solution for Whitehall to deliver Brexit. "Hopefully, the lesson from that is that if there is something that is big and affects all of government, you need to run it from the centre," he says.

Similarly, DIT had an initial crisis of purpose because for its early months May's government had not made a decision about whether the UK would leave the EU customs union as part of Brexit. As the IfG observed in 2019, the situation made it impossible for DIT to progress new trade deals until a call was made on the UK's future trading status.

DExEU was dissolved on 31 January 2020. DIT survived until February 2023, when it was absorbed into the new Department for Business and Trade.

Boris Johnson's 2020 decision to merge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with the Department for International Development is perhaps the most classically controversial MoG change of recent years (*see p.72*). Ostensibly, it was designed to better align the UK's aid spending with the nation's other overseas priorities, particularly in light of Brexit. Some viewed it as a cash grab for DfID's £10bn budget by a former foreign secretary who had been forced to operate on a fraction of that sum when he was the boss at King Charles Street.

Unpopular with staff from the international-development side – who were massively outnumbered by their FCO counterparts – the merger took more than two years to complete and coincided with a spike in staff turnover.

According to the National Audit Office, the process cost at least £24.7m to deliver, excluding indirect costs such as disruption, diverted effort and the impact on morale. The figure also does not include the department's new HR and finance system, or its Aid Management Platform programme. Significant IT issues persisted for staff, which is not uncommon for MoG changes. In the case of the FCO and DfID merger those problems also hampered the UK's response to the fall of Kabul and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Other problems included friction caused by former DfID officials getting different overseas allowances to their former FCO colleagues and a requirement for former DfID staff to have higher-level security clearance than was previously the case. Some former DfID staff did not meet the

Multiple changes It wasn't just the doors revolving at 1 Victoria Street over the past 20 years

"DIUS felt like the absolute worst. The longevity of it, the rationale for why it was done. When it was undone, it wasn't undone well" ***Dave Penman, FDA***

"reserved" nationality requirements of the FCO and FCDO, barring them from applying for some roles in the new organisation. The requirements stipulate that only UK nationals – or in certain circumstances citizens of the Irish Republic or the Commonwealth – can be employed to undertake particular roles, because of the sensitive nature of the work. Jobs in the Security Service, the Secret Intelligence Service, and the Government Communications Headquarters are automatically "reserved" to UK nationals.

Twelve months after the merger, a survey of senior officials conducted for the FDA union found that just 7.5% considered the reorganisation to have been a success. A March 2024 NAO report on the merger said the new department had experienced higher staff turnover in the years following the merger compared to that of FCO. DfID already had a high turnover rate – of approximately 11% in 2019-20, before the merger was announced.

Back to the future With Ed Miliband back in DECC's successor department DESNZ, the MoG wheel has almost come full circle

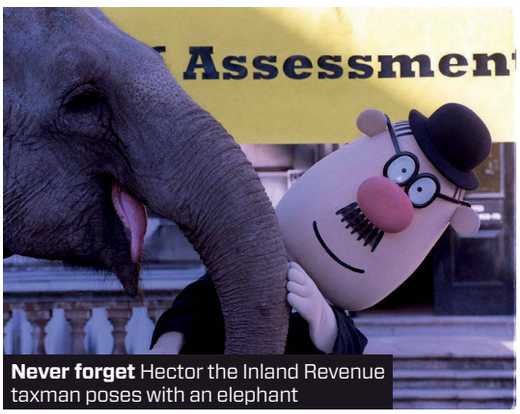
Farewell We hardly knew DExEU

Turnover appeared to increase the most for middle and higher-grade staff between 2019-20 and 2022-23, according to the NAO. The report said Grade 6 turnover almost doubled from 5.3% to 10.4% over the period, while turnover among senior civil servants increased from 7.6% to 11.7%.

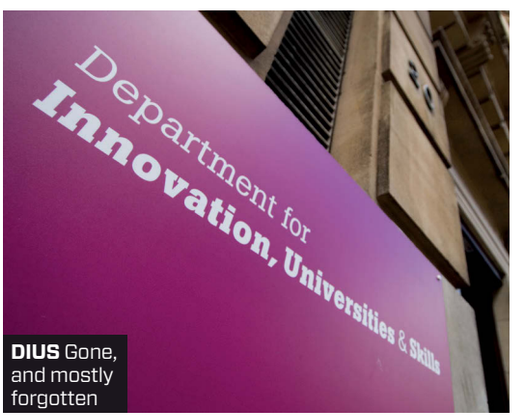
The FDA's Penman says the exodus was aided by the fact that disaffected DfID officials were not short of options for other jobs. "You can imagine how many NGOs there are in that field, and they're very well-connected people," he says. "You can't necessarily be a diplomat somewhere else, but you can work in the aid sector in lots of places. Part of it was also about the policy outcomes they were trying to achieve."

The IfG is more sanguine about the creation of FCDO. Senior researcher Jack Worlidge says there is a "strong school of thought" that it made sense to bring development into line with broader foreign policy. "I know lots of Conservatives who are pro aid spending but think the FCDO merger was a good idea," he says. "Separate to that is the question of how it was done, how disruptive it was and how long it took and, downstream, how the department was then able to react in situations like the Afghanistan withdrawal."

Durrant notes the Conservative Party has a track record of combining aid with foreign policy but says Johnson's error was being very critical of DfID when the merger was announced. "Civil servants obviously serve the government of the day, but they are also human beings and it put people's backs up," he says. "The aid sector, which is a big, important, lobby, were very anti it and it was very much informed by Johnson's time as foreign secretary. There was a sense that this was someone who had been foreign secretary and had been jealous of DfID."



Never forget Hector the Inland Revenue taxman poses with an elephant



DIUS Gone, and mostly forgotten

Much lamented The merger of DfID and the FCO

The most recent large-scale MoG change has been the creation of the DBT, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology – all established in February 2023.

The move essentially scrapped DIT and BEIS, and created standalone energy and technology departments, with some tweaks to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for good measure. Shortly after last July's general election, the Starmer government announced that the Government Digital Service, the Central Digital and Data Unit, and the Incubator for AI would all move from the Cabinet Office to DSIT to "unite efforts" on the digitisation of public services in a single department.

The Cabinet Office has a role in advising the prime minister on MoG changes and an ad-hoc team that can be stood up to assist departments with restructuring. For the creation of DBT, DESNZ and DSIT, a cross-government oversight board was set up – with a senior DESNZ official at its helm. A new integrated corporate services function was also launched for DESNZ and DSIT. It handles estates, security and digital services and some of the departments' commercial, finance and HR needs.

Commentators told *Civil Service World* that the approach taken with the creation of DBT, DESNZ and DSIT appeared to have more central-government support than had been the case with other recent MoG changes. The Cabinet Office declined the opportunity to talk about the evolution of its MoG-support work for this feature.

Worlidge is relatively supportive of the

2023 MoG changes. "BEIS was large, unfocused and had a huge number of remits and spanned a massive range of policy," he says. "So to reunite the bits of DECC which previously existed with the other stuff in DESNZ makes a lot of sense. And having DBT, as it is now, bringing trade and business back together makes more sense. There's something about splitting up big and complicated departments as well when they have been smashed together by previous governments."

He acknowledges DSIT was "very much a reflection" of then-PM Rishi Sunak's personal priorities and assumptions – raising questions about its future. Nevertheless, the Starmer government's decision to proceed with adding the GDS, CDDU and i.AI to the department looks like a vote of confidence.

Worlidge and Durrant are of the opinion that the fewer MoG changes civil servants are subjected to, the better. "It's so disruptive to the work of a department if you're talking about big restructures or demergers," Durrant says. He argues that other approaches to breaking down silos and cutting down departmental boundaries should be tried first – with the Starmer "mission boards" approach being one way of doing that.

"DExEU didn't work on a political level, but it also didn't work on an official level. A lot of departments were like, 'Who are these upstart people telling us what to look into? We know our areas'" *Tim Durrant, IfG*

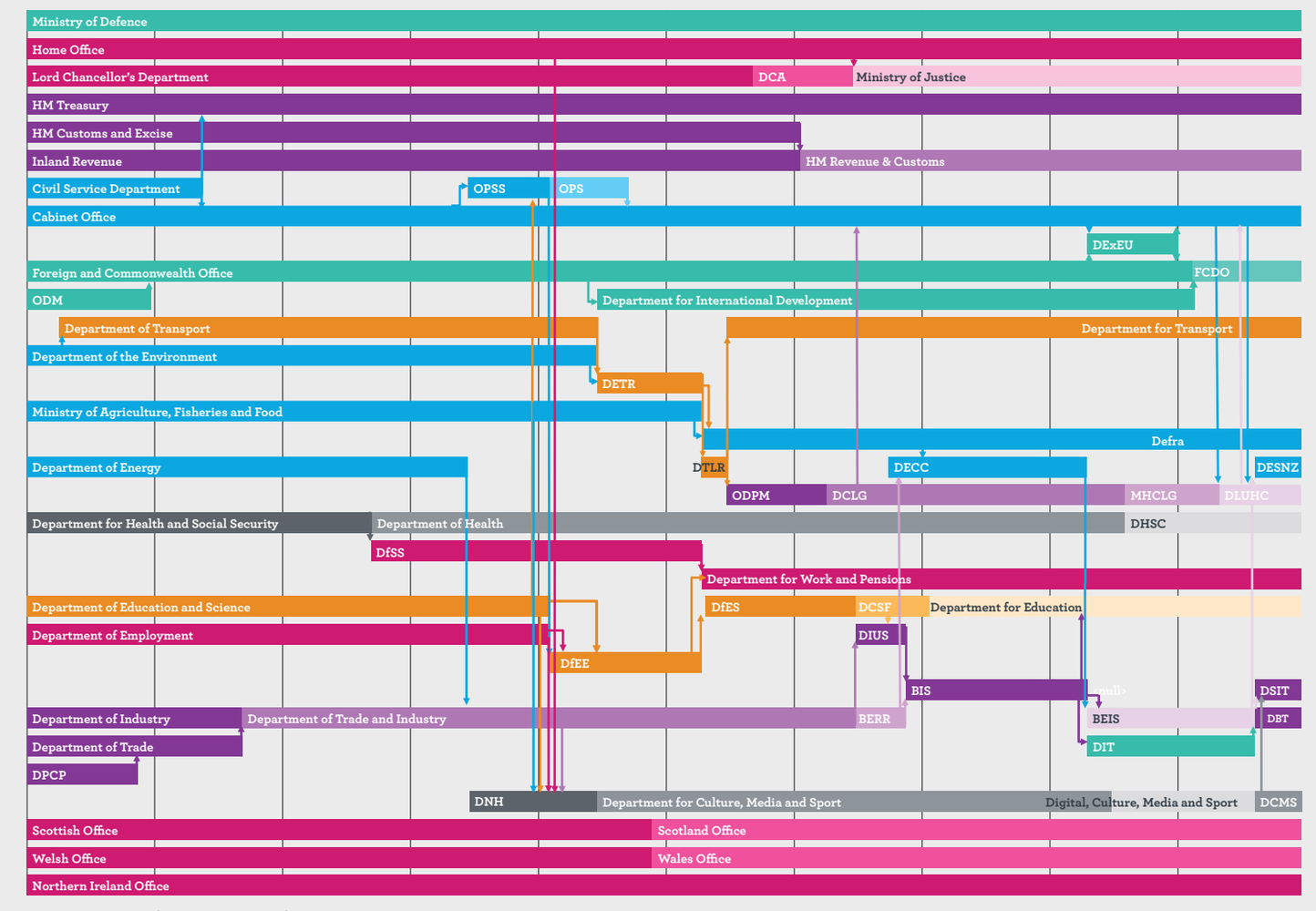
Nevertheless, there is one exception from the IfG: earlier this year its Commission on the Centre of Government called for No.10 and the Cabinet Office to be restructured into a new Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, along with a separate Department for the Civil Service.

Penman points to HMRC as an example of a merger that had "strong rationale for it", with lots of overlapping areas of work and potential for intelligence-sharing and joint skills development.

Despite the existence of clear cultures remaining from its predecessor departments after almost two decades, he says the MoG change that created HMRC has been "one of the successful ones".

"There are always legacies in any organisation, particularly when you had two organisations with such strong identities and history," he says. "But it makes sense, and if it makes sense, it's worth the pain. It drives innovations, it makes policy outcomes easier." ■

HISTORY OF DEPARTMENTAL REORGANISATIONS, 1975 TO FEBRUARY 2024



Source: Institute for Government analysis of data from House of Commons, and Butler and Butler, British Political Facts, 1986. Copyright IfG

GAME CHANGERS

On a panel at *CSW*'s 20th anniversary reception, the civil service chief operating officer and two former senior civil servants shared their reflections on the theme of change. Words by **Tevye Markson**. Photography by Tom Hampson

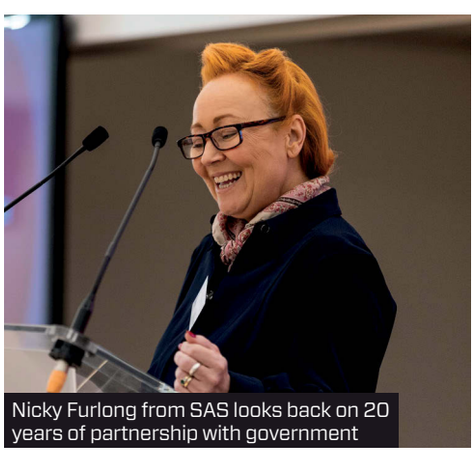
L-R: *CSW* co-editor Suzannah Brecknell, former perm sec Clare Moriarty, civil service COO Cat Little and Behavioural Insights Team founder David Halpern

From Suffragette meetings to the first United Nations General Assembly, Westminster Central Hall has witnessed change in action for more than a century.

In this historic building, *CSW* celebrated its 20th anniversary in November, bringing together civil servants and other 'friends of the show' to discuss how government has changed over two decades and what more is to come.

The event began with speeches from *CSW* co-editor Jess Bowie and Nicky Furlong, Northern Europe head of public sector, health & life sciences at SAS – which sponsored the event. *CSW*'s other editor Suzannah Brecknell then convened a conversation between Cat Little, Dame Clare Moriarty and Professor David Halpern on the theme of change.

CSW's co-editor Jess Bowie reflects on two decades of the magazine


Nicky Furlong from SAS looks back on 20 years of partnership with government

Each had a different take on the concept but Cat Little, civil service chief operating officer and Cabinet Office permanent secretary, was quick to point out that the civil service is currently being asked to embark on "one of the biggest reform agendas that we've had in recent times". Addressing the audience, she set out three philosophies that will be at the forefront of her mind as she aims to drive the changes to the civil service that the new government is seeking.

"Firstly," she said, "the civil service is made up of at least 100-plus organisations and 300 ALBs. And, to be honest with you, we do lose count every now and then. I think it was Charles de Gaulle who reportedly said in France, how on earth do you govern a country that has 246 different varieties of cheese? And I think every now and then, the civil service is a bit like that. So I've really learned over time that when you try to change things in the complexity of an organisation with very rich diversity, it's really important that we don't treat change as a monolithic effort. Quite often, we have to pick the things that make the biggest difference and stick to it and agree that that is where our collective change efforts are actually going to be."

Little said this was part of the thinking behind One Big Thing, an initiative launched last year that focuses civil service learning and development efforts on a single theme.

In 2023, the theme of One Big Thing was data, with 200,000 civil servants taking part in masterclasses. The current initiative (which runs until February) is innovation. Little said 100,000 civil servants have taken part in innovation masterclasses so far, "thinking about how we unleash the creativity of what we do and apply it to day-to-day problems". She said this is a "good example of how you can make change work at that sort of scale".

Little then moved on to discuss the importance of recognising that incentives in the civil service and wider public sector are not always the same as those in the private sector.

"If I had a pound for every minister who said to me, 'Why can't you just give people a performance bonus and assume that that incentivises them to do things differently?'" she said.

"When you talk to civil servants, what gets them out of bed every morning is that they really passionately believe in changing the country for the better and they're really incentivised by bringing skills and making things better for the common good," she said. "And so it's really important that we understand the complexity of the different systems that we operate in and we don't try to assume that what incentivises good performance in the public sector is the same as what it might be in other parts of the economy."

Little's final point – which she described as "probably the most important thing" – was that change in the civil service must be "in support of even bigger and more important changes that we're trying to make as a country".

She said the civil service should not "change for change's sake" but "in order to drive better outcomes for the country as a whole".

"So at the start of the new Labour government, with missions at the heart of what we're trying to change for the long-term good of the country, I think the really interesting question is: how does the civil service change itself, its behaviours, its cultures, its ways of working, in pursuit of those outcomes and the missions that we have been discharged with?" she said.

"When we talk about change, we often think about technology and processes, but actually, it's all about people"
Clare Moriarty

Little added: "And we can talk a lot about why it's so difficult to work across systems between departments to collaborate in what we do, but change for the country is the thing that should be driving and incentivising change for the service as a whole."

Meanwhile, Moriarty, who was a civil servant from 1985 to 2020 – and who served as a perm sec in two departments – chose to reflect on the importance of people in driving change.

Moriarty said she became passionate about making the civil service more »

people-focused when she joined the then-Department for Constitutional Affairs in 2005 and became involved in the creation of "a really good and enduring model of leadership". She said this "opened windows into thinking about the world in different ways". But she said she "tried to pop the cork from underneath, and got a very sore head".

As she moved up the ranks, she became involved in a project called Transforming Whitehall and ran a workshop for the Top 200, a scheme that brought together the most senior officials for away days and leadership events.

During the workshop, Moriarty asked senior officials "to articulate the true values that drove progression". She said a group of very senior officials spontaneously came up with the phrase "we say one thing and do another".

"It's really important that we don't treat change as a monolithic effort" *Cat Little*

"After that, I used to go around saying the determining characteristic of the senior civil service was the ability to say one thing and do another. It didn't necessarily make me very popular," Moriarty said.

The project also galvanised Moriarty and fellow "change makers" to try to take over the Top 200 and "make it about people". They came up with a "fabulous, really high-energy experiential agenda", Moriarty said, but "the system came back and said, no, what we needed to talk about was 'game-changing reform', and clearly people were not anything to do with [that]".

Moriarty said she "banged her head on the desk for quite a long time" afterwards trying to get people issues onto the agenda, but finally achieved her aim by taking the agenda out of the equation. By then, she was part of an initiative called One Team Gov – a now-global movement focused on radical public sector reform through practical action, which was created by two UK civil servants and began life in 2017 as an "unconference" in London. Moriarty went to see then-cabinet secretary Jeremy Heywood one day to ask if they could turn the Top 200 into an unconference. To her surprise, he said yes, as long as she "took the risk on it". They ran the Top 200 unconference in 2018 and "certainly for a moment, it felt like we had really got that focus on people", Moriarty said.

"I hope that more progress has been made since," she added. "When we talk about change, we often think about technology and processes, but actually, it's all about people."

Professor Halpern, whose roles in government included founding and leading the Behavioural Insights Team and being a What Works national adviser for almost a decade, focused his reflections on the need for "genuine" innovation.

He said governments often have "some version of thin change", partly because ministers aren't prepared to carry out radical change, and often use the language of experimentation and innovation – "but if you look beneath the bonnet, nothing very much has changed".

"There's a sort of comfort to be had in that, but we should be after some version of genuine, authentic, appropriately calibrated change," he said.

Halpern said the new government's mission-driven approach, in principle, gives officials flexibility about how they achieve the missions, as well as the ability to say "we don't really know what is effective here, but we've got a plan to figure out what is more effective". It should also provide lots of opportunity to bring in tools that are "genuinely about innovation", he added. ■

Joining the dots to help each other do more

The Civil Service Awards recognise exceptional ideas that inspire meaningful change. Their true potential extends beyond the event by connecting initiatives, sharing stories, and fostering a culture of innovation to amplify impact and build a legacy of continuous improvement

Dean Richardson
Head of Digital Enablement
Mastek

Once again, the Civil Service Awards was a resounding success. It showed how even in complex, challenging, and stressful situations, good ideas – delivered well by teams or individuals – can make a real difference to people's lives.

Reflecting on the variety of these ideas, it's clear that there are even greater opportunities to be had. That is by connecting the dots between disparate concepts and solutions, we can broaden and elevate their impact.

Furthermore, one of the discussions we had during the evening was about how the ideas and contributors could inspire future contributors and winners. In short, how we can turn significant change programmes into an enduring legacy? These are the areas of focus that stood out to us.

Amplification

Each one of the suggested ideas has a story behind it, which were brought to life by the people and teams at the event. So, the question is, how can we help share these ideas more broadly and in a way that develops them further? Each individual challenge also relies on the communities involved being aware of the proposed solutions – without this, the good work is not getting to where it needs to be heard.

Understanding the different channels available, mapping audiences, and establishing how effective each channel is could help bring the ideas to a larger audience. Within each project, having a clear communications approach and plan would help to share the information with a wider audience.

Connection

Often the ideas are regional, proof of concepts, or designed to deliver a specific outcome – and once the event is over, no further action is taken. However, with additional facilitation and sponsorship, a number of these could be broadened. While many of the initiatives were one-off activities, this doesn't mean that the concept isn't repeatable in other scenarios. With a wider outlook and approach, good ideas could be shared, repeated, and delivered across different regions, departments, and situations. Decision review boards, business change champions, and project managers would all help to propagate change and amplify impact.

Building for the future

During the awards, we were fortunate enough to meet several of the winners and hear more about why they won their particular category. This got us thinking. What if we could build on this beyond the event? How do we encourage others to tackle difficult problems? How do we learn from each idea when new challenges are faced? How do we inspire future award winners?

Legacy is an often-used expression covering a number of meanings. In this context, it's about establishing and cultivating a repeatable business improvement culture by reinforcing the messages and connecting the ideas of the award-winning alumni.

In essence, a programme of events could be created that promotes the concepts and people behind them. A change community working regularly together would not only enable the sharing of ideas, but it would also give others the impetus to do similar things in their own areas.

Conclusion

We were very lucky to witness the energy, sense of achievement, and pride in the room at the awards. Truly inspirational. Harnessing this and converting it into sustained business change – so that we create more future winners and deliver more benefits to people – is a challenge that's rewarding in itself. It's a great example of how industry partners can support this vital process, providing the skills and experience that accelerate change by putting ideas into action.

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THINK BIG

This year's One Big Thing is focused on helping civil servants be more innovative. Here, the Cabinet Office tells us about the projects already underway – and how you can get involved

We're living in rapidly changing times. From conflict and climate change to the rise of AI and digital transformation, the challenges and opportunities the country and the world are facing are complex. It's no secret that the public sector needs to adopt new technologies, systems and processes so that it can keep pace with change, solve problems and deliver public services.

This is where the civil service's One Big Thing initiative comes in. Following last year's inaugural campaign, which saw more than 200,000 participants improve their data skills, this year's iteration focuses on innovation. Civil servants are being encouraged to learn a step-by-step innovation process before experimenting with delivering small, tangible changes.

The idea is to harness the innovative potential of civil servants and capitalise on the transformative power of collective action. The cumulation of many small changes can have a bigger impact, hence this year's tagline: "One Big Thing starts with one small change."

The programme aims to equip civil servants with knowledge and skills to help them in formulating and developing new ideas to deliver impact for their team, department and the public. Ultimately, One Big Thing will help civil servants to deliver small changes that realise tangible benefits and demonstrate that innovation can come from anyone, anywhere. It's part of a wider focus on continuing to build towards a culture of continuous improvement where civil servants are encouraged to share ideas, collaborate to refine them, and safely experiment with delivering them.

This year's programme is split into three parts. More than 110,000 civil servants having already taken part in the first step: an online 'Innovation Masterclass'. The civil service has packed its e-learning offering with advice and tips from innovators in both the private and public sector.

The second phase comprises team conversations in which participants reflect on their learning, share ideas and agree on the practical change that they can make as a team. So far over 1,500 of these conversations have been recorded.

Heading into the New Year, One Big Thing is approaching its final stage – experimentation. Following learning and team conversations, groups of civil servants across the country will experiment with delivering the agreed 'small change' and share their stories including what they learnt across the civil service.

WHAT IS INNOVATION?

At its heart, innovation is about the novel application of ideas, methods and technologies to improve outcomes. It's not just about generating ideas – it's about creating genuine value. One Big Thing is based on four pillars to reinforce a culture that supports innovation:

CAPABILITY – Ensuring everyone has the right skills and tools

INCENTIVES – Celebrating and rewarding experimental approaches

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT – Creating a blame-free environment where failure can be accepted as part of learning

RESOURCES – Providing the time, space, and investment needed for innovation

Innovation Squads

Already the civil service has been taking steps towards greater innovation. At the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), digital teams have worked in multidisciplinary agile teams for years. Drawing inspiration from similar initiatives like Virgin Media's Innovation Squads, a team at MHCLG piloted an Innovation Squad concept with non-digital colleagues.

A team of six civil servants, who had not worked together before, were drawn from different specialisms and divisions across the department. The team was given six weeks to improve a process of their choice anywhere in the organisation. The only ask of them was that they be creative, think innovatively and be unafraid to disrupt.

After workshopping ideas, the squad agreed that speeding up access to accurate information was a problem that was worth solving and could be of benefit to the entire department.

The answer: a chatbot called 'HR Harry'. Built using Microsoft's Power Virtual Agents app, by squad members who had no prior coding knowledge, HR Harry is being tested by the MHCLG HR team as part of their suite of internal digital services. The Innovation Squad is now supporting other functions to test and develop their own chatbots.

“One Big Thing will help civil servants to deliver small changes that realise tangible benefits and demonstrate that innovation can come from anyone, anywhere”

Sparking innovation

Already across the civil service, there are steps being taken to encourage more innovation. The Government Communication Service (GCS) established ‘Project Spark!’ – a programme to identify ideas for innovation, test them, and quickly scale them up through a ‘Dragons Den’ style opportunity.

The Met Office won the support of Spark! when they pitched a project that addresses the fact that one in five people in the UK have disabilities affecting their internet and social media use.

The team pitched their ideas to improve digital communication accessibility to a panel of experts. The pitch focused on centralising tools and training, collaboration with existing accessibility projects, and exploring generative AI applications. The presentation itself demonstrated accessibility best practices, including alt text, accessible colour schemes, and audio overviews.

Following unanimous support from the Dragons, the team has been working with the GCS Innovation Lab to develop and scale their solutions across government communications. Through workshops with communication specialists, they identified three key focus areas: improving access to best practices, developing an AI virtual assistant for accessibility guidance, and expanding British Sign Language usage.

The project has fostered valuable partnerships, including collaboration with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and Google.

ONES TO WATCH

The public deserves and expects to see improved, targeted, responsive services from the government. Civil servants are already working in this area to embed a culture of innovation and improve many services:

- The Department for Work and Pensions has developed a Passport Benefit Checking Service to speed up identification of whether someone qualifies for free medication.
- HM Revenue and Customs has integrated Open Banking, a cutting-edge payment technology and has saved over £1m in processing costs and reduced error corrections.
- Natural England has pioneered the use of artificial intelligence to restore peatlands, automatically analysing huge volumes of peatland images to identify where maintenance is needed.

What’s next?

Civil servants have until 14 February 2025 to undertake their training, take part in team conversations and get experimenting with their ideas. By Valentine’s Day it is hoped that a majority of the civil servants across participating departments will have taken part, and possibly become enamoured with innovation.

Beyond One Big Thing, the civil service as a whole will be continuing its efforts to think and do things differently. ■

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

In her first *CSW* interview as permanent secretary at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, **Sarah Healey** shares her thoughts on changes ahead, and her tips for keeping worries at bay. Words by **Suzannah Brecknell**. Photography by Louise Haywood-Schiefer

Like most people who take an interest in politics, Sarah Healey didn't sleep much on the night of the 2024 election. "That's okay," she says. "You can go for a few days on the adrenaline." But while most politics-watchers had finished their involvement in the democratic process as they left the polling booth, the permanent secretary at the communities department (which was about to change its name, though not its focus), was relying on adrenaline to carry out the unique role of supporting a major democratic transition of power. It's a role that gives her – and many other civil servants – a huge sense of pride. "There is a huge amount of energy that comes with the post-election feeling, no matter what the new government," she says, before adding: "An energy and a whole new set of tasks."

Healey worked with five secretaries of state in her last role as perm sec at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and she is well used to the rituals of handshakes by the door and clapping-in that go with welcoming a new minister. How is it different when the change is the result of an election, not a reshuffle?

"You always feel a great responsibility as a permanent secretary to make sure that your new secretary of state is happy with the support they're getting," she says. "But obviously it's a bigger sense of responsibility when it's a significant shift, and when it's someone who doesn't have years of experience but is keen to get on with making a difference."

Six months on, the evidence that her new secretary of state – also the deputy prime minister – was keen to make a difference can be »

“The connections between and solutions to policy challenges are much more obvious in a local setting than in the meeting rooms of government buildings”

found in the result of all those post-election "tasks". A new National Planning Policy Framework, an ambitious English devolution white paper and the unsafe cladding Remediation Acceleration Plan are just the most prominent outputs since the election.

Last summer, Healey helped her staff to manage this workload by encouraging them to take a proper break when possible, but also acknowledging the unsettling nature of change for her teams. "We tried to focus really hard on communication, because inevitably there's a lot of fluidity in how things work in the few days post-election. People can feel almost as worn out by the uncertainty as by the intensity," she explains. "And so my absolute number-one focus was to make sure that everybody knew what was happening and what the new priorities were as quickly as possible – what we'd heard from ministers, and also what their preferences were, how they liked to work."

Place-based policy

Healey joined the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – as it was then known – in February 2023 as part of a perm sec shuffle caused by the creation of the science, business and energy security departments. She recalls being "thrilled" at the move, drawn by the department's "huge, really significant cross-government agenda", comprising closely connected social and economic policies that lend themselves to systemic thinking.

She contrasts this to her old departmental home: "I absolutely loved DCMS, but it's not always straightforward to explain why heritage policy was in the same department as cybersecurity. Whereas at MHCLG, it is all about the places that people live and what they mean to them. And so working in a way that's really coherent, both internally but also across government, is very, very important to me."

This incudes a place-based approach that makes the most of MHCLG's wide geographic spread. "The thing that's really unusual about MHCLG," she says, "is that, for a primarily policy department, we've got a vast number of offices around the country." This is appropriate for the department that "thinks from the perspective of place like no other". Her ambition is for teams in each of those locations to work on making "place-based policymaking" a reality.

Alongside this, there's a natural fit between MHCLG and the Places for Growth agenda – government's drive to relocate thousands of civil service roles out of London. Like most departments, MHCLG has made good progress overall, but shifting senior roles has been a slower job. This matters, Healey says, because good leaders play a key role in building a community that attracts talented people to the civil service.

"If you don't have enough SCS in a location, then the location is not as vibrant, not as driven," she says. "We've got some amazing directors and deputy directors who spend their time making the places where they work really fantastic offices to work in. But if there are places that don't have enough senior officials... it can be really hard to encourage more people to take jobs in a place where they might not be sitting on a daily basis with the rest of their team."

In 2024, the department focused particularly on building SCS presence in Wolverhampton – home to its second HQ – and in Darlington, where MHCLG is part of what Healey calls the "increasingly huge and growing government economic campus".

SCS leads were appointed in both these locations last spring, with the Darlington role advertised specifically in Darlington and Wolverhampton as part of a drive to advertise a certain proportion of jobs for locations outside of London. Doing this tests the market of talent in those areas, and enables MHCLG work with universities and other employers – including departments in those locations – to "spread the word" about civil service jobs.

Mission-led working

Healey describes MHCLG as a "mission-foundational department", working across almost every mission established by the new government, although it doesn't explicitly lead on any of them. "Missions are real in local places," she says. "The connections between policy challenges – such as growth or safe streets – and the solutions to those challenges are much more obvious in a local setting than in the meeting rooms of government buildings."

The foundational role, as Healey sees it, "is to connect the missions with those places. We've always been an advocate for local and regional government, and the main conduit between central government and local governments. We can, I think, use that role to give people access to help shape and deliver the missions."

She echoes this when asked what kind of leadership a mission-driven civil service would need. "Mission-driven leadership is all about collaboration, isn't it? It's about

HOUSEBUILDING TARGET

The government has pledged to build 1.5 million new homes by the end of the parliament – or 370,000 homes a year, well above the number built in recent years. It has set mandatory targets for local authorities in a reformed National Planning Policy Framework, which also requires councils to review green-belt boundaries and identify lower-quality "greybelt" land that could be made available for new developments. If councils are failing to meet their targets, central government will step in to oversee delivery.

CSW met Healey before the new NPPF came out, but it was already apparent that housing targets would require bold action. Beyond the difficulties of driving delivery at a local level, industry has raised concerns over skills shortages and other factors that limit the UK's capacity to get building.

The only area where government plays a role in delivery is via the Affordable Housing Programme, which supports councils and housing associations to build more social housing. The AHP got a £500m boost in the most recent Budget, but has itself been hampered by delays and challenges. In July 2024, the government announced the programme would deliver between 110,000 and 130,000 houses by 2026, compared to an initial target of 180,000 set in 2020.

What has MHCLG learnt from these challenges? Healey says it "embarked on a really serious programme", thinking hard about how to respond to the kind of supply-chain and wider market challenges that impacted the AHP – like the pandemic and sharp rises in inflation.

A lesson from that experience, she says, is the need to closely monitor and step in early if things are not going to plan. Indeed, she attributes recent rises in the number of houses built in part to "fantastic work done in the department to track delivery and monitor what's happening on the ground in a much more active sense". But it's also important, she suggests, to design systems that allow for flexibility in the way delivery partners respond to external shocks.

As an example, she points to the levelling up funds given by the previous government to support regeneration work locally. After councils found it hard to spend these in time, the department radically changed the way requests for flexibility were handled. This meant local authorities could adapt their plans in the face of changing circumstances.

"There's a lot of fluidity in how things work in the few days post-election. People can feel almost as worn out by the uncertainty as by the intensity"

openness, and keeping your eyes on what it is you're trying to achieve." This shared goal is "the North Star", she says. "That makes a real difference for people's sense of inspiration about what they're trying to do."

Healey also recalls the importance of a clear North Star, or a "galvanising" vision when she reflects on her experience of cross-government working throughout her career. A standout example, she says, was work on the Children's Plan, led by Ed Balls when he was secretary of state for children, schools and families. The plan was a "galvanising document" which was developed collaboratively with other departments and set out a clear aim of how government would "make the UK the best place in the world for children to grow up".

Healey says she remembers clearly the day when a DG in the department – Sir Tom Jeffery – came up with that strapline. "I'm a real 'doer' so I was already focused on making the thing happen, thinking much less about the big picture vision," she recalls. "But one day Tom said in a meeting with [Balls] 'We're here to make the UK the best place in the world for children to grow up' and everyone in the room thought 'That's it! That's what this is about.'"

That's not to say the doing wasn't important, she continues, explaining that underneath the Children's Plan were a set of Public Service Agreements, negotiated as part of the spending review which took place at the same time. These pushed through delivery, she said, but the statement and strategy were key in building a common focus.

Healey is no stranger to driving collaboration across a system – at DExEU, she was one of two directors general helping to build the department once it was formed by then-prime minister Theresa May. Likewise, MHCLG and DCMS rely on collaborative working in different ways. So how does one make that kind of leadership work?

"Some of it is about mindset," she says. "Asking yourself: 'Do I have the right answer to this or is somebody else likely to have as good an answer as I have?' It's being really respectful of broader perspectives and wanting to know what other people's experience of your policy agenda and delivery is, because that will be a fantastic indication of whether you got it right or not."

Devolution

Though its name has changed, MHCLG's underlying focus remains very similar.

Government after government has declared the benefit of handing more powers to local and regional areas, but progress has been patchy and slow. In recent years, however, there have been some key shifts, such as the establishment of elected mayors in some regions – which Healey describes as an "essential, established part of the architecture of government and governance in England" – and wide devolution deals known as "trailblazers" for a few key areas. These deals, initially covering greater Manchester and the West Midlands, gave the combined authorities power over areas like transport and skills, and the government was also building proposals to give these areas a single funding settlement, rather than a patchwork of grants from different departments.

CSW spoke to Healey in the autumn, before the new government had set out its plan on English devolution. Avoiding policy details, therefore, we discussed instead what she saw as the key factors that would influence the success of this agenda. First, she noted the challenge of capability and capacity within local government.

"You want to be sure that you're not loading responsibility onto organisa-

tions that are not ready for it, or capable of making the most of it. You want it to be a success," she says. Linked to this is the need to test and follow evidence, rather than pushing ahead with models that may not work. For this reason, she says, the trailblazer model has been a really good idea, allowing new structures to "run in those places before you roll it out everywhere".

She also reflects on the need to reassure peers across Whitehall about the mechanisms – not just the benefits – of devolution. "We need to do a really good job of recognising the concerns that departments might have about meeting their policy objectives, while devolving a lot more control to local areas," she says. "We have a model of personal accountability from permanent secretaries with the spending of public money to parliament. And it's important that we sustain that while at the same time giving greater responsibility to local areas."

Several weeks after we meet, the English devolution white paper is published, outlining how the new government will address these challenges. The white paper sets out what it calls a "simple" goal to drive a step change in devolution: all areas in England should eventually be covered by strategic authorities, modelled on the successful combined mayoral authorities structure. To start with MCAs will get the extra powers currently only available for trailblazers. All MCAs will also get a single funding settlement, described as an integrated settlement. This would give local areas greater flexibility over how they spend money, accompanied by greater accountability through a "single, mutually agreed outcomes framework, monitored over a spending-review period".

It soon becomes clear when talking to Healey that she is deeply interested in people – both the stories they tell and how she can learn from them. When *CSW* asks what she might have been if she hadn't become a civil servant, her two replies reflect this passion for people.

When she was seven, she says, she wanted to run the National Portrait Gallery. "I love portraiture. Always have – it's the fact that each one is a sort of story of a genuine person who represents something important, or is telling a story of the past. You can see into a different time as well, to the time when the portrait was made. I just think that's really exciting and interesting."

Though she never got that job, she did get to work closely with the Portrait Gallery at DCMS, she notes with evident pride, before adding that she might also have considered a job in retail. "Shops are really interesting places. How do you provide an environment people want to be in? How do you both respond to and shape what it is that people want to buy? I love the interaction with the public. I used to work in a bookshop, and I just loved talking to people."

It's perhaps not surprising, then, that Healey has chaired the Civil Service People Board for several years. It's an agenda that really matters to her, she says, and takes up a substantial amount of her time.

On this year's agenda for the board will be a refreshed civil service workforce plan – which, according to the Budget Red Book, will set out "bold options to improve skills, harness digital technology and drive better outcomes for public services" – as well as an update on the civil service D&I strategy. Getting the latter right will be a "big priority", Healey says, as the board aims to "set out an ambitious evidence-based vision on diversity and inclusion".

While the details of these plans are still being developed, clues to how Healey will approach them can be found in her description of the Civil Service People Plan, launched last spring. "What I really liked about the plan," she says, "is that it's a very concrete set of actions that are trying to genuinely change the experience of people working in the civil service: how they recruit, how they do learning and development and how they can rely on their HR function to really perform."

She also highlights new civil service line-management standards – rolled out in August – that set a baseline of capability for all line managers as a key development. "When you think about people's actual experience," she says, "it so often comes back to how great their manager is – or not, as the case may be.

"I think if you could get everybody recognising the value of line management and up to that standard, that is the area where we can make the biggest difference to people's performance and their experience of working in the civil service and therefore solve a lot of things like retention and turnover."

Another insight into Healey's character emerges when *CSW* asks what keeps her awake at night: "My mantra is that you should only worry about things when worrying about it is going to help, and a lot of the time it doesn't help. So I don't worry about it."

She adopted this approach, she says, after watching the film *Bridge of Spies*, which explores the relationship between an American lawyer, played by Tom Hanks, and a suspected Russian spy, played by Mark Rylance.

"At various points during the film, Hanks says to Rylance: 'You might go to the electric chair. You don't seem worried.' Rylance just replies, 'Would it help?'... I remember thinking: that's such a good mantra. Worry about things when it will help. It's a good way of trying to manage stress, to ask yourself: 'What is the stuff that I can really make a difference to by being concerned about it?'" ■

GRENFELL AND LISTENING TO CHALLENGE

Healey joined MHCLG long after the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire and can't yet give a detailed response to the specifics of the inquiry report, but she's surely been reflecting on the lessons. Does she think MHCLG already does things differently, as a result of the tragedy? Yes, she says, "not least the immense focus on building safety, moving from a very small number of people who felt that was their prime responsibility to a significant team. There has also been a programme of remediation and a substantial change in the regulatory environment." Yet, she warns against complacency about the broader lessons from Grenfell, "and which you see repeated in inquiries such as Windrush and the Horizon scandal".

These inquiries, she says, should prompt questions like: "Are we listening enough to the voices of those people who we don't normally hear from? Are we open to criticism? And when somebody says they think something isn't working, do we reach for the line that explains why it's working – or do we actually look at whether they might be right?" She adds: "This department was criticised in the report, rightly... the work ensuring that you are open to challenge doesn't stop."

Healey recalls a piece of work she did with a cohort of officials on the Future Leaders Scheme some years ago. Using People Survey data, they found organisations where staff felt safe to challenge were also the most engaged. Next, they looked at the organisations with the highest scores around challenge: "In almost every instance, there was a formalised but systematic way of getting feedback and input... saying, 'we want to listen to what you've got to say'." There is more to do on this, she says. "It's clearly incredibly important to make sure you don't retreat into, 'I'm only listening to what I want to hear'."

“Collaborative leadership is about mindset. Asking yourself: ‘Do I have the right answer to this or is somebody else likely to have as good an answer as I have?’”

WORDS OF WISDOM

What do senior women leaders wish they could tell their younger selves? **Claudine Menashe-Jones** gives *CSW* the highlights of a new study

What advice would you give to your younger self? This was one of the questions asked in our new research on women's leadership published in the *European Mentoring and Coaching Council Journal*. We spoke to women in leading positions across government, business and charities around the world about what helped them reach and thrive in their roles. From permanent secretaries to CEOs, the messages were clear: back yourself, get the support you need (*after* big promotions too, not just before) and take time to think.

Doing this research was such an eye-opener for me, despite having my own experience of getting to senior leadership in the civil service and serving as a director of a global company. It was inspiring – and at times a bit horrifying – to hear the stories of what it took for women in so many different contexts to become leaders in their fields. It's hard to do justice to the full range of insights this work has to offer for all leaders and organisations, not just women themselves. But as we return to our desks after the new year, I thought I would share the wisdom that these women generously shared with me.

Is it still harder to get to senior leadership if you're a woman?

Most of these women didn't experience a "glass ceiling" in their progression – where they were explicitly excluded from any senior roles simply because of their gender – but they all spoke about gender-related challenges which they faced in their careers. This "second-generation gender bias" is already well documented in research across countries and sectors. It includes an array of less tangible barriers that women consistently face at work, such as being channelled into inward-looking business roles or having to meet performance criteria that favour stereotypically male styles of leadership and management.

The "double bind" is a particular example of this more subtle gender bias that came up again and again in the stories women told. This is where expectations of women as leaders – "be confident, assertive and strong" – conflict with expectations of them as women – "be kind, caring and soft" – leaving them in a lose-lose situation where they're punished either way. As one woman put it: "Women are never quite right, because we're being measured by a standard that wasn't made for us. It's a man's suit that we're being asked to step into. And it doesn't fit."

It's reassuring that women in public and third sector roles interviewed for the study were less likely to have experienced the level of gender bias in their progression described by women in the private sector. They said that seeing other women in leadership roles mattered a lot, and that it also took individual drive and determination to succeed. "I genuinely don't think I ever felt like I couldn't move to the next level because I was a woman," one said. "In fact, what always used to drive me to do bigger things was the feeling that if I didn't apply, some less-qualified and less-capable man would get it instead."

This doesn't mean the civil service can be complacent about gender barriers to progression, subtle or otherwise. One senior diplomat reported this comment from a future manager: "'Do you think you can still come and do this job, because it's a big job, and you're gonna have a small child?' Which was something, frankly, they shouldn't have said, and it really knocked my confidence for quite a long time."

"You don't need to be brave on your own. Women talked without exception about the importance of seeking out all sorts of support as their careers developed"

The "glass cliff" – where women are put into more precarious and challenging leadership roles than their male counterparts – was another phenomenon explored in the research. It was fascinating to see just how many women spoke about taking on very difficult roles as part of their journeys to senior leadership. These were high-stakes jobs where things were "a mess", "toxic" or "huge" and far too big for one person to handle.

Some women reflected that gender stereotypes may have played a part in their selection for certain roles. In many cases, they were seen to possess the people skills necessary for leading through difficult changes: being "nice to everyone" while also "sorting things out" or being "fixers". One paraphrased this line of thinking as: "Put the woman at the front and let her voice the message, because it'll come across softer." She added: "But I always felt like I was the one making the hard calls."

Another gendered expectation was an instinct to step in to protect others. As another participant said: "Am I taking it over because I think I can handle it better than anyone else in my organisation? Probably. And am I taking it over because I'm a woman and I'm, like, designed to protect everybody around me, so I'll pick up all the heat? Probably."

Interestingly, some women described choosing these roles, being drawn to them "like a moth to flame". Research suggests this may be explained by an assumed need to prove yourself as a woman leader. "So, yes. It's a glass cliff, that I was complicit in," one such leader told us, adding: "At that time if anyone had said, 'No, it is probably a bit much, you shouldn't,' I would have probably said, 'No, I can do that.'"

A common plot twist in these stories is that once in these roles, women felt alone and lacking in support. As a former DG put it: "I've worked hard and been lucky enough to get this senior position that's across government and high profile, so do I dare say, 'Wait a minute, you're breaking me?' The need to show competence and the importance of looking highly unflappable. I wonder if there is just this additional pressure for women."

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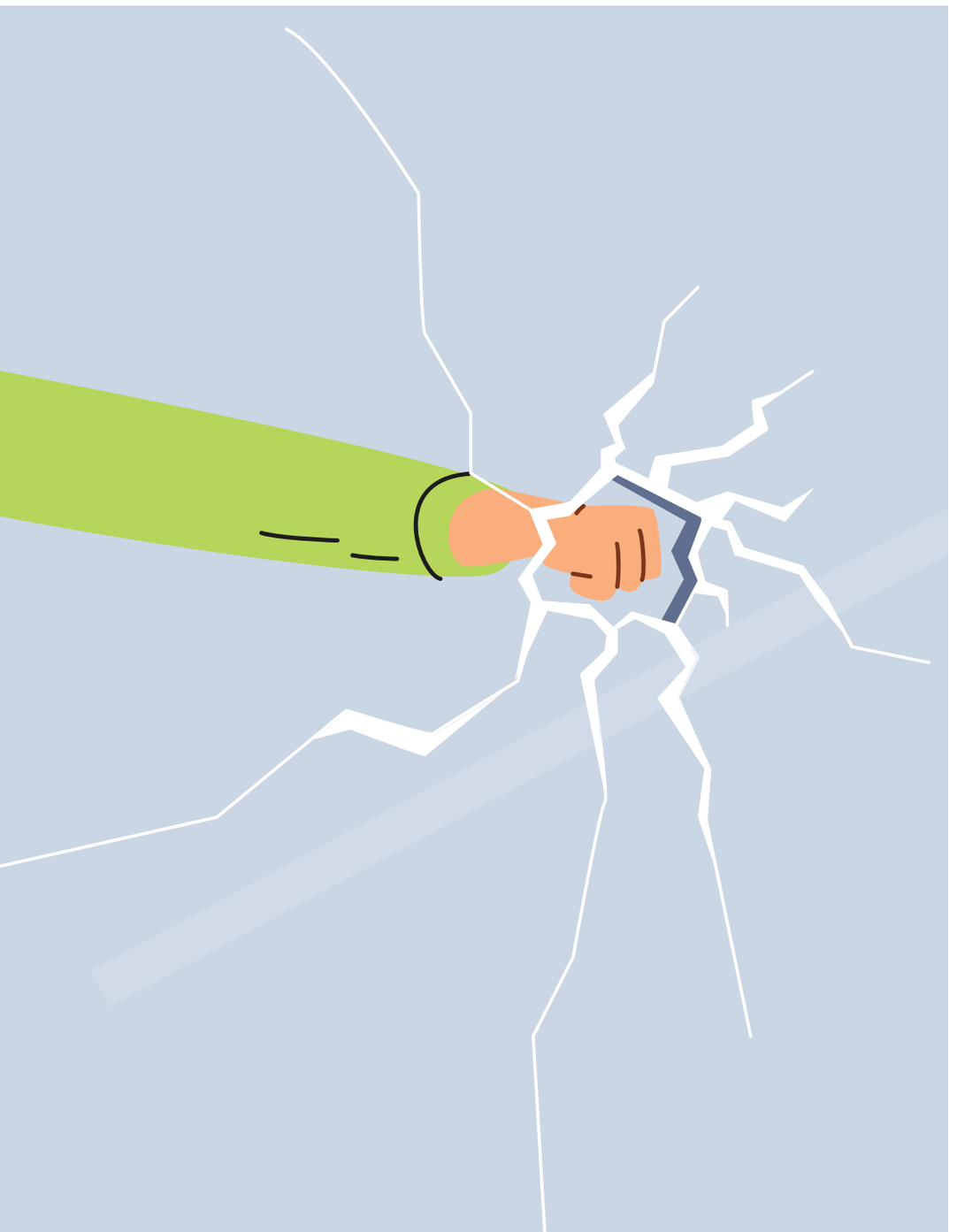


So, what advice would these women give to others making their way to leadership today?

The most consistent piece of advice was "back yourself" – have the courage to speak up, even if you're the newest person at the table, and let go of the need to feel like an expert before you put your head above the parapet.

"Don't wait until you're perfect at something before you try," one woman said. "Figure out your own leadership style and go for it. Don't be pigeonholed or stereotyped into what people might expect from female leadership."

"It was fascinating to see just how many women spoke about taking on very difficult roles as part of their journeys to senior leadership"

But you don't need to be brave on your own. Women talked without exception about the importance of seeking out all sorts of support as their careers developed, from informal peer groups to mentors and coaches. Finding that you're not alone in the challenges you face can have a profound impact on your sense of self-efficacy, even before you get to practical things like advice.

Observations included: "If you're the only one doing it, then you're definitely on your glass cliff. But actually, if there's a group of you doing it, that cliff starts to level out into more of a broad, sunny upland."

The research also showed that this wasn't just about getting to senior leadership, but also about thriving when you finally make it: "I didn't need coaching to make partner; I needed it after I got there."

This was intimately linked to the third thing that women wanted to say to their younger selves: take time to think. At times, this is about resilience – finding ways to "put your own oxygen mask on first" so that you can serve others better. The pressure to progress (self-imposed and otherwise) is fierce, and on this fast track we might not pause to think about what we want, how we want to show up and the leader we want to be. The emphasis here is not on learning new leadership skills or pursuing a specific goal, but on developing that sense of yourself as a leader to get beyond the male success stereotype.

An interviewee summed up this pressure: "Don't be girly, don't be maternal. You know, don't be little sister, or big sister... but actually show up as a woman leader with legitimacy and own your space."

One DG described how taking a step back in this way had helped her reset expectations of herself and work in a more sustainable way: "It makes you think about how you're going to do the job without driving yourself into the ground by trying to be conscientious and do everything."

It was in these moments that women formed their identities as leaders and were able to become role models for others. "I genuinely think you can be leaderly and be warm and emotional at the same time," one said. "And actually, you should really have faith in that. It's not about being soppy, but it is about being empathetic.

"If I think about the reputation that I have in the civil service, that is what people always say I'm like: effective and yet human." ■

Claudine Menashe-Jones is an executive coach and former senior civil servant. She works with UN agencies, UK government departments and charities and businesses around the world.

The research was co-authored with Rebecca Newton PhD – CEO of CoachAdviser – and Patrycja Sowa, a psychologist, executive coach and researcher.
The full report is available at www.cmjstrategies.com/blog

DAVE PENMAN SOME THOUGHTS FOR THE NEW CAB SEC

HE MAY WISH TO STAY MORE IN THE BACKGROUND BUT CHRIS WORMALD MUST STILL LEAD FROM THE FRONT, AND PAY IS A GOOD PLACE TO START

A New Year heralds a new cabinet secretary and head of the civil service. Welcome, Chris, all is fine.

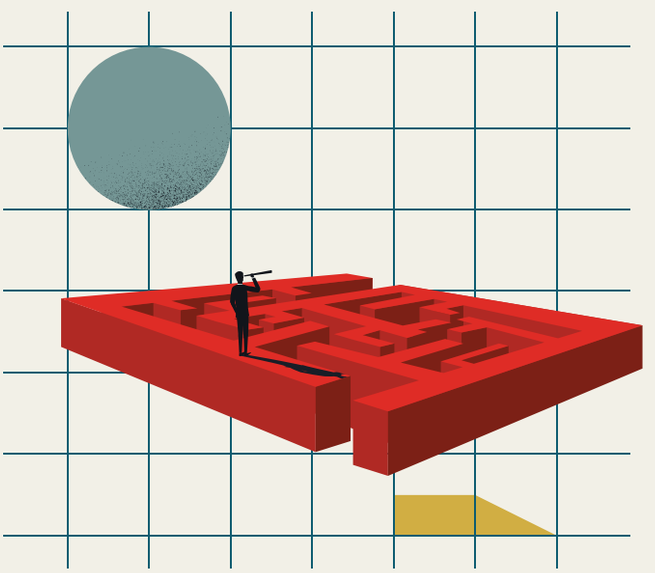
It says a lot about the past few years that the most experienced permanent secretary didn't appear on many people's lists for top pick as Simon Case's replacement. A job that used to be defined as being in the shadows has in recent times been a very public one, through necessity rather than choice, I would suggest. Events have thrust the role and its occupants into the limelight. I suspect the new prime minister, as well as the new cabinet secretary, will be seeking to reverse that trend (insert gif of Homer Simpson stepping back into the hedge).

Less drama would, generally, be a good thing. For one, it's a distraction and saps energy and goodwill. I had high hopes for this government before "Tepid-BathGate" and the accompanying briefing. Time will tell whether this was a misstep or a more fundamental issue that will poison the well. One of the problems for cabinet secretaries is that they are (usually) the head of the civil service, but when it's being attacked from within government – particularly with the covert, or, in this case, overt approval of the prime minister – they are unable to publicly defend their staff, undermining their leadership. Doing this almost within hours of appointing Chris Wormald to the role was, I would suggest, one they'll be teaching in the "how-not-to" bit of leadership programmes in the future.

The new cabinet secretary has been tasked with "rewiring government" and we saw a little of what that means in the speech Pat McFadden, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, made in December. However you describe this – as "missions" or, when it doesn't work, "siloed government" – genuine collaboration across government and public services has been the goal of successive administrations. It's not easy to ensure that the right decisions can be made and, crucially, that money can flow to the right projects and people.

It's interesting that the new cab sec, in his 12 years as a permanent secretary, has worked in two departments that are at the forefront of this challenge: health and education. Relatively small civil service departments, but with huge responsibilities for significant areas of crucial public services. How to turn government ambition into reality on the ground is their daily challenge and so Wormald is well placed to understand the task at hand and help shape this work. Much has been said about hiring an insider to do this work, but it's an electrician you need to rewire your house, not a theoretical physicist. Understanding the civil service with all its strengths, weaknesses and, crucially, the role that ministers play in making it work is vital if reform is to succeed.

He inherits a civil service that has suffered a battering over recent times. It has been under-resourced, underpaid and scapegoated. Despite this, it still has an incredible source of dedicated, talented people who want to make it work. It still attracts some of the brightest people in the country who want to change citizens' lives for the better. It's got big issues that need addressing and haven't been in any meaningful or strategic way for decades. Pay is the top of my list and not just because that's what you'd expect from a trade union leader. It goes to the heart of how we solve some of the problems that continue to manifest themselves in the service. How we recruit, retain and motivate people in what is ultimately a people business has been relegated to a cost-control mechanism.



"Much has been said about hiring an insider to do this work, but it's an electrician you need to rewire your house, not a theoretical physicist"

We've been treading water on this for too long. What we need is fundamental structural and strategic reform, and this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do that. Get that right and integrate it with a strategic workforce plan, and you can build a service that's ready for the challenges of the next decade. Now that would be an achievement for a new cabinet secretary. ■

Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA union

Magnificent eight

In his final lecture as cabinet secretary, **Simon Case** praised inspirational officials, saying: "If we keep hiring people with these characteristics, I'll remain optimistic about the future of the civil service." **Suzannah Brecknell** reports

Outgoing cabinet secretary Simon Case has paid tribute to officials across the country whose commitment and service is "an antidote to cynicism".

Speaking at an event hosted by the Strand Group, part of King's College London's Policy Institute, Case also emphasised the need to balance continuity with change so that the civil service is "viewed as an integral part of the journey ahead, rather than through the rear-view mirror".

"Whilst continuity keeps us grounded in our past," he said, "to stay relevant and useful, the change required will have to come at a pace far beyond anything we have achieved before. A common commitment to collective change is vital."

The former cab sec, who stepped down on 16 December, used his final lecture in post to describe eight officials who exemplify the best traits of the civil service.

The portraits, he said, show the civil service seizing opportunity, protecting impartiality and acting with selflessness. "They are inspirational, connected, innovative, responsive and committed," he said. "And above all, like so many others here tonight, they are passionate about public service."

"As long as we keep hiring people with these characteristics, and can persuade them to stay in the organisation, I shall remain optimistic about the future of the civil service and the country we serve," he added. "It's through people like this that the civil service creates impact and re-earns its right to exist.

"And for those who are cynical about public service, or war-weary about whether government can help solve the major challenges we face as a nation – I offer these civil servants as a human antidote."

Case described how the civil service is "in part and with others" the steward of "core essentials for our nation and its citizens": economic growth, public services, preservation of the Union, the rule of law and maintenance of strong defences.

"To be those stewards – better stewards – we must remain relentlessly curious; improve our skills and knowledge, particularly in science and technology; and be open to changing how we design and deliver public services," he said.

"But we must also make sure that we represent the vital, enduring values of the UK and be the constant, at times of political turnover and transition – whether in rapid or slower time."

The civil servants described by Case were also at the lecture, and were given a round of applause by an audience of officials, former officials, academics and policy-watchers. The cabinet secretary said of the need for change: "We are not asking the civil service to be things it cannot be. These eight portraits already show us that what we need to be is quite possible." ■

PORTRAITS OF A PROFESSION: THE EIGHT OFFICIALS RECOGNISED BY CASE

Simon Case's portraits began with Bec, who joined the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory by working in its staff nursery and then seized the opportunity to become an apprentice – she is now working towards a degree-level qualification. Case said he is "immensely proud" of the civil service's apprenticeship programmes.

"We are prioritising future skills and plugging gaps: in science, tech, digital and data; in cybersecurity, engineering and project delivery," he said, adding: "We created this opportunity – Bec seized it, and made us better for it."

The second portrait, exemplifying the need to protect impartiality, was of Ruby – a Home Office civil servant who worked on the controversial Rwanda scheme. While experiencing the discomfort of becoming "lightning rods for controversy, even amongst our own colleagues", Ruby and her team "correctly recognised the right of ministers to explore innovative and deeply controversial – as in this case – solutions," said Case.

He praised her "no-nonsense and can-do attitude" and urged colleagues across the civil service to follow this example. "Despite the increasing temptation, amid the agitation and kerfuffle of politics today, we must avoid becoming the arbiters of legitimate debate in a democratic society – and stick to our core task," he said.

The third portrait was of Clarice, winner of the 2022 Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service, who exemplified selflessness in her service. "Clarice does not wear a uniform," Case said "but in Ukraine's courageous military fightback against Putin's relentless and spiralling aggression, she's made an enormous personal difference to the front line."

Case described how Clarice's work with the Ukraine Taskforce was "motivated not by public glory, but by mission and public service" – like the work of many other civil servants supporting military and other colleagues in this effort.

Next, Case described Richard, who joined the civil service through the Department for Work and Pensions' Life Chances scheme and now works in a Doncaster job centre to support ex-offenders like himself.

Richard's "very complicated background – prison, homelessness, long periods of addiction – became a source of strength," Case said, adding that it is "an honour to work alongside him, I am so impressed by his courage and pride".

"His is an inspiring story," Case said. "It's someone taking control of their life and changing their destiny. And the civil service recognising his determination and passion, and giving him the platform to help others."

The fifth portrait was of former fast streamer Eloise, who now works in Cumbria heading up a team overseeing £200m worth of government investment into Barrow-in-Furness.

"She is embedded in the area she serves – embodying the idea that we do a better job when we have people designing policies and focusing on places where they themselves have roots," Case said.

This approach, he said, is "in stark contrast to the old model of civil servants clustered in London like iron filings stuck to the Whitehall magnet – a model which must be consigned to history".

Eloise is from the area, he noted, which means "she has the inside track on how to make the connections and open up the opportunities that are desperately needed there". Working in the place she knows and loves "is the best use of her connections, her skills – and reflects the direction of the civil service: putting our brilliant people in the midst of the communities they know so well".

Next Case described "arch-innovator" Rory, who is helping to expand AI use across the NHS. This expansion brings many benefits, Case noted, and is "happening in a regulated way – as a collaboration between clinicians, software engineers, data scientists and product designers, with a careful eye on information governance".

Rory's priority, he continued, is "to generate and evaluate" evidence which will build confidence among medics and the public that "AI is a safe, ethical and effective tool, which can help make the NHS more efficient and bring down waiting lists".

"Adopting the latest technology is nothing new for the civil service," Case noted, adding that some in the room would remember the days of typing pools and that when he himself first started out, "emails were still pretty new".

AI brings many possibilities in healthcare and across government, he said: "We must embrace this change if we are to meet the demands on public services – and it is people like Rory who are leading the way."

The seventh portrait was of Sara, exemplifying the way in which the civil service can respond to crises.

Sara managed a team of 60 officials to run 80 quarantine hotels in the North West during Operation Pitting which evacuated around 15,000 British nationals and eligible Afghans from Afghanistan in August 2021.

"They were arriving thick and fast with absolutely nothing – no possessions and often no money," Case said, adding that "on Op Pitting, it sometimes felt to Sara as if her team were making up new ideas at 4am each morning. But their creativity was working. They got feedback to say they were providing 'gold standard' care."

"I'd love to bottle that spirit," Case said.

The final portrait was of Rizwan, another winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service, who manages 18 jobcentres in southeast London and exemplifies the committed nature of the civil service.

Rizwan began working in the area in 2013, Case said, "and over a decade on, he remains hard at work in the community where he started – promoting people's life chances with the employers whom he has been ringing up, looking for opportunities, for years.

"He won the Prime Minister's Award for encouraging his teams to get over five and a half thousand young people onto the Covid-era Kickstart programme in just six months," Case said. "It meant 16 to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit had a vital leg-up onto the job ladder.

"Six new job centres opened their doors, and more than 1,000 new work coaches were recruited and trained to get people into a job and stay in it. His results were the best at district level in the UK." ■

COACH'S CORNER

Former director general and executive coach **Peter Shaw** reflects on his time in government and shares his advice for getting on in the workplace. Words by **Jess Bowie**

Before becoming an executive coach, Peter Shaw was a civil servant whose decades as an official spanned several departments and three director general posts. Since switching careers in 2004 and becoming a founder member of the international coaching organisation Praesta Partners in 2005, he has coached chief executives from multinational companies, public sector bodies and charities, as well as permanent secretaries, DGs, vice-chancellors, board chairs and emerging leaders. He is also a visiting professor of leadership development at higher education institutions in the UK and Canada and has written more than 30 books, including *Shaping Your Future Leadership* and *The Power of Leadership Metaphors*.

Why did you leave the civil service?

When I was a director general in the education department, I particularly enjoyed mentoring people. The Cabinet Office had also used me to mentor new people into the senior civil service. I really enjoyed seeing people grow and develop. I concluded that coaching is what I'd love to do: it seemed good to move into the next phase of my working life at age 55 rather than 60, so I could build a second career in coaching. Now I often say to people: "What is catching your imagination in your 50s – and how can you turn that into your next career?"

What was your best day in government?

I had 32 years working in government: they were full of days that I really enjoyed and felt were worthwhile. It was a privilege to work with ministers on issues that directly affected citizens. I did 19 jobs in 32 years: I have no regrets about being a civil servant. I would always encourage young people to think seriously about that sort of work, because you learn so much and can make a valuable contribution towards enabling public services to work effectively.

Things always go wrong. There are bad days in every month. One of the approaches I sometimes use with people who are worried about things going wrong is: if four things have gone wrong in a week, that's not been the best of weeks. But if only two things go wrong, it's been a good week.

Do things go wrong more often in government than in the private sector?

I do quite a lot of coaching in big, global private sector organisations, and many of the issues and pressures are remarkably similar. And if people say: "Oh, it's harder in the civil service," I tend to think: "No." The effect of the market and finances often bites far more quickly and far more acutely in the private sector than in the public sector.

What makes a good minister?

Someone who understands how government works, how public opinion is formed, and who is rooted in appreciating the perspective of citizens. Someone who can see a bigger picture and is not dominated by short-term goals.

Who were some of your favourite ministers to work for?

Some of the ministers I've particularly respected have combined clarity and humanity. Of the Labour ministers I have worked with, I particularly admire Stephen Timms, with whom I worked in a couple of ministerial roles. He has always put serving the nation first. He was a cabinet minister, and then he reverted to being a minister of state. He was willing to take a lower role because he believed in the work he was invited to take forward. He subsequently became the chair of parliament's Work and Pensions Committee and is now back in government as a minister of state. He is somebody of utter integrity who has always been really committed to doing the right thing for people, bringing a strong focus on fairness and justice. He was, at one stage, stabbed in his constituency office and nearly died. He recovered from that showing great bravery. His commitment to contributing to public life is impressive.

I enjoyed working with a number of Conservative ministers, including being principal private secretary for Keith Joseph, who was regarded very critically by a lot of people, but who personally was a very humane and engaging minister to work with. He hated the television and therefore never adjusted to communicating through that medium. In that sense, he was probably the last of a generation. Since then, politicians have had to work effectively with the media.

What's changed in coaching over the last 20 years?

One big change I've been involved in has been the rise in the number of job-share partnerships. It has been a delight to work with many partnerships, including some that reached director general level. It's a brilliant way for the civil service to retain talent and you get two brains for the price of one. It's also great to see more men in job shares these days. My colleague Hilary Douglas and I have been influential in building the confidence of managers to draw effectively on the distinctive contribution of job-share partnerships. »

"A common mistake new leaders make is feeling like they have to be an expert on everything and solve every problem right away"

Many coaching themes remain the same as 20 years ago. Early in my coaching career, I developed a framework of four themes – vision, values, value-add and vitality – to provide a basis for leaders to think about their future. I continue to use this framework today because it remains just as relevant as 20 years ago. The pressures on people may have changed with technology and faster expectations, but the core of leadership development – knowing how best you step up and add value while retaining your vitality and resilience – has stayed consistently important.

Another shift in coaching has been a move from asking purely open questions, which were shaped by counselling approaches, into a more dialogue-based approach. I seek to engage in deep conversations with executives, exploring possibilities, consequences, risks and opportunities. I see it as part of my role to ask leading questions, drawing from an understanding of the leadership context they are operating in. It's not about telling them what to do; it is about providing a safe space for them to think through their ideas. I always ask at the end of a session, "What do you take from this conversation?" to ensure they have clarity on their next steps.

How do you help clients when they are in the middle of a crisis?

When people come to me in moments of professional crisis, my role as a coach is not to give direct advice, but to help them explore their options. If people ask me directly, "What should I do?" I make it clear it's not for me to give a recommendation. Instead, I guide them through exploring different possibilities, seeking to ensure they consider all the relevant issues and risks. I ask direct questions, especially if they seem too focused on one viewpoint, but it's for them to weigh everything and decide.

I don't use a set framework for crises. Instead, I seek to help the person identify the immediate problem, the underlying issues, and their emotional and rational reactions. Often, separating these two can make a big difference. I encourage them to clarify what they are personally responsible for and what is the responsibility of others. In a crisis, people often feel the burden is entirely on their shoulders, but by taking a step back, they can see more clearly how they involve others. My goal is to help them understand their role and responsibilities and how they can best contribute, whether that's informally talking to others or taking formal action.

What are some of the common mistakes new leaders make?

A common mistake new leaders make is feeling like they have to be an expert on everything and solve every problem right away. What's key is taking time to understand the issues, listening to a variety of perspectives, and not just accepting the "conventional line". It's important to hear from different stakeholders and understand where each of them is coming from. New leaders need to get a clear steer on their own boss's expectations and priorities, and then play those back to the boss or colleagues to check that they've understood them correctly. Key is focusing on what must be done in the role and what can only be done by you.

Recognising the importance of calibration points is also essential – after one month, and especially after six months. Those are good moments to reassess what has gone well or less well and determine where you can add most value and next focus your energy.

Can you explain how you use metaphors in your work?

When I coach people, I find metaphors really helpful, but I avoid using ones currently used in their organisations because that takes them into a stereotyped perspective. I avoid phrases like "grasping the nettle" or "blue-sky thinking". I try to uncover the metaphors that individuals like to use and help them develop their application. Often, it relates to sports or other activities they're involved in. For example, I co-wrote a booklet called *Knowing the Score: what we learn about leadership from music and musicians* with a director general in the Scottish Government – a chamber music player – based entirely on music metaphors.

"Really understand yourself, in terms of what motivates you and what can derail you, and be clear what really matters"

I work with someone who is very structured at work. But in his spare time, he plays jazz, which is unstructured and free flowing. We've explored how he could apply his jazz experience – going with the flow – to his work and balance the two parts of his personality. I work with several people who enjoy cycling where we often draw parallels from cycling: the Peloton, the slipstream, when to take the lead, when to operate alone and when in partnership and when to conserve energy and so on.

Parenthood provides another powerful metaphor. Recognising that there might be similarities between managing a toddler or a teenager and, say, unpredictable behaviour from a member of staff has often prompted individuals to recognise they have transferable skills. Metaphors help people see how their personal skills apply professionally.

What are three key tips you would give people hoping to climb the career ladder?

Really understand yourself, in terms of what motivates you and what can derail you.

Be clear what really matters, in terms of the values that are relevant in the job and the balance between your work and your personal priorities.

Be deliberate in building up your expertise and your experience in dealing with different types of situation.

A big part of my job is to help people think about what their next steps might be. What skills have they got that are transferable to different parts of government or elsewhere? The theme of stepping up is a constant one in my work – helping people find their voice at the next level. I had a lovely conversation yesterday with somebody who's now in an acting senior SCS post and is loving it. We have been preparing for quite a long time to be ready for a more senior role. She's ready for it now and is finding her voice and is recognising that she is influential. One of the joys of coaching is that you can help people reach the stage where they step up and feel they can make a difference in their next sphere.

What advice would you give the new cabinet secretary?

Be clear what will keep you sane in your personal life through what will inevitably be a demanding situation. Be thoughtful about how you will bring the best out of the civil service to ensure that they are working effectively with the government of the day. ■

TRUST ISSUES

Via illuminating interviews from both camps, this book provides expert guidance on how the vital relationship between ministers and civil servants can be repaired. Review by **Duncan Brown**

- The Mind of the Minister
- Tom Brown
- Biteback

Since Brexit and Covid, "the intensity of damaging behaviour, the testing of civil service integrity and a scorched-earth approach to constitutional norms have left scars that need more than time to heal" observes Tom Brown in the introduction to *The Mind of the Minister*, a plea to inject trust into strained and worsening relations between officials and politicians.

One of the prickliest ministerial takes in the book comes from Andrew Lansley (Conservative): "The driving consideration for most civil servants, particularly those in charge of an area of activity, is control. If they can change the policy and retain control, they'll be perfectly happy. But if change in the policy means losing control, they will be very unhappy and will try to resist it." Rory Stewart (Conservative) has a different complaint: civil servants "never thought really that my analytical skills or my knowledge or decision-making were remotely interesting to them". He describes nightmarish meetings where he brings together all the interested parties to broker the best possible decision, and finds that this isn't a role it's acceptable for him, the minister, to play.

Stewart's frustration goes to a fundamental tension about the minister-official relationship: what power do ministers really have if they're not allowed to engage in the detail, even when they're an expert?

Everyone in the book agrees the "detail" is overwhelming. As Vince Cable points out, a red box full of "complicated, detailed descriptions of the policy analysis" is never going to be helpful in a minister's day job dealing with parliament and the media. Part of the role of spads is to deal with this complexity: they provide necessary *political* heads for getting to grips with the big, complicated problems of modern government. They act almost as a shadow civil service. Brown points out that the "homogenous and nepotistic" state of affairs that predated merit-based recruitment (introduced in 1854) had its advantages: "Officials and ministers were almost exclusively drawn from a very small pool of social elites with similar worldviews." One would be unlikely to find excrescences like "woke hobby horses" in a system like that – which would presumably help things along from a getting-things-done point of view. But thankfully, and for very good reasons – as Brown makes clear – we don't live in that world any more.

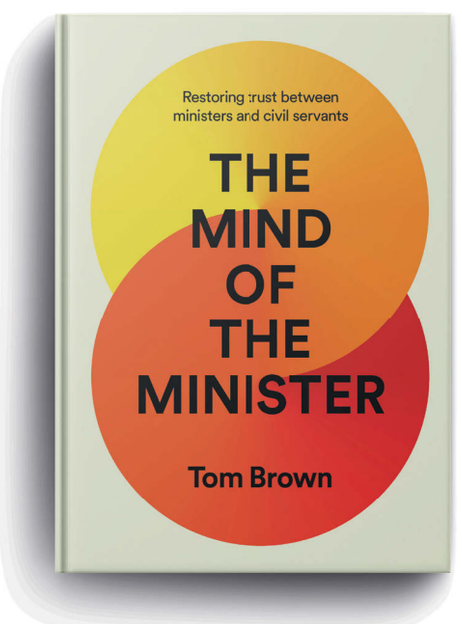
You can see the introduction of spads as a repoliticisation of the civil service following those changes. That their presence has been normalised rather than formalised is a consequence of the fact that the role was never really designed for; it just needs to exist. That doesn't mean it's cost-free: "The primary purpose of civil servants [has shifted] from being policy advisers to policy deliverers," Brown observes. To adapt to this state of affairs, both ministers and the civil service need to reflect on where the service's value lies: domain and implementation expertise, not political advice, probably ought to be its principal offering. Former DfE perm sec Jonathan Slater notes that "the most senior [officials] in the [ministerial meeting] are the people who know least about it. Part of my job was to get the junior person who knew most about the subject in the room". Without wanting to put too fine a point on it: this is grade-inverting radicalism.

"The emotional labour of building relationships very much sits on the civil service side" ***Clare Moriarty***

I think he's right. But of course "the room" isn't necessarily a safe place for a junior – or even a senior – civil servant to be. As former perm sec Clare Moriarty points out: "The emotional labour of building relationships very much sits on the civil service side... the very idea of an official shouting at a minister is simply inconceivable because the relationship is not such that that would ever happen." Dominic Raab helped nobody, least of all himself, by being aggressive and intimidating towards his officials. As Brown observes: "Of every secretary of state mentioned for being either 'excellent' or 'terrible' to work with, it was the 'excellent' ones who had notable policy achievements to speak of."

The author is, of course, keen to stress that this relationship is a two-way street. But it's also true that by comparison with becoming a minister, becoming a perm sec is bound to require many, many more hours of assessment, feedback and reflection. They have to be ready to be the adult in the room. Ministers do not.

Brown lets his subjects speak for themselves, often limiting himself to clarifications and the occasional useful explainer. Rich in insight and anecdote, these interviews show us politicians and officials bound together – and sometimes thriving – whether they like it or not. There are prompts here for some quite fundamental reforms to the civil service, especially around spads. Brown agrees, but doesn't make his calls too forcefully. These are first and foremost human relationships, he'd say; it depends. But it's clear that trust, while necessary, is not always going to be sufficient to make such imbalanced relationships work. ■



Going for growth

It's central to all their missions, but is growth going well for Labour? And does it look set to improve? **Tevye Markson** asks the experts

The new Labour administration came to power last year on the promise to kickstart economic growth, naming it as its central mission for this parliament and targeting the highest sustained growth in the G7.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves's October Budget, Labour's first in 14 years, set out a plan to "put public finances on a sustainable path to create the conditions for growth". The government also began consultation on its new industrial strategy and outlined the eight key areas of growth it will focus on. A multi-year spending review is still to come this year, which the Treasury says will "take a mission-led, reform-driven, technology-enabled approach to funding public services while investing in long-term growth".

In his "Plan for Change" speech in December, prime minister Keir Starmer gave a new, more tangible emphasis to this central mission, underpinning it with measurable milestones. But reaction to Labour's efforts to drive growth so far has been mixed.

What has Labour got right?

The International Monetary Fund said the Budget would "boost growth sustainably" and praised the government's "focus on boosting growth through a much-needed increase in public investment while addressing urgent pressures on public services".

The Budget was also praised by the Institute for Public Policy Research, which said its increase to public investment "has the potential to significantly increase growth", while the chancellor's tweaks to how government measures debt in its fiscal rules showed "an important, pro-growth approach".

The Budget's rise in capital spending will keep public investment broadly flat at around 2.5% of GDP over the next five years, rather than dropping to 1.7% under ex-chancellor Jeremy Hunt's plans from last spring.

"It's definitely a step in the right direction," Pranesh Narayanan, a research fellow at IPPR and former Treasury official, tells *CSW*. "The main thing the Budget got absolutely right was around public investment."

What this means, Narayanan explains, is "a lot more investment in the real foundational parts of the economy, such as transport infrastructure, energy infrastructure and the capital side of public services. So, improving the technology that the NHS uses, improving buildings. It's something that even organisations like the IMF have been recommending the UK do".

Narayanan views the top-up to the health department's budget and Labour's commitment to NHS reforms to improve productivity as crucial for growth. "There's a very clear link between declining health and worse economic outcomes," he says.

Prof Richard Davies, head of the Growth Co-Lab at the LSE, says the government has "correctly identified productivity as the UK's core underlying economic challenge" and has "really interesting and ambitious plans, particularly on investment".

"Lots of people are saying there might be a trade war between the US and China. That's completely wrong" ***Richard Davies, director, Growth Co-Lab, LSE***

But he says the context of historically high government debt means there is "quite a lot less room for manoeuvre than in previous governments".

Giles Wilkes, a senior fellow at the Institute for Government and former special adviser to Theresa May, says the Budget was "overall a foundation for more pro-growth policies" and was the start "Labour had to make". But his optimism is quelled by the "really lousy starting point" for the new government.

"Now we've got Donald Trump and the risk of trade protectionism to add to it all," Wilkes says. "So I'm not going to say, 'yay, it's all great, upgrade Britain', but hopefully they can now work on the institutional changes they think are needed to get a good industrial strategy going."

What are the concerns about Labour's approach?

The Office for Budget Responsibility, Institute for Fiscal Studies and Resolution Foundation have all been more lukewarm about the plan.

In its report published alongside the Budget, the OBR slightly upgraded its growth forecast for this year and next, but it also adjusted them down in the latter three years of this parliament, forecasting GDP growth of 1.1% in 2024, then 2% in 2025; followed by 1.8% in 2026, and then around 1.5% from 2027 onwards. This leaves the average rate of growth over the next five years unchanged compared to Hunt's March Budget.

IFS director Paul Johnson described the October Budget as a "non-event" and said: "The increase in investment spending apart, there was nothing there for growth, supposedly the central focus of this government."

And Resolution Foundation analysis found the fiscal event hadn't "delivered a decisive shift away from Britain's record as a 'stagnation nation', with the outlook for growth and living standards remaining weak in this parliament".

There has also been concern among businesses at increases to National Insurance contributions, with the Confederation of British Industry's chief executive Rain Newton-Smith warning that "margins are being squeezed and profits are being hit" and when you "hit profits, you hit competitiveness, you hit investment, you hit growth".

The CBI's post-Budget survey found almost two-thirds of firms think the Budget will damage UK investment. Why? Because of increases in employer NI contributions alongside a rise to the National Living Wage and potential costs from »

Work in progress Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves prepare for the Budget

Labour's employment-rights reforms.

Davies agrees this could become a problem for the Labour government. "Ultimately, the country as a whole needs business to be making investments in order for the economy to grow again, because the reason we don't have growth is essentially a very low investment rate," he tells *CSW*. "There's a direct link between the confidence and, essentially, cash flows of UK businesses and the investment rate in the economy as a whole."

However, he says it is "very difficult to think of a sensible alternative" to raise the money needed to stabilise public finances and boost investment. He says Labour will be hoping "it's a short-term pain long-term gain kind of scenario".

Wilkes agrees: "NI contributions are not a great thing to go after. And business is going to grouch a lot." But, he adds, "it doesn't scupper Labour's growth mission".

Narayanan says it is "possible that some of the tax-raising measures, like the employer National Insurance contributions, could potentially dampen growth", but that it is "difficult to tell right now".

He believes the Treasury is betting that businesses will view higher employment costs as an incentive to automate some of their activities. "If the bet is correct, then you will see more productivity growth," he says. "If they don't, if businesses just cut jobs without driving investment forward, then you're in a situation where that's probably negative for growth.

"I think that is the big uncertainty around what they've announced."

How does Reeves's growth mission plan stack up?

The Budget set out Labour's growth mission plan, which is structured into seven "pillars": economic and fiscal stability; investment, infrastructure and planning; place; people; industrial strategy and trade; innovation; and net zero.

"It's not totally different from other governments' growth plans and, as a recipe for growth, those are the right ingredients," Narayanan says. "Putting industrial strategy in as its own pillar, putting net zero in as its own pillar – I think those are positive things.

"Obviously, we're still trying to figure out the details of how much weight the government is placing on each of these pillars. And I think we'll find out more about that during the Spending Review."

Davies says the themes are familiar: "They haven't invented a new engine. But the way you set that engine up, the way you operate it, the way you drive it, will make a big difference to how fast you go. These are things that we know drive the economy: investment, research and development, and a clear strategy covering all that."

But Wilkes says the plan lacks "a sense of an overall philosophy for why this cocktail of different interventions is going to be any better than the last lot".

What does Labour need to do next?

The next big looming checkpoints that will set out Labour's path to better growth are the industrial strategy and Spending Review.

Wilkes says the industrial strategy needs to be developed using a "well-evidenced and quite ruthless process of prioritisation within the sectors they're asking for".

The government also needs to make its investment offer to the rest of the world "really compelling" and give international business executives "a reason to think twice about the UK, which is often about just being really available to them to explain what your priorities are". Ensuring Poppy Gustafsson, the minister appointed to head up the new the Office for Investment, has "clout" will be key to this, Wilkes says.

Davies agrees that Labour's next

focus to drive growth should be the industrial strategy, but he says it should hone in on steel in particular.

"We need a really clear industrial strategy, particularly in the context of the election of Donald Trump and the implications of that for global trade," says Davies. "Lots of people are saying there might be a trade war between the US and China. That's completely wrong."

Davies says the focal point of the trade war is the steel tariffs Trump put in place in 2018. "China is making lots of cheap steel. The US is then blocking that steel, which means this subsidised, environmentally unfriendly Chinese steel has to find somewhere to go, and it ends up in countries like Britain," he says.

"And so what we're seeing right now is the complete failure of the British and European steel industries. And this is important for industrial strategy, because steel is the foundational material in absolutely everything in every industry. We need an urgent plan to set that right."

What reforms could help departments to drive growth?

Labour's manifesto says its determination to drive growth will "depend on a dynamic and strategic state". What might this look like in practice?

Narayanan says ministers should make sure they are getting "a real flow of information into central government from local authorities who really know their regional economies" about their economic strengths and where businesses are struggling to grow. "Overall national GDP growth is just growth across all the regions added up and a lot of the growth we've seen, especially over the last few decades, has pretty much just been driven by London and the south," he says.

"I think there is a real opportunity to bring some of the other regions along, and that provides bigger growth benefits because these areas haven't seen great levels of growth overall for a fairly long time."

Wilkes would like to see the civil service better reward officials who are good at working outside of their department as well as within it.

"I think the focus should be on what growth actually delivers for people, and what growth delivers for people is better living standards"
- Pranesh Narayanan, research fellow, IPPR

"So often, just doing well at your own thing is what gets you noticed," he says. "I think it would be good if civil servants were rewarded not just for sticking to their own agenda, but for reaching out across government and working with their colleagues in other departments."

For Davies, one of the most important changes is already happening. In the last year, the government has ramped up its use of "areas of research interest" – where departments set out the key research questions that they are seeking evidence on. This is "a really good development and the government should continue doing that and even expand it", Davies says.

Is growth the right central mission?

Narayanan – speaking with great prescience a few weeks before Starmer's Plan for Change speech in December – said the intent behind the mission is the right one but the focus on growth itself is wrong. "I think the focus should be on what growth actually delivers for people, and what growth delivers for people is better living standards."

The target of raising living standards in every part of the UK as part of the economic growth mission was announced as a key element of Starmer's Plan for Change, with a promise to measure progress through higher real household disposable income per person and GDP per capita by the end of the parliament.

No.10 insisted, however, that achieving the fastest growth in the G7 remains the government's central mission in this parliament.

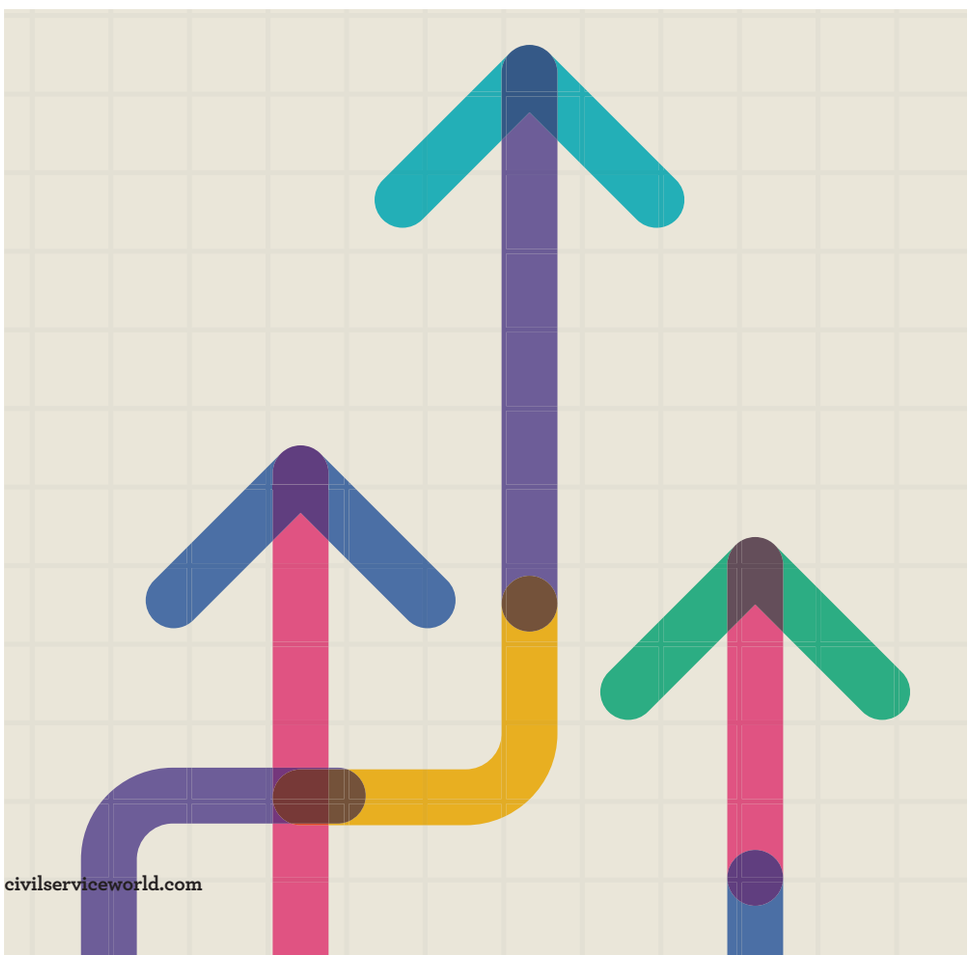
Is this realistic? UK economic growth has slowed substantially since the 2007-2009 global financial crisis: GDP per capita grew at only 1.3% annually in the following decade, a drop of around one percentage point from the decade prior to the crisis.

The UK economy has also taken longer to recover from the Covid pandemic than most other G7 countries, and in 2023 had the second-lowest growth rate in the G7, only faring better than Germany.

Key to the stagnation is the UK's average rate of productivity growth, which was just 0.6% in the decade after the financial crisis. This is slower than in France (0.9%), Germany (1.2%), and the US (0.9%).

"I would say it's a very ambitious, stretching goal," Davies says, "because economies change speeds pretty slowly, outside of things like a financial crash or pandemic. And our growth is currently much lower than America's.

"There are some economies – let's say Germany, Italy – that we really should be able to beat. But coming number one, that means beating America as well, which is a really challenging task." ■



Industrial STRENGTH

How can an industrial strategy bring about meaningful change? **Gareth Davies** set out his approach at a recent lecture. **Suzannah Brecknell** reports

For Gareth Davies, permanent secretary at the Department for Business and Trade, this is personal. Speaking at a lecture given to mark the start of a partnership between his department and the Policy Institute at King's College London, Davies made it clear to his audience of students, officials and policy-watchers that the work of shaping and growing the UK economy is very human, with real-life impact, and with rewards that are "immense".

"I grew up in Liverpool in the '80s," he said. "Some of you may remember, that was a pretty tough time. I saw at first hand what happens when growth slows, when industries stop investing, when companies stop exporting. Wages are flat, jobs are cut, families and communities suffer. Frankly, horizons narrow. So, this isn't just numbers, something you read about in the *Financial Times* or *The Economist*. This is real life, real people, real opportunities." A faster-growing economy means "challenges like the climate transition, tackling poverty, strengthening our defence, would feel far more tractable", he continued.

The crux of Davies's speech set out what an industrial strategy is, and what it would take for that strategy to succeed. Crucially, he said, an industrial strategy is about "the shape and composition of the whole economy" and is not just another label for growth policy. The latter, he explained, is about things like "high-quality infrastructure, an effective planning system and a highly skilled workforce" – factors which create a foundation on which an industrial strategy will build.

"Different governments will rightly make political decisions about how much to lean into shaping the economy," he noted, "but all modern governments will have a profound influence on the structure of the economy, implicitly or explicitly."

Responding to a question from the audience, Davies acknowledged that this influence on the economy is exerted by everything from visa policies to farming regulations, meaning that a cross-government approach is vital. "An industrial strategy fails if it's just seen as the business department's strategy," he said. "It's about how the country will compete, how it will prosper, how it will make its way in the world over the next decade; how it will manage the big global trends of decarbonisation and the opportunities of digital; and how we'll make sure we create inclusive, secure and resilient growth. This is very much a cross-government endeavour."

Speaking to *CSW* after the event, Davies fleshed out how he's going to make sure the strategy isn't perceived as something orchestrated through DBT. The government is building in coordination from the start, he said, with a set of measures that will make it "not easy, but easier" to build a cross-government approach.

The first is the Growth Mission Board, chaired by the chancellor, with the "prosperity departments" represented at the table. This provides a place for "proper cross-government conversation about what's needed for growth," he said, and is also reflected at an official level.

DBT's industrial strategy team also has secondees from a range of government departments, including the Treasury, which means those departments are represented and involved in shaping the work very practically. Finally, individual sectoral plans will be led by the relevant departments, so it's "very much bringing in the whole of government right from the start".

Speaking of the imperative to partner effectively with business, Davies acknowl-

edged there is a tension here, and that partnership must not slide into lobbying. "But it's a mirror risk of being too cynical, of holding businesses at arm's length and, as a result, not understanding what it will really take to shift sentiment and to shift those investment decisions," he said. "Ultimately, this rests on high-quality capability and expertise."

He went on to explain that the core capability he wants to build in DBT is "understanding business," which will be "the heart of what we do".

"Everyone needs to understand how businesses think, how they approach issues, what pressures they're facing, the context they're operating in," he said. To this end, he's keen to encourage more secondments and hires from business, who can bring new ideas and perspectives to the department.

Despite this focus on the new, Davies is very aware of the importance of institutional memory. In fact, his appreciation for a historical perspective is one reason he began the partnership with King's, and has chosen to appoint Sam Lister as head of the industrial strategy team (Lister led work on the 2017 industrial strategy published under then-business secretary Greg Clark).

Davies referred positively to the 2017 strategy at several points in the lecture – for example, its use of challenge funds with flexible stage-gate approvals, which allowed government to invest in four Grand Challenges it had identified as national priorities but gave flexibility to stop and redirect funding if needed.

As well as building capabilities in his department, Davies suggested that government will also need to support capabilities in local and regional government, noting that one way to do this is to share expertise by basing DBT staff in mayoral authorities. "I'd like to build up that approach and think about how we can help them potentially catalyse and accelerate inward investment," he told the audience.

What is an industrial strategy?

Davies sees an industrial strategy as "setting a direction for the whole economy". That is, it should include a range of sectors, rather than just the traditional "industry" and manufacturing sectors, and should be about "the shape and composition of the economy".

Industrial strategy is not just about subsidies. It should use "a full range of policy levers and all tiers of government to attract investment". While in some sectors – or for some companies at certain moments – "targeted, timely, temporary" subsidies may be the right choice, some of the UK's most successful industrial interventions have used a wide range of tools. Davies pointed to the Treasury as an example, arguing that it has "successfully run an implicit financial-services industrial strategy for decades".

In most cases, an open, competitive process is the best way to decide on how to allocate funding or support, since "money and attention are in short supply. In government, you need to be very conscious of the opportunity cost of any intervention. Supporting this company, this sector, always means you're not supporting someone else."

Sharply defined metrics matter, but "only if you're willing to learn and adapt. You need to be ready to stop interventions that aren't working and double down on those which are".

Davies added that an industrial strategy "needs to align work across three dimensions: the national business environment, sectoral strategies and bottom-up plans for local areas".

"Too often," he said, "industrial strategy has been seen purely as a national strategy, something driven from the centre with local government playing a reactive, responsive role. But this, to me, is to ignore the importance of local insight, local knowledge and local ownership of any plan."

It's important to "strengthen the capability and capacity at local levels, particularly the mayoral combined authorities, which have the potential to provide a long-term consistency of approach," he said.

How to make it work?

There are lessons to be learned from around the world. "The most successful examples of industrial policy in advanced economies build on deep comparative advantages," Davies said. The UK's strategy should "work with the grain of our existing institutions and industrial structure, starting from a clear-eyed assessment of our relative strengths as a country, considering what makes us distinctive".

A consistent approach builds business confidence, but this is an area where the UK has a "longstanding weakness". To counter a tendency towards short-term thinking in UK political culture, the government is setting up a new Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, chaired by Clare Barclay, CEO of Microsoft UK. The advisory council will be on a statutory footing and will aim to provide the kind of institutional corrective that the Office for Budget Responsibility has offered when it comes to fiscal strategy.

Getting industrial strategy right, Davies concluded in his lecture, requires "complex policy and institutional design".

"It needs rigorous use of evidence and evaluation. It needs a complex balance of consistency of approach, but the flexibility to adapt and learn," he said. "Strong institutions can help government achieve the right balance. But, in my experience, the most important factor is this strong partnership approach between businesses, unions, local leaders, universities and governments, because only through this collaboration, through this challenge, can you create the sense of a shared goal, the sense of excitement, the sense of shared endeavour needed to unlock investment and ultimately drive the growth, productivity and higher living standards that we all know the country needs." ■

Gareth Davies in conversation with Professor Jon Davies, director of the Strand Group


Journalist and King's College visitng fellow John Rentoul (left) with Gareth Davies


Former business secretary Greg Clark

SERVE AND PROTECT

Cheaper imports for consumers or protection for domestic industries? Trade Remedies Authority chair **Nick Baird** tells **Vivienne Russell** how he is guiding the new organisation through a dynamic but delicate policy area. Photography by Elio Zhang

Ironing boards, bicycles and rainbow trout may not appear to have much in common, but they are all products that have come under the scrutiny of the Trade Remedies Authority due to suspected unfair trading practices.

The TRA is a relatively new arm's-length body, set up in 2021 and sponsored by the Department for Business and Trade. Its creation was a necessity after the UK's departure from the European Union, since our trade remedies functions had previously been carried out by the European Commission.

Nick Baird, a former diplomat who was chief executive of UK Trade and Investment from 2011 to 2013, joined the TRA as board chair at the start of 2024. This followed a period working in the private sector, largely at the international energy company Centrica. In an exclusive interview with *CSW*, he sets out the role of trade remedies in supporting economic growth, his ambitions for the agency and some reflections on leadership and governance in increasingly challenging times.

Trade remedies – or trade defences as they are known in some jurisdictions – are a series of policy measures designed to protect domestic trade by restricting unfair foreign competition. For Baird, these policy mechanisms have not been well understood when it comes to their role in supporting economic growth. Their use requires fine judgements and careful balancing between potentially conflicting interests.

"What you're balancing, in simple terms, is the need to protect domestic production, and the jobs associated with that, against the benefits to the consumer of cheaper imports which would compete with that domestic production," Baird explains.

The conversation is timely. Baird is speaking to *CSW* just days after Donald Trump was re-elected as US president on a platform that promises a raft of protectionist trade measures and the imposition of tariffs on most imports to the US. While he won't be drawn on the politics, Baird agrees that trade is an area increasing in political salience, and argues that "the world is moving in a more protectionist direction". The challenge for UK trade policy is how to adapt to this new reality.

"In trade remedies you really feel you are making a significant difference and are part of the government's biggest priority: economic growth"

"The big strategic question for the UK is how a medium-sized economy, which is very committed to open trade, adjusts to a more protectionist world," Baird says. More protectionist, rather than completely protectionist, is the emphasis, but he's clear that the world is "complicated" and trade is a "dynamic and transitional" area requiring carefully judged, finely balanced responses from policymakers. These responses will, of course, vary from sector to sector. TRA activity to date has ranged from traditional industries such as steel to emerging products such as biodiesel.

Biodiesel, which promises a greener fuel option for aviation and farm machinery – areas that have been harder to decarbonise – offers a useful encapsulation of the TRA's challenge. "Certain countries are seeking to develop an industry in biodiesel," Baird explains. "They are doing what in many ways is quite a natural and normal thing to do: providing subsidies to help that industry take off and grow. But when it moves into the export sector, what you're then potentially doing is providing unfair competition into other countries."

The question for the UK, which has some small biodiesel producers, is whether to nurture and protect that activity by insulating it from international competition, or to protect the cost to the consumer, which by extension promotes the wider net-zero agenda. "It's a really important judgement in the context of economic growth as to whether you are protecting a UK industry and its capacity to survive and grow, or whether you're protecting and sup-

porting the position of the consumer."

TRA investigations are triggered by industry or trade associations concerned about unfair trading practices, although ministers do also have powers to ask it to investigate. Its investigations fall into three broad categories. The first are dumping investigations, where imported goods flood a market and are sold at a price that undercuts usual market rates. The second are subsidy investigations, where subsidised imports might be threatening UK businesses. And the third are safeguard investigations, where emergency actions are taken in response to a sharply increased volume of imports in a particular market.

Once TRA investigators have carried out their review, and assuming they are satisfied that damage or injury has been caused to UK business, they can issue recommendations to ministers to apply a trade remedy as a counter measure. This might impose a tariff on foreign imports of particular goods, or apply quotas to import volumes with the purpose of levelling the playing field for companies competing in the UK market. "Transparency is a big part of how we operate," Baird says. "Although if a company does not wish to be identified as triggering an investigation, that is also possible."

Investigations engage with all parties and make judgements on unfair practices, including applying an economic interest test assessing whether a new measure would be in the overall interests of the UK economy. The test considers impacts on regions, jobs and competition. Recommendations are published first in draft form, and are open to comment from interested parties. Final recommendations then go forward to ministers.

Establishing relationships with industry and building trust is a key focus for the TRA. Baird and the authority's chief executive, Oliver Griffiths, spend much of their time at industry events, explaining and promoting their work. "For the sectors where there's been a lot of use of the TRA already, there is extremely good knowledge of us and, I would say, a high level of trust," Baird says. "All our survey feedback suggests that in the steel sector, for example, they really understand how we work and are highly appreciative of the amount and ease of contact that they can have."

Setting up a non-departmental public body from scratch with a specialist and nuanced remit is always going to be a big ask, but having come in as its second chair, taking over from Simon Walker, Baird is positive about the TRA's early achievements. It is, he says, doing "pretty well", given it had to be set up from a standing start and has onboarded around 150 specialist staff – a mix of lawyers, economists and investigators who combine analyst and forensic accounting skills.

A total of 39 cases have so far been completed, with a further 20 ongoing, and the government has accepted 97% of recommendations put forward, with none challenged on appeal. Its workload, however, is increasing. "Over the last six months, we've done as many subsidy and dumping cases as we did over the previous two years," Baird says. The organisation is now "running hot", something DBT is well

aware of, Baird notes, and negotiations are under way for an appropriate funding settlement at the upcoming spending review.

If the world of global trade is fast-moving, then so too is the TRA's operating model. The organisation is already reviewing its ways of working and its digital platforms and systems to see how it can investigate cases more quickly and efficiently, using fewer people. "It gives you a sense of how dynamic and transitional both the TRA and the world in which it operates is," Baird says.

Future challenges include a continued investment in the TRA's talent pipeline, where progress has been slower. It has "tended to be behind" its recruitment timetable, Baird acknowledges, but the picture is improving, with capability now in place to develop people.

"On the specific area of trade defence, we didn't have a lot of people operating on that pre-Brexit, within the civil service and elsewhere, because we didn't need it. There are a few out there in academia but not a huge number. But there are plenty of trade-policy experts and so there's been an ability to cross-skill them."

While skills is a challenge, Baird says it is "one of the most interesting and exciting" areas for the TRA, and he speaks passionately of the exciting potential it offers to develop a career that sits at the heart of the government's policy agenda. Trade remedies is a "great area to get into", he stresses. "It's going to be right at the centre. You really feel you are making a significant difference and are part of the government's biggest priority: economic growth."

Baird says he was drawn to the role of chair by the combination of helping to direct a still-fledgling organisation to establish itself and the policy area, which sits right at the nexus of the public and private sectors. "Being in there, helping with the development of skills, helping with the culture and the motivation of a completely new organisation, has been very interesting to me," he says. "So much of my later career has been about helping the public and private sectors work better together. Having a board where you can draw on the expertise of the private sector alongside the expertise of the public sector is hugely beneficial."

"We don't micromanage. We operate a highly collaborative, no-blame culture, but we are firm, and when there's a problem it needs to be dealt with collaboratively and constructively"

Returning to the public sector in a non-executive role, Baird says he has been struck by a policy, resource and operating context that is more challenging than ever, underscoring the need for the public and private sectors to work together "dynamically and in harmony".

He picks out three ambitions for the TRA that, if delivered, will mean his term as chair has been a successful one. First, an efficient and effective organisation that is "really humming" and setting the international standard in terms of how it operates. Secondly, a settled process that is supporting UK growth while adjusting to the realities of a more protectionist world. And thirdly, a thriving, motivated workforce with a strong sense of inclusion. "I'm very focused on inclusion because a big part of what I spent my time doing in the last couple of years in Centrica was getting myself reverse-mentored." Baird said he learned a lot from "bright, younger, diverse people" about how workplace cultures may need to adapt to allow people to flourish in their roles.

Asked about his leadership style, Baird says transparency and collaboration are key. "We don't micromanage. We operate a highly collaborative, no-blame culture, but we are firm, and when there's a problem it needs to be dealt with collaboratively and constructively," he says.

"The other thing I find really important in boards is real trust and openness between the executives and the non-executives, and the CEO-chair relationship is really important in that space." Problems need to be flagged early, he says, and while executives shouldn't be afraid to highlight risks and issues, they should resist over-promising as that can damage trust.

Skills complementarity is also crucial. "What I'm seeing with our board is private sector members bringing a lot of expertise around cost efficiencies, good project management, KPIs and so on. And we're seeking to broaden that into better digital expertise and more awareness of what other trade remedies organisations use and how they operate," Baird says. "That complements the really decent, inclusive culture that we're seeking to develop, and that comfort with complexity and multi-stakeholder environments, which I think the public sector is good at. We've got that combination, so that's really good." ■

The campaign to recruit the TRA's next chief executive is ongoing, as the current CEO, Oliver Griffiths, will take up a new role at Ofcom from March. You can request details or a candidate pack by contacting the TRA's recruitment consultants via simon.havers@odgersberndtson.com

STEELING ITSELF

The Trade Remedies Authority has found itself at odds with ministers over early recommendations to remove safeguards from certain categories of steel. Overcapacity in the world market means that steel is often at high risk of dumping and many jurisdictions, including the US and EU, have taken steps to protect their steel industries. The UK steel industry is currently protected from cheap foreign imports by the imposition of safeguards, which originated in 2018 through membership of the EU. These impose a quota on certain imports of steel products, above which a 25% tariff is levied.

An early job for the TRA post-Brexit was to consider whether the UK should retain these EU safeguards. Ministers rejected TRA recommendations that safeguards be removed from five categories of steel, which triggered emergency legislation and a change to the framework the TRA operates under, to widen the economic interest test and give greater flexibility to ministers. A second consultation and set of recommendations retained the disputed safeguards, and these were further extended in 2024 for another two years.

However, according to World Trade Organisation rules under which the TRA operates, safeguards can only be extended twice, so there is a question about the impact on UK steel when the current safeguards expire in 2026. "In mid-2026 we can no longer do further steel safeguards so what we're going to need to look at, and the steel industry will ask us to look at, is how much and what sort of protection is needed after that," says Baird.

This will also have to be done in the context of the UK's new Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). This will be implemented in 2027 and applies a carbon price on imports of some of the most emissions-intensive industrial goods.

GET THE ROLLOUT RIGHT

Can a personalised employment service replicate its success across the country? **Nadine Smith** and **Niall O'Reilly** sing the praises of Individual Placement and Support

A jobcentre is one way to get help if you're looking for work, but it's not right for everyone. What if you need personalised, longer-term support to enable you to prepare for work? What if you need your future employer to understand your needs in work so you can stay in work? What if you are transitioning from school to work and have severe mental illness? This is where Individual Placement and Support (IPS) comes in – a government-backed employment service that aims to transform the job-seeking experience of vulnerable people.

Initially adopted on a small scale by the NHS to target those with severe mental illness, IPS is being expanded with the backing of Social Finance, a non-profit organisation that helps our partners to design, fund and scale solutions to complex social issues. IPS is now available in every severe mental-health service across England, and is also reaching people with drug and alcohol problems and those impacted by homelessness.

Matt Tapp from Enable is one of the many employment specialists who tell us that the one-on-one approach of IPS allows support workers to focus on people's strengths and ambitions. In Matt's experience, working with clients' personal motivation is what determines their success, rather than focusing on their diagnosis.

In the last year alone, IPS has helped over 40,000 people to find and stay in work. Government's Get Britain Working White Paper, announced on 26 November, will deliver an additional 8,500 new mental-health staff and will expand access to IPS for severe mental illness, reaching 140,000 more people by 2028-29.

While regional flexibility to deliver services is vital, there are always risks to rolling out a personalised programme on a large scale. To counter this, Whitehall must base the IPS roll-out on the key principles underpinning the model, which include focusing on competitive employment rather than volunteering or sheltered work; zero exclusion; openness to all who want to work; and close integration between employment specialists and mental-health teams. Failure to comply with the evidence-based model could make the programme hard to evaluate, and could undermine the quality of service for some of our most vulnerable people.

"In the last year alone, IPS has helped over 40,000 people to find and stay in work"

The Youth Futures Foundation says that 39% of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) report having a mental-health condition. This group faces unique challenges, including a lack of experience, skills gaps and lower self-confidence than older adults. This is in addition to other barriers related to housing, education and family circumstances. Using a "fidelity scale" to guarantee that delivery meets a high standard, Social Finance would like to see IPS trialled for NEET young people across the country.

Setting up the right environment to offer people support where they need it, in the way they need it, is crucial to the success of our most vulnerable people. As the country faces crisis levels of economic activity, IPS is not just an employment service but a way to work with more left-behind communities to build thriving partnerships and places for long-term economic growth. ■

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Julie faced enormous barriers to work, but her employment specialist helped her develop the confidence to get a role as an assistant psychologist, working with elderly clients with dementia. Without support, Julie wouldn't have been able to get into employment at all, and she felt relief knowing that support continues should she need it at any point.

Nadine Smith and Niall O'Reilly are directors at Social Finance – a non-profit organisation that helps partners design, fund and scale solutions to complex and enduring social issues in the UK and globally. They launched the world's first Social Impact Bond in 2010 and since then their work has delivered lasting and widespread change that improves the lives of people and communities

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FOUR THINGS WE LEARNED AT THE PUBLICTECHNOLOGY CYBER SECURITY CONFERENCE

At the annual security gathering last month, experts from across government and beyond shone a light on the crucial work of those charged with protecting public servants and services. **Sam Trendall** reports

On 3 December, the new chief executive of the National Cyber Security Centre, Richard Horne, gave his first major speech in post, warning that the UK and its citizens are engaged in a fundamental battle.

As he unveiled the NCSC's 2024 report – which showed that the volume of the most severe incidents handled by the organisation had risen 44% year on year – he said: "We find ourselves now in a contest for cyberspace, between those who are using technology to improve our lives and prosperity and those who seek to use our digital dependency against us, to cause maximum disruption and destruction."

Three miles across London, those speaking at another gathering – the PublicTechnology Cyber Security Conference – made fewer headlines than the NCSC boss. But the event, attended by more than 140 public sector experts, was no less clear in drawing attention to the importance of cybersecurity to government and the citizens it serves. Here are some of the highlights:

There are now 'more techies than policy pros' in government

The government's careers website states that "policy professionals work at the heart of the civil service".

This characterisation is reinforced by a study published earlier this year by the Institute for Government, which found that policy is "numerically and culturally dominant in the civil service's top tier". The specialism accounts for 43% of Whitehall's 148 most senior officials, despite representing less than 7% of the overall cross-government headcount.

But, in sheer volume at least, technologists can now claim the upper hand on their policy partners, according to Thomas Beautyman, deputy director for government digital capability in the Central Digital and Data Office.

He said: "In UK government, there are now about 40,000 digital, data and cyber professionals. That is more than all of our policy professionals put together. So digital, data and cyber is now a core skill and a core responsibility of civil servants."

This figure has doubled in the past five years, which the digital skills chief calls "a big win for us".

But Beautyman, taking part in an onstage Q&A with *PublicTechnology*, said that "increasingly, we see the boundaries dispersing between what is technical and not technical". This means that "we need to think about [chief information security officers], security architects – and everybody else", he added, citing a particular need to grow expertise among senior managers.

"We know there is insufficient understanding about some of the risks we've heard about today," Beautyman said. "There is maybe a lack of confidence from many of our business leaders. If you were to compare the skills and experience of government COOs, service owners and operational directors to some of their peers in leading private organisations, then we'd probably see a wider mix in some of those skills. A lot of the work we're trying to do – probably three-quarters of my week – is spent advocating with our most senior decision-makers to invest more time in understanding the risks and the opportunities."

With a potential candidate pool of 40,000, *PublicTechnology* suggested it might be beneficial to see technologists selected over their policy colleagues for permanent secretary and chief executive appointments. Beautyman responded: "I can't comment on that!"

Why is cybersecurity like slime?

The need for cybersecurity to spread throughout an organisation – including right up to its highest levels – was further endorsed by Amie Alekna, chief security officer at the Ministry of Justice.

She revealed to attendees that she often tells her team that cyber should operate like "slime", permeating the department. She invoked the analogy when an audience member asked about the ministry's "approach to making security everyone's responsibility".

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

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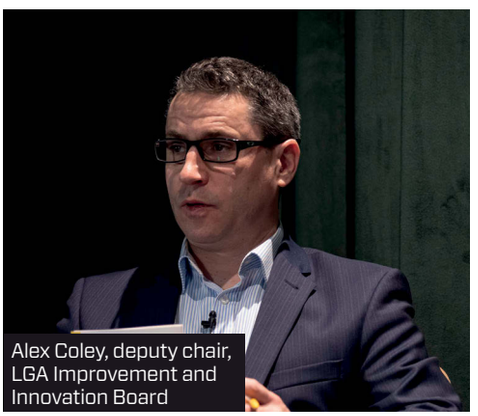
Alekna said: "We try to provide training for lots of different levels and abilities across the organisation. So there's training for seniors who are leading in cybersecurity, and there's different training for everyday users."

She went on to speak about the nine events the MoJ put on for Cyber Security Awareness Month in October: "We are really trying to make it accessible for people and make people want to come on board because, invariably, nobody's interested in cybersecurity until something bad happens, and then they want to get on all your courses and they want to know you. But it's about trying to tap into people in that state of calm. So we just try to be in everyone's faces!"

Amie Alekna, chief security officer, Ministry of Justice

Sam Trendall, editor of PublicTechnology

Sapna Chadha, chief executive, Cyber Resilience Centre for London



Alex Coley, deputy chair, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board

Thomas Beautyman, deputy director for government digital capability, Central Digital and Data Office

Would a senior police officer hire a convicted cybercriminal?

The National Cyber Resilience Centre Group – funded by the Home Office – oversees a network of nine regional centres across England and Wales. Each brings together expertise from government, industry, academia and the police, with senior officers serving as leaders for many of the centres.

At a national level, detective superintendent Ian Kirby leads the NCRCG as its chief executive. Speaking at the event, Kirby said that the group – chiefly through its Cyber PATH programme – works with young people to offer routes into the security industry, and help establish a pipeline of talent for UK public bodies and businesses, particularly SMEs.

Given the widespread chronic need for IT security skills, Kirby was asked by the audience about the potential merits of hiring convicted cybercriminals. While stressing that such a decision would always depend on the particular circumstances, the NCRCG head – a career police officer who has held senior roles focused on drugs and firearms trafficking, as well as cyber – said he would be more than happy to do so.

Meanwhile, the chief executive of the Cyber Resilience Centre for London, Sapna Chadha, cited the value of the work her organisation does with City and Birkbeck universities to ensure tech experts are ready for the workforce.

"We take on master's students as part of our team, and we train them to go around and speak to businesses," she said. "We're taking them from an environment where they've been very technical and academic, and they're suddenly learning soft skills and understanding how to demystify their work in the language of business."

Chadha also cited the importance of cyber experts speaking the same literal language as those they are trying to reach.

"We've got a very diverse workforce because we have to go to areas with very different demographics in London, and we are using their languages to speak with them. For example, we have Arabic-speaking and Portuguese-speaking staff, and that's been really helpful in interacting with these different communities."

Why a local GDS could be a 'force multiplier' for councils' cyber credentials

The Local Government Association is currently engaged in a project to develop plans for a Local Government Centre for Digital Technology.

It's understood that the proposed facility would be backed – both financially and operationally – by central government departments. A white paper released by the LGA this summer said that the LGCDT would have a remit of "using technological innovation to deliver reform and promote inclusive economic growth across councils".

Alex Coley, a councillor at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and deputy chair of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, said: "If you think about what the NCSC has done for cyber nationally, we want to do something for the local government sector where there is a place you can go and do what we're already doing – but to escalate that, to be a force multiplier, and to have more good people giving more advice out to more recipients in the sector. And it's a priority that we're doing this by direct contact with people; it's not something we're doing by press release or something that we're doing by issuing new technical guidance or procedures.

"We're expanding the footprint of professional capability across the public sector, and that's crucial." ■

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SMART STATE

As officials face pressure to improve services and reduce budgets, they must make the most of the opportunities presented by AI. **Mark Rowe** reports on a day designed to cut through hype and offer practical advice on using new technologies to rethink services

The answer to life, the universe and everything was, according to Deep Thought, the supercomputer in Douglas Adams' *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 42. For government, the answers to everything from making the NHS more effective and back-office procedures more efficient to procurement and mitigating climate change are proving more complex. Artificial Intelligence (AI), however, is being increasingly promoted as a game changer and was the subject of a day-long event attended by top-tier civil servants and hosted by IBM in partnership with Civil Service World.

The conference asked a simple question: Rethinking Public Services: Can AI Deliver a Better Future? The future is already here, if in a rather embryonic form: according to Ruth Kelly, chief analyst for the National Audit Office, just 30% of 90 governmental departments and arms-length bodies use AI for some form of digital application, though 70% are "actively planning for AI".

The key for government is to recognise that AI will re-shape the way it works to be more responsive to the needs of citizens, said Giles Hartwright, associate partner, defence, at IBM Consulting. "Citizens increasingly expect digitalised services, so scalable and secure technologies will be the backbone of modern governance." For now, many data sets are in dire need of modernisation – the Police National Computer, in use by all frontline police forces, Hartwright pointed out, dates to 1974.

Moving from rigid bureaucracy to a more dynamic structure would require "ongoing training and fostering a culture of innovation", Hartwright added, noting the public sector would also need private and academic input. "We need agility and collaboration."

Speaking of his own time in the civil service, Hartwright noted that "collaboration, historically has not been the greatest quality of government departments." The skills base of the civil service also needs to be improved, he said, as just 4% of civil servants are digital professionals, compared to 8-12% in wider industry.

A new era in government

Despite the challenges, this was an exciting time to be in the civil service, David Knott, the UK's chief technology officer declared. "We're moving from an era of experimentation into an era of implementation," he said, saying it was time to build on the foundational work of the Government Digital Service. This will mean, he suggested, moving from a time when the focus was on wide experimentation, to a more focused approach on the areas where AI could make the most difference.

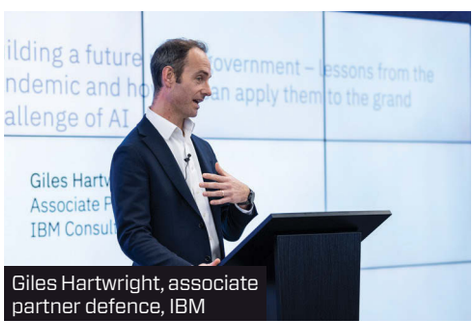
"Lots of things are up to date in government departments but we have to make that normal across departments." Earlier this year a report from the Alan Turing Institute found that AI could help automate around 84% of repetitive transactions across 200 government services.

Government also needed to focus on addressing other fundamental barriers to AI adoption, such as legacy systems, data quality and encouraging a digital-first culture "How do you change the culture?," Knott asked "We need long-term investment and vision. There is a need to identify digital leaders and give them the mandate to implement change in departments."

AI in practice

A fascinating example of how AI can make a meaningful difference came from Jan Spoenle, Presidential Judge at the Court of Appeals in Stuttgart in Germany. AI proved transformational in dealing with a deluge of legal claims concerning the "Dieselgate" car manufacturers' scandal. Cases increased 10-fold in just five years, nearly every case went to appeal and submissions could stretch to 180 pages. "Unfortunately, we were not able to appoint 10 times as many judges to deal with everything," he said. "We had to think outside the box".

A human, manual process to identify the "data diamonds" – the key data required to uphold or dismiss a case, such as engine type or emissions standards – would have proved incredibly time-consuming. Instead,



Giles Hartwright, associate partner defence, IBM

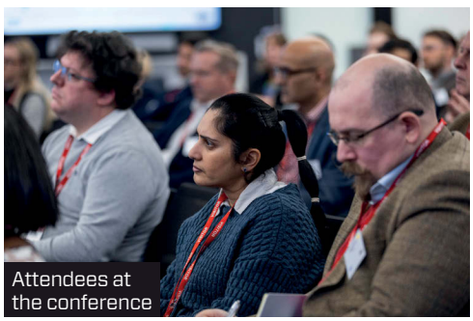
Deborah Threadgold VP technology, IBM, (left) and Mark Worden, AI Product Manager, NatWest

David Knott, CTO, Central Digital and Data Office, DSIT

the judiciary worked with IBM to develop and deploy an AI system called OLGA to handle the repetitive tasks that did not require legal expertise, such as searching for key words. The system featured a dashboard of case files and filter tables such as car brands or legal firms involved. "OLGA was in effect an intelligent research assistant and easy to use. We told the judges if you can buy things on Amazon, you can use OLGA," said Spoenle. Crucially, OLGA was not bespoke to Dieselgate. "We wanted to design an AI tool that could be applied to other issues – such as claims against online gambling companies."

From left: Blake Bower (IBM) Ruth Kelly (NAO) Jess Bowie (CSW) Stuart Hoddinot (IFG) and Francois Josserand (IBM)


Delegates watch a demonstration from IBM and Boston Dynamic's Spot


Attendees at the conference

People power

One concern around AI can be the potential for job losses, but Spoenle was reassuring. "In reality, we actually had too few people originally, so by using OLGA, the existing overworked staff were freed up to work on more useful tasks where humans need to be in the loop." He also noted that by removing the most repetitive parts of human work, systems like OLGA could help to address recruitment and retention challenges faced by public sectors across many countries.

This was also the experience of NatWest AI Product Manager Mark Worden, whose bank's virtual assistant CORA has freed up staff to have longer, more meaningful chats with customers, as the technology's language models pass customers onto a human being for complex or sensitive subjects, such as bereavements.

The benefits were clear to Blake Bower, director of Government and Regulatory Affairs, IBM UK: "People go into the civil service to make a difference, they don't want to spend time doing the mundane legacy tasks, AI can be motivational, freeing them up."

The skills gap

Not only will AI affect how civil servants do their jobs; for technology to bring about real change and drive long-term productivity, it must be part of a broader shift in how government and public services work. AI will re-shape what it is to be a public servant, with new skills and new roles, according to Kelly. "AI by itself is no panacea," she said. "Change is really difficult and challenging, you are not just replacing workload, you are redesigning the way in which you work, that is a big gap to cross." To head off resistance to change, Hartwright argued that both technically and culturally, staff need to be involved early.


Geeth de Mel, senior researcher, IBM Research Europe

Viewing AI as a constantly rolling innovative approach, rather than as a project to be completed within a fixed timeframe, was helpful, suggested Bower. "As we develop policy the temptation is to think what legacy systems can support that – instead we need to think what support systems can we build alongside [policy] – it's a different mindset."

The NHS was given as a classic example of how AI can simultaneously help and expose fundamental structural shortcomings. Stuart Hoddinott, senior researcher at the IfG, cited a doctor who saves 20 minutes a day by getting AI to transcribe his notes, but then wastes an hour walking around the hospital looking for a printer that works. Data is also very fragmented, he added, with most trusts not fully digital and using systems that do not talk to each other.

All the speakers agreed, therefore, that it was important not to be dazzled by AI but to focus first on the practical tasks it could help with. For civil servants, much of the impact of AI will come first in relation to operational work rather than interacting with the public, said Kelly, and be applied to common applications and functionality such as facial recognition and cross-checking documents.

The day had begun with Hartwright presenting research from IBM's Institute of Business Value which explored the characteristics of governments who are best able to seize the possibilities offered by new technologies. Over the course of the day discussion confirmed the importance of these characeristics: investing strategically in data and tackling legacy systems, empowering people to embrace change, and building strong partnerships with external partners. "Transformation in government is rarely achieved in isolation," Hartwright said. "Trusted partnerships between the public and private sectors are essential to driving change..together we can create a public sector that not only meets today's challenges but also leads the way in shaping a better future for everyone." ■

Scan to read more about the event

The event was sponsored by IBM, who also sponsored this article and were given advance sight of it before publication.

SPONSORED EDITORIAL

DREAM DATA

At a recent roundtable discussion hosted by *Civil Service World* and Hitachi Solutions, senior civil servants and industry experts explored the next steps in data transformation in government, emphasising skills, culture shifts, and strategies to maximise data's impact. Words by **Murielle Gonzalez**. Photography by Tom Hampson of Visual Eye

Early on, the new government signalled a bold approach to digital strategy. Moving key agencies such as the Government Digital Service (GDS) and the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology expanded DSIT's scope, centralising key digital and data functions under its remit. The move reflects a commitment to modernise the public sector through enhanced data use in policymaking, service delivery, and innovation.

To unlock strategies for getting the data government needs, *Civil Service World* and Hitachi Solutions hosted a roundtable discussion with senior civil servants and digital leaders. CSW editor Suzannah Brecknell began proceedings by noting the need to understand what data transformation looks like and what is stopping us from getting there.

Reflecting on current and future challenges, participants agreed that while progress has been made in recognising the strategic importance of data and establishing foundations in governance and literacy, much work remains to build on the momentum of recent years. They identified three priorities to fully embed data into policymaking and service delivery: skills, culture, and strategic focus.

Giving value to the frontline

Discussion about data's purpose centred on the need to deliver value at the frontline. One participant highlighted that too often, data sits in 'models' "without being used to make a tangible difference". The attendee argued that the key challenge is to "unlock the power of linked data" by delivering it to the people who need it most – whether they are probation officers, social workers, or local government employees.

The meeting heard that by making data accessible and actionable, government can improve service delivery, prevent adverse outcomes and optimise resource allocation. In the criminal justice system, for example, linking datasets across different agencies could significantly reduce the inefficiencies currently caused by delays in accessing information about offenders. For government, ensuring that data is available at the right time – and in the right format – can lead to better decisions that ultimately benefit citizens.

There was consensus that connecting data from different departments and services is key to improving outcomes. However, achieving this requires a concerted effort to address technical and policy barriers. Participants recognised that data-linking initiatives within individual departments were a step in the right direction but that more needs to be done to streamline the process across government. This path should include the adoption of common standards – many of which have already been developed by central teams in the Cabinet Office – and, through programmes such as the Data Maturity Assessments, ensuring that data governance structures are robust enough to facilitate seamless integration.

Data gains momentum across government

As these observations suggest, departments are now more aware that data can drive better outcomes for citizens, improve operational efficiencies and foster innovation. As one participant noted, "the battle to make people realise the relevancy of data is, to a certain degree, won". This shift in mindset has been key to the success of initiatives that improved data sharing, governance, and analytics.

Participants noted that the introduction of GDPR and the Data Protection Act has had a catalytic effect, compelling departments to put robust governance in place, ensuring data is handled securely, and encouraging a more structured approach to data use. However, a focus on data protection can drive risk-averse behaviours which delay or prevent data sharing.

The push for data literacy, seen in initiatives like mandatory e-learning for civil servants and the Cabinet Office's One Big Thing programme, has begun to close the knowledge gap, making data tools more accessible across government.

While there was broad praise for the progress made, attendees also noted that there is a long way to go before it can be said government has all the basics right. One participant noted that senior leaders still need greater understanding of frontline needs and how to provide cross-system data in a way that is useful for service delivery. Attendees concurred that the "basics" of data management – data quality, error margins, and user-centric data provision – are still areas that require significant improvement across government. Building capability and culture will be key to enhancing the foundational work done so far.

Building skills and focusing on strategic priorities

The overall sentiment at the table was that public sector organisations to adopt and implement new data technologies and capabilities at a faster pace to keep up with evolving needs, rather than falling behind. The emphasis was on agility and focusing on the relevance of different applications rather than a slow, rigid approach.

Participants agreed that for government, one way to build capability is to become an "intelligent customer," moving beyond simply procuring data solutions to building internal capacity to guide, manage and adapt these solutions. As one attendee explained, "the best way forward is not for suppliers to 'do data to us' but to enable us to do it ourselves." This shift involves cultivating skills that allow departments to specify requirements, understand the capabilities of data tools, and ensure solutions align with policy objectives.

Alongside a strategic approach to prioritising projects according to their relevance to departmental outcomes, another suggestion that received support was ensuring all initiatives embed data considerations from the start by changing budgeting rules.

The Treasury's Green Book currently advises that all proposals seeking funding "contain proportionate budgetary and management provisions for their own monitoring and evaluation". A similar rule around allocating a proportionate sum to data management and maintenance could support better integration, upskill staff and encourage longer-term planning for data use.

"The push for data literacy has begun to close the knowledge gap, making data tools more accessible across government"

Shifting the mindset

In terms of general data skills, participants agreed that, despite progress, there remain large discrepancies in the basic understanding of decision-makers and frontline staff. As one participant put it, there's a wide gap between those who store everything on their hard drives and those experimenting with advanced technologies like AI.

While it's important to raise everyone in government to a level of proficiency that allows for the effective use of data across the board, participants also identified more subtle challenges in the culture around data.

One such challenge is the scepticism some civil servants have towards data, particularly when it conflicts with their personal experiences. As one participant noted, "we give people the data, and they just don't believe it." The sentiment underscores a behaviour change: people must be able to access and understand the data but also trust it enough for it to inform their decisions. This shift is especially important when data might challenge long-standing assumptions or practices. There was consensus that overcoming this resistance requires technical solutions and a shift in how civil servants think about and use data.

Civil servants at the table differed on whether this culture change should be driven by updated policies and rules or through leadership and demonstration. Considering some of the negative impacts of a risk-averse approach to things like GDPR and data protection, some participants wondered if new legislation or policy guidance might be needed to set a more innovative and open approach to data and data sharing.

Others argued that enforcing data practices through legislation would ensure compliance but might limit a deeper understanding of data's benefits. The table agreed that strong senior-level leadership and accountability would foster a genuine culture shift. As one civil servant noted, "legislation could enforce practice, but only a shift in mindset can ensure true data-driven transformation."

As the discussion closed, participants reiterated the fact that data is not an end in itself but a means to deliver better services, improve lives, and enhance the efficiency of government operations. Improving data maturity across departments requires consistent training, upskilling, and thoughtful integration of new technologies. One participant noted that data professionals could learn from the approach taken by digital government initiatives in recent years and focus on building a user-led and outcome-focused culture that would help them achieve a truly data-driven transformation in government. ■

Participants have not been named, other than CSW editor Suzannah Brecknell, as the event was held under the Chatham House Rule, encouraging free discussion and open sharing of information

The event was sponsored by Hitachi Solutions. All delegates, including Hitachi Solutions' representatives, were given advance sight and the opportunity to comment on this article

The Procurement Act 2023 marks the most significant overhaul of public sector procurement in decades. As civil servants prepare for the changes, **Murielle Gonzalez** reports on a discussion sharing practical advice for implementation and offering insights into managing the change

GREATER PURCHASE

Around £300bn – almost a third of government's annual budget – is used to buy goods that help the public sector achieve its policy and service aims. The rules for how public sector bodies buy these items are about to undergo a major change when the Procurement Act 2023 comes into force in February. The act, designed to create a more efficient, transparent and flexible system, seeks to meet the needs of the public sector and its suppliers while promoting economic growth, sustainability and social value.

To help civil servants navigate the changes and realise the opportunities they present, *Civil Service World* and CCS hosted a webinar with senior officials who have been closely involved in preparations for the new landscape. Lindsay Maguire, deputy director for procurement reform at the Cabinet Office, gave an overview of the main changes and purpose behind the reforms, while Andie Brookes, head of policy implementation at CCS, offered hands-on advice from an organisation which has already spent several years preparing for the changes.

Flexibility, transparency and innovation

Maguire explained that the UK's departure from the EU provided an opportunity to rewrite procurement rules, tailoring them to national needs and priorities. The new legislation, she explained, is built around three core principles: flexibility, transparency and encouraging innovation. "We've heard the feedback: procurement is slow, bureaucratic and full of red tape. But what we're aiming for is a system that allows us to be more flexible and efficient, so procurement can become an enabler of innovation, not a blocker."

She stressed that while the reforms present the opportunity for procurement professionals to have more strategic conversations and try different commercial models, they will not spell a complete overhaul of all procurement processes, but rather provide flexibility where it is most needed while maintaining efficiency for routine purchasing activities. "There's lots of things that we buy that are price driven in commoditised markets, which don't need a three-stage procurement but a very straightforward set of timescales and requirements to navigate that procurement," she said.

Another key pillar of the reforms is ensuring greater visibility of government spending to enhance public confidence. "We want to show our commitment to taxpayers by being transparent about what we're buying, why we're buying it and how much we're spending," Maguire said. This enhanced scrutiny, she explained, will also give the government better control in excluding suppliers that pose risks, particularly in sensitive areas such as national security.

A project of change

As the UK's biggest procurement agency, offering services to the whole of the public sector, it's not surprising that the Crown Commercial Service is leading the way when it comes to preparing for the changes. Brookes said she realised as early as 2020, when the government's initial consultation was completed, that the overhaul "couldn't be handled as a side project".

In October 2022, CCS set up a project team tasked with overseeing the transition. The team spent the first six months conducting in-depth discovery work to understand CCS's existing "as-is" state and what needed to change. "We reviewed every single process, updated our guidance and mapped out how we'll operate under the new regime. It's been a huge effort," she said, adding that the findings from this phase informed the detailed implementation plan.

CCS has relied on the ADKAR – Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement – change-management model to manage the transition. Brookes explained: "This framework has helped us make sure our people not only understand why the changes are necessary, but also feel confident and capable of applying the new procedures."

Brookes told webinar attendees that to avoid disrupting business-as-usual activities, CCS had divided the work into five key workstreams: people and capability, ways of working, systems, guidance and commercial tools. "By breaking down the work into these focused areas, we've been able to tackle each element of the change in a systematic and manageable way," she said.

The project team has also taken a proactive communication approach, using newsletters, roadshows and other channels to raise awareness. "We've spent three years communicating these changes to our staff. It's not just about compliance; it's about getting everyone on board and ready to make the most of the new opportunities," Brookes explained.

CCS's approach is aimed at balancing the need for compliance with opportunities for innovation. "This reform gives us the flexibility to innovate, but we need to make sure that the solutions we create are not just ambitious but also workable," Brookes said, adding that the work is about finding the right balance between creativity and practicality.

"What we're aiming for is a system that allows us to be more flexible and efficient, so procurement can become an enabler of innovation, not a blocker"
Lindsay Maguire, Cabinet Office

Managing cultural shifts in procurement

Both Maguire and Brookes stressed that if the new act is to achieve its aims, the reform will need to go beyond procedural changes and transform how procurement is viewed and managed across government. A key challenge will be overcoming resistance to change and helping teams across departments adopt new ways of working.

"This isn't just a change for procurement teams," Brookes said. "Contract managers and service users will need to behave differently under the new regime. They may not have seen themselves as part of the procurement process before, but now they will play a crucial role in ensuring contracts are managed effectively."

Maguire noted that risk aversion and governance structures have historically held back innovation. "We need to tackle these barriers head-on," she urged. "Teams need to break free from defaulting to what they know and be open to experimenting with different procurement models. This reform provides the tools to do so."

Both speakers encouraged procurement professionals to seize the flexibility offered by the new regime to innovate. Maguire urged teams to consider how they can work more closely with suppliers to find the best solutions. "The real benefit will come from using the new tools to get better outcomes. I want procurement teams to think strategically, to consider what they can do differently, and to share those successes across the sector," she said.

While the Procurement Act 2023 represents a significant shift, it's important to remember that this is a long-term change, and organisations shouldn't expect an immediate overhaul. "It's not going to be a big bang," Brookes said. "We've got contracts that will continue under the old regime, so we'll be managing both systems for some time. This is about being prepared and making the most of the opportunities as they come up."

Maguire echoed this sentiment, urging public sector bodies to focus on areas where the new regime can deliver the most value. "I understand that capacity is an issue, so concentrate your efforts on areas where you can really drive benefits. The key is to think strategically and start making small changes that will make a big impact over time."

The Procurement Act 2023 offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape public procurement in the UK. Success will depend on careful planning, effective change management and a willingness to embrace new approaches. While the transition may take time, the potential benefits – greater transparency, increased efficiency, and the flexibility to innovate – make this a journey worth taking. As Brookes reassured the webinar's audience: "It'll be fine – just breathe and take it one step at a time." ■

GET READY FOR FEBRUARY 2025

The implementation of the Procurement Act 2023, originally due to come into force in October 2024, is now expected on 24 February. Maguire explained that the delay was needed to allow the new government to review and align the reforms with its priorities. Specifically, it allows ministers to redraft the National Procurement Policy Statement, which sets out priorities that all contracting authorities must consider.

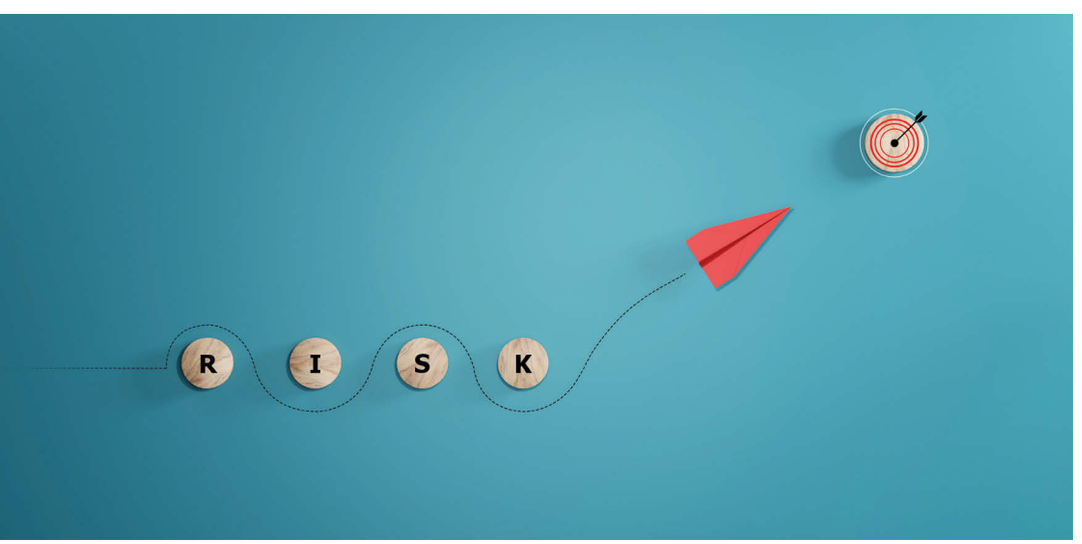
"When the election was called back in May, we absolutely were on track for an October go-live," Maguire said. "Procurement does feature quite heavily in the new government's manifesto, and they wanted to make sure that we were going live with a regime that fully met their requirements and vision for procurement."

RISKY BUSINESS

How can the National Audit Office support the civil service through challenging times? **Russell Heppleston** shares his advice on risk and resilience

Navigating the risks facing our society today is no small feat. From economic shocks and supply chain disruptions to geopolitical conflicts and extreme weather, the challenges are vast and varied. Add in the ever-present threats of cyber attacks and data breaches, and it's clear that the risk landscape is more volatile and ambiguous than ever before.

We are living in what some call a "permacrisis" – where crises seem to be a constant, rather than an exception. As civil servants your job isn't an easy one, but it's crucial in responding to, managing and overcoming these relentless challenges.



Where does the National Audit Office come in?

Our vantage point is unique, and our value for money work across the whole of government means we can recognise interdependencies and consequences across departmental boundaries. This gives us a long-term view towards achieving sustainable goals. Given the scale and variety of the risks that government has to deal with, it's key that risk management is central to our role in securing long-term value for money and delivering resilient public services.

Over the last year we've focused attention on some of the most challenging risks facing the nation, including the auditing of risks on the National Risk Register. Our resilience programme of work started with value for money reports on resilience to flooding and extreme weather. Over the coming year we plan to continue this focus, including the publication of reports on cyber resilience and resilience to animal diseases.

We also publish good practice and share our insights across government to make it easier for others to understand and apply the lessons from our work.

Last year we published *Overcoming the Challenges to Managing Risks in Government*. If you haven't read it yet, I'd encourage you to take a look. This guide aims to help government leaders and practitioners to overcome deep-rooted challenges to improving risk maturity and effectiveness. It offers guidance not only on how government identifies and manages threats, but also on how it can identify opportunities and take well-managed risks when considering improvements, transformation and innovation.

To help leaders and practitioners we've set out 10 approaches to risk management:

- Establish strong leadership that recognises risk management as a strategic enabler, and a tone at the top that promotes a positive risk culture
- Build expertise that increases the impact and value of risk management activities and strengthens credibility, drawing on external specialists where appropriate
- Define and embed risk appetite and tolerance, setting clear parameters and guardrails by which to make risk-informed decisions and take well-managed risks and opportunities
- Take a forward-looking view, anticipating emerging risks and identifying risks over the horizon, increasing the ability to prepare and respond
- Make risk-informed decisions that place risk at the heart of strategy and outcome delivery, and recognise risk as both a threat and an opportunity
- Adopt a whole-systems approach to understand the inter-connections of risks from end to end, including third parties and the extended enterprise
- Assess risk impact using quantitative and qualitative methods alongside good quality and robust data, to understand the individual and aggregate impact of risks
- Take action to address risks by making sure accountability and responsibilities are clear, and by checking the effectiveness of actions taken to mitigate risks
- Set meaningful performance metrics to make sure attention is focused on the risks that matter most to strategic objectives and outcomes
- Drive continuous improvement by learning lessons and implementing good practice from within and outside of the organisation, and by benchmarking against others

We published a template alongside this guide to help organisations assess their risk management practices. This checklist can be used by leaders, practitioners and audit committees to influence risk maturity improvement plans and risk culture.

In this current state of permacrisis, significant risks will continue to play out. The role of civil servants is crucial to navigating and overcoming the challenges that lie ahead.

The NAO will continue to influence change and challenge government. By drawing out key learnings, we can help you to navigate the largest and most complex risks now and in the future. ■

Russell Heppleston is a risk manager for the National Audit Office

TOP TABLE

Refreshed index of global civil service performance is a crucial pathway to service improvement, says Blavatnik School of Government's **Kathy Hall**

More people across the world participated in elections than ever before in 2024. Faced with complex global and domestic challenges, political leaders new and old are looking to their civil services to help develop and implement reforms to deliver better outcomes for their citizens, including here in the UK, where prime minister Keir Starmer is looking for a "decade of national renewal".

These expectations create both intense pressures and exciting possibilities for public administrators – not least the golden opportunity to seek out and learn from good practice.

As Leo Yip, head of the Singaporean Public Service has said, even though we operate in different countries with different systems of governance, civil servants are all in the same profession and have the common aim of solving largely similar challenges and improving the lives of our peoples. "It is therefore all the more important that we learn from one another," he says.

The Blavatnik Index of Public Administration, launched in December at Oxford University, aims to support civil service leaders around the world to do just that.

Building on the 2017 and 2019 International Civil Service Effectiveness Index, initiated by former cabinet secretary Lord Jeremy Heywood, this refreshed index brings together the best available data on the performance of public administrations in 120 countries. It looks at four overarching domains of an effective civil service – strategy and leadership; public policy; national delivery; and underpinning people and processes.

Singapore tops the index, followed closely by Norway, Canada, Denmark and Finland. The UK is joint sixth with New Zealand. Whilst dominated by Western Europe, the list's "top 25" includes countries from across five continents. Similarly, whilst high-income countries tend to rank more highly, the leading nations in other income groups (including Brazil, Ukraine and Rwanda) are largely equal with the lower and middle performers of the higher income groups, showing there is good practice to be shared across regions and income groups.

The UK government may take confidence from the relative strength of the UK civil service in policymaking and system oversight. The index also suggests that ministers and civil service leaders are right to prioritise improving data and digital services. The UK civil service ranks less highly on these themes and may be able to learn from the experience of peer countries, for example on developing cross-government digital infrastructure and increasing the use of data in policymaking.

A new Blavatnik Index website offers an opportunity to explore our data more fully and use interactive tools to compare performance. The Index of Public Administration does not, however, provide a definitive picture of performance. Limitations in the data can lead to apparent anomalies. Extending the index country coverage to 120 has meant not including otherwise eligible data sources that only cover a subset of countries. Practitioners will therefore want to triangulate the comparisons with their own domestic data and experience and use the interactive tools to seek out the most relevant comparators.

At the Blavatnik School, we'll be aiming to work with governments and international bodies to support efforts to improve public administration data and conduct further research and analysis such as the production of regional-level indices.

But the real value of the Blavatnik Index is in the conversations between civil services that it starts and the peer learning it supports. Lord Gus O'Donnell, a former UK cabinet secretary who chaired the project's senior leadership panel, says the Blavatnik Index is a valuable tool for the current generation of public administration leaders to better understand and monitor how their administration compares globally.

He hopes it encourages leaders to engage with their peers to share best practice from their country and to learn from others. I hope readers of *Civil Service World* will also be inspired to join this conversation. ■

Kathy Hall is chief operating officer at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government

"The UK civil service may be able to learn from the experience of peers on developing cross-government digital infrastructure and increasing the use of data in policymaking"

As government tackles complex and nuanced challenges, participatory and deliberative tools can bring many benefits to civil servants. In this six-page report, *CSW* first hears from Nuffield Council on Bioethics director **Danielle Hamm** about a practical example of a citizens' jury exploring a controversial topic, and then from Cabinet Office deputy director **Catherine Day** about how deliberative democracy can contribute to good policymaking. Edited by **Beckie Smith**

CITIZENS ASSEMBLE

GAUGING PUBLIC OPINION ON THE ASSISTED DYING DEBATE

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics used a citizens' jury to add evidence to the increasingly politicised debate on assisted dying. **Danielle Hamm** explains

Assisted dying is a highly complex, sensitive and ethically charged topic. Many jurisdictions worldwide do not permit it, but there has been an increasing number considering or passing legislation to change this in recent years. Currently, the UK does not permit assisted dying, but both political and public conversations around that fact are intensifying.

Back in 2015, Westminster debated this topic, with 118 MPs voting for and 300 against; but this year, Labour MP Kim Leadbeater's terminally ill adults (end of life) bill passed with a majority of 55. It will now enter committee stage, offering us a chance to talk about death and dying in an open and informed way. We must seize this opportunity, and we must ensure the public's voice is central – which is why I must highlight how disappointing it was to see the debate's lack of reference to the credible deliberative evidence available. For an issue that cuts so deeply into the fabric of personal and societal values, this absence is notable.

The evidence we have to understand what the public think and feel about assisted dying has stagnated. By this, I mean it has largely been limited to polling and survey methodology, which, although useful as an indicator of public opinion, cannot offer a reflection of informed public judgement. And it had primarily been collected by those with an interest, i.e. campaign organisations, which raises questions about the impartiality of the data.

Through our conversations with UK policymakers and legislative decision-makers, it became clear to us that there was a vital need for robust, independently gathered insights into not only what the public think about assisted dying, but why they think it. This is why we decided to commission England's first citizens' jury on the topic.

Since October 2023, we have been working with Hopkins Van Mil, M.E.L Research and the Sortition Foundation to design, facilitate and organise this project. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics is not seeking to form an organisational position on assisted dying – we see ourselves as a broker, there to unpack the associated social, ethical and practical considerations that underpin people's views.

A citizens' jury is similar to a legal jury in that it brings together a representative group of people and provides them with the information they need to discuss and reach a conclusion together. The main difference is that a citizens' jury goes one step further by seeking to ensure the group reflects the chosen population's demographic makeup and attitudes. So, in the case of our assisted-dying jury, we needed to ensure that the mix of people selected to enter deliberations represented the average spread of attitudes people living in England have about assisted dying.

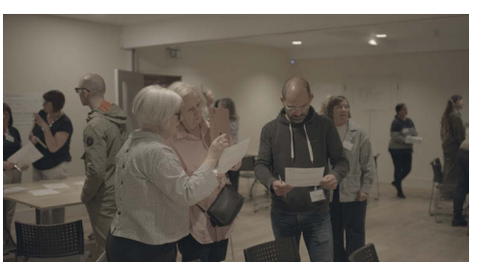
"The evidence we have to understand what the public think about assisted dying has stagnated"

Critics of citizens' juries often suggest attitudinal inclusion is a weakness, claiming that it weights the likely outcome, or stacks the deck unfairly. That is not the case, and this is an important point to make – citizens' juries include attitudinal data because in doing so, they provide a more accurate representation of the population being governed. Bringing 30+ people who had no opinion on assisted dying together and asking them to form a view would be interesting, but it would not be a citizens' jury and it would not tell policy and decision-makers what a representative group of the English population thinks. It is also worth highlighting that people entering the jury process with an assumed view may leave thinking and feeling something else; opinions can change and, indeed, we saw this happen in our project.

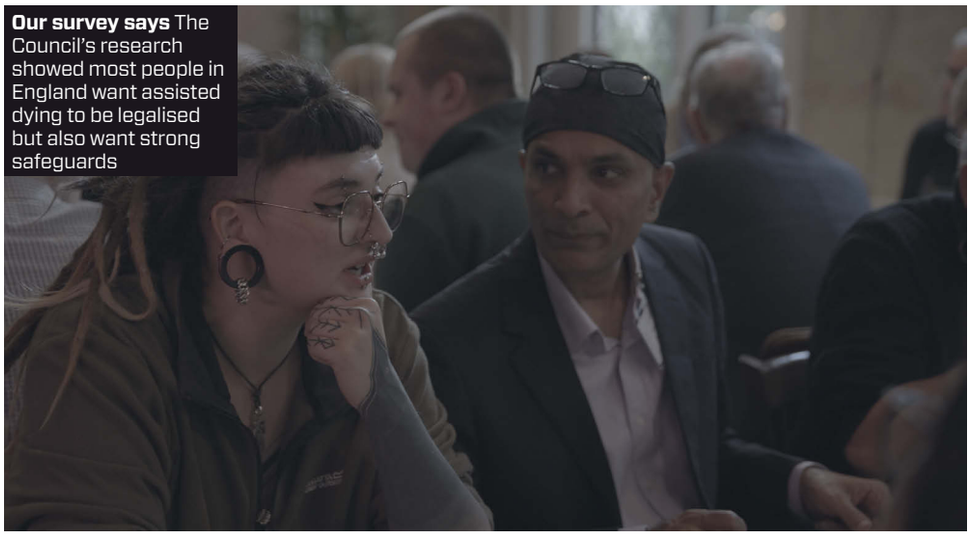
Using a process called sortition, we recruited 34 people living across England to become jury members and answer these questions: should the law in England be changed to permit assisted dying? What are your reasons for or against? If the law does change, what should the service look like? If it doesn't change, are there any other changes you would like to see?

Together, the jury members entered an intense, eight-week deliberative process where they were given a wide range of materials to increase their understanding and awareness of assisted dying. These materials had been carefully curated by our independent advisory board and content group to ensure they were balanced, comprehensive and accurate.

Jury's out Jury members embarked on an intensive, eight-week process to understand and deliberate on the issue



In September, we published a verbatim account from the jury – showing that the 28 members who participated in the final votes had concluded with a majority »



Our survey says The Council's research showed most people in England want assisted dying to be legalised but also want strong safeguards

in favour of legalising assisted dying in England for adults with a terminal illness and the capacity to choose. This data release received extensive media interest, with an estimated 2.6 billion people reached by the news coverage. MPs and peers were sent a briefing pack of the data and invited to request a meeting with us, should they have any questions.

Shortly after we published our findings, we ran a national survey that used insights gathered through the jury process to design several assisted-dying scenarios. These explored concepts such as terminal diagnosis and non-England residents accessing an assisted-dying service in this country. We immersed 2,000 people in England in these scenarios and then asked their view.

In 2024, we published the result of this survey and a further summary analysis of why the jury concluded as it did. These insights showed that the majority of the public want assisted dying to be legalised in England and that the most favoured eligibility criteria would be adults with a terminal diagnosis of six months. There was less support for a 12-month diagnosis and lesser still for the inclusion of intolerable suffering, through fear that it would make the service too easy to access.

Our data also showed ensuring safeguards was of utmost importance. The public want to see safeguards that are strong enough to protect vulnerable people from pressure or coercion, and medical professionals from action by those who oppose assisted dying. Indeed, it was confidence in the possibility of achieving adequate safeguards that, after religious beliefs, was the second-biggest influencer of whether someone was in favour or against legalisation.

Two areas where we exposed a lack of public consensus is whether under-18s or people who are not residents of England should be able to access an assisted-dying service. Strong opinions were felt on either side, with some believing under-18s with a terminal illness and parental support should be eligible; but others thinking the establishment of informed consent in children would be too difficult and parents should not be put in that situation. With regards to residency, some felt people should be living in England to gain access, but others could see a financial benefit to the NHS if non-residents were able to use it.

This independently gathered evidence provides the trustworthy and rich intel decision-makers will need if they are charged with shaping new legislation and guidance. But throughout our engagement, it has become clear that there is still some work to do in raising awareness of deliberative democracy, such as citizens' juries, and the positive impact of embedding such methods into policy development.

At the NCOB, we are working to put ethics at the centre of decision-making through projects such as this one, which gather the evidence so sorely needed. We are also producing tools and frameworks to assist civil servants and policymakers in how they can utilise ethical insights in a timely way.

Our door is always open to any civil servant, policymaker or governance decision-maker who wants or needs information about the ethical implications of innovation. In a world where trade-offs are inevitable, ethical insight can help to promote fairness and equity, for the benefit of us all.

Danielle Hamm is director of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics

WHY GOVERNMENT SHOULD MAKE USE OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS

Catherine Day is a deputy director in the Cabinet Office who convenes a cross-government participatory methods forum to improve participation in policymaking. Day reflects on the forum's first year, barriers to participatory governance and her experience as an observer on the Nuffield Council's citizens' jury on assisted dying.

What's your day job, and how did you get involved in participatory governance?

I'm a deputy director in the Joint Data and Analysis Centre, which grew out of Covid. A lot of my job is around how we bring in all possible inputs, including strategy and futures-analysis products, to help government take the best decisions and how we're transparent about that. I saw a gap around how we bring in inputs from other bits of society, other sectors and the public to shape the evidence and decisions – but also how we work collaboratively with all of the key actors in our society to deal with the opportunities and challenges in front of us.

Where did the idea for the participatory methods forum come from?

Our generation finds itself on the hook in really complex times – government is never going to be able to tackle issues like climate change and huge advances in technology alone. The idea was born to try and help central government to get ways of working that more meaningfully engage a broader range of stakeholders and people in other sectors.

It's an informal network. It started as a question: are other people thinking about this? Should we join forces to understand how we can have the most impact? It came about after King's College, London hosted an event for the UK's "deliberative community" – government, civil society, parliament, the media and other sectors – examining the parts each sector has to play to help strengthen democracy. It became pretty clear that while participatory approaches are used routinely at local and regional level – examples include Camden Council's Community Wealth Fund *(see box)* – there's a big gap in central government. There are pockets where they've been used, but there's never been a concerted effort to learn from that, to understand the potential and then systematically to unlock that.

"This is such an important way in which government should evolve – but it's really easy to do these things extremely badly"

Culture shift These days in Ireland, big changes that affect most people will prompt calls for citizens' assemblies and even graffiti saying "assembly now"

CAMDEN COUNCIL'S COMMUNITY WEALTH FUND

Camden Council is working on several community-focused projects stemming from the Camden Renewal Commission, which it set up in 2020 with UCL's Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose to help the borough "move forward from Covid-19". Commissioners representing Camden's community and voluntary, business and academic sectors were asked to suggest practical solutions to help create a fair, sustainable society and address inequalities in the borough. They proposed four missions – on diversity in leadership; economic opportunity for young people; food; and healthy, sustainable and creative neighbourhoods – that underpin the council's strategy.

Camden Council will launch a £30m Community Wealth Fund this year as a social-impact investment fund designed to further the four missions. It will use approaches such as repayable loans, equity finance and mentoring to support people, businesses and organisations. The council is currently recruiting 15 young people to join a youth panel that will help decide how to invest the first £1m of the fund.

Wealthy and wise Camden's Community Wealth Fund

What were the forum's first steps?

At first it was tiny – a dozen of us or so – but it's grown fast over its first year. Early on we identified three things we could usefully do: one was to build the evidence base. We have international examples, like Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, which has created a culture shift *(see box)* – if there's something big that affects most people in Ireland, there will be calls for citizens' assemblies and graffiti saying "assembly now". We wanted to understand what's worked, or might work, in the UK. We commissioned the Joint Data and Analysis Centre to help us pull together that evidence base as a baseline for planning.

The second thing was to raise awareness about these approaches and where they might be useful. We had good support from the policy profession. Early on, we took Defra perm sec Tamara Finkelstein – who is head of the profession – and Home Office perm sec Matthew Rycroft to visit a citizens' assembly on neighbourhood policing in Waltham Forest, and built out from that. So we have champions who "get it" and we've done a lot of explaining and testing. That priority links to a desire to build capability, particularly around designing approaches so they play a meaningful part in decisions, which is the main thing to get right.

Finally, we wanted to help government to adopt this in smart ways; we're being systematic about building capability that will last. The evidence is clear that this is such an important way in which government should evolve – but it's easy to do these things extremely badly. So in our second year, I'm keen that we find a couple of worthy priorities to do a fantastically good job on, with all of government corralling around it, showing how it can be done. The work Sally Warren is leading on with the NHS 10-year plan is a flagship for these methods so far.

What are some of the pitfalls that organisations can fall into?

Participatory governance is all about agency, getting people involved and rebuilding trust in our institutions. One common mistake is to use these approaches but not integrate them into the decision-making process. The Nuffield Council's citizens' jury was different – it was about building the evidence base and the purpose was clear. But from a government perspective, you wouldn't want to point these things at a decision you've already made, like a glorified focus group. There has to be a genuine opportunity to shape outcomes and really good communication about how that's happened. If people don't think they've been listened to, you can end up undermining trust.

What are some of the barriers to central government adopting these approaches?
The biggest one is cultural – it's just not the way that we work at the moment. There's a fair amount of risk involved, and no obvious centre of expertise in government to ask: "How do we do these things?"

It also gets caught up in our system of government. One line of criticism is that in a representative democracy, elected representatives should take decisions rather than being seen in any shape or form to outsource them. That's a misconception, really. These approaches are inherently democratic and they don't replace the decision-making machinery we've got; they strengthen it and enable us to take into account all the things that need to be taken into account to make good decisions. So it's about good decision-making, rather than the decision-makers.

Why do you think the citizen's jury is well suited to the issue of assisted dying?
These sorts of participatory, deliberative approaches offer a structured approach to work through incredibly complex areas in a way that just doesn't exist otherwise. It's about informed public judgement. Legislation sometimes feels like a blunt tool for societal issues like assisted dying or abortion; it needs to be a bigger conversation that reflects society's changing views. The process supports people to stop and think; it gives them the time, space and tools to properly engage with something really difficult that in day-to-day life, they might not have a chance to. It's so important that we do, because time affects us all, ultimately – and so here is a set of decisions that it's in our interest to engage with properly.

What was it like being an observer on the Nuffield Council's citizens' jury?
The first thing that always strikes me is the energy in the room. You have people who in the normal course of life would never come across each other, let alone talk about really deep and meaningful and important issues. That generates a power and an energy that's difficult to pin down.

"You wouldn't want to point this at a decision you've already made, like a glorified focus group. There has to be a genuine opportunity to shape outcomes"

I'm also filled with admiration for the people who facilitate these processes, focus them on the most important things, bring out all of the different perspectives in respectful ways, and get to decisions. It requires a completely different skill set from the ones written down in competency frameworks.

What will your engagement with the Council look like in the future?
The Council has delivered a powerful bit of work; it's learnt a lot of things that I want to make sure the country benefits from. Part of the support the forum can offer is helping to make sure the right engagement happens at the right time with government. I came across this work reasonably late in the day – it had already been designed and commissioned. In the future, I would like conversations to start earlier on about the role of government in enabling these activities to be useful. Our evidence work shows the most impactful approaches are the ones that government, parliament and civil society come together to support in some shape or form.

What do you want organisations that want to work with government to know?
I want organisations like Nuffield Council to have a very obvious way into government. We need to see a culture change not just in government but in the country, and to grow a sense of civic purpose. Just ask! It amazes me how few people do. Just because you can do something alone, doesn't always meant that's the best route to get the outcomes we all want – so let's try and work together to design approaches that have real impact and change the course of our country for the better.

I think the temptation is often – within and outside of government – to bite off the things you can chew that are going to be relatively neat to deliver. But we shouldn't be wasting our limited effort on the stuff that's not going to make a really big difference. We should point this at our biggest, most complex challenges. Let's be a bit brave.

How do you know which issues are worth spending resources on?
Your criteria could include how many people it will affect – our evidence shows issues of high public salience tend to be more responsive to these approaches, because people can see how it's relevant to them. And what's the impact – on current lives, future lives, or spending? These approaches are also useful for complex and societal issues because they are a good way of tapping into our collective ideas and wisdom, which I think of as democracy's superpower. We've done some preliminary work on this and have a list of priorities, which include climate and the environment; societal issues like justice, health, immigration and assisted dying; and our shared, long-term national goals. Something I'd like to understand better in our next phase of evidence work is the opportunities for the biggest returns that doing these things well opens up. It's difficult to measure when you're talking about alternative futures, but we should have a go. ■

IRELAND'S CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ABORTION

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly was established in 2016 to consider political questions such as abortion, fixed-term parliaments, population ageing and climate change.

In 2016 and 2017, 99 assembly members – chosen at random to represent Ireland's population – spent five weekends deliberating on abortion, hearing from medical, legal and ethical specialists on both sides of the debate. The assembly recommended amending the Irish constitution to repeal the eighth amendment, which made abortion illegal unless the mother's life was at risk, and legalising abortion without restrictions up to certain gestation limits.

A 2018 referendum that followed the assembly backed legalisation, and the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 legalising and regulating abortion passed later that year.

Deciding vote Signs designed to sway voters in the 2018 referendum on abortion

FORGET ME NOT

Does the civil service value its institutional memory? **Susan Allott** asks if we can ever escape from Groundhog Day

In the spring of 2011, Kathy Melling was settling in for a late night in her office at the Department of Health, where she'd worked as a policy lead for over two years. Her team of policy experts – employed on fixed-term contracts – was being disbanded under the austerity measures of the new coalition government, and this was their last day. Melling had been working flat out for weeks, wrapping up as much as she could and archiving all the material her team had been working on. Late in the evening, a senior official popped her head into the office and politely suggested Melling ought to go home. Before she did so, Melling took a moment to contact her colleagues across the civil service with her personal email address, asking them to get in touch if they needed help taking forward the work she'd been responsible for.

"It was a frustrating time," Melling says. She was aware that a smaller team of civil servants was to continue her work – which was still considered a priority – but there had been no formal handover. Within weeks of leaving, she received "a flurry of emails" from officials needing her input. They were starting from a point of almost no policy knowledge, and appeared to be replicating work from scratch. On her own time, Melling made several visits to meet the new team, and soon realised "they didn't know where to find the digital resources we had created. If I hadn't reached out to people before I left, leaving them my personal email, all that work would have been lost."

Fast-forward more than a decade, as a new administration settles into office, and it seems a good moment to ask whether anything has changed since Melling's experience in 2011. Is the civil service losing valuable knowledge and expertise as people move on? Are civil servants encouraged to seek out historic policy decisions to inform their work, and if so, do they know where to find them? Or could they be duplicating work and repeating mistakes, at huge cost to the public purse?

Most commentators approached by *CSW* agree there is a persistent problem with institutional memory in the civil service. The question of why, and what might be done to resolve it, is more complex. "Government is not unique in struggling to manage this," says Catherine Haddon, programme director at the Institute for Government, pointing out that any large organisation will encounter these issues. But the unique challenge faced by the civil service, Haddon suggests, is an unusually high rate of churn. And this will be exacerbated when a change of political party ushers in a new set of ministers.

"There is a changing of the guard that happens when you've had 14 years of one government," Haddon says. "You can expect changes of permanent secretary in the coming year, and there has been considerable change in private office staff, people who stayed on to see through the new government but have now done their 18 months. There are risks around that."

This movement at senior level is precisely the reason we need officials at lower grades to remain longer in post, argues a policy official who prefers to remain anonymous: "We have a permanent civil service, and the idea is that ministers churn and civil servants don't. But in practice, civil servants move on to move up." This policy, our source argues, is a significant block to institutional memory, which could be resolved with a new approach to pay. "It's ridiculous that you can't get promoted in your job. In the private sector they take the »

“If I hadn’t reached out to people before I left, leaving them my personal email, all that work would have been lost”
Kathy Melling

view that we don't want to lose this person who is critical to the business. But in the civil service, you don't get promoted in post."

A recent IfG report – *20 ways to improve the civil service* – also highlights the issue of churn, recommending that permanent secretaries should be held to account for meeting new staff turnover targets, which would include internal turnover within departments. Given that this recommendation is not directly addressed in the latest Civil Service People Plan, how can we best capture institutional memory before it walks out of the door?

Robin Butler, who was cabinet secretary and head of the civil service from 1988 to 1998, tells *CSW* that the loss of most historical sections, and the advisers attached to them, was short-sighted. "It was the economising in the '90s that led to the abandonment of historical sections in most departments other than the Foreign Office," Lord Butler says. "The memories of what's important about an issue, and what was relevant to decisions, come from people's personal recollections. A historical adviser could refer you to someone who's an expert on that episode."

"The memories of what's important about an issue, and what was relevant to decisions, come from people's personal recollections" *Lord Butler*

Clearly there have been huge changes to working practices since the 1990s, and the means by which we store and retrieve historic records is one of the changes that Butler would argue has not been uniformly beneficial. There are examples of excellence, such as the FCDO, which has both held on to its physical library and supplemented it with extensive digital resources. "Our intranet has an incredible treasure trove of old Foreign Office documents," says Sam Navaratnam, team leader, Saudi Arabia. "We also have research analysts who provide historic analysis for us, and they sit in on our policy meetings and discussions and keep records of what we say and do. So that's all kept for future reference."

But the FCDO is an exception in this regard. And there is some evidence that the phasing out of physical libraries and historic advisers reflects a culture of short-termism. "When I joined the Treasury 20 years ago there was a library, but it wasn't valued; nobody used it," says Peter McDonald, who has since moved to the Welsh Government, where he is director for transport and connectivity. "I never had any incentive to give it any thought. It wasn't laziness; it's just that we were encouraged to focus on the here and now."

Have historical perspectives been sidelined, as Butler suggests? Or can new approaches balance out the challenges that come with change? Some departments are taking steps to rebuild a historical perspective through partnerships with a team of academics at King's College London. The Department for Business and Trade's partnership will see King's academic Emilia Braddon write a PhD on the history of the department, while perm sec Gareth Davies will support postgraduate learning through a visiting professorship. Launching the partnership, Davies said he wanted to capture the long history of trade departments and the Board of Trade. "This sense that someone's previously been grappling with the challenges that we're grappling with today is so important," he said. "The context may have changed, technology may have advanced, social norms could have shifted, but I find that opening the files gives you an insight into how people were looking at an issue, what played out as expected, what didn't; and, crucially, provides a new challenge to your implicit assumptions."

The issue of how best to manage digital records remains a challenge, however. Most acknowledge that the paper-based approach to record keeping is a thing of the past, and that tapping into the memories of colleagues through verbal exchange is not always possible. Unfortunately, as Haddon points out: "There are plenty of knowledge-management systems out there, but Whitehall has never managed to adapt itself to a way of working that fits different documenting styes." Some would argue that AI might be the answer, but Haddon is circumspect. "Generative AI is fallible, and it can corrupt as well as resolve issues," she says.

In some respects, digital technology has brought real positives. Its arrival in the 1990s heralded a culture change, "driven by openness and a drive to share knowledge, which helps you retain institutional memory", says David Mann, who was brought in by the Blair government as part of the drive to bring all government transactions online by 2005. He went on to become head of innovation for Direct.gov and helped to form the Government Digital Service.

"One of the things GDS did well was that we worked in the open," Mann says. "We encouraged the team to blog about our work as we were doing it. There was a mix of practitioners and leadership writing on the blog in a practical, useful way for other digital practitioners across government to learn from."

Mann believes this practice of working in the open is only possible when officials feel able to share all stages of learning – including the acknowledgement of mistakes – with the permission and backing of leadership. "I'm talking about

THE KIM PROFESSION

Knowledge and information management professionals are the custodians and ethicists of official information and records for the civil service.

According to the Civil Service People Survey, there are approximately 2,500 civil servants who declare themselves as aligned to the KIM profession. This will be made up of a mixture of professionals whose work is wholly related to the disciplines within the profession and others who carry out these functions locally within their business unit as part of their wider role (e.g. local information managers or a business unit's FoI officer).

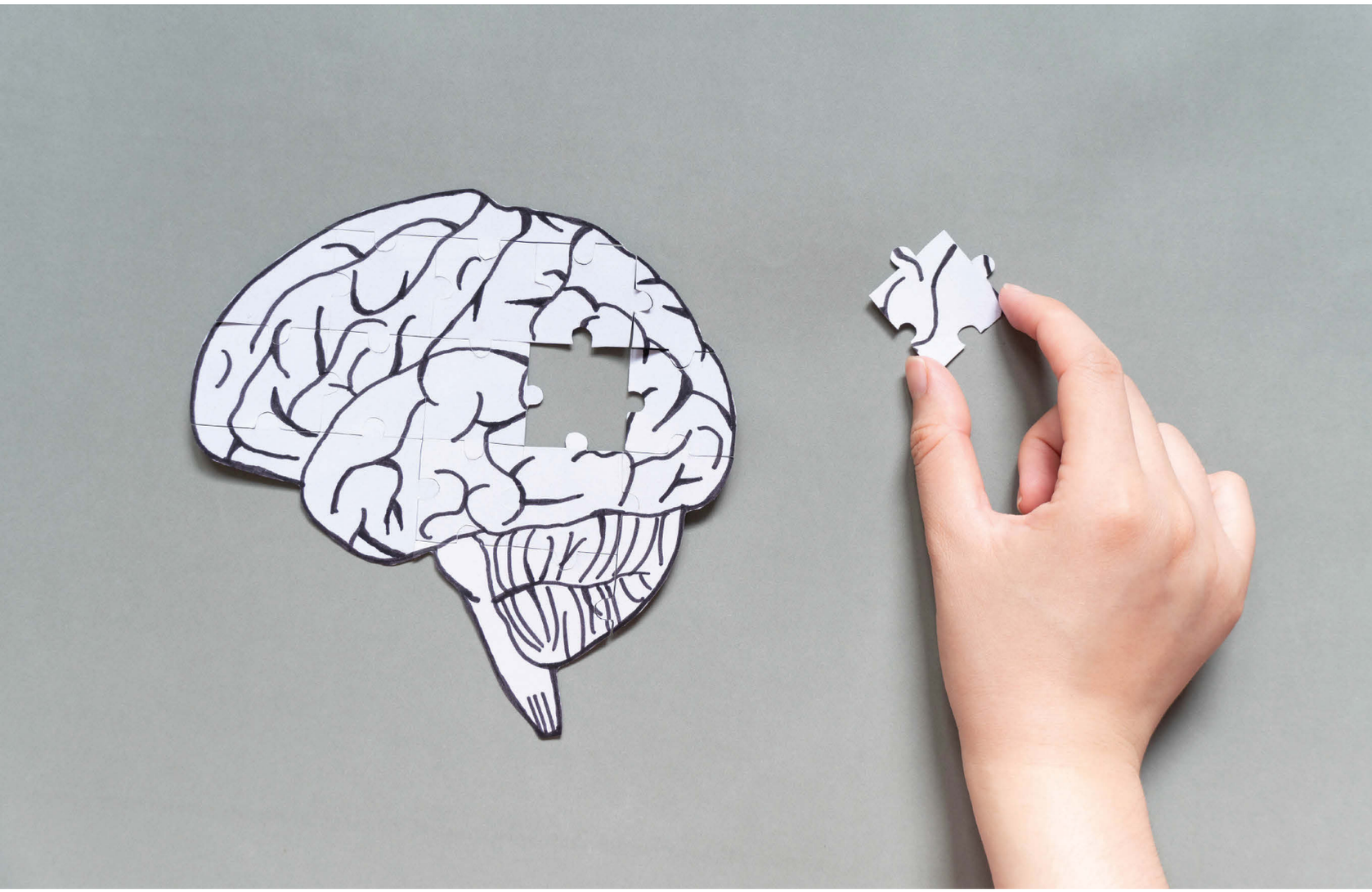
It is a requirement under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 that each department must have an information management function with a designated manager.

The work of the KIM professional varies from operational activity to policy advice and advice on how to meet the requirements of legislation and regulatory obligations. The civil service code requires civil servants to "keep accurate official records and handle information as openly as possible within the legal framework".

The Code of Practice on the Management of Records issued under section 46 of the FoIA warns that "information can become a liability if it is not properly managed".

The current KIM head of profession is Roger Smethurst, who works at the Cabinet Office. Smethurst is a fellow of the Information and Records Management Society and a fellow of the Chartered Management Institute.

Civil servants can contact KIM at: head-of-profession-gkim@cabinetoffice.gov.uk



storytelling, the useful narrative behind a piece of work, writing this stuff down," he says. "I'm worried that since 2016, there has been a tailing off of that transparency around government. If the civil service is in a defensive posture, which it has been over the past few years, then it's not at the top of the to-do list to be open and transparent."

Is the real issue a cultural one, rooted in a preference for secrecy and discretion over openness? Mann suggests this tendency ebbs and flows with different styles of leadership. "It could be that a lot of the practitioners of the more open style of working are no longer inside government; they will have taken that ethos with them," he says.

Could it be that Mann and his team were not working on anything highly sensitive, hence their willingness to share? Haddon touches on this, explaining that concerns about Freedom of Information and inquiries such as Covid and Grenfell have made people nervy. "I don't think there is a significant attempt to avoid scrutiny, but I don't think people will be as candid as possible in a written record," she says.

Our anonymous source thinks the problem goes deeper. "The civil service does not value expertise," he says. "As a minister, you want a team under you who will do what you want, so if you've got people there who think they've seen it all before, they can become 'no' people – and ministers don't like that." This perspective echoes Melling's experience back in 2011. "Our team was unpopular internally," she says. "We were seen as know-it-alls."

Is it fair to suggest that ministers are undermining the effort to draw on and record institutional memory, favouring a drive for new ideas and fresh approaches? Is there a view among senior officials that historical perspectives and policy experts are a drag on progress? Not always, but the message coming from ministers is vital, Haddon says: "If officials feel it's fine to solve policy issues without looking back at the paper trail and then to move on to the next job, if that's the way to have success, then they won't value retaining their records."

Despite these challenges, Haddon is clear that the issue is being tackled – partly because of the likelihood of future inquiries, and FoI. "The paper trail is incredibly important both politically and legally," she says. But the drive for change is also coming from civil servants, many of whom value institutional memory and recognise its importance, both in the now and for future generations.

Heading up this challenge, the government's knowledge and information management profession takes responsibility for record keeping and curating information in all its forms. These officials are working to champion the profession and make people aware of what it does. As deputy head of digital and information professions at the Ministry of Defence, Rebecca Dorsett told *CSW* in 2023, "if we use KIM professionals in the right way, my God they can help transform things across government".

Given the moment of transformative change we are living through, it seems vital that senior leaders – especially ministers – set the tone in ensuring that institutional memory is preserved. Partly this is about an expectation of good record keeping. But it may also prove transformative to signal that policy advice should include lessons from the past as well as ideas for the future. ■

Arrested development

CSW speaks to former Department for International Development permanent secretary Mark Lowcock about the rise and fall of the department and what could come next. Words by **Tevye Markson**

"When Boris Johnson became the prime minister – that's what changed everything."

Sir Mark Lowcock, the longest-serving permanent secretary of the Department for International Development, is reflecting on the moment when the department's 23-year ascent was sharply halted and reversed.

Less than a year after coming to power, Johnson chose to "dismantle and parcel" out the capabilities which made DfID an international "superpower", Lowcock writes in his new book *The Rise and Fall of the Department for International Development*.

The book, based on more than 100 interviews with former DfID ministers and civil servants, charts the creation of the department in 1997 and the historical context preceding it; the following 23 years of "unusual effectiveness"; and its demise in 2020 along with the UK's reputation as an international development "superpower".

Lowcock is unequivocal about the influence of Johnson – who was elected as prime minister in December 2019 – on the latter.

"The Conservative Party at that point was captured by its right wing and reverted to the mode it had been in the 1980s and 1990s," he says. "Boris Johnson was at the forefront of that, and that's what changed everything."

Back in 2016, Lowcock – then still the department's perm sec – was serene about progress on international development. In an interview with *CSW*, he said he believed there was "a settled view" on the need for the UK to play its part and that he was worrying "much less than I used to about having to make the case for development".

Comparatively, its descent was rapid. Just over a year after Johnson got the keys to No.10, DfID had been merged into the Foreign Office and the UK's aid budget would go on to be cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income.

The Rise and Fall describes the path chosen by Johnson as one where the functions of DfID were being "dismantled and parcelled out" across various parts of the Foreign Office. "The result was as intended," the book says.

Soon enough, Lowcock writes, a comprehensive and intentional destruction had taken place: of structures, skills, and processes that had been built up over 23 years, and which had enabled DfID to spend a large budget well and achieve the development outcomes that ministers had chosen to prioritise.

Within six months of its creation in 1997, DfID – led by development secretary Clare Short and permanent secretary John Vereker – had published a white paper which *The Rise and Fall* describes as "the most consequential statement of British government policy on international development of the last 60 years".

What made the white paper, which was based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development goals agreed the previous year, such a success?

"It was very prescient," Lowcock says. "The goals set out in that white paper were adopted in the year 2000 by every country which was a member of the UN and became the agenda for international development for the following 15 years."

It took some time, however, Lowcock says, "for the new direction re-

ally to be believed and internalised, and [officials] to think, 'Oh, we're really going to do something now'".

"For the first two years of the Blair government, there was no more money, and in fact the budget was very tight. So it wasn't at all clear that the new government was really committed to development," he says. "It took a long time for that to be bedded in."

A key moment was the categorical support given in 2006 by then-development shadow secretary Andrew Mitchell in response to that year's development white paper.

By this point, the department had earned a striking international reputation – with the head of the Canadian International Development Agency, for example, writing in a 2005 government report that DfID "is generally considered to be the best in the world" – but it was the domestic support which secured its future.

"It became clear that the Conservative Party were now fully on board with what the Labour government had been doing by then for eight or nine years, and that actually is what gave the priority to this issue another 10 years, from 2010-2020," Lowcock says.

This, he adds, is a good example of the power of consensus in enabling governments to "sustain an approach for long enough to be able to make a real difference" when tackling "big, difficult" policy issues.

Mark Lowcock

With the right approach, Lowcock is confident that development is an arena where Britain can "quickly" restore its international reputation.

After leaving DfID, he became the United Nations' under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator. In this role, he "heard what people were saying about this country when we weren't in the room". Britain became "a laughing stock in the years after Brexit", he says.

To reverse the decline, Lowcock says the new Labour government must do three things: be clear what policy objectives it wants to pursue; stabilise the budget so there is a predictable amount of money that is only used in pursuit of those objectives; and "sort out the organisational mess".

The latter will require "rebuilding the expertise and rebuilding the systems and processes" to enable money to be spent well to achieve the desired outcomes, he says.

"We do not advocate more money," Lowcock adds. "We advocate spending the existing budget much better."

He warns, however, that Labour will have to face up to the fact that the skills and capability needed to run a diplomatic service are "completely different" to those needed for good development policy.

"Unless you recognise that and work out what you need to do for both a fantastic diplomatic service – which this country desperately needs and we've under-invested in – but also putting back in place capabilities to do development well, you're going to fail in whatever objectives you have," he says.

Lowcock says there has been a "haemorrhaging" of expertise, with hundreds of officials leaving – "often the best people". He says the government will have to work out how to attract them back. This is not about recruiting more people, he says, but improving the average calibre.

"We do not advocate more money. We advocate spending the existing budget much better"

Improving systems, meanwhile, will require putting in place the right culture and incentives, he says.

These issues are "exactly the same as the things the government needs to get to grips with across all public services", Lowcock notes.

Ultimately, Lowcock and co-author Ranil Dissanayake conclude that the "quickest, easiest and cheapest" way to get development back on track would be to bring back a dedicated development department but have it share a platform (buildings, IT and corporate support services) with the Foreign Office.

Lowcock's book includes behind-the-scenes insight into the development reform options Labour was considering before coming to power in July. A few months on, however, there still isn't much clarity on the party's plan.

Labour's election manifesto said it would "turn the page to rebuild Britain's reputation on international development" and that the mission statement would be "to create a world free from poverty on a liveable planet".

"That's a statement that provides essentially no information on what they actually plan to do," Lowcock says, "because it's hard to imagine what you could do with your aid budget that doesn't fit within that vision".

There's also a line in Labour's manifesto that has Lowcock actively worried: "Development work must be aligned closely with our foreign policy aims."

"That's a mindset which is a bit redolent of Boris Johnson's government, and also governments in the Margaret Thatcher and John Major era, where »

they thought the aid programme was not that important, and to the extent that it was valuable, it was because it could help with other objectives," he says.

"If your mindset is 'really this aid budget is to help with other objectives, not to promote development or reduce poverty', that's a recipe for scandal."

Lowcock points to Pergau Dam, Britain's most infamous aid scandal, where £234m of aid money was used to fund a hydroelectric dam on a river in Malaysia while the UK negotiated £1bn in arms sales to the south-east Asian country's government.

"I think Labour need to think really carefully about that and be clear that the purpose of the aid budget is to promote development, and that's in Britain's long-term interests," Lowcock adds.

"If you have mixed motives, you'll find you don't do much that's good on development. And, actually, trying to use the aid programme as a sort of bribe for other things doesn't work either."

He also warns that Labour won't restore Britain's reputation "just by using different words". "It will be actions that matter," he says. "And, in particular, it's not a good idea for them to go banging on about restoring British leadership. Saying that doesn't achieve anything, it just irritates people, actually. What they need to do is take specific actions which people admire and think are the right things to do."

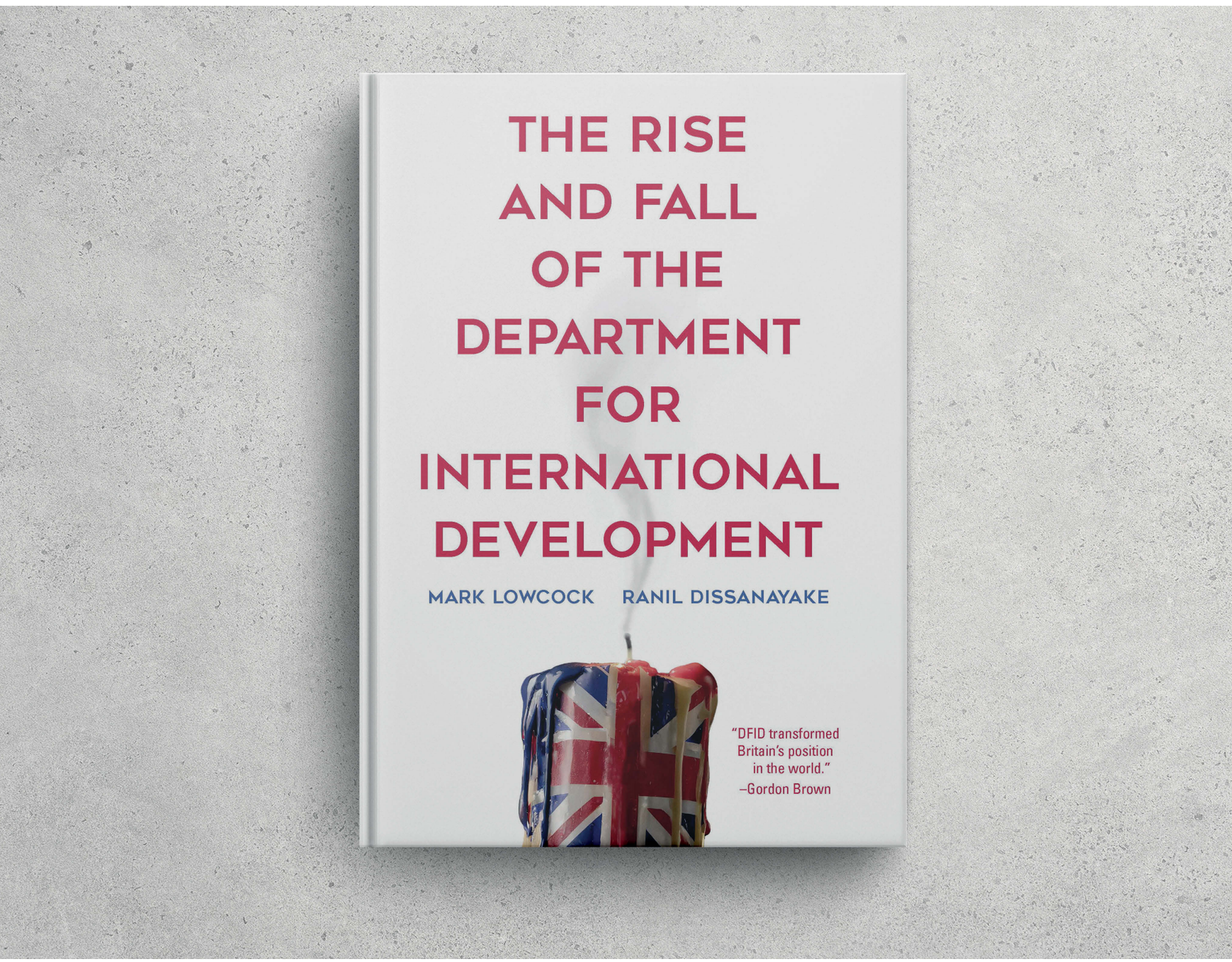
David Lammy's first move upon becoming foreign secretary was to launch a series of reviews, including commissioning former DfID perm sec Minouche Shafik – Lowcock's predecessor in the role – to assess the government's approach to international development.

CSW asks if this, at least, is an encouraging sign.

"It's hard to imagine someone better to help them with this question on how to fix the terrible mess that they've inherited," Lowcock says – noting that Shafik is a friend he has known for a long time.

"I hope that she's able to make really powerful recommendations and that [Labour] listen hard to them," he adds.

Importantly, *The Rise and Fall* doesn't just focus on the vital role ministers have played in the UK's development story. It also sets out the key role that senior officials played, be that John Vereker's advice to Clare Short on her walk to No.10 after the 1997 general election – "don't leave the room without



agreement to a new department covering international development" – or the successive system reforms enabling the department to deliver on ministers' priorities.

CSW asks Lowcock to reflect on the differing roles and relative importance of political and official leadership – and the key skills needed for both.

"Politicians were a very important part of the DfID story," he says.

"Development is discretionary. It's not like the defence budget, or the welfare budget or the NHS, where politicians have to have a big focus on those things, just because there's a huge public demand for it. Development is something that governments do because they decide it's an important thing to do."

Lowcock says it was, therefore, important that the successive governments of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May "decided this was something that it was morally right to do, but also it was in the country's best interest".

"These were governments that were for international development, and that was a political choice," he says.

Lowcock says DfID was also "very lucky" to have had ministers "for most of its life" who thought "this is a great job and found it very personally fulfilling". "And I'm not talking about Priti Patel here," he adds.

Hilary Benn – a favourite of DfID staff and a politician who has had a catalogue of ministerial posts, including his latest role as Northern Ireland secretary – told Lowcock and Dissanayake that the development secretary role has been the most satisfying of his career to date.

As well as wanting the job, Lowcock says a good minister will have relevant expertise and be able to learn on the job. They should then stay on as long as possible to make a real impact, he adds. In 2020-21, DfID's last year of existence, the department had four secretaries of state, and 20 people served as ministers. "That is a recipe for chaos and disaster and for achieving absolutely nothing," Lowcock says.

He goes on to say that civil servants need a broader set of skills. These include: strategising; management; numeracy; understanding how public policy works; getting on well with your ministers; having an awareness of the wider political context; understanding where the media is coming from; and knowing how parliament works.

It also helps if officials "know the subject matter of the relevant department very well".

"For most of its life, DfID had very senior officials and permanent secretaries who had deep expertise and experience in development. It doesn't mean it's not a good idea to have done some other things at some point. But to have a deep experience of the work of the department really helps a lot."

Ultimately, civil servants need to know how to get the organisation working in a way that turns spending into real-world progress on the policy objectives set by ministers. This, Lowcock says, was something DfID's officials excelled at.

"One of the things that was very striking about DfID – and everybody says this, the Cabinet Office, the NAO, the press, international comparators – was that it was an unusually effective organisation," he says.

"The civil service has taken an absolute battering over the last 10 years"

Long story Short DfID's first development secretary

Lowcock spent 32 years at DfID and its predecessor organisations, rising through the ranks to become the department's top official in 2011 and leaving in 2017 to work at the UN, where he stayed until 2021.

He now juggles writing books – *The Rise and Fall* is his third – with various board and university positions. This includes being a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development, and a visiting professor of practice at London School of Economics' Department of International Development, which was established in 1990 and continues to outlive its ill-fated government namesake.

Could he be tempted to return as perm sec if Labour brought DfID back?

"I do lots of other things now," Lowcock says. He adds that he has "a lot of admiration" for the FCDO's permanent secretary for development, Nick Dyer, who is described in the book as "one of the architects of the DFID model".

"If they allow him to do the things that we all know need to be done, he'll do a fantastic job for them," Lowcock says.

However, he says he would "think very carefully" if asked by the government to help with anything specific.

Does he miss working in government?

"In some ways, I do," Lowcock says. "I must admit I now enjoy doing other things.

"I feel very, very lucky. You only get one life, and if you're exceptionally lucky, you get to do a diverse range of things in it."

Before our time with Lowcock comes to an end, *CSW* gets one more question in: How has your perspective on the UK civil service changed over the last seven years observing it from outside?

"The civil service has taken an absolute battering over the last 10 years," he says, citing comments from newly-elected Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch who, less than 24 hours before our interview, said that 10% of civil servants should be in jail.

"The approach that too many politicians have taken to attacking the civil service, particularly, I have to say, on the right of the political spectrum, is very destructive. Every country needs a really good civil service, and the civil service needs to be respected, invested in and valued." ■

***The Rise and Fall of the Department for International Development* by Mark Lowcock and Ranil Dissanayake is published by the Center for Global Development. For more information visit www.cgdev.org**

Tracing the Troubles

The Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery provides information to victims, survivors and their families about Troubles-related deaths and serious injury, and promotes reconciliation. Here, **Tristan Pedelty** explains how it came into existence and what it's achieved in the two years since it was formed

"Just come and do a short, nine-month project to set up a new arm's-length body" was the pitch on the telephone from the then-Northern Ireland Office permanent secretary, Madeleine Alessandri. "I need someone who can get the sponsorship arrangements in place and get a board appointed, get them an office with a name plate and they can take it from there." Just over two years later, I'm handing on the baton as the first chief executive of the recently formed Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, and returning to Whitehall.

To say that the manner in which the commission came about was "contested" is the civil service equivalent of labeling a course of action to a minister as "courageous". The idea was for a single organisation with strong powers to replace a myriad of different processes for families to obtain information and justice about what happened during the Troubles/Conflict, and therefore to promote a more reconciled society. But the lack of detail, suspected ulterior motives and a lack of consultation meant that no party in Northern Ireland supported the proposals, victims groups were opposed, the international community raised human rights concerns and there was much debate over the legislation in parliament. And the timetable required by the bill for the organisation to be capable of accepting cases was half the time it usually takes to set up a new ALB!

If that were not enough, the stakes of what we were actually trying to do were very high. While in Great Britain, "the Troubles" is something firmly in the past for the vast majority, in Northern Ireland, the continued trauma and impact of a violent and brutal time in recent history still weighs heavily on a significant proportion of the community.

But, with very low expectations from the public and stakeholders that gave us the freedom to take risks and not be afraid of failure. With a rare alignment in government of policy and resource we had the internal tools to make progress. And with plenty of recent experiences across Whitehall of setting up new organisations to draw from – such as the Independent Monitoring Authority, the Trade Remedies Authority, the Advanced Research and Invention Agency – we were able to focus

most of our attention on the substance.

In just 24 months, we saw: one change of government confirming that the commission will continue; two court judgments upholding the commission's independence and capability of meeting ECHR requirements; five values in the ICRIR Code of Conduct; seven commissioners appointed; over 10 board meetings held; 12 surveys, consultations and feedback papers; over 20 meetings with delegations at the Council of Europe; and 85 victims, survivors or families actively engaging with the commission about the possibility of an investigation.

How did we achieve this? We focused on purpose, planning and people.

Purpose

From two of us at the start (me and the excellent business manager, Corinne), to an organisation of over 100, constantly coming together as a team and discussing our purpose was key. For some from Northern Ireland, this felt very personal; for others, there was the professional pride in bringing their skills to bear to try to have a real-world positive impact. It allowed us to focus on why independence mattered and in what ways; and to concentrate on the activities that mattered most to help achieve the purpose. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority reviews consistently highlighted the strength of purpose across all team members as driving an empowered and cohesive approach to a challenging deadline.

Planning

Bringing cross-civil service and consultancy expertise to ensure risk management and regular planning was essential. Project portfolio management methodology, in a proportionate way, meant we could demonstrate what resource we needed and identify bottlenecks. We could explain to ministers or the board why we needed decisions when we did, and could check our overall progress. A programme board – including those from the Treasury, Cabinet Office, IPA, our lead non-executive board member, Les Philpott, and the SRO who had set up the Independent Monitoring Authority – were an excellent combined critical friend. They were not only encouraging when it looked difficult, but brought their own expertise and didn't let us duck the key issues. Their focus meant we got a good balance between the ideal outcome we wanted, and what was realistic in the timeframe (and what could come later).

People

Building a team with the range of skills that we needed and with different perspectives took a lot of time, but it was worth it. I saw it as my responsibility to think about how people would challenge and complement each other and come together focused on the shared purpose. Our team was spread across Northern Ireland and Great Britain. This meant we had direct understanding of how things were feeling, and also enough distance to stand back and evaluate next steps. We focused on stepping outside of government – how did it feel not to trust the state? What was the experience of the victim trying to interact with the commission? Getting the commissioners onboard in shadow form also meant we had Sir Declan Morgan, a distinguished legal mind and true public servant to begin providing public leadership before the commission was even formed. We spent a lot of time coming together – remotely and physically to share problems (and solutions) and we drew on a range of experts, Policy Lab, former senior police officers and headhunters to get jobs done or help us hone our approach. It was a genuine, collaborative effort and everyone put in the extra mile.

"The stakes of what we were trying to do were high: in Northern Ireland, the continued trauma and impact of a violent and brutal time in recent history still weighs heavily"

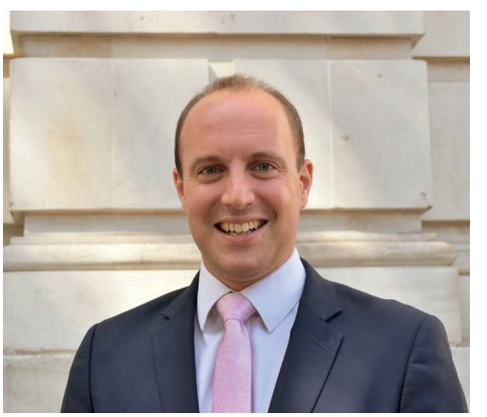
What do we hope to share with the wider civil service from our experience?

We've already fed many of the lessons we learnt into some practical Cabinet Office guidance about setting up ALBs . Despite government routinely setting up new organisations, there were no templates and checklists for the common ingredients to consider. We used personal contacts to speak to others who had just done the same and copied their documents, but templates and central expertise would have saved some time (and worry) reinventing things others had already solved.

Through the use of precedent and templates, this means the team should be free to really sweat the difficult stuff – for example, what precisely is the organisation's purpose and how will it achieve benefits? These can often be the areas that ministers are struggling to articulate too – but getting this right unlocks better board appointments, better governance and a clearer focus on having a positive real-world impact rather than just consuming public resource.

And the most difficult area to get right is usually "independence". In setting up a new organisation to carry out activities, it is inherent that there is some reason why the department itself cannot carry out those activities. However, the civil service either overly worries about giving up control, or gives so much space that legitimate accountability mechanisms and interactions are not created. The right level of autonomy should be given in the areas that will give the organisation the ability to deliver its objectives and achieve the desired outcomes. When this is done alongside thinking through the potential risks from independence to help design the accountability and internal governance arrangements, this starts to enhance the new organisation's ability to deliver. The new board and the leadership team are clear on the areas where they have freedom and flexibility, and central government gets out of their way to get on with it as they are comfortable that risks are managed through levers and checks and balances.

For the ICRIR, it is now over the first hurdle in its journey. There will doubtless be many more to come. But to navigate this it is led by a board who will continually focus on the needs of victims, survivors and families being served and promoting reconciliation. Alongside the ingredients and space for a relentless focus on meeting its promises, and on learning and adapting based on values of respect and objectivity. And, for the next ALB that Whitehall has the challenge to set up, I hope sharing our experience and what we learnt from it will make their journey that bit easier. ■



Tristan Pedelty was the first chief executive officer and commissioner of the ICRIR, having been the senior responsible owner for the programme to establish the new commission. Over his career he has had roles in the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit, the BBC Trust, HM Treasury and in the Cabinet Office

Malcolm Beattie on understanding the barriers to new ways of working

In 2014, I was asked to form one of the first innovation labs in the UK, the Northern Ireland Public Sector Innovation Lab. Operating at devolved government level, the aim was to create a safe space for experimentation, creativity and the application of new methodologies aimed at addressing some of the complex, seemingly intractable challenges facing public servants.

We developed expertise in design thinking, behavioural science, policy analysis and systems modelling, bringing fresh thinking into the public sector. The positive impact of these methods cannot be over-emphasised – worldwide there is an abundance of case studies evidencing their value. I left public service convinced beyond doubt of the enormous potential these methodologies have for driving greater public value.

My time at the lab taught me a lot about the challenges of the prevailing ecosystem in which I was attempting to spur innovation and new ways of working. Here's what I learned.

The system needs innovation, but it's hard

Innovation has a role to play in every sector. But nowhere is it needed more than in the public sector. And nowhere is it harder to do. The sheer complexity of public services; the range of competing stakeholder interests; the endless pressures and changes in the system; the constraints of limited and diminishing public finances; and the unrelenting rise in public expectation and demand – these all make for an intensely challenging environment. Time, space and opportunity to meaningfully innovate is extremely scarce. Unless and until that space is created and protected, innovation will always get squeezed.

The status quo needs disrupting

Public sector leaders can be deeply risk averse. Often the only innovations that take place are tinkering at the edges driven by crises or complaints. Innovation demands creative and talented people who are disrupters (right-hemisphere thinkers), unafraid to take measured risks and challenge the status quo. But the system tends to draw, retain and reward individuals who follow the rules and protect the status quo (left-hemisphere thinkers). The system needs to recognise and support public entrepreneurs.

The system works against innovation

Another limiting factor is the system immune response to innovation – see Rowan Conway and co's *From design thinking to systems change*, which describes the immune response of hierarchical, bureaucratic systems, which works insidiously against innovation. These processes are there to ensure the integrity of services and protect public funds, but they operate as a blunt instrument and innovation can be seen as a variance to the norm. To counteract this, innovation needs to be formally recognised in strategic and business plans, job roles and descriptions and personal objectives so it is understood as an essential part of business.

Innovation labs and service-design teams can add great value, but cannot effect the system-level change needed to reshape how we develop, design/redesign and implement policies, services and processes. Affirmative and deliberate steps are essential to embed these new methodologies.

Will mission-oriented innovation be any different?

I certainly hope so, but there remains the very real risk that the prevailing culture and the system immune response will rob mission-oriented innovation of its potential by dragging the new methodology into the exhausting paraphernalia of bureaucracy so that vast amounts of capacity are diverted to feeding the machine, and much less on the actual missions. One way to avoid this is to a create mission-oriented skunk works, providing space with a high degree of autonomy, unhampered by bureaucracy, in which the missions are the sole focus. ■

Malcolm Beattie is the former head of the Northern Ireland Public Sector Innovation Lab

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Introduction

The Civil Service Awards are now in their 19th year and offer the opportunity to recognise and celebrate the wealth of inspirational individuals and innovative projects within the Civil Service.

We launched A Modern Civil Service that is more Skilled, Innovative and Ambitious last year. This year's Civil Service Awards categories embody this vision and each award fall under the headings. The nominations process opened on 13th May 2024 and closed 26th July 2024. This year we received 2,116 nominations against 12 award categories.

Sifting panels were conducted throughout August and September to whittle down the nominations in each category. Panels were chaired by the respective Category Champions, and panel members comprised stakeholders and individuals selected either due to their skillset of their membership in a profession or network.

Our Awards Champion, Gareth Davies, and their final judging panel then selected the top 3 finalists in each category, forming the official shortlist for 2024.

Many congratulations to all of you who have been shortlisted in this year's programme. This is a fantastic recognition of the incredible work you have delivered and an achievement you should be proud of.

The Civil Service Awards Team

A word from Awards Champion, Gareth Davies CB

Gareth Davies CB

Permanent Secretary, Department for Business and Trade

I am delighted to champion the Civil Service Awards. They recognise and showcase the best of the Civil Service.

As we come together for the 19th year of the awards, I am very proud of the extraordinary achievements of our colleagues who exemplify the very best of public service.

And this year marks a significant milestone. We received an unprecedented 2,116 nominations – the highest number in our awards' history. The nominations demonstrate the exceptional talent within our teams and also reflects the unwavering commitment of civil servants to delivering outstanding public services across the United Kingdom.

Our finalists demonstrate daily how focusing on people, performance, and partnership leads to remarkable outcomes for our citizens. Tonight we are not just celebrating our finalists and winners. We're showcasing the collective strength of a Civil Service.

Congratulations to all, and thank you for your outstanding service to our nation. With many thanks to our sponsors – Mastek, Newton, Accenture, Baringa, Indeed and PA Consulting.

I hope you have a wonderful evening.

Meet our Champions

The Civil Service Awards Category Champions are proud supporters of the awards and promote their specific category to colleagues through networks across government and actively encourage nominations.

Our Category Champions select an expert panel to support them in reviewing the nominations before choosing the top entries within their category.

Excellence in Delivery Award Co-Champion

Sir Peter Schofield KCB

Permanent Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions

Excellence in Delivery Award Co-Champion

Myrtle Lloyd

Director General, Customer Services, HM Revenue & Customs

Developing and Supporting People Award Co-Champion

Sarah Healey CB CVO

Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Developing and Supporting People Award Co-Champion

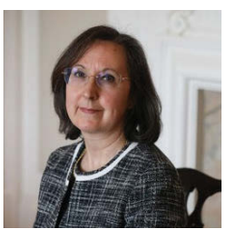
James Bowler CB

Permanent Secretary, HM treasury

Diversity and Inclusion Award Co-Champion

Sir Jim Harra KCB

First Parliamentary Secretary and Chief Executive, HM Revenue & Customs



Diversity and Inclusion Award Co-Champion

Madeleine Alessandri CMG

Chair, Joint Intelligence Committee

Best Use of Data, Science, and Technology Co-Champion

Professor Jas Pal Badyal FRS

Chief Scientific Advisor for Wales, Welsh Government

Best Use of Data, Science, and Technology Co-Champion

Professor Sir Ian Diamond

UK's National Statistician, UK Statistics Authority Board

Creative Solutions Award Co-Champion

Sir Matthew Rycroft KCMG CBE

Permanent Secretary, Home Office

Creative Solutions Award Co-Champion

Susannah Storey

Permanent Secretary, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

Evaluation and Analysis Award Co-Champion

Sam Beckett

Chief Economic Adviser, Head of the GES and Second Permanent Secretary, HM Treasury

Evaluation and Analysis Award Co-Champion

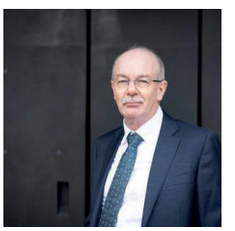
Mel Nebhrajani CB

Director General, Litigation with Justice and Security, Government Legal Department

Programme of the Year Award Co-Champion

Cat Little CB

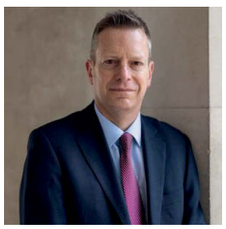
Civil Service Chief Operating Officer and Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Office



Programme of the Year Award Co-Champion

Nick Smallwood

Chief Executive, Infrastructure and Projects Authority and Head of Government's Project Delivery Function



Collaboration Award Co-Champion

Paul Lincoln CB OBE VR

Second Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence

Collaboration Award Co-Champion

Dr Rannia Leontaridi OBE FRSA

Director General, Aviation, Maritime and Security Group, Department for Transport

Delivering for Citizens Award Co-Champion

Tamara Finklestein CB

Permanent Secretary, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Delivering for Citizens Award Co-Champion

Jaee Samant

Director General, Public Safety Group, Home Office

Rising Star Award Co-Champion

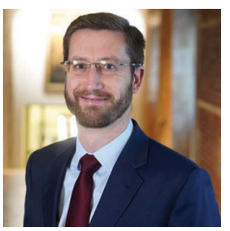
Dame Antonia Romeo DCB

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Justice

Rising Star Award Co-Champion

Patrick Gilligan

2023 Winner of the Rising Star Award



Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award Co-Champion

Simon Case CVO

Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service

Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award Co-Champion

Martin Harvey

2023 Winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service

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Developing and Supporting People Award

Recognising excellence across learning, skills development, strengthening capability, and talent management, or demonstrating a highly effective contribution to promoting or improving health and wellbeing within the Civil Service.

Ben Bilefield

Department for Energy Security and Net Zero

Zen with Ben started as an informal weekly mindfulness session led by Ben Bilefield for his BEIS team in September 2021. Since then, it has grown organically through word-of-mouth recommendations, reaching over 1,500 civil servants across the UK in over twenty-five government departments, mostly outside of London. Ben fosters a sense of community, creating a safe and open space for colleagues to honestly share their feelings and improve their mental health by developing their mindfulness practice. Participants describe the sessions as "friendly," "invaluable," and "transformative" for their mental health, even calling them an "essential part of their weekly schedule."

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1. SimilarWeb, Total Visits, June 2024

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Recognising those who work to embed diversity and inclusion, driving positive change for our colleagues and making the Civil Service a model, open and transparent employer to better serve the public.

Nigel Epton

Department for Work and Pensions

Nigel is profoundly deaf and a BSL user. He has found that support within UC for others who are also BSL users could be improved, especially within our communications. With many customers having to wait for interpreters to be booked or using RelayUK. Nigel has been working to create a way to communicate with customers and has been conducting a trial with video appointments by conducting warm up calls, support ad-hoc calls and UCR interview calls. With fantastic feedback from the customers with how somebody within the department can support and help them with their claims.

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Best Use of Data, Science, and Technology Award

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Recognising excellence in the application of data, science or digital technology to solve problems or improve things; celebrating people whose commitment to technological improvements creates measurable outcomes.

Prioritising Asylum Customers' Experience Programme

Home Office

When the Asylum Initial Decision backlog peaked in 2022 with almost triple the number of cases received since 2020, the Asylum Transformation Programme established the Prioritising Asylum Customers' Experience (PACE) programme, to meet the former Prime Ministers' challenge of clearing the asylum backlog by the end of 2023. Embarking upon a programme of huge scale, complexity and sensitivity, the Home Office used machine learning and AI, complex simulation models, centralisation of tasks and implementation of new systems, to drive continuous innovation. Delivering at pace, the legacy Asylum backlog of Initial Decisions was cleared by December 2023, and caseworker productivity tripled. This has delivered improved outcomes for asylum seekers and saved significant sums for the taxpayer.

Pearl of wisdom

Krystal clear

Where there's a Will

Blue Skye thinking

Let's be Frank

The real McCoy

SUPPORTED BY

Creative Solutions Award

Recognising innovation and creativity and how it translates into real world benefits.

Geospatial Commission: National Underground Asset Register Team

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

There are approximately four million kilometres of underground pipes and cables nationally and a hole dug every 7 seconds installing and maintaining them. Asset owners are legally required to share location data supporting 'safe digging,' but with no standardised approach, multiple organisations must be contacted for every dig. That is why the Geospatial Commission is building The National Underground Asset Register - a digital map of underground pipes and cables, that gives planners and excavators instant access to the data they need to work safely, reducing a 6.1 day process to 60 seconds, providing estimated economic benefits of over £400 million annually.

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Evaluation and Analysis Award

Recognising development in the areas of evaluation and analysis for improved insights and to better inform our work.

Early Years Data and Analysis Team

Ofsted

Ofsted's Childcare Deserts and Oases project has transformed disparate cross-government and commercial data into novel real-world insights on the everyday experiences of parents seeking nurseries/childminders. It provides a hyperlocal view of childcare access across 180,000 neighbourhoods in England, using a two-step-floating-catchment model to account for local transport connections and the population of local children. This analysis has been instrumental in the early evaluation of a £14 billion investment in expanded childcare entitlements and their potential influence on local labour market participation. Ongoing data feeds from this modelling are informing policy discussion and evaluation at the highest levels across No.10 and DfE.

Empowering collaboration

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Collaboration Award

Recognising excellent collaboration that spans the boundaries between administrations, government departments, agencies and bodies.

Scottish 4G Infill Programme

Scottish Government

The Scottish Government's 4G Infill (S4GI) programme is a £28.75 million investment which has successfully delivered 4G connectivity for the first time to fifty-five rural and island locations across the country, in areas where industry would not invest due to the challenges of doing so. S4GI has been a highly successful programme delivering transformational connectivity to over 2,200 premises in extremely hard-to-reach locations amidst the challenging backdrop of a global pandemic, global supply chain issues and rising costs. Residents, businesses and visitors to these communities have found the new connectivity life-changing for both their personal and professional lives.

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Heartiest congratulations to our inspiring Civil Service teams!

Since 2014, we've proudly partnered with our dedicated Civil Service to deliver departmental policy outcomes and help transform the Public Sector.

Together as one team, we have helped to protect vulnerable people, and communities, secure our borders, manage migration, improve trade flow, reduce crime and keep our country safe.

That's why we're so proud to be here today, to celebrate you – the inspiring civil service individuals and teams who lead by example. We thank you for fostering a genuine culture of excellence, diversity, inclusion, and collaboration.

You make our Mondays Happy!

We celebrate your unwavering leadership, dedication, and commitment. #CSAwards

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Delivering for Citizens Award

Recognising those who have public service at the centre of delivery; including efficiency and ensuring value for money, actions which result in better outcomes for citizens, and demonstrating world class service to the public.

'Help Gran Stop Spam' Campaign

Information Commissioner's Office

The ICO identified older and situationally vulnerable people being targeted by unlawful predatory marketing calls. We wanted to protect people from predatory calls by empowering the public to register with the Telephone Preference Service (TPS), increasing the number of nuisance calls reported and showcasing our work in this area. Our campaign included social media creative using the tagline 'Help Gran Stop Spam' as well as case studies in the press, support from external partners and an improved website journey and SEO. The campaign received positive media sentiment and prompted a 366% rise in TPS registrations in the first three days.

CSW

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Programme of the Year Award

Recognising exceptional achievement from a programme anywhere across the Civil Service.

HMP Fosse Way Team

HM Prison and Probation Service

HMP Fosse Way is the second of six new prisons delivered as part of the Government's commitment to build 20,000 new prison places. The war in Ukraine acutely impacted construction, with the effect on the labour market and supply chain changing the whole complexion of the programme. Significant pressures on prison population also meant it was crucial that the prison opened on time. Due to the extraordinary commitment and collaboration across both public and private sectors, the prison was opened on time. Further to this the team oversaw an accelerated ramp up- providing quicker prison capacity at a critical juncture.

Newton

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Congratulations to all those shortlisted and this year's winners

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Rising Star Award

Recognising the potential of someone in the first five years of their Civil Service career.

Arnie Delstanche

Defence Science Technology Laboratory

Arnie Delstanche has made it his mission to transform Dstl's approach to data analysis for wargaming and field experimentation. Through development of novel analytical tools and commitment to sharing knowledge and best practice, Arnie has strived to develop himself and others while improving the efficiency and quality of analysis used to inform decision-making across the MOD and Civil Service. His enthusiasm for implementing innovation so early in his career undoubtedly sets him apart and the pioneering dashboards and analytical capability he has developed have generated evidence that will inform the operations of our Armed Forces now and in the future.

Cabinet Secretary's Outstanding Leader Award

Recognising individuals who have demonstrated outstanding leadership, regardless of grade or role.

Kevin Clark

HM Prison and Probation Service

Governor Kevin Clark transformed HMP Wayland from a struggling institution into a model of excellence. Under his leadership, the prison achieved a 49% reduction in violence and self-harm, boosted staff morale, and significantly reduced attrition rates. As a champion of Gender Equality in the BCN region, he uplifted female staff and set new standards for inclusivity. His innovative approach to workforce development and operational efficiency established benchmarks in prison management. Kevin's adherence to the Civil Service Code, commitment to professional development, and ethical governance make him an exemplary candidate for the Outstanding Leaders Award.

Prime Minister's Award for Exceptional Public Service

Recognising individuals or teams who performed exceptionally, going above and beyond the call of duty to make a tangible difference to our nation and the lives of its citizens.

Pauline MacNeil

Ministry of Justice

During the Civil Disorder period, Pauline led the Response and Command functions within Courts and Tribunals, managing data collation, briefings, and operational responses. She coordinated with Police Escort and Custody Services (PECS), planned additional court hours, and supported cross-system decision-making. Despite leading a depleted team for almost twelve months, Pauline ensured swift guidance, maintained morale, and received exceptional feedback. Her efforts resulted in minimal disruption, safe operations, and prompt sentencing, earning recognition for the court system's effective response.

Congratulations to our Winners!

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