

What's on the minds of the SCS?

A diverse sample of 34 people from Permanent Secretary and Director General levels were asked about their most significant work challenges. These are some of the questions on their minds as they face a period of financial cuts and political uncertainty

- *Is the policy machine holding us back?*

There has been much talk of improving delivery in recent years, but policy-making is often assumed to be the glory of the Civil Service. It has been, after all, what the best and brightest have concentrated on. The newer DG generation suspects that policy-making is a machine which is not very effective – there is simply too much policy, it is often wrong first time, and is still rooted in separate departments even when the issues are supposed to be 'joined up.'

- *Going beyond 'efficiency', 'effectiveness' and 'reform'*

Although words like 'efficiency' and 'reform' have been around for many years, they can be used to side-step a concrete view of what 'better' government looks like. To many in the system they have become just words with little impact. Some DGs feel that the current financial pressures are a potential lever for more innovative change and a fresh vision of a Civil Service which can achieve more with less. There is concern that cuts spread across all activities will not be the impetus for such re-thinking. 'Efficiency' may be a poor mantra when there is really no money to spare.

- *How do we make policy and delivery design work for people on the ground?*

Government needs to be in touch, not just with the public and communities, but with all those who work at the delivery end of public services. It is at the boundary between policy and service design that this understanding is most critical. The need for information flow into government from those nearer the point of delivery is well accepted. It is time for more innovative practices to achieve it.

- *Can we grow our collective confidence to manage change?*

Civil Servants are not short of bright ideas, but they have little confidence in the ability of the system as a whole to carry through change successfully. DGs expect accelerated change over the next few years, but some are not hopeful about the real willingness and ability of senior civil servants themselves to change their own work habits and behaviour. They believe that a more searching understanding of why some change initiatives have succeeded and other failed may take the service beyond rather general views on change management towards a more context-specific understanding of how innovation can occur and how change can be managed more successfully.

- *How do you get people to do things when you can't offer them money?*

Over many years, government has encouraged the private and third sectors to do things by dangling money in front of them. When there is much less money, how can the Civil Service create the right conditions for other sectors to support public policy?