

A crossroads for diversity and inclusion in the civil service

Assessing the 2022 D&I strategy



About this report

In February 2022 the Cabinet Office published the *Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022–2025*. This paper looks at the current state of D&I in the institution, including the success or otherwise of the previous 2017–20 strategy, and how the new strategy's shift in focus – from protected characteristics like gender and ethnicity to geographic and socio-economic background – fits into the government's wider approach to D&I.

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Introduction

In February 2022 the Cabinet Office published its new *Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022–2025*, with the aim of promoting fairness and performance within the institution. The previous strategy, *A Brilliant Civil Service*, ran from 2017 to 2020 and concentrated on improving the representation and inclusion of staff based on legally protected characteristics such as disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation.* The 2022 strategy represents a change in direction. In line with the government’s commitment to ‘levelling up’ it places greater emphasis on socio-economic background and for the first time incorporates the geographic location and professional background of civil servants under a new, broader definition of workforce diversity.

The role of diversity and inclusion (D&I) in government has long been a subject of public debate, but has received renewed attention in 2022. Liz Truss, in her short stint as prime minister, pledged to get rid of D&I professionals in the civil service because she felt that these jobs “distract from delivering on the British people’s priorities”.¹ During the summer Conservative leadership contest, Rishi Sunak avoided much comment on diversity and inclusion initiatives, instead focusing more on policies on officials spending time on secondment outside London and improving external recruitment into the civil service.²

With a new prime minister who has yet to set out his government’s approach on this subject – but whose campaign promises on the civil service appeared broadly in sympathy with the 2022 D&I strategy in focusing on geography and professional backgrounds – this is a good moment to re-examine what the strategy gets right, what could be improved and how it can be successfully implemented.

Over the last year the Institute for Government has run a series of private roundtables, bringing together current leaders of public sector organisations with more junior public servants from diverse backgrounds to discuss how the sector can produce more inclusive policies and services. The Institute also conducted interviews and facilitated a workshop focusing specifically on the 2022 civil service strategy, including Cabinet Office officials, D&I professionals and staff network leaders, as well as external experts.

We find that the new strategy is in many respects a worthwhile effort to broaden the discussion about diversity and inclusion in the civil service – in particular, by treating the geographic location of civil servants as a form of diversity, an idea that featured in the 2021 *Declaration on Government Reform* but had not previously been incorporated into civil service D&I strategies.³ It also sets out welcome commitments to improving the civil service’s evaluation of D&I initiatives.

* Under the Equality Act 2010, it is against the law to discriminate against anyone in the workplace or in wider society based on the following ‘protected’ characteristics: age, gender reassignment, being married or in a civil partnership, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

However, as the civil service turns to implementing the new strategy, it could be strengthened in five key respects:

1. The strategy set out a broad 'vision' for diversity and inclusion. The Cabinet Office must now more clearly communicate to departments their role in setting **specific objectives**.
2. The Cabinet Office must demonstrate to civil servants that the strategy's broader definition of diversity does not mean a reduced focus on protected characteristics, by explicitly **recognising where work still needs to be done** to improve the representation and inclusion of staff based on factors such as ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation and making **clear commitments to change**.
3. Despite promising emphasis on socio-economic diversity in the language of the strategy, it mostly restates existing commitments in this area. The civil service should set out further measures to **address barriers to progression** based on occupational 'self-sorting' into operational career paths and should explore ways to **make the culture of government more inclusive** – including the policy profession and the senior civil service – for staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
4. The government's plans for an 'inclusion at work panel' to research and evaluate evidence for D&I interventions – proposed in a separate policy paper published this year – should be incorporated into the civil service D&I strategy. The panel should **set out measures to improve inclusion** it will research and trial in the civil service, along with their expected timelines.
5. The strategy's emphasis on internal evaluation is welcome, but the civil service also benefits from external scrutiny. The Cabinet Office should **report publicly on its progress against the objectives** set out in its new D&I strategy, using the new machinery set up to monitor delivery internally.

The case for diversity and inclusion in the civil service

Box 1: Diversity and inclusion in the workforce defined

Diversity means recruiting a workforce made up of people with varied characteristics, experiences and perspectives.

Inclusion means creating an organisational culture in which everyone feels valued and supported to succeed at work, regardless of their background, identity or circumstances. Staff from diverse backgrounds have equal access to resources and are involved in decision making.⁴

Despite the publication of the new *Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy* in February 2022, recent ministers have expressed scepticism about the role of D&I in government. The former Cabinet Office minister Jacob Rees-Mogg described D&I roles as a “job creation scheme created by the woke for the woke”, saying he did not believe those employees were “doing anything useful”.⁵ As prime minister, Liz Truss pledged to get rid of D&I professionals in the civil service because she felt that these jobs “distract from delivering on the British people’s priorities” and promote “left-wing groupthink in government”.⁶

More generally, D&I initiatives are sometimes characterised as anti-meritocratic and a diversion from delivering priorities at work, involving ‘tick-box’ recruitment and time-wasting training.⁷ But when executed well, such practices can help organisations to recruit, retain and properly utilise the broadest possible range of talent and to improve decision making.

Diversity is part of recruiting top talent

Deeply ingrained social inequalities, including within the education system, mean people from some backgrounds may be less qualified for certain jobs. In the UK there are considerable disparities in educational attainment and future employment opportunities based on factors including where students live, their socio-economic background, ethnicity and gender.⁸ It can also be harder for some groups, for instance those with disabilities or caring responsibilities, to access training or professional opportunities that might otherwise make them more attractive candidates.⁹

However, there is good evidence that the existing talent pool is underexplored. For instance, in 2017 an independent review of race in the workplace found that people from minority ethnic backgrounds generally have educational outcomes on a par with or better than white people, but are less able to secure opportunities for employment that match their abilities – with a disproportionate number of ‘overqualified’ minority

ethnic employees ending up in low-paying roles.¹⁰ Part of this may be explained by people from those backgrounds having limited access to social networks that offer other groups a first entry point in employment and career guidance – but bias in recruitment processes also has a role to play.¹¹

People who have experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, religious belief, disability or sexual orientation are all more likely to report having the skills to undertake more demanding work than their current role.¹² Hiring managers are more likely to employ people similar to themselves, especially where assessing candidates for 'fit'.¹³ Research shows that interviewers also tend to evaluate talent using proxies they associate with other high-performing employees – such as confidence or speaking with a particular accent – which may obscure direct assessment of a candidate's ability.¹⁴ Even the way in which 'merit' is defined can favour certain groups. Past research has found that gender-role stereotyping is reinforced in how competencies are defined, with the result that women are consistently rated lower than men in terms of leadership ability.¹⁵

For instance, people from minority ethnic groups are still under-represented among candidates deemed 'appointable' for top civil service jobs. In competitions overseen by the Civil Service Commission in 2021–22, minority ethnic candidates made up 25% applications but only 11% of shortlists and 8% of appointable candidates – a sharp drop off through each stage of the recruitment process compared to other demographics.¹⁶ In 2021, applicants from minority ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds also experienced lower success rates in entering the civil service graduate scheme than average.¹⁷ This suggests the civil service still has work to do to attract and develop a more diverse field of candidates, but also that it should look at its recruitment processes to understand whether and how they might be disadvantaging some demographics.

Improving how the civil service attracts and assesses the abilities of people from under-represented groups will provide a larger talent pool of potential employees. Working to develop current employees from under-represented backgrounds will also improve its pipeline of future candidates – which is especially important considering the high level of internal recruitment in the civil service. While recruitment should not be based primarily on demographic characteristics, it is important for the civil service to keep sight of such factors to understand how and why a hiring system might be serving up candidates of a particular type, what untapped pools of talent might exist and how best to reform recruitment processes to access them.

Diversity and inclusion initiatives help to engage and retain employees

Discrimination, exclusion and barriers at work are 'push' factors that can cause staff to leave their employer.¹⁸ Conversely, organisations perceived by their staff as committed to D&I register higher rates of employee engagement and retention, both for staff from minority backgrounds and their wider workforce.¹⁹ In particular, millennial and Generation Z employees are more likely to want to stay with their organisation for more than five years when they feel satisfied with their employer's efforts to create

a diverse and inclusive workplace.²⁰ The civil service cannot always compete with the private sector on pay,²¹ which makes it even more important to attract and satisfy its staff on other grounds, including by demonstrating an organisational commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Diversity and inclusion can improve decision making

Ministers and senior officials recognise the value of 'diversity of thought' for challenging assumptions and 'groupthink' within the civil service.²² This concept seems to refer variously to a diversity of political views, to different ways of approaching problems based on professional or academic training, and to a diversity of lived experience based on selected demographic characteristics – usually geographic location and class. In his 2020 Ditchley lecture on government reform, Michael Gove – then chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster – suggested that government decision making benefits from employing staff reflecting the society it serves, as in this way the civil service is able to draw on the experiences of officials to better understand the views and impact of policy decisions on the public:

“Groupthink can affect any organisation – the tendency to coalesce around a cosy consensus, to resist change, look for information to confirm existing biases and to reject rigorous testing of delivery... How can we in Government be less southern, less middle class, less reliant on those with social science qualifications and more welcoming to those with physical science and mathematical qualifications – how can we be less anywhere and more somewhere – closer to the 52% who voted to Leave, and more understanding of why?”²³

The civil service should attract, recruit and make proper use of specialist talent in decision making, as the Institute for Government has argued in recent research.²⁴ As such plans to introduce multi-disciplinary teams in government are welcome. There is good evidence that diverse teams with differing professional backgrounds and intellectual approaches are better able to innovate and tackle complex problems.²⁵

Demographic differences are not good predictors of differences in people's values, beliefs, or methods of processing information.²⁶ But demographic factors do contribute to a 'diversity of experience', which can affect how individuals interact with service users, and therefore understand problems and solutions. Private sector organisations such as McKinsey argue that building a diverse workforce reflecting their customer base allows them to better understand consumer perspectives, spot and react to market developments, because staff are likely to operate in different networks and engage with a wider pool of stakeholders.²⁷ Similarly, the Good Governance Institute has made the case that diversity in the NHS workforce results in better access and quality of care for its patients.²⁸ The civil service helps formulate and deliver policy for all of UK society, so it is vitally important for it to get officials with varied backgrounds and experiences around the table who understand how the government's work affects different demographics.

This is part of the rationale behind civil service relocation, which aims to ensure that “government will make decisions differently in future” by employing officials with experience of life in areas outside of London and the South East.²⁹ Similarly, civil servants who are embedded in, for instance, the LGBT+, Deaf, or British Pakistani communities can provide valuable challenge based on their insight into how policy may impact those groups, or how their lived experience as part of that group has shaped their worldview. As Wendy Williams pointed out in the *Windrush Lessons Learned Review*:

“Where in a workforce, those at a very senior level, are made up from people who come from a narrow range of backgrounds and life experience, this can be more likely to lead to circumstances where mistakes, obvious to those with lived experience outside of that narrow range, are missed.”³⁰

Diverse teams are by no means a substitute for consulting the public, but they may be a useful forum for identifying the need to consult where government has “lost sight” of the implications of policy on sections of society, as the Home Office did for the Windrush generation.³¹

‘Diversity of thought’ requires not just diversity, but also inclusion. Worryingly, just 55% of officials agree that it is “safe to challenge the way things are done” in their organisation, according to the latest civil service survey of staff attitudes.³² This drops still lower among certain demographics – for instance, just 32% of officials with a severe disability feel safe to challenge, as do 39% of Black officials from a background other than African or Caribbean. Supporting officials from all backgrounds to feel valued and able to contribute their perspectives at work will help the civil service to reap the benefits of a diverse workforce for decision making.

The state of diversity and inclusion in the civil service

The 2022 D&I strategy is not starting from scratch. There has been an ongoing programme of work to improve diversity and inclusion in the civil service over many years, including through previous D&I strategies co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office, initiatives originating in individual departments and later rolled out across the civil service, and grassroots efforts from staff networks.

The civil service operates diversity internship programmes for students from minority ethnic backgrounds, who are socially or economically disadvantaged, or who have a disability.³³ Departments subscribe to the Disability Confident scheme, which encourages employers to recruit, retain and develop people with disabilities,³⁴ while the Future Leaders cross-government development scheme for high-potential officials offers programmes to accelerate the development of minority ethnic participants and those with disabilities or long-term health conditions.³⁵ There are various mentoring schemes targeting civil servants from different backgrounds – for example, the LGBT+ staff network runs a cross-government mentoring scheme and the Ministry of Justice’s mentoring scheme for staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds was recently extended across the civil service.³⁶ Permanent secretaries act as ‘diversity and inclusion champions’, holding specific briefs to promote issues around gender, disability, race, faith, sexual identity, social mobility, age and being a carer.³⁷

The 2017 diversity and inclusion strategy

A Brilliant Civil Service – the previous D&I strategy, which ran from 2017 to 2020 – concentrated largely on improving representation and inclusion based on protected characteristics. It set out plans for cross-government targets to increase the flow of minority ethnic and disabled staff into the senior civil service, overseen by a Diverse Leadership Task Force reporting to the cabinet secretary. These targets – running until 2025 – were published on the online Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard until their removal in May 2022.³⁸ It is difficult to tell whether the civil service met these ‘flow’ targets, as they were for the proportion of new entrants into the senior civil service (SCS) who were disabled or from minority ethnic backgrounds, and this data is not publicly available. But the *overall* proportion of both minority ethnic and disabled staff in the senior civil service increased year on year between 2017 and 2021. In 2022, the proportion of minority ethnic staff in the SCS decreased slightly for the first time since 2015, although the general trend remains one of improvement.

A large part of the strategy involved improving the collection and publication of D&I data. For instance, it set out aims to increase data collection on sexual orientation to at least 70% of civil servants and to include questions on gender identity in the annual civil service survey of staff attitudes – both of which were accomplished.³⁹ In line with the strategy, the civil service has now also developed measures for assessing socio-economic background, which the Cabinet Office includes as a demographic variable in its annual survey of civil servants’ attitudes.⁴⁰

However, data on both gender identity and socio-economic diversity are still not published in core statistics on the size and composition of the civil service workforce.⁴¹

The overarching goal set out in the 2017 D&I strategy was to become “the UK’s most inclusive employer” by 2020.⁴² Overall satisfaction with inclusion and fair treatment in the civil service, as measured by its annual survey of staff attitudes, has increased since 2017 – but disparities between demographics remain and some have deepened. Progress against actions to improve inclusion has been less evident than those to improve diversity and data collection. The Civil Service Leadership Academy developed and continues to offer a workshop on inclusive leadership for senior civil servants, as proposed in 2017.⁴³ But the framework promised in the 2017 strategy for benchmarking inclusion in the civil service against other employers is still under development,⁴⁴ and it is not publicly known whether the civil service followed through with its proposed programme of ‘culture audits’ to help departments understand how culture and values affect workplace behaviours or with what success.

Our research suggests that a team in the Cabinet Office conducted a number of culture ‘enquiries’, analysing cultural rules and norms in departments based on small-group discussions with staff – but these do not appear to have been conducted in a systematic way across the whole of the civil service, instead mostly where individual teams and units had asked to participate. Exploring the experience of people based on protected characteristics did not appear to be an expressed purpose of the exercise and it aimed only to investigate, rather than offer recommendations to improve, organisational culture.

The 2017 strategy put good emphasis on transparency but had mixed success in delivering it. The Cabinet Office created an online public data dashboard showing an accessible picture of diversity and inclusion in the civil service, but this has not been updated regularly. And the civil service has not reported publicly on whether many of the measures set out in the 2017 D&I strategy were implemented.

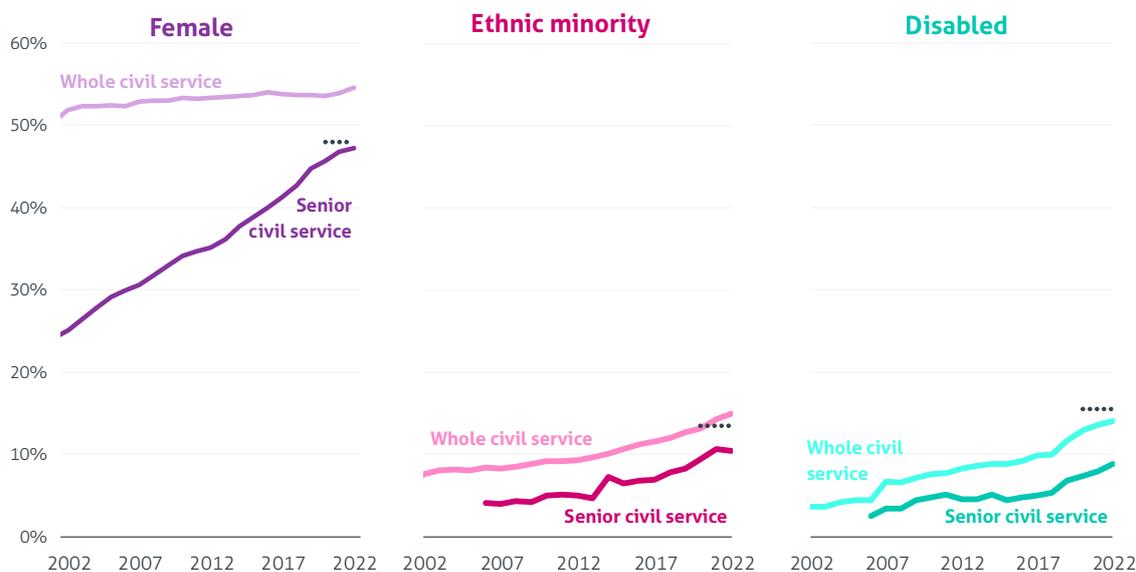
Diversity in the civil service in 2022

In some areas, the civil service has become more representative of the public that it serves. Recent progress can be seen in headline figures for three key measures of sex, ethnicity and disability – legally protected characteristics once greatly under-represented within the civil service.* As of March 2022:

- 55% of civil servants are female, including 47% of senior civil servants, compared with 48% of the economically active population
- 15% of civil servants are from a minority ethnic background, including 10% of senior civil servants, compared with 14% of the economically active population
- 14% of civil servants have a disability, including 9% of senior civil servants, compared with 16% of the economically active population.

* For more detailed information on the diversity of the civil service workforce, see the Institute’s explainers on [disability](#), [ethnicity](#), [sex](#), [sexual orientation](#), [faith](#) and [age](#) in the civil service.

Figure 1 **Proportion of female, minority ethnic and disabled staff in the civil service, 2002 to 2022**



..... indicates the figures for the economically active working-age UK population, Q2 2021 to Q1 2022

Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Annual Civil Service Employment Survey, 2001–2018; Cabinet Office, SCS database 2001–2006; Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–2022; ONS, Labour market survey, Table A02: Labour Force Survey Summary: economically active total population and female population (UK, aged 16–64, Q2 2021 to Q1 2022); Table A09: labour market status: economically active by ethnicity: People (not seasonally adjusted), Q2 2021 to Q1 2022; and Table A08: Economic activity of people with disabilities aged 16–64: levels, UK, GSS Standard Levels (People), Q2 2021 to Q1 2022. Notes: All civil service staff numbers are by headcount. The benchmarks for the economically active working-age population with each of these characteristics are calculated as the average over the last four quarters up to 31 March 2022.

Female officials and officials from minority ethnic backgrounds are now at least as represented in the civil service as a whole as they are in the economically active population, while the gap in representation for people with disabilities has narrowed to two percentage points. The senior civil service has further to go – none of the above categories matches the population-wide percentage – but steady progress has been made. The proportion of female senior civil servants has nearly doubled over the last 20 years, while the proportion of minority ethnic and disabled senior officials has more than doubled.

Figure 2 **Proportion of civil servants identifying as LGB+ by grade, 2016 to 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Annual Civil Service Employment Survey, 2016 to 2018, and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018 to 2022. Notes: the percentages shown in this chart exclude those with an unknown sexual orientation. The benchmark is calculated as the UK population aged 16+ who identify as gay/lesbian, bisexual or another sexual identity, divided by the UK population with a known sexual identity, from the ONS Annual Population Survey, 2022.

Civil servants who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or recorded their sexual orientation as 'other' (LGB+)* as a proportion of those providing information on their sexual orientation has also increased in recent years, and is now higher than in the economically active population. Although for both the civil service and the public, a high proportion of people opt not to provide this information; there is no data on the sexual orientation of 29.2% of officials.⁴⁵ As of 2022, 6.1% of civil servants who declare their sexual orientation are LGB+, an increase from 3.8% in 2016, when this data was first published.

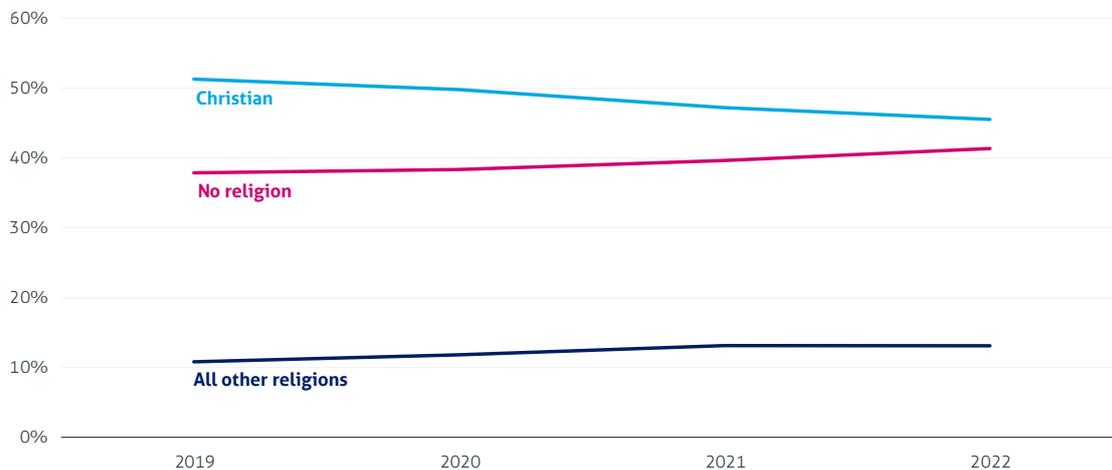
These figures are actually higher in the senior civil service, where 6.6% of staff are LGB+, up from 5.3% in 2016. This may partly reflect that senior officials feel better able to declare their sexual orientation than junior officials – in 2022, 76% of senior civil servants provided this information compared to just 67% of administrative officers and administrative assistants.

Workforce data on civil servants' faith has been published since 2019, but as with sexual orientation, a high proportion (30%) of officials opt not to provide this information.⁴⁶ In 2019, the faith of the civil service workforce was in line with the wider population – in both cases, 51% of those with a known religion were Christian and 38% had no religion or belief.⁴⁷ Since then, the proportion of Christian staff has decreased to 46% of civil servants, and the proportion who have no religion or belief has increased to 41%. The proportion of officials with a religion or belief that is not Christianity has increased from 10.8% to 13.1% of civil servants.

* The Annual Civil Service Employment Survey (ACES) invites civil servants to record their sexual orientation as "Heterosexual/straight", "Gay or Lesbian", "Bisexual" or "Other". Our use of the term LGB+ refers to staff who report belonging to one of the last three groups. The term 'LGBT+' is not used because this data refers only to sexual orientation. The Annual Civil Service Employment Survey does not collect data on the gender identities of civil servants.

Among these, the proportion of Muslim civil servants grew the most, from 3.7% to 4.7% of civil servants. In England and Wales, 6.5% of the general population is Muslim,⁴⁸ so they remain under-represented in the civil service – especially in the senior civil service, where just 1.7% of officials are Muslim.

Figure 3 **Proportion of civil servants by religion, belief or non-belief, 2019 to 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2019 to 2022. Notes: The percentages shown in this chart exclude those with an unknown religion. 'All other religions' includes Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and 'any other religion'.

While the civil service has recently developed new measures for socio-economic background (SEB), these have not yet been included in its annual workforce statistics, only its survey of staff attitudes. We can speculate on the distribution of socio-economic background in the civil service using the number of responses by group in the survey. However, this is not as robust as analysis based on workforce statistics.⁴⁹

Thirty-nine per cent of the UK workforce are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as measured by parental occupation, the metric recommended by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC).⁵⁰ But only 34% of respondents to the 2021 civil service staff survey were from low SEBs. The survey results also suggest that the civil service gets more socio-economically exclusive with seniority. While lower socio-economic backgrounds were over-represented among administrative officers and administrative assistants, the most junior grades, just 21% of respondents in the senior civil service were from low SEBs.

Figure 4 **Socio-economic background of civil servants by grade, 2021**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2021. Notes: As no workforce statistics are currently published on socio-economic background (SEB) in the civil service, this chart draws on the number of responses by group in the Civil Service People Survey to illustrate distribution of SEB by seniority. These should not be treated as workforce statistics. Following the Social Mobility Commission, SEB is approximated using civil servants' parental occupation when they were aged 14 and grouped according to the three-class National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) scheme. The figures shown here exclude civil servants with an unknown socio-economic background.

Inclusion in the civil service in 2022

The civil service's annual survey of staff attitudes measures satisfaction with inclusion and fair treatment, in an aggregate score combining answers to questions such as "I am treated fairly at work", "I am treated with respect by the people I work with" and "I think that my organisation respects individual differences (for example, cultures, working styles, backgrounds, ideas, etc.)".⁵¹

Across the civil service there has been an overall increase in satisfaction with inclusion and fair treatment since 2017, but disparities between demographics remain and in some cases have deepened. The gap in satisfaction between staff who are female, male or identify in another way has narrowed. However, the disparity between cisgender and transgender staff has increased. White staff continue to register higher satisfaction with inclusion and fair treatment than staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, with the gap between these groups widening slightly between 2017 and 2021.

A striking 13 percentage point difference between officials with and without a long-term limiting health condition has endured over the period. Heterosexual or straight staff registered the same high levels of satisfaction with inclusion and fair treatment as gay and lesbian staff in 2017, but a small disparity between these groups has now opened up, while bisexual staff and those with another sexual identity continue to register lower satisfaction.

Since benchmarks for socio-economic background were first included in 2019 there has been a consistent disparity of 5 percentage points between staff who describe themselves as coming from a lower socio-economic background and those who do not.

Figure 4 **Satisfaction with inclusion and fair treatment in the civil service by demographic, 2017–2021**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2017, 2019 and 2021.
 Notes: This chart shows inclusion and fair treatment theme score (percentage positive) which is an aggregate score combining responses to four survey questions on inclusion and fair treatment. Socio-economic background was not included in the survey until 2019.

Clearly some civil servants continue to face severe issues with fair treatment. In 2021, some 29% of officials with a severe disability reported that they had been discriminated against in the last year. As did 21% of those who identified their sex in a way other than male or female, and 20% of those who reported a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual. Over the past five years the Cabinet Office alone spent £300,000 (excluding legal costs) settling 10 cases of either race or disability discrimination.⁵²

Additionally, a recently leaked Cabinet Office review, based on interviews, focus groups and surveys of staff, found that civil servants from minority ethnic backgrounds felt alienated and that they had to “work harder to be respected and understood”.⁵³ Officials reported they felt they had to change how they spoke and presented themselves in order to be perceived “as valid as someone who went to Oxbridge”, and female staff described times “where they felt their ideas were not respected, or where they were labelled as rude when they acted assertively to mirror male colleagues”.

This supports evidence heard by the Institute in a series of roundtables on diversity and inclusion in the public sector over the past year. Our conversations with officials from a range of backgrounds and seniorities suggest that while diversity is improving in the civil service, many staff feel that inclusion still has a long way to go. We heard from officials who felt that to succeed at work they have to speak and act in a way that emulates white, middle-class colleagues. Several people talked about the difficulty associated with being the first or only staff member from their minority background in a team or department, for which they felt civil servants do not receive sufficient support. Many suggested that there are higher expectations of performance for staff from minority backgrounds in order to achieve the same acknowledgement and seniority as their colleagues.

The Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022–2025

A successful civil service D&I strategy must learn from the successes and failures of the 2017 strategy, build on recent progress in improving the diversity of the civil service workforce, and address the ongoing concerns of officials from minority backgrounds who find that the systems and culture of the civil service make it harder for them to access the same opportunities as their colleagues.

The 2022 strategy sets out a vision for how the civil service will align its diversity and inclusion agenda with the commitment to “draw on the talents of the widest possible range of geographical, social and career backgrounds” first set out in the 2021 *Declaration on Government Reform* – and with ‘levelling up’ more broadly.⁵⁴ It aims to go “further than the current Equality Act provisions by building on and expanding a previous focus on Protected Characteristics to deliver for all”.⁵⁵

The civil service relocation programme is a major focus of the strategy. It restates key commitments set out in the declaration on relocating 50% of senior civil service roles outside London by 2030 and reinvigorating civil service secondments between the UK governments.

Another focus is improving external recruitment into the civil service, through developing a new ‘Porosity and Pathways Action Plan’, a senior civil service attraction strategy, and a new apprenticeship strategy. As part of this, the civil service plans to strengthen and expand its school outreach programmes, targeting schools with a high proportion of students on free school meals, as well as increasing uptake and reviewing assessments for its entry-level talent programmes. The strategy also incorporates a target to recruit 1,000 prison leavers by the end of 2023, first announced in the 2021 Beating Crime Plan.⁵⁶

The strategy aims to review training for managers to help them understand the value of diverse viewpoints and how to encourage ‘diversity of thought’ within their teams. It also sets out to monitor departments’ progress on implementing recommendations from the government review on bullying, harassment and discrimination in the civil service.⁵⁷

Developing better evidence for and evaluation of D&I interventions in the civil service is another key strand of the strategy. The Cabinet Office plans to create evaluation frameworks, underpinned by data, to support departments and professions in evaluating their D&I programmes.

The 2022 strategy is in many respects a worthwhile effort to broaden the discussion about diversity and inclusion in the civil service. However, as the civil service turns to implementing its new D&I strategy, it could be strengthened in five key areas.

1. Definitions and targets

Previous civil service D&I strategies concentrated on improving the representation and inclusion of staff based on legally protected characteristics such as disability, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation. In its 2022 strategy, the Cabinet Office has shifted its focus, placing a renewed emphasis on socio-economic background and for the first time incorporating the geographic location and professional background of civil servants under a new, broader definition of workforce diversity. In taking such a broad view of diversity, however, the 2022 D&I strategy itself takes a somewhat broad-brush approach. It does not focus on improving the representation and inclusion of people based on particular characteristics; for instance, by setting targets for the recruitment of disabled or minority ethnic staff into the senior civil service or establishing plans to address specific barriers faced by carers, older staff or transgender employees. It aims instead more generally to “support talented people regardless of background”.⁵⁸

The new strategy doesn't make full use of targets

Diversity can take many forms. It is right that senior officials – and presumably ministers – recognise its complexity. But in addressing diversity at such a general level, the strategy is not specific enough about its objectives and success criteria. For instance, the strategy states the civil service will “use positive action where needed... to ensure the broadest range of diversity is achieved”,⁵⁹ but does little to explain what this means in practice, making it hard for civil servants to determine whether it has been achieved or, more importantly, for decision makers to be held to account for it.

The new strategy sets out just two clear targets for workforce diversity: ensuring 50% of senior civil servants are based outside London by 2030, and recruiting 1,000 prison leavers by the end of 2023. It does not include plans to directly target the recruitment, retention or progression of staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds, despite the fact that addressing this kind of inequality is emphasised in the language of the strategy. Previous headline targets for new minority ethnic and disabled entrants into the senior civil service – which ran until 2025 – were removed from the public Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard in May 2022.⁶⁰ The timing of this is unfortunate: this year, the proportion of minority ethnic officials in the senior civil service declined for the first time since 2015.⁶¹

Workforce targets are not a silver bullet. They will not work without an underpinning theory of change, and if formulated badly can lead to organisations focusing on one characteristic at the expense of others, or else ‘hitting the target but missing the point’. But they are helpful for focusing minds, setting out a clear ambition and holding an organisation to account for its realisation. In the absence of specific, visible targets for the representation of minority ethnic and disabled staff in the senior civil service, there is a danger that gains made in representation over recent years could backslide.

The strategy is unclear about the role of departments

In our interviews it was suggested that the Cabinet Office deliberately designed the new strategy to be very high-level, as a framework upon which departments should set out their own bespoke plans and targets. A principle of subsidiarity – that decisions ought to be taken at the lowest, most distributed level possible – is a coherent approach to D&I. It makes sense to allow departments to respond to their own particular circumstances. For example, the Department for International Trade currently has the highest proportion of minority ethnic staff of any department, but one of the lowest proportions of female staff – whereas the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a relatively high proportion of female staff but a lower proportion of ethnic minority officials.⁶² Departments should be allowed to work within a broader strategic framework set by the centre to target interventions where they are needed most.

But this approach only came out of our interviews and is not outlined in the D&I strategy. Nowhere does the document explicitly set out a department's role in developing its own practical plans and targets, let alone provide any guidance on how it should approach this task. As a result, the strategy merely appears vague. Expecting departments to fill in the detail without requiring them to do so, or providing clear guidance and support in setting appropriate targets and establishing the organisational processes necessary to achieve them, has not set up the strategy for successful implementation.

Without clearer guidance, departments may follow the Cabinet Office's lead, setting out broad-brush visions for D&I that do not include specific objectives and targets for the representation and inclusion of staff based on legally protected characteristics. Some will also, in isolation, develop a patchwork of plans that do not align with the vision at the centre of government. And others may even neglect to produce their own D&I plans at all. The strategy's failure to clearly set out how and why it is taking an approach based on subsidiarity is confusing not just for HR teams in departments but for staff across the civil service – and for the public, including potential employees. It makes it difficult to understand what is being done to improve diversity and inclusion across the civil service as a whole, and with what results.

Now that the new strategy has established an overall direction for diversity and inclusion in the civil service, the Cabinet Office should:

- Set out a clear definition of what achieving “the broadest range of diversity” means in practice, clarifying when and how “positive action” should be used to achieve it. This could be published alongside the Government Equalities Office's new updated guidance on positive action for employers and industry sectors, due out by the end of December 2022.⁶³
- Mandate that departments set their own specific objectives within the framework of the civil service D&I strategy. These should include targets for the recruitment, retention and progression of staff based on protected characteristics, as well as staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds, driven by departmental-level data on under-represented groups.

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- Support departments in setting D&I objectives and establishing the organisational processes necessary to achieve them.
 - Monitor and report publicly on departments' progress against their D&I objectives on an annual basis. This information should be made readily available in a single location on the government website.

2. Protected characteristics

The 2022 D&I strategy aims to go “further than the current Equality Act provisions by building on and expanding a previous focus on Protected Characteristics to deliver for all”.⁶⁴ It includes no specific mention of gender, sexual orientation, age or faith, and beyond a single reference – in the foreword – to people from minority ethnic backgrounds, includes no further mention of race. Previous targets for new minority ethnic and disabled entrants into the senior civil service, which ran until 2025, were set aside this year. There is just one action specifically geared towards staff with disabilities: increasing the number of civil service organisations signed up to the Disability Confident employer scheme. Improving the diversity of geographic, professional and socio-economic background in the civil service, while welcome, should not mean a reduced focus on protected characteristics, especially where disparities remain at senior level.

The civil service should not be complacent about protected characteristics

Despite some progress there is still work to be done to improve the recruitment and progression of staff based on protected characteristics in the civil service. That progress is not self-sustaining – this year, the proportion of minority ethnic officials in the senior civil service declined for the first time since 2015.⁶⁵ It is especially important that momentum is maintained within the context of potential headcount reductions.⁶⁶ It is promising that Rishi Sunak has now reinstated the Fast Stream, the civil service's graduate development programme, but the pause to recruitment to the scheme this year, in the name of cutting civil service staff numbers, risked disrupting the pipeline of diverse talent to future leadership positions in government.⁶⁷ The Fast Stream currently outperforms both the senior civil service and the civil service as a whole in representation on the grounds of disability, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation.⁶⁸

The Cabinet Office should say how protected characteristics fit into its new definition of diversity

Ministers and senior officials need to be mindful of the context into which the 2022 strategy has been published. For many years the civil service D&I agenda has focused on improving the representation and inclusion of staff based on protected characteristics. Publishing a D&I strategy with only a single action specifically aimed at staff with disabilities, and none at all for ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age or faith leaves senior officials and ministers open to the accusation that addressing disparities based on these characteristics is no longer a priority.

In our research, we heard from a variety of civil servants from these backgrounds who feel profoundly alienated by the government's current approach. The civil service needs to show that characteristics such as ethnicity and disability fall under its new, broader definition of diversity by explicitly recognising where work still needs to be done to improve the representation and inclusion of staff from these demographics and making clear commitments to change. To successfully deliver the new D&I strategy, it will be important for the Cabinet Office to engage with staff networks, listen to their concerns, and communicate how the strategy will deliver better outcomes for their members. The civil service has a job to do to persuade parts of its workforce of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the strategy.

The Cabinet Office should:

- Set the expectation that departmental plans include actions to improve the recruitment, progression and inclusion of staff based on protected characteristics, where departments are falling below benchmarks for the economically active population.
- Clearly demonstrate through internal and external communication that the civil service remains intent on improving the representation and inclusion of staff based on protected characteristics.

3. Socio-economic diversity

Previous civil service D&I strategies have incorporated actions on socio-economic diversity, but in the 2022 strategy it is newly prominent in focus. The authors of the strategy have clearly engaged with the Social Mobility Commission's recent report on improving career progression in the civil service.⁶⁹ But despite its language around the importance of tackling this type of inequality the strategy does not include plans to directly target the recruitment, retention or progression of staff from those backgrounds. Nor does it address barriers to progression based on the tendency of staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs) to 'self-sort' into operational career paths in the civil service.

The strategy's emphasis on geographic diversity is coherent with socio-economic diversity

The new strategy reaffirms the ambition of the *Declaration on Government Reform* to draw on the talents of "the widest possible range of geographical, social and career backgrounds" in the civil service. It restates key actions from the declaration, including plans to relocate civil servants outside London and the South East and reinvigorate secondments between the governments of the four nations of the UK.

It is good that the strategy recognises the links between geography and socio-economic backgrounds. Civil service relocation will arguably lead to increased socio-economic diversity. According to the Social Mobility Commission (SMC), accelerated promotion in the civil service is linked to securing certain high-profile jobs ('accelerator roles') with exposure to ministers and senior officials, such as in a private office, running

a bill team, or specific policy roles in central departments. Ministers and senior officials are based mainly in London, but only 23% of London-based civil servants are from a lower socio-economic background compared to 47% in the North East.⁷⁰

Location is a major barrier to the progression of staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds within the civil service, because lower SEB staff based outside the capital may lack the economic resources to move there, making it harder for them to take positions based in Whitehall. Since 2021, more than 15,700 civil service roles have been announced as relocating outside London, making headway towards the government's headline target of 22,000 – although it is unclear how many roles have moved so far.⁷¹ Promisingly, the proportion of senior civil servants that work in London fell from 67% in 2021 to 62% in 2022.

The strategy makes a fair start at making 'unwritten rules' about progression explicit but lacks plans to tackle deeper issues

Civil servants from advantaged backgrounds tend to have better access to information about 'accelerator roles' through mentoring from senior colleagues, and are more comfortable using informal or temporary appointment processes to negotiate promotion opportunities where those from lower socio-economic backgrounds often act more cautiously.⁷² The government's plan to deliver an induction making explicit some of the 'unwritten rules' around accessing career development opportunities in the civil service constitutes a fair start to addressing this problem, as is a new commitment that temporary promotions will be filled consistently through 'expressions of interest' or a similarly fair and transparent process. A new online induction for civil servants was piloted in 2021 and rolled out more widely this year, although it is not clear whether it yet includes this material.⁷³

But the problem runs deeper than a simple lack of information. According to the SMC, staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds are often put off from pursuing professional opportunities because officials in senior grades, central departments and policy roles tend to present as being from higher socio-economic backgrounds – and lower SEB staff may feel they have to 'put on' a similar presentation to succeed. This includes assuming a 'received pronunciation' accent and style of speech, an emotionally detached manner, and being able to make and respond to conversation referencing 'cultural touchstones' associated with a middle-class upbringing, such as the theatre and foreign travel. According to the SMC's research, assimilating and adhering to this behaviour is important to perceived 'fit' within parts of the civil service and may act as a barrier to staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds in interviews and performance reviews, in connecting with senior staff who could provide mentorship or advice, and simply feeling comfortable at work.

A recently leaked Cabinet Office review, based on interviews, focus groups and surveys of staff, also found that civil servants felt they had to change how they spoke and presented themselves in order to be perceived "as valid as someone who went to Oxbridge".⁷⁴ Our conversations with officials confirm that this is a key issue raised by civil servants from lower socio-economic backgrounds. But the 2022 D&I strategy does not set out any actions geared towards making the culture of the civil service, especially the senior civil service and policy profession, more inclusive to lower SEB employees.

The civil service should do more to address bottlenecks in operational career paths

Besides Whitehall-centrism and lack of guidance around 'unwritten rules', the SMC finds that limited prospects for promotion in operational roles is one of the main factors limiting the progression of staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Some 41% of lower SEB civil servants are in operational roles, twice the proportion as in policy roles (20%).⁷⁵ The SMC puts this down to lower SEB staff more often joining the civil service in junior roles, which frequently involve delivering front-line services – but notes that even when joining at higher grades, these staff may self-select into operational careers because they view the work as more tangible and meritocratic compared to policy, which is seen as vague and dependent on mastering a behavioural code that favours those from advantaged backgrounds. But operational career paths often have 'bottlenecks' – a large number of junior staff competing for a small number of senior roles – and promotion elsewhere in the civil service usually requires demonstrating a broad range of skills, including experience of policy.

The D&I strategy recognises this problem in setting out an action to review policy job advertisements to ensure that the importance of skills and experience is emphasised, rather than focusing on qualifications, which is known to reduce the socio-economic diversity of applicants. But it does not include any comprehensive plan to address bottlenecks in operational career paths themselves, or the deeper-running difficulties faced by staff in moving from operational to policy roles. More needs to be done to provide opportunities for lower grade operational staff to gain policy experience and 'demystify' policy work, as well as to shift the perception that policy roles are inherently more prestigious than delivery roles.

To build on the work it is already doing to improve the progression of lower SEB staff in the civil service, the Cabinet Office should:

- Set the expectation that departmental plans include interventions to improve the recruitment, progression and inclusion of staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds – especially where departments are falling below benchmarks for the economically active population.
- Review how hiring processes can help those who might self-select into operational career paths consider policy roles.
- Set up a cross-government scheme to support lower grade staff in departments and directorates that are heavily tilted towards operational roles in gaining policy experience.
- Consider piloting 'cultural sharing initiatives', as proposed by the SMC, with the aim of normalising and revaluing culture associated with staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds.⁷⁶

4. 'Diversity of thought' and inclusion

The 2022 D&I strategy aims to encourage 'diversity of thought' within the civil service by establishing teams made up of people with varied backgrounds and experiences to challenge 'groupthink'. But it includes few specific plans to improve inclusion, which is necessary if the civil service is to foster the open and free-thinking policy making environment the government says that it wants. Demographic and cognitive diversity is associated with greater creativity, but also increased conflict within teams – so an inclusive culture is crucial for unlocking the benefits of diversity for decision making.⁷⁷ When employees of all backgrounds feel valued for their differences and included in decision making processes, they are more likely to appreciate different ideas and debate their perspectives with others in a constructive way, helping teams overcome 'groupthink' to reach more robust decisions.⁷⁸ Without an inclusive organisational culture, the civil service will be unable to fully benefit from the advantages of a diverse workforce.

All kinds of diversity should be valued in the civil service

Ministers and senior officials enthusiastically make the case for the benefits of civil servants with lived experiences relating to selected demographic characteristics such as geography, class and professional background, as Michael Gove did in his 2020 Ditchley lecture.⁷⁹ Part of the rationale set out for civil service relocation is to ensure that "government will make decisions differently in future" by employing officials with experience of life in areas outside London and the South East.⁸⁰ The same logic implicitly extends to the lived experience of civil servants from minority ethnic backgrounds, with disabilities, or with different sexual identities. In fact, officials from these demographics register some of the lowest confidence to "challenge the way things are done" at work, according to the latest civil service survey of staff attitudes. Just 32% of officials with a severe disability agree it is safe to do so in their organisation, as do 39% of Black civil servants with a background other than African or Caribbean, and 42% of those with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Ministers and senior officials should make the same positive case in relation to these characteristics too. But as *Civil Service World* reported in its recent investigation into politicians' comments about D&I in the civil service, many officials have been left with the sense that ministers feel "some kinds of diversity might be preferable to others" and that "they recognise that action needs to be taken to bring about diversity, just as long as it suits the diversity they want to promote".⁸¹

The civil service still has work to do on inclusion

Our conversations with officials suggest that currently many staff do not feel their backgrounds and perspectives are valued. For instance, we heard from officials who felt that to succeed at work they have to speak and act in a way that emulates white, middle-class colleagues. Several civil servants talked about the difficulty associated with being the first or only staff member from their minority background in a team or department, for which they felt they did not receive sufficient support. Many suggested that there are higher expectations of performance for staff from minority backgrounds in order to achieve the same acknowledgement and seniority as their colleagues.

Some contributors perceived this to be reinforced by a performance appraisal system they feel gives little weight to objectives on diversity and inclusion, meaning that some managers can get away with doing little towards their D&I objectives, while those who are active in staff networks or outreach work are not sufficiently recognised for the work they do and the benefits it brings the civil service. This is partially supported by our previous research on civil service pay and performance, in which interviewees told us they felt there is little strategy underpinning the use of performance mechanisms, and that decisions about who should receive bonuses are more a negotiation or a “horse-trading exercise” than a genuine reflection of staff performance.⁸²

More specific and detailed plans for improving inclusion are needed

While the D&I strategy recognises the link between diverse teams in which people feel safe and supported to contribute their experiences and improved decision making, it again sets out few specific plans for how it will improve inclusion in the civil service. A commitment to tackle outright bullying, harassment and discrimination is the minimum required to ensure a professional workplace. And plans to review training for managers to help them support and develop ‘diversity of thought’ in their teams sound very similar to the training on inclusive leadership for managers developed under the previous D&I strategy back in 2017. Indeed, the new strategy does not reflect on those 2017 efforts or describe how the training it proposes will build on or differ from it.

In March 2022, the government published *Inclusive Britain*, a separate strategy setting out its plans to address racial disparity in education, health, criminal justice and employment across the UK.⁸³ It proposed setting up an ‘inclusion at work panel’ made up of academics and practitioners to oversee a programme of research and workplace trials, with the aim of producing an evidence base for D&I interventions and rooting out poor quality training, including within the civil service. This should be should incorporated into the civil service D&I strategy.

Improving inclusion in the civil service is a challenge, not least because the evidence base about which practices influence the inclusivity of organisations is still emerging.⁸⁴ The new inclusion at work panel should explore the evidence for promising interventions, trial and evaluate them to discover what is effective. Scrapping interventions that don’t work or even have unintended negative effects is important and will improve diversity and inclusion. But establishing a better evidence base for D&I should be about innovating – and rigorously testing – new practices as well as eliminating ineffective ones.

For example, the civil service has phased out unconscious bias training on the basis that there is “no evidence” that it changes attitudes or behaviour in the long term and may even have potential backfiring effects.⁸⁵ But given compelling evidence that officials from minority backgrounds continue to experience problems with fair treatment, there remains a clear need to challenge prejudiced ways of thinking that could unfairly influence decisions such as who gets a job or promotion. It is right to abandon measures that do not work or prove counter-productive, but this must not dissuade the civil service from proactively researching and testing which interventions do work, and then introducing them.

The government should set out some of the measures to improve inclusion in the civil service that will be researched and trialled by its proposed 'inclusion at work panel', along with their expected timelines. Some must address fundamental issues of fair treatment and discrimination, while others should prompt staff to reflect themselves on how to get the best out of each other.

These might include:

- Linking managers' performance against D&I objectives to pay, building on the roll-out of capability-based pay in the senior civil service.
- Reviewing and reforming structural biases in performance management systems.
- Creating robust support programmes for the first staff members from a specific minority background in teams.
- Expanding existing mentoring and reverse-mentoring schemes pairing staff from minority backgrounds with senior leaders.
- Conducting 'culture enquiries' that focus explicitly on the experience of staff from minority backgrounds, providing specific recommendations for improving organisational culture in teams.
- Piloting 'perspective-taking' exercises in which people imagine scenarios as other people, focusing on their emotions and interests – which early evidence shows can reduce bias.⁸⁶

5. Evaluation and scrutiny

The 2017 civil service D&I strategy talked in general terms about "taking evidence-based action" and evaluating the impact of new initiatives, but the 2022 strategy makes more concrete commitments to evaluate progress made and the success of the strategy's interventions.⁸⁷ It lays out an approach in which all D&I activity should be justified by evidence and evaluated for impact, to ensure that the actions the civil service takes produce their intended outcomes. The Cabinet Office plans to create evaluation frameworks, underpinned by data, to support departments and professions to evaluate their D&I programmes. It also intends to benchmark and test departments' delivery of the objectives set out in the D&I strategy using a four-part internal assurance framework, including a civil service D&I dashboard that brings together all data on diversity and inclusion across government.

This is a welcome development in line with initiatives across government to improve the evaluation of policy outcomes. As departments develop their own, more detailed objectives, the Cabinet Office should use this machinery to monitor and hold departments to account for their work on diversity and inclusion.

But while this emphasis on internal evaluation is welcome, the strategy neglects external scrutiny. It includes no objectives to improve the transparency of civil service D&I data, except for publishing the planned sites for forthcoming civil service relocations. Nor does it set out a commitment for the civil service to report publicly on its progress in carrying out the actions it proposes. In fact, it specifies that “engagement with external assurance and benchmarking organisations should be by exception only”.⁸⁸

The strategy lays out plans to increase the visibility of the broad range of experiences and opportunities available in the civil service, by establishing civil service ‘role models’ and expanding its school outreach programmes to target deprived areas. The ambition to create “a civil service that is visible to everyone” is right, but it is missing a key component – plans to improve the transparency of its work on diversity and inclusion.⁸⁹ If the civil service wants to attract, retain and support employees from minority groups, and spread best practice to other parts of the public and private sector, it is important for it to build trust with potential recruits and current staff through observable action and progress. To build on its plans to create a more visible civil service, the Cabinet Office should:

- Publish all available data on the diversity of the civil service – including workforce statistics on socio-economic background – regularly and in an accessible format.
- Report publicly on its progress against the objectives set out in its new D&I strategy, using the new machinery set up to monitor delivery internally.
- Monitor and report publicly on departments’ progress against their own departmental D&I objectives on an annual basis. This information should be made readily available in a single location on the government website.

Conclusion

Previous civil service D&I strategies concentrated on improving the representation and inclusion of staff based on legally protected characteristics such as disability, ethnicity, sex and sexuality. In its 2022 D&I strategy, the Cabinet Office shifts its focus, placing a renewed emphasis on socio-economic background and for the first time incorporating the geographic location and professional background of civil servants under a new, broader definition of workforce diversity.

The civil service is right to aim to draw on a wider pool of talent, both outside London and from different professional backgrounds outside government, as the Institute for Government has argued previously.⁹⁰ But beyond this, the strategy sets out an approach with little focus on individual characteristics and the barriers associated with them, instead aiming generally to “support talented people regardless of background”.⁹¹ In taking such a broad view of diversity, the 2022 D&I strategy itself is too broad-brush: it fails to set out clear objectives or success criteria for improving representation and inclusion in other areas.

Although interviewees have told us that the Cabinet Office intends the strategy as a framework under which departments can and should elaborate their own, more specific, plans and targets, this is not set out explicitly within the document. If the Cabinet Office intends to take an approach to D&I based on subsidiarity, it must make this clear – alongside how it intends to support and hold departments to account for their own plans for D&I.

The lack of specific objectives to improve the representation and inclusion of staff based on protected characteristics risks progress made over recent years. In our research, we heard from a variety of civil servants from these backgrounds who feel alienated by the government’s current approach. At the same time, the strategy could have been more ambitious on socio-economic diversity. While it doubles down on earlier commitments to civil service relocation and new inductions outlined in the *Declaration for Government Reform*, which will be helpful in improving the progression of staff from lower SEBs, the 2022 strategy was a missed opportunity to set out further measures, particularly those aimed at ‘demystifying’ roles in policy and addressing the cultural barriers that officials from lower SEBs raise time and again in interviews.

Improving inclusion in the civil service is a challenge, not least because the evidence base about which interventions work is still emerging.⁹² But it is vital. In interviews we heard from officials from a range of different backgrounds who feel they have faced barriers to progression at work based on their gender, class, ethnicity or other demographic factors. Many civil servants we talked to did not feel that their backgrounds and experiences are valued in government, and some felt increasingly disaffected. Ministers are keen to cultivate ‘diversity of thought’ in the civil service – which requires taking concrete steps to ensure officials from all backgrounds feel valued and supported to contribute their perspectives.

The government's separate proposal for an 'inclusion at work panel' should be incorporated into the civil service D&I strategy, and should turn urgently to researching and evaluating effective measures to tackle prejudiced ways of thinking and biased systems, and create more inclusive working cultures and processes.

Finally, the new strategy puts promising emphasis on improving the internal evaluation of D&I interventions, but external scrutiny is also important. The civil service needs to make transparency a priority if it wants to attract, retain and support minority groups within its workforce and spread best practice to other parts of the public and private sector, as part of its wider effort to create "a civil service that is visible to everyone".⁹³

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