INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Whitehall Monitor 2024



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About Whitehall Monitor

This 11th edition of *Whitehall Monitor* looks at the civil service in 2023, the first full calendar year of the Sunak government, and the last before the next general election, which the prime minister has suggested will be in late 2024.

It was a year in which many of the civil service's long-standing problems – on expertise, workforce retention and accountability among others – were exposed, and from which many lessons should be learned.

Understanding the civil service matters because its work affects all of our lives in significant ways. This report brings together, analyses and visualises a range of publicly available data, alongside the Institute's ongoing research, to chart the change of the civil service and identify those lessons.

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Foreword

This is the 11th edition of *Whitehall Monitor* – our annual, data-based assessment of the UK civil service. This edition poses two questions, which give this year's report its structure: How did the civil service change and perform in 2023? And how should it change this year and in the future?

Some of the immediate pressures facing the civil service eased in 2023. The political tumult of 2022, with its three prime ministers and record-breaking 67 cabinet appointments, gave way to relative stability. Prolonged industrial action over the winter of 2022–23, in which more than 100,000 civil servants went on strike across the country, was paused following an increased pay award – although the civil service still had plenty of challenges to contend with, including persistently high inflation, renewed strikes elsewhere in the public sector and conflict in Europe and the Middle East.

But its work was not defined by all-encompassing crises to the same extent as for most of the last decade, dominated as it was by the implementation of Brexit and the response to the pandemic.

In theory, then, 2023 had the makings of a year in which the civil service could have made serious progress in improving its own capabilities. Some such progress has been made. The government's efforts to relocate civil servants out of London are moving apace and the benefits are beginning to be felt. The workforce continues to become more representative of the UK, with the proportion of senior officials who are female matching the economically active population for the first time. And the government's digital skills, and those of its workforce, are improving.

But 2023 also laid bare deep-rooted and long-standing problems with the civil service that are undermining government effectiveness. Staff turnover fell from its immediate post-pandemic peak but remains too high and continues to harm institutional memory. Further real-terms pay cuts still hinder the civil service's ability to attract and retain top talent, as do slow and onerous processes for recruiting from outside government. A worrying fall in staff morale has raised questions about how the institution is led. The failure to properly plan its workforce has been exposed by implausible forecast cuts to administration budgets, the prime minister's U-turn to restore arbitrary targets for headcount cuts, and departments' (costly) reliance on private sector consultancies and temporary workers.

These problems are not new. They are reminiscent of historic civil service reform plans from the likes of Francis Maude, John Fulton or even Richard Haldane. But they are undermining the UK government and they represent a decades-long failure to grasp the nettle on civil service reform. Unfortunately, 2023 was another year in which these issues went unresolved. Thankfully, support for Whitehall reform seems to be growing, slowly, and enjoys a degree of cross-party consensus – at least in recognising the problems.

As well as Lord Maude's latest review of the civil service, last year also saw the former Cabinet Office minister Jeremy Quin set out his priorities for reform, and it is reported that Sue Gray, Keir Starmer's recently appointed chief of staff, has been charged with developing Labour's plans for Whitehall reform, should it win the election pencilled in for 2024.

In the context of that impending election, the prospect of a stable government – of whichever political make-up – with a full parliamentary term ahead of it, provides an opportunity for Whitehall reform that neither the civil service nor government can afford to miss. Civil service reform is unlikely to feature in the election campaign. But it is integral to any government's ability to tackle the long-term challenges the UK faces – of burnt-out and backed-up public services, rising destitution, an ageing population, rapid technological change and a climate in crisis.

So, ministers and civil service leaders should be prepared, early into a new parliament, to face up to these problems and set in train more fundamental reforms to the civil service than have been attempted in decades. This year's Whitehall Monitor sets out the Institute's view on what those problems are, and what those reforms should include.



Dr Hannah White OBE
Director, Institute for Government

Part 1: How the civil service changed in 2023

Part 1 of this report analyses how the civil service is changing and, particularly, the trends that drove this change in 2023. It covers six key themes:

1. Size and turnover of the civil service

The civil service grew by 15,400 FTE (3.2%) roles in the year between September 2022 and September 2023, reaching 496,150 FTE at the latest count. Approximately 93% of this growth occurred in the Home Office and MoJ, reflecting the need to staff front-line 'operational delivery' roles such as asylum decision making and prison officers.

In that context, it was disappointing that Rishi Sunak U-turned on his attitude to arbitrary headcount targets last year, with the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, introducing an "immediate" cap on numbers and the target of returning to pre-pandemic levels.[1] This would currently require cutting more than 70,000 roles.

In 2022/23, some 11.9% of civil servants either moved departments or left the service. While this represented a drop in turnover on the post-pandemic peak, the proportion of officials leaving the civil service entirely remained worryingly high.

2. Structure and location of the civil service

The machinery of government (MoG) changes made in February 2023 resulted in the creation of the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. These were as disruptive as MoG changes always are, but there was a welcome logic behind them. Meanwhile, the public bodies review programme continues to make progress, and is taking a more sensible approach than its predecessors.

The government is also making good progress towards its target of relocating 22,000 civil servants out of London, with the target date brought forward from 2030 to 2027. The proportion of senior civil servants located in London has fallen from 74% in 2020 to 69% in 2023. Encouragingly, the benefits of these moves are beginning to be felt in government.

3. Budgets and major projects

Inflation is squeezing already tight departmental budgets, which now face average real-terms cuts in 2023/24 and 2024/25. While only a small proportion of these budgets are for paying civil servants, those allocations are also under pressure. Provisional forecast spending on staff within administration budgets imply undeliverable cuts of an estimated £2.5 billion between the last financial year and next, which would require staff cuts of over 20% starting immediately, which will not happen. Spending on the civil service will be tight for the foreseeable future, but these plans need to be brought back to reality.

Whitehall's reliance on private sector consultancy and temporary labour has increased, with spend on consultancy reported in departments' annual accounts rising by 40% in real terms since 2018/19. Meanwhile, the government's major projects portfolio continues to expand in size and cost, though the government's confidence in its delivery has also improved slightly.

4. Morale, pay and industrial relations

The morale of the civil service declined last year, for the second year running. Civil servants are especially unhappy about their pay, with a 9 percentage point drop – to less than one third of the workforce reporting to be satisfied – last year.

This came in the context of ongoing real-terms pay cuts across the civil service, of between 12 and 26% for each civil service grade since 2010. There is increasing evidence that low pay is harming the civil service's ability to recruit and retain top talent.

5. Diversity

The workforce continues to become more representative of the UK population, with female representation among the senior civil service for the first time matching the population benchmark in 2023. Representation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, however, remains a particular problem.

6. Transparency

Despite welcome announcements about future improvements to government transparency, departments still struggle to meet existing requirements, such as on Freedom of Information requests. The repeated failure to publish departments' outcome delivery plans has also undermined transparency.

By understanding how the civil service continued to change in 2023, we can identify ongoing workforce and governance problems that should be the target of long-term reforms to the civil service – the subject of Part 2 of the report.

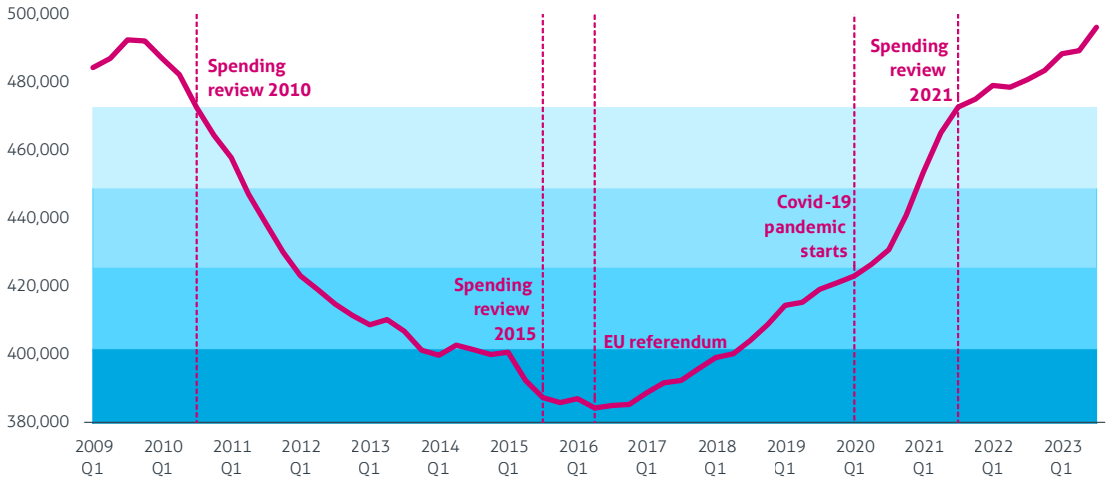
Size and turnover of the civil service

The recent growth of the civil service

The growth of the civil service has eased slightly

The size of the civil service has declined steadily since the Second World War, during which it more than trebled in size. Despite periods of growth in the intervening decades the civil service reached its smallest post-war size in 2016, at 384,230 'full time equivalent' (FTE) staff, following the cuts during the coalition and Conservative governments. Since then, however, the civil service has grown by 111,920 staff (29%). This took its size in September 2023 to 496,150 FTE – larger than it was in early 2010 at the start of the coalition.

Figure 1.1 **Civil servants (FTE), Q1 2009 to Q3 2023**



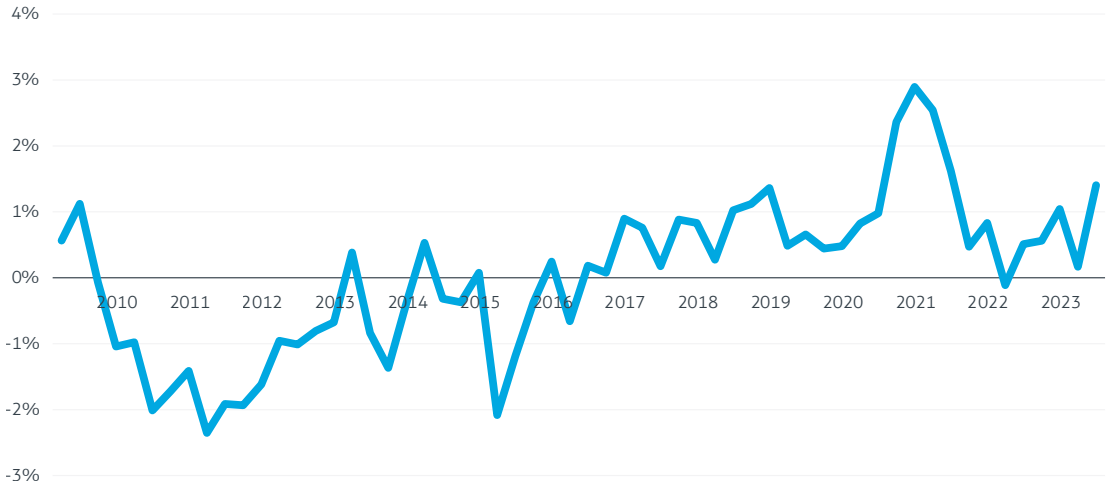
Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2023.
Notes: Each 5% decrease in FTE since the 2010 spending review is represented by a darker shade of blue.

This expansion has come in two main phases. After the EU referendum, more civil servants were recruited to prepare for the UK to formally leave the bloc and to staff permanent new post-Brexit functions – that is, those previously managed at the EU level.

But then an even more rapid phase of growth came during the Covid pandemic: the rate of growth more than doubled between Q3 and Q4 2020, and remained above 2% per quarter until Q3 2021. This then eased – in Q2 2023 the civil service expanded by just 0.17%, almost the lowest rate of growth since 2016. But in Q3, numbers increased further – by 1.4%, which is the highest rate since Q3 2021.

Such continued growth runs contrary to the stated ambitions of successive Conservative governments to reduce the size of the civil service. However, the most recent, significant uptick in the growth rate did occur before the government's decision in October 2023 to cap the number of civil servants at the then current level, and later reduce it to pre-pandemic levels.[2]

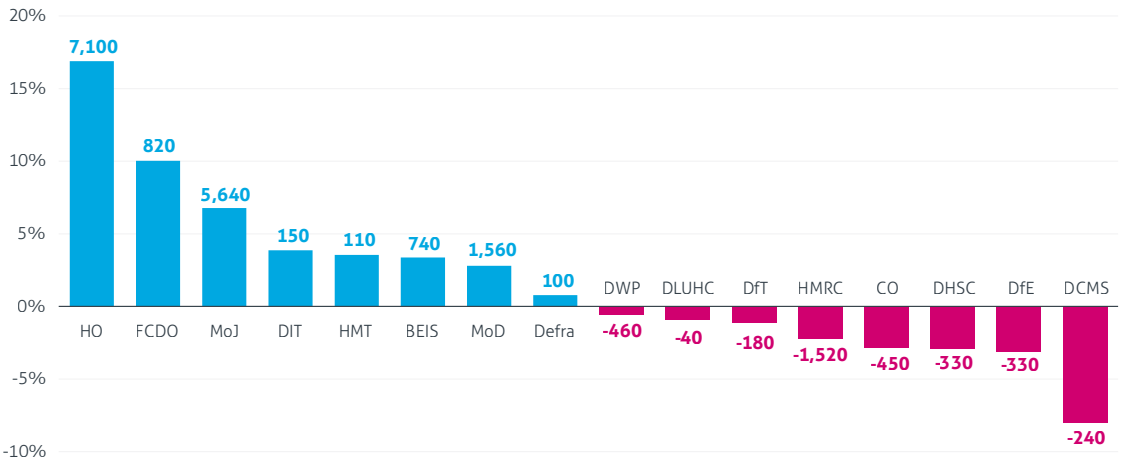
Figure 1.2 **Quarterly change in civil servant numbers (FTE), Q2 2009 to Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q2 2009 to Q3 2023.

Over the past 12 months – between Q3 2022 and Q3 2023 – the civil service grew by 15,400 (3.2%). The departments experiencing the highest proportional rates of growth in this period were the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The former also saw the largest increase in absolute numbers of staff, at 7,100, while DCMS* and HMRC saw the greatest proportional and absolute reductions in staff respectively, with 240 and 1,520 fewer FTE.

Figure 1.3 **Change in civil servant numbers (FTE) between Q3 2022 and Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q3 2022 to Q3 2023. Notes: Figures relate to departmental groups. These figures account for transfers of staff that were the result of machinery of government changes, and exclude newly created departments (DESNZ, DBT and DSIT). For recently abolished departments, figures relate to their size in Q2 2023, which was the last quarter for which their figures were reported. The figures for each department denote net change in FTE staff. For a list of department initialisms, see Methodology.

* The Department for Culture, Media and Sport. For a list of department initialisms, see Methodology.

In the case of the Home Office, this follows a recent trend – the department's growth has been accelerating in recent years as it has sought to resource new post-Brexit migration and border arrangements and, more recently, address problems with the asylum system. The FCDO began to grow again in late 2022 following a period of retrenchment through 2020 and 2021. DCMS, meanwhile, shrank significantly over the past 12 months – contrasting sharply with its breakneck expansion since 2016, and HMRC has continued an unpredictable path of expansion and contraction.*

Figure 1.4 **Change in civil servant numbers (FTE) by department, Q3 2010 to Q3 2023**

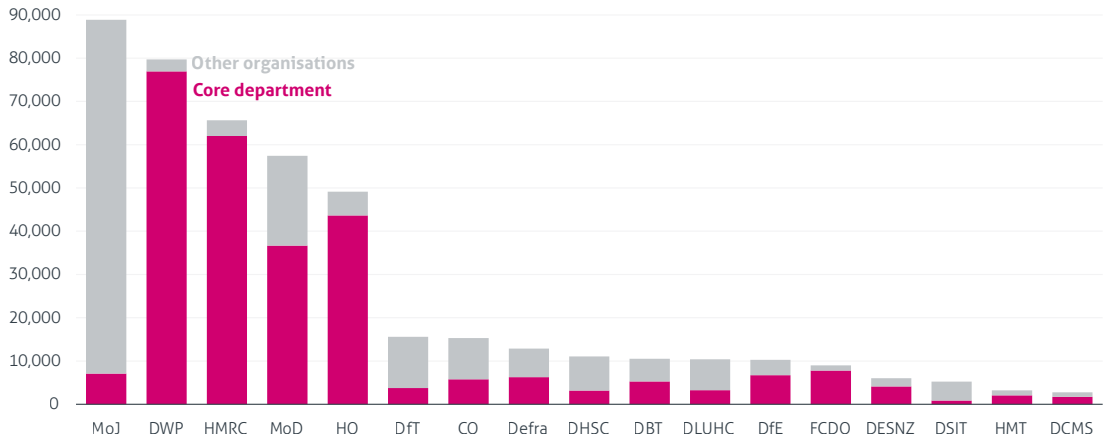


Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q3 2010 to Q3 2023.
Notes: Figures relate to departmental groups. BEIS ceased to exist in February 2023, and the last release of figures was Q2 2023. DIT, DESNZ, DBT and DSIT are not shown as they were not in existence in 2010. See Methodology for information on other departmental changes. These figures correct for transfers of staff that were the result of machinery of government changes.

Following the 2010–16 contraction and subsequent growth of the civil service, all but four departments now have more civil servants than they did in 2010. The four departments that still remain smaller than they were in 2010 are also the four largest, with big operational services – MoJ, DWP, HMRC and MoD. Collectively, these departments have approximately 57,000 fewer civil servants than they did in 2010. Several smaller, policy-focused departments such as DCMS and DfE, and at the centre of government such as the Cabinet Office and Treasury, are meanwhile proportionally far larger now than they were in 2010.

* More than 800 staff moved from DCMS to DSIT following the February 2023 MoG change, but are still within DCMS's payroll and so are reported within that department. In the future, these staff will be reported under DSIT, considerably increasing the reductions in DCMS.

Figure 1.5 **Civil servants (FTE) by departmental group, Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q3 2023. Notes: 'Core department' includes ministerial departments (excluding UK Export Finance), as well as HM Revenue and Customs, which is a non-ministerial department. 'Other organisations' refers to all other bodies employing civil servants (such as executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and Crown non-departmental public bodies) within the departmental group.

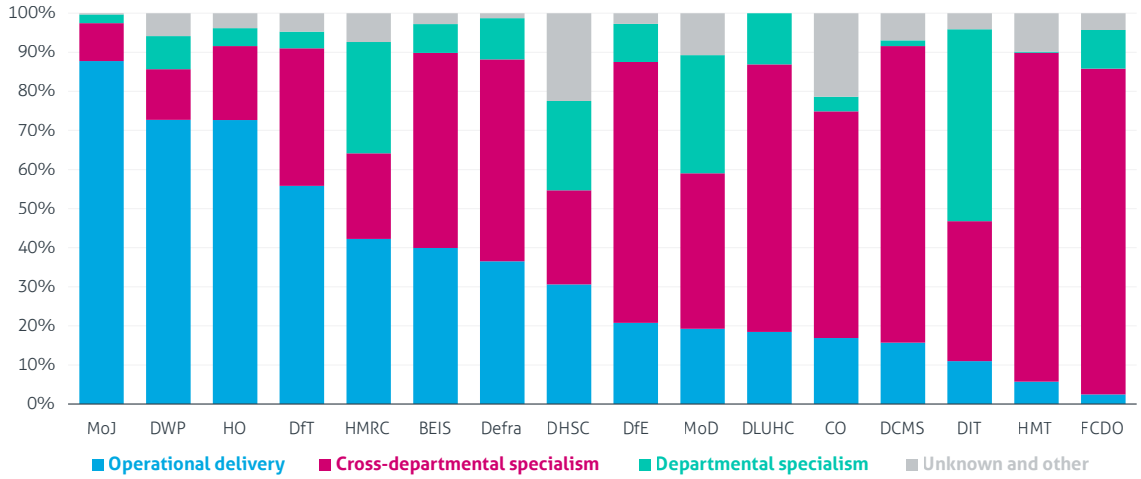
The changing size of civil service professions sheds some light on how and why the civil service has grown – but is undermined by poor data

The size of the civil service is often the subject of political debate. That debate should be informed by a clear understanding of how and why the size of the civil service has changed. This is easier to establish for some departments than others. MoJ, for example, has grown by 18,500 staff since Q2 2016. HM Prison and Probation Service, part of MoJ, grew by 15,310 over the same period. This gives a strong indication that MoJ's growth has been driven by the demands of the prison and probation services.

But this understanding cannot be reached elsewhere. The Home Office, for example, grew by 18,710 staff over the same period. A very small proportion of this growth was in the National Crime Agency, and the remainder in the 'core' Home Office. It is difficult, using publicly available data, to understand in much more detail how different parts of the department have changed over time.

A more useful way to understand why departments have grown or shrunk is to look at changes in the *types* of work that civil servants do, or the 'profession' to which they belong. All civil servants belong to a profession. Some, most obviously the policy profession, are 'cross-departmental' – common to all departments. We classify others, such as the international trade, tax and intelligence analysis professions, which are mostly confined to one department, as 'departmental professions'. Prison officers, asylum caseworkers and Jobcentre Plus staff, meanwhile, are part of the operational delivery profession – which makes up more than half of the entire civil service. Identifying how the sizes of these professions have changed can suggest why the civil service and individual departments have changed in size over time.

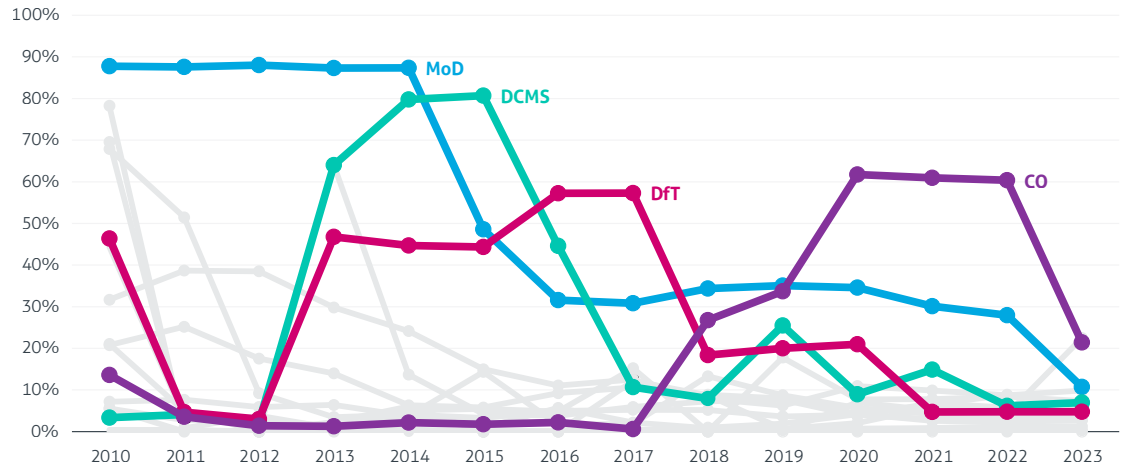
Figure 1.6 **Professions of civil servants (FTE) by department, 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2023.

Historically, data on the professions of civil servants has been poorly collated and reported, and has often been unreliable. MoD, DCMS, DfT and Cabinet Office, for example, have often not reported the professions of large proportions of their staff. The data quality has improved substantially in recent years as more departments have more comprehensively reported the professions of their staff. But these data quality issues make comparisons over time difficult.

Figure 1.7 **Civil servants (FTE) for whom profession is not reported, by department, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–17 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–23. Notes: Figures reported are the combined total staff included in 'not reported' and 'other' categories, divided by the total staff number in each department.

With that significant caveat, it is still possible to use professions data to draw some conclusions. We have focused on how and why the civil service has grown since 2016 and the EU referendum, given the extent of political commentary on the subject and because the quality of the data in recent years is better than it was in 2010.

Figure 1.8 **Civil servants by profession (FTE), 2016, 2019 and 2023**

Profession	2016	2019	2023	Change, 2016-2019	Change, 2019-2023
Operational delivery	213,460	225,990	250,240	12,530	24,250
Other named profession	33,090	40,090	58,245	7,000	18,155
Not reported	37,020	51,330	44,470	14,310	-6,860
Policy	16,570	23,570	32,135	7,000	8,565
Digital, data and technology	10,880	11,280	22,575	400	11,295
Project delivery	10,510	14,320	17,510	3,810	3,190
Tax	26,790	13,180	16,465	-13,610	3,285
Science and engineering	11,490	11,570	12,860	80	1,290
Human resources	8,220	7,440	12,470	-780	5,030
Legal	7,320	6,970	10,805	-350	3,835
Finance	11,270	8,170	9,890	-3,100	1,720
Total	386,620	413,910	487,665	27,290	73,755

Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2016 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2019 and 2023. Notes: 'Not reported' aggregates two categories in the source data: 'other' and 'not reported'.

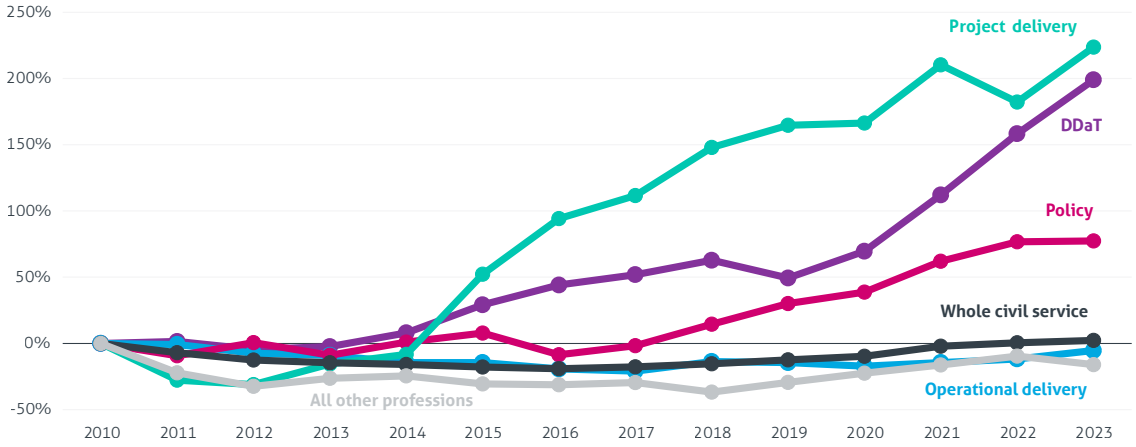
The growth of the civil service has been driven by rising numbers of front-line staff

Between the twin expansions of 2016–19 and 2019–23 the operational delivery profession added far more staff than any other individual profession. This followed a reduction in the number of such civil servants by over 50,000 in the six years to 2016. The profession remains 5% smaller now than it was in 2010.

There was also a notable expansion in the policy profession in both periods, and a striking addition of digital, data and technology (DDaT)* professionals during 2019–23. The small sizes of these professions compared to operational delivery mean that they – as well as the project delivery profession – have experienced very significant proportional growth. However, growth in the policy profession slowed sharply between 2022 and 2023 following far higher growth rates between 2016 and 2022.

* This report refers to the digital, data and technology (DDaT) profession, though in November 2023 this was rebranded as government digital and data.

Figure 1.9 **Change in civil servant numbers (FTE) by profession, since 2010**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2016–17 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–22. Notes: DDaT = digital, data and technology.

On a departmental basis, the four departments that have added the largest numbers of staff since Q2 2016 were MoJ, Home Office, BEIS and MoD. Together these departments grew by over 51,000, accounting for 46% of the entire growth in the civil service. Figure 1.10 shows how individual professions have contributed to this growth in each department. In MoJ, high numbers of prison and probation officers in HMPPS (and to a lesser extent in HM Courts and Tribunals Service) mean that the operational delivery profession dominates – it is growth in these front-line roles that has driven the growth of the department.

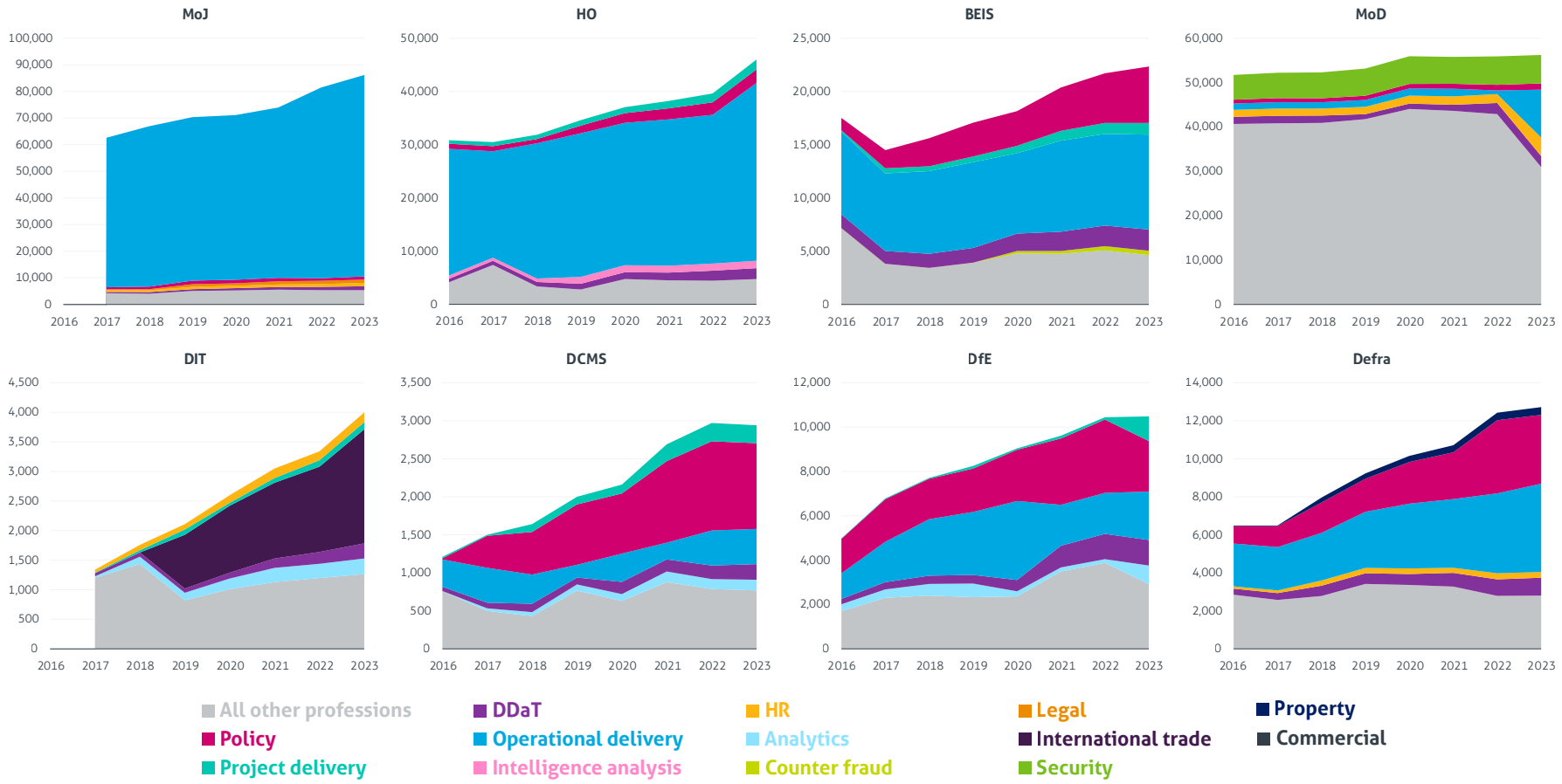
The same applies in the Home Office – possibly due to the recruitment of more immigration and asylum caseworkers, as well as other front-line staff working on migration and the border – and partially in MoD, though here the HR profession has more than doubled in size. As noted above, however, this growth should be considered in light of the staffing reductions in these departments between 2010 and 2016. In BEIS, meanwhile, the policy profession in 2023 was more than four times larger than in 2016 and there were 1,200 more operational delivery professionals.

The four departments that have seen the most proportional growth since Q2 2016 are DIT, DCMS, DfE and Defra. Together, these departments grew by an average of 122%. Growth in DIT,* which expanded consistently until it was merged into DBT, has been mostly driven by the creation and expansion of the international trade profession. In DCMS, the policy profession appears to have expanded very significantly, as has the project delivery profession. In DfE, the expansion has been driven by the addition of similar numbers of project delivery, operational delivery and DDaT professionals. Finally in Defra, growth in the policy and operational delivery professions dominates.

This demonstrates how the growth of the civil service since 2016 has been driven by growth in the operational delivery profession – which has itself been driven by pressures on front-line services, and particularly those run by MoJ and Home Office.

* Here and throughout we refer to departments, including DIT, that were closed or merged as part of the machinery of government changes in February 2023. We do this where relevant to the analysis to which we are referring.

Figure 1.10 **Civil servants (FTE) by profession, selected professions and departments, 2016–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2016–17 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–23. Notes: Scales differ for each department. MoJ data is shown from 2017 because the department did not report the professions of most of its staff in 2016. DIT data was first published in 2017. 'All other professions' includes 'not reported' and 'other'. See Methodology for details of selection of departments and professions, and for a full list of professions.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the policy profession, particularly in BEIS and DCMS, could suggest hiring rounds to assist EU exit preparations, to staff new functions resulting from leaving the EU, or the increased focus in recent years on areas such as digital and technology policy. Growth in the DDaT profession, meanwhile, is unsurprising as the government continues to focus on expanding its digital capability and improving online public-facing services.*

The folly of headcount targets

The Sunak government has flip-flopped on headcount targets

The size of the civil service has been a continuous source of commentary and controversy in recent years. In August 2023, for example, there was widespread coverage of research by the TaxPayers' Alliance that was critical of the expansion of the civil service since 2016.[3] Several commentators have called for staff numbers to be cut,[4] and there have been a number of attempts by government to do so.

At the 2021 autumn budget and spending review, when Boris Johnson was prime minister, an 'efficiency and savings review' earmarked efficiency savings of 5% in departmental budgets, which the government said meant that the "non front line" civil service headcount could be reduced to 2019–20 levels by 2024–25.[5] This was superseded by the announcement in May 2022 of an aim to reduce to 2016 levels, equating to a reduction of 91,000 roles.[6]

Sunak then scrapped this target after becoming prime minister in October 2022, saying that he did not believe "top-down targets for civil service headcount reductions are the right way" to ensure "every taxpayer pound goes as far as it possibly can".[7]

A further efficiency and savings review was announced in the 2022 autumn statement. This led to the announcement in the spring budget of 2023 that departments had identified efficiencies going beyond the 5% target set in 2021. At this time the government was clear that it envisaged a lower headcount in the civil service, but would not set specific targets.

Oliver Dowden, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, said in January 2023 that while tight budgets would "certainly" mean a reduction in headcount, the government's approach, in contrast to that of the Johnson administration, was that it would be "driven by outcomes".[8] In March the Cabinet Office minister Alex Burghart went further, saying: "There is no target... we're not saying that we have to reduce headcount by a certain figure."[9]

However, the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, abandoned this approach at the Conservative Party conference in October 2023, announcing plans to reduce civil service headcount to pre-pandemic levels. This would follow an "immediate" cap on civil service headcount at its then current levels.[10] There are a number of uncertainties around

* These conclusions must be treated with some caution, again given the historic poor quality of the data. In some departments, for example, the proportion of the workforce whose profession is not reported has fallen in recent years – making it difficult to determine whether apparent growth in some professions is real, or the result of roles that have always existed being reported for the first time. This is true of MoD in particular, where our 'all other professions' category includes large numbers of staff with an unreported profession, and apparent increases in some professions in recent years coincide with falls in the 'unreported' category. It is also the case that historic poor reporting can suggest unrealistically large changes. In DCMS, for example, the policy profession appears to be no less than 87 times larger in 2023 than in 2016 – which is likely explained by the 510 staff with an unreported profession in 2016.

the cap. The Treasury has said that it does not mean a recruitment freeze, and that ongoing recruitment campaigns (including the Fast Stream) would continue – making it unclear how the cap is operating in practice. The government also claimed that the cap could save up to £1bn by 2025.[11] This is unlikely, as it is based on the misleading assumption that civil service expansion would otherwise have continued at its average rate since 2016. In fact, the latest figures show lower rates of growth in recent quarters than during the pandemic and following the EU referendum, as described above.

To deliver this latest incarnation of a headcount reduction target, departments will be asked to produce plans to reduce headcount to pre-pandemic levels, beginning in the next spending review period (from 2025). The target date for reaching this level was set in November's autumn statement, as the "end of the next spending review period".[12] This would mean reducing the workforce by more than 70,000 roles between 2025/26 and 2027/28.

Government should look forward, not back, when assessing the size of the civil service

The government is right to seek efficiency, and it is legitimate that reducing the size of the civil service forms a part of its plans. It seems uncontroversial that the civil service should be as small as it can be, consistent with fulfilling the government's objectives and maintaining state capability. As discussed above, the civil service has grown substantially since 2016, often at rapid rates. And though this expansion was from a low base, reflects the increase in permanent post-Brexit functions and has been largely driven by the need for more front-line capacity, there is likely to be room to reduce headcount in certain parts of the civil service.

What matters is how that reduction happens. As we have argued before, headcount targets are a blunt tool.[13] There is no objective reason to assume that either of the pre-pandemic or pre-EU referendum periods represented the optimum size of the civil service. The government should instead engage in comprehensive workforce planning – taking a serious look at what the demands on the civil service will be over the medium to long term, before considering what that means for civil service numbers.

This should involve looking forward, not back to convenient markers in the UK's recent history. There will, for example, be huge pressure[14] on public services for the foreseeable future and a likely need for more staffing in areas such as prisons and immigration casework. On the other hand, greater automation, the wider take up of artificial intelligence tools in the public sector and a serious look at the size and spread of back-office professions, such as policy, may push the necessary number of civil servants in the opposite direction.

There are some welcome signs that this kind of thinking is being done. In November Oliver Dowden announced an 'Incubator for AI', which will consider how AI use in government can help to reduce civil service headcount.[15] Hunt's linking of the new headcount target to the cross-government public sector productivity programme, announced in June and being carried out by the chief secretary to the Treasury, is also a positive sign.[16]

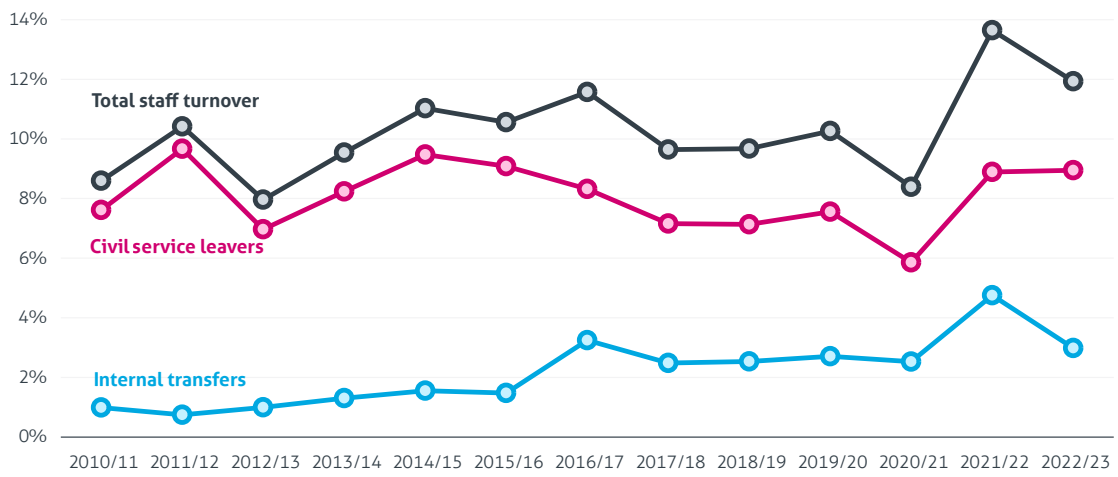
But it is not helpful to have set an arbitrary target in advance. Targeting 'pounds not people' is, as we have argued, a far more sensible approach.[17] And this should start with coherent and comprehensive workforce planning that maps the government's priorities against the resources required to deliver them. This would help to avoid the boom and bust cycles of civil service numbers outlined in this section, as well as the over-reliance on consultants and temporary labour (more on which below).

Turnover of civil servants

'Churn' has fallen but remains high

In debates about the efficacy of the civil service, the frequency with which staff change roles is as much of a theme as their overall numbers. The latest figures show that this long-running problem continued in 2022/23 – when more than one in 10 civil servants either moved between departments or left the civil service entirely (11.9%). This marked a fall on the post-pandemic peak of 13.6% staff turnover in 2021/22, but remains higher than at any other point since at least 2010/11. And these statistics do not include moves *within* government departments, meaning they remain an underestimation of overall civil service 'churn'. This is a problem for the civil service because high turnover damages productivity, undermines subject knowledge and expertise, disrupts projects and increases the resources required for recruitment and training.[18]

Figure 1.11 **Civil service staff turnover (headcount), 2010/11–2022/23**

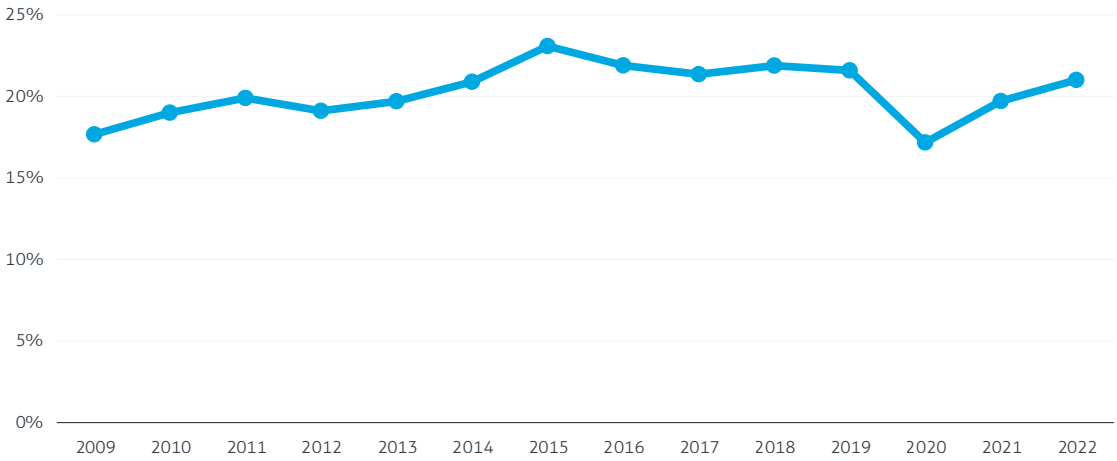


Source: Institute for Government analysis of data provided by the Cabinet Office, 2010–17, and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–22. Notes: Total staff turnover is the sum of civil service leavers and internal transfers of staff.

The reduction in staff turnover in the latest year has been driven by fewer civil servants taking new roles in other government departments, down to 3% in 2022/23 from 4.8% in 2021/22. However, the proportion of civil servants leaving the civil service altogether remained at its post-pandemic peak of 8.9% in 2023/23 – the highest level it has been since 2015/16. This is a particular concern, given declining morale among civil servants, addressed in detail below. Demotivated civil servants are more likely to be open to new and often higher paid employment options outside the service – something that should be seen as a red flag for civil service leaders aiming to retain top talent.

The data also chimes with the results of the Civil Service People Survey, which has found that the proportion of civil servants who want to leave their organisation either as soon as possible or in the next year has increased for the past two years, from a recent low of 17% in 2020 to 21% in 2022. This increase, however, has reversed a sharp fall in the proportion of officials who wanted to leave during the pandemic, and remains comparable to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1.12 **Civil servants wanting to leave their organisation either as soon as possible or within the next 12 months, 2009–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2009–2022.

Turnover is highest at the centre of government, at around a quarter in both the Treasury (26.2%) and the Cabinet Office (23.7%). In some senses this is understandable, given the common model for civil servants to serve a period at the centre of government before moving back into departments, in a mutually beneficial exchange. But this churn also causes problems. For example, the Institute has previously identified high turnover in the Treasury as undermining the department's ability to take a long-term strategic view of government spending.[19]

Figure 1.13 **Civil service staff turnover by department (headcount), 2018/19–2022/23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office: Civil Service Statistics, 2018–23. Notes: Total turnover is the sum of internal transfers and civil service leavers.

Elsewhere, smaller departments, those focused on policy and those with higher concentrations of staff in London tend to have higher than average levels of turnover. DHSC, DLUHC, DCMS, BEIS, Defra and DIT* each had turnover at or above 15% in 2022/23.

By contrast, bigger departments and those operating more front-line services tend to have relatively low levels of turnover. HMRC, the Home Office and MoD – the first two of which, as shown above, have high proportions of staff in the operational delivery profession – each had turnover below the civil service average of 11.9%. Turnover is, however, slightly above average at DWP – at 12.4% – and is notably above average at MoJ at 15.5%, likely reflecting high rates of turnover among HM Prison and Probation Service staff.[20] Turnover remains lowest in the Scottish and Welsh governments, at 6% and 4.7% respectively.

Structure and location of the civil service

Restructuring departments

Machinery of government changes are disruptive, but there was a logic to Sunak's 2023 restructuring

Prime ministers often change departmental structures – whether to signal their commitment to a policy area, bring together areas they feel fit well or for more political reasons.[21] In February 2023, a few months after becoming prime minister, Rishi Sunak embarked on a significant set of such departmental reorganisations. Three new departments were created: energy and net zero policy were combined into the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), in an echo of the former Department of Energy and Climate Change. Business and trade policy were reunited in the Department for Business and Trade (DBT). The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) was more novel, created from various parts of the rest of government, especially the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, since renamed as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

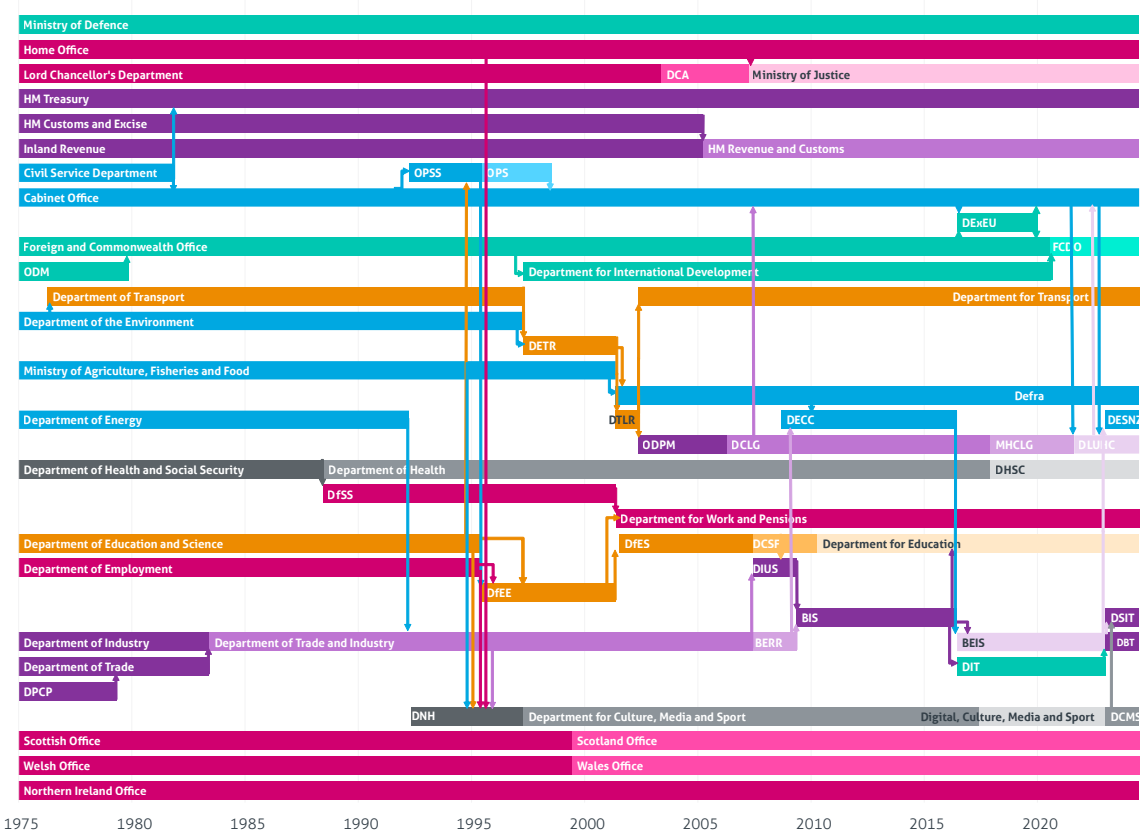
Machinery of government (MoG) changes are only rarely worth the cost, disruption and distraction.[22] Sunak's reorganisations, like all others, created difficulties with unclear lines of responsibility as well as more mundane but important factors like email and IT confusion. These and other issues – which are real but often imperceptible to ministers – take a long time to address: at the time of writing there are still cases where file sharing within the new departments is impeded between staff formerly of separate departments, and problems with security passes and other logistical frustrations have persisted. In a further sign of disruption, it remained unclear for most of 2023 how many staff the new departments had – despite the changes formally occurring in February, they were unable to report quarterly staff numbers in March, June or September.** The first data on the new departments' staff numbers came in December.

* Prior to the full implementation of the MoG changes announced in February 2023, in which BEIS and DIT were merged to become DBT.

** In each of these three quarterly releases of public sector employment figures, which include civil service staff numbers, the ONS noted regarding the machinery of government changes that "the full transition programme is yet to complete and consequently the new departments were not in a position to report per the new structure for the [month] 2023 statistics. All affected departments and their associated agencies will appear under existing hierarchies until the transition programme is complete."

All that said, the latest MoG changes do have merit and will likely prove worthwhile in the longer term. BEIS, the main forerunner department, had become large, with a vast remit spanning very different areas of policy. In this context, there was a logic in returning to a structure that had previously existed, and the transition was made less disruptive than others by the fact that the relevant teams had remained distinct within BEIS. Similarly, business and trade sit naturally alongside one another in DBT. The mistake was arguably the creation of the Department for International Trade in the first instance, which created an incentive to prioritise concluding trade agreements over securing the best outcome from a business or economic perspective. Internalising more of the trade-offs in one department may lead to better decision making.

Figure 1.14 **History of departmental reorganisations, 1975 to 22 January 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of data from House of Commons, and Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, 1986.

DSIT, with fewer direct policy and operational levers, has the most uncertain future. Its formation is clearly a result of the prime minister's personal interest in its agenda, and there is a risk that it currently relies overly on political influence for its clout. Building on DCMS's success in expanding its data, digital and technology capacity was an alternative option. Now that the department is established, however, it is important that it is fully embedded into Whitehall – for example, by ensuring it has an established working relationship with the Cabinet Office on digital and data issues.

Public bodies

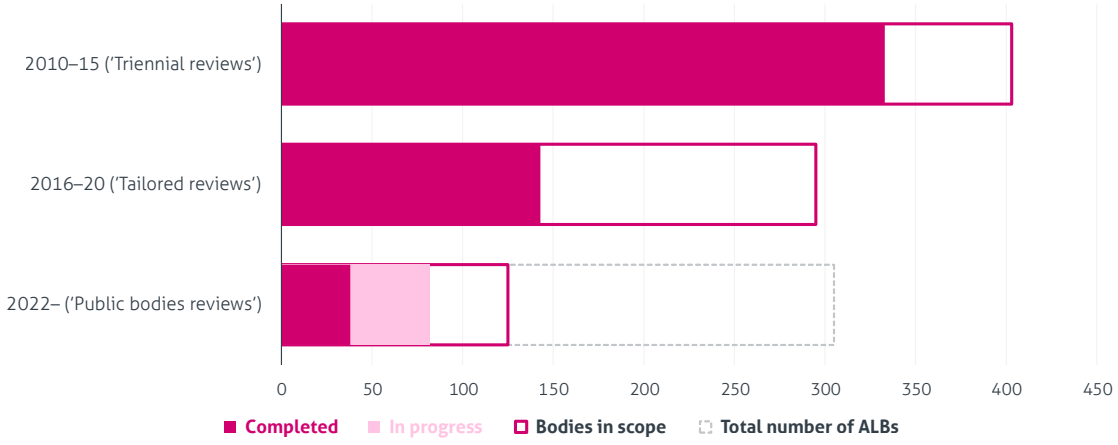
There has been progress in reviewing public bodies...

While less eye-catching than large departmental reorganisations, changes to the landscape of public bodies also have a significant impact on the functioning of the state. Since 2010, there have been a series of programmes reviewing the need for, and performance and governance arrangements of, the hundreds of public bodies, including arm's-length bodies (ALBs),[23] that deliver public or government services.

The current public bodies review programme was launched in April 2022.[24] It has more realistic goals than its predecessors – using a self-assessment process and departmental prioritisation to determine which arm's-length bodies require full-scale reviews, rather than aiming to review all such bodies within one parliament. Reflecting this emphasis, the Cabinet Office has committed to an 'initial' 125 reviews[25] – with a focus on larger bodies meaning that the vast majority of ALB activity by expenditure is in scope.[26]

In all, the programme appears to be progressing more in line with expectations than did the 'tailored reviews' of 2016–20. Of the 82 reviews launched as of January 2024 approaching half have been completed (although nearly a third of this 38 have not yet been published). The number of bodies scheduled for review in 2023/24 is slightly larger than last year, with three reviews carried over.[27] Interviews with reviewed bodies suggest that while the self-assessment process is detailed, it is helpfully explicit as to how bodies are being assessed, giving them greater clarity and certainty than before.

Figure 1.15 **Public body reviews conducted, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, public bodies reports, 2015 and 2020; Cabinet Office, 'List of Public Bodies for Review in 2022/23' and 'List of Public Bodies for Review in 2023/24'; and figures provided by the Cabinet Office on reviews completed and launched since 2022. Notes: For 2010–2015 and 2016–2020, data only includes bodies in existence at the end of the review period. Only non-departmental public bodies were within scope of the tailored reviews. Not all ALBs are being reviewed as part of the 2022 review programme.

There are, however, some potential concerns about the programme. While the emphasis on prioritisation should focus resources towards the highest-risk bodies, many reviews completed in the first year of the programme have been of smaller, lower-spending bodies – with the danger that reviews of higher-spending, more strategically important bodies are delayed.

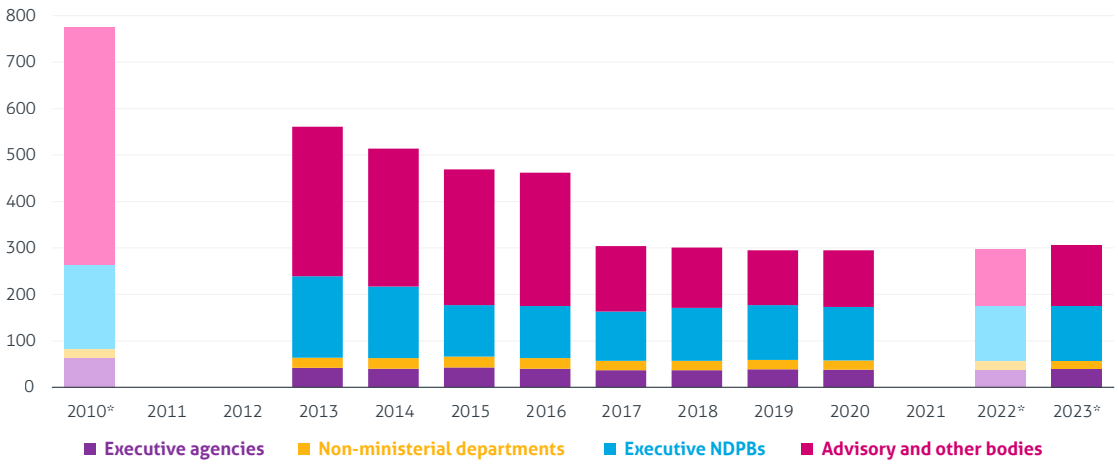
Interviews with reviewed bodies also suggest that sponsorship arrangements between ALBs and their parent departments are not being properly considered, partly because of the major role departments themselves play in the process – and despite consideration of sponsorship arrangements being an explicit aim of the reviews. Recruiting independent reviewers to lead each process was intended to help with this, but their levels of experience and robustness have varied. Departments should welcome critical feedback and take the learning approach to reviews that they would expect of ALBs.

Finally, compliance with the requirement to identify savings of more than 5% of day-to-day spending through the reviews has been inconsistent. While the imposition of fairly arbitrary financial targets across the diversity of ALBs is unhelpful, in the absence of any change to the review guidance the Cabinet Office should ensure this requirement is consistently observed.*

...and a welcome shift of focus, away from reducing numbers as an end in itself

Previous reviews of public bodies have focused explicitly on reducing their number. The Cameron government's 'bonfire of the quangos' and its aftermath saw the overall number of ALBs fall by 62% between 2010 and 2020.[28] While the Cabinet Office has not published the number of ALBs since the start of the pandemic, when there were 295 bodies,[29] it told us that there are now 305 – a level last seen in 2017.

Figure 1.16 **Arm's-length bodies, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of departmental annual reports (2010); Cabinet Office, public bodies datasets, 2013–20; GOV.UK announcements of public bodies reforms (2022); and figures provided by the Cabinet Office (2023). Notes: Government did not publish this dataset for 2010–12 or 2021–23, so alternative sources have been used for these years. Figures for 2010 and 2022 are not completely consistent with other datasets.

The rising number of ALBs partly reflects new bodies being created to administer functions previously undertaken by EU institutions; for example, the Trade Remedies Authority and the Office for Environmental Protection. But new bodies have also been established for other reasons: to provide infrastructure finance (the UK Infrastructure Bank); to fund scientific research (the Advanced Research and Invention Agency);

* The Institute has previously argued that while improving value for money is an important consideration, the imposition of arbitrary financial targets is unhelpful, particularly when improving the performance of public bodies might entail short-term investments to improve efficiency in the long term.

to approve and inspect schemes to enable walking and cycling (Active Travel England); and to deliver broadband and 4G to rural areas (Building Digital UK). The remainder of the increase reflects the reclassification of existing organisations; for example, bodies previously 'unclassified' being brought into the more strictly defined category of ALB,* or largely state-funded private or third-sector organisations being incorporated into government.**[30]

The increase in the number of ALBs obscures the fact that 11 have been closed since 2020. The Birmingham Organising Committee for the 2022 Commonwealth Games closed, as planned. Other organisations were brought into their sponsoring departments (such as NHS Improvement) or merged with other public bodies.[31] Some were simply abolished, such as the Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise, which was closed in 2021 following a review by the Department for Transport.[32]

Nonetheless, this modest rise in the number of ALBs suggests that the government has tempered its ambition to reduce the number of public bodies as an aim in itself. The new review programme has so far emphasised cost efficiency instead. This is welcome, as governments' preoccupation with driving down numbers has previously led to the short-sighted abolition of useful (if flawed) bodies like the Audit Commission,[33] or mergers of bodies whose functions were mismatched, as was arguably the case with the creation of Public Health England.[34]

It is, however, important to note that officials conducting these reviews of public bodies are still required to consider the government's 'three tests' for the existence of a public body.[35] These tests should be changed – as the Institute set out in our 2023 report *When should public bodies exist?*, the current 'three tests' unhelpfully stipulate that ALBs should be treated as a 'last resort' – even when they would be the most effective mechanism for delivering government objectives.[36]

Moving civil servants out of London

The government has made progress moving civil servants out of London

Efforts to make the civil service less London-centric have been a long-running, but recently increasingly successful, theme of civil service reform. The Johnson government instigated a renewed effort to relocate civil servants following the 2019 general election and, at the March 2020 budget, a target was set for 22,000 more roles to be based outside London by 2030. June 2021's Declaration on Government Reform subsequently added a target of 50% of senior civil service roles being based outside London by the same year. While we are critical of targets for overall headcount reductions, because they target a proxy (people) rather than the root ambition of the policy (to reduce the cost of the civil service), headcount targets for relocation are more useful because the end goal is the precise change sought: to move people.

In December 2023 the government announced it was bringing the 22,000 target forward to 2027, in part because it had already relocated just over 16,000 roles. It also explained that the government excludes Scottish and Welsh government civil servants from Places for Growth targets, although stopped short of explaining exactly

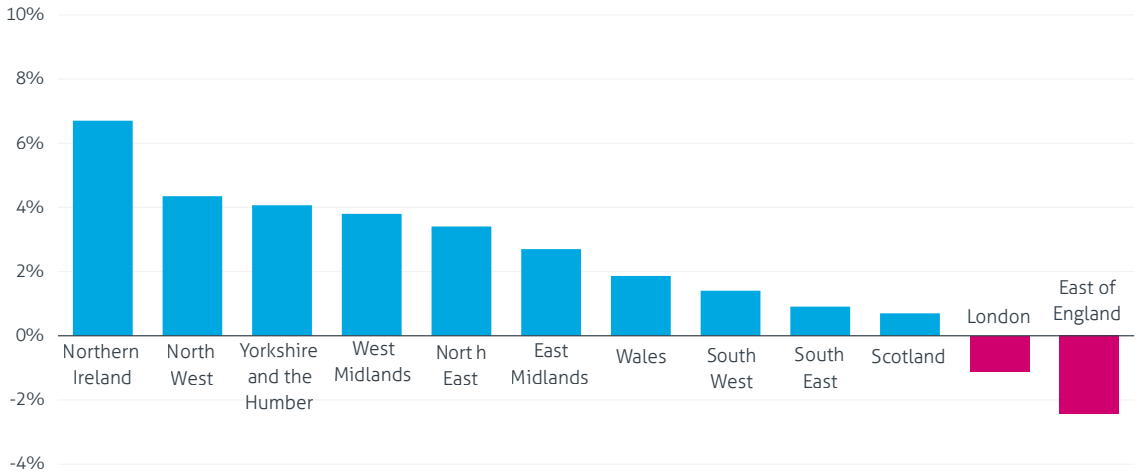
* British Technology Investments and the Financial Reporting Council are examples.

** Oak National Academy, which began as an online classroom and teaching resource hub during the pandemic, is an example.

how the 22,000 target itself is calculated. A recent Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) report suggested the figures referred to the number of new roles created outside London, rather than the number of London roles moved outside the capital.[37]

The recent progress made is positive. Between 2022 and 2023 the number of civil servants in London reduced for the first time since 2017, while the number in most other regions increased.

Figure 1.17 **Change in number of civil servants by region (headcount) between 2022 and 2023**



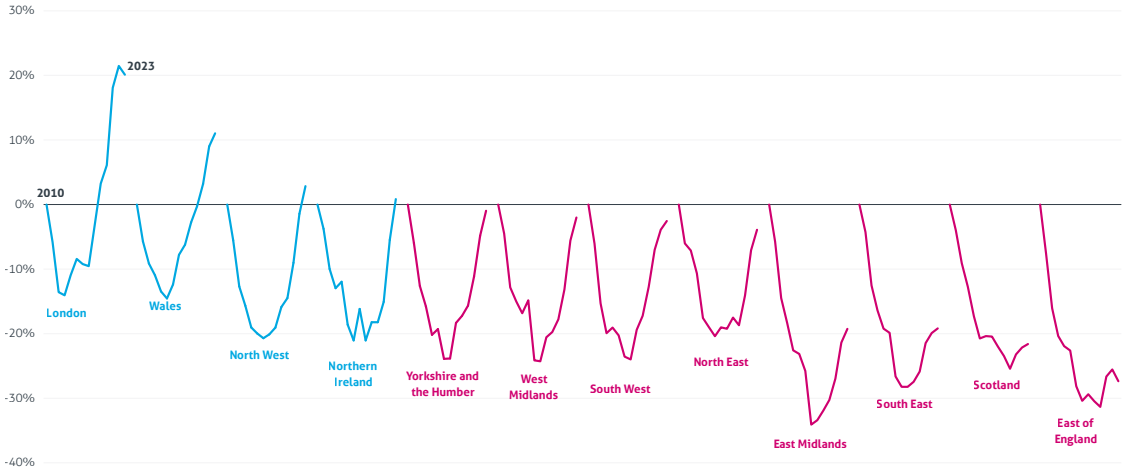
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2023. Notes: Figures exclude civil servants based overseas and civil servants working for the Scottish or Welsh governments.

But this progress must be set in the context of a civil service that has become substantially more London-centric since 2010. As the civil service contracted from 2010–16, all regions in England saw a deeper proportional decline in staff numbers than London. During the post-Brexit expansion, London bounced back more strongly, and from a higher base. This means that, in total, the number of civil servants in London has grown by 20% over the past 13 years – the most of any region (Figure 1.18).

The percentage of senior civil servants in London has decreased from 74% in 2020 to 69% in 2023. This demonstrates progress towards the government's 50% target (Figure 1.19). But it also shows the scale of the challenge the government still faces. A large proportion of policy professionals also remain based in London (67%) compared to the other nations and regions of the UK (Figure 1.20), while an analysis of the regional composition of the whole civil service shows the extent to which even grade 6 and 7 roles are concentrated in the capital (Figure 1.21).*

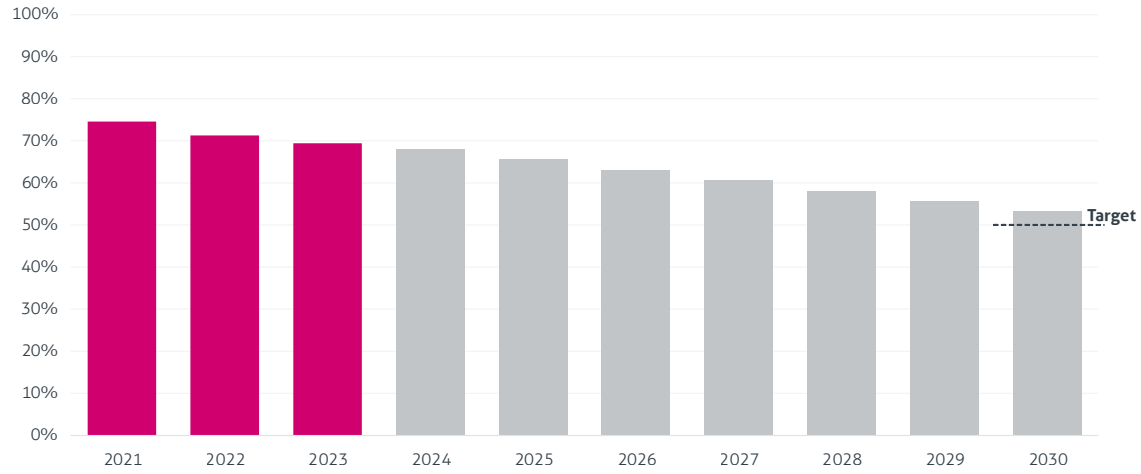
* The data used in Figure 1.20 and Figure 1.21 includes civil servants in the Scottish and Welsh government. This is because the Civil Service Statistics do not break down in a way that allows Scottish and Welsh civil servants to be excluded from these analyses, as per Places for Growth's clarified methodology.

Figure 1.18 **Change in number of civil servants by region (headcount) between 2010 and 2023**



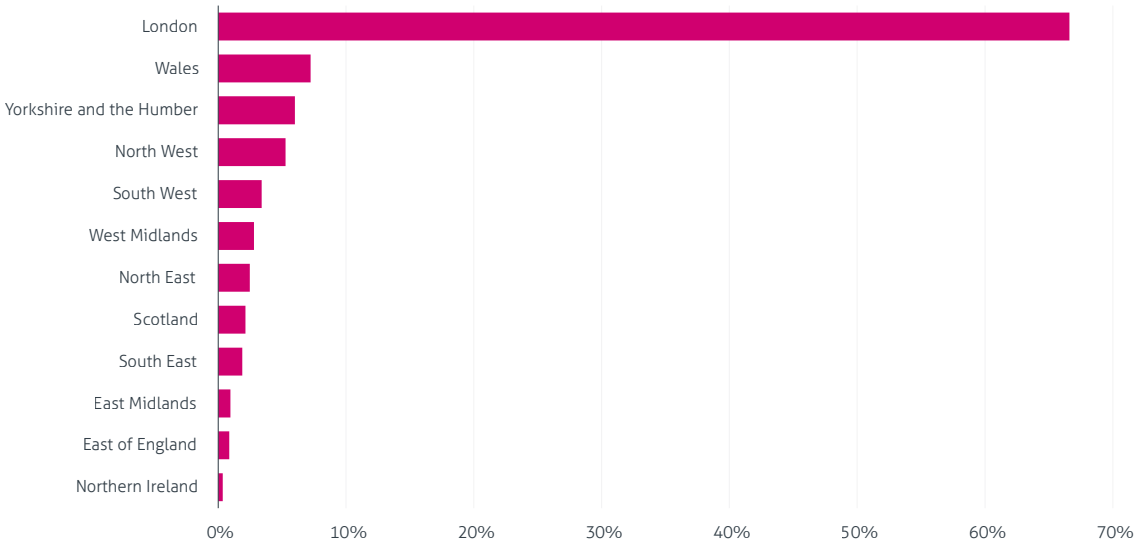
Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–18 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2019–23. Notes: Figures exclude the security services, civil servants working for the Scottish or Welsh governments and civil servants based overseas.

Figure 1.19 **Senior civil servants based in London, actual and forecast, 2021–30**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Places for Growth Relocations Data 2020-2023', Notes: The grey bars represent a forecast based on a linear trajectory. The government aims to reduce the proportion of senior civil servants outside London to 50% of the total by 2030.

Figure 1.20 **Location of civil servants in the policy profession, 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2023. Notes: Figures exclude civil servants based overseas and include civil servants working for the Scottish and Welsh governments.

Figure 1.21 **Location of civil servants by grade (percentage of grade in each region), 2023**

	Whole civil service	AO/AA	EO	SEO/HEO	Grades 6/7	SCS
London	20%	9%	16%	24%	41%	62%
North West	13%	15%	15%	11%	9%	5%
Scotland	10%	13%	12%	10%	9%	6%
South West	9%	7%	7%	12%	10%	5%
South East	8%	9%	10%	8%	6%	4%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8%	8%	9%	7%	7%	4%
Wales	7%	9%	8%	7%	6%	5%
West Midlands	7%	8%	7%	6%	4%	3%
North East	7%	9%	7%	6%	4%	2%
East Midlands	5%	6%	5%	4%	3%	1%
East of England	4%	5%	5%	3%	2%	2%
Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%
Not reported	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2023. Notes: AO/AA = administrative officer/administrative assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior executive officer/higher executive officer; and SCS = senior civil servant. Percentages calculated from headcount figures. Figures exclude civil servants based overseas and include Scottish and Welsh government civil servants.

There is increasing evidence that relocation improves the civil service's effectiveness

As the number of relocated roles grows, there is increasing practical evidence that moving more civil servants – particularly policy professionals and senior civil servants – outside the capital can make the civil service more effective, in three main ways.[38]

First, it offers talented people who cannot or do not want to live or work in London more opportunities to take on senior or policy roles. For example, over two thirds of Treasury officials at the Darlington Economic Campus are new to the civil service (69%), and most of the DEC's staff have been recruited from Darlington and its surrounding areas (80%). This allows civil servants from different backgrounds to more effectively contribute to the civil service. For example, the Cross Government Social Mobility Network chair described relocation as "game-changing" for the civil service's ability to attract people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.[39]

Second, it helps to change the way policy is made by exposing policy makers to different views and stakeholders. As one interviewee for our research into Darlington put it: "In London, we read what Torsten Bell thinks. Up here, we're talking to different people, hearing different things."

Third, it helps to increase 'pride in place' and give an (albeit limited and highly localised) economic boost, and in so doing supports the government's levelling up agenda. One interviewee in Darlington described how the campus had put the town "on the map"; another called it "a beacon you can hold up to show what a great place we can be".

But setting up new offices is one thing; making them work in the long term is another. There are several factors critical to the relative success of relocation so far:

- **Support from key stakeholders.** There must be continued senior civil service presence and leaders must inject a sense of identity and purpose into a new office; ministers must give positive permission for staff to practise hybrid ways of working and continue to visit; staff should have viable and varied career routes.
- **A focus on attracting and retaining the best people.** Jobs in the civil service must be more accessible to external recruits; career paths should be adapted to suit local workforces and should model best practice to the rest of the civil service, with reduced churn; and offices must establish and maintain their own versions of sought-after 'accelerator roles', which advance people's civil service careers.
- **Keeping focused on being national policy makers.** While embracing and demonstrating the benefits of developing and providing policy advice from outside London, staff must retain a national focus and be alert to the risks posed by working across multiple sites and away from parliament.
- **Co-locating departments in a thematic campus.** Co-location, ideally in the same building, can reduce departmental silos. It can also give civil servants varied career paths, while also channelling movement between jobs more productively to allow officials to develop greater subject-specific knowledge.
- **Leaning into the existing strengths of an area** when deciding which departments to base there. This makes it easier to recruit staff with the necessary skills and improves the chances of an economic multiplier effect.

There is evidence that the civil service has learnt the right lessons from relocation success so far. For example, recent Places for Growth guidance encouraged departments and public bodies to co-locate in thematic campuses, while the December 2023 announcement of a DSIT second HQ in Greater Manchester and DBT second HQ in Darlington leant into the existing strengths of those areas.[40]

But other aspects of the December announcement were less encouraging. DESNZ's second HQ seems to be a standalone office located in Aberdeen, a city that currently only has around 50 UK civil servants. As it stands, building a meaningful civil service career in the city will be hard and so it may not be a magnet for policy professionals or senior staff – the two groups it is particularly important for relocated offices to attract if they are to make an impact. Building a thematic campus around net zero could be a more viable long-term approach.

Budgets and major projects

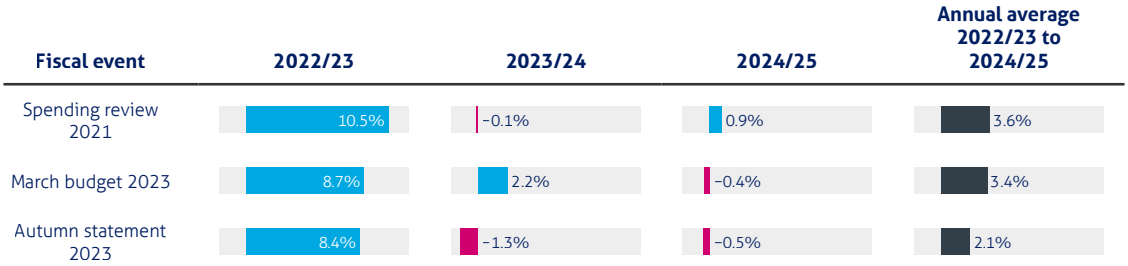
Departmental spending

Inflation is squeezing already tight departmental budgets – with staff costs set to shrink significantly

Departments are struggling with increasingly tight budgets. The 2021 spending review, which covered three years to 2024/25, was viewed as relatively generous at the time of announcement. Day-to-day spending was set to increase substantially relative to (non-Covid) spending in 2021/22 in the following three years.

Since then, inflation has been much higher than expected. This has meant higher costs facing departments, most importantly through higher pay awards to public sector workers.* The government has provided some extra money to prop up struggling public services, but even so the overall generosity of plans has now been eroded (as shown in Figure 1.22). What began as a spending review of comparable generosity to the 2004 exercise – which included relatively generous settlements for most departments – now resembles the plans laid out in 2007, which many commentators at the time considered tight.[41]

Figure 1.22 **Real-terms change in day-to-day spending forecast at fiscal events, 2022/23 to 2024/25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook, October 2021, March 2023 and November 2023 and HM Treasury, Spending Review, October 2021. Notes: 'Day-to-day' spending refers to RDEL. Excludes temporary coronavirus-related spending in 2021/22, temporary energy support in 2022/23 and 2023/24 and adjustments to pension contributions due to the SCAPE rate in 2024/25. Data shows change relative to a year earlier deflated using the GDP deflator.

As Figure 1.22 shows, spending increases have not been even across the three years covered by the spending review but were 'front-loaded'. This means departments planning their budgets for next year (2024/25) are, on average, facing real-terms reductions following cuts this year. Delivering these cuts will be difficult given growing demands on government spending, not least due to declining public service performance outlined in the Institute's *Performance Tracker*.[42]

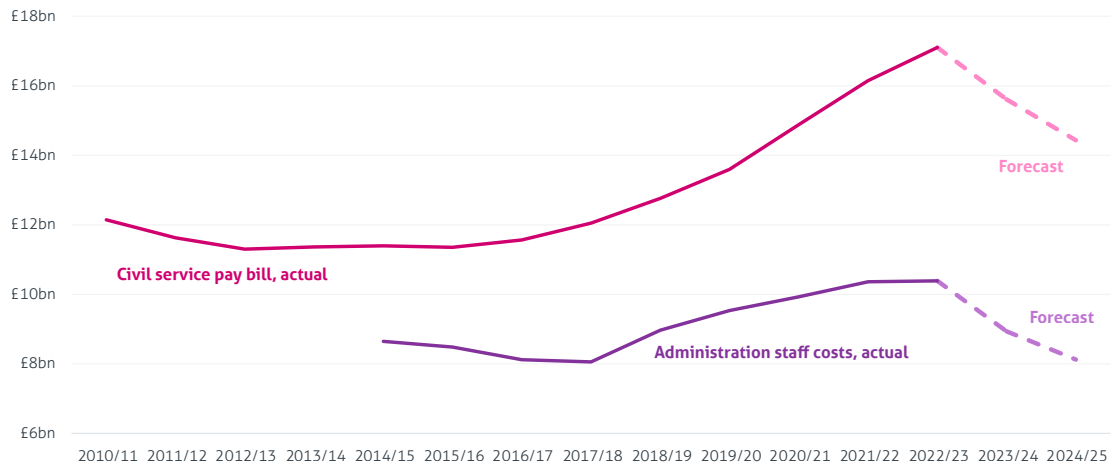
These pressures also have an impact in Whitehall. Most government spending is on the programmes it delivers through the NHS, schools and defence. Only a fraction – around 3.5% of day-to-day spending – goes directly on the civil service. This spending is not

* Throughout this section, we use the GDP deflator to capture inflation. This is a measure of economy-wide inflation that is used to assess real-terms changes in departmental budgets. Over the past couple of years this has increased less than the Consumer Price Index, which measures prices facing households. This is because many of the goods that have increased fastest are imports, and so are not captured by the GDP deflator. Costs facing government have increased less than costs facing households, though: while energy makes up 10% of household budgets it accounts for only around 1% of public service budgets.

exempt from the planned squeeze next year; in fact, the government's official spending plans imply very large cuts in spending on civil servants over this financial year and next.

As Figure 1.23 shows, administration staff cost budgets submitted by departments in the middle of 2023 show spending 22% lower in real terms in 2024/25 than 2022/23. If we assume a similar fall to the overall civil service pay bill, these plans have total spending on civil servants falling by £2.5bn in cash terms between last financial year and next year.* Given likely inflation-linked increases in pay, this would require cutting civil service numbers by over 20%, or approximately 100,000, within the year. It would take spending on the civil service relative to total spending to its lowest level since at least 2010.

Figure 1.23 **Civil service pay bill and administration staff costs, 2010/11–2024/25 (2023/24 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses, 2017–2023; Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2010–2023 and OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook, November 2023. Notes: Civil service pay bill calculated as total number of civil servants multiplied by mean civil service pay. For each financial year, pay bill is the average of the two calendar year values. Administration staff costs is staff costs within administration resource departmental expenditure limits. Dashed lines indicate forecasts. For civil service pay bill, the forecast assumes it follows the same path as administration staff costs.

These plans appear to be undeliverable. To meet Jeremy Hunt's target to reduce headcount to pre-pandemic levels, the number of civil servants would need to fall by more than 70,000 roles, but not until some time after the current spending review ending in 2024/25. These plans are also only indicative, and departments retain flexibility to spend their overall administration budgets differently, spending more on staff and less on other costs. As a result, we should expect spending plans for the next financial year to be updated to present a more realistic path. Even if these plans become more realistic, it is likely that spending on the civil service will still be a target for some savings next year, via Hunt's cap on existing headcount and targeted recruitment freezes. If spending on staff followed planned overall administration budgets (rather than being cut more severely, as current pencilled-in plans imply), spending would still be slated to fall by 7.5% in real terms in 2024/25.**

* Though some civil servants are not classified within administrative spending.

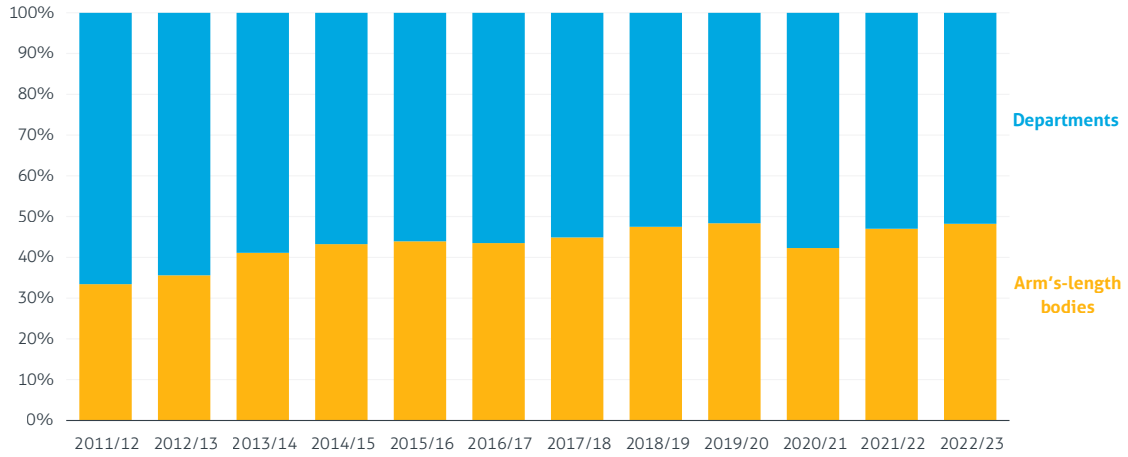
** The path for overall administration DEL set out in official Treasury documents implies spending remaining flat in real terms in 2023/24, before falling in 2024/25. This seems like a more realistic path for spending than the figures for staff costs, given 2023/24 is three quarters completed.

Beyond 2025, no firm departmental totals have been allocated, nor a budget for spending on Whitehall. However, the overall spending envelope pencilled in to the government's fiscal plans is extremely tight. Whether or not the government after the next election, whoever it may be, commits to Hunt's planned reduction in civil service numbers, these tight overall plans imply Whitehall budgets are likely to be very tight for several years to come.

That means government is likely to focus on achieving better value for money where it is being spent, although Institute for Government analysis suggests that improving public services will also require more money.[43] Spending money more efficiently in public services will also depend on an effective civil service. A major squeeze on administrative spending, as implied by current plans, could make that more difficult.

The proportion of departments' day-to-day spending via ALBs has increased

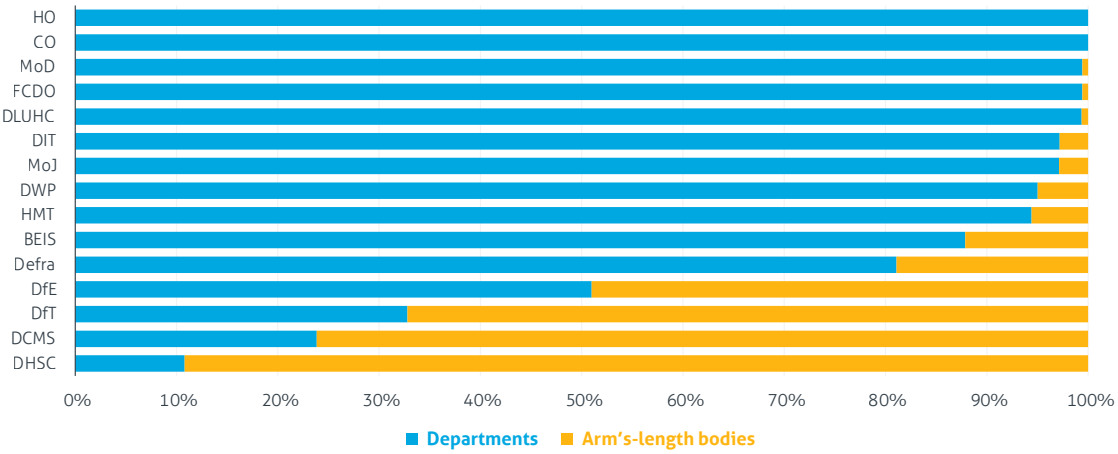
Figure 1.24 **Day-to-day departmental group spending by spending body, 2011/12–2022/23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HMT, OSCAR II database, 2011/12 to 2022/23. Notes: 'Day-to-day' spending refers to RDEL. Excludes a small amount of spending categorised as devolved. For full details, see Methodology.

A significant proportion of departmental budgets is spent by their ALBs – and these proportions have increased slightly in 2022/23 in comparison to the 'core' departments. While this increased share of spending may partly result from a rise in the number of ALBs, it also reflects spending in core departments like DHSC and DfE beginning to fall back to pre-pandemic levels, following a period of unusually high spending by central government.[44] NHS England is the highest spending ALB, accounting for more than half of the total ALB spending shown.

Figure 1.25 **Day-to-day departmental group spending by department and spending body, 2022/23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HMT, OSCAR II database, 2022/23. Notes: 'Day-to-day' spending refers to RDEL. Excludes a small amount of spending categorised as devolved. For full details see Methodology.

The amount spent through ALBs varies considerably between departments. The department with the highest proportion of day-to-day spending delivered via ALBs is, by a significant margin, DHSC – reflecting the scale of spending channelled through NHS England. By contrast, other departments such as DWP deliver major public services directly from the core department.

Major projects

The government's major projects portfolio continues to grow in size and cost

Many of the government's most complex, expensive and long-term projects are brought together in the government major projects portfolio (GMPP)[*,45], maintained by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA). For projects of sufficient size and significance – from the delivery of T levels to the replacement of Trident – this allows the IPA to monitor their progress and support departments with delivery. The GMPP therefore provides a useful snapshot of the government's ability to manage and deliver these complicated projects.

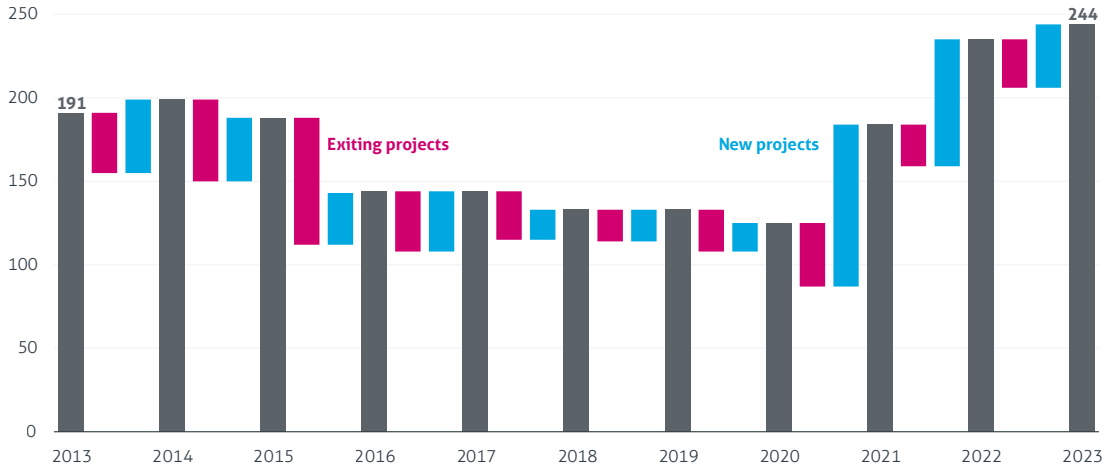
After a five-year period of reduction between 2015 and 2020, in 2021 the portfolio grew by nearly half to 184 projects from 125 in 2020. As well as an increase in the number of large projects being undertaken by departments, this growth was, at least in part, due to a change in the IPA's approach. It is now doing more 'front-loading' – including projects in the GMPP at an earlier stage of their development.

The rate of growth slowed last year: the number of new projects joining the portfolio halved between 2022 and 2023. Some 38 projects were added in 2023, including HMRC's Northern Ireland delivery programme to ease customs checks on goods

[*] The GMPP is a list of complex projects delivered by government departments. Projects are included in the portfolio after approval by the Treasury after consideration of the following characteristics: cost above the 'designated authority limit'; risk of breaching the 'departmental spending limit'; significant contractual obligations beyond the agreed spending plan; contentious or a risk to the public sector; requirement for primary legislation or statutory requirement for HMT approval

shipped from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, in line with the terms of the Windsor framework. Most of these 38 projects were previously existing initiatives reclassified as major projects[46] – only nine were entirely new in 2023.

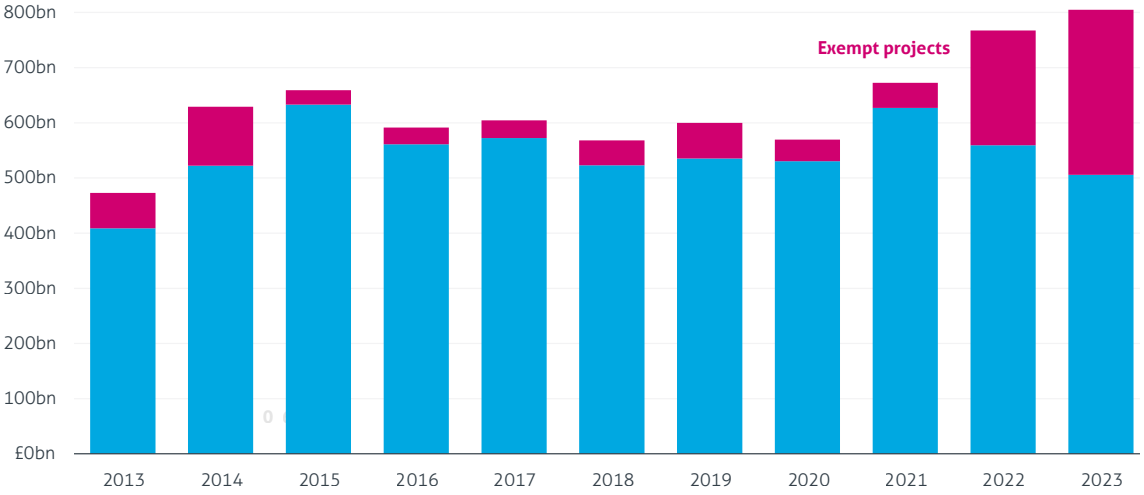
Figure 1.26 **Size and composition of government major projects portfolio, 2013–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Annual Report on Major Projects*, 2013–23. Notes: Changes to major project selection criteria in 2021 resulted in a reversal in the decline in both size and costs of the portfolio.

The individual costs of most projects are published – the most expensive include the geological disposal of radioactive waste, the Universal Credit roll-out and Dreadnought-class submarines, each of which costs more than £20bn.[47] Some costs of individual projects are exempt from publication on grounds of commercial sensitivity or national security. But the total cost of exempt projects is published. This now accounts for 40% of the total cost of the portfolio (an increase from £208bn in 2022 to £348bn in 2023 at 2023/24 prices); as the criteria for exemption hasn't changed, this may be a function of the phasing of projects in scope but it presents an unwelcome reduction in the extent to which parliament and the public can scrutinise the government's delivery of major projects.

Figure 1.27 **Whole-life cost of government major projects portfolio, 2013–23 (2023/24 prices)**

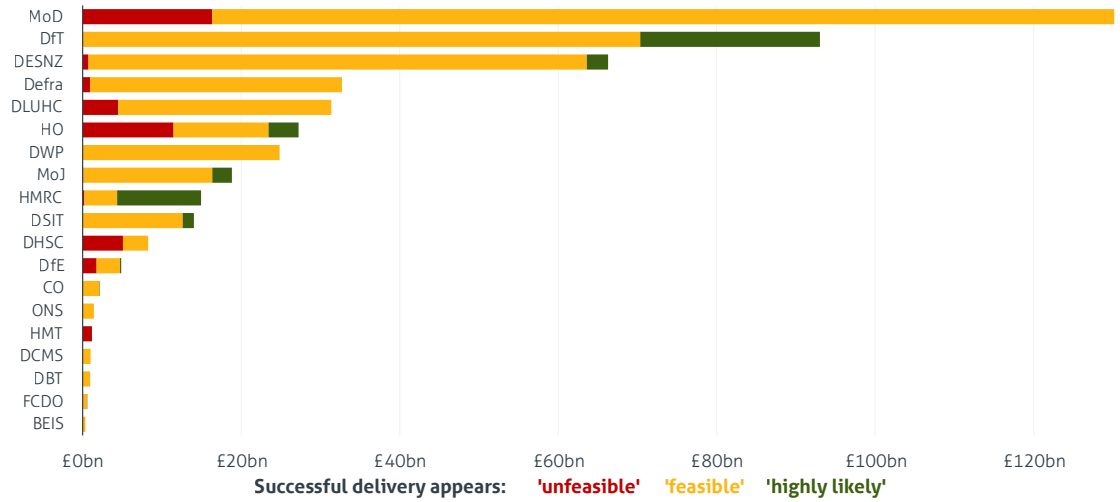


Source: Institute for Government analysis of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Annual Report on Major Projects*, 2013–23. Notes: Whole-life costs adjusted applying GDP deflator from the year they were reported. Exempt projects are projects with data (including costings) that are exempt from publication; for example, for national security or commercial reasons. Previously exempt projects can become non-exempt, and vice versa.

The whole-life cost of the GMPP has increased by £87bn to £853bn (in 2023/24 prices) between 2022 and 2023. Nearly two thirds of this increase came from projects new to the GMPP, while exempt projects are of relatively higher value within the portfolio: the number of exempt projects grew by 21%, their cost increased by 67% in real terms.

It is also notable that the monetised benefits of the programme have fallen below the total whole-life cost, returning £758bn from £805bn of cost. However, the portfolio includes projects that bring non-monetary benefits including those relating to national security and the provision of justice.[48]

Figure 1.28 **Whole-life cost of government major projects portfolio by department and delivery confidence rating, 2023**



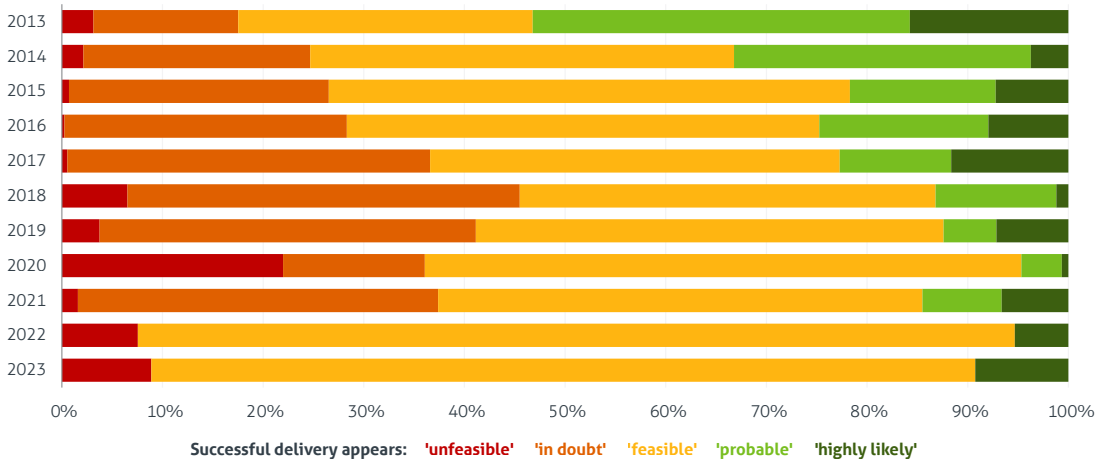
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Annual Report on Major Projects*, 2022–23. Notes: Projects that are exempt from publication – for example, for national security or commercial reasons – are excluded.

There has been a small improvement in confidence of successful delivery of these projects

A key part of the IPA's function in monitoring major projects is assessing the confidence in successful delivery, assigning them red, amber or green ratings, with red projects considered undeliverable and prioritised for extra support. The system of classification was simplified in 2022,[*,49] making comparison over time more difficult – but while the proportion of projects rated 'red' has fallen from 12% in 2022 to 10% in 2023,[50] the value of these projects has increased year on year. Confidence in delivery has declined over time, with the proportion of the portfolio rated 'green', and previously 'amber/green', falling from 53% of total cost in 2013 to 15% in 2021. Eleven per cent of the cost of the portfolio was rated highly likely to be delivered successfully by 2023, though the change in the methodology from 2022 makes it difficult to assess whether this marks a further deterioration.

* In April 2021 the IPA moved from a five-category classification to three categories of 'unfeasible', 'feasible' and 'highly likely' represented by red, amber and green. The simplification was introduced to refocus the approach to make proactive interventions in the lowest rated projects. However, it has also reduced the capacity to differentiate between the projects subsequently grouped together as amber.

Figure 1.29 **Whole-life cost of government major projects portfolio by delivery confidence rating, 2013–23**



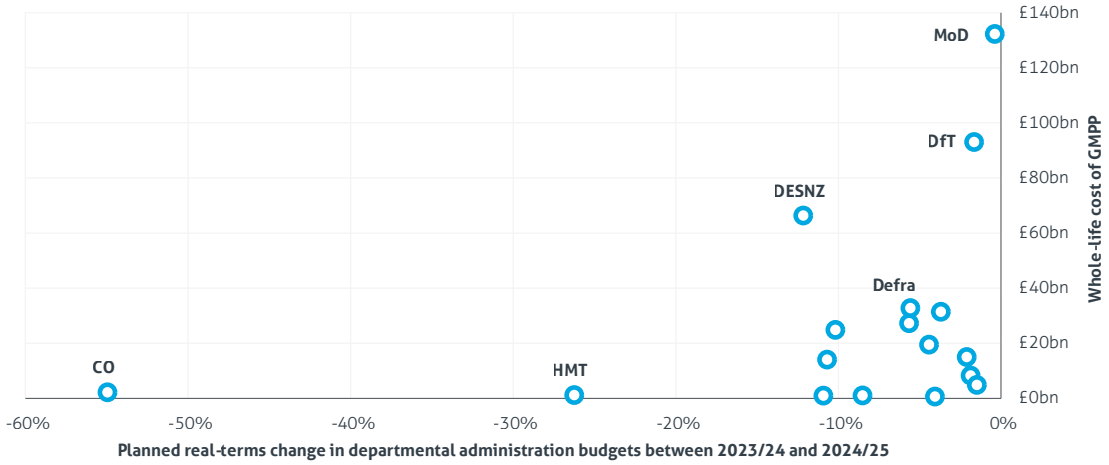
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Infrastructure and Projects Authority, Annual Report on Major Projects, 2013–23. Notes: Projects that are exempt from publication – for example, for national security or commercial reasons – are excluded. The IPA delivery confidence classification was simplified in 2022 with 'in doubt' and 'probable' removed as categories.

Given the increase in the number and total whole-life cost of the projects within the portfolio, the IPA is likely to be spreading limited resource more thinly across the portfolio. Part of its response to this is to focus on those projects that align most closely with government's priorities, as set out in the latest (unpublished) outcome delivery plans for departments.

The IPA's chief executive has also highlighted the continued work of the organisation to develop project management capabilities elsewhere in government. For example, 37% of senior responsible owners have completed the Major Projects Leadership Academy[*,51] and a further 2,000 will have been accredited by the government project delivery profession by the end of 2024.[52] This progress could be threatened by reductions to administration spending, if they result in a contraction of project delivery capability within departments.

* The senior responsible owner (SRO) is accountable for a project's delivery of its outcomes and benefits. The SRO owns the project business case and is accountable for project governance. See: Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Government Functional Standard GovS 002: Project delivery*, 15 July 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1002673/1195-APS-CCS0521656700-001-Project-Delivery-standard_Web.pdf

Figure 1.30 **Whole-life cost of government major projects portfolio, 2023, compared to planned real-terms change in administration budgets between 2022/23 and 2024/25, by department**

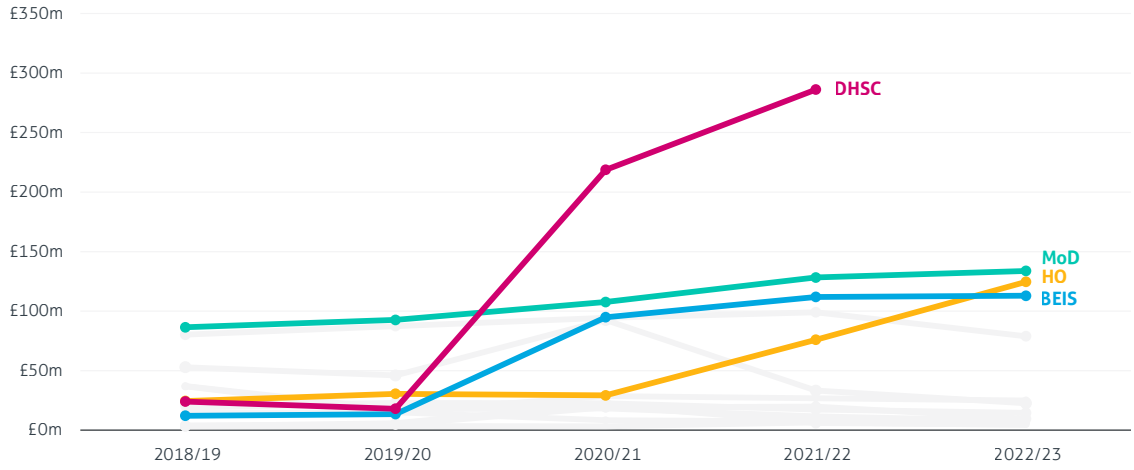


Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, *Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses*, 2023 and Infrastructure and Projects Authority, *Annual Report on Major Projects*, 2022–23. Notes: Projects that are exempt from publication – for example, for national security or commercial reasons – are excluded. Administration budgets cover departmental administration including and beyond government major projects portfolio (GMPP) and compare 2022/23 outturn to 2024/25 planned expenditure.

Spending on consultants and temporary labour

Whitehall is over-reliant on consultants

Figure 1.31 **Civil service consultancy spending by department, 2018/19–2022/23 (2023/24 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of departments' annual reports and accounts, 2018/19–2022/23. Notes: Figures relate to core departments only, with the exception of HMT, MoJ and the Cabinet Office, where figures are for core department and agency spending. Figures for FCDO before the department's creation in 2020 are the sum of DfID and FCO figures. DHSC had not published its 2022/23 annual report and accounts at the time of publication.

Departments and public bodies often employ consultancies to bring in specialist skill sets or to provide an external perspective on key programmes. The advice this provides can be used to identify options, recommendations and solutions for business transformation. Temporary staff, or 'contingent labour', are also often used to cover short-term needs, such as unexpected peaks in workload, absences or vacancies.

Limits on consultancy spend were introduced in 2011, with central authorisation required if contracts exceeded nine months in length or £20,000 in cost (rising to £600,000 in early 2023).[53] Spending decreased initially, and it has been suggested that consultants may have begun offering lower rates.[54] More recently, a number of issues have precipitated an increase in consultancy spend. The government did, for example, spend significant sums to aid its EU exit preparations.[55] The pandemic was also a driver of increased spend – Test and Trace, for example, was reported to have signed a contract with Deloitte for around £1m per day.[56] Total spend on consultancy by core departments, as reported in departments' annual reports and accounts, increased by an estimated 40% in real terms between 2018/19 and 2022/23.* BEIS and the Home Office have seen the greatest proportional increases in this period.

The government has made efforts to improve the management of consultancy contracts. *The Consultancy Playbook*, which aims to help departments to make informed decisions on employing consultants and managing their contracts,[57] was launched in 2021. However, the short-lived Crown Consultancy Hub, an intended in-house consultancy arm for Whitehall, deploying civil servants in a similar capacity to consultants, was scaled back to be a 'centre of excellence', before being scrapped in early 2023. The limits imposed in 2011 were then scrapped in February 2023, raising the limit for central authorisation to £20m.[58]

Our analysis also identified significant increases in spending across Whitehall on temporary labour. DHSC spent approximately 15 times as much on temporary labour in 2021/22 as in 2018/19, due to the immense pressure placed on the department during the pandemic, which created an urgent, short-term demand for labour.

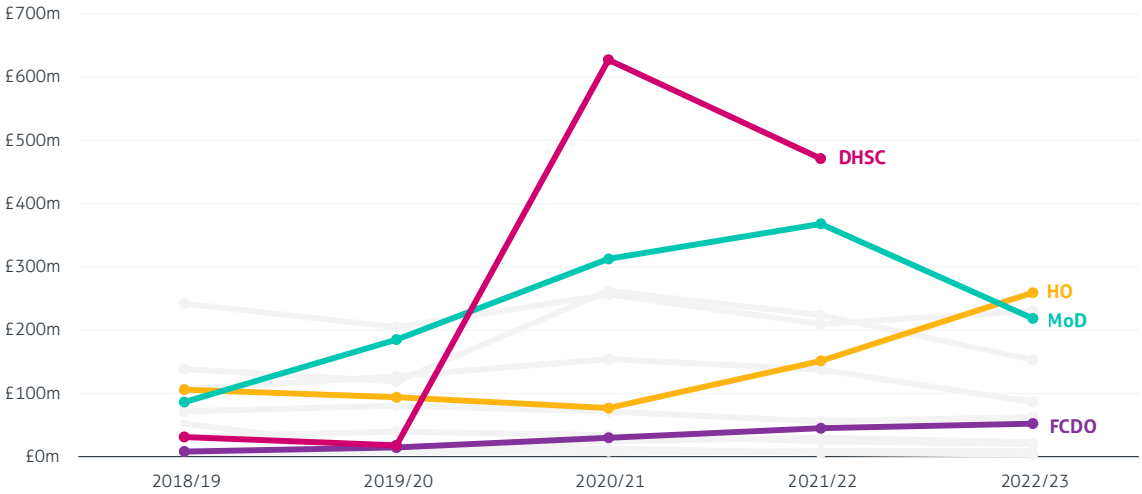
In 2022/23 the Foreign Office spent more than six times as much on temporary labour as in 2018/19.** The department lists the DfID–FCO merger, IT/digital activity, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine as the main causes of high temporary labour spend.[59] MoD has seen the second largest proportional increase in temporary labour spend from 2018/19 to 2022/23, citing an increased demand for specialist and private-sector expertise due to changes in defence business practices.

The Home Office, showing an increase of 145% in real terms from 2018/19 to 2022/23, has cited various workstreams high on ministerial agendas as being responsible for this, including small boat crossings and post-Brexit border arrangements. Backlogs in the Passport Office caused by Covid have also driven increased temporary labour spend.

* This excludes DHSC because, at the time of writing, the department had not yet published its annual report and accounts for 2022/23. It also excludes the territorial offices and HMRC. For further information on our analysis of consultancy spend, see Methodology.

** For the years prior to the merger of FCO and DfID in 2020, we aggregate spend on temporary labour from both departments.

Figure 1.32 **Civil service temporary labour spending by department, 2018/19–2022/23 (2023/24 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of departments' annual reports and accounts, 2018/19–2022/23. Notes: Figures relate to core departments only, with the exception of MoJ, HMT and the Cabinet Office, where figures are for core department and agency spending. Figures for FCDO before the department's creation in 2020 are the sum of DfID and FCO figures. The 2020/21 figure for Defra is unavailable so is plotted here as the average of 2019/20 and 2021/22 figures. DHSC had not published its 2022/23 annual report and accounts at the time of publication. Figures for BEIS and DCMS are unavailable.

Consultancy and contingent labour spending can be justified – but should not be used to cover poor workforce planning

Such spending will sometimes be necessary. It is understandable, for example, that crises such as the pandemic, or complex issues like the UK's exit from the EU, should trigger a significant increase in Whitehall calling in external support. Equally, an outside perspective can be useful for the delivery of corporate functions or strategy. But the civil service is reaching too readily for expensive external support. Officials should more carefully consider whether an outside perspective is valuable enough to justify the expense.

There should also be more careful consideration given to the development of in-house skills and expertise. The civil service has made progress in developing the skills of its workforce through its professions and functions over the past decade. But while Jeremy Quin, the former minister for the Cabinet Office, said that 70% of consultancy spend is on specialists and technical experts,[60] many of those specialist skills may be needed repeatedly by the civil service. We have previously argued, for example, that the civil service needs more project management and portfolio management capabilities, and should publish a workforce strategy that evaluates and sets out the skills it needs.[61]

The increased spend on contingent labour is particularly hard to justify. As with consultants, there will sometimes be a genuine need for such support. Unforeseen events may require surge capacity in some areas and the civil service should not employ a large reserve of under-employed staff in case of such events. Yet this is less understandable when contingent labour is used to address vacancies or peaks in workload that could or should have been foreseen. As noted above, arbitrary targets to reduce civil service headcount can make effective planning far harder, and lead to further boom and bust cycles in civil service staff numbers, resulting in the need for makeshift staffing habits.

In both cases, there is a risk of over-reliance on external support tipping into dependency. This in turn, as well as being an ongoing expense, prevents the accumulation of institutional memory and expertise in departments, particularly in times of crisis, ultimately leading to the civil service becoming less well-equipped to handle future crises.

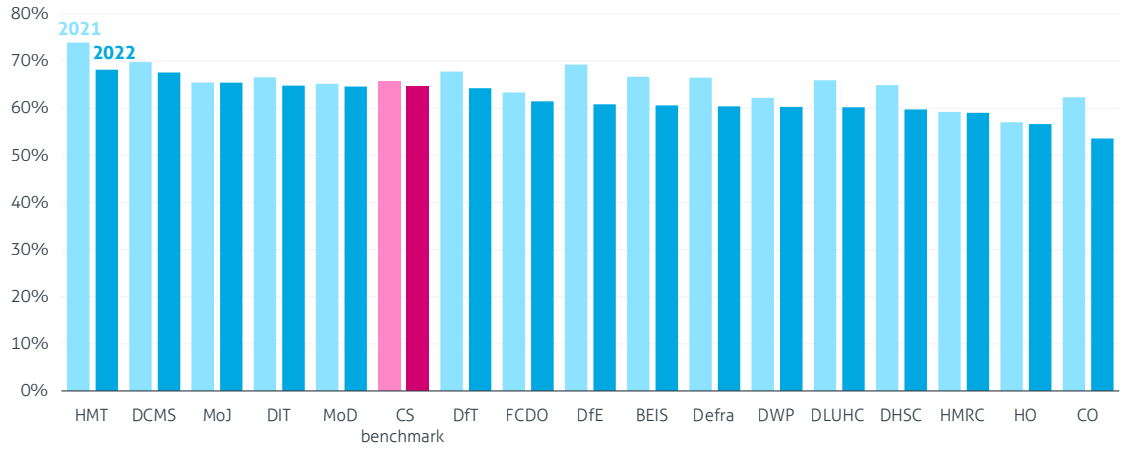
The Labour Party has announced that, if elected, it will aim to cut consultancy spend in half and departments will need to demonstrate the value-for-money case for employing consultancies. Departments employing consultancies must already demonstrate value for money (although it is unclear how many requests are denied) and contingent labour employment already requires central approval if contracts are worth £1,000 per day or more.[62] The proposal shows a welcome focus on reducing Whitehall's reliance on consultancy, though the 50% target should be kept under review, should it not prove the optimum balance of spend. Ultimately a thorough approach to workforce planning, and a more careful assessment of what skills the civil service should have in-house, are more likely to effectively drive down costs in the long term.

Morale, pay and industrial relations

Civil service morale

After rising every year since 2010, the civil service's engagement scores – a headline indicator reflecting civil servants' motivation, pride, advocacy and attachment to their organisation – fell in its 2021 staff survey, and fell again more sharply in 2022. Falls were experienced in every department, including a stark decrease of 9 percentage points in the Cabinet Office – a major shift in a measure that normally only shows small changes over time.

Figure 1.33 **Engagement scores of civil servants by department, 2021–22**

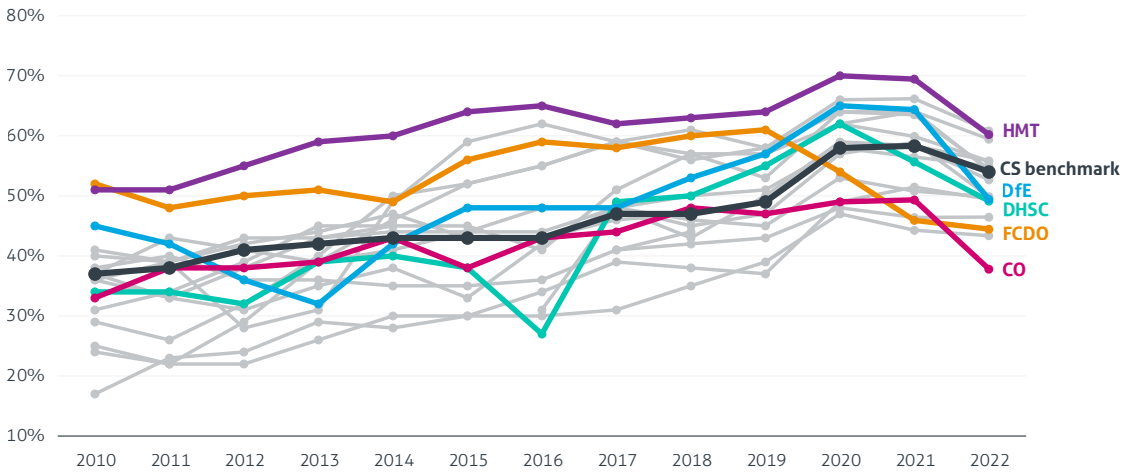


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2021–22. Notes: The civil service benchmark refers to the median score of all organisations participating in the people survey each year without weighting by organisation size.

The political disruption of 2022, with high ministerial churn, is one possible reason for poor scores that year – as was the on-off 'war on Whitehall' that resulted in often strained ministerial–official relationships (discussed more in Part 2). In this context

of instability, civil servants' satisfaction with their leadership and how change is managed either fell or remained the same in every government department. There were six secretaries of state for education in 2022 – DfE's score for managing change dropped by 15 percentage points between 2021 and 2022.

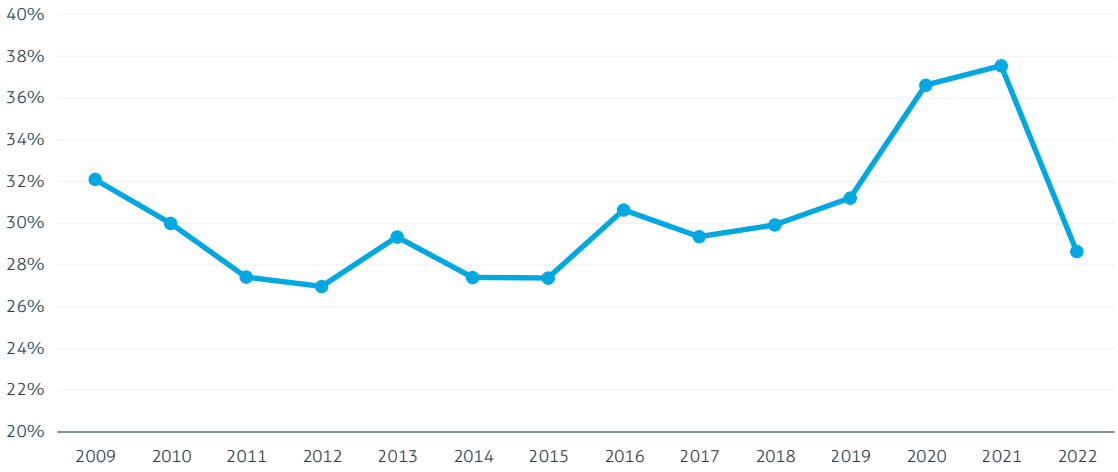
Figure 1.34 **Civil servants satisfied with leadership and how change is managed, by department, 2010–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2010–22. Notes: The civil service benchmark refers to the median score of all organisations participating in the people survey each year without weighting by organisation size.

Civil servants in 2022* were particularly unhappy about pay – under a third of staff were satisfied with their pay and benefits package (29%), a fall of 9 percentage points from 2021. This year's addendum to the government's pay remit guidance, allowing departments to make a one-off payment of £1,500 to officials below SCS level, will likely go some way to improving morale in the short term. But the non-consolidated awards will not address the real-terms cuts to civil service salaries in the longer term.

Figure 1.35 **Civil servants satisfied with their pay and benefits, 2009–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2009–22.

* We are using the 2022 data because it is the latest publicly available Civil Service People Survey results. There is often a significant delay between the completion of the annual survey and the publication of results. For example, this survey was conducted in Autumn 2022 but the headline results were not published until March 2023.

The continuing problem of low pay

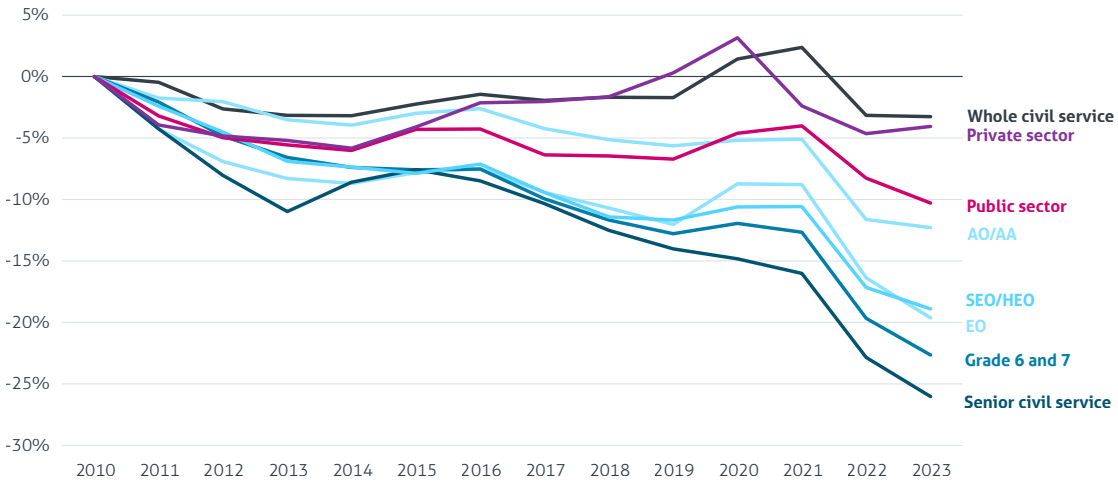
Pay settlements paused industrial action, but pay remains low

In 2022, civil servants were offered a pay increase of 2%, with departments having flexibility to pay up to 3% in certain circumstances. This guidance was published in March 2022 – but with inflation climbing to 11% by October, civil servants' salaries rapidly decreased in real terms, leading to a series of strikes over the winter of 2022/23.

The industrial action was resolved with a pay settlement in June 2023. Non-senior civil servants received a lump sum of £1,500, and a headline pay increase of 4.5%, rising to 5% for the lowest earners. Senior civil servants received a 5.5% pay rise, in line with the recommendation of the Senior Salaries Review Body.

Overall, however, civil service pay remains relatively low. Pay fell in real terms in 2022/23, albeit not by as much as in 2021/22. Every civil service grade has seen a reduction in real-terms pay of 12–26% between 2010 and 2023. The gap is greatest for senior civil servants (SCS), whose median salary has fallen by more than 25% in real terms over the same period.

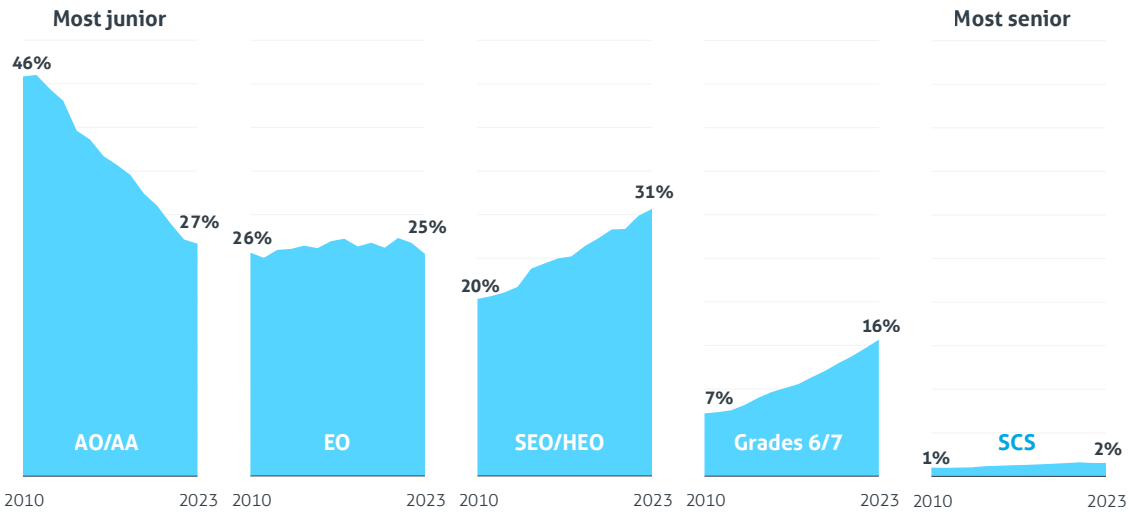
Figure 1.36 **Change in median civil service salary by grade since 2010 (real terms)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings time series of selected estimates, 1997–2023; ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–18; Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2019-23; and OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook, November 2023. Notes: AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; and SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer.

As in previous years, the median pay of the whole civil service fell far less than that of individual grades. This is because the composition of grades has shifted substantially over time, with the civil service becoming more top heavy. The number of AO/AAs (the most junior ranks), for example, has fallen by around 45% from 224,200 in 2010 to 123,560 in 2023, while the number of those at grades 6 and 7 (the levels just below SCS) has doubled from 35,290 to 72,610.

Figure 1.37 **Civil servants by grade (FTE), 2010–23**



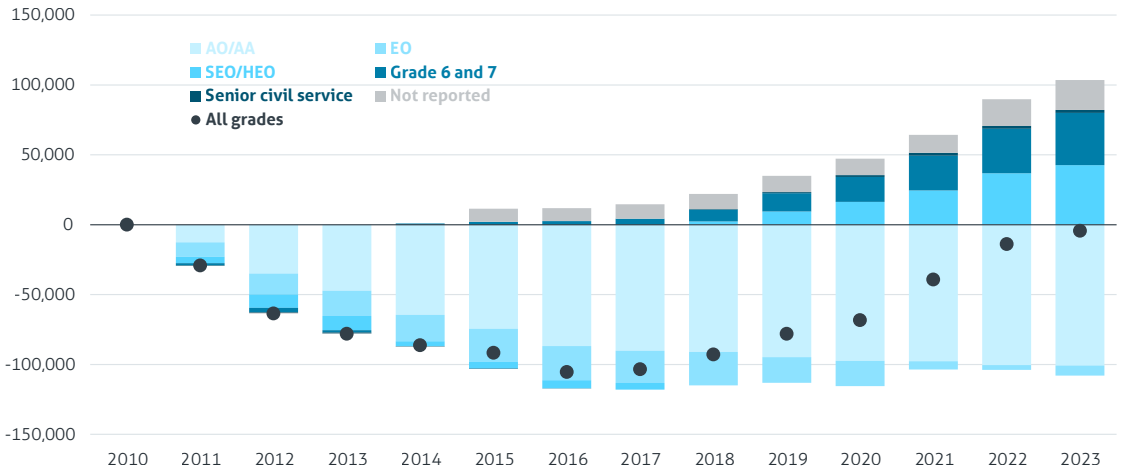
Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–18 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2019-23. Notes: The percentages shown in this chart exclude those with an unknown grade. AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer; and SCS = senior civil service.

There are several factors that could be driving this pattern. One is that a changing civil service composition reflects a genuine need for a different skill mix. It could be, for example, that the need for the most junior staff may have reduced through increased automation and digitisation of services. That much of the fall in AO/AAs has been driven by reductions in DWP and HMRC supports this: the increased use of technology in the implementation of tax and benefit policy could have reduced the need for administrative employees. Indeed we were told that business transformation and automation was a factor behind DWP's phasing out of the AA grade, and that the automation of clerical tasks has driven an approximate 15% reduction in the AO grade in operational areas of DWP over the past two years. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to distinguish between instances in which automation and improved processes have driven change in the grade composition, and where other forms of staff cuts are also a contributing factor.

Grade inflation poses problems for the management of the civil service

It is also likely that low pay in the civil service is itself an important factor in the civil service's changing grade composition. The trends in different grades point to 'grade inflation' – where departments promote civil servants before they previously might have done, to increase their pay sufficiently to stop them leaving the civil service for the private sector, where pay options have significantly improved in relative terms over the past decade. While a combination of automation and job reductions may explain the fall in the most junior grades, grade inflation is also likely to explain, in part, the increases of staff at SEO/HEO, grades 6/7 and SCS level. This does not, however, detract from the real-terms pay cuts felt across the civil service.

Figure 1.38 **Cumulative change in civil servant numbers (FTE) by grade since 2010**

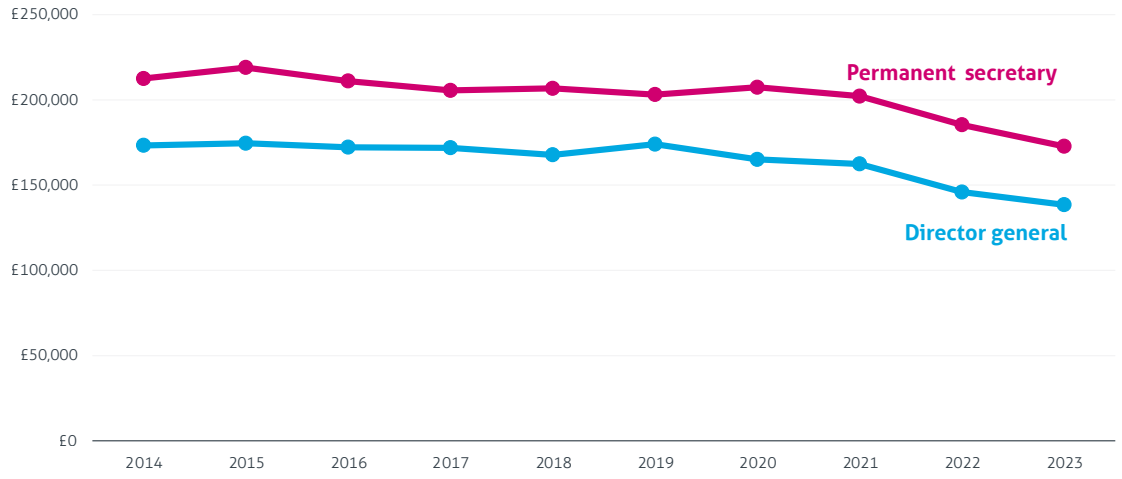


Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Civil Service Statistics, 2010-18; and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2019-23. Notes: AO = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer.

Grade inflation caused by low pay comes with two main problems. The first is that, while civil servants may be doing the same or similar work to what they previously would have done but from a higher graded role, a gradual shift in expectations around what civil servants at each grade can and should do makes recruitment more difficult, with people not always sure what they are signing up to. That this shift may happen faster in some departments than others also undermines consistency of expectations between departments and the civil service's coherence as an institution.

The second problem is that, for those such as directors general and permanent secretaries with no grade to inflate to, real-terms pay has got far worse and the positions less attractive. It also means that difficulties competing with the private sector will be concentrated in the most senior ranks of the civil service, precisely where the most capable people should be employed.

Figure 1.39 **Real terms salary of permanent secretaries and directors general, 2014–23 (2023 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Senior Salaries Review Body annual reports, 2014–23 and OBR, Economic and Fiscal Outlook, November 2023.

Holding down pay may not have even saved the government a significant amount of money. For example, if the civil service had the same grade composition in 2023 as it did in 2010, the total pay bill would be approximately £1.6bn lower than it is (£15.4bn, rather than £17.0bn). Put another way, grade inflation may have contributed to increased costs to the government, undermining any savings from holding down pay.

Contrast this with an illustrative scenario in which grade inflation had not happened (and the civil service in 2023 again had the same grade composition as in 2010) because pay for each civil service grade had risen in line with the private sector since 2010.* In this scenario, we estimate that the total pay bill would be £17.6bn, not too dissimilar to the cost the government currently faces. In other words, had pay risen more in line with the private sector in recent years, the government would likely be facing a similar cost to resource the civil service that it currently does, but without the morale, recruitment and retention problems that come with low pay.**

Low pay undermines recruitment and retention of civil servants

Low pay makes joining the civil service less attractive. As one interviewee we spoke to while writing our report *Opening up* put it: "Pay shouldn't be the reason you come and work in government – but it genuinely is a huge barrier to getting the right people in."[63]

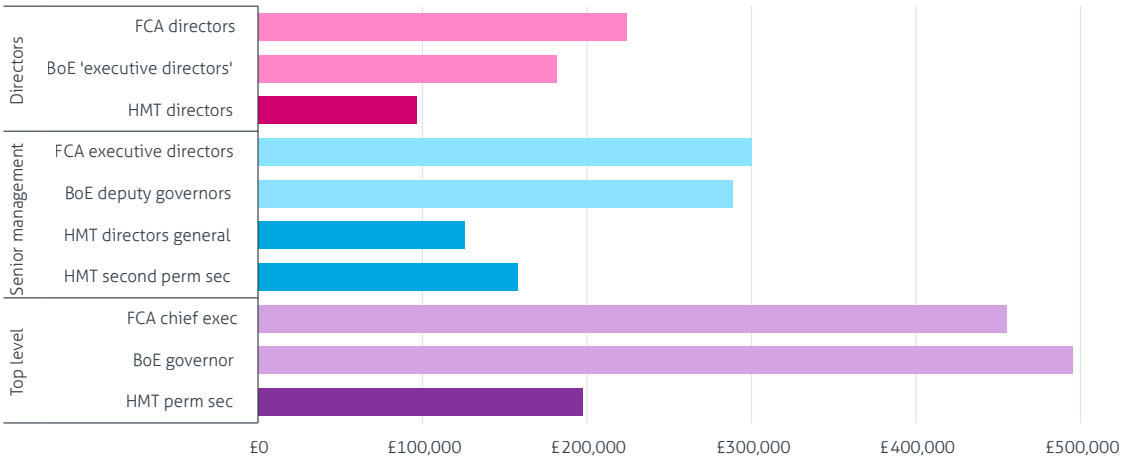
Our research into the Darlington Economic Campus found that even civil service salaries in Darlington are uncompetitive, despite local private sector salaries being lower than in London. One interviewee gave an example of a financial controller of a local business who they had encouraged to explore the opportunities available at the Treasury. The interviewee said: "I assumed the gap between private sector and civil service salaries would be less of a problem in the North East, but that wasn't the case. The individual in question would have taken a 50% pay cut to go to HMT, but their offer was even lower than that." They didn't pursue the opportunity.

It is not only private sector salaries against which government struggles to compete, but pay in other parts of the public sector that are not bound by civil service pay guidance. As Lord Macpherson, a former Treasury permanent secretary, highlighted as far back as 2014, the Treasury faces challenges competing with the Bank of England (BoE) and Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).[64]

* In reality, even if grade inflation did not take place, we would expect to have seen some changes in grade composition for the reasons described above, such as technological change and the changing demands on services.

** For further information on how we estimated these scenarios, see the Methodology.

Figure 1.40 **Executive pay at HM Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority, 2022/23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, organogram of staff roles and salaries, 29 December 2022; Bank of England, Bank of England Annual Report and Accounts – 2023, 6 July 2023; and Financial Conduct Authority, Financial Conduct Authority Annual Report and Accounts 2022/23, 20 July 2023. Notes: 'Top level' refers to the organisations' leaders, 'Senior management' includes leaders' immediate deputies and typically executive members of the organisations' boards (or, in the Bank's case, the Court), while 'Directors' refers to the group of typically around 20–30 directors in each organisation who typically report to the executive members of the board or Court.

Low pay also makes it more likely that good people will leave. The 2022 people survey found that 55% of civil servants who intend to leave their role, either as soon as possible or in the next year, wish to do so "for a better pay and benefit package".[65] This was by some way the most common reason for wanting to leave, followed by the desire for career progression within the civil service (31%) and in response to poor leadership (30%). Similarly, satisfaction with pay and benefits was the only 'theme' of the 2022 survey that was significantly positively correlated to civil servants wanting to stay working for their organisation.* And a 2023 survey of the FDA union for senior civil servants similarly found that as many as 87% of civil servants thinking about leaving the civil service entirely cited pay as the main factor.[66]

Real-terms pay cuts are a problem across the civil service, but particularly so among the most junior and most senior ranks. For the former, median salaries (£22,510 for AA/AO in 2023) were especially squeezed by high inflation. Among senior civil servants, there are fewer opportunities for promotion and salary comparisons with equivalent private sector roles are stark. So it is at the top and bottom of the civil service that we can expect the impact of comparatively low pay to hit hardest in terms of recruitment and retention.

The relationship between low pay and overall morale in post is less clear

Pay is clearly a driving factor behind civil servants choosing to leave the civil service, and so must be instructive as to their satisfaction within the service. However, the relationship between civil servants' satisfaction with their pay, their overall satisfaction with their role and other factors behind morale is less clear.

* For further information on the Institute's analysis of the Civil Service People Survey, see Methodology. For more information on the people survey itself, see our explainer on the topic.

This is demonstrated by the correlation between the main themes of the Civil Service People Survey and the staff 'engagement index' – its headline estimate of morale. Satisfaction with pay and benefits is less strongly correlated with staff engagement than every other theme of the survey. In other words, civil servants' satisfaction with their workload, manager, team, working culture, their organisation's objectives and approach to leadership and change were all more strongly correlated with engagement levels than their satisfaction with pay.

Figure 1.41 **Civil service engagement compared to selected people survey theme scores, 2010–2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2010–2022. Notes: Figures used are 'benchmark' scores, which report the scores of the median organisation within the civil service. The employee engagement index is composed of the results of five specific questions on engagement while each theme score is based on a variable number of questions relating to that theme.

This does not mean that satisfaction with pay is not important. And part of the weak correlation between pay and engagement may be explained by the consistently low satisfaction with pay over time. But pay should be understood as one of a range of factors that affect how civil servants view their work and careers.

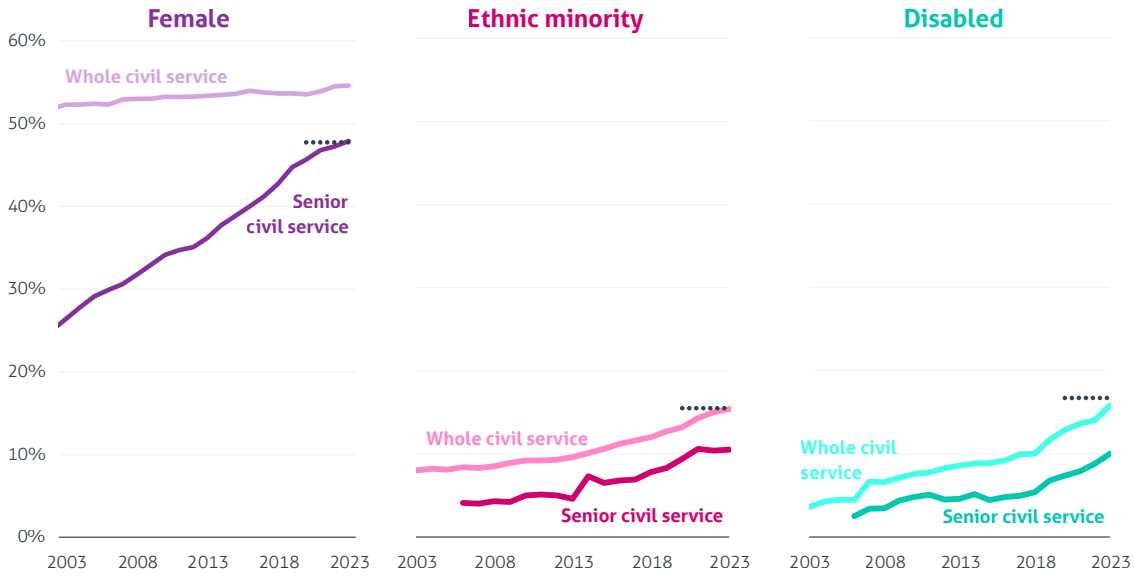
Diversity

The civil service has, correctly, long recognised the need to increase the diversity of its workforce.[67] Its latest efforts to do so are framed by the *Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022–2025*. As we noted in 2022,[68] this new strategy introduced a focus on socio-economic background. It also incorporated the geographic location and professional backgrounds of civil servants in a broader definition of diversity. These are welcome conceptions of diversity of thought but, as we argued at the time, should not reduce the attention paid to diversity of protected characteristics such as ethnicity and disability.

Long-running improvements in representation continued last year

For at least the last two decades there has been an upward trend in the proportions of female civil servants, those from ethnic minorities and those with a disability – both in the civil service overall and in the senior civil service. These trends continued in 2023.

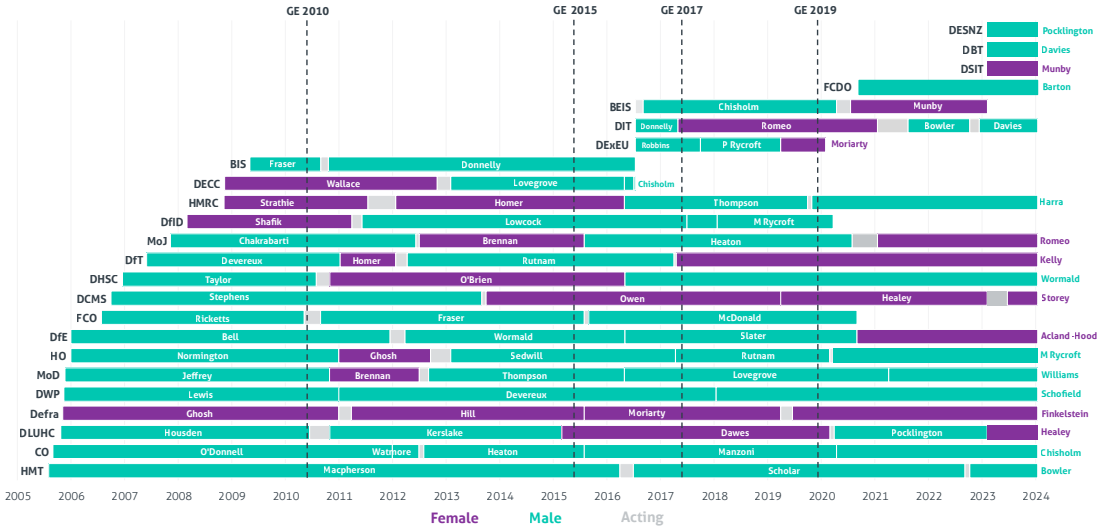
Figure 1.42 **Female, ethnic minority and disabled staff in the civil service, 2003–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Annual Civil Service Employment Survey, 2003–18; Cabinet Office, SCS database, 2001–06; and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–22. For sources of population benchmarks, see Methodology.

As of March 2023, over half of civil servants were female (55%). This includes 48% of senior civil servants, and compares to 48% of the economically active population. While female representation across the whole civil service has consistently been higher than in the economically active population, 2023 was the first time that the senior civil service reached the population benchmark. Female representation has also recently improved at the most senior ranks, though has still been better in the past. In 2011 there was, briefly, a gender-balanced team of departmental permanent secretaries. There was a low of three female permanent secretaries in 2016; this has risen to seven today.

Figure 1.43 **Sex of permanent secretaries since 2005**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG permanent secretaries database.

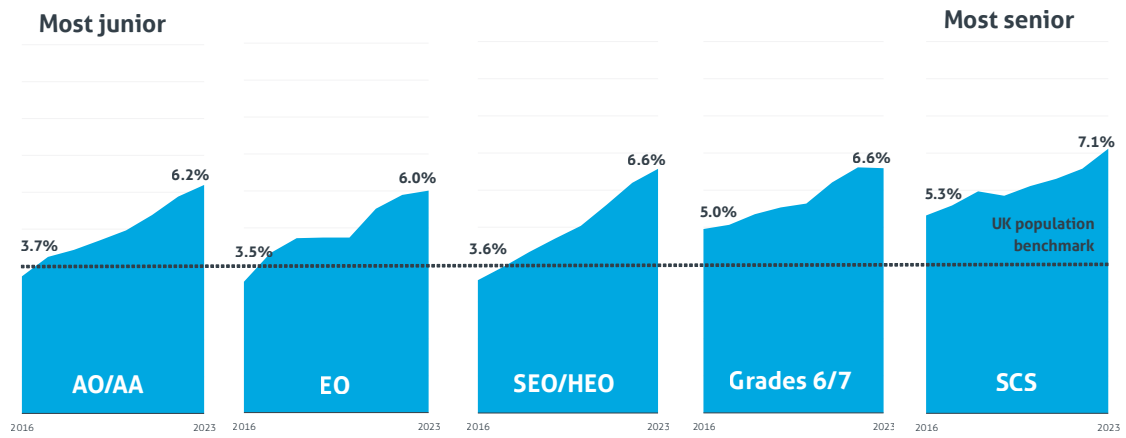
By contrast, minority ethnic representation across the civil service has still not reached that of the economically active population. It is close, though: 15.4% of civil servants come from a minority ethnic background, compared to the population benchmark of 15.5%. The senior civil service is, however, some way behind, at just 10.5%. This proportion fell in 2022 for the first time since 2015, and rose again in 2023, but remains just below the 2021 level.

The representation of disabled people across the civil service has continued to increase. Across the civil service, the proportion of staff with a disability is less than a percentage point below that of the economically active population, while the senior civil service is almost 7 percentage points behind.

There are also increasing proportions of civil servants at all levels of seniority identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or recording their sexual orientation as 'other' (LGB+).* As a proportion of those providing information on their sexual orientation, in 2023 the number of staff identifying as LGB+ continued to increase at almost all levels of seniority in the civil service. Only the proportion for grades 6 and 7 (6.6%) was unchanged on 2022. At all grades, the proportion is significantly higher than the population benchmark figure of 4%.

* This LGB+ categorisation is used because it reflects the data as reported by the Cabinet Office in the 2023 edition of its Civil Service Statistics. This dataset does not include civil servants identifying as transgender.

Figure 1.44 **Civil servants identifying as LGB+ by grade, 2016–23**

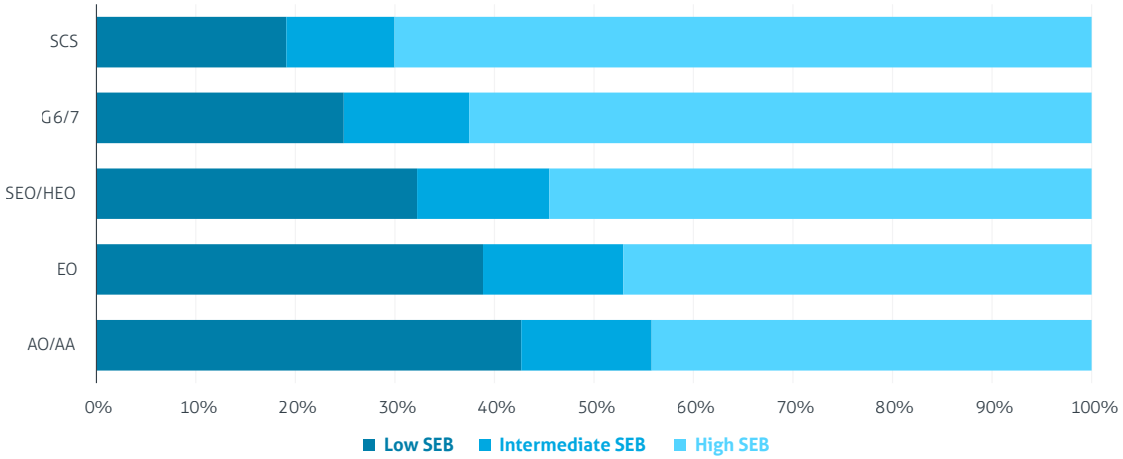


Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Annual Civil Service Employment Survey, 2016–18; Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–23; and ONS, Annual Population Survey, 2022. Notes: Excludes unknown sexual orientation. AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer; and SCS = senior civil servant.

The civil service faces a big challenge in improving socio-economic diversity

One area where diversity has not improved is the socio-economic background (SEB) of civil servants. We have estimated that in 2022 the proportions of the civil service as a whole coming from low, intermediate and high socio-economic backgrounds* are 33.7%, 13.2% and 53.1% respectively. Compared to 2021, this is a lower proportion of low-SEB and a higher proportion of high-SEB civil servants – although the change for both cases is less than half a percentage point.

Figure 1.45 **Socio-economic background of civil servants by grade, 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2022. Notes: AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer; G6/7 = grade 6/7; and SCS = senior civil servant. For details of how socio-economic background has been determined, see Methodology.

* These figures are estimates because the civil service does not include measures of SEB in its annual workforce statistics – only in its survey of staff attitudes. We have reached these figures by looking at the number of responses to the staff survey that answered a question on SEB in different ways. It should be noted that only 222,000 civil servants responded to the relevant question in 2021, and 237,000 in 2022. For full details, see Methodology.

Discrepancies in SEB between grades also persist. Of the most junior grade (AO/AA), 44.2% can be estimated to be from a high SEB in 2022, compared to 70% of the senior civil service, while 42.7% of the most junior grade were from a low SEB, as opposed to 19.1% of the senior civil service. Compared to 2021, this is a higher proportion of the SCS coming from a high SEB and a lower proportion from a low SEB. The proportion of the most junior grades from a low SEB has decreased, and that from a high SEB has increased.

The senior civil service being unrepresentative of the population also extends to educational background. In research for an upcoming report on the senior civil service, we found that 53% of current permanent secretaries and directors general attended Oxford or Cambridge universities in some capacity, with 46% attending as undergraduates. Seventeen of the 22 permanent secretaries that we could find a full educational history for also attended Oxbridge in some capacity.[69]

These discrepancies demonstrate the importance of the new D&I strategy. However, it will require better defined plans to be a success: as we noted in 2022, the strategy does not include many clear actions relating to SEB. There are, for example, no plans to target the recruitment of individuals from lower SEBs, or to address bottlenecks in operational career paths, where those from lower SEBs are over-represented – although its reference to delivering induction to new starters making clear some of the 'unwritten rules' around career development opportunities in the civil service was welcome.

One of the simplest things the civil service could do in this area would be to start publishing robust statistics. While it has developed new measures for SEB, it still does not include them in its annual workforce statistics – meaning that the figures above are drawn from the less robust annual survey of staff attitudes.*

There has been modest progress in improving the diversity of the Fast Stream

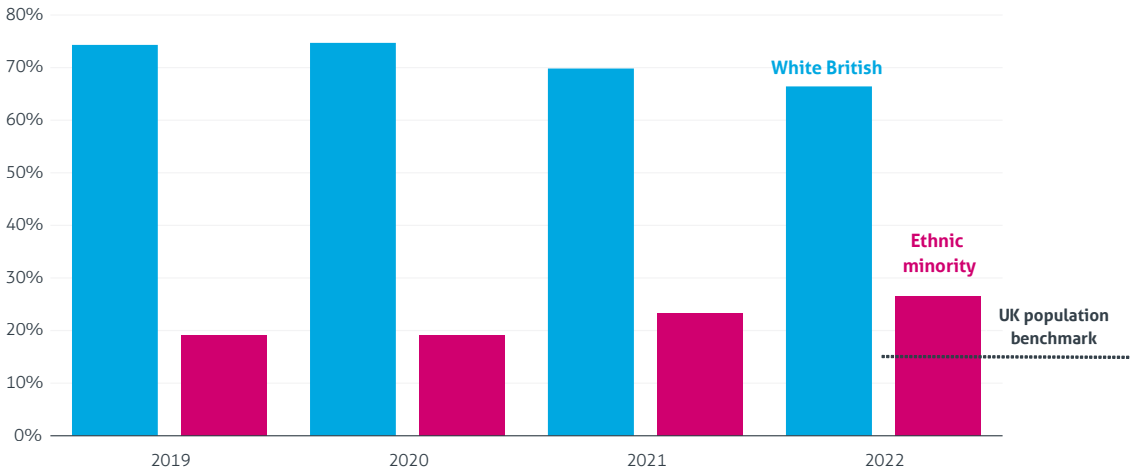
The Fast Stream is the civil service's flagship graduate programme. As a future talent pipeline, it is particularly important that it recruits from a diverse range of backgrounds. The programme has become increasingly ethnically diverse, with the proportion of minority ethnic appointees having been on an increasing trend since 2019 (Figure 1.46).

The proportion of lower-SEB appointees, however – when assessed by whether they had been eligible for free school meals – is still lower than the population benchmark, even though it has increased in every year since 2019 and stood at 21% in 2022 (Figure 1.47). This is welcome progress, and shows that the Civil Service Fast Stream is increasingly accessible to those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, more progress needs to be made before the Fast Stream is representative of the population as a whole. Around 70% of the 2022 cohort was from outside London, down from 73% in 2021 and unchanged from 70% in 2019.

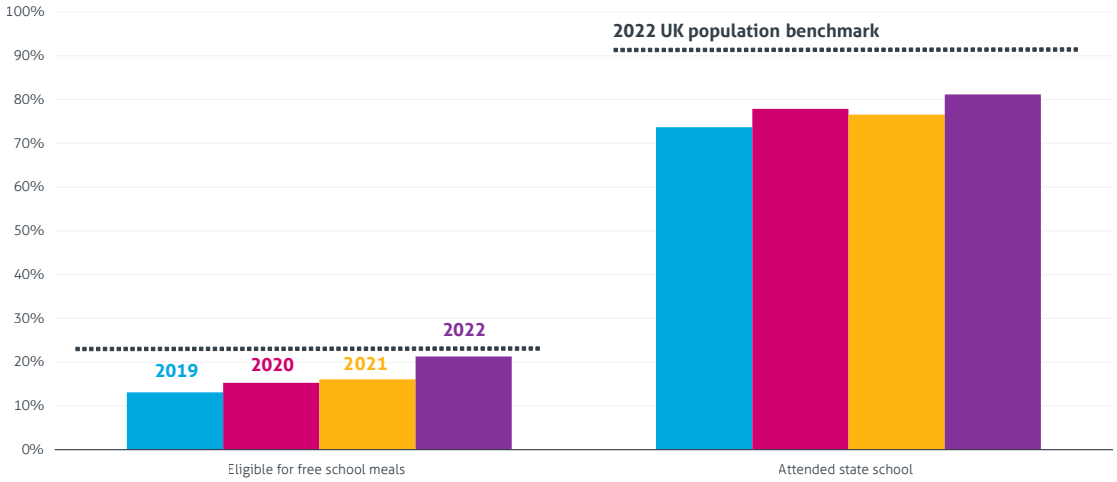
* For more on how we use survey data see Methodology.

Figure 1.46 **Civil Service Fast Stream appointees by ethnicity, 2019–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of written parliamentary question UIN 174514, 30 March 2023 and Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2022. Notes: Fast Stream data shows the proportion of applicants recommended for appointment to the Civil Service Fast Stream. Ethnic minority 'population benchmark' is calculated as the proportion of economically active 16–64-year-olds self-identifying as minority ethnic.

Figure 1.47 **Socio-economic diversity of appointees to the Civil Service Fast Stream, 2019–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Fast Stream recruitment data 2019-21; written parliamentary questions UIN 174516 and UIN 174515, 30 March 2023 and Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics, 9 June 2022. Notes: Data shows the proportion of applicants recommended for appointment into the Civil Service Fast Stream. Population benchmark for 'attended state school' calculated as the proportion of 11–15-year-olds attending a state-funded school.

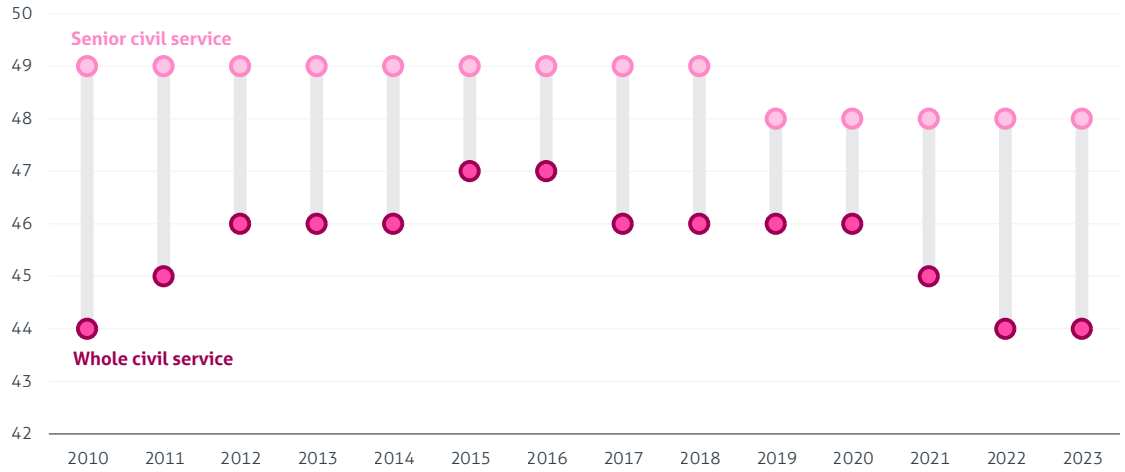
Better progress has been made in recruiting individuals with more diverse tertiary educational experiences. In 2022 the head of the civil service, Simon Case, announced that the government would aim for at least half of the Fast Stream intake to have STEM degrees as part of a wider effort to diversify thought in the civil service and increase civil servants' ability to work with data and digital systems. This target was reached with the cohort of Fast Streamers starting in September 2023, and achieved through the creation of a generalist 'STEM stream', identical to the generalist stream but where only those with STEM backgrounds were eligible to apply.

There are signs the civil service may have stopped its trend of getting younger

Since the mid-2010s, the civil service has been trending towards a younger make-up, including at senior levels. Yet in 2023, the median age of the civil service remained at

44, having declined from 47 in 2015. The median age of the senior civil service has remained constant at 48 for five years.

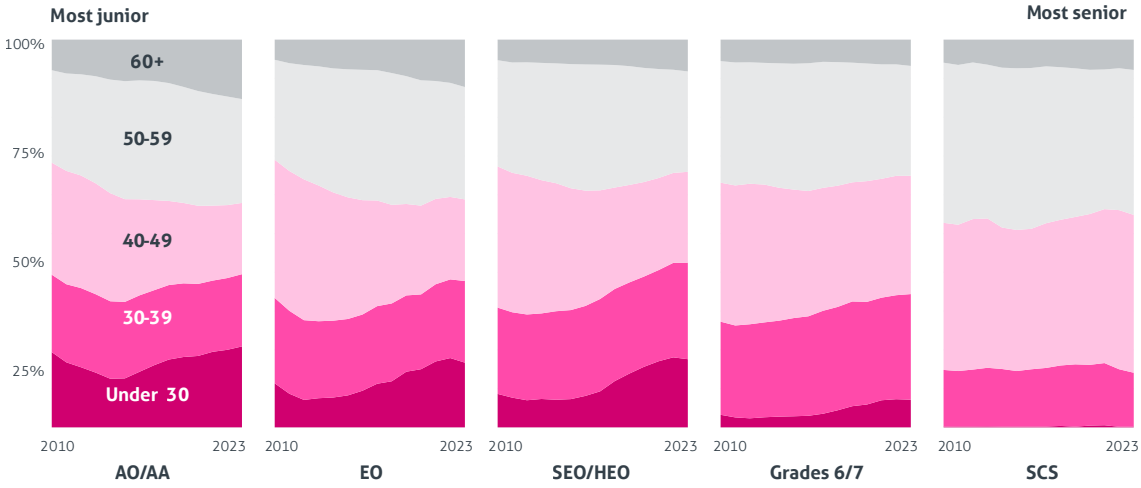
Figure 1.48 **Median age of the whole civil service and the senior civil service, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–23. Notes: Ages are published in terms of whole years.

At grades 6 and 7, the trend of having more under-40s has continued. At EO level, the proportions of civil servants aged under 40 and under 30 have declined for the first year since an upward trend began in the earlier 2010s. At SEO/HEO level there has also been a very small decrease in the number of civil servants aged under 30. Overall, the civil service has been getting younger since 2010, but it may be possible that this trend is beginning to reverse.

Figure 1.49 **Civil servants by age and grade, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–23. Notes: The percentages shown in this chart exclude those with an unknown age or grade. AO/AA = administrative officers/administrative assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior executive officer/higher executive officer; and SCS = senior civil servant.

Improving diversity is too important to be derailed by culture war distractions

The civil service's D&I initiatives, and politicians' views of them, have at times caused controversy. In 2022, for example, Liz Truss said she planned to remove D&I professionals from the civil service, saying they "distract from delivering on the British

people's priorities".[70] Jacob Rees-Mogg, meanwhile, described D&I schemes as a "job creation scheme created by the woke for the woke" and said he did not believe that people in D&I roles are "doing anything useful".[71]

In 2023 the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, announced a review of spending on equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives – with departments asked to confirm how many officials work on such initiatives, and "how that work supports government priorities".[72] At the reshuffle in November, when Esther McVey was appointed minister without portfolio in the Cabinet Office, there was briefing that she would be fulfilling a role as a 'common sense' tsar, leading 'the anti-woke agenda'[73] – with various pieces of reporting suggesting that this would include a focus on cutting D&I efforts in the civil service.[74]

In the autumn statement in November, the government reported on its audit of equality, diversity and inclusion spending – saying that it was "considering introducing a presumption against external EDI spending and increasing ministerial scrutiny of EDI spending whilst streamlining EDI training and HR processes with a view to getting value for the taxpayer".[75]

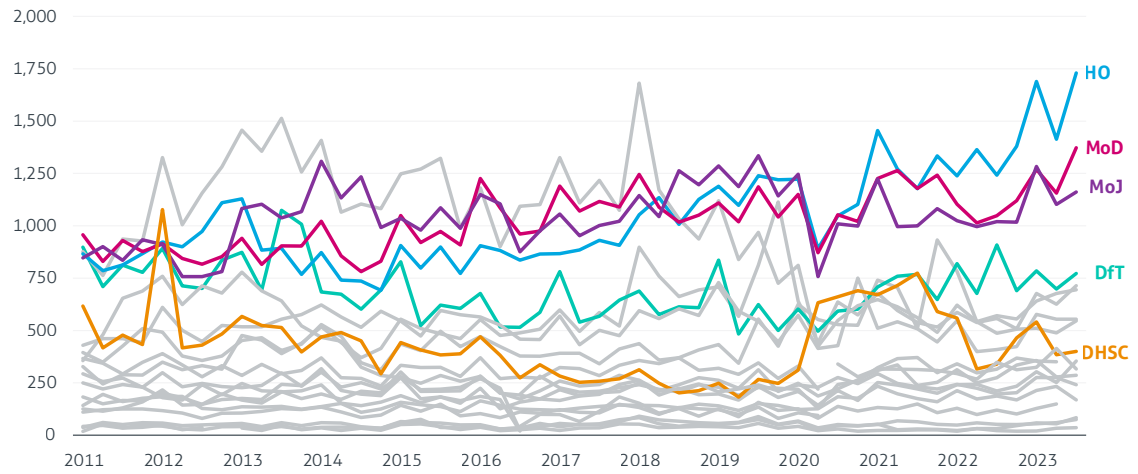
Spending public money efficiently, either directly or indirectly via the civil servants' time, is vital. Ministers are right to assure themselves of this, to rigorously assess the effectiveness and impact of such efforts, and to raise questions where they see fit. But in doing so, it is also sensible to recognise that the core purposes of D&I efforts are to attract varied skill sets and diverse perspectives, while making civil servants feel welcome in their work environment. As the new civil service 'People Plan' describes, it is to "set the standard for inclusive workplaces where people achieve their full potential".[76] This is critical for better serving the public, but also because the civil service, like any employer, has an interest in and obligations to its staff. A relentless focus on what is and is not 'woke' – accompanied by media highlighting of eye-catching events or initiatives in Whitehall, including those focused on wellbeing[77] – skews public debate and distracts from the core aims of D&I that ministers say that they support.

Often this is an issue with unofficial communications such as off-the-cuff comments by (then) ministers. Official government language is more measured. The announcements in the autumn statement (referenced above), for example, avoid inflammatory language. But the wider political environment does matter. As we discuss in Part 2, it is easy to see how these issues – and the civil service more broadly – could become political footballs this year. Ministers should try to ensure that they do not.

Transparency

Some departments have struggled to meet their key transparency obligations

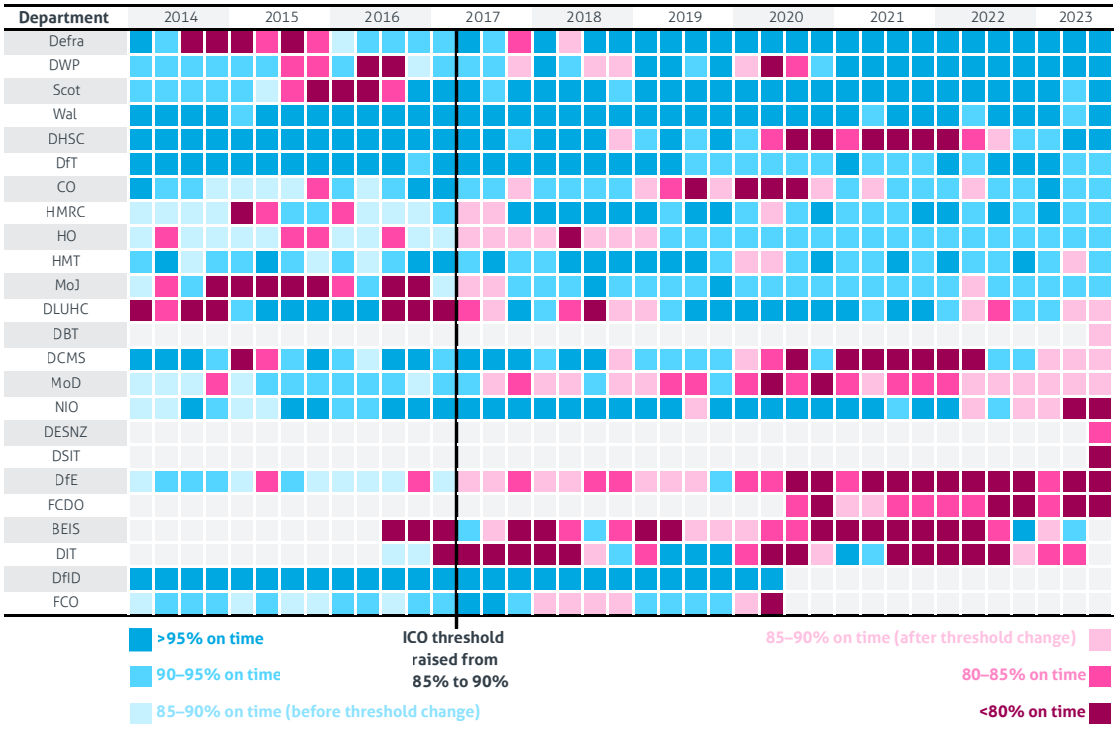
Figure 1.50 **FoI requests received by government departments, Q1 2011 to Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Freedom of Information statistics, Q1 2011 to Q3 2023.

Departments continued to receive a high volume of Freedom of Information (FoI) requests in the last year. There has been a significant increase in the volume of FoI requests to the Home Office, probably reflecting the centrality of the department to Rishi Sunak's small boats and asylum backlog commitments. In Q3 2023, the Home Office received 1,730 FoI requests – the second highest* number ever received by a central government department in a single quarter.

Figure 1.51 **Timeliness of FoI responses by government departments, Q1 2014 to Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Freedom of Information statistics, Q1 2014 to Q3 2023.

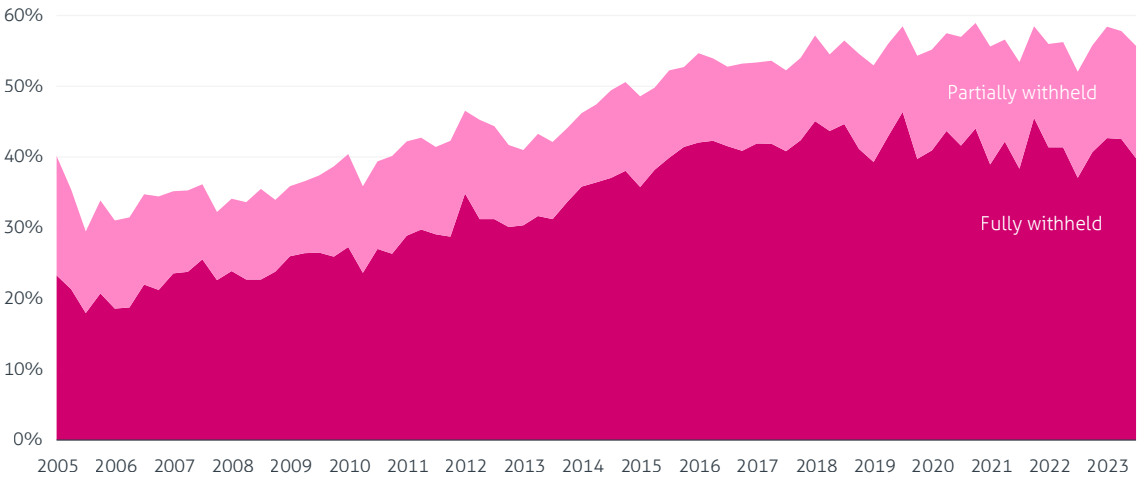
* The highest ever number was 1,843 to the MoD in Q1 2005, the first quarter the FoI Act came into force.

Government departments are legally required to respond (or claim extensions) to FoI requests within 20 working days for their response to be considered 'on time'. If a department does not meet this target for at least 90% of its FoI requests, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) may place it under special monitoring. In Q3 2023, 11 of 20 (55%) government departments met the ICO's target, down from 11 of 19 (58%) in the same quarter in 2022.

The three departments created in February's machinery of government changes failed to meet the ICO target in Q3 2023 – just under 90% of DBT's responses were on time, while DSIT (77%) and DESNZ (81%) were further from the target. Ensuring timely responses to FoI requests may be a challenging task for the new departments, given the track record of their predecessors and the disruption caused by the departmental restructures. In September 2022, BEIS was issued recommendations by the ICO to improve the department's procedures, while DIT received an enforcement notice* in the same month.

In June 2023, the ICO issued an enforcement notice to MoD, requiring the department to respond to hundreds of requests that had passed the 20 working day deadline.[78] MoD's FoI performance worsened due to the pandemic (as happened in many departments), though the last time it met the ICO threshold in two consecutive quarters was in 2017.

Figure 1.52 **FoI responses partially and fully withheld by government departments, Q1 2005 to Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Freedom of Information statistics, Q1 2005 to Q3 2023.

In the first six months of 2023, 15 government departments fully or partially withheld information in response to more than half of their FoI requests – only DfT, DfE, the Wales Office and the Northern Ireland Office granted information in full in a majority of cases. Across government, 58% of FoI responses were withheld in part or full.

The MoJ faced particular scrutiny for its transparency processes in August 2023, after it was revealed that officials had prepared "background notes" about an FoI requester – *The Times* reporter George Greenwood – for a special adviser (SpAd) to consider.[79] In October 2023, the Cabinet Office published its guidance clarifying that SpAds should

* The Information Commissioner's Office issues enforcement notices in cases where there are "repeated and/or significant or systemic issues" with a public body's obligations under the Freedom of Information Act.

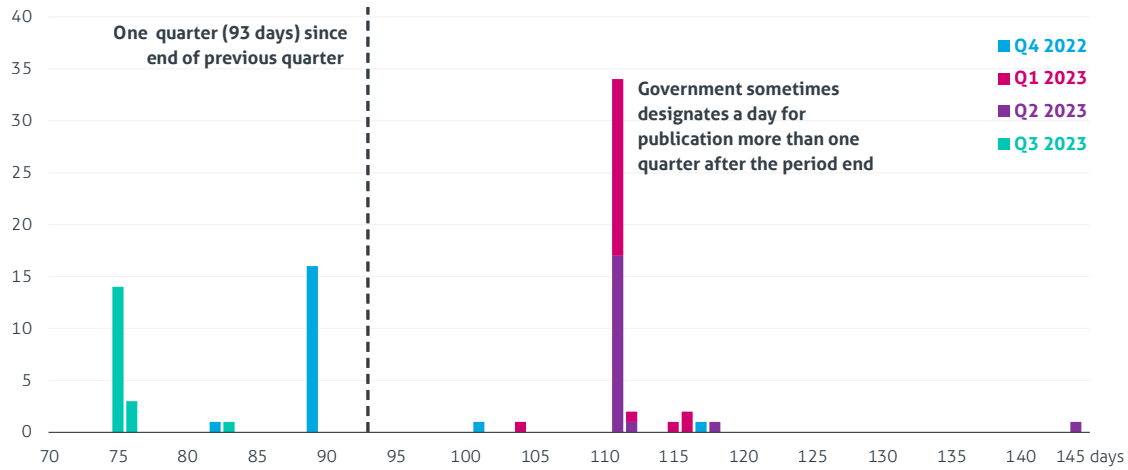
not be involved in making decisions about disclosing information in response to FoI requests, but acknowledged that they may give "assistance and advice" about aspects such as the presentation of information.[80] The last quarter in which the MoJ granted information in full in more than 50% of its FoI responses was Q1 2009.

New transparency commitments are welcome – but more will need to be done to actually deliver them

As part of its ethics and integrity measures announced in July,[81] the government accepted a number of recommendations around departments' quarterly releases of information about lobbying and conflicts of interest.[82] In December, the Cabinet Office published its update to guidance about how these returns should be published,[83] including clear guidance for meeting descriptions – the Institute has previously criticised the inconsistent quality of departmental releases, such as the Treasury minister responsible for financial services attending 39 meetings described only as being about "financial services".[84]

The Cabinet Office is also reportedly developing "a single platform to collate and publish" these transparency returns – replacing the existing system under which individual departments publish separately. The SCS will also be required to report the same information as ministers, and government will publish a central register of senior officials' second jobs.[85] These reforms are welcome, but the government has not yet been clear about when many of them will take effect. The government should implement its pledges in a timely manner to continue making progress on improving transparency and ethics in government.

Figure 1.53 **Departmental transparency releases, by number of days between period end and publication, Q4 2022 to Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of departments' published transparency releases, Q4 2022 to Q3 2023.
Notes: Transparency releases referred to are published details of ministerial gifts, hospitality, travel and meetings. DSIT and HMT's Q3 2023 releases are not included as they had not been published as of 15 January 2024 (107 days after the ending of the reporting period).

The Cabinet Office's December guidance clarified that this transparency information – on their ministers' meetings, travel and hospitality received, as well as similar information for some senior civil servants and special advisers – is now supposed to be published by departments within three months of the end of each reporting period (previously this was defined as "on a quarterly basis"). However, these releases do not

always appear at regular quarterly intervals, as they are managed as part of the government communications 'grid' and therefore sometimes are delayed to fit around other announcements. Of the 81 transparency returns published by core government departments in 2023, only 35 (43%) were published within one quarter (we have defined this as 93 days) of the quarter to which they refer. A further 34 (42%) were published at the same time as the Cabinet Office (where the Cabinet Office did not publish within 93 days), or earlier – that is, on or before the day designated by the government for transparency releases to be published as part of its communications 'grid'. The majority (90%) of the most recent returns, relating to Q3 2023, were published well within one quarter, though this is partly due to the timing of December's parliamentary recess.

In response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's recommendation that departments' transparency releases should be published more frequently, the government said only that it would "look to" move to a monthly reporting cycle once the central database is developed. It is welcome that departmental transparency performances have generally improved in recent years – the Institute found in 2021 that some releases were being published after more than two quarters.[86] But officials will need to step up their efforts in light of the government's commitments: DSIT's late publication of its April–June 2023 release, 33 days after most other government departments, would be a substantial problem under a more frequent reporting system.

The repeated failure to publish departments' outcome delivery plans hampers scrutiny of government strategy

The importance of transparency in government goes beyond requests from the public for information, or releasing information to avoid potential conflicts of interest. It has far wider benefits to the effective operation of government.

Outcome delivery plans (ODPs), for example, are intended as the principal strategic document agreed by each Whitehall department with No.10, the Cabinet Office and Treasury.[87] They are part of the government's performance framework, through which departments' progress towards their stated priorities – and how they are using their resources to do so – can be tracked. These are important planning documents that would benefit from outside input and scrutiny.[88]

But for the past two years, the centre of government has blocked the publication of departments' plans.[89] The last publicly available versions of these plans were published in July 2021 (two prime ministers ago).[90] And these were heavily redacted compared to the internal, unpublished versions used by departments.

Redaction is right in the small number of cases where publication of these plans would endanger national security or market sensitivity. But these defences are not generally applicable to departments' ODPs. Transparency would help to make these plans more robust. The government should rectify this next year by publishing ODPs in full wherever possible, as well as publishing regular updates on departments' progress against their plans.

Part 2: How the civil service needs to change

The prospect of a stable government – of whichever political makeup – with a full parliamentary term ahead of it following this year's general election represents a critical opportunity for civil service reform.

Neither the civil service nor government can afford to waste it. Ministers and civil service leaders should be prepared, early into the new parliament, to acknowledge long-standing and deep-rooted problems in Whitehall. They should set in train more fundamental reforms to the civil service than have been attempted in the past decade.

We have identified six key areas in which the civil service should change to improve UK government over the next parliament.

1. The civil service workforce could be much more effectively planned, to help the civil service become more efficient and to improve its ability to recruit and retain top talent.

2. The centre of government should be better able to support the prime minister to set strategy across government and align the government's priorities, policy and budgets.

3. Civil servants' relationships with ministers should be reset and clarified to strengthen relationships and accountability within government.

4. Whitehall policy making should be more long-term, open, cross-cutting and imaginative to deal with the challenges facing the UK.

5. The civil service needs to accelerate its efforts to keep up with the digital and AI revolution that will change its work fundamentally. This will require progress to transform legacy IT and improve external recruitment and talent retention.

6. Improvements are urgently needed to the structures and processes which keep the UK resilient and prepared for crises of the future – as the Covid Inquiry is showing.

Momentum for serious reform of Whitehall seems to be quietly building. In July 2023 the then Cabinet Office minister, Jeremy Quin, delivered a speech on his priorities for the civil service, covering its skills – especially on digital – and efficiency. This was followed in November, when Lord Maude set out proposals for a radical shake up of the civil service – and UK government – in his Review into civil service governance and accountability, which we discuss below.

The opposition, too, is targeting reform. Keir Starmer has appointed former senior civil servant Sue Gray as his chief of staff, and has tasked her with developing plans for reforming Whitehall should Labour win the next election.

There is more consensus on the problems facing the civil service than on many other questions of policy. Plenty of civil servants, politicians and outside experts will recognise the issues we have identified above. It is welcome that leading figures are considering their priorities for reform in the next parliament.

This second part of Whitehall Monitor aims to support, and further, this debate. It offers the Institute for Government's own priorities for reform in these six crucial areas.

The civil service workforce

Poor workforce planning has hampered civil service effectiveness

The civil service is an enormous organisation – in many ways better thought of as a sector – consisting of more than half a million employees. With officials in roles ranging from permanent secretaries to prison officers, it is inevitably difficult to cohere and plan the workforce. But the current incoherence prevents the civil service from reaching its full potential. It has long been undermined by deep-rooted workforce issues, as demonstrated throughout much of Part 1 of this report:

- More strategic workforce planning would help the civil service to improve its recruitment, development and retention of top talent
- Changes to pay and career structures, and civil service culture, could reduce the excessive turnover of officials, strengthening institutional memory, expertise and delivery
- Reforms to recruitment and interchange with other sectors could open up civil service culture and ensure government can make the most of outside expertise
- More senior specialist roles would dismantle barriers to career development and help the government to value staff for their knowledge and expertise, not just managerial skills
- Continuing to make the civil service less London-centric is important for increasing its available talent pool and breadth of experience
- More competitive pay would strengthen the civil service's brand as an employer, reducing the pressures on recruitment and retention.

Many of these are long-running issues. As long ago as 1968, Lord Fulton argued against excessive turnover, or 'churn', saying that: "It cannot make for the efficient despatch of public business when key men rarely stay in one job longer than two or three years before being moved to some other post".[1] Since the publication of the Fulton report at least five government reform plans, including the 2021 Declaration on Government Reform, have recommended greater external recruitment to the civil service.[2] Similarly, seven commitments have been made to increase secondments since 1988.[3] But despite the efforts of previous reformers, these problems have not been solved.

After some lost years, the Sunak government has taken small steps in the right direction

After Boris Johnson won the 2019 general election his chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, and chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, had grand plans to reform Whitehall and the people who worked in it. They had the political capital to do so, Johnson having won an 80-seat majority, but little progress was made during the rest of the parliament. The distraction of the pandemic was a legitimate justification for this in 2020 and 2021. But Cummings' adversarial style made enemies instead of

allies, while the Declaration on Government Reform, a thoughtful plan led by Gove and the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, ended up a further example of a missed opportunity to achieve real change.[4]

Four years on, the Sunak government has taken some tentative steps in the right direction. A pay settlement was reached that eased the industrial dispute of winter 2022/23 and recognised, with a one-off payment to most officials, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and declining real-terms civil service pay. In July, the then Cabinet Office minister, Jeremy Quin, made a speech focusing on a modest number of specific initiatives he believed could make progress before the election, including opening the civil service to more digital expertise through external recruitment and secondments from the private sector.[5] Given how little time Sunak's government has before the end of the parliament, a targeted approach to the workforce was pragmatic. To attempt another all-encompassing reform programme such as Gove's declaration would have been implausible.

But it does mean that this parliament will end with fundamental workforce problems yet again unaddressed. And in some areas Sunak has missed opportunities to tilt the service in the right direction. His sensible abandonment of Johnson's headcount cuts target soon gave way to a new 'cap' on civil service headcount and a later commitment to a reduction to pre-Covid levels.[6,7] This headcount target, once again, prevents more useful workforce planning moving forward.

Civil service workforce: recommendations

The next government should make long-term workforce reforms

The next government, whatever its make-up, should seize the opportunity of having a full parliamentary term ahead of it to address these workforce problems. The necessary reforms will take time to bed in, but will help ministers deliver their policy priorities more effectively – so are worth the time and effort.

The size and total funding of the civil service are inherently political decisions for ministers to make. But to enable it to be as effective as it can be these considerations should first and foremost be shaped by what the government needs the civil service to do to develop and deliver its policy priorities – rather than by arbitrary headcount targets or short-term, superficial 'efficiency drives' that have proven time and again to be inefficient.

For this reason, civil service leaders and ministers should develop a strategic workforce plan at the start of each parliament, which lasts the duration of that parliament. This should forecast what resources the civil service will need to implement the government's priorities and respond to long-term trends, including technological and demographic, and set out priorities for workforce reform. This would guard against further boom-and-bust waves of civil service recruitment and retrenchment while helping to make the service more efficient. The *Civil Service People Plan 2024–2027*, published earlier this month, rightly recognises the need for "improved strategic workforce planning".[8] But doing so requires ministers and civil service leaders to be willing to address the issues that make such planning more difficult.

Reducing turnover

To reduce churn, HR directors should, where they do not already, sit on departmental boards, and permanent secretaries should be held to account for the level of turnover in their department. Certain civil servants – among the senior ranks and in the policy profession, in particular – should be employed with minimum terms of service, before which they cannot move to another civil service job except under rare circumstances. This would strengthen existing assignment duration policies, while avoiding some of the risks associated with fixed-term contracts for civil servants' incentives to speak truth to power.

These moves must come alongside a cultural change towards turnover at the individual and department level. The recent introduction of guidance on the expected assignment duration for top roles is helpful, but will only make a difference if moving early comes with real negative reputational consequences.

Improving pay and career progression

Any workforce plan must recognise that civil service pay is straightforwardly uncompetitive with the private sector – and much of the rest of the public sector. Real terms cuts have degraded the civil service's ability to attract and retain the best talent. Real-terms pay should rise in years to come to make it more competitive. Beyond that, departments and professions should be given greater flexibility to structure pay in a competitive manner. This is especially important for the digital, data and technology (DDaT) profession – where welcome progress has already been made – which must compete with the private sector for top digital talent.

Deeper career pathways and performance-related pay should reward officials who stay in post and accumulate expertise with higher pay. And an expert pay review body should be introduced for non-senior civil servants to bring them in line with most public services.

Composition, and location, of the workforce

The composition of the civil service workforce should change. There are too few top roles in which officials can be valued solely for their knowledge and ability, rather than their managerial capability. This damages the recruitment and retention of specialists in areas such as digital and data, and therefore the capability of the civil service. Other large organisations, like Google, Legal & General, Deloitte and the Bank of England, all offer these types of roles, and they have been previously proposed by civil service reformers, including Sir John Kingman in his 2003 capability review of the Treasury.[9] Such senior specialist roles should be piloted across departments and professions, and expanded where found to work.

The composition of the civil service should also continue to change by further progressing the civil service relocation agenda. This has been the most successful aspect of workforce reform this parliament. As our report into the Darlington Economic Campus, *Settling In*,[10] indicated, it is beginning to prove its worth by better enabling people who cannot or do not want to live in London to work for the civil service, and exposing policy makers to different experiences.

The new Civil Service People Plan described efforts to build a single platform for skills development, driven by individual-level data on the skills and experience of civil servants.[11] This is welcome and would strengthen civil service leaders' capacity to plan and enhance the interoperability of the workforce. But it will require time, political support and resources to achieve.

Recruitment

The way the civil service recruits staff should be overhauled. The civil service interprets its need to recruit 'on merit on the basis of fair and open competition' in a restrictive manner that prevents hiring managers from tailoring processes in order to more fully understand candidates. A less prescribed, more decentralised approach to recruitment, on the basis of more intellectually and demographically diverse recruitment panels, would enable recruiters to do so.

Departments should be encouraged to test for expertise and knowledge for relevant roles, not just behaviours and competencies. Jobs should be externally advertised in most circumstances across government. Internal recruitment processes should change as well – hiring managers should be consistently able to see internal candidates' previous performance appraisals. Senior leaders should also be able to secure approval to directly appoint high performers to roles that suit their skill set or will aid their development in limited circumstances. And every effort should be made to simplify administrative barriers.

Onboarding and induction processes should be much faster and more effective. Interchange should be boosted with large-scale and long-term secondment programmes with the wider public, private and third sectors, following through on the new Civil Service People Plan's recent commitment for sector-based secondment programmes across the civil service's professions and functions.[12] The Maude review specifically endorsed many of the Institute's proposals in this area.[13] The same themes featured in the Declaration on Government Reform, demonstrating a broad consensus that change is needed.

Impartiality

Reform of civil service recruitment should bolster not undermine civil service impartiality.[14] Impartiality ensures that merit – the ability to do the job well – is the defining principle on which civil servants are appointed, not patronage. This is a precious inheritance that many other countries seek to emulate.[15] The current rules around ministerial involvement in recruitment strike broadly the right balance. Ministers have power to shape the most senior appointments, including through being consulted on the job description and selection panel, and in practice a civil servant at director level or above who does not have the confidence of their secretary of state will either not be appointed, or not last long in the job if they are. Going further would risk politicisation.

Ministers should be encouraged to participate in permanent secretary and director general appointments using the means already available to them. Departments should make ministers more aware of the opportunities they have to influence appointments as well as the proper limits to their involvement.

The centre of government

The 'centre' – 10 Downing Street, the Cabinet Office and Treasury – is fundamental to UK government, given its responsibility for setting much of the government's strategic direction, ensuring the government's priorities, policy and budgets are aligned, and holding the rest of government to account for its delivery. Alongside the prime minister, chancellor, other ministers and political appointees, the centre is comprised of many thousands of civil servants. And it is from the centre that the civil service is led, managed and organised.

So the performance of the civil service and of the centre of government are interconnected. An effective centre requires an effective civil service, and vice versa. For this reason, the Institute has over the course of the last year undertaken a Commission on the Centre of Government to assess the Cabinet Office, No.10 and the Treasury.[16] We have held more than 10 evidence sessions and spoken to dozens of experts ranging from former prime ministers to eminent scientists, serving permanent secretaries to charity leaders.

The commission will report in February 2024. It will conclude that the centre is failing in its core purpose of supporting the prime minster to set and drive the government's direction and holding the rest of government accountable for delivering it. The centre too often misses the opportunity to set a government's priorities, outcomes and principles at the start of each parliament.

Structurally, No.10 and the Cabinet Office are not set up to support the prime minister as effectively as possible. There is inadequate direct, strategic and economic expertise at the prime minister's disposal. The Cabinet Office's purpose has become ambiguous over time, and teams at the centre compete with confused and overlapping remits.

Meanwhile, the civil service needs to be led more powerfully at the centre. The cabinet secretary and head of the civil service would benefit from clearer authority to genuinely lead and organise the institution.[17]

The centre of government: recommendations

When our Commission on the Centre of Government publishes its final report, we will address the problems we have identified by setting out principles for how the centre should work, and a series of proposals for how the centre could be reformed to serve its purpose more effectively.

First among those principles will be the conviction that the centre should do what can only be done at the centre of government, delegating all else. That makes its responsibility to set strategy even more crucial. So we will recommend a new approach for governments to take in setting their priorities and aligning those priorities to budgets and policy across Whitehall. We will also recommend fundamental structural changes to No.10 and the Cabinet Office to increase the strategic support available to the prime minister, clarify roles and remits between teams, and strengthen the leadership and governance of the civil service.

Civil service–ministerial relations

Relations between ministers and civil servants have been tense

Poor relations have made government less effective

Tensions between ministers and civil servants have been stark in recent years, the primary cause being criticism and active disparagement of officials from political figures.[18] The cabinet secretary himself highlighted this last year, saying: "The last five years or so have seen an increased number of overt attacks on civil servants, individually and collectively, by significant political figures."[19] The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) has similarly noted "public criticism of civil servants becoming increasingly disparaging in tone".[20]

Political figures have used such language both within government and outside of it. Dominic Cummings[21] and Jacob Rees-Mogg,[22] for example, both took publicly antagonistic attitudes towards the civil service while in office, and Rees-Mogg sharpened his language once freed from the constraints of government.[23] Regular criticism of diversity and inclusion initiatives and 'woke' accusations, discussed in Part 1 of this report, have also been a theme of recent years. Politicians have damaged relations in other ways, too – Sir Tom Scholar was unceremoniously dismissed as the Treasury's permanent secretary under Liz Truss, and Dominic Raab resigned as deputy prime minister and justice secretary after being found to have bullied civil servants.

These words and actions have an impact. Civil service morale is declining, and the rate of officials leaving the service is very high. While many factors contribute to these issues, hostility from ministers and other political figures is undoubtedly one. This environment has also made it harder for civil servants to do their jobs – the cabinet secretary has said that insulting language directed at civil servants had "undoubtedly undermined the good functioning of government".[24] The Covid inquiry offered a particularly striking example, with Martin Reynolds, Boris Johnson's former principal private secretary, saying of Cummings' alleged "sh*t list" of senior civil servants that there was:

> **"quite a bit of unease in the civil service around... the so-called "sh*t list" of people who were thought to be at risk... So I think it is fair to say, in the period you're talking about, there were quite a lot of other things taking place which meant that quite a bit of senior energy and attention was focusing on other things".[25]**

The civil service has at times appeared to contribute to a cycle of deteriorating relations. The CSPL,[26] for example, has noted an apparent increase in civil servants leaking to the media – which, barring exceptional circumstances, is clearly unacceptable.* There have also been troubling instances of a small number of officials in the Home Office apparently resisting agreed government policy (discussed in more

* The Institute for Government has called for improvements to routes available for whistleblowing in the civil service, and for complaints procedures, which would further reduce the circumstances in which unauthorised leaking could be legitimate.

detail below). This risks becoming a vicious cycle, with the result that civil servants feel unable to challenge ministers, and ministers are mistrustful of their officials. Ultimately, this would damage the quality of decision making and government effectiveness.

The impartiality of the civil service has been called into question in recent years

In addition to damaging government effectiveness, poor relations have also triggered debates around the impartiality of the civil service – concerning both whether the civil service is, in fact, impartial, and even whether the current model is desirable. Several incidents have provoked these debates.

In 2022, a small number of Home Office officials protested the Rwanda asylum scheme by pinning mocked up immigration enforcement notices targeting Paddington Bear on Home Office noticeboards.[27] Leaked messages from an internal communications network also highlighted opposition to the policy, with one official posting: "Do we have a responsibility to not just leave, but to organise and resist?"[28] Suggestions of resisting a policy in this way are clearly inappropriate and appear to breach the civil service code. If civil servants feel unable to implement a legal* policy, having raised concerns by all appropriate means, they should resign.

But this example from the Home Office shows fault also lies on the political side. In March 2023 Conservative Campaign Headquarters emailed party members, in the name of the then home secretary, Suella Braverman, accusing "an activist blob of left-wing lawyers, civil servants and the Labour Party" of blocking the government's efforts to stop small boat crossings.[29] This was an entirely inappropriate attack on civil service impartiality. Even though apologies were made, it demonstrates the traction that scepticism of civil service impartiality can gain. It also emphasises the risk of civil servants behaving in a way that feeds such scepticism.

There have been several other recent examples of politicians accusing civil servants of a lack of due impartiality. Dominic Raab accused "activist officials" of trying to block government reforms,[30] while Jacob Rees-Mogg blamed officials for the difficulty of scrapping thousands of EU laws.[31] There is no evidence for either of these contentions – yet they demonstrate how poor relations can feed such scepticism.

The furore around Sue Gray's departure from the Cabinet Office to become Keir Starmer's chief of staff also falls into this category. It is true that, while it is not unusual for civil servants to transition to political roles – there is ample precedent of similar moves – Gray's seniority, prominence, sensitive government roles and the lack of an intervening period outside the civil service made this an unusual case. It is also true that the move risked damaging trust between officials and ministers. But it was wrong for some to cast doubt on Gray's conduct as a civil servant. There has never been a serious suggestion – and certainly no evidence – from any political party that she has not behaved with due impartiality.**

* These protests occurred prior to the Supreme Court's ruling on the Rwanda scheme in November 2023. The protests also targeted the merits of the policy itself, rather than discussing the potential implications of an adverse court ruling.

** What the episode did demonstrate – as the Institute for Government argued at the time – was the need for clearer rules around civil servants' future employment.

A final trend in recent years has been politicians themselves risking damage to the perception of civil service impartiality via dismissals of senior officials. It is right and normal for ministers, including the prime minister, to exercise significant influence over and indeed approve the appointment of senior officials. What is less common is for several permanent secretaries to have recently left their positions, seemingly following political pressure. This risks the appearance of civil service personnel decisions being made on the basis of their alignment with ministers' views.[32] Even though this has not had a material effect on civil service impartiality (ultimately, career civil servants were replaced by other career civil servants), perceptions matter, and it nevertheless risks officials being less willing to give tough advice to ministers.

These controversies have had an impact, as debates around whether the civil service *is*, in fact, impartial moved into discussions over whether it *should* be. Indeed late 2022 and 2023 saw several calls for greater use of political appointments in the civil service. The former cabinet minister Liam Fox responded to the Sue Gray saga by arguing for more political control over the most senior civil service jobs.[33] Lord Frost has argued that "we must find a way for the upper reaches of the civil service to reflect to a greater extent the politics of the Government".[34] The Maude review covered earlier in this report also proposed a series of radical changes in this area,[35] including ministers having the option of their special advisers overseeing the recruitment process for senior civil service roles, ministers being able to directly appoint a (civil service) chief of staff, and four-year fixed tenures for all senior civil servants.

Such arguments are understandable. More political appointees could, in one sense, sharpen accountability, as ministers would have more direct reports working to further their aims within their department. Such appointees could also bring fresh perspectives and more political zeal to their minister's priorities, but the drawbacks would outweigh the benefits.[36] It would reduce the experience and expertise available to new ministers – particularly after a change in government – while weakening the principle of merit-based recruitment, and the robustness of advice available to ministers. Any minister who sought to involve themselves in a much wider range of senior recruitment would also find they were using their time inefficiently, at the expense of progressing their policy priorities.

The answer to the need for more political support for ministers, when it is felt necessary, is to increase the number of special advisers. Ministers can also appoint non-political policy advisers, should they wish to bolster particular expertise in their department. As we have long argued, there are aspects of the way the civil service works that can frustrate ministers. Part of the answer to this is to address such issues within the civil service, including through the reforms we discuss throughout this report, rather than to politicise its senior ranks.

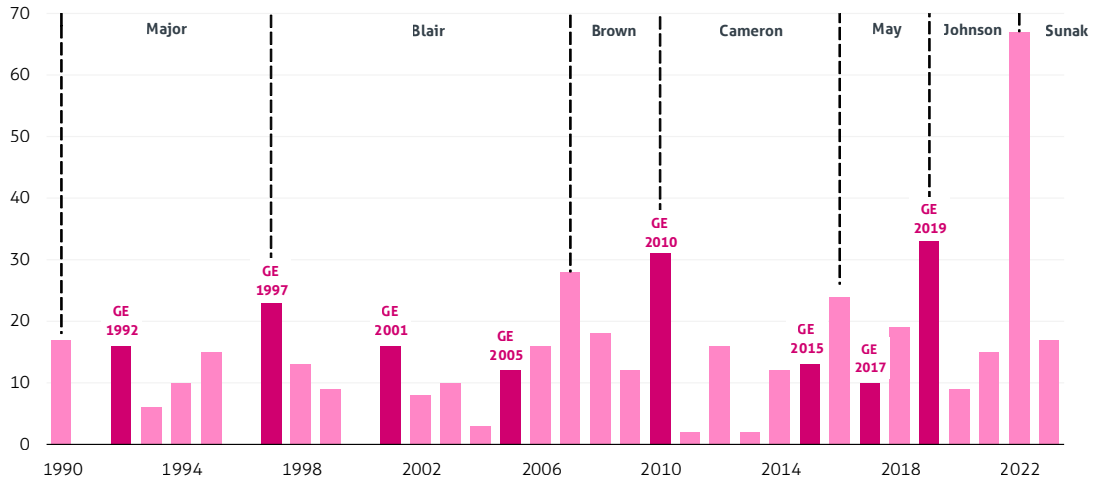
But these debates around impartiality would probably not have arisen if the underlying relationship between ministers and officials had not become so acrimonious. In the years ahead, a reset and fundamentally reformed relationship – based on mutual respect and understanding – is also essential.

Rishi Sunak has partially stabilised relations

Lower ministerial churn in 2023 laid the foundation for more positive relations

Rishi Sunak has made some progress towards building a more stable positive relationship. This is partly a result of the calmer political environment – which has, for example, translated into reduced churn in ministers. Indeed after the tumult of 2022, which saw a record 67 cabinet appointments made, there were only 17 in 2023 (Figure 2.1). This is still a higher than average level of annual cabinet turnover (especially outside of an election year),* and Sunak's first year in office saw a higher level of ministerial resignations outside of reshuffles than any of his recent predecessors' first year in office (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.1 **Cabinet appointments, 1990–2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG ministers database. Notes: Liz Truss was also prime minister for part of 2022. Figures include ministers attending cabinet. Only appointments to substantive offices are included, appointments to multiple posts at once are treated as single appointments and acting appointees (e.g. maternity cover) are excluded.

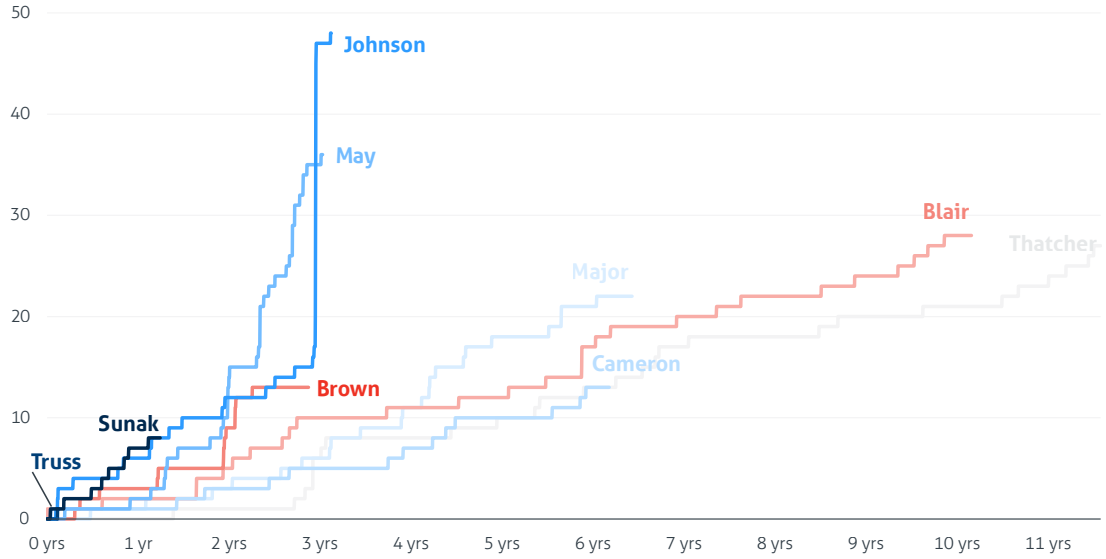
The 17 cabinet-level changes in 2023 were partly a result of February's machinery of government changes and the November reshuffle. A number of cabinet ministers also left government outside of reshuffles – including Ben Wallace, Dominic Raab and Nadhim Zahawi – and there were changes in the junior ministerial ranks, including those caused by the resignations of Robert Jenrick, Dehenna Davison and Lord Goldsmith.

High turnover in ministers, and particularly in secretaries of state, is not conducive to effective government or easy relations with officials. The appointment of a new secretary of state often resets departmental priorities and leads to existing policy being revisited. This is most clearly the case in policy areas given particular importance by a previous minister. For instance, when Alex Chalk replaced Raab at the Ministry of Justice, he scrapped the Bill of Rights Bill – which had been introduced to parliament a full year earlier by the Johnson government, then dropped by Liz Truss, before being re-adopted by Sunak – and reversed recent changes to the criteria for some prisoner transfers.[37]

* Since 1990, there have been an average of 15 new cabinet appointments made in a calendar year.

Such chopping and changing can be frustrating for officials, particularly if large amounts of their work become redundant overnight.* Lower ministerial churn is therefore welcome. If the prime minister wants to focus on delivery before the next election – and benefit from stable, positive working relations between ministers and officials – he should try to avoid disruption, including through reshuffles, in 2024.

Figure 2.2 **Ministerial resignations outside of reshuffles, 1979 to 22 January 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of sources including Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*; House of Commons Library; King A and Allen N, 'Off with their heads: British prime ministers and the power to dismiss', *BJPolS*, 2010, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 249–78; and IfG ministers database. Notes: We exclude those resignations announced before a reshuffle but effectively taking place during it, e.g. Hurd (1995), Smith/Blears/Hughes/Watson (2009), Dunlop (2017).

A clear change of tone has also helped

While this reduction in ministerial churn has laid the groundwork for calmer relations, also important has been an obvious shift in tone from Sunak's government. Giving evidence to the Liaison Committee in July, for example, Sunak praised civil servants he had worked with and firmly disavowed characterisations of the civil service as a "blob".[38] The cabinet secretary also strongly denounced such language.[39,**]. Further evidence of a shift in tone came after the November reshuffle. James Cleverly, on becoming home secretary, reportedly praised officials in an all-staff meeting, and was quoted as saying: "I will back you and I will defend you. Even when you mess up... I have no intention of briefing against officials [...] I criticise in private and I praise in public."[40]

These are welcome developments, though there have been some less encouraging signs too. Sunak missed an opportunity to further his support for the civil service, for example, in his neutral acceptance of Raab's resignation[41] – in which he did not express a view on the reason for the deputy prime minister's departure. The plan to cap and then cut the size of the civil service, meanwhile, is a legitimate decision for the government to have made, but one that could be inappropriately spun for political

* Other changes in ministerial roles can have more surprising implications. The appointment of Lord Cameron – the first foreign secretary to serve from the House of Lords since the 1980s – was particularly notable last year. Given the procedural and cultural differences in how the Lords works compared to the House of Commons, it will have forced Foreign Office civil servants to rapidly improve their understanding of the upper house.

** Though his defence of the civil service was arguably belated – perhaps because he felt he now had the political backing necessary to give it.

gain. And while not perhaps intended as a critique of the civil service, the measure was still announced without notice to civil service leaders. More recently, there were reports after the November reshuffle that Esther McVey, as a minister without portfolio in the Cabinet Office, could focus on tackling 'woke' issues in Whitehall. Such moves should not mark a return to using the civil service to make a political point – which is a particular risk as the general election approaches.

Civil service–ministerial relations: recommendations

Sunak's premiership has so far marked a welcome easing of tensions between ministers and officials. Yet the fact that relations reached such a low point in recent years – and the reasons behind this – demonstrate why fundamental reform is necessary to clarify and strengthen the relationship.

A new, firmer statutory footing for the civil service

There is an inherent tension between ministers and civil servants in a democratic system.[42] Ministers want to progress their priorities, which they have a mandate to deliver, while civil servants are duty bound to ensure proposals are as watertight as possible, raising inconvenient facts or challenges with implementation.

This is a necessary and at its best creative tension; for their part, ministers can test civil servants' assumptions and bring drive, urgency and legitimacy. This relationship can only work with mutual respect and understanding. Without it, the work of government suffers. But the relationship should not be so reliant on the presence of 'good chaps' willing to uphold existing convention. Greater clarity is required about the respective roles and accountabilities of both ministers and officials.[43] The confusion and ambiguity at the heart of this relationship runs far deeper than the attitude of individual administrations or cohorts of civil servants.

The Institute has argued that, to address these and many other problems in the civil service, it is now necessary to place the institution on a firmer statutory footing.[44] This would clarify the responsibilities and therefore the accountabilities of the civil service, as opposed to those of ministers. It would enshrine the permanence and impartiality of the civil service, define its purposes and objectives, and create clear mechanisms for officials to be held to account for their performance. As Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future noted in endorsing the proposal,[45] it would also help the public feel assured as to where accountability and responsibility lie.

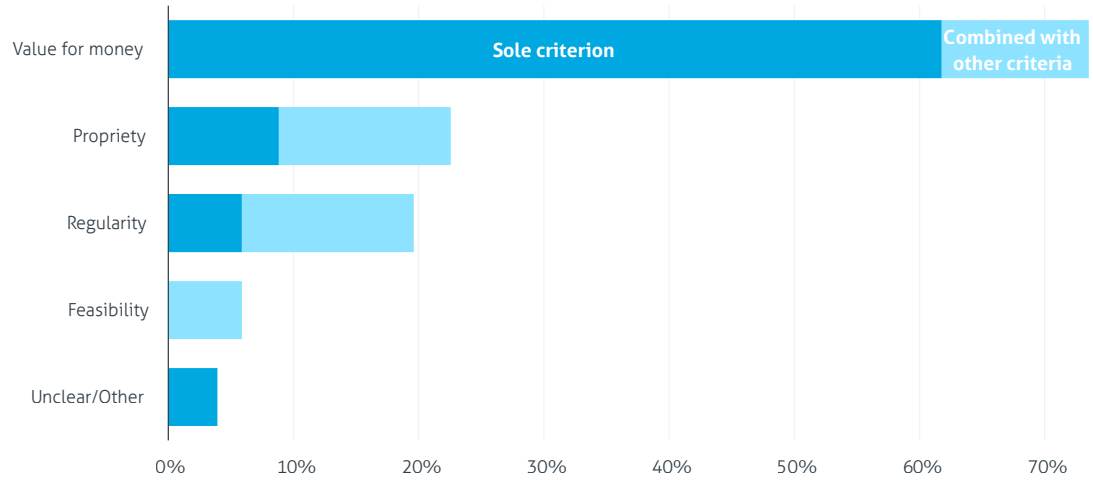
This would have several benefits that would help to create a more constructive relationship between ministers and officials. It would place a statutory responsibility on the head of the civil service and permanent secretaries to maintain the capability of the civil service in several areas – including standards of policy making and advice to ministers, project management, risk management and crisis response. Clearly and unambiguously making senior civil servants accountable for these tasks would effectively enshrine a stewardship function for the civil service. It would empower the civil service's leadership with the authority to genuinely lead the institution, and the responsibility to do so.

Our recommendation for the statute to create a new Civil Service Board, chaired by a minister, would provide a means for civil servants to be properly held to account. An obligation on the board to report regularly to parliament would strengthen scrutiny of the civil service.

Crucially, the statutory role we envisage would not impede ministers' rights to make policy decisions affecting the size, make up and capabilities of the civil service. Instead, we recommend a change to the criteria and use of ministerial directions.* Were ministers to choose to pursue an action that would affect any of the capabilities that senior officials had a statutory duty to maintain, permanent secretaries should be empowered to request a ministerial direction from the secretary of state to proceed on the grounds of an expanded definition of 'feasibility'. This would allow permanent secretaries to raise concerns when proposals may prove to be beyond the capacity of government, or when they would undermine their statutory duties to maintain the capabilities of government.[46] But, as with the existing system of ministerial directions, this would place accountability for the ultimate decision squarely on the relevant minister.

This would require a significant shift from the existing use and perception of ministerial directions – three quarters of which have been requested on the grounds of value for money (74%), either alone or in conjunction with another criteria. Only eight have ever been requested on feasibility grounds and then only alongside other criteria. It would also require a cultural change in the way that some ministerial directions are perceived. They should not be seen, as they sometimes are, as a sign of a policy's failure or that the permanent secretary considers the policy to be unworkable or 'wrong'. Directions have been used in recent years in support of policies most would deem necessary if expensive, such as the energy bill relief scheme at the height of the energy price crisis in 2022.

Figure 2.3 **Grounds for ministerial directions, 1990 to 16 January 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of figures provided by HMT (pre-2013 figures) and GOV.UK reporting of ministerial directions (2014–present). Notes: Requests for ministerial directions can cite multiple criteria. Includes technical directions, which allowed departments to spend money preparing for Brexit before relevant legislation had been passed.

* These are the formal instructions permanent secretaries can request from their secretaries of state – in the former's capacity as accounting officers accountable to parliament for how their department spends money – if they think a spending proposal breaches any of the criteria of regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility.

Reforming the governance of the civil service in this way would simplify the relationship between ministers and officials by creating a mutual understanding of who is responsible for what. The civil service would be accountable for providing a certain level of service, with the ability to shift that accountability on to ministers if their legitimate decisions made that impossible.

There have been other suggestions for how to achieve similar ends. Lord Maude, for example, agreed that "the arrangements for governance and accountability of the civil service are unclear, opaque and incomplete".[47] His proposals include a formal delegation letter from the prime minister to endow the head of the civil service with the mandate and authority to run and reform the institution, and a reformed and more independent civil service commission to hold them to account. Maude also proposed that ministers should publish their objectives and permanent secretaries should make public accompanying implementation plans. He also suggested the publication of more evidence behind policies, and audits by the Civil Service Commission of the quality of advice provided to ministers.

While such reform would certainly sharpen accountability, we believe our proposed statutory solution is stronger. Maude rejected it on the basis that it could cause conflict between senior civil servants and ministers – for example, if the head of the civil service felt obliged to disobey an instruction from the prime minister if it conflicted with their statutory obligations. But this is to misunderstand our proposal. Ministers must be able to direct civil servants and override their concerns (so long as the action is legal). Our proposed reform to the system of directions would ensure that this remains the case.

Strengthening the civil service's role within the constitution

The civil service's role as a 'constitutional guardian' – that is, its responsibilities to advise on, uphold and discharge aspects of the UK's constitution – needs to be clarified and strengthened. Again, placing it on a firmer statutory footing would help achieve this. There are already elements of the civil service's role that are constitutional in nature. The requirement for officials to act in accordance with the civil service code, for example, is effectively a constitutional principle. Some civil service roles – for instance, accounting officers – can also be thought of as fulfilling a constitutional, or at least quasi-constitutional, role.

But when it comes to advising the government on constitutional issues, or constitutional propriety, the civil service as an institution has no formally defined role. The final report of the Institute for Government's Review of the UK Constitution, carried out jointly with Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, proposed the creation of a permanent centre for constitutional expertise in the Cabinet Office.[48] This would bring together existing constitutional advisory functions, serving as a source of advice for ministers and officials. It would help to fulfil the obligation we proposed as part of a statutory role for the civil service, for it to maintain government capability as regards "[...] advice on the constitutional and administrative responsibilities of the government".[49]

We echo that review in recommending that the cabinet secretary should be able to request a ministerial direction where they are unable to assure ministers of the 'constitutional propriety' of their proposals.[50] This would accompany a more formal role for the cabinet secretary as the primary constitutional adviser.

Introducing a new criterion of 'constitutional propriety' would allow the cabinet secretary to raise concerns publicly about ministers' proposals without undermining the ability of ministers to make a policy decision. If, as a hypothetical example, the lord chancellor intended to respond to a court finding against the government by issuing strong criticism of the judiciary – which would clearly be constitutionally improper – this would allow senior officials to request a direction on the grounds of constitutional propriety before facilitating the lord chancellor's plans.

Together, these proposals would strengthen the capacity of the civil service to advise ministers on constitutional issues, and to raise concerns, without undermining ministers' ability to proceed if they so wished.

Policy making

There is a gulf between the scale of the most intractable problems facing the UK and the policy responses of recent governments. Whether improving rates of productivity and economic growth, reducing regional inequality, meeting the public health and social care needs of an ageing and increasingly ailing population, reducing the prevalence of long-standing societal ills such as destitution and homelessness, clearing and preventing backlogs across public services, or the huge task of managing the net zero transition, successive governments' policy has failed to keep up with the pace of change of these most pernicious problems. Unless that changes, many of them will continue to get worse.

Improving Whitehall's policy making capability should be a joint endeavour between ministers and civil servants. Ministers should decide upon and deliver policies capable of addressing society's long-term priorities as they see them. Civil servants should support ministers to reach effective policy decisions and implement them. Their advice should be honest, where necessary challenging, and based on the best available evidence and experience.[51]

Short-term policy and budgets cannot address long-term problems

Most of the major problems that government faces are chronic and long-term in nature. And recent governments have shown that it is possible to make effective, long-term policy under the right circumstances. New major infrastructure like the Elizabeth Line, 15-year 'contracts for difference' accelerating investment in renewable energy,[52] and long-lasting social reform such as same-sex marriage,[53] are policies designed to survive multiple administrations and parliamentary terms. But there are many long-term policy areas, including those listed above, which governments have been unable to address.[54]

Long-term policy making is difficult for several reasons. It is hard to build cross-party consensus in the UK, partly because of the confrontational incentives created by a first-past-the-post electoral system.[*,55] Ministers change roles frequently, so their focus is often skewed towards policies that can be compellingly presented and take effect in the short period they are likely to be in post.[56] Even over the course of a parliamentary term, ministers are incentivised to focus more on what they can achieve before the next election than the long-term results of their policy decisions.

Governments also tend to link their fiscal rules to parliamentary terms. The failure to fully capture the impact and implications of policies over longer periods of time, and the primacy of meeting blunt 'by year five' fiscal rules further incentivises short-term gaming.[**] The budgets of Whitehall departments, local government and public services are frequently too short in scope and uncertain to provide a basis for planning long-term reforms. Capital investment, for example, is too volatile[57] – and in any case capital budgets are frequently raided to support day-to-day spending to keep public services

* Social care is a prime example of this difficulty for recent governments. Despite agreeing with the need for reform, George Osborne branded Labour's 2010 proposals a "death tax", and Labour called Theresa May's 2017 manifesto policies a "dementia tax".

** Further analysis of this problem will be set out in a forthcoming Institute report.

running (as seen in the government's use of NHS capital budgets to plug costs of last year's industrial action).[58,59] And the Treasury has for too long prioritised short-term flexibility in the tax system over setting and achieving clear long-term objectives.[60]

These factors encourage ministers and officials alike to value policies capable of being planned, budgeted for, agreed and implemented immediately or within one or two years. If government is to tackle the biggest problems society expects it to address, it must overcome this chronic short-termism.

Organising policy across institutional boundaries remains arduous

As well as being long-term in nature the most pressing problems tend not to fit neatly into departmental silos.[61] Both Conservative and Labour governments have pursued cross-cutting policy priorities in recent decades, from Tony Blair's programme to end child poverty, to Boris Johnson's 'levelling up' agenda, and most recently Rishi Sunak's economic pledges. In opposition, the Labour Party has proposed that, should it form the next government, it would pursue five cross-cutting 'missions'.

But successive administrations have still found it difficult to manage policy programmes across departments and tiers of government.[62] Budgets tend to be agreed bilaterally between departments and the Treasury and this means, as per the rules of *Managing Public Money*, that permanent secretaries, as accounting officers of their departments, are directly accountable for how most public money is spent by their department – and their department alone.[63] Ministers are, perhaps not unsurprisingly, incentivised to focus more on those policy areas directly within their remit than those shared with or led by other ministerial colleagues.*

Cross-cutting policy priorities are most likely to thrive when the prime minister dedicates time and attention to them, as the Government Equalities Office found when it was working across departments to draft the bill introducing same-sex marriage.[64] But the prime minister's time is extremely limited, sometimes applied unpredictably or inconsistently, and changes with each holder of the office.

It remains a deviation from the norm for the government to prioritise setting up civil service structures to support cross-cutting policy outside departmental boundaries. It also does not do enough to learn from successful past examples of interdepartmental policy making – such as on social exclusion, the Office for Criminal Justice Reform or, more recently, preparations for Brexit. The civil service has not translated this history into a series of tools and models ministers can readily deploy in support of their priorities. Cross-cutting policy making will soon need to be the norm rather than the exception. This will require just as much change from civil servants as it will from ministers.

* Tackling obesity is an example. While DHSC has overall responsibility for public health policy, the main policy levers to reduce obesity sit within Defra (food regulations), DCMS (advertising regulations) and the Treasury (taxes). There are major economic and health gains to be won by reducing obesity, but it has not been a priority in any of these departments, and indeed has been seen primarily as a threat to their core policy objectives (low food prices and food security, a thriving UK media industry and fiscal prudence respectively).

Too much policy neglects evidence and remains closed to outside input, despite real progress on government's data capabilities

Over the past two decades, civil service policy making has benefited from marked improvements in government's capabilities to collate and use data, digitise services and evaluate policies. This progress has improved the use of evidence in policy and should not be underestimated.

But too much policy remains unhelpfully closed to evidence and input, particularly from outside central government. Practical, understandable barriers often stymie comprehensive external engagement. Civil servants sometimes feel they do not have enough time to ensure outside evidence and input is fully sought, especially in contexts like the Covid-19 pandemic, which required policy at pace.[65] They can feel that outside evidence might point towards proposals misaligned to ministers' priorities and so may be politically unwelcome. In energy policy, for instance, outreach to external experts has been undermined by officials being tied to a 'house view' that limits "what evidence is deemed relevant, what policies are considered, and who is consulted".[66] Or they can lack the knowledge, networks and capability to bring in that outside view. Where good practice exists, it is usually the result of the skills of particular civil servants, rather than a systematic approach of seeking external expertise.[67]

Sometimes policy officials' limited access to evidence reflects poor data practices. In the justice system, for example, too often the information policy makers need is not collected, not held in the right format, is poorly standardised or not shared across departments.[68]

Useful analysis is also sometimes not shared across government. During the pandemic, for example, the Treasury produced its own projections for what might happen to the economy, under alternative assumptions about the disease and UK policy responses, but it did not share these widely across government, preventing other departments from fully understanding the evidence base for decision making.[69]

In other areas, policy can fail because it is designed contrary to available evidence. The government's Rwanda asylum policy and wider Illegal Migration Act are the most recent, and damning, examples. The prime minister's strategy on small boats hinges on the hypothesis that, by making the asylum system harsher and more difficult to navigate, the government can significantly deter people from crossing the English Channel.[70] However, the Home Office permanent secretary has confirmed on several occasions since the ministerial direction issued on this policy that there is insufficient evidence to support that assumption.[71]

The civil service also still has far to go to improve the diversity of thought and lived experience of its own officials, including by increasing socio-economic diversity.[72] Whitehall policy making is still too centralised and parochial, too frequently averse to genuine collaboration with front-line public services and other tiers of government.[73] The civil service is conscious of the need to improve its ability to conduct deliberative policy making, directly working with people affected by or with experience of a policy area, but it remains behind local government in this regard.

Subject matter expertise remains a problem for civil service policy makers

Concern over the rarity of civil servants with expert policy knowledge, technical or operational expertise in a given policy area is not a new problem – it was mentioned in the 1968 Fulton report, for instance.[74] The civil service has developed deep specialist expertise in some areas since then, especially over the past decade through its 'functions' in areas such as commercial, digital, finance and project delivery. But in policy making, civil servants are still incentivised too strongly to move quickly between roles, focusing on general policy making skills over the accumulation of subject matter expertise.

Policy making roles are varied and require a broad skill set. Civil service policy makers must be able to synthesise information, navigate different interests, advise ministers, convene experts and partners, and engage citizens.[75] But, in aggregate, the civil service in many policy areas does lack sufficient officials with deep subject knowledge and long-lasting, close professional relationships with stakeholders in their policy area. This can be frustrating for ministers, and restricts the quality of policy advice. As Sir David Lidington told us after four years as minister for Europe: "I would sometimes know the stuff more than [my officials] did."[76] Similarly, a lack of specialist expertise has been identified as a priority issue in the Treasury in various reviews of the department, including the Institute's review of its performance in the pandemic,[77] and an internal review of its response to the financial crisis.[78] The civil service would be better equipped to advise ministers and deliver their priorities if it cultivated subject matter expertise more effectively.[79]

This is difficult because civil servants are often not rewarded for developing deep subject matter expertise. As described above, high levels of civil service turnover are in part driven by a pay and career structure that, far from rewarding a progressive accumulation of expertise within a role or single policy area, encourages ambitious civil servants to move departments regularly, accumulating increasing managerial responsibilities over specific policy expertise.[80]

There is insufficient accountability for the quality of policy advice and analysis

There is too much confusion over ministers' and officials' respective roles in policy making. While ministers are broadly responsible for making policy decisions, and civil servants for helping the government implement those decisions, officials are also responsible for advising ministers on policy, and ministers often make decisions about policy implementation. This ambiguity makes it difficult for government to learn lessons when policies fail.* And it can lead to blame games and the avoidance of accountability.

* Was the delayed roll-out of Universal Credit, for example, the responsibility of civil servants advising on realistic timelines for the policy's implementation, or the responsibility of the ministers presiding over the policy?

This can lead ministers to express frustration at the quality of advice they receive from civil servants, and the difficulty in rectifying the problem because of unclear accountability.[81] It can be difficult to differentiate between problems genuinely caused by poor civil service advice and those that result from political disagreements between ministers. For instance, the former Brexit secretary David Davis told us that "Whitehall did a really crap job of negotiation", and accused officials of "running a parallel policy separate to the department" during the Brexit years. But he also acknowledged that Theresa May as prime minister played a major role in creating this situation by giving Davis' permanent secretary – Olly Robbins – a second role as her EU sherpa, putting him in an "impossible position".[82] It can be difficult to judge – from parliament or otherwise outside government – the validity of frustrations with civil service advice, particularly because so much policy analysis and advice remains private.

The line between ministers' and officials' role in policy making will never be entirely clear. Nor should it be – it is implausible to overly formalise that core relationship at the heart of government. But ultimately a clearer delineation of responsibilities would help. And greater accountability over the quality of policy analysis and advice offered by the civil service would benefit both sides of the relationship and stand to enhance the effectiveness of policy.

Policy making: recommendations

Changes of approach could make Whitehall policy making more open, expert, long-term, intelligent and accountable. But any reforms should account for the complex and unpredictable systems in which policies are developed and iterated,[83] as well as the full and proper role of ministers in both the outcomes and process of policy making.

Cultivate domain expertise and reduce churn

To incentivise civil servants to develop expertise in particular policy areas they must be rewarded for staying in post for longer and deepening their policy knowledge in a particular area. This will require cultural change with both 'carrots' and 'sticks'. For the former, career pathways should be designed to reward those building deep specialist knowledge, so that civil servants can become more senior, with higher pay, as they become more expert in their policy area. For the latter, minimum terms of service could be used across the senior civil service and for certain policy officials, to prevent officials from moving to another job in the civil service, unless under certain specified circumstances, before they have served their time. It is welcome that the policy profession has recognised the need to address this problem, and is also considering other techniques such as secondments and expertise accreditation to make progress.

The recruitment of policy experts from outside government similarly needs to improve. New senior – and well paid – policy specialist roles should be created in every department to facilitate this.[84] As covered above, external recruitment should be improved in other ways to make the process smoother for applicants, including by making job advertisements more understandable, encouraging hiring managers to test candidates for knowledge and reducing onboarding times. Large-scale secondment schemes should be established between departments and other partners in their policy sectors, to enable interchange of policy experts.

Champion robust, diverse evidence to support decision making

Policy officials already understand the importance of using diverse evidence to inform decision making. The policy profession's standards say officials should use data, evidence and advice from a range of sources – including learning from independent analysis, outside experts, those working on the front line, and people with lived experience of the subject area – to understand the "diverse needs of those affected" by policy and, ultimately, design policy well.[85] But, as established above, there are often practical barriers to achieving these standards – whether civil servants' lack of time, feelings that external expertise might not align with ministerial priorities, or lack of the knowledge, networks and capability to bring in an outside view.

The policy profession cannot police these standards of policy making alone. It requires ministers and senior civil servants in each department to expect policy proposals, wherever possible, to be informed by the best available evidence and input. Clarifying accountability for policy advice, and publishing more of it (see below), would help. But ultimately if ministers and senior officials want high-quality advice, they need to hold their teams accountable for the evidence base underpinning advice, and they need to *want* to engage with that evidence.

Hold civil servants accountable for the quality of their advice

There are several ways in which the accountability of the civil service for policy making can be clarified and strengthened. This report, above, explains the Institute's recommendation for placing the civil service on a new statutory footing and, in doing so, endowing the head of the civil service and permanent secretaries with a statutory responsibility for maintaining the capability of government in a number of areas, including the provision of policy advice. This would make more explicit the civil service's responsibility to ensure it is able to provide top quality, consistent policy advice to ministers.

This accountability could be enacted via a new oversight board for the civil service. If ministers felt the civil service was failing to undertake its duty to provide high quality advice, they could use this board as a means of holding the civil service to account and rectifying the problem. On the other hand, if permanent secretaries believed that ministerial decisions jeopardised their duty to maintain policy making capability, they would be able to seek resolution themselves through the board, ultimately using a ministerial direction on the grounds described above if necessary.

In addition to this, senior, dedicated heads of policy should be created in each department. Versions of this role already exist in some departments, though we contend they should be more senior roles, directly accountable for the quality of the department's policy advice and its approach to policy making. They would be responsible for directing the commissioning of research and engaging partners in policy making, to ensure that departments have access to the evidence they need to provide high quality advice.[86]

Publish more evidence, analysis and advice

Accountability for the civil service's policy advice and analysis would also be strengthened if more of it reached the public domain. This would help those outside government to scrutinise and judge whether that analysis is of the standard ministers should expect. Previous Institute research has found that opening up the policy making process can prove a key determinant in successful policies.[87]

Knowing advice would be published, in some form, would encourage officials to ensure it is of as high a standard as possible. It would incentivise officials to speak truth to power, rather than telling ministers what they think they will want to hear. And it would incentivise ministers to engage fully with evidence, analysis and advice. It could also encourage talented people outside government to come into the civil service, with the reassurance that their advice could be protected and represented fairly.

This goes against the instincts of many civil servants and former ministers. Some argue that publishing policy advice would actually "reduce the amount of truth to power", as officials "would not want their rejected advice being made public".[88] It is right that officials should always be able to provide ministers with private, confidential advice. But that does not mean that more of the case behind policy cannot be published more promptly. This has been done in New Zealand, and has not appeared to have had a 'chilling effect' there.[89]

Whitehall could also look to the example set by local government, where cabinet papers are routinely published at the point at which policies are formally adopted. Jonathan Slater, the former head of the civil service policy profession, has noted from his experience working at Newham and Islington Councils that "requiring civil servants to be able to explain openly the range of options available to ministers, and the delivery and other implications of each of them, is a critical element in local government officials' greater connectedness with the needs of the public".[90] He also emphasises that publishing advice would allow select committees to ask questions about ministers' policy options appraisal process. He argues the "discipline" of doing so would improve these processes and result in "more well-informed analysis" of the policy options. Beyond local government, departments could also look to the example set by the Food Standards Agency, which publishes its board papers and live-streams its board meetings online.

There are many ways UK government could publish more civil service policy advice and analysis. These could include publishing by default all civil service policy analysis unless exempted by specified criteria; publishing final, anonymised advice behind key policies a set number of months after policy decisions are taken; publishing the papers of departmental board meetings except where confidentiality is specifically required; and publishing versions of cabinet sub-committee papers retrospectively once key policy decisions are reached.

Look beyond departmental silos and take a deliberate approach to cross-cutting policy

Addressing the long-standing problem of Whitehall's aversion to cross-cutting policy making will take deliberate, sustained effort from both the civil service and ministers. It should begin with how the government's strategy and budgets are set. Priorities for government should be set by cabinet at the start of each parliament. These should include clear, shared outcomes that the government will aim to deliver. This can act as a framework from which strategy and budgets should follow. The prime minister and chancellor should expect their cabinet colleagues to work up cross-cutting strategies, and bids for budget allocations, that match those shared outcomes. That will mean reforming the spending review process, which should require departments to develop cross-cutting plans and bids.*

The civil service also has a responsibility to draw on past successes in cross-cutting policy making, and should develop a series of models for how such policy agendas can be managed effectively between departments. This would, for example, improve the government's ability to construct new units – or offices – between departments to lead co-ordination of policy for key cross-cutting issues, under the leadership of secretaries of state and with facilitation from the Cabinet Office.

More broadly, the policy profession should focus on strengthening the civil service's ability to design and deploy multi-disciplinary teams on policy problems, which both the profession and the new Civil Service People Plan rightly recognise as a priority.[91] Policy processes should not be the sole domain of policy civil servants. Operational delivery experts should always have a role in these teams, so that the front line can more readily be involved, earlier, in policy making. Multi-disciplinary teams should routinely seek seconded experts from outside UK government – whether from elsewhere in the public sector, the private sector, academia or civil society. This can be done on a part-time basis to improve collaboration between sectors, while not requiring experts to leave their current roles.

Give regulators the tools to make intelligent policy

Particularly since Brexit, government has found itself increasingly obliged to delegate more technical policy decisions to independent regulators. The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, for example, granted new powers to the Financial Conduct Authority and the Bank of England to amend and update rules previously established through EU legislation.[92,93] Legislation last year gave Ofcom a new core duty and wide-ranging powers to protect citizens from harm online, which the regulator must balance with upholding freedom of expression,[94] and also gave the Office for Students new powers to regulate free speech in universities and student unions, which it must balance with protecting institutional autonomy.**,[95]

* The Institute will set these proposals out in greater detail in a report of the Commission on the Centre of Government in February 2024.

** This trend is not universal: the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023 revised the powers of the Trade Remedies Authority, providing ministers greater discretion over how to respond to its recommendations, following its politically unpalatable determination on steel safeguards, which was overturned through emergency legislation in 2021.

Empowering and requiring independent regulators to make such trade-offs can be a sensible approach to achieving long-term policy outcomes. But ministers wanting to use this approach must be willing to set high-level, strategic objectives and then allow regulators to organise delivery independently. Ministers should then accept the legitimacy of decisions taken within regulators' statutory parameters and review progress made towards their objectives over time.

Build on recent progress in policy evaluation

Evaluation is an important and undervalued part of policy making. The Evaluation Task Force (ETF), a joint Cabinet Office–Treasury team, has made good progress improving the quality and prevalence of government evaluations since its creation in 2021. This progress should be built upon in years to come.

The ETF's strategy includes the targets that, by 2025, every department will have published an evaluation strategy; every major project and ETF-priority project will have robust evaluation plans; and 90% of departments will be compliant with the Treasury's evaluation conditions set with budgets at spending reviews.[96] These are sensible aims that will require political and senior official commitment to achieve.

In particular, the ETF is rolling out an evaluation registry – a record of evidence from policy evaluations to inform future policy making.[97] Unveiling plans for the registry in July 2023, the then minister for the Cabinet Office, Jeremy Quin, said that more than 2,000 evaluations would be available to all government departments by the end of 2023.[98] The registry is then expected to be rolled out for public access in 2024. A public registry of government evaluations would be a useful resource for civil servants and outside stakeholders looking to engage with government policy making. Departments' evaluations should be published on this registry promptly after completion, except where confidentiality is genuinely necessary for specified purposes.

Politicians have powers to improve policy making in the civil service

Ministers lead the policy making process. They set the timeline in which policy is developed, have the power to set expectations for how their policy officials will develop proposals, and ultimately decide what policy is pursued.

This means that civil servants must always ensure policy development reflects ministers' priorities, commitments and preferences for ways of working. Ministers can legitimately – sometimes even necessarily – restrict officials' scope to approach policy making in a particular manner – for example, for the sake of timeliness, or for other political reasons. There is also nothing preventing a minister from disregarding even the best-developed policy advice and opting for the 'not recommended' option, and nor should there be. But ministers' policy making power comes with responsibility. Ministers should take the lead in addressing the policy making problems described above, giving civil servants the permission, and resource, they need to develop policy effectively.

This is particularly true for the problem of short-termism in policy making, the factors behind which are largely in the control of elected politicians rather than civil servants. The decision to pursue policies that are likely to have an impact either in the period a minister is in post, or over the course of a parliament before the next election – rather than policies most likely to address a given issue over a longer time frame – is the prerogative of ministers. Likewise, it is up to the chancellor and the prime minister to decide whether and how the government makes long-term spending commitments, and what fiscal rules set the context for that spending.

Civil servants have a role in developing analysis and advice for long-term policy, and putting the civil service on a statutory footing would help to support this role. But fundamentally, if ministers want to fix long-standing problems they must be willing to decide upon long-term policies.

Digital, data and AI

Enhancing the civil service's digital and data skills, and improving its use of technology, have long been identified as priorities in successive civil service reform plans, including the 2021 Declaration on Government Reform. In July 2023, Jeremy Quin, then a Cabinet Office minister, made a further commitment to this area in a speech on civil service reform,[99] emphasising the importance of attracting and retaining digital talent and upskilling current officials. Both were welcome indications of the importance attached to the issue.

The government's overall approach to this area is set out in the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO's) "digital and data roadmap"[100] – a strategy for large-scale transformation into a "more efficient digital government" from 2022 to 2025.[101] The six cross-government missions it identifies – including to digitise infrastructure, decision making and public services, and to increase the prevalence of digital and data skills in the civil service – bring welcome clarity about what the government is trying to achieve, even if it is disappointing that the milestones used internally to assess its progress are not public.

Progress is nevertheless being made. Capabilities have improved substantially in the past decade, and big steps have been taken to develop and improve public-facing digital services. The DDaT Functional Leadership Group – bringing together the relevant senior officials from across Whitehall – meets regularly to assess progress.

But serious challenges remain. 'Legacy IT', for example – where departments rely on outdated IT systems – continues to hamper the government's progress in other areas, and aspects of the roadmap, such as improving existing digital public services, are behind schedule. While both CDDO and the Government Digital Service (GDS) benefited from more stability in personnel last year, the ever-present risk of high turnover in the civil service could also hamper successful delivery of the roadmap. Long-term stability at the senior level is a key issue, given the importance of the accumulation of expertise to digital transformation.

More fundamental, however, is that the landscape shifted significantly in 2023 with a step-change in the development of generative AI.[*,102] As a result, the entire digital, data and AI agenda for the civil service has become much more urgent and important.

* Which the government defines as "any type of artificial intelligence (AI) that can be used to create new text, images, video, audio, or code".

The civil service needs more digital experts who should be explicitly protected from the headcount cap and later reductions

The civil service has made progress in strengthening its digital workforce. As we discussed in Part 1, it has been one of the most rapidly expanding professions in recent years. There are now more than 28,000 professionals in the digital and data workforce, expanding from 2.8% of the workforce in 2018 to more than 5% in late 2023 (and with a target to increase this to 6% by 2025).[103] While this compares to an industry average of 8–12% of the workforce, the growth in recent years is impressive.[104] There are also signs that this will continue – we heard that the DDaT Fast Stream is now the third most popular, for example. In September, the government announced plans to recruit 2,500 tech and digital roles, including through apprenticeships, while also opening a new pilot digital secondments programme to bring in skills from the private sector – the first recruits from which have already started their placements.

But while there has been progress in boosting skills, there are still difficulties. The scale and pace of change required leaves little option but to build these skills increasingly rapidly. In March last year, the National Audit Office (NAO) said that "the existing skills gap is getting worse", and that "CDDO is concerned that digital teams in departments will not have the skills and expertise necessary to implement the roadmap".[105] It noted that digital, data and technology vacancies increased from 3,900 in April 2022 to 4,100 in October 2022 – and as of November 2023 this had not significantly changed, at 3,905 vacancies.[106] There has, however, been progress in reducing the vacancy rate from 14% to 12% since late 2022, approaching the target of 10% by 2025.[107]

External recruitment is a particular challenge, with an estimated 37% of recruitment campaigns ending unsuccessfully.[108] This is partly due to an unfavourable job market – there is high demand for digital skills from employers across the economy and insufficient supply in the labour market. As the NAO put it: "Many believe the talent is simply not available in the marketplace to achieve the degree of transformation the government needs."[109] The government has the additional burden of offering comparatively poor pay, though there have been notable efforts to address this: all central government departments are using or are in the process of implementing the DDaT pay framework, which gives them additional flexibility in the pay they can offer when recruiting for DDaT specialists. This has had some benefits. The MoJ, for example, adopted the framework two years ago and the use of contractors (brought in to counter a lack of in-house expertise) has notably reduced.

The categorisation of the DDaT workforce under the DDaT capability framework – and the recent refresh of the framework[110] – is also positive. Defining each DDaT role in government, and setting out the required skills and level of those skills, will help to build consistency in the treatment of the profession across government as well as helping with recruitment by enabling consistent job adverts. The launch of a new DDaT brand in November 2023 ('government digital and data') is also intended to boost recruitment. However, given the NAO's conclusion in March 2023 that "the roadmap's activities will not fully address the current skills gap or the government's inability to attract enough external specialists to the civil service",[111] it is unlikely that this will resolve these issues.

Looking ahead, there is a risk that the government's headcount cap and subsequent intention to reduce the number of civil servants to pre-pandemic levels could, if

implemented badly, jeopardise efforts to increase the DDaT headcount. The profession has historically weathered headcount cuts well, and there is no sign of an intention to reduce its numbers. In fact, the government has been explicit that growing the digital workforce "will help the government to meet its ambitions to reduce the overall civil service".[112] Nevertheless, the government should make an explicit exception from headcount reductions for the DDaT profession.

A further priority is upskilling existing civil servants. The roadmap pledges that over 90% of senior civil servants will have been trained on digital and data essentials by 2025. This is a welcome commitment, yet we were told that by September 2023 only 600 senior officials of more than 7,000 had been upskilled.[113] The NAO has also criticised the training for being insufficiently detailed around the government's digital operating environment and the constraints associated with legacy systems (discussed below), and this should be addressed. Plans to survey the senior civil service, asking them to self-identify their levels of digital skills, are welcome: this survey should be used to focus further upskilling efforts.

There are also efforts to upskill the wider civil service. A new annual initiative – "One Big Thing", which sees civil servants taking shared action around a reform priority – was in 2023 focused on data training, with all civil servants meant to undertake a day's worth of this training in the autumn.[114] Yet we were told that only 40%* of officials signed up to participate (55% of staff in core departments). While this will doubtless have been beneficial, with more than 700,000 learning hours recorded and in eight departments more than half of staff taking part, the relatively low sign-up rate is disappointing and there were large discrepancies in sign-up rates across departments. While such training has the potential to benefit all civil servants, a more targeted approach could be more practical and realistic. Digital leaders should consider whether resources are being focused on areas where they are most needed.

One Login is a good news story – but more needs to be done to meet the roadmap's target for improving digital public services

Improving digital public services is a key focus of the roadmap, with two of the six missions dedicated to it. One Login – the government's identity verification service for people to access online services – is the focus of one of them, and has made good progress. Building such a service while respecting privacy is not straightforward, not least because the UK is, according to experts, the first country in the world without ID cards to develop such a system.

GDS, which has developed the system, has also faced the challenge common to any cross-cutting Whitehall initiative of securing buy-in from departments. Yet this has been a success. The first 23 government services have been onboarded,** more than 2.5 million people have used the service to prove their identity, and we have heard that the collaboration between GDS and departments has worked well. There will be further challenges this year as larger services such as HMRC's are onboarded. But if One Login continues to be successful, it will open the door to more innovative services such as a fully digital government mail service.

* This figure includes all departments and agencies, the devolved administrations, and the Scottish and Welsh governments.

** For example, the Disclosure and Barring Service's Basic Check and HM Land Registry's Sign Your Mortgage Deed services have been onboarded.

GDS has recently had less success with two of its other services, GOV.UK PaaS (Platform as a Service) and GOV.UK Verify. GOV.UK PaaS – a cloud hosting platform for departments – was established in 2015, and GDS announced its decommissioning in July 2022.[115] The decision was taken in the face of other cloud providers developing better technology, and the platform failing to meet internal targets for growth in users. On the other hand the closure of GOV.UK Verify, the precursor to One Login, was more due to poor product design. It missed several key milestones by large margins, including its implementation date, and both the NAO and IPA recommended its closure. There is, however, a more promising side to this. We heard that GDS had received support from ministers and senior officials for its practical, 'fail fast' approach to closing services that aren't working. This is welcome, considering the difficulty of this kind of innovation.

Beyond developing these new services, CDDO's roadmap also focuses on improving existing digital services to make them more efficient and accessible. The roadmap's target is for at least 50 of the government's top 75 services to have moved to a 'great' standard of performance by 2025. Progress thus far (as of September 2023) has included defining what 'great' is,* assessing all 75 services against that standard, and supporting 15 services to reach it. This mapping of the challenges facing services is necessary for their transformation, but the rate of change will need to be accelerated to meet the 2025 target.

Progress has been made on mapping the challenges of legacy IT systems, but they are still a serious – and expensive – risk

Legacy IT systems continue to pose serious difficulties for the civil service. Such systems are defined as those that are "out of support, not cost-effective, hard to maintain, above an acceptable risk threshold or an end-of-life product".[116] Concerningly, this definition applies to some vital systems – including both the Police National Computer (the main database of criminal records, introduced in 1974) and 'Drivers 90' (the DVLA's record of all drivers, introduced in 1990).

Beyond the risk of such critical systems failing, they are extremely costly, as they require civil servants to perform additional tasks to compensate for missing functionality and poor interfacing with more modern systems. In 2020, for example, Government Security estimated that almost 50% of total IT spending at the time was dedicated towards "keeping the lights on" with legacy systems, with an estimated risk over the following five years of £13bn–£22bn.[117] As the systems age, it also becomes increasingly difficult to recruit people who have the knowledge required to maintain them.

Addressing such systems is not always a focus. Last year, the NAO noted that changes to legacy systems and processes are "often overlooked" in favour of simpler digital initiatives,[118] and that departments can find it easier to bid for capital funding for new developments than resource funding to maintain existing services.[119]

CDDO's roadmap seeks to address the issue in its fourth mission – "efficient, secure and sustainable technology" – and £2.7bn of the £8bn provided for investment in digital change between 2022–23 and 2024–25 is being allocated to cyber and legacy

* Services reached the 'great' standard if they reach a high, measurable standard of both efficiency and usability.

IT.[120] However, the common legacy IT framework, designed simply to assess legacy IT issues in order to address departments' lack of information on them, was only completed in October 2022 and is still being rolled out. This use of consistent criteria in departments is valuable in giving a cross-government view of the problem, and as of September last year 26 organisations had registered and scored their assets using the framework.[121] But this does not yet move on to remediation work. By 2025, the aim is only for all systems 'red-rated' through the framework to have "an agreed remediation plan in place".[122]

This slow pace of change reflects the scale of the challenge posed by legacy IT systems. Yet the scale of the challenge is a consequence of the fact that the problem has been left to fester for so long, as risk and cost have grown inexorably. The problem must be treated more urgently – both for the full benefits of digitisation to be realised, and to alleviate the unacceptable risk currently surrounding vital systems.

The government should pay more attention to the impact of AI on the civil service

The civil service has been alive to the development of AI for some time. The government issued guidance on its use in the public sector in mid-2019.[123] But the rapid progression of this technology over the past year, and its prospects for the immediate future, mean that the civil service must now dedicate much greater resource and focus to understanding the implications – opportunities and risks – for the way the civil service works and how it sits in the wider digital and tech agendas.

Building capability in AI across government has been particularly challenging because the recent significant developments in generative AI came halfway through a spending review cycle. As a result, funding for much of the work done on AI thus far comes from existing departmental budgets. The next spending review may see more funding allocated to more ambitious AI projects.

There have, however, been several recent indications that the government is beginning to think about the impact of AI on the civil service. Also included in Quin's 2023 reform speech was the announcement that following a pilot, the 'incubator for automation and innovation' (i.AI) would become a permanent civil service team, focused on "some of our most important and intractable challenges".[124] This appears to have been renamed in November, when Oliver Dowden announced the incubator for AI, which aims to "help departments harness the potential of AI to improve lives and the delivery of public services".[125] It will be partly focused on training civil servants, and Dowden suggested that it would help to cut the size of the civil service.

Earlier in the year, Dowden had also discussed the use of AI in the civil service in an interview, mentioning a trial of "the application of AI to ministerial red boxes".[126] CDDO, meanwhile, published guidance for civil servants on the use of generative AI in June 2023, which emphasises fact-checking content produced by the technology and protecting sensitive information.[127] There have been other indications from press reports – for example, the Department for Education running a trial comparing a chatbot's ability to summarise lengthy government documents to that of civil servants'.[128]

The government is right to consider the potential benefits of AI for the work of the civil service. A Harvard Business School study recently gave access to GTP-4 to employees at Boston Consulting Group, who were found to complete more work to a higher quality.[129] Management consultants McKinsey recently argued that generative AI is likely to have the biggest impact on work that requires expertise and knowledge, and that these fields are now the most vulnerable to automation.[130] And Rupert McNeil, the civil service's former chief human resources officer, has argued that the civil service workforce could be reduced by two thirds in the next 15 years, partly through the use of AI.[131]

In the context of this potential scale of change it is not yet clear that the government is taking the possible impact of AI on the civil service sufficiently seriously, despite the welcome early signs.* The potential risks and benefits, including for automating roles, are substantial and urgent.[132] The civil service must now grapple with how the technology stands to change its ways of working, its focus and its allocation of resource more fundamentally. Civil service leaders and ministers should conduct a detailed investigation to forecast the impact of AI on civil service work, including the workforce. This should explore which processes and analytical functions can effectively and safely be automated, but it must also attend closely to the potential risks of the technology with respect to data privacy, bias and other unintended consequences, as well as civil engagement.[133] Alongside this, government must continue to quickly build an effective regulatory regime.[134]

* On 18 January, as this report went to press, CDDO published a Generative AI Framework for HMG. The framework is "necessarily incomplete and dynamic", but sets out 10 common principles to guide the "safe, responsible, and effective use of generative AI in government organisations".

Resilience and preparedness

The Covid inquiry has demonstrated why the civil service is integral to building a resilient state

The Covid inquiry – launched in July 2022 – is ongoing. Hearings throughout 2023 served to demonstrate the importance of the UK being prepared for, and resilient to, crises when they occur. Both preparedness and resilience appear to have been inadequate, to varying degrees, in the UK government in the years before the pandemic. Protecting citizens from high-impact risks is a core function of government and, as the inquiry is laying bare, there can be an enormous cost to failing to prepare.

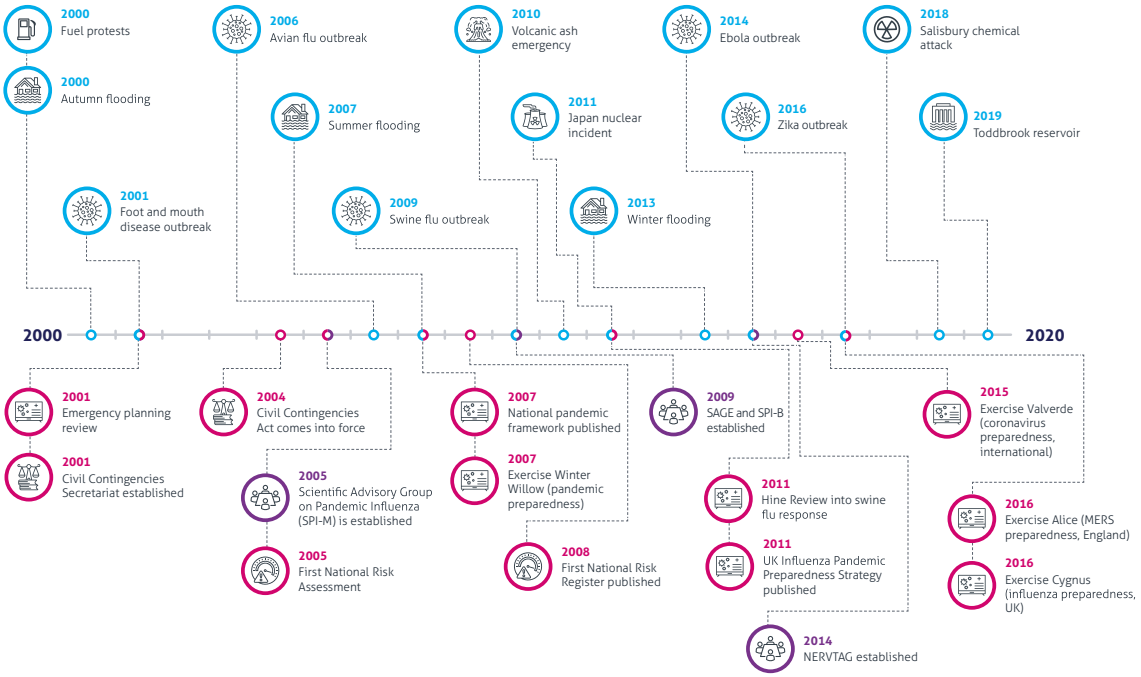
Managing extreme risks well is difficult. Governments face constant demands on their attention and resources from chronic policy problems and short-term crises, making it hard for ministers to concentrate on uncertain threats that may not emerge. As with other long-term aims or projects, preparedness and resilience are also poorly aligned with political incentives and parliamentary timescales. This means the civil service has a vital role to play in maintaining focus and expertise on risk management and preparedness.

The government identifies risks through the classified National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) process. There is also an unclassified version of the NSRA, the National Risk Register (NRR). The NSRA does not try to detail every possible risk but captures a wide range of possible impacts, from nuclear accidents and terrorist attacks to flooding, electricity network failure – and pandemics. Each risk is assigned to a lead government department, with the secretary of state, board and accounting officer ultimately responsible for preparedness.[135]

But the Covid inquiry hearings are highlighting key weaknesses in UK resilience, many of which were identified in previous Institute research into how preparedness was managed in the years before the pandemic.[136] Our research found that many departments were poorly prepared for key risks, particularly where they were not the lead department responsible. Risk management was not seen as a priority by many departments, and ministers and key officials gave relatively little time to it. Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, captured one element of this – the divide between national security and other risks – in his evidence to the inquiry, arguing that the system was "surprisingly bad... at responding to threats of this kind which are not in the traditional national security system".[137]

Preparedness exercises did not appear to have the desired impact in some cases, with key recommendations, such as improving stockpiles of PPE, not implemented. Evidence to the inquiry has shown that only eight of the 22 lessons that emerged from Exercise Cygnus in 2016 had been fully addressed by the time the Covid pandemic hit.[138] Much discussion leading up to the inquiry focused on whether UK pandemic preparedness was overly focused on flu, but even accounting for that, departments should have been more prepared. School closures, for example, had been identified as a possibility in a major flu epidemic. Scrutiny of plans either internally or externally also appeared to be limited.[139]

Figure 2.4 **Timeline of selected emergencies and changes to emergency planning, 2000–20**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of news reports.

Our research found that the capability of civil servants and their engagement with preparedness and risk management were variable. Officials were not incentivised to develop skills and expertise in important areas including risk analysis, modelling, and systems thinking, or in specific fields such as biosecurity. Representatives of local and devolved governments have suggested that officials also had inadequate understanding of the functions of local government and the details of devolution settlements when it came to preparedness and emergency response, making effective coordination difficult.[140]

Some of these problems were due to wider issues described elsewhere in this report, such as churn in the civil service. As Oliver Letwin pointed out in his evidence to the Covid inquiry, training – in this case on preparedness and resilience – is only useful if both ministers and officials are in place long enough to use it.[141] Pay competition has also been a problem, particularly when it comes to digital, data and technology skills.[142]

Risk identification processes failed to correctly estimate the potential impact of a coronavirus-type pandemic. The NSRA has been criticised for being too closed, overly classified and too short-term in the lead-up to the pandemic. For example, the then head of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS), Roger Hargreaves, now director of the COBR unit, told a Lords select committee inquiry on preparedness in 2021 that "finding a way to inject some independent challenge is probably our highest priority for the next round".[143] The way the NSRA was organised before the pandemic also made it hard to examine how risks might combine or 'cascade', and once risks had been identified monitoring varied greatly, with some areas monitored far more closely than others.[144]

Centrally, the CCS had been pulled into crisis response and away from preparedness too often in the years leading up to the Covid pandemic, and the Cabinet Office did not effectively ensure that departmental preparedness was adequate and consistent. One email submitted as evidence to the Covid inquiry from mid-March 2020 stated: "Apparently departments hold their own detailed civil contingencies plans, as well as their business continuity plans. We do not have these centrally." That the Cabinet Office did not have sight of these plans centrally as standard was a mistake. That they did not do so by mid-March 2020 is incredible.[145]

The CCS also struggled to unify departmental responses to the pandemic, particularly when it came to economic and health policy. Responsibility for risks that cut across departments was unclear in the lead-up to the pandemic, while planning in other areas ended up siloed, with a lack of engagement from other departments. The CCS has had limited resources available to allow it to play an effective co-ordinating and refereeing role across government.[146]

The threat of extreme risks has not gone away, and may be increasing as climate change impacts increase and the world becomes increasingly technologically dependent and interconnected. The most recent NRR references "an ever-changing and growing set of risks".[147] The Covid pandemic showed that risks can materialise at any time; reform of the civil service's approach to resilience and preparedness should be a priority for the next parliament.

Progress has been made since the pandemic

The government published a new 'resilience framework' at the end of 2022, which referenced many of the issues the Institute and others have identified. It promised: clear ownership of all risks, including complex and cross-cutting risks; more external expertise in the NSRA process; better consideration of chronic as well as acute risks; capability building in the civil service; and improving co-ordination across government.[148]

As part of this the government split up the CCS to separate the resilience and emergency response functions. The former now sits in the Resilience Directorate, under the new head of resilience, and the latter in the COBR unit.[149] This is a welcome development, which we recommended in our report on managing extreme risks.[150] The government has also set up a new resilience sub-committee of the National Security Council, chaired by the deputy prime minister and including the chancellor.[151] And it has recently published a document setting out the lead government department for each risk, helping to clarify responsibility and accountability.[152]

On risk identification, there has been a commitment to refreshing the NSRA process and incorporating more external challenge, with the promise of a systematic expert advisory programme from early 2024.[153] The most recent edition of the public NRR includes many risks that were previously only covered in the classified NSRA, while the time frame over which it looks at 'non-malicious' risks has been increased from two to five years, and the NSRA itself has moved from a biennial process to an iterative rolling one.[154] The government is also developing a new approach to assessing chronic risks.[155] These are all positive changes.

There has been further work on improving skills. The government is developing a UK Resilience Academy to ensure individuals working on resilience have the capability they need, and has also promised a "new training and skills pathway" through its crisis management excellence programme. The national exercising programme has been restarted and two national exercises were held in 2023.[156] In addition, since December 2022 the government has published three issues of the UK resilience 'Lessons Digest', which shares lessons from exercises and emergencies among the resilience community.[157] More external guidance has been promised for businesses, with particular assistance on critical infrastructure and cyber threats, as well as a new website with practical advice for households.[158]

The use of data for resilience and preparedness has also improved. The government established the National Situation Centre (SitCen) in September 2021 to bring data and analysis together for crisis and risk management. In a statement to the Covid inquiry the Cabinet Office stated that SitCen had supported the response to events including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, extreme heat and the Sudan evacuation, and that to date it has "identified risk data for two thirds of all NSRA risks".[159] This is a notable improvement on the situation prior to the pandemic. The Office for National Statistics and SitCen have also published new cross-government crisis data sharing guidance.[160]

Finally, progress has been made in specific risk areas. The recent AI white paper proposed a new "central risk function" to identify and monitor AI risks.[161] The refreshed Biological Security Strategy was released in June 2023 and promised the development of a real-time National Biosurveillance Network, establishing a new UK Biosecurity Leadership Council and a Biological Security Taskforce in the Cabinet Office, with an expert challenge group to provide external scrutiny.[162] And a new Centre for Pandemic Preparedness was also established by the UK Health Security Agency in June 2021.[163] All of these initiatives have the potential to be beneficial. However, it is crucial that the Resilience Directorate is able to draw them together effectively to ensure a cohesive and streamlined process for identifying and managing risks.

Resilience and preparedness: recommendations

More needs to be done to create a resilient UK

Many of the reforms promised in the new resilience framework are positive steps, though some have long lead-in times and other areas are still lacking. For example, while the framework stated that it was important that investment in resilience was considered and co-ordinated across government and that "HM Treasury has prioritised join-up of spending plans where appropriate", reforms to better co-ordinate spending and to measure and track departmental investment are not promised until 2030.[164]

Reforms take time – but better preparedness and risk management should be an urgent priority, with no assurances on when the next extreme risk might come. Mapping out the UK government's resilience capabilities is a welcome step but is something that might have been hoped for before the framework. And while the longer time frame of the NSRA is welcome, it is still too short to properly capture the full range of risks and should be extended further. The former government chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance said in his statement to the Covid inquiry that he thought

there was more to be done to improve the methodology of the NSRA, particularly when it came to assessing impact rather than likelihood, the separation of acute and chronic risks, and the consideration of compound risks.[165]

The Institute has recommended adopting a modified 'three lines of defence' model for resilience, which separates out responsibilities for risk management, oversight and audit. Keeping day-to-day risk management in departments (the first line of defence) as is currently the case is sensible, but means that there is a risk of fragmentation with systemic and cross-cutting risks falling through the cracks. Ownership of some complex cross-cutting risks could still be clearer. More also needs to be done to ensure risk management and preparedness is appropriately resourced – departments should more carefully consider risk management in spending review bids.

A strong central co-ordinating and enforcement function (the second line of defence) is key to ensure that departments are managing their risks effectively. Separating out the CCS into crisis response and preparedness is a positive step, but it is not clear whether that alone will be sufficient to solve the problems the Institute identified with central co-ordination of preparedness and resilience. The government committed £10 million at the autumn budget to finance research on risks to the economy and public finances, "to better factor in the savings... in the long run by spending on resilience today".[166]

But it does not appear to have committed additional resources to improve the Resilience Directorate's ability to unify and check departmental preparations more widely. Hargreaves stated in his evidence to the Covid inquiry that in terms of headcount "it is very similar to what was there before" and that "there's no new money, there might be less money, but if there are good proposals, who knows, there could be more money... It is not spending more money here and might spend less."[167] Witnesses called by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy also expressed doubts that the new head of resilience is, at director level, senior or empowered enough to impel departments to focus on resilience.[168]

Additional investment is not a prerequisite for improvements, but if UK resilience is going to be improved it is essential that the Cabinet Office has the capacity to effectively play a co-ordinating and enforcement role. The new programme of preparedness exercises will only be successful if there is effective oversight of the response to findings and clarity that actions are being taken as a result.[169]

Finally, reform is needed at the third line of defence – audit. The Covid pandemic has revealed failures of preparedness but assessing resilience should not wait for a crisis. Parliament should strengthen its scrutiny of risk management, with a cross-cutting committee focused specifically on resilience and preparedness. The government made the first of its promised annual statements on civil contingency risks and resilience to parliament in December; a welcome first step to help facilitate scrutiny. But parliament should ensure it has the capacity to scrutinise these disclosures effectively. The government should also consider the case for an external body, like the Office for Budget Responsibility or Climate Change Committee, to provide independent oversight and scrutiny.

Finally, it is crucial to clarify where accountability for resilience, risk management and crisis response lies. As discussed elsewhere in this report, part of our call to put the civil service on a statutory footing would place a statutory obligation on the head of the civil service and permanent secretaries to maintain government capability – including in these areas.

The Covid inquiry is showing the very real costs of government failures when it comes to preparedness and resilience. There are no guarantees about when the next major risk will materialise; ensuring that resilience and preparedness are appropriately resourced, effectively co-ordinated from the centre, and scrutinised properly should be a priority for the civil service to make sure that the UK is better prepared in the future.

Conclusion: the year ahead

UK politics in 2024 will be dominated by a general election. In this context the civil service must prove itself to current and potential future ministers. To the former, it must show that it can focus on delivering this government's priorities right up to the end of the parliament, even as attention moves to what might come next. With shadow ministers, the civil service must build confidence that it will be able to pivot and deliver their priorities effectively, should there be a change of government.

So the election year will test the civil service in several ways. First, it will need to support useful access talks with the opposition, once they begin, and will need to gear up to provide for a smooth transition – again, in the event of a change of government. This is a significant responsibility, albeit one that will only affect the work of a tiny minority of the half a million civil servants around the UK, and one that the civil service has a long track record of discharging successfully.

The more difficult test will come in the weeks and months after the election, when the civil service must show its mettle to new ministers. For it to be able to deliver that – and any future – government's priorities and tackle the intractable policy problems facing the UK, civil service leaders and ministers will need to address the institution's own deep-rooted problems. Top of the list should be the issues, analysed in this report, with how the civil service workforce is managed; how the institution is led and governed; its approach to making policy; its digital expertise; and its role in making the UK a resilient state prepared for future crises.

This time next year, therefore, we will be able to judge whether the civil service had a successful 2024 by answering four questions. First, and foremost, has the civil service done everything in its power to support the ministers throughout the final year of this parliament? Second, has it navigated the immediate pressures it faces with regards to workforce morale, possible industrial action over the pay settlement, and difficult forecast administration budgeting? Third, has it supported a smooth general election in each aspect of its responsibilities? And fourth, after an election, can it provide the government with an honest assessment of the longer term Whitehall reforms required – and how could it go about delivering them?

Those questions are for then. For now, the civil service must retain focus on the task at hand, working towards their departments', and ministers', priorities as effectively as it can. We hope the analysis and recommendations in this report can help in that aim.

Methodology

We set out below our methodology behind various pieces of analysis that have contributed to this year's Whitehall Monitor. For questions on the below, or regarding any of our findings, please get in touch via email at enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

Open access data

Our charts draw principally from publicly available government data, which in most cases we have further processed and analysed. We have collated the final data inputs for each of our charts and published them on our website alongside this report.

If you have any questions about the analysis of this data, please get in touch via email at the address listed above.

Throughout the report

Defining departments

Where possible, we categorise bodies into 'departmental groups' according to where ministerial responsibility lies, even when these are reported under a separate departmental heading in government data. For example, we group Ofsted with the DfE departmental group, and not as a separate department, as it is reported in the original ONS Public Sector Employment data.

In such cases where source data reports organisations as independent from core departments, we have identified the departmental group to which those organisations belong by using the 'sponsor department' identified by the most recent (2020) public bodies report published by the Cabinet Office, or by government statements – such as on machinery of government changes – to parliament.

Unless otherwise indicated, the figures used throughout the report are for departmental groups, and therefore include the civil servants who work in the 'core' departments as well as the agencies and non-ministerial departments they oversee.

A table listing the departments and their associated organisations is found overleaf. We have not included organisations that no longer exist – for example, because they have been merged with other bodies or renamed. However, historic organisations are counted in our figures for change over time, and details of those used in our analysis is available upon request.

Machinery of government (MoG) changes

We reflect the new departmental structures created following February 2023's MoG changes only where it is possible to do so using publicly available data. For example, the latest size of each departmental group reflects the existence of DBT, DSIT and DESNZ, whereas charts showing change over multiple years exclude the new

departments and reflect, where possible, the final size of their predecessors. In each case, we explain why we have used which version of departmental structures in the figure sources.

List of departments and associated organisations

Initialism	Department	Other organisations
AGO	Attorney General's Office	Crown Prosecution Service; Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate; Government Legal Department; Serious Fraud Office
CO	Cabinet Office	Crown Commercial Service; Government Commercial Organisation; UK Statistics Authority; Government Property Agency
DBT	Department for Business and Trade	Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service; Companies House; Competition and Markets Authority; Insolvency Service; Export Credits Guarantee Department
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Charity Commission; National Archives
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Animal and Plant Health Agency; Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science; Ofwat; Rural Payments Agency; Veterinary Medicines Directorate
DESNZ	Department for Energy Security and Net Zero	Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem)
DfE	Department for Education	Education and Skills Funding Agency; Standards and Testing Agency; Teaching Regulation Agency; Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation; Ofsted; Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
DfT	Department for Transport	Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency; Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency; Maritime and Coastguard Agency; Office of Rail and Road; Vehicle Certification Agency; Active Travel England
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care	Food Standards Agency; Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency; UK Health Security Agency

DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	HM Land Registry; Planning Inspectorate; Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre
DSIT	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	Building Digital UK; UK Intellectual Property Office; Met Office; UK Space Agency
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions	The Health and Safety Executive
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	FCDO Services; Wilton Park Executive Agency
HMRC	HM Revenue and Customs	Valuation Office Agency
HMT	HM Treasury	Debt Management Office; Government Actuary's Department; Government Internal Audit Agency; National Savings and Investments; Office for Budget Responsibility; National Infrastructure Commission
HO	Home Office	National Crime Agency
MoD	Ministry of Defence	Defence Science and Technology Laboratory; UK Hydrographic Office; Defence Equipment and Support; Defence Electronics and Components Agency; Royal Fleet Auxiliary, Submarine Delivery Agency
MoJ	Ministry of Justice	HM Courts and Tribunals Service; Legal Aid Agency; HM Prison and Probation Service; Office of the Public Guardian; Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority; UK Supreme Court
NIO	Northern Ireland Office	
Scot Gov	Scottish government	Accountant in Bankruptcy; Consumer Scotland; Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal; Disclosure Scotland; Education Scotland; Food Standards Scotland; Forestry and Land Scotland; National Records of Scotland; Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator; Registers of Scotland; Revenue Scotland; Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service; Scottish Fiscal Commission; Scottish Forestry; Scottish Housing Regulator; Scottish Prison Service; Scottish Public Pensions Agency; Social Security Scotland; Student Awards Agency for Scotland; Transport Scotland

OSSS	Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland (including Office of the Advocate General for Scotland)	
Welsh Gov	Welsh government	ESTYN; Welsh Revenue Authority
WO	Office of the Secretary of State for Wales	

Defining civil servants

We define civil servants as politically impartial, appointed officials of the UK Home Civil Service, which supports the work of the UK's central government departments. This includes agencies that employ civil servants such as executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and some non-departmental public bodies.

Our definition includes staff of the three Whitehall-based territorial offices that manage the UK's relationship with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. And we include the civil servants employed by the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland, but not the staff of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which is administratively distinct.

In this way, civil servants are defined more narrowly than public sector workers: police, teachers, NHS staff, members of the armed forces or local government officers are not counted as civil servants. Nor do we include the UK's diplomatic service in our analysis since it, too, is administratively separate from the UK Home Civil Service.

Civil service grades

Broadly, there are five civil service job grades:

1. Administrative officer/administrative assistant (AO/AA) – the most junior civil service grade. These roles tend to comprise administrative support and operational delivery roles, such as prison officers and caterers.

2. Executive officer (EO) – civil servants in this grade offer business and policy support and include roles such as executive assistants, finance, HR, IT and communications specialists.

3. Senior executive officer/higher executive officer (SEO/HEO) – includes policy officers and officials with specific policy responsibilities.

4. Grades 6 and 7 – these civil servants tend to be experienced officials with significant policy responsibilities.

5. Senior civil service (SCS) – the most senior grade of the civil service made up of the senior management team. Generally, directors are ultimately responsible for the policy work of their team and directors general oversee directors and work closely with the department's ministers. Each department also has a permanent secretary as part of the SCS, who supports the minister at the head of the department, acts as the accounting officer and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the department.

Inflation/real-terms figures

For government spending information that spans multiple years, we use the GDP deflator to present numbers in consistent prices. The GDP deflator is a measure of economy-wide inflation and so is appropriate for considering changes in government spending. We use the GDP deflator published alongside the November 2023 autumn statement. For information on pay, we use the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to present numbers in consistent prices as this is the relevant measure to understand how much pay packets are worth to households.

Part 1

Size and turnover: Civil service staff numbers

To analyse civil service staff numbers, we use Table 9 from the ONS's quarterly Public Sector Employment series, which contains staff numbers (headcount and full-time equivalent, FTE) in all public organisations that employ civil servants. Unless stated otherwise, we use FTE figures, which count part-time staff according to the time they work (e.g. a person working two days a week as 0.4 FTE); this is more accurate than headcount, which does not distinguish between full-time and part-time employees.

Staff numbers are generally reported to the nearest 10. The ONS and the Cabinet Office (for its Civil Service Statistics) report staff numbers lower than five as "..". We have rounded any staff numbers lower than five to three.

Our figures exclude temporary census field staff, and for operational security reasons staff from Central Government Security (formerly Security and Intelligence Services) have been excluded from civil service statistics published since Q2 2016. We adjust for this by manually excluding Central Government Security staff from our datasets before this date, too.

To analyse other characteristics of the civil service, such as age, pay, profession, location and ethnicity, we use the Cabinet Office's annual Civil Service Statistics release. To analyse the engagement and experience of civil servants, we use the Cabinet Office's annual Civil Service People Survey.

Our analysis of change over time for each departmental group takes account of the reclassification of staff between organsiations, as relevant. We do this to more precisely portray the changing size of departments, rather than changes to the way in which officials are formally counted and reported, where it is more accurate to do so. Reclassificaitons are usually noted by the ONS in footnotes to the data tables.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID) were merged to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in Q3 2020. Our calculated rates of change and size of FCDO over time are assumed to be equivalent to the sum of the figures for the two component departments for quarters prior to Q3 2020; the same applies for BEIS before the merger of BIS and DECC. We do not do the same for the new DBT, DSIT or DESNZ because those MoG changes were not the result of simple mergers between departments.

Professions

Our analysis of the civil service professions uses Table 8A in the Cabinet Office's annual Civil Service Statistics.

All civil servants belong to a profession. The professions in the civil service have changed over time, and the current professions are listed below. For all of our analysis, we group very similar professions into 'profession groups', and it is these groups that we use and refer to as 'professions' throughout our analysis.

For some analysis we also group the professions into three categories. The operational delivery profession occupies its own category. We group all other professions into 'cross-departmental specialisms' (professions such as policy, which span multiple departments), and 'departmental specialisms' (professions such tax, which are overwhelmingly concentrated in one department). The list of professions below reflects how we group them into cross-departmental specialisms and departmental specialisms. For the years in which they existed, now-defunct professions are also grouped into the categories below. Note that operational delivery is not included in the list below.

Cross-departmental specialisms (Institute parent category)

- Analytics (*Institute parent category*)
  - Economics
  - Operational research
  - Social research
  - Statistics
- Commercial
- Communications
- Digital, data and technology
- Finance (*Institute parent category*)
  - Corporate finance
  - Finance
- Human resources
- Internal audit
- Policy
- Project delivery
- Property
- Knowledge and information management
- Legal

Departmental specialism (Institute parent category)

- Counter fraud
- Geography
- Inspector of Education and Training
- Intelligence analysis
- International trade
- Medicine

- Planning (*Institute parent category*)
  - Planning
  - Planning inspectors
- Psychology
- Science and engineering
- Security
- Tax
- Veterinarian

In Figure 1.10, there are eight departments shown. The four departments on the top row of the figure (MoJ, HO, BEIS and MoD) are the four that experienced the greatest absolute growth in staff numbers (FTE) between Q2 2016 and Q3 2023. The four departments shown on the bottom row are the four that experienced the greatest proportional growth in staff numbers over the same period (DIT, DCMS, DfE and Defra).

For each department, the five profession groups highlighted are those that experienced the greatest growth in absolute numbers over the period. If this would have included either of the 'not reported' or 'other' categories, we have disregarded them. We have also disregarded a very small number of cases where the 2016 figure was implausibly low (or 0), resulting in an artificially high change. In the cases of MoJ and DIT, where data is shown from 2017, we have analysed the five profession groups with the greatest growth between 2017 and 2023.

It should be noted that we have used separate datasets to identify the departments to include in this chart (the ONS's quarterly Public Sector Employment data) and to analyse the change in professions over time (the Cabinet Office's Civil Service Statistics). These two government datasets give slightly different numbers for the total number of civil servants in a department at any given time.

As we discuss in the text, the civil service's professions data has historically been inconsistent. We have avoided correcting for this, except for in one instance. DWP did not report the professions of over 95% of its staff in 2018, 2020 and 2021. Given the size of the department, this would significantly skew the trend data, particularly for the operational delivery profession. For this reason, we interpolated DWP's professions numbers for these years based on its reported numbers in 2017, 2019 and 2022.

Throughout our analysis, we combine the figures stated in the source data under "not reported" and "other". It should be noted that the civil service relies on self-reporting of professions by civil servants for this data.

Turnover of civil servants

Data on civil service staff turnover is derived from the annual Cabinet Office Civil Service Statistics dataset (Tables 20, 42 and 43). We use headcount rather than full-time equivalent staff for all staff turnover calculations. Figures relate to the core department and do not include agencies within the departmental group.

External staff turnover is calculated as the number of civil servants who left the civil service entirely over the course of a given year, as a percentage of the average civil service headcount during that period. Average civil service headcount is calculated as the mean of civil service headcount at the beginning and end of the interval (for

instance, headcount in March 2021 and March 2022 for the period 2021–22). We use average headcount to account for the fact that the number of civil servants changes over the course of the year.

Internal staff turnover is calculated as the number of civil servants who transferred to another department over the course of a given year, as a percentage of the average civil service headcount during that period.

Total staff turnover is calculated as the number of civil servants who either left the civil service entirely or transferred to another department over the course of a given year, as a percentage of the average civil service headcount during that period. This is an underestimate of real internal turnover in the civil service because it does not include civil servants who transferred to another role within the same department. Unfortunately, data on staff transfers within departments is not publicly available.

Structure and location

Public bodies

Throughout this report we use 'public bodies', which includes public corporations, unclassified bodies and parliamentary bodies, to encompass the widest possible group of organisations. However, in a number of charts we are relying on Cabinet Office data that is limited to a narrower subset, 'arm's-length bodies'. This category only encompasses non-departmental public bodies, executive agencies and non-ministerial departments.

The figures on the number of bodies that have been reviewed as part of the public body review programme (Figure 1.15) were provided by the Cabinet Office, and are accurate as of January 2024.

To calculate the number of arm's-length bodies in 2022, we looked at the last public update to the Cabinet Office dataset in 2020, and adjusted for public announcements on the establishment or abolition of bodies according to GOV.UK, the body's own official website, or the National Archives.

Figures for the number of arm's-length bodies in 2023 (Figure. 1.16) were provided directly by the Cabinet Office and are accurate as of September 2023. These figures do not include the Supreme Court as a non-ministerial department and, although it is unclear whether this is a substantive reclassification, we have reflected the absence of the Supreme Court in our data.

Location of civil servants

In December 2023, the Cabinet Office published guidance on the government's Places for Growth initiative, which clarified that the government's relocation targets excluded Scottish and Welsh government civil servants.

Because of the way the Civil Service Statistics are reported, some data we analyse and charts we produce are able to exclude civil servants who work for specific departments; others cannot. Where possible to do so, we exclude Scottish and Welsh government civil servants from our charts on the location of staff, to reflect the

government's methodology. This means that Figure 1.17, Figure 1.18 and Figure 1.19 all exclude Scottish and Welsh government civil servants, while Figure 1.20 and Figure 1.21 include those working for the Scottish and Welsh governments.

All charts exclude civil servants based overseas.

Figure 1.19 displays a forecast of the percentage of senior civil servants based in London from 2024 to 2030. This forecast is a simple linear extrapolation of data supplied from 2021 Q1 and 2023 Q2.

Budgets and major projects

Spend by public bodies

Our analysis uses the Online System for Central Accounting and Reporting (OSCAR) II annual data taken from three releases (2022 for 2017/18–2021/22, 2017 for 2015/16 and 2016/17 and 2015 for 2010/11–2014/15) to assemble financial returns from 2010 through to 2022. For the 2023 figure, due to delays in the publication of finalised full-year data, we have used an interim 'in-year' dataset for the 2022/23 financial year.

We used final outturn figures and excluded so-called 'non-budget' and 'non-voted' expenses, as these are more likely to include double-counted figures or revaluations. This means that the data does not include spending granted directly to the devolved administrations or local authorities.

This analysis is necessarily imperfect, and some spending by public bodies (particularly executive agencies that are closely integrated into their departments) is categorised as departmental spend. For instance, the OSCAR dataset suggests that most spending by the Ministry of Justice is directly spent by the department. This is incorrect, as the MoJ's annual reports consistently show most money is spent by its arm's-length bodies, such as HM Courts and Tribunals Service and HM Prison and Probation Service. Spending by non-ministerial departments such as the Food Standards Agency is also categorised as departmental, despite them being a type of ALB. As a result, our analysis underestimates the proportion of spending by ALBs, and overestimates the proportion of spending by departments.

This dataset also underestimates the total scale of spending by public bodies as it does not consistently include public corporations, or includes only their net rather than gross spending.

Major projects

Analysis of the government major projects portfolio (GMPP) comes from data collected and published by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA). The latest IPA dataset (2022–23) contains data on whole-life costings of individual projects unless where exempt, as in accordance with the government's transparency policy, on grounds such as national security or commercial sensitivity. However, total whole-life costings of projects delivered by individual departments include the costs of exempt projects. Our analysis for Figure 1.27 includes costings of exempt projects while Figures 1.28, 1.29 and 1.30 do not include projects with exempt costings or projects that are exempt from providing a risk rating.

Whole-life costs of the portfolio have been adjusted to present numbers in consistent prices. The GDP deflator is a measure of economy-wide inflation and so is appropriate for considering changes in government spending. We use the GDP deflator published alongside the November 2023 autumn statement, adjusting the figure for 2020/21 to be the midpoint of the 2019/20 and 2021/22 values as the pandemic affected the deflator's measurement. Our calculations use the total value of individual projects published in the IPA's data which may vary from the headlines in the IPA annual report due to rounding.

Real-terms changes to planned departmental administrative spending were taken from Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses, 2023 and adjusted using the GDP deflator.

Spending on consultants and temporary labour

The data in this section has been taken from departments' annual reports and accounts, which display consultancy spend and contingent or temporary labour for each financial year. DHSC had not released its 2022/23 annual reports and accounts at the time of writing, so Figures 1.31 and 1.32 do not display DHSC's consultancy and temporary labour spend for 2022/23. The increase in total consultancy spend from 2018/19 to 2022/23, therefore, excludes DHSC. We have not analysed the territorial offices or HMRC.

Other data points are unavailable because departments have not reported consultancy or temporary labour spend in their annual reports and accounts. BEIS and DCMS have not reported temporary labour spend for any of the years between 2018/19 and 2022/23. Defra has not reported its temporary labour spend for 2020/21, which we have estimated using an average of Defra's 2019/20 and 2021/22 spend. For years prior to the merger of FCO and DfID, FCDO's spend is plotted as the sum of DfID and FCO. Some departments do not report core departmental spend separately, and instead report core and executive agency spending. These departments include the Cabinet Office, MoJ and HMT. BEIS core consultancy spending was calculated by subtracting ALB and executive agency spending from departmental group spending.

Morale, pay and industrial relations

Civil service pay

Figure 1.39 uses the median permanent secretary and director general pay as per the Senior Salaries Review Body reports, 2014-23. The SSRB gives the median permanent secretary salary as a range between 2014–17; we use the mean of the range to represent the median salary. The data is presented in real terms and is adjusted by 2023 prices, using the OBR's November 2023 estimates.

Figure 1.40 was created using data from the annual reports of the Bank of England and Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) for 2022/23. HM Treasury salary information was sourced from its 'organogram of staff roles and salaries', published in the same financial year (on 29 December 2022). The values in the chart represent the mean of all reported salaries at each respective grade. Where salaries were provided as a range rather than a point (as with the Treasury and some FCA salaries), salaries were assumed to be the midpoint of the range.

Civil service paybill scenarios

We calculated estimates for the actual current civil service paybill and for two hypothetical scenarios.

To estimate the actual current civil service paybill we combined statistics on the number of civil servants at each grade (FTE) and the mean salary for each grade.

In the first scenario, where the civil service in 2023 has the same grade composition as in 2010, we estimated the number of civil servants at each grade by multiplying (i) the proportion of civil servants at each respective grade in 2010 and (ii) total headcount in 2023. The paybill for this scenario was then estimated by multiplying these estimates for headcount by grade with the mean salary by grade in 2023.

In the second scenario the civil service in 2023 again has the same grade composition as in 2010 but wages rise in line with the private sector. Mean civil service salary by grade is grown in line with wage growth in the whole private sector from 2010 (specifically, the private sector gross annual earnings measure in Office for National Statistics, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2010–23. Again, the paybill was estimated by multiplying these estimates with actual headcount by grade for 2023.

Those with unreported grades were excluded from all calculations due to limited data availability, meaning that the estimated total paybill is a slight underestimate in each scenario.

For Figure 1.23, we take staff costs in administration day-to-day spending from HM Treasury, Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses, 2023, and calculate the total civil service paybill as the number of civil servants multiplied by mean wage. We calculate the paybill for a financial year by averaging the two calendar year values, and to forecast the total paybill we assume it exhibits the same percentage change as staff costs in administration spending. We also show staff costs in administration RDEL, which is based on departments' reported planned spending as set out in HM Treasury, Public Sector Expenditure Analysis, July 2023. How departments spend their administration budgets is subject to change, so these figures are only provisional.

We deflate figures using the GDP deflator from the autumn statement 2023.

Relationship between low pay and overall morale

We calculated correlation coefficients between the employee engagement index of all civil servants and the nine people survey theme scores for the period 2010–2022, using both median and mean scores. Scores for the 'pay and benefits' theme are much less correlated with overall engagement than any of the other themes.

We note that 'pay and benefits' theme scores are, however, considerably more correlated with scores for the questions 'I want to stay working for [my organisation]'/'I want to leave [my organisation]' (positively and negatively, respectively) than any other theme scores over the same time frame.

Diversity

Female, minority ethnic and disabled staff

For the proportion of female staff in the civil service, the population benchmark is taken from the ONS's Labour Force Survey (Table A02). The number of economically active women aged 16–64 is averaged over the most recent four quarters, and divided by figures for the whole economically active population, treated in the same way. The latest quarter available in this dataset is May–July 2023.

The same methodology is used to reach the population benchmark for minority ethnic representation – using Table A09 – and for disabled representation, using Table A08. In both of these cases, the latest quarter available is April–June 2023.

Sexual orientation

For Figure 1.44, the population benchmark is calculated from the ONS's Sexual Orientation, UK dataset, based on the Annual Population Survey. The latest figure available, and the one used for the benchmark, is for 2022.

Socio-economic background

In the absence of robust workforce statistics, our analysis of civil servants' socio-economic background uses the annual Civil Service People Survey. The Cabinet Office publishes the results of the people survey by socio-economic background. This data breaks down responses by officials in the national statistics socio-economic classification categories 'never worked', 'routine', 'intermediate' and 'high', based on a series of questions about the main income earner in their household when they were 14 years old. Under each of these categories, the data states the number of survey responses received by officials in each grade.

We have combined the number of survey responses received under the 'never worked' and 'routine' categories into the 'low' socio-economic background category, in line with the terms used by the Social Mobility Commission, and used the resulting data to estimate the socio-economic background of each grade.

Educational background of permanent secretaries and directors general

We conducted a desk research exercise in August 2023 to gather information on the educational background of all permanent secretaries and directors general. Information was gathered from a range of public sources, including GOV.UK and LinkedIn.

Fast Stream diversity

The data on the Civil Service Fast Stream diversity was taken from written parliamentary questions UIN 174514, 174515, 174516 and 174517. The benchmark for the economically active working-age UK population that is from a minority ethnic background is calculated from the ONS 'A09: Labour market status by ethnicity' dataset. It is the economically active population aged 16–64 that self-identified as of 'Mixed', 'Indian', 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi', 'Chinese', 'Black/African/ Caribbean' or 'Other' ethnicity, as a percentage of the total economically active population aged 16–64. To adjust for seasonal variations in employment data, we calculate the average for each of these benchmarks over the last four quarters up to 31 March 2022 (to

match the publication date of the 2023 Civil Service Statistics dataset, which is the source of our data on civil service diversity).

The population benchmark for those who are eligible for free school meals is taken from the DfE's 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' 2021/22. It is calculated as the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals at January 2022. It includes all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools, non-maintained special schools and state-funded alternative provision schools.

The population benchmark for those who attended state school is also taken from the DfE dataset 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' 2021/22. It is calculated as the percentage of 11–15-year-olds attending a state-funded school.

Part 2

Ministerial resignations

Our tally of resignations includes only those outside of reshuffles; those during reshuffles are often difficult to discern from sackings (although we do include Jonathan Aitken's resignation in 1995, when he resigned to fight a libel action).

We do not count those who announced in advance that they would step down at the next planned reshuffle or those who were sacked. This means that our numbers may differ very slightly from others'.

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