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INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

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About Whitehall Monitor

This 12th edition of *Whitehall Monitor* looks at the civil service in 2024, which began under the Sunak government and ended with the first Labour government for almost a decade and a half, following Keir Starmer's victory in the July 2024 general election.

His government had a difficult inheritance. The economic and fiscal circumstances are challenging, with many public services under strain and the public still feeling the effects of a cost-of-living crisis.

Labour has said it wants to be a 'mission-led' government, heralding what is billed as an entirely new way of governing that will, in the prime minister's words, require a "complete rewiring of the British state".

To do this the government will need a capable, confident civil service. Understanding the extent to which that exists now, as ministers look to deliver on the 'Plan for Change' in 2025, is the principal focus of this year's report.

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Foreword

This 12th edition of *Whitehall Monitor* – the Institute for Government's annual, data-led assessment of the UK civil service – is the first to be published under a Labour government. It analyses how government has changed since Keir Starmer's victory in the July 2024 election, and assesses the early impact of his administration.

The new government has had to grapple with a difficult inheritance. The economic and fiscal situation is seriously challenging, public services are under huge strain, with demands only likely to increase, while the public is struggling with ongoing cost-of-living pressures. Exacerbating these domestic trials are the wars in Europe and the Middle East, and the uncertainty created by Donald Trump's return to the White House; just some of the multiple, intersecting challenges that will absorb ministerial bandwidth in the months and years to come.

Such a legacy would be daunting for any incoming government. But new ministers and their advisers have had to tackle these challenges while at the same time learning how to navigate Whitehall after almost a decade and a half in opposition. And while many aspects of Whitehall and Westminster benefit from continuity, Labour will need a concerted change in approach from many civil servants – driven by the new cabinet secretary Sir Chris Wormald – if it is to make a success of the 'mission-led government' to which it aspires.

This means an effective partnership between ministers and civil servants will be more vital than ever, particularly when the excitement of an incoming government fades and the day-to-day frustrations of governing emerge. Indeed, six months into the new administration, statements from Labour figures including the prime minister himself indicate that this is already happening.

Political frustrations with the government machine are not new (as readers of previous editions of *Whitehall Monitor* will know) but need to be channelled productively to provide impetus for meaningful reform. Starmer's 'Plan for Change' speech was welcome in identifying the government's priorities within its five missions, and highlighting the need for change in Whitehall.

But while the government's appetite for public service reform is welcome, its proposals lack definition. Change in Whitehall takes time and, as the data collated in this year's *Whitehall Monitor* shows, there is much to do. Ministers must waste no time in getting started.

Dr Hannah White OBE, Director and CEO, Institute for Government

Overview

The first full change of the party in government for 14 years presents the UK with an opportunity for renewal, and for real reform. It must take it. The challenges, international and domestic, are huge, as the effects of conflict and political instability are increasingly felt at home.

Nor should Keir Starmer believe that his government's massive majority insulates him from some of the travails facing governments in Europe and elsewhere; having been elected on a relatively low proportion of the vote, his party needs to show that it can use its parliamentary mandate to deliver for a frustrated public.

Starmer has said he will head a 'mission-led government', breaking out of long-standing departmental silos to work towards five overarching aims with meaningful benefit to that public. His 'Plan for Change', announced in December, promised to build on the missions much promoted during the election campaign and set some ambitious 'milestones' towards meeting them.

For this to succeed, the government will need a highly capable and confident civil service. In this edition of *Whitehall Monitor* – more data-focused and with less commentary than in the past, to complement our existing publications from the election period – we analyse the latest data on the civil service,* assessing what Labour can expect from Whitehall as it enters its first full calendar year in office. Labour's political team, too, will need capability in its ranks, so in this year's report we also look at Starmer's cabinet, its shape and experience, to assess how well it is set up to lead these changes.

Mission-led government will require a fundamentally different way of working

The government envisages much of its reform agenda, and indeed its wider policy aims, being delivered through its five missions. But this year will show whether promises made in opposition can be translated into government.

There is much work to do. If the missions are to function in a truly cross-government manner they will, for example, require a clear and radical governance structure. But while mission boards have been established, they have not yet gripped their tasks and have been created alongside existing government structures rather than replacing and directing them.

* *Whitehall Monitor* draws on many data sources that cover different date ranges; in every case, we use the latest data available. This means that some data reflects a period since the general election. Data on civil service staff numbers, for example, is available up to Q3 2024. But in other cases the latest data covers a period before the election. Figures for civil servants' morale are only available for late 2023, while most other data on the civil service reflects the situation in March 2024.

That will need to change as work comes to a head on the comprehensive spending review, reportedly to be announced in June, which will be the most important indication of whether the government is serious about its new way of working. If so, it will be essential that budgets are aligned to priority missions, and that mission boards have the authority to direct cross-departmental activity.

'Rewiring' the British state is a welcome but formidable task

Reorientating government around missions will require deeper changes to Whitehall, and the government has started to show that it recognises the scale of the task. Starmer has appointed Sir Chris Wormald as his new cabinet secretary, publicly charging him with "nothing less than the complete rewiring of the British state".[1] The prime minister is expecting much from the half a million officials under Wormald's leadership, too many of whom are, he says, "comfortable in the tepid bath of managed decline".[2]

This level of expectation has been matched by other senior government figures. After Starmer announced the Plan for Change, the senior Cabinet Office minister, Pat McFadden, reinforced its message, emphasising his own personal investment in civil service improvement and reform. This is encouraging, as many previous reform agendas have foundered without the high-level backing that, for now at least, Labour is showing.

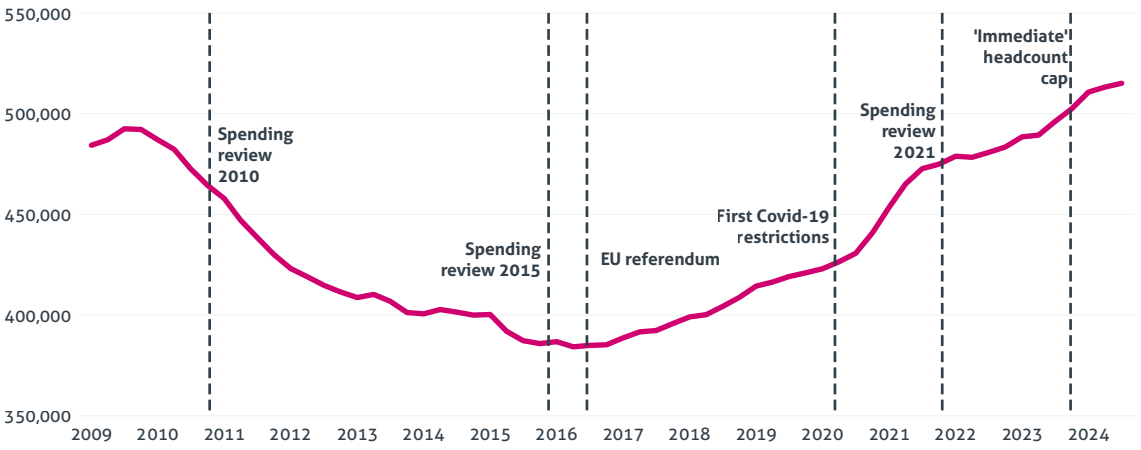
McFadden talked about creating a "test and learn" mindset. To succeed, that will mean ministers and civil servants doing more to learn, as well as to test. Policy evaluation, for example, has improved in recent years – but it needs to be embedded in more policy areas and across public service delivery. Learning also implies more failures, and McFadden said that he wanted to encourage more risk-taking in the public sector. Ministers will need to be willing to absorb risk too, and ensure that their teams are savvy enough to 'fail' in ways that can be presented as constructive learning rather than media disasters that undermine the government's efforts.

In 2025 we will learn whether the government is in it for the long haul, and start to see how ministers, the civil service and wider public sector respond to the challenge. We hope that this is the galvanising moment for the state that the prime minister envisages.

The evidence reveals familiar problems with the civil service that must be addressed

But the civil service will not be able to meet the challenges of the moment if familiar problems remain unaddressed. Perhaps most obvious is poor workforce planning. Civil service numbers have continued to grow, mostly because of the need to recruit more front-line workers such as prison officers and Jobcentre staff. Ministers are right to resist repeating the mistakes of their predecessors and so should not be tempted by a specific headcount cap or target, because of the perverse incentives such a crude measure will introduce. But efficiencies will need to be made, and that will in many areas mean a reduction in the number of officials on the books.

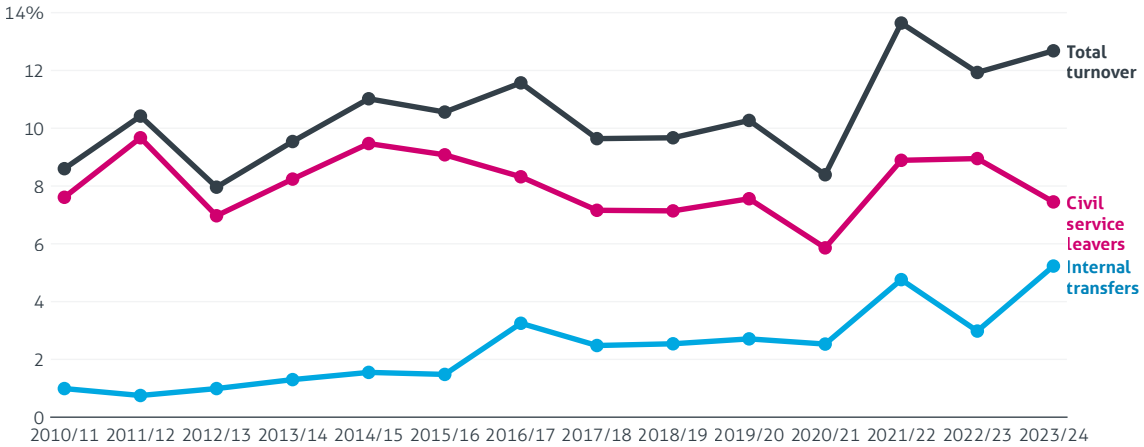
Figure 0.1 **Civil service staff numbers, Q1 2009 to Q3 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment Data' (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2024.
Notes: All figures are FTE.

Staff still move too often. While 2023/24 saw a welcome drop in the proportion of officials leaving the civil service entirely, there was a large increase in moves between departments – probably a result of machinery of government changes – which pushed up overall rates. Talented people are still cycling through jobs too quickly, failing to develop sufficient expertise to do them to the best of their ability. Civil service pay structures incentivise such movement, and inflation-eroded pay (albeit boosted recently) fuels even more movement and contributes to grade inflation.

Figure 0.2 **Civil service staff turnover, 2010/11–2023/24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of data provided by the Cabinet Office, 2010–17 and Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2018–24. Notes: Based on headcount figures. Total staff turnover is the sum of civil service leavers and internal transfers of staff.

Elsewhere, morale has dropped again, if only slightly and despite satisfaction with paying improving. But officials' increasingly negative views about their leadership and how change is managed shows that the civil service needs an injection of energy and direction.

And there is no shortage of work to be done in improving the capability of the civil service. Spending on consultancy, for instance, remains high. Consultants can be used well if providing specialist or temporary expertise. But the civil service needs to be better at growing its own capability rather than hiring it in from outside at greater expense. Both a change of government and a new cabinet secretary should be able to add momentum for improvement in all these areas.

There are also examples of where the civil service has continued to make progress over the last year. It has built on its long record of becoming more reflective of the society it serves – with numbers of female, minority ethnic and disabled officials continuing to rise – though there is more to do on the mix of socio-economic backgrounds. There are also signs that Whitehall is taking developments in new technology seriously. Reliance on legacy digital systems is still a problem, but on artificial intelligence there have been several exciting pilots, and a logical consolidation of relevant teams in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

A plan for the year ahead

Labour spent much of the six months following the election saying what it plans to do in government. In 2025 it needs to start acting on those plans. After the election, we published *20 Ways to Improve the Civil Service*, summarising more than a decade of Institute for Government research on the subject.[3] It proposed a series of tangible measures that would make the civil service more effective.

It is positive that there has already been movement from the government on several of our recommendations. Particularly welcome was a commitment to a comprehensive workforce plan and, announced in McFadden's December speech, another to expand secondment programmes into the civil service. Opening up recruitment processes is another McFadden priority we firmly back.

But there is much more to do. Our assessment of the most important reforms to equip the civil service to deliver on the Plan for Change are found overleaf.

Priority reforms to best deliver the government's Plan for Change in 2025

1. Ensure that the workforce plan in development is comprehensive, long-term, and aligns the civil service's work, budgets and people.

2. Replace 'success profiles' to make recruitment less prescribed and more decentralised.

3. Require all civil service professions to develop capability frameworks for their members, including clear guidance for departments on pay.

4. Continue relocating civil servants outside London to themed campuses.

5. Create a mandatory training programme for performance management

6. Establish a physical campus for the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit to strengthen the civil service's commitment to staff training and development.

7. Advertise all civil service jobs externally by default.

8. Create more senior specialist roles in every department, which do not entail significant management responsibilities.

9. Set up large-scale secondment programmes in every department and 'mission' to facilitate higher levels of interchange with sectors outside UK government.

10. Require each department to appoint an individual with the authority to establish multidisciplinary teams.

11. Set stringent standards for departments to follow on the timely publication of internal evidence, analysis and policy advice.

Part 1: The new government

Labour's political teams

Starmer prioritised continuity in his first cabinet

Keir Starmer's first cabinet largely mirrors the pre-election shadow cabinet, with the September 2023 shadow cabinet reshuffle laying the ground for his government. With the exception of Lisa Nandy (who took over the culture portfolio from Thangam Debbonaire, who lost her seat at the general election), every full member of cabinet came into government holding the brief they shadowed in opposition.* Most had also shadowed those briefs for a considerable period in opposition – 15 of them for more than two years.

This continuity is welcome. While nothing can fully prepare individuals for the challenges of entering government after a long spell in opposition, it helps when new ministers have acquired a good understanding of a policy area and key stakeholders in their shadow roles.[1] This was particularly important for this transition given how late access talks (pre-election meetings between the opposition and senior civil servants) began in the electoral cycle.**

The high degree of continuity between shadow cabinet and government posts – and the relatively long time for which shadows covered the same brief – has not always been the case. The 1997 transition saw significant discontinuity, including in key portfolios like health, while plans laid before 2010 were complicated by coalition negotiations.

The resignation of the transport secretary, Louise Haigh, in November 2024 disrupted the continuity among Starmer's top team, otherwise unchanged since July, though her replacement, Heidi Alexander, can draw on her three and a half years of experience as deputy mayor of London for transport in her new role.

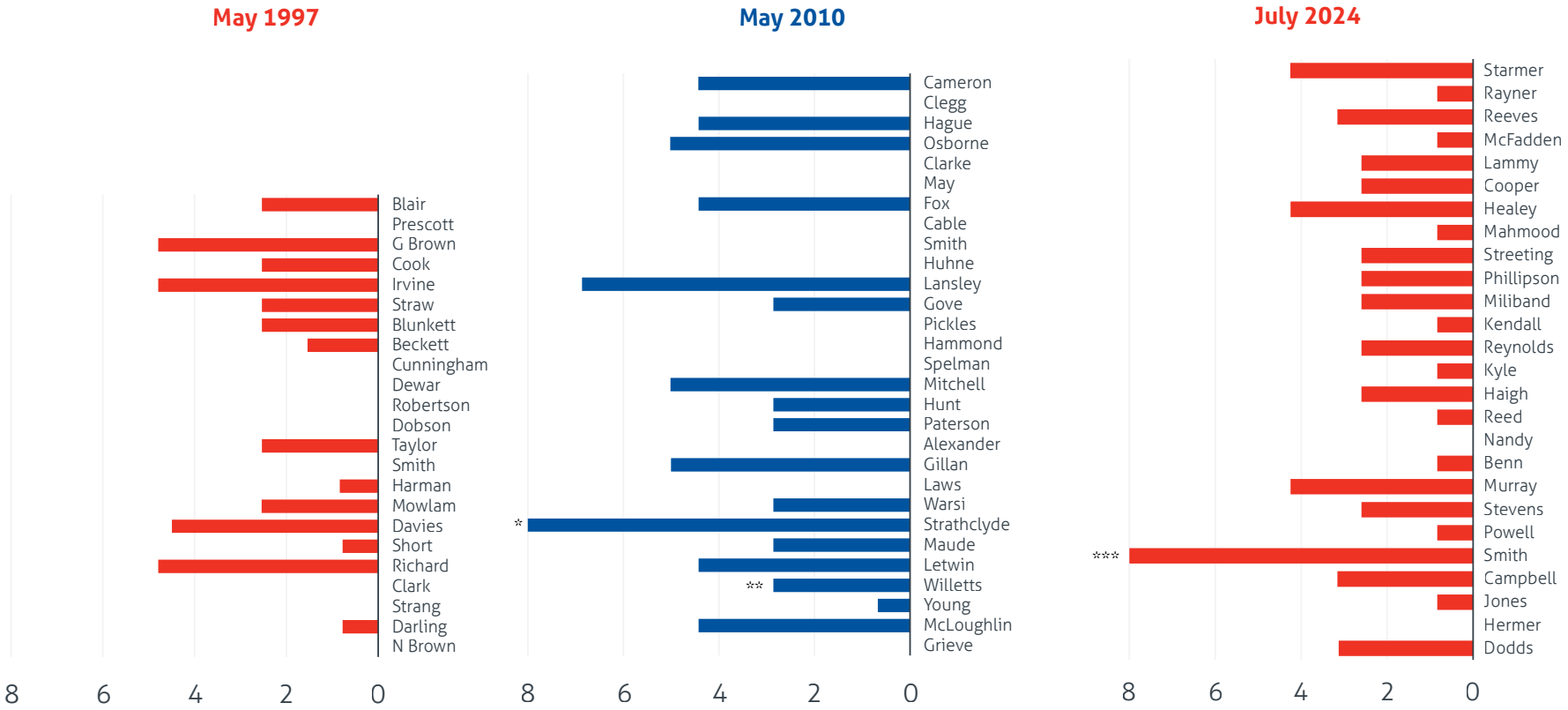
Some ministers have experience from the Blair and Brown governments

Starmer's cabinet also has a considerable level of experience in government, with more former ministers – including three former cabinet ministers – than Blair's in 1997, and the same number as the coalition in 2010.[2] The prime minister can also draw on his own experience leading the Crown Prosecution Service before entering parliament in 2015.

* Though the attorney general is not a full member of cabinet, Richard Hermer KC was made attorney general instead of Emily Thornberry, who shadowed the role.

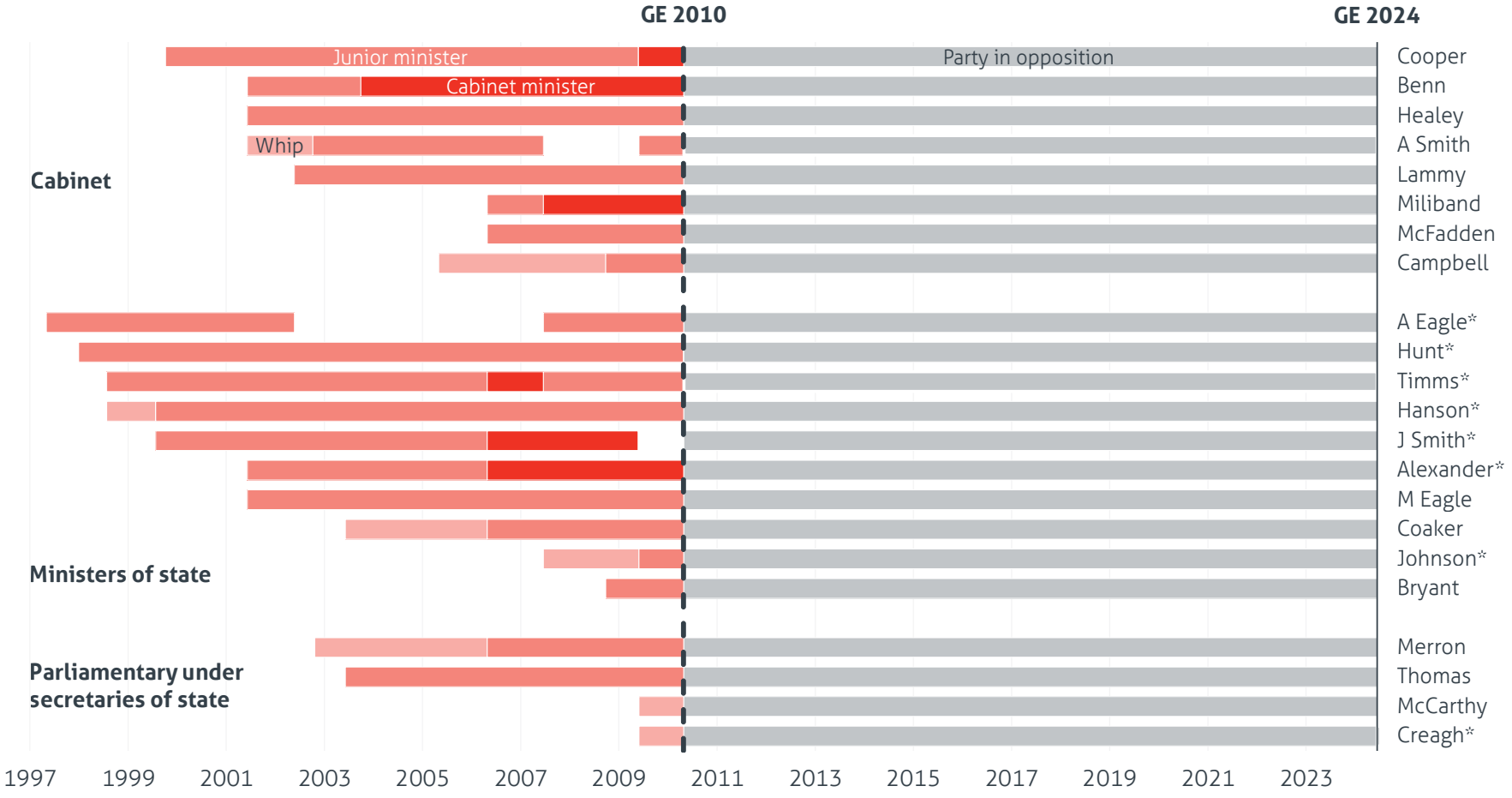
** Access talks commenced in February 2024, five months before the election. By contrast, talks began at least 16 months before the 1997 and 2010 elections.

Figure 1.1 **Years shadowing role held in cabinet after the May 1997, May 2010 and July 2024 elections**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG Ministers Database, House of Commons weekly information bulletin, and media reports. Notes: *Lord Strathclyde was shadow leader of the House of Lords for 11 and a half years. **David Willetts's time as shadow minister for innovation, universities and skills does not include his before this as shadow secretary of state for education and skills. ***Baroness Smith was shadow leader of the House of Lords for nine years.

Figure 1.2 **Previous ministerial experience of government ministers, July 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG Ministers Database. Notes: Excludes junior government whips. *Ministers who were not part of the shadow frontbench immediately before the election.

Outside of cabinet, former ministers like Diana Johnson and Stephen Timms – who also scrutinised their current departments as select committee chairs in the last parliament – have been brought into government even though they did not serve in Starmer's shadow frontbench team. Other former Labour ministers who have returned to government include some MPs who were re-elected in 2024 having previously left parliament (such as Douglas Alexander) and some former MPs who have been appointed to the Lords (Jacqui Smith and David Hanson).

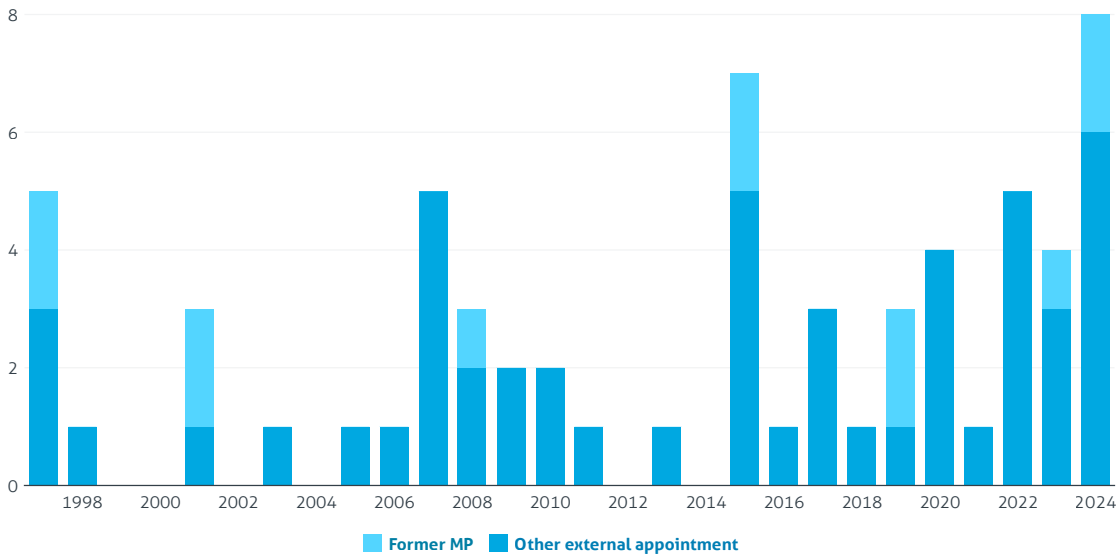
Taken together, this means that Starmer's government has been able to draw on a significant bedrock of experience.[3] While government has changed significantly since any Labour ministers were last in office, this should nonetheless have helped them get to grips with their roles.

Starmer has used direct appointments to the Lords to bring external expertise into his government

Starmer has also sought to bring external expertise into the ministerial ranks. On taking office he made seven people, including previously non-political figures, ministers by appointing them to the Lords. This is not new – elections (and changes of prime minister outside of an election) are often accompanied by a spate of direct appointments, as seen in 1997, 2007 and 2015. Previous prime ministers, notably David Cameron, have used direct ministerial appointments to bring business experience to Treasury and trade-related roles in particular; Cameron himself was ennobled by Rishi Sunak to enable him to become foreign secretary in 2022.

Starmer's newly ennobled ministers cover a broader range of briefs, however. Appointments include Patrick Vallance as science minister – who can draw on a career in academia, medical research and as government chief scientific adviser – and James Timpson as prisons minister, who was previously chief executive of the Timpson Group and chair of the Prison Reform Trust.

Figure 1.3 **Direct ministerial appointments to the House of Lords, 1997–2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG Ministers Database. Notes: In 2024, Rishi Sunak made one external appointment and Keir Starmer made a further seven appointments. Two appointments were made by Boris Johnson in 2022 and three by Liz Truss. In 2019, Theresa May made one external appointment and Johnson appointed two former MPs. Incoming prime ministers made all appointments in 1997, 2007, 2010 and 2016.

But being a minister is an explicitly political role, not a technocratic one. Both political nous and an understanding of parliament and Whitehall help ministers to advance their agendas. While Starmer's appointments have already made progress in getting acquainted with the political aspects of their jobs, in this regard they started in a different place from their colleagues in the Commons.

In an unusual move, some newly elected MPs have become ministers

Starmer also made the unusual move of appointing six ministers and two whips who were first elected as MPs in July. They may face a similar challenge to the Lords ministers – new MPs already have much to grapple with without the pressure of a government role, and these new ministers may find that being tied to their departments makes it more difficult to build important relationships with other MPs.

The appointments do, however, bring a depth of external experience and perspectives: Miatta Fahnbulleh brings previous experience in think tanks and the civil service to DESNZ, and Hamish Falconer can draw on his diplomatic career at the FCDO. Georgia Gould, meanwhile – now a Cabinet Office minister – led Camden Council as it developed its own 'mission-led' approach.

Special advisers are indispensable to any government – but there were early signs of discontent

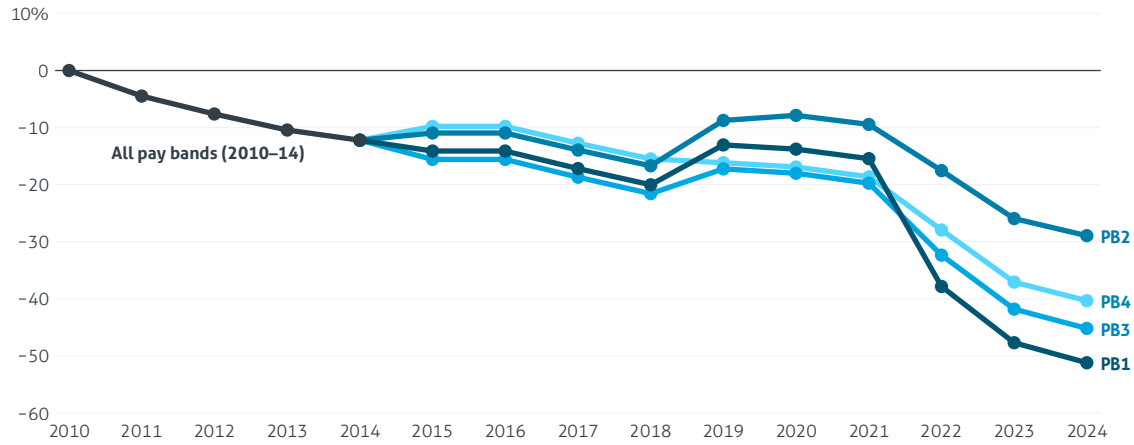
Labour's election victory also brought a new cohort of special advisers (spads) into government departments. Details of their numbers and pay have not yet been released, though Starmer's version of the ministerial code removed the limit (anyway rarely observed in recent years) on the number of spads per cabinet minister.[4] There have nonetheless been indications that Starmer's government, like others before it, is sensitive to accusations that they appoint too many special advisers.[5]

This sensitivity is misplaced – a strong political team pays dividends that far outweigh the short-term challenges of negative headlines.[6] And the government's apparent hesitation to appoint more spads has already caused problems: it appears to have led to the government making the mistake of using an 'exceptional' process to appoint as civil servants some party-aligned figures who may have been better appointed as spads (covered in more detail in the Recruitment chapter).[7]

Soon after the election there were also reports of spads unionising over discontent with pay, contracts and conditions, as many were reportedly offered salaries that were lower than their predecessors and lower than they received in opposition.[8] In this light it is notable that spad pay scales have remained largely static between 2010 and 2024 – the maximum possible salary for special advisers in March 2024 was less than £2,500 higher (1.63% in nominal terms) than in 2010. This means that in practice, spad pay across all four pay bands has fallen significantly in real terms: the mid-point pay at band 1 (the lowest band) has decreased by 51.2% since 2010.

It has been reported that the spad pay bands, which the previous government repeatedly promised to review, were revised following the general election. Details of the new pay bands have not yet been made public.[9]

Figure 1.4 **Real-terms change in pay band mid-points for special advisers since 2010**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Special adviser data releases: numbers and costs, 2010–24. Notes: PB1 is the lowest pay band; PB4 is the highest pay band. Before 2015, the pay scale included pay band 0 (below £40,352). PB4 incorporates the scheme ceiling. For 2015–18 the lower range for PB1 was not stated and has been estimated as £40,000.

Spads play a vital role in making government work effectively. So this discontent – particularly so soon after the election – will have been a concern to No.10. Indeed the media commentary that preceded Sue Gray's resignation as the prime minister's chief of staff in October was partially fed by briefings from disgruntled spads.[10] Things seem to have improved since then, with the prime minister's current chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, reportedly making repairing relations with spads a key part of his No.10 reset.[11] Ensuring that they focus on adding value to government, rather than criticising their bosses in the media, should be a priority for McSweeney, and the wider No.10 team, throughout this parliament.

Mission-led government

Mission-led government is central to the government's objectives

As well as a new slate of ministers and spads, the new government brings – or intends to bring – an entirely new way of governing, and of working, to Whitehall: 'mission-led government'.

Five 'missions' were first announced by Keir Starmer in February 2023.[12] While the exact wording has changed, the missions played a key role in Labour's pitch to the country when in opposition, including in its manifesto. The five missions, each with associated end goals, are:

- **Kick-start economic growth**
- **Make Britain a clean energy superpower**
- **Take back our streets**
- **Break down barriers to opportunity**
- **Build an NHS fit for the future.**[13]

These missions featured heavily in the early activity of the new government. In Starmer's first press conference he announced that there would be five cross-cutting 'mission boards' comprised of ministers and officials to make key decisions and oversee the work of each mission across government.[14] The state opening of parliament saw the King say that his government will be 'mission-led'.[15]

This focus on the missions has continued. In December, five months into his premiership, Starmer made his Plan for Change speech – setting out six 'milestones' for the missions to achieve by the end of the parliament, and giving a stronger indication of the Whitehall reform that will be needed to deliver on them. In his own words, the speech "doubled down on our national missions".[16]

Missions are intended as a new way of governing

This shift to mission-led government is in some ways a new concept, popularised by the economist Mariana Mazzucato.[17] She has presented it as a tool to tackle the most important issues of the 21st century, and a way to restructure the work of government and how it relates to the private sector and civil society. This model sees 'missions' not as just another word for 'priority' but as a new way for government to work, akin to the way that 'new public management' changed the way the state operated under Margaret Thatcher and beyond.

There has been a plethora of work published across the UK think tank sector on how mission-led government might work in practice, including by the Institute for Government,[18] IPPR,[19] Demos,[20] Reform[21] and Nesta.[22] Some common themes have emerged – including seeing the approach as involving more long-term policy making, working across government (between both different departments and tiers of government), working in a more experimental way, testing and iterating approaches, and forming better partnerships with the private sector and civil society.

In the Plan for Change, the government describes the five missions as an effort to shift Whitehall and Westminster towards more long-term ways of working.[23] And it sets out how they will change the way government works, by, for example:

- Making better use of "technological deployment, innovation and learning from experiments"
- Building a culture of "continuous improvement"
- Breaking down silos between departments in Whitehall
- Working with devolved governments to "align efforts across all nations on these islands"
- Being more open with the public about the challenges and trade-offs involved in the missions
- Delivering the missions through "partnership between public and private sectors, national and local government, business and unions, alongside the whole of civil society".[24]

None of these efforts is new. Governments have, to differing extents, long sought to operate in these ways. But not being new is no criticism – they remain laudable aims, and while there is a wealth of theory on how mission-led government *might* work, practical examples of governments working in this way are harder to find (at least according to the definitions adopted by the current government). The most widely discussed example is that of Camden Council in London, which in 2021 set four missions and has to some extent shifted towards more mission-led working.[25] It is notable therefore that the former leader of the council, Georgia Gould, is now serving as a minister in the Cabinet Office.

There are certainly benefits to be had from mission-led government. Policy making is a prime example – the fortunes of successive governments have suffered because of persistent problems with how the civil service approaches policy making,[26] many of which might benefit from a mission-led approach. The tendency towards short-termism is particularly damaging. At a time when most of the major challenges facing the country – improving productivity, reducing regional inequality, adapting to an ageing society or mitigating and responding to climate change – are chronic in nature, it is concerning that long-termism in policy making regularly founders on contact with political incentives and timescales.[27] Other weaknesses in policy making that could in theory benefit from a mission-led approach include resistance to outside input, departmental silos remaining entrenched and a lack of diversity of thought and direct experience among officials.[28]

So the theory is certainly appealing. But realising this vision is a huge challenge, calling for a reinvigorated effort to shake up Whitehall.

Further detail has emerged on how the missions will work – but the real test is yet to come

Starmer's speech represented a doubling down on mission-led government. It added some detail to the end goals of the missions – which vary in specificity – by adding the following 'milestones' to be achieved by the end of the parliament:

- Raising living standards in every part of the United Kingdom, so working people have more money in their pocket as we aim to deliver the highest sustained growth in the G7
- Building 1.5 million homes in England and fast-tracking planning decisions on at least 150 major economic infrastructure projects – more than the last 14 years combined
- Ending hospital backlogs to meet the NHS standard of 92% of patients in England waiting no longer than 18 weeks for elective treatment
- Putting police back on the beat with a named officer for every neighbourhood, and 13,000 additional officers, PCSOs and special constables in neighbourhood roles in England and Wales
- Giving children the best start in life, with a record 75% of five year olds in England ready to learn when they start school
- Securing home-grown energy, protecting billpayers, and putting us on track to at least 95% clean power by 2030, while accelerating the UK to net zero.[29]

These milestones include clear timelines and, for the most part, clear metrics for progress to be measured against. This is welcome – it goes some way to addressing the lack of clarity in the original missions and setting out how the government plans to move towards the end goals. They also add to some short-term targets, announced before the election, to achieve early on in the missions, such as "recruit 6,500 new teachers", or the less specific "crack down on antisocial behaviour".[30] But with just one milestone for each mission except growth, there is a risk that they will lead to a focus on the headline metrics at the cost of the overall mission – or simply cause confusion.

This year, attention must turn to putting these plans into action. In some areas – such as the commitment to work collaboratively with those outside government – more detail is needed. But most important will be a clear institutional framework for the missions. There has been some progress in establishing this, and some missions now have fairly extensive structures around them. For the 'clean power' mission, ministers have appointed a 'mission control' team led by ex-Climate Change Committee chief executive Chris Stark and an advisory commission of experts.[31,32] The 'growth' mission, meanwhile, has seen the establishment of a growth delivery unit and a council of economic advisers.[33] There is a risk, though, that such structures are too closely tied to the lead departments, raising the question of how cross-cutting they will really be.

Some of the other announced structures are more clearly designed to bring departments together. There is a new Mission Delivery Unit (MDU) of around 25 people in the Cabinet Office, with Clara Swinson – previously a director general in the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) – appointed to head it.[34] The mission

boards have also been established (though, contrary to what was said before the election,[35] the prime minister will assess progress through 'stocktakes' for each mission[36] rather than chairing the boards).

The exact role of these boards will need to be clarified. They are understood within government to operate as cabinet committees, with collective decision making powers, and Pat McFadden recently confirmed that they would include officials and allow others to be invited in to participate.[37] But they exist alongside regular cabinet committees, making their role – especially where remits overlap – unclear. Establishing a Mission Strategy Board to broker between missions and act as the ultimate decision making forum, as the Institute has previously recommended,[38] would be sensible.

The real test will be whether the government will bring about the reforms to the budgeting and spending review process that will be necessary for the missions to work as intended. This will require the development of joint spending plans for each mission, and a more joined up and strategic approach to budgeting overall.[39] Rachel Reeves has said the second phase of the spending review will be mission-led[40] – its release later this year will be a make-or-break moment for mission-led government.

The civil service will need to change to deliver mission-led government

Starmer's Plan for Change speech also had an unexpected but welcome focus on civil service reform, even if his language about Whitehall languishing in the "tepid bath of managed decline" proved counterproductive. The prime minister emphasised the need to "rewire" how the civil service works to "ensure it is equipped with the right structures, tools and ways of working to deliver the Plan for Change",[41] and the need for better adoption of artificial intelligence and greater accountability for senior officials were singled out.

Starmer's speech was quickly followed by one from McFadden. Focusing on civil service reform and under the same Plan for Change branding as Starmer's, the speech was a further acknowledgement that mission-led government will require significant changes to how Whitehall works. The specific proposals outlined – simplifying civil service recruitment processes and more hiring from outside, the adoption of a "test-and-learn mindset" – were welcome, if familiar. And McFadden's acknowledgement that he didn't have all the answers was refreshing.

But the missions face up to difficult, long-term challenges, and the government is already more than six months into its term. There is so far little evidence that the missions have truly gripped Whitehall. The next six months will be critical: ministers will need to make swift progress in the areas they have identified, think more radically in others, and crucially be willing to sustain a focus on reform over the long term.

In the remainder of this report, we look at the state of the civil service that Labour has inherited, and which it will need to change to deliver its agenda.

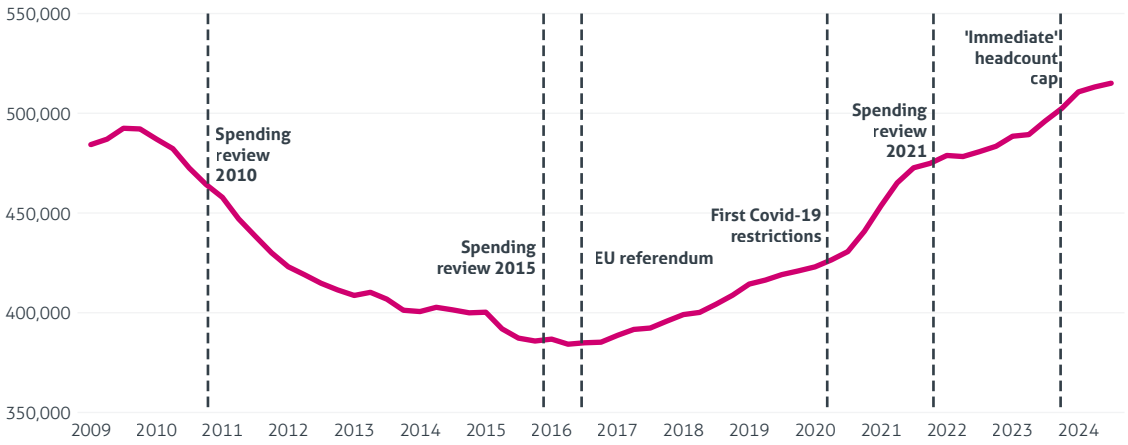
Part 2: The state of the civil service

The size of the civil service

The expansion of the civil service has continued

The past year has been marked by continued growth in the civil service. The latest data shows that in Q3 2024 civil service numbers stood at 515,085 (on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis). This represents growth of 3.8% over the previous 12 months.

Figure 2.1 **Civil service staff numbers, Q1 2009 to Q3 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment Data' (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2024.
Notes: All figures are FTE.

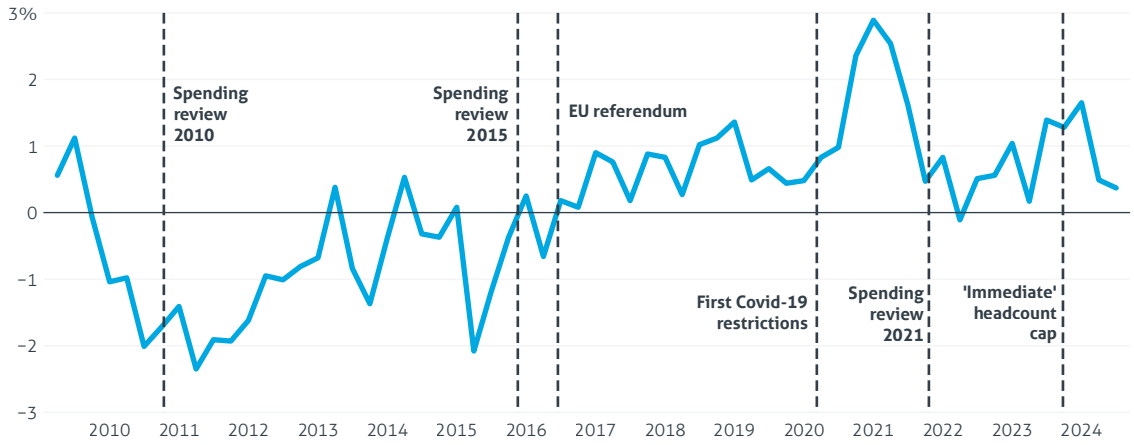
This growth occurred despite the former chancellor Jeremy Hunt imposing an "immediate" cap on civil service headcount in October 2023.[1] Indeed, following this announcement the civil service expanded by 1.3% in Q4 2023 and 1.6% in Q1 2024. The rate of growth fell to 0.5% in Q2 2024 and 0.4% in Q3 2024.[*]

The civil service has now expanded in all but one quarter since the EU referendum in 2016, with the quarterly growth rate sometimes approaching 3% during the pandemic. While much of this growth – particularly in response to the referendum and pandemic – was explicable and necessary, it has not unwound, and the post-pandemic expansion has occurred without a comprehensive plan or rationale.

[*] We analyse civil service numbers on an FTE basis – as opposed to headcount, which is the measure that the former chancellor's cap applied to. However the civil service has continued to expand on both an FTE and headcount basis since the cap was announced.

More concerning is that it has been contrary to the explicit intentions of ministers. This unplanned growth represents a continued failure by both ministers and Whitehall leaders to properly plan and manage the civil service workforce.

Figure 2.2 **Quarterly change in civil servant numbers, Q2 2009 to Q3 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment Data' (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2024.
Notes: All figures are FTE.

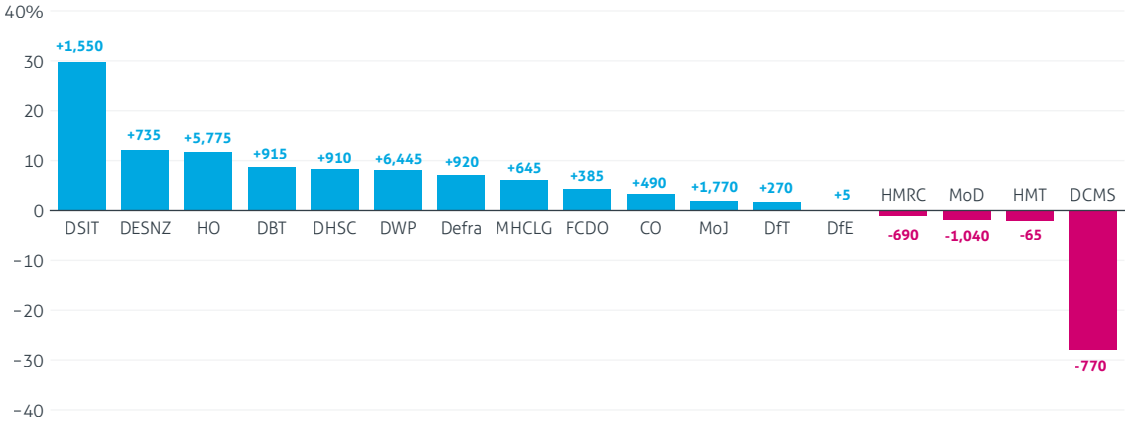
In July 2024, the new Labour government announced that it would lift Hunt's headcount cap. This was intended to help departments save money on consultancy spending (discussed in a separate chapter of this report) and "make value for money decisions about how to resource work".[2] The government has also confirmed that it is developing the civil service's first strategic workforce plan,[3] and has pledged "underpinning reform proposals" to enhance its efficiency and effectiveness.[4]

While there has been no further detail, this broad approach will be welcome if borne out. The previous government made a mistake in trying to make savings through the blunt instrument of a headcount cap – an arbitrary figure divorced from any assessment of how large the civil service needs to be. A more sensible approach to workforce planning, focused on cost effectiveness rather than headcount, would involve a detailed assessment of the demands likely to be placed on the civil service in the medium term, the mixture of skills and professions it is likely to need, and the likely impacts of artificial intelligence and greater automation.

Despite some significant changes, the largest and smallest departments in Whitehall remain the same

This year we have changed our methodology for assessing how individual departments have changed in size over time – to include, rather than correct for, staff movements that were the result of machinery of government changes.*

Figure 2.3 **Change in civil servant numbers by department, Q3 2023 to Q3 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment Data' (Table 9), Q3 2023 to Q3 2024.
Notes: Figures are calculated using a methodology that differs from that used in previous editions of *Whitehall Monitor*. See Methodology for more details. All figures are FTE.

Using this new methodology, the data shows that over the 12 months to Q3 2024 the recently established Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) expanded by 30%, adding more than 1,500 officials. Most of this change is accounted for by 810 staff moving from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to DSIT in Q1 2024,** though there was also a move of 70 officials to the department from the Cabinet Office in Q4 2023.

Unsurprisingly, the other two new departments set up under Rishi Sunak also saw significant growth over this period as they got up and running, with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) expanding by more than 12%, and the Department for Business and Trade growing by more than 8.5%. The Home Office also saw significant growth, of almost 12%. DCMS has experienced the most significant fall in staffing, as a result of the staff move to DSIT. If this move is excluded, the department in fact grew slightly between Q3 2023 and Q3 2024.

* For more information, see Methodology.

** These staff were transferred to the DSIT payroll in Q1 2024, having previously been paid from the DCMS payroll while in fact working for the new department.

Figure 2.4 **Change in civil servant numbers by department, Q3 2010 to Q3 2024**

Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment Data' (Table 9), Q3 2010 to Q3 2024.
Notes: Figures are calculated using a methodology that differs from that used in previous editions of *Whitehall Monitor*. See text for more details. DESNZ, DBT and DSIT are not shown as they were not in existence in 2010. Departments such as BEIS and DIT are not shown as they are no longer in existence. Based on FTE figures.

In some cases, these changes over 12 months continue longer running trends (Figure 2.4). The Home Office, for example, had been expanding continuously since 2017, with its rate of growth increasing significantly in late 2023 and early 2024, probably due to pressures around illegal migration. Q3 2024 ended this trend, marking the first quarter in which the Home Office shed staff since Q4 2016.

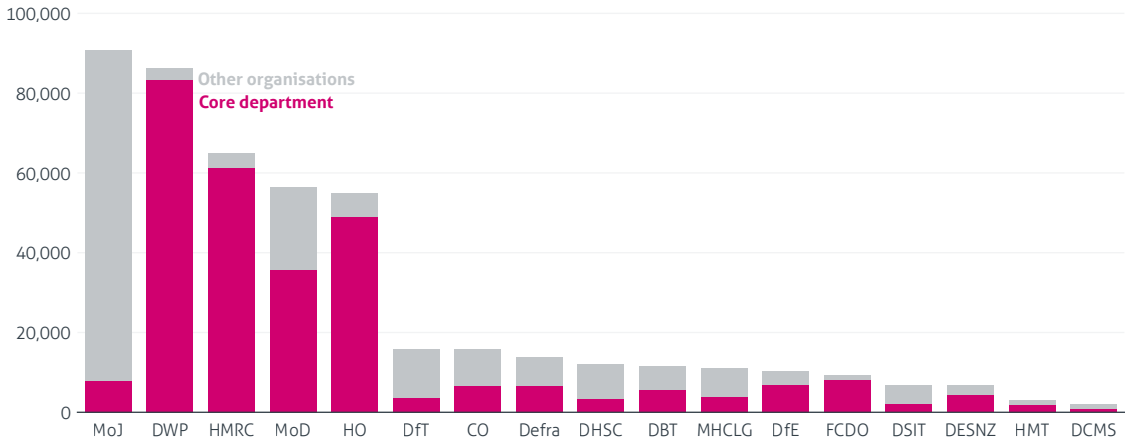
The sizes of both the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), each of which expanded by more than 8% over the 12 months to Q4 2024, have been more volatile. DHSC grew rapidly during the pandemic, shed staff afterwards, and has begun to expand again over the past year. DWP, meanwhile, also saw a brief but rapid expansion during the pandemic having shrunk since 2010, and subsequently shed numbers again before beginning to add them in recent quarters. The declining size of DCMS, on the other hand – which as outlined above reflects machinery of government changes – has begun to reverse its breakneck expansion it has seen since late 2015.*

These changes leave both the largest and smallest departments in Whitehall unchanged from the same time a year before. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ), DWP, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Home Office are the five largest departments, and DCMS, the Treasury, DESNZ, DSIT and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) are the five smallest.

As Figure 2.4 shows, it is notable that three of the four largest departments (DWP, HMRC and MoD) remain smaller now than they were in 2010. This is why, despite most departments being significantly larger now than in 2010, the civil service overall only recently surpassed its most recent previous peak size in 2009.

* The longer term trends in Figure 2.4 also show the impact of our methodological change. The significant expansion of DHSC in Q2 2013, for example, reflects the creation of Public Health England (PHE), which brought an additional 4,800 staff into the departmental group of what was then the Department of Health. The employees of PHE's predecessor (the Health Protection Agency) were not classified as civil servants. MHCLG shows a similar example – its expansion in Q3 2023 reflects the move of HM Land Registry into the department from BEIS.

Figure 2.5 **Civil servants by department, Q3 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment Data' (Table 9), Q3 2024. 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. All figures are FTE.

These figures give an overview of how the civil service as a whole and individual departments have changed in size. But it is often more difficult, at least using publicly available data, to understand *why* these changes have occurred. In some departments (or, more accurately, departmental groups), it is clear what lies behind the changes. In the MoJ, for example, 80% of its growth between Q2 2016 and Q3 2024 occurred in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service,* suggesting that the growth in numbers has been a response to the significant pressures in those services.[5] In many other departments, however – including the Home Office, Defra, the Cabinet Office and Department for Education (DfE) – this data does not show where most of their growth has occurred.**

* Or its predecessor, the National Offender Management Service.

** In the chapter of this report on the civil service professions and functions, we use data on the professions to shed more light on the reasons behind the changing sizes of different departments.

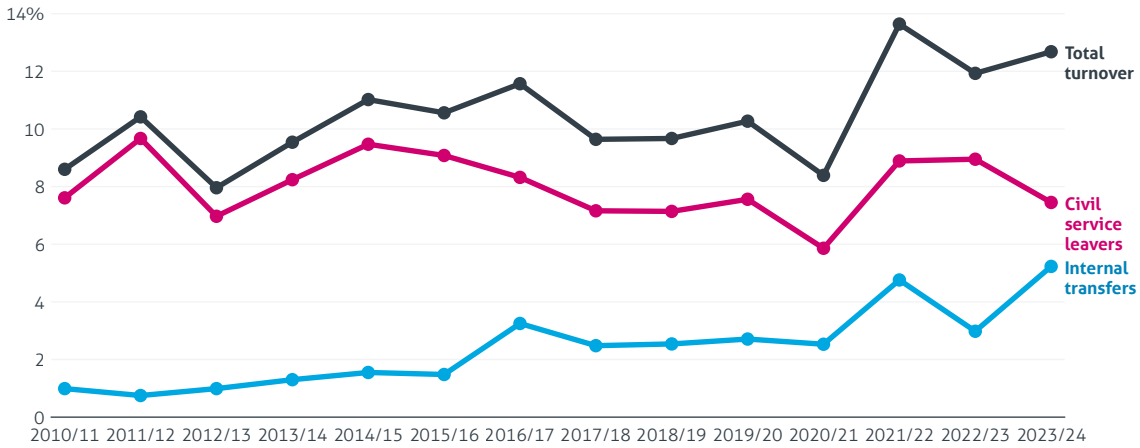
Turnover and leaving route

High turnover is still a problem across the civil service

The high frequency with which officials change roles harms civil service effectiveness. Previous Institute research has found that high turnover reduces productivity, disrupts long-term projects, undermines specialist knowledge and expertise, and leads to increased costs relating to recruitment and training.[6]

In 2023/24, more than one in 10 civil servants (12.7%) either moved between departments or left the civil service entirely. This represents higher turnover than in 2022/23, and while not quite as high as the post-pandemic peak of 13.6% in 2021/22, is the second highest level of churn* in the civil service since at least 2010/11. Importantly, these figures do not account for the regular moves that officials make within the same department, meaning they significantly underestimate the true level of turnover.

Figure 2.6 **Civil service staff turnover, 2010/11–2023/24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of data provided by the Cabinet Office, 2010–17 and Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2018–24. Notes: Based on headcount figures. Total staff turnover is the sum of civil service leavers and internal transfers of staff.

The higher rate of turnover in 2023/24 was driven by an increase in internal transfers (staff moving between departments), which reached a record high of 5.2% of the workforce and will have been partially driven by machinery of government changes including the creation of DESNZ, DSIT and DBT in 2023. This offset the encouraging drop in the proportion of staff leaving the workforce in 2023/14, at 7.5%, after it had spiked to 8.9% in 2021/22 and 9.0% in 2022/23. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some of this reduction was related to the pay deal put forward in June 2023 (discussed more later).[7]

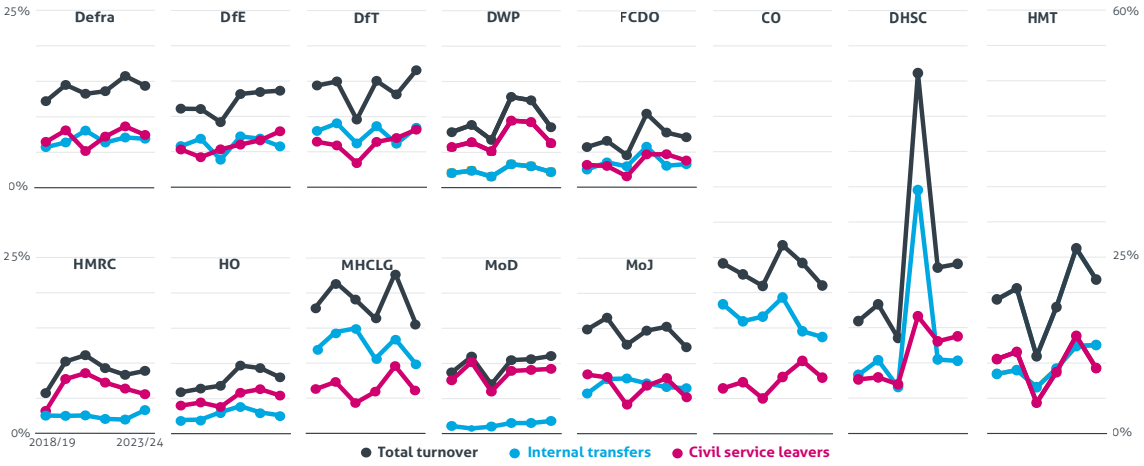
There is some indication that turnover is even higher in the senior civil service. Cabinet Office estimates published by the Senior Salaries Review Body suggest that, including moves within the same department, about a third of senior civil servants left or moved roles in 2022/23.[8] This proportion has been steadily increasing since the pandemic, with significant implications for institutional memory, effectiveness and delivery across Whitehall.

* In this section, 'turnover' and 'churn' are used interchangeably.

Within core departments, overall turnover was highest in 2023/24 in DHSC (24%) and at the centre of government, in the Treasury (21.8%) and the Cabinet Office (20.5%). The practice of civil servants being posted to the centre before moving back into other departments explains some of this, but such high levels of churn remain counterproductive.

While turnover decreased in 2023/24 across most departments – most dramatically in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), by 7.1 percentage points (ppts) – it increased in the MoD, HMRC, DfE, the Department for Transport (DfT) and DHSC. The increase in churn was highest in DfT – by 3.4ppts. Turnover in the Welsh and Scottish governments has remained lower than in Whitehall departments (4.8 and 5.1% respectively), mostly due to the very low number of internal transfers.

Figure 2.7 **Civil service staff turnover by department, 2018/19–2023/24**



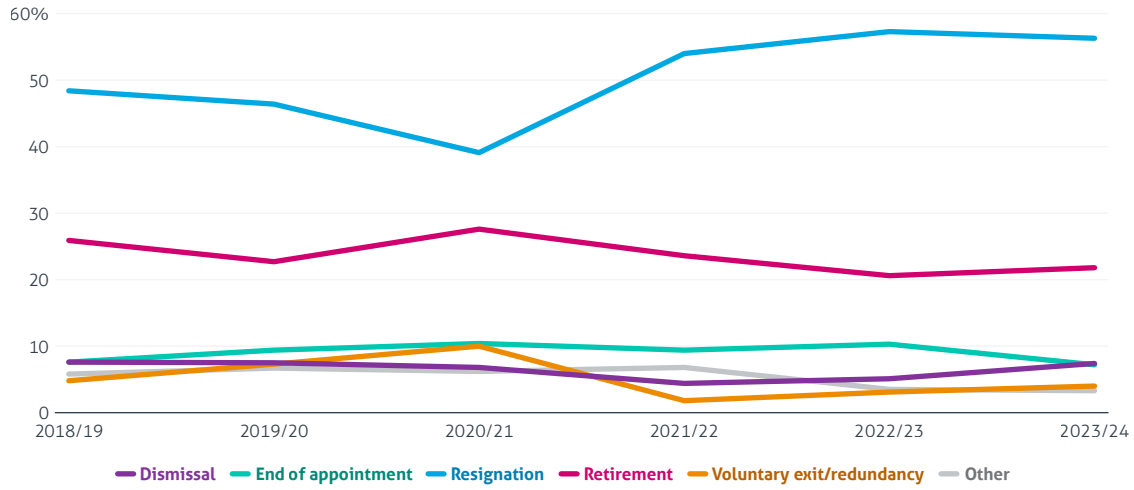
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2019–24. Notes: Based on headcount figures. Figures refer to core departments. Total staff turnover is the sum of civil service leavers and internal transfers of staff. Figures for FCDO before 2020 are calculated using the sum of the figures for FCO and DfID. DBT, DCMS, DESNZ and DSIT have been excluded because of machinery of government changes.

The most common leaving routes for civil servants vary by department

There are several ways for officials to leave the civil service. Resignation is by far the most common. In 2023/24, over half of those who left the civil service had resigned (56.3%). Retirement is the second most common – between 20% and 30% of civil service leavers were retirees in every financial year since 2018/19. And both dismissals and the end of temporary appointments accounted for about 7% of civil service leavers apiece in 2023/24.

During the pandemic, staff who resigned dropped as a share of total leavers – from 46.4% in 2019/20 to 39.1% in 2020/21, but subsequently rebounded and has since stabilised at a slightly higher rate than before the pandemic. By contrast, the figures for retirement and voluntary exit or redundancy peaked during the pandemic (reaching 27.6% and 10% of leavers respectively in 2020/21) and have been lower in recent years (21.8% and 4.0% in 2023/24).

Figure 2.8 **Civil service leavers by leaving route, 2018/19–2023/24**

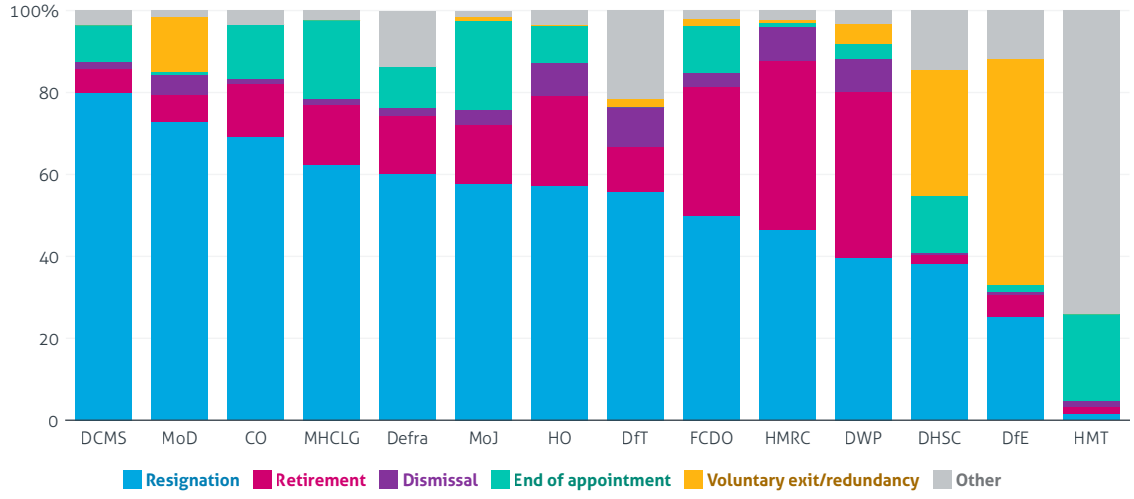


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2019–24.

The breakdown of leaving routes differs by department. Though resignation is the most common route across most (core) departments, in some, such as DCMS, it is the overwhelming reason for departure (79.9% in 2023/24), with retirement a far less common cause than elsewhere in Whitehall. The share of staff retiring varies substantially between departments, accounting for 40.7% of all leavers in DWP and only 1.6% of leavers in the Treasury in 2023/24.

Because departmental patterns in how civil servants leave vary over time, annual figures provide only a snapshot. For example, while 2023/24 saw resignations as a share of total leavers fall in most departments, the MoD saw it jump from 58.5% to 72.9%. The particularly high numbers of staff leaving through voluntary exits or redundancies in DHSC and DfE in 2023/24 are also one-off events rather than marking a more long-standing pattern.

Figure 2.9 **Civil service leaving routes by department, 2023/24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2024. Notes: Figures refer to core departments.

Long-standing trends in civil servants' intention to leave continue

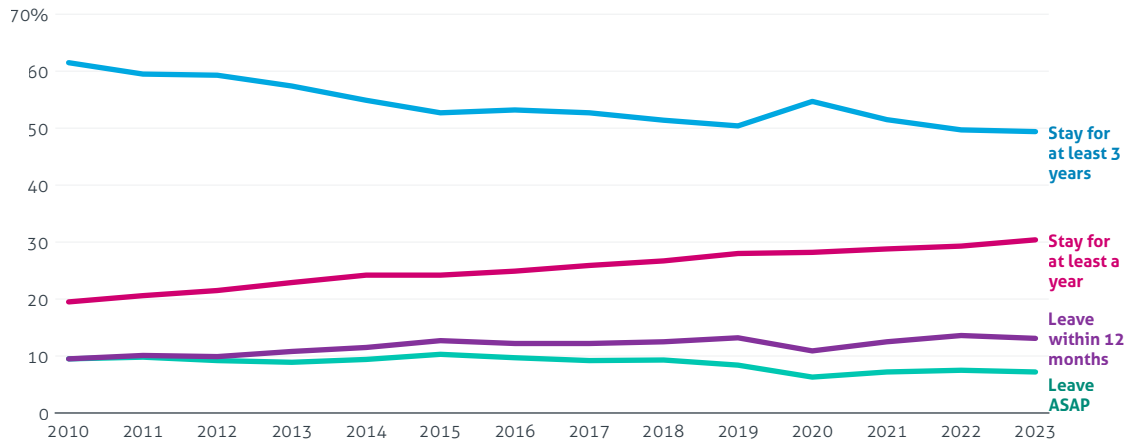
Using data from the Civil Service People Survey,[9] we can also see how officials feel about remaining in the civil service, and how soon they intend to leave.

The data shows that in 2023, roughly half of civil servants planned on staying in their organisation for at least three years (49.4%). This figure has been on a slow but noticeable downward trajectory since 2010, though with a pandemic-induced increase in 2020. The opposite is true of the share of staff who say they want to stay in their organisation for at least a year, which has risen almost every year since 2010 and in 2023 stood at 30.4%.

Those who say they want to leave their organisation within 12 months or as soon as possible make up 13.1% and 7.2% of the civil service respectively. The former figure is only slightly higher in 2023 than in 2010 (9.5%), whereas the latter is slightly lower than in 2010 (9.5%). The share of staff wanting to leave either as soon as possible or within 12 months dipped in 2020 and has ticked up since.*

Year-on-year changes in these metrics are often not substantial in most (core) departments. But there are exceptions. In 2022, for example, in the Cabinet Office the share of civil servants wanting to leave as soon as possible increased to 16.4% (from 9.9% in 2021). In 2023, however, the figure declined to 10.8%, and the proportion of officials intending to stay for longer periods of time increased.

Figure 2.10 **Civil servants' intention to leave their organisation, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2010–23.

* The data also show that the desire for better pay and benefits is the most common reason for such officials wanting to leave the civil service.

Morale

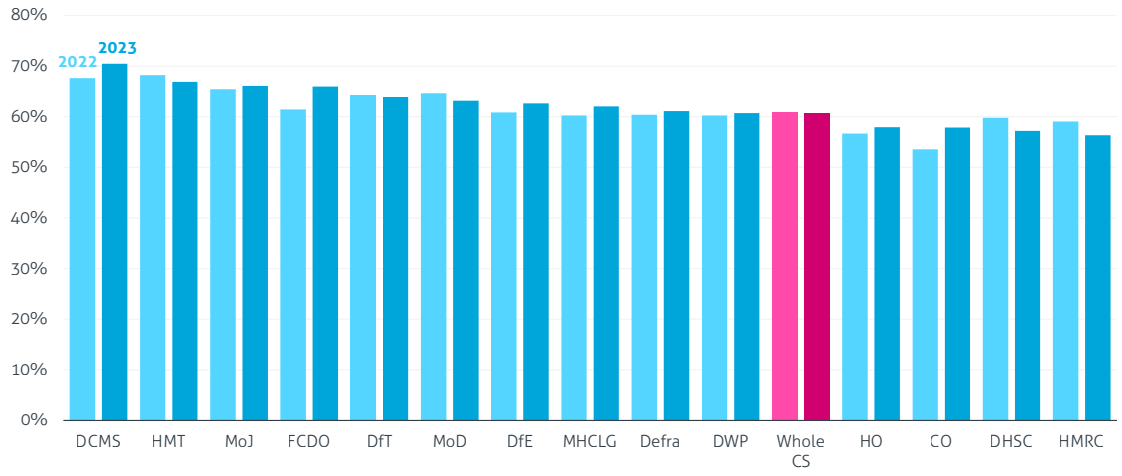
The civil service tracks the morale and views of its workforce through the annual Civil Service People Survey.[10] The survey covers a range of topics, from officials' understanding of the Civil Service Code to their views on their manager and team and detailed questions about their wellbeing.

Overall civil service morale has continued to fall

The headline measure of the people survey is the Employee Engagement Index. This is used as a measure of officials' overall attitudes to their organisation, calculated using responses to questions around their motivation, and pride in and attachment to their organisation.

Across the civil service as a whole, the engagement index fell in 2023* for the third consecutive year, following a near decade-long trend of rising morale. However, as discussed in the preceding chapter, this has only translated into minimal increases in the proportions of officials intending to leave their organisation as soon as possible or within 12 months. Unlike in 2022, when the engagement index fell in every department, there was a more mixed picture in 2023. The index rose in most departments, and particularly strongly in the Cabinet Office and FCDO, where it increased by more than 4ppts.

Figure 2.11 **Engagement scores of civil servants by department, 2022 and 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2022 and 2023. Notes: All figures are mean scores. This includes the 'Whole CS' figure, which is the mean engagement score for all civil servants and is therefore skewed towards the scores of the largest departments. Recently created or abolished departments (such as BEIS, DIT and DBT), which did not exist in the same form in both 2022 and 2023, are not included.

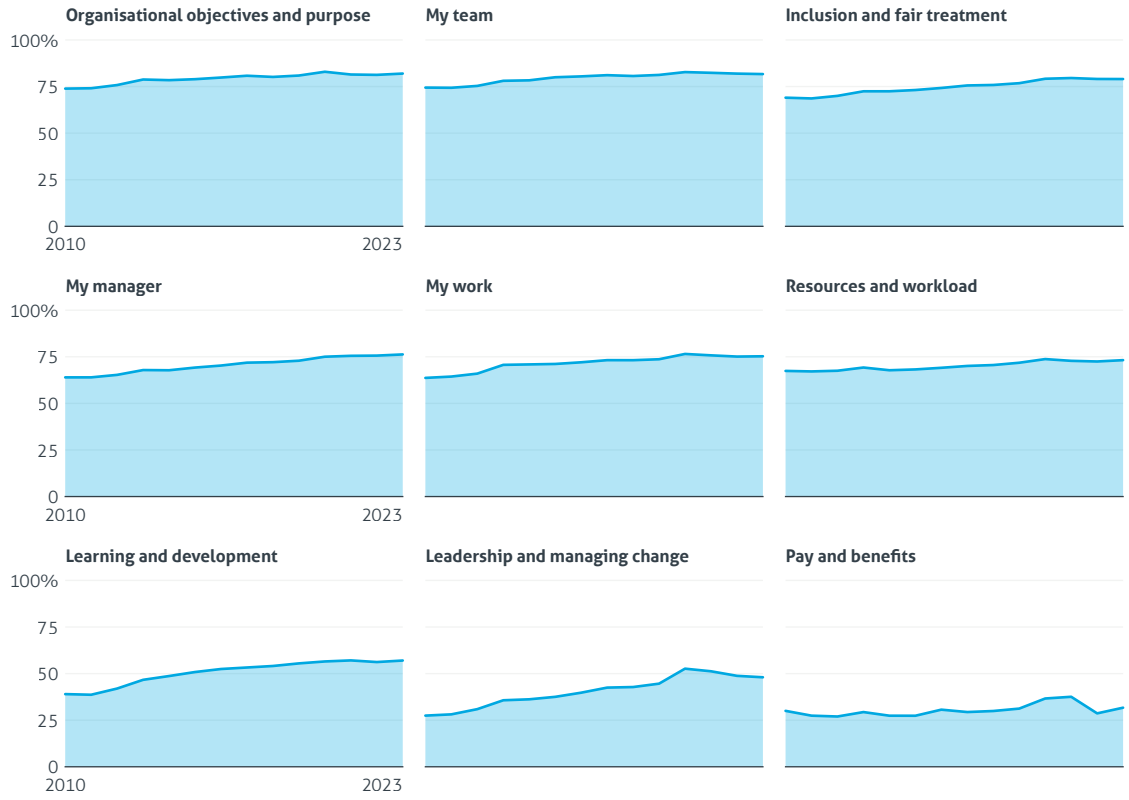
In both cases this followed a trend of marked falls in engagement – the Cabinet Office's score had fallen for four consecutive years, including a dramatic fall of almost 9ppts in 2022 (tallying with the significant increase, discussed in the preceding chapter, in the proportion of Cabinet Office officials wanting to leave the organisation as soon as possible in that year, and perhaps not coincidentally with the short-lived Truss premiership); the FCDO's index had fallen by a total of 10.5ppts between 2019 and 2022. DHSC and HMRC, meanwhile, saw the largest falls in engagement between 2022 and 2023, by a relatively modest 2.5 and 2.7ppts respectively.

* Data collection for the people survey happens between September and November each year, but there is a delay of some months between the survey being completed and the results being published. While the 2024 survey was completed late last year, the 2023 results are still the most recent available.

Officials are more satisfied with their pay

Beyond the headline engagement index, the people survey also tracks civil servants' overall satisfaction in nine broad areas. Similarly to the engagement index, these nine 'theme scores' are calculated using officials' responses to several questions under each theme. With the exception of the 'pay and benefits' and 'leadership and managing change' themes, officials' satisfaction in all of these areas has broadly trended upwards for almost a decade and a half.

Figure 2.12 **Civil servant satisfaction with aspects of their working experience, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2010–23. Notes: This chart presents the nine 'theme scores' in the Civil Service People Survey. They are intended to measure officials' overall satisfaction in each area and are calculated using responses to a number of questions under each theme. All figures are mean scores for all civil servants.

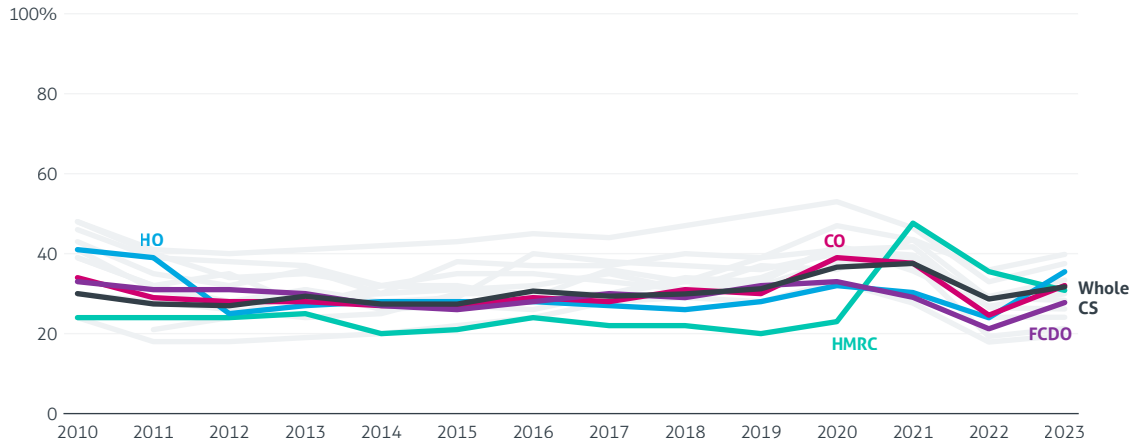
There were some notable changes to the theme scores in 2023, both across the civil service as a whole and in individual departments. The civil service-wide measure of satisfaction with 'leadership and managing change', for example, declined for the third year in a row, though by less than a percentage point. Analysis of individual departments shows a mixed picture – in HMT this measure fell by more than 5ppts, in DHSC by more than 4ppts and in both DfT and HMRC by more than 3ppts. On the other hand, the measure increased by over 7ppts in the Cabinet Office and more than 5ppts in the FCDO.

Satisfaction with 'organisational objectives and purpose' also showed an interesting picture in 2023. While the civil service-wide measure rose by less than one percentage point, this masked significant improvements in departments such as the Cabinet Office (+7.1ppts), MHCLG (+7.3ppts) and FCDO (+8.8ppts).

However, it was the measure of officials' satisfaction with pay and benefits that saw the most marked change across the civil service as a whole in 2023. The proportion of officials satisfied with their remuneration increased by over 3ppts, following a fall of almost 9ppts in 2022. Officials' more positive outlook likely reflects the 2023 pay settlement* – generous in comparison with 2022 – in which non-senior civil servants received a pay increase of up to 4.5% (rising to 5% for the lowest earners) and a one-off payment of £1,500.[11] Senior civil servants received a 5.5% increase, with a further 1% available for the lower-paid, in line with recommendations from the Senior Salaries Review Body.[12]

Last year, the new government announced a 5% uplift for both junior and senior officials.[13] Any impact of this decision will be reflected in the 2024 people survey, which closed late last year.

Figure 2.13 **Civil servant satisfaction with their pay and benefits, by department, 2010–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2010–23. Notes: 'Pay and benefits' is one of nine 'theme scores' in the Civil Service People Survey, calculated using responses to a number of questions under each theme. All figures are mean scores. This includes the 'Whole CS' figure, which is the mean score for all civil servants and is therefore skewed towards the scores of the largest departments.

Again, there is a more nuanced picture of pay satisfaction in individual departments. The Home Office saw a remarkable rise of over 11ppts in 2023, for example, while in the Cabinet Office there was a smaller but still very significant increase of more than 7ppts.

There were still three departments (MHCLG, DfT and HMRC) in which satisfaction with pay fell. HMRC is particularly notable – the measure fell by more than 4.5ppts in 2023, following the fall seen in all departments in 2022. This followed HMRC's measure of satisfaction with pay more than doubling – from 23% to more than 47% – in 2021.

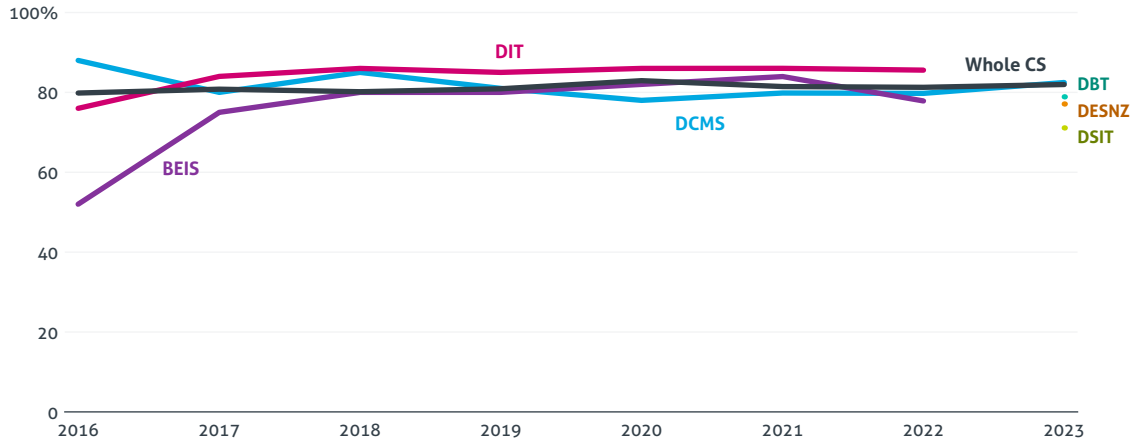
* The '2023 pay settlement' refers to the 2023/24 pay award, announced in June 2023. Civil servants would have begun feeling the impact of this award during 2023, explaining the increased satisfaction with pay in the 2023 people survey, which collects data in autumn each year. Other sections of this report discussing civil service pay show an increase in pay in 2024. This also reflects the 2023/24 pay award, and occurs because the annual Civil Service Statistics publication captures data on 31 March each year. The 2024 data on pay was therefore captured on 31 March 2024, reflecting the final month of the 2023/24 pay award.

Looking across the range of theme scores also gives a sense of the overall performance of departments in 2023. Both the FCDO and Cabinet Office, for example, saw strong improvements across multiple theme scores, as reflected in their higher overall engagement scores. Worse performing was HMRC, which saw notable falls in its scores for leadership and managing change, learning and development, and pay and benefits.

DSIT has struggled to achieve the morale levels of its predecessor department

The 2023 survey was also the first year in which three new departments – DBT, DESNZ and DSIT – took part. Across the core themes, DBT's scores were largely similar to those of its predecessors (BEIS and DIT) the year before. Some exceptions can be seen in the 'organisational objectives and purpose' theme score (DBT's was 6.7ppts lower than DIT's in 2022, though similar to BEIS's) and satisfaction with pay and benefits (DBT's 2023 score was 5.9ppts higher than DIT's in 2022, though most departments improved in this regard in 2023 in any case). DESNZ's scores were similar to those of its predecessor BEIS on all measures.

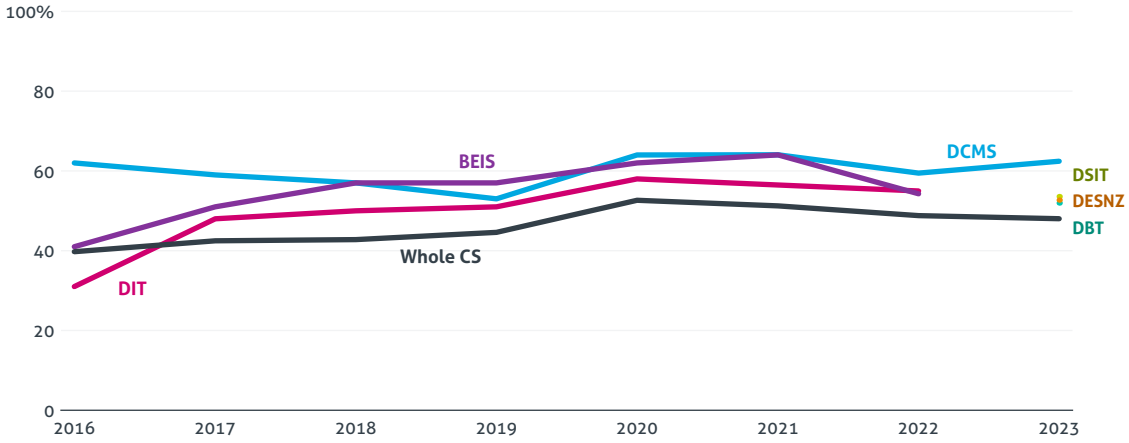
Figure 2.14 **Civil servant satisfaction with their department's organisational objectives and purpose, new departments and their predecessors, 2016–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2016–23. Notes: 'Organisational objectives and purpose' is one of nine 'theme scores' in the Civil Service People Survey, calculated using responses to a number of questions under each theme. In this case the 'organisational objectives and purpose' theme score concerns officials' views around the clarity of the aims of the organisation, rather than their personal views on what those aims are. All figures are mean scores. This includes the 'Whole CS' figure, which is the mean score for all civil servants and is therefore skewed towards the scores of the largest departments. The time series begins in 2016 as this is when BEIS and DIT, two of the predecessor departments shown, were established. A methodological change in 2017 means that, for individual departments, 2016 data for this measure is not directly comparable to the following years.

DSIT has not fared as well. Across every theme score, it performed worse than its main predecessor department (DCMS) in 2023, and worse in all but one measure ('my work') than DCMS in 2022.

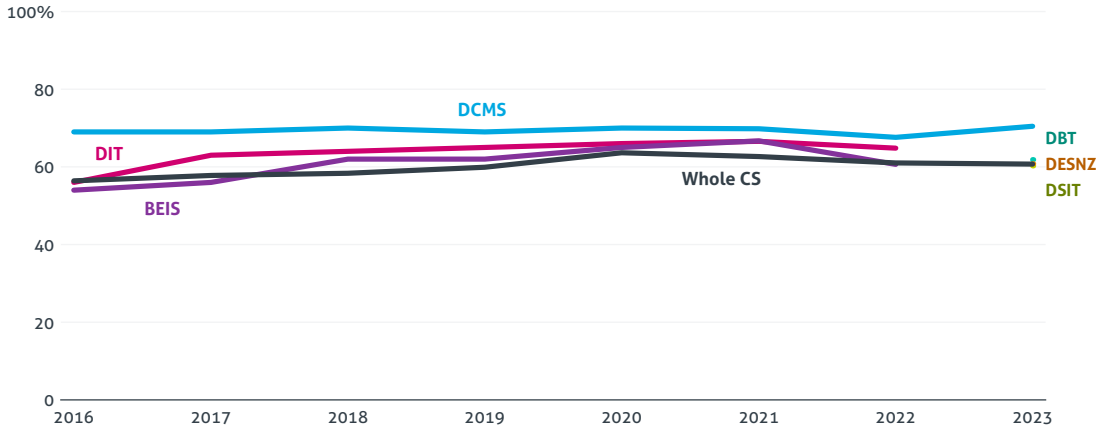
Figure 2.15 **Civil servant satisfaction with leadership and how change is managed, new departments and their predecessors, 2016–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2016–23. Notes: 'Leadership and managing change' is one of nine 'theme scores' in the Civil Service People Survey, calculated using responses to a number of questions under each theme. All figures are mean scores. This includes the 'Whole CS' figure, which is the mean score for all civil servants and is therefore skewed towards the scores of the largest departments. The time series begins in 2016 as this is when BEIS and DIT, two of the predecessor departments shown, were established. A methodological change in 2017 means that, for individual departments, 2016 data for this measure is not directly comparable to the following years.

Most concerning for a newly established department, its scores for 'leadership and managing change' and 'organisational objectives and purpose' were 8 and 11 points below those for DCMS in 2023 respectively. Overall, its engagement score – at 60.3% – is relatively low, and more than 10ppts lower than DCMS's.

Figure 2.16 **Engagement scores of civil servants, new departments and their predecessors, 2016–23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2016–2023.Notes: All figures are mean scores. This includes the 'Whole CS' figure, which is the mean score for all civil servants and is therefore skewed towards the scores of the largest departments. The time series begins in 2016 as this is when BEIS and DIT, two of the predecessor departments shown, were established.

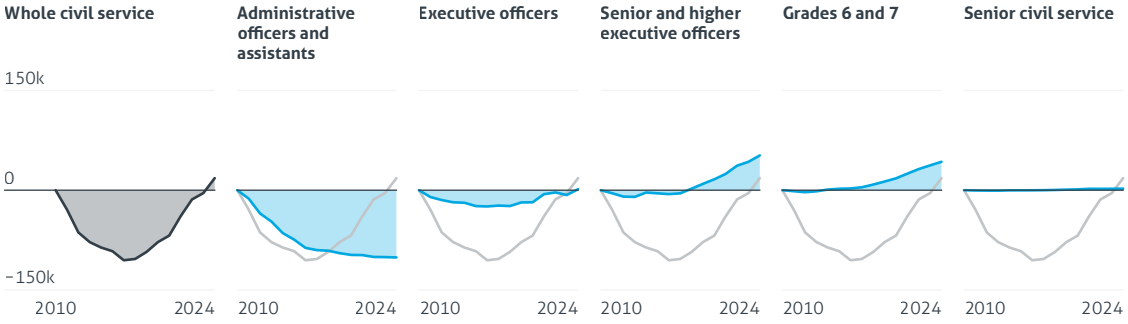
Grade structure and pay

There has been a big shift in the grade structure of the civil service

Between 2010 and 2016, as the civil service shrank, the numbers were mainly shed at the lowest grades. In both absolute and percentage terms, reductions were concentrated among the most junior 'administrative officer/assistant' (AO/AA) grades.

The post-2016 expansion of the civil service did not replace these officials. Indeed, the ranks of AO/AAs continued to shrink. Instead, this period saw growth in slightly more senior as well as mid-level ranks. The number of 'executive officers' (EOs), for example, having fallen between 2010 and 2016, had returned to 2010 levels by 2024. The ranks of senior and higher executive officers and grades 6s and 7s expanded by 62% and 106% respectively between 2016 and 2024.

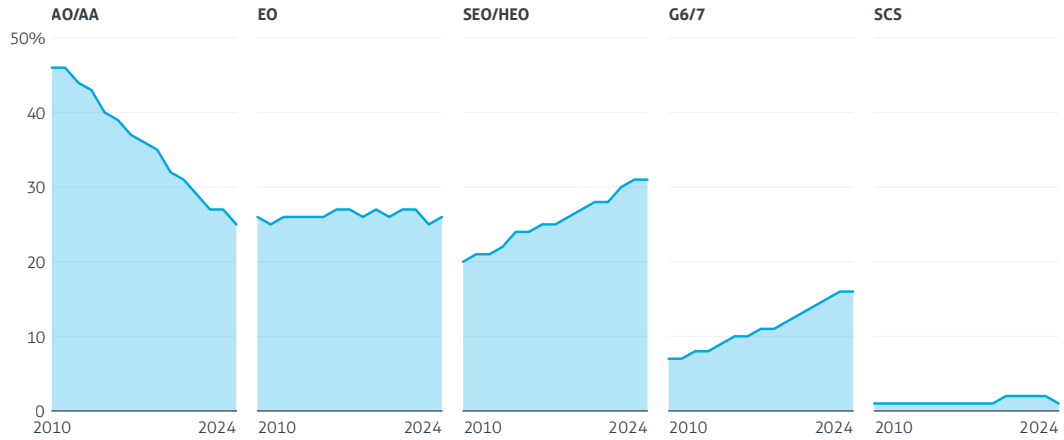
Figure 2.17 **Change in civil servant numbers by grade, 2010–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2010–24.Notes: All figures expressed in FTE. The 'Whole civil service' series includes those whose grade is unreported, and is repeated in each of the charts showing the change in size of each grade.

In 2024, there were more than 100,000 fewer AO/AAs than in 2010 (a decline of 45%) but more officials at every other grade. This is the first year for which this is true – the number of EOs, for example, was still below 2010 levels in 2023 and is now 1.2% higher. Both the senior civil service and senior and higher executive officer ranks have expanded by around 50% since 2010, while the numbers of grades 6s and 7s have expanded by 121%. The result is that the civil service has become significantly more weighted towards the middle and more senior ranks.

Figure 2.18 **Civil servants by grade, 2010–24**



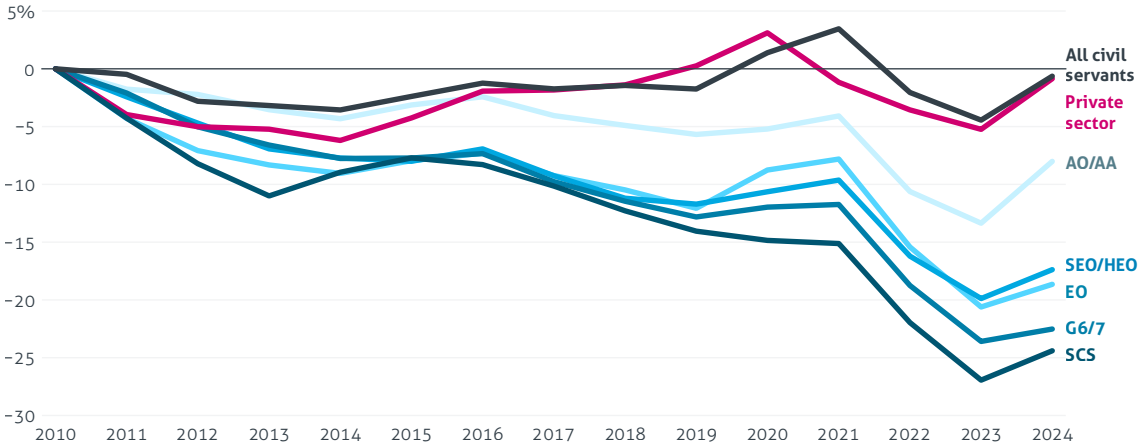
Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2010–24. Notes: Based on FTE figures. The percentages shown in this chart exclude those with an unknown grade. AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer; G6/7 = grades 6 and 7; and SCS = senior civil service.

The growth of the mid-level grades 6s and 7s has been particularly stark in some departments. While their numbers across the civil service have risen by 121% since 2010, this figure is more than 200% in the Home Office, DHSC, DCMS and DfE. In the Cabinet Office, it is an astonishing 422%.*

2024 saw a boost in civil service pay, though some grades have fared better than others since 2010

Having fallen in both 2022 and 2023, average civil service pay increased in real terms in 2024** after the settlements outlined in the previous chapter. Median pay in 2024 almost returned to its 2010 level, though was still lower than in 2020 and 2021. This pattern broadly matches the private sector, where average pay is less than 1% below 2010 levels, but still below its peak in 2020.

Figure 2.19 **Real-terms change in median civil service salary by grade since 2010**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–24 and ASHE, full time gross annual pay, 2010–24. Notes: AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; HEO/SEO = higher/senior executive officer; G6/7 = grades 6 and 7; SCS = senior civil service.

* It should be noted that, in some departments, changes in the numbers of officials at different grades will be accounted for by machinery of government changes.

** This represents the impact of the 2023/24 pay award, which was announced in mid-2023 and was relatively generous. The impact of this pay award is seen in the figures for civil service pay in 2024 because the annual civil service statistics publication collects data for 31 March each year. The 2024 statistics therefore collected data on pay for 31 March 2024, reflecting the 2023/24 award.

While *overall* civil service pay is almost back to 2010 levels, this is not true for pay at each grade. Pay restraint through the 2010s meant that the salary at each grade did not keep up with inflation. And as discussed above, the 2023 pay deal (shown in Figure 2.19 as pay in 2024) also awarded bigger increases to those at the bottom of the pay scale than those at the top. As a result, pay at AO/AA level was only 8% lower in 2024 than 2010 in real terms, while pay at SCS level was 24% lower.

This has impacted the competitiveness of civil service salaries. In 2011,* an average grade 6 or 7 salary would have put an official at around the 80th percentile of earners in the whole-economy 'business administrative professionals' category (the most comparable data category to civil servants, which includes consultants and economists among other roles).** By 2024, an average salary was around the 70th percentile in that same category. Relative to comparable outside options, the civil service role would be much less attractive, at least in pay terms, in 2024 than in 2011.***

A similar story holds at lower grades, although the scale of change is smaller because falls in civil service pay at those levels have been less significant. In 2011, an SEO or HEO average salary would have put a worker at 7% below the median of the business administrative professional category. By 2024 these grades were 14% below the median.

The shift in grade structure means that pay restraint has saved less money than it could have

The calculations above compare pay at the same grade between 2011 and 2024. But it is notable that, while average pay at each grade has fallen in real terms, overall civil service pay is the same as it was in 2010. This is accounted for by the shift towards more medium- and senior-level staff in the grade structure of the civil service, discussed above.

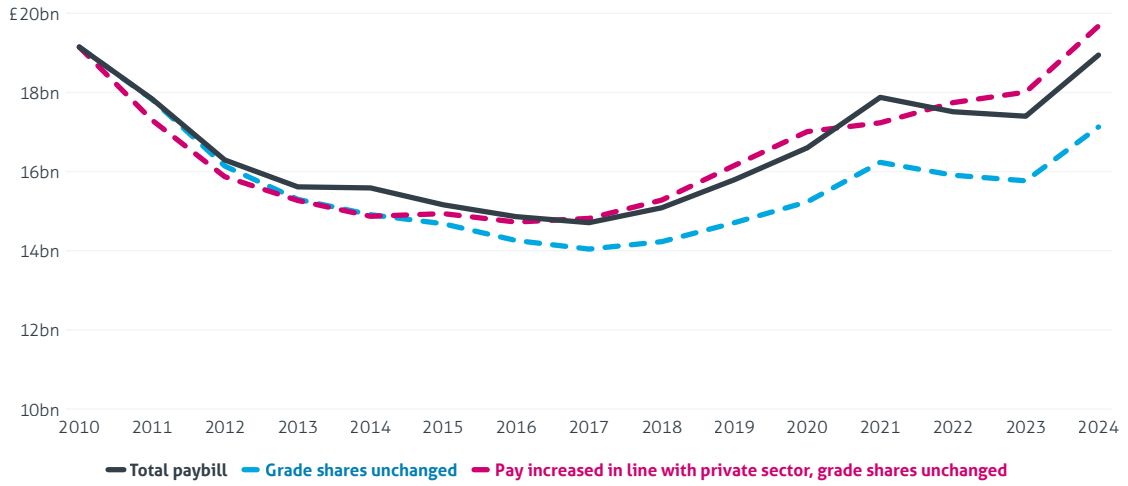
This means that pay restraint over the past 15 years has saved much less than it would otherwise have done. In 2024, spending on civil service pay was approximately £19 billion – the same as in 2010 (in real terms). Had the grade structure remained unchanged since 2010, and pay for each grade had changed by the same amount, spending on pay would have been £1.9bn (10%) lower in 2024.

* When comparing salaries to the private sector, we start comparisons in 2011 rather than 2010 because the ONS changed its profession classifications in that year.

** The source for analysis in this paragraph is: Institute for Government analysis of Office for National Statistics, 'Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, *Earnings and hours worked, occupation by four digit code*, Table 14.7a, October 2024, www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/occupation4digitsoc2010ashetable14

*** Comparisons in this paragraph only focus on headline pay and do not account for bonuses or pension entitlement. Pension entitlement is more generous in the public than private sector, although the civil service scheme has become less attractive since 2010.

Figure 2.20 **Spending on civil service pay under different scenarios, 2010–24 (2024 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2010–24 and ONS, 'Labour Force Survey', 2024. Notes: 'Grade shares unchanged' takes the change in average pay at each grade between 2010 and 2024 and calculates total pay in 2024 if the grade composition of the civil service then was the same as it was in 2010. 'Pay increased in line with private sector, grade shares unchanged' does the same calculation except it assumes all grades saw pay change in line with the private sector average.

Pay restraint has contributed to the shift in grade structure

There are two possible causes of these changes in the civil service grade structure.

First, they could have resulted from a necessary or inevitable shift in the structure of the civil service, in part reflecting the automation of administrative roles. There is clear evidence of this in some departments. For example, the most significant reduction in AO/AA numbers between 2010 and 2024 in absolute terms was in DWP, which shed more than 36,000 of those officials – a proportional decrease of 63% against the whole civil service figure of 45%. HMRC's ranks of AO/AAs also fell substantially, by more than 23,000 (59%) over the same time period. Both have implemented some level of automation – in their welfare and tax policy services respectively – in this time. And, as we referenced in last year's *Whitehall Monitor*, automation partially influenced DWP's decision to phase out the AA grade entirely, and has driven some of the decline in the AO grade.

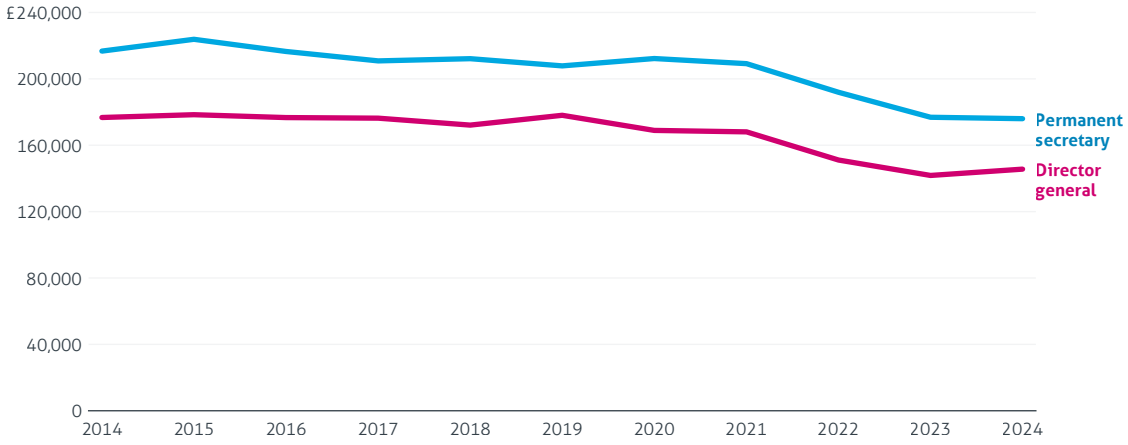
The second possible cause is 'grade inflation': civil servants being promoted more quickly than they otherwise would have been, and roles being advertised at higher levels than previously, in an attempt to recruit and retain the best in an environment of inflation-eroded grade-specific salaries. That the number of employees at higher grades (rather than just the share) has increased so quickly suggests that at least some grade inflation, more than an intentional change in structure, is doing most of the work here. The fact that the largest *proportional* reductions in AO/AA numbers since 2010 have been seen in the FCDO and HMT (64% and 70% respectively) – departments which would not obviously have large numbers of staff vulnerable to automation – lends further weight to this explanation.

It is not possible to precisely disentangle these two effects, but we can compare changes to pay and roles in the civil service with the private sector. Between 2011 and 2020,* jobs classified as 'professional occupations' increased from 14% to 24% of employees across the economy as a whole, while 'administrative' roles fell slightly from 12.6% to 11.2%. While this is not as dramatic a shift as in the civil service – where AOs and AAs fell by a third as a proportion of the workforce, while SEO/HEOs rose by over a third and grades 6s and 7s by more than half** – the trend is in the same direction.

Pay in the senior civil service continues to be uncompetitive

While grade inflation has helped ease the impact of pay restraint at lower and middle grades, there is much less flexibility for senior civil servants – the lower number of available roles at senior grades means less room for artificial or early promotion. Pay restraint has also been particularly severe for the most senior officials. Median pay for both directors general and permanent secretaries has fallen substantially in real terms since 2014.***

Figure 2.21 **Median salary of permanent secretaries and directors general, 2014–24 (2024 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Senior Salaries Review Body reports, 2014–24. Notes: In cases where salaries were given as a range, the mid-point was taken.

This has increased the pay disparity between the senior civil service and positions of equivalent seniority in the private sector. Between 2011 and 2019, senior civil service pay fell by 10.2% in real terms, while median pay among chief executives and senior officials in the economy as a whole increased by 9.5%.

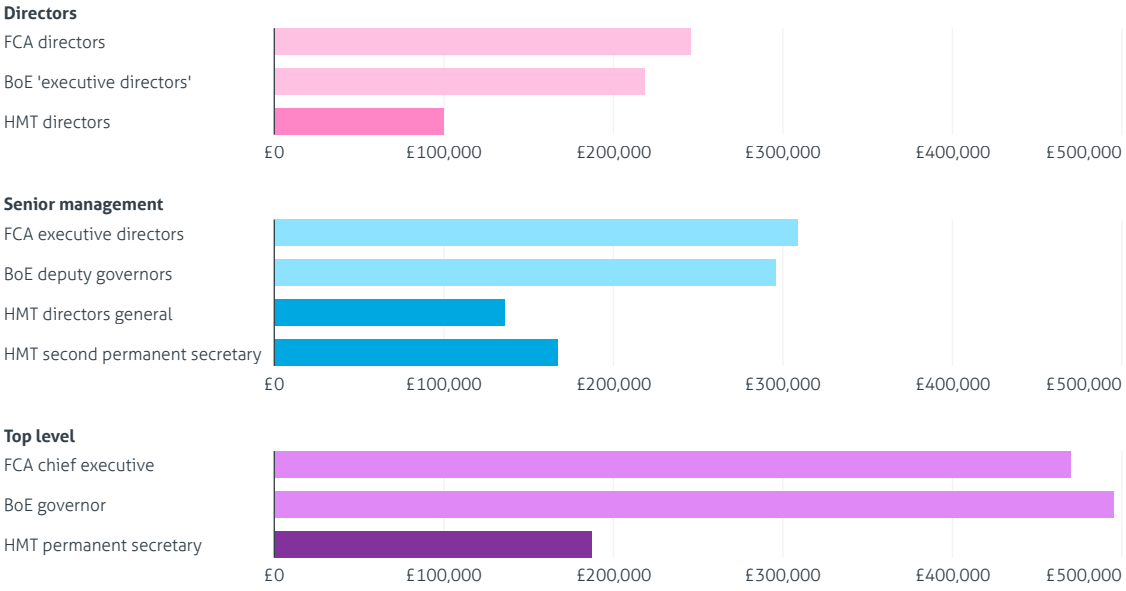
* These years are used for this comparison because the same occupational classification code was used throughout this period.

** These calculations show grades as a proportion of the civil service workforce whose grade was known at the relevant point, excluding those whose grade was not reported.

*** 2014 is the furthest back that consistent information for both permanent secretary and director general salaries is available in Senior Salary Review Body reports.

Senior civil servants are also paid less than their counterparts elsewhere in the public sector. Senior officials at the Treasury are paid much less than their equivalents at the Bank of England and Financial Conduct Authority, for example.

Figure 2.22 **Executive pay at HM Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority, 2023/24**



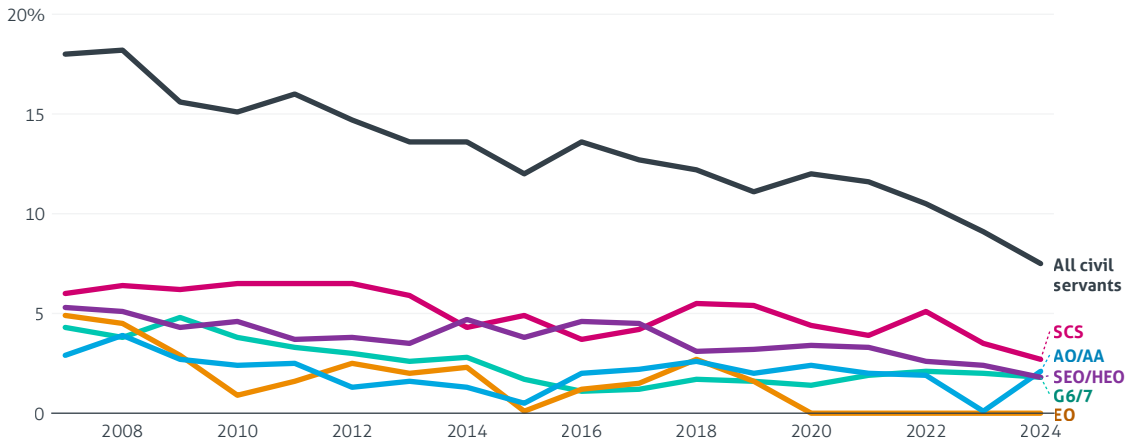
Source: Institute of Government analysis of HM Treasury, Annual Report and Accounts of HM Treasury: year to 31 March 2024, July 2024; Bank of England, Annual Report and Accounts 1 March 2023–29 February 2024, July 2024 and Financial Conduct Authority, Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24, September 2024. Notes: Where a range is given the mid-point is shown.

One way the insufficiency of senior officials' salaries can be shown is that external entrants to the civil service are often offered higher salaries than internal candidates – in part because, while internal candidates have shown a willingness to be paid well below the market rate to do a civil service job, external candidates often have different minimum expectations around pay that need to be met for them to apply for and/or take up a role. The SSRB has reported that "externally recruited SCS are paid on average around £10–20k more than other SCS".[14]

The gender pay disparity is becoming less stark

A more welcome development in civil service pay has been the progressive decline in the gender pay disparity.* In 2007 the median female civil servant was paid 18% less than the median male civil servant – by 2024, the figure had dropped to 7.5%.

Figure 2.23 Civil service gender pay disparity by grade, 2007–24



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2020–24. Notes: Pay disparity figures refer to the percentage difference between the male median and the female median as a share of the male median. All differences shown are differences in favour of men. AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; HEO/SEO = higher/senior executive officer; G6/7 = grades 6 and 7; SCS = senior civil service.

While the pay disparity is lower at all grades in 2024 than it was in 2007, the reduction for the civil service as a whole appears to have been driven primarily by improved female representation at more senior (and better paid) grades. Within grades, in 2024 the disparity ranged from 2.7% for the senior civil service to 0% for staff at the executive officer (EO) grade.

* The figures we use in this section do not represent the gender pay gap, which has a precise definition and which cannot be calculated by civil service grade with the available data. We therefore refer to the 'gender pay disparity'.

Recruitment

The effectiveness of the civil service depends on the quality of civil servants. But previous Institute research has found that the civil service's approach to recruitment requires considerable improvement.[15,16]

This is particularly true of the 'success profiles' approach to recruitment, and the widespread use of assessment based on 'behaviours', which require candidates to explain how they have demonstrated an abstract concept (such as 'delivering at pace' or 'seeing the big picture') in a way that earns them marks on a set schema.[17] This system has questionable value to hiring managers and is difficult for external candidates to understand, putting internal candidates (or those with connections in the civil service) at an advantage. Other changes needed include making job adverts clearer, and more formally allowing managers to access information about internal candidates' previous performance.

More generally, the civil service's employment offer needs to be modernised. As private companies increasingly market themselves as being places employees can 'make a difference', and as flexible working becomes common across the economy – previously potential selling points of a civil service career – the civil service needs to find new ways to stand out from the pack.

Encouragingly, this is a topic in which the Labour government is interested. It was welcome that Pat McFadden's speech in December (also discussed elsewhere in this report) echoed the Institute's analysis, as he announced that "it's time to overhaul how recruitment is carried out across the Civil Service... if you don't understand the civil service process, good external candidates can find it near impossible to jump through the hoops of 'behaviours' and 'competencies' and 'success profiles'".[18] There was also a positive commitment to increase the number of secondments into Whitehall – including by expanding the No.10 innovation fellowship, which brings technologists into government, and establishing a new route to bring front-line workers in the wider public sector into the civil service.

Further inspiration for changes to recruitment practices could be found in the government-commissioned Maude Review. Published in late 2023, it produced a series of recommendations about how to improve recruitment, many of which were based on the Institute's paper *Opening Up*.[19,20] Some progress has been made on a small number of the reforms Maude recommended – for example, in 2023 the Conservative government committed to making senior officials' post-employment restrictions clearer at the point at which they take up a role, although any changes are yet to come into force.[21] But in other areas, such as adopting a more robust approach to performance management and strengthening the government's alumni network, there remains work to do.

Appointing officials 'by exception' has caused controversy

Meritocratic recruitment through fair and open competition is fundamental to the civil service and enshrined in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.[22] But sometimes running a full recruitment process is not the best route – for example, in cases where there is a time-sensitive need to recruit someone with particular skills.

In these circumstances, candidates can be appointed 'by exception'. This bypasses the usual recruitment processes, although in most circumstances appointees can only stay in post for a maximum of two years before either being reappointed through a normal recruitment process or leaving the civil service.[23]

During its first few months, the Starmer government made some unforced errors by using exceptions to appoint former Labour Party employees and donors to senior civil service roles. Many of these appointments would have been better suited to being brought in as spads or non-partisan policy advisers (pads).[24]

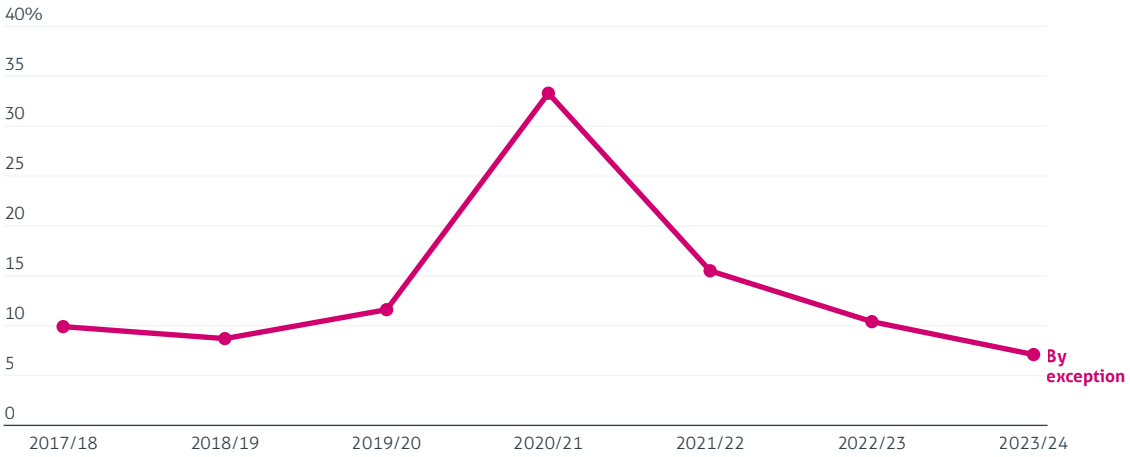
A subsequent investigation by the Civil Service Commission found that in the first couple of months of Labour's term there was actually a reduced number of exceptions granted – the new government was not flooding the civil service with politically aligned appointments.[25] But it also noted the importance of departments carrying out a rigorous evaluation of an appointment's propriety.

The exceptions route should be subject to increased ethical safeguards, with more transparency about applicants' formal political activity. For example, for temporary appointments that need approval from the Civil Service Commission – at director level or above – any history of employment by, or donations to, a political party or explicitly party-aligned organisation should be declared on a candidate's exception form.

This should be scrutinised properly by departments, the Cabinet Office propriety and constitution team and ideally (with the necessary resourcing) the commission itself. Having a political background should not be a bar to an exception being approved, but knowing about it would help decision makers come to a more informed judgment about whether an exceptional appointment is appropriate.

The proportion of appointments made by exception across the whole civil service tends to be fairly low. There was a substantial increase in 2020/21 – when exceptions reached a third of all appointments, largely because of the pressures of the pandemic – but, after falling back to pre-Covid levels in 2022/23, they are now below them. In 2023/24, the most recent year for which data is available, 93% of people were recruited into the civil service through fair and open competition (91,351), and 7% by exception (6,977).[26]

Figure 2.24 **Civil service appointments 'by exception', 2017/18–23/24**



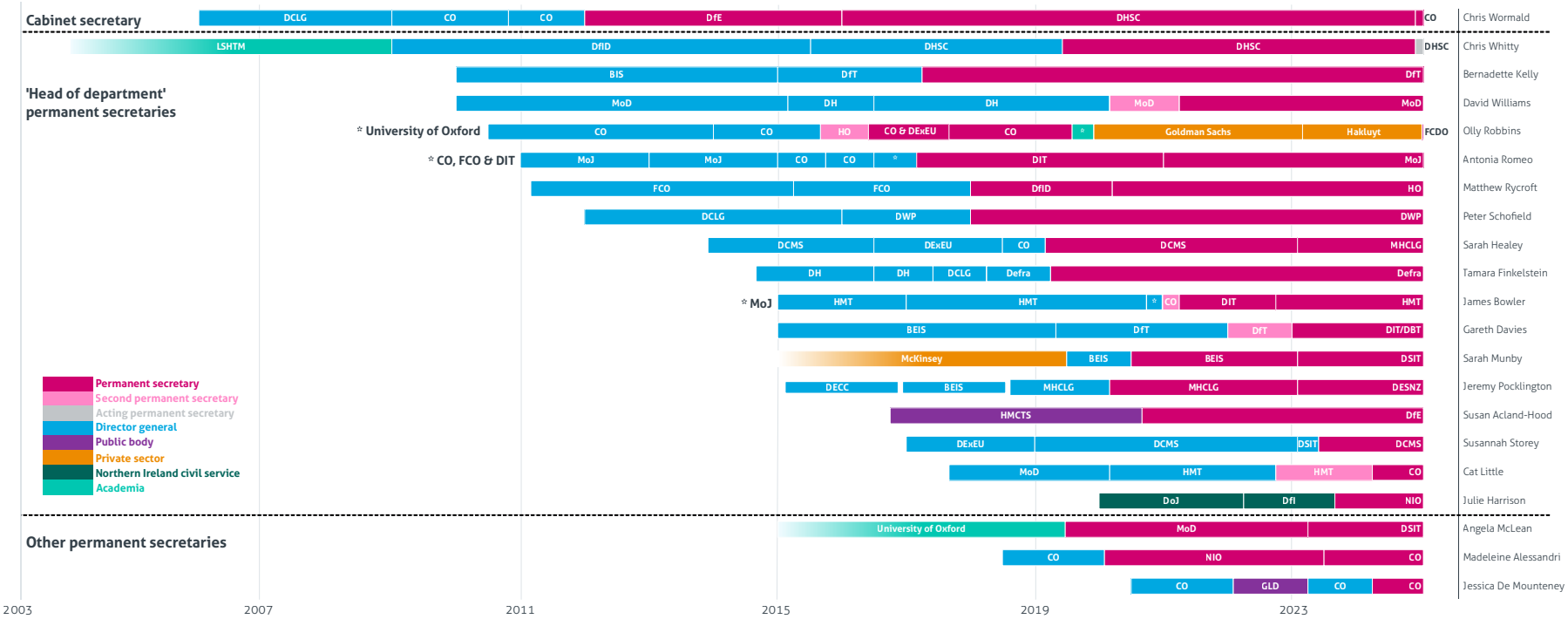
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Civil Service Commission annual reports, 2017/18–2023/24. Notes: Appointment 'by exception' refers to instances when a candidate is recruited into a civil service job through means other than fair and open competition. There are 10 types of exception set out in the Civil Service Commission's recruitment principles – ranging from appointing individuals with highly specialist skills not readily available within the civil service to approving transfers into the civil service from the Northern Ireland civil service.

Senior officials increasingly have more relevant experience

It is particularly important that the best candidates are recruited to the most senior jobs in the civil service. One key factor is whether a candidate has relevant experience. Historically, this was something the civil service tended to overlook, with top jobs – especially at permanent secretary level – going to the person 'next in line'.[27] But in recent years the situation has noticeably improved.[28]

Currently, 10 of the 16 'head of department' permanent secretaries in ministerial departments have had prior experience in their department (or a forerunner) at director general or second permanent secretary level. Some who have not still have relevant experience – Julie Harrison, for example, was appointed Northern Ireland Office permanent secretary after running two departments in the Northern Ireland civil service; Cat Little moved to become Cabinet Office permanent secretary after working closely with her predecessor, Alex Chisholm, on civil service effectiveness while second permanent secretary at the Treasury.

Figure 2.25 **Permanent secretaries' careers from first director general level role, 2003–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG SCS database. Notes: Chart shows the career of current permanent secretaries from their first director general or equivalent role until January 2025. Start date corresponds to day appointment was announced. The bars with gradient shading indicate that the start date of the position is unknown, and the permanent secretary may have held multiple positions within the same institution. Permanent secretaries who are employed by a non-ministerial department or other public body are not included, nor are the Welsh or Scottish government permanent secretaries. In cases where civil service roles are held alongside external roles (e.g. academic fellowships) only the civil service roles are displayed. LSHTM refers to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. At the time of writing, Sir Chris Whitty is acting 'head of department' permanent secretary in DHSC.

Diversity

Today's civil service is more demographically diverse than ever

Promoting diversity and inclusion has been a priority for civil service leadership in recent years. The Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for 2022 to 2025 said that "a truly diverse workforce and culture of openness and inclusivity" act as "a means of delivering better outcomes to the citizens we serve".[29]

As the Institute has argued elsewhere,[30] three main arguments can be made as to why increasing diversity in the civil service is important:

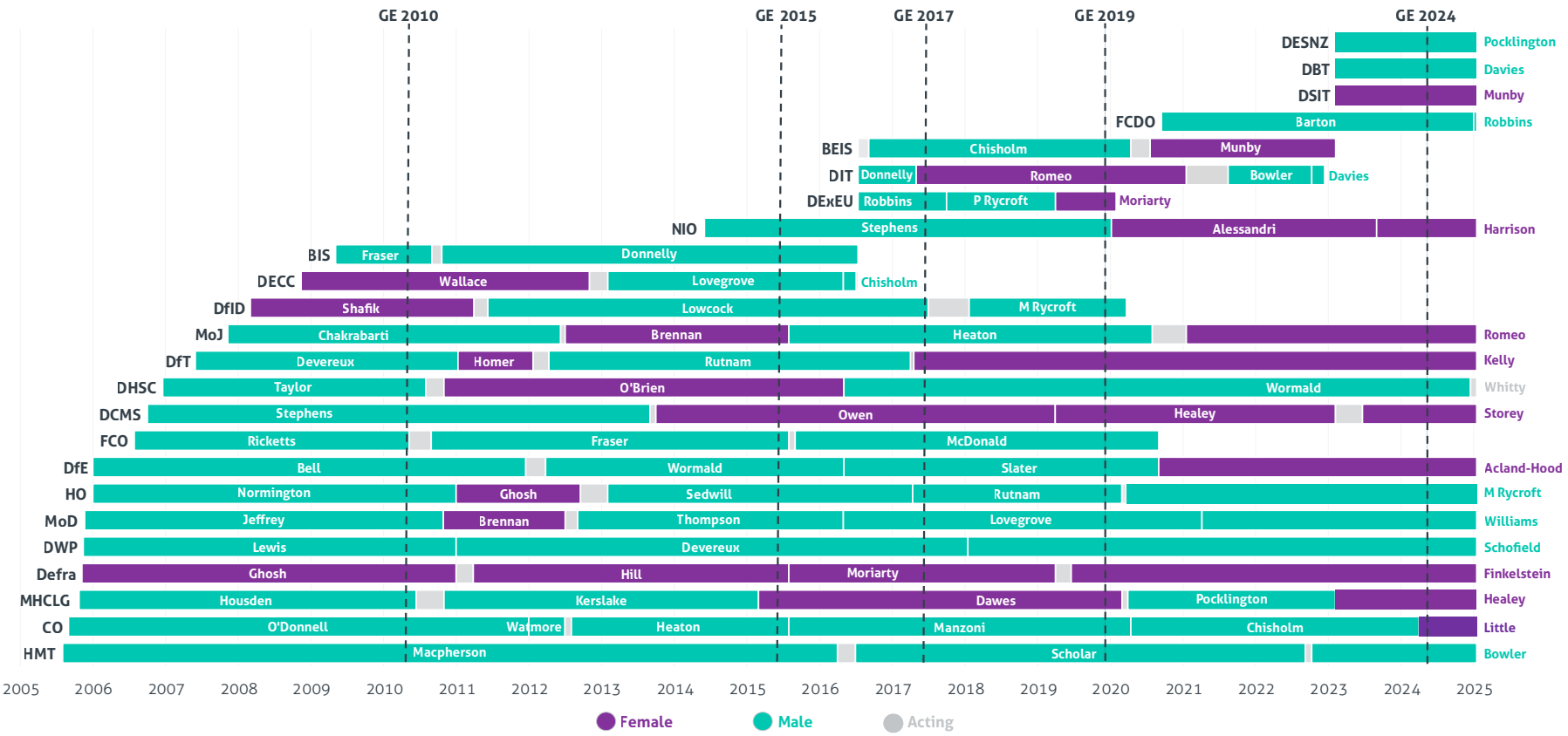
- **Talent and performance.** Failing to reach into different communities to attract, appoint and retain the best people for the job may become a drag on performance.
- **Diversity of ideas.** Attracting people from a variety of backgrounds to the civil service is likely to improve the quality of work by bringing forward new ideas, perspectives and ways of working.
- **Trust and reputation.** A civil service that reflects the society it serves is more likely to be trusted by the public.

Over time, the civil service has become more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability status, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, faith and age, though progress in some areas has been faster than in others.

Figure 2.26 **Female, minority ethnic and disabled staff in the civil service, 2000–24**

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', 2018–24. Notes: For sources of population benchmarks, see Methodology.

Figure 2.27 **Gender of permanent secretaries, 2005–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG SCS database. Notes: Only includes 'head of department' permanent secretaries. Permanent secretaries who are employed by a non-ministerial department or other public body are not included, nor are the Welsh or Scottish government permanent secretaries. NIO timeline starts after head of department was returned to permanent secretary grade in 2014.

The senior civil service is catching up on female representation

Women make up over half of the civil service (54.5% in 2024), as they have every year since 2001. Women's representation in the senior civil service (SCS) has continued to increase, reaching 48.2% in 2024, just below the benchmark for the economically active population (48.8%). At all other grades, the proportion of female employees exceeds the population benchmark.

Women's representation varies by department. Among departmental groups, DWP has the highest overall share of female staff (62.6%), while DHSC has the highest share of female staff in the SCS (56.4%). The MoD ranks lowest on both metrics – only 41.4% of civil servants and 34.9% of senior civil servants are women.

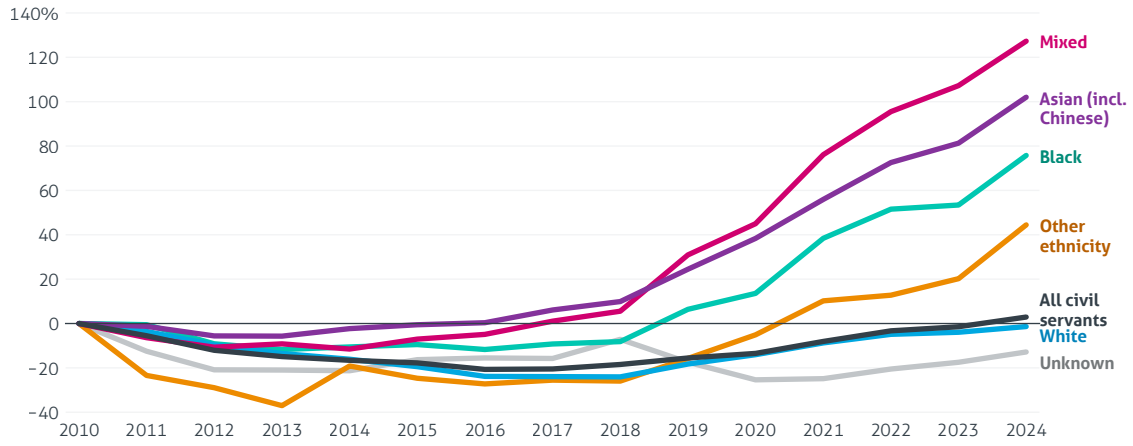
The proportion of permanent secretaries who are women has also steadily risen, though there has not yet been a female cabinet secretary. Of the 16 ministerial departments run by a permanent secretary, half are headed by women.

The civil service has tracked wider society in becoming more ethnically diverse

Ethnic diversity in the civil service has, over time, closely tracked that of the economically active population. The share of minority ethnic civil servants increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 16.6% in 2024, and all minority ethnic groups were better represented, both in absolute terms and proportionally, in the civil service in 2024 than in 2010. The SCS has also more than doubled its proportion of minority ethnic staff from 5% in 2010 to 10.7% in 2024, although it remains below the population benchmark.

Ethnic minority representation also varies by department. In 2024, DESNZ had the highest share of minority ethnic staff, at just over a quarter (25.8%), followed by the Treasury and DHSC (both at 25.4%). The MoD was the least ethnically diverse department (7%).

Figure 2.28 **Change in civil service staff numbers by ethnicity, 2010–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Annual Civil Service Employment Survey', 2010–18 and Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2018–24. Notes: Unknown includes both 'not declared' and 'not reported'. Until 2021, 'Chinese' was listed as a separate ethnic category. To allow comparison over time, the headcount for the 'Asian' ethnic category combines the figures for both the 'Asian' and 'Chinese' categories between 2010–21.

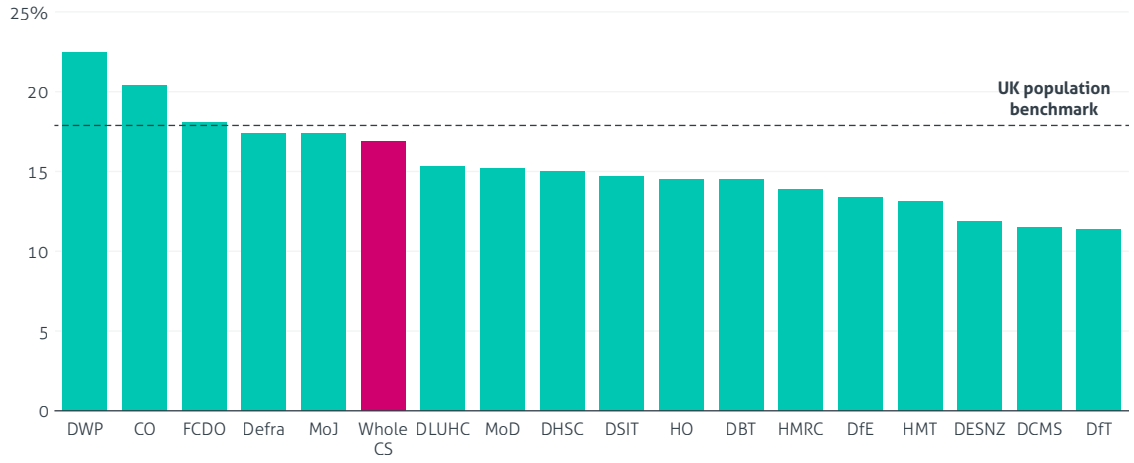
Disabled representation has improved, but remains below the wider population

Since 2010, the share of civil service staff who report a disability has more than doubled, from 7.6% to 16.9% in 2024. This remains slightly below the UK population benchmark, which has also been on an upward trajectory, reaching 18.1% in 2024.

In 2024, only the share of disabled staff at EO level (19.2%) was above the population benchmark. The SCS was furthest below the population benchmark, with 10.8% of staff identifying as disabled.

This also varies by department. In 2024, only two departments – DWP and the Cabinet Office – surpassed the UK population benchmark in terms of disabled representation. The departments with the lowest share of disabled staff were DfT, at 11.4%, and DCMS, at 11.5%.

Figure 2.29 **Disabled staff in the civil service by department, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2024. Notes: Figures refer to departmental groups. Percentages calculated as share of headcount for which disability status is known. For sources of population benchmarks, see Methodology.

LGB+ staff are still better represented in the senior ranks than in the civil service as a whole

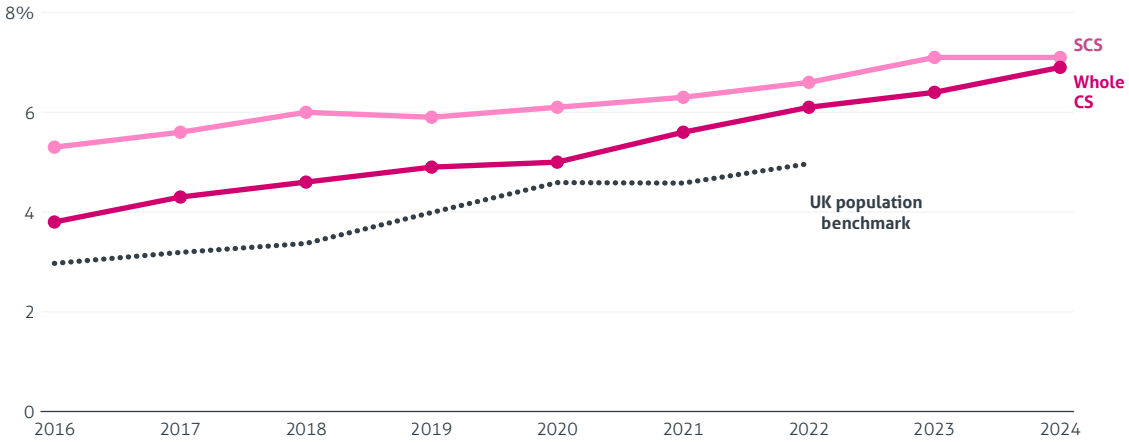
LGB+* representation in the civil service has been on an upward trajectory, climbing from 3.8% of staff identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other in 2016 (the earliest data available) to 6.9% doing so in 2024. In all years for which robust data is available on the share of the total UK population identifying as LGB+, the civil service has been above the population benchmark.

These figures are higher in the SCS, where 7.1% of staff identify as LGB+, up from 5.3% in 2016. Unlike for disabled staff, employees from a minority ethnic background, or female civil servants, LGB+ civil servants make up a higher proportion of the SCS than of the civil service as a whole – although that gap has narrowed over time.

* The Cabinet Office invites civil servants to record their sexual orientation as 'Heterosexual/straight', 'Gay or Lesbian', 'Bisexual' or 'Other'. Our use of the term LGB+ refers to staff who report belonging to one of the last three groups. The term 'LGBT+' is not used because this data refers only to sexual orientation. The civil service records data on gender identity separately.

In 2024, the share of staff identifying as LGB+ was higher in all departments bar the MoD than in the general population (5%, according to the latest available data from the ONS).

Figure 2.30 **LGB+ staff in the civil service, 2016–24**

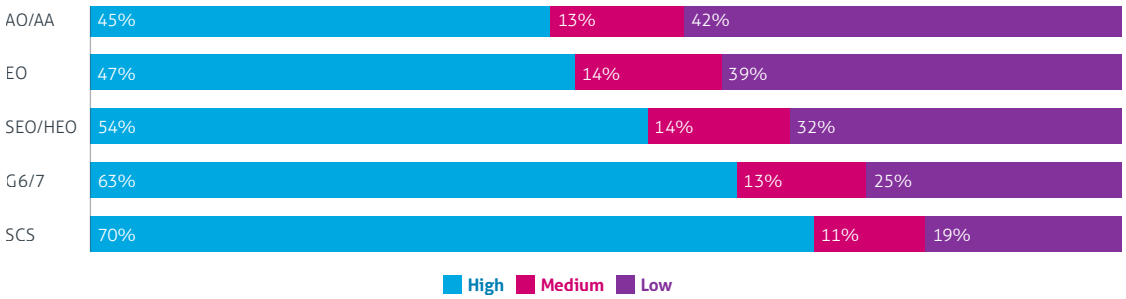


Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Annual Civil Service Employment Survey', 2016–18 and Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2018–24. Notes: SCS = senior civil service. The LGB+ label is used because the Cabinet Office collects data on sexual orientation and gender identity separately. Percentages are calculated as shares of total headcount for which sexual orientation is known. For sources of population benchmarks, see Methodology.

Staff from high socio-economic backgrounds dominate the civil service

Extrapolating from data from the annual Civil Service People Survey, we can infer* that a majority of civil servants come from high socio-economic backgrounds. The figure has remained stable over the last few years, at slightly above 50%. About a third of civil servants are from low socio-economic backgrounds. Those from high socio-economic backgrounds make up a plurality of staff at all civil service grades, but the pattern is starker at more senior grades. Over two thirds of the SCS (70% in 2023) come from a high socio-economic background.

Figure 2.31 **Socio-economic background of civil service staff by grade, 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service People Survey', 2023. Notes: AO/AA = administrative officer/administrative assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior executive officer/higher executive officer; G6/7 = grades 6 & 7; SCS = senior civil service. For details on handling of socio-economic background data, see Methodology.

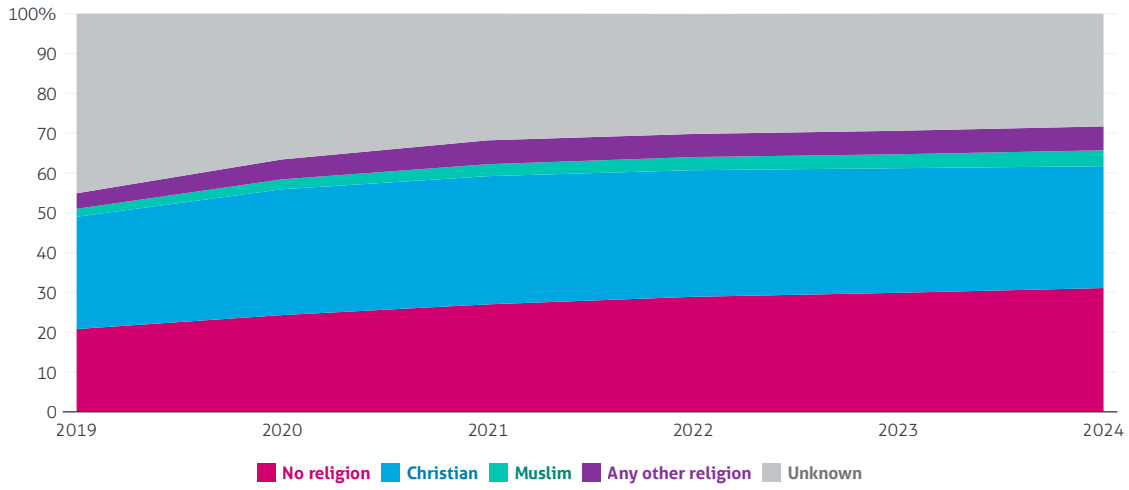
Staff with no religion have become the single largest faith group in the civil service

The breakdown of civil servants by faith, belief or religion has changed over the past few years. The most significant change in absolute terms is the increase in the number

* See Methodology for details of how socio-economic background data is extracted from the people survey.

of civil servants who say they have no religion – from 92,690 in 2019 (20.8% of total staff numbers)* to 168,870 in 2024 (31.1%). In 2024, 'no religion' became the largest single faith category in the civil service, surpassing Christianity for the first time.

Figure 2.32 **Faith of civil servants, 2019–24**



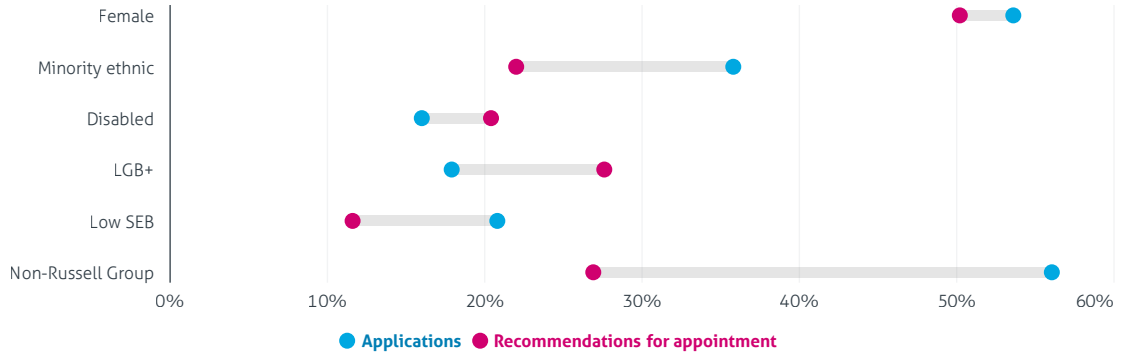
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2019–24. Notes: 'Unknown' includes both 'not declared' and 'not reported'.

Diversity gaps persist in fast stream recruitment

The civil service fast stream is the civil service's flagship graduate programme. As a future talent pipeline, it is particularly important that it identifies the best people from the population regardless of their background.

Data from 2024 shows that the proportion of successful candidates (those recommended for appointment) who are LGB+ or disabled is higher than the proportion of applicants belonging to these groups. The opposite is true for non-Russell Group candidates (the group for which there is the largest disparity), women, ethnic minorities and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 2.33 **Diversity in recruitment to the civil service fast stream, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Fast Stream Recruitment Data', 2024. Notes: All figures are calculated as a share of those for whom each demographic characteristic is known. SEB = socio-economic background. The LGB+ label is used because the Cabinet Office collects data on sexual orientation and gender identity separately.

* The figure is calculated as a share of total staff, including those whose faith is unknown ('not declared' or 'not reported')

The data provides more detail on the success of applicants from different ethnic groups. For example, those who identified as 'White – British' were disproportionately likely to be appointed – the proportion of successful applicants belonging to this ethnic category was 13ppts larger than their share of the total applicant pool. Conversely, the proportion of successful applicants who identified as 'Black or Black British – African' was 8.2ppts lower than the proportion of total applicants who did so, making them the ethnic category with the largest (negative) discrepancy between applications and recommendations for appointment.

Relocation

Between 2019 and 2024, one of the Conservative government's top priorities for civil service reform was to relocate officials outside of London. This was a welcome focus, with Institute research showing that relocation was beneficial in three main ways:

- Attracting different types of people into the civil service
- Allowing different regional voices to influence policy making
- Providing a modest and localised economic boost in the area in which an office has been established.

A report published by the government in October 2024 evaluated how effective the relocation agenda had been and found that "interview respondents [noted] increased cross-department and cross-profession collaboration and increased pride in place".[31] But it also found room for improvement. The proportion of *senior* roles based outside London lagged behind the government's target; people co-ordinating new or nascent regional offices sometimes do so as a corporate responsibility, with some offices not being given sufficient formal resources to establish themselves; and there is a "free riding" dynamic, with some departments relying "on the overperformance of others to meet collective... targets".[32]

The government has continued to make progress in relocating officials across the country

The relocation efforts of recent years have been driven by targets set in 2019. The government committed to moving 22,000 (FTE) officials outside the capital,* including 50% of UK-based senior civil servants – initially by 2030, with the target then brought forward to 2027. The most recent data, for Q1 2024, showed that 21,002 FTE roles had been relocated – meaning that, accounting for the delays in reporting, the government is likely to have already hit the 22,000 target, six years ahead of the original schedule.[33]

Progress on relocating senior roles has been less impressive. On an FTE basis, the latest data (on this occasion, for Q4 2023) shows that 31.4% of senior civil servants are based outside the capital.[34] Using headcount figures,** the equivalent figure is 36%. This highlights the scale of the remaining challenge, particularly as the roles easiest to relocate are likely to have already been moved.

* The methodology behind this calculation is unclear. A 2023 Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report suggested that the target was measured by counting the number of new roles created outside London, rather than the number of previously London-based roles that moved outside the capital. See more at: https://publications. parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmpubadm/793/report.html

** The Institute's view is that headcount (rather than FTE) is a better measure for assessing progress in relocating officials, as relocation requires moving individual staff members, regardless of their working pattern. All figures in this chapter are calculated from headcount data unless otherwise stated.

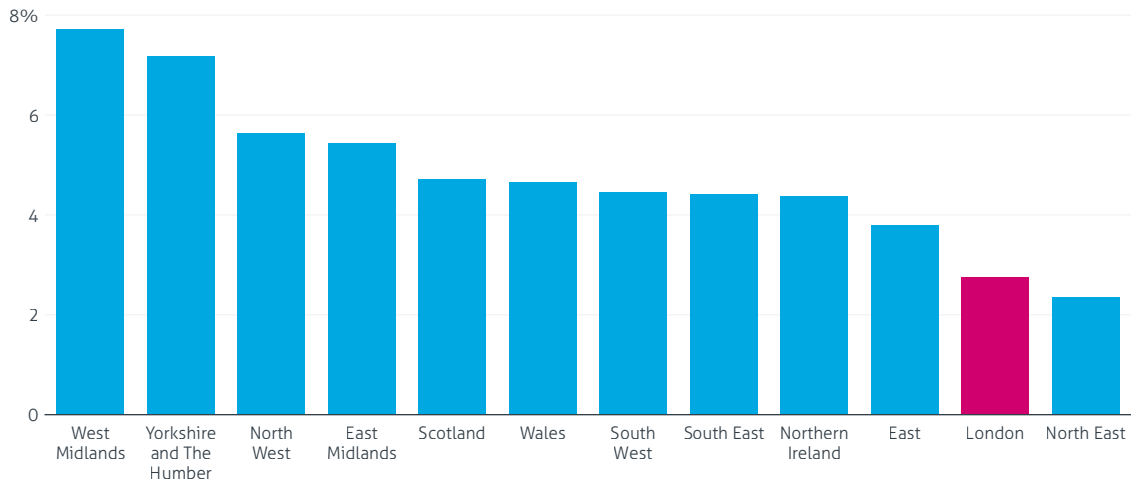
Figure 2.34 **Location of civil servants by grade (percentage of grade in each region), 2024**

Location	Whole civil service	AO/AA	EO	SEO/HEO	Grades 6/7	SCS
London	20%	9%	16%	25%	42%	64%
North West	13%	16%	16%	13%	10%	5%
South West	9%	8%	7%	13%	12%	6%
South East	8%	10%	10%	8%	6%	4%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8%	9%	10%	8%	7%	5%
West Midlands	7%	9%	8%	7%	5%	4%
North East	7%	10%	7%	6%	5%	2%
Wales	6%	9%	8%	7%	5%	5%
Scotland	5%	7%	7%	5%	3%	1%
East Midlands	5%	7%	5%	4%	3%	2%
East	4%	6%	5%	4%	2%	2%
Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Not reported	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2024. Notes: Calculated from headcount figures. UK-based civil servants only. Civil servants working for the Scottish and Welsh governments excluded. AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive office; SEO/HEO = senior executive officer/higher executive officer and SCS = senior civil servant.

The latest data shows that, in 2024, growth in civil servant numbers in almost every region (except for the North East) outstripped that in London. 2024 was the second consecutive year in which the number of officials in all but one region grew by more than in London. In 2023 the number in the capital fell by 1%, but the overall growth of the civil service in 2024 meant that an expansion of 2.8% still resulted in London having the second lowest growth.

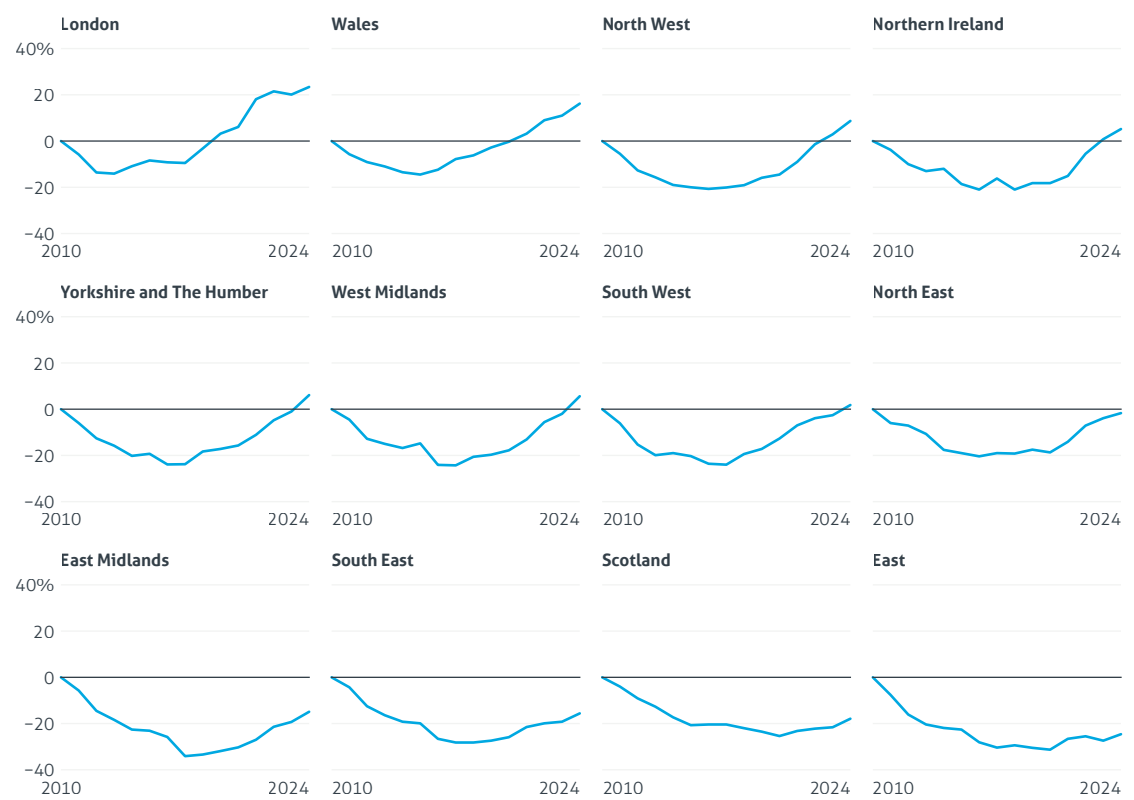
Figure 2.35 **Change in civil servant numbers by region, 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2023–24. Notes: Calculated from headcount figures. Civil servants in the Scottish and Welsh governments excluded.

But progress in relocating civil servants over the last few years must be set in the context of a civil service that became substantially more London-centric between 2010 and 2022. As the civil service contracted between 2010 and 2016, 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.

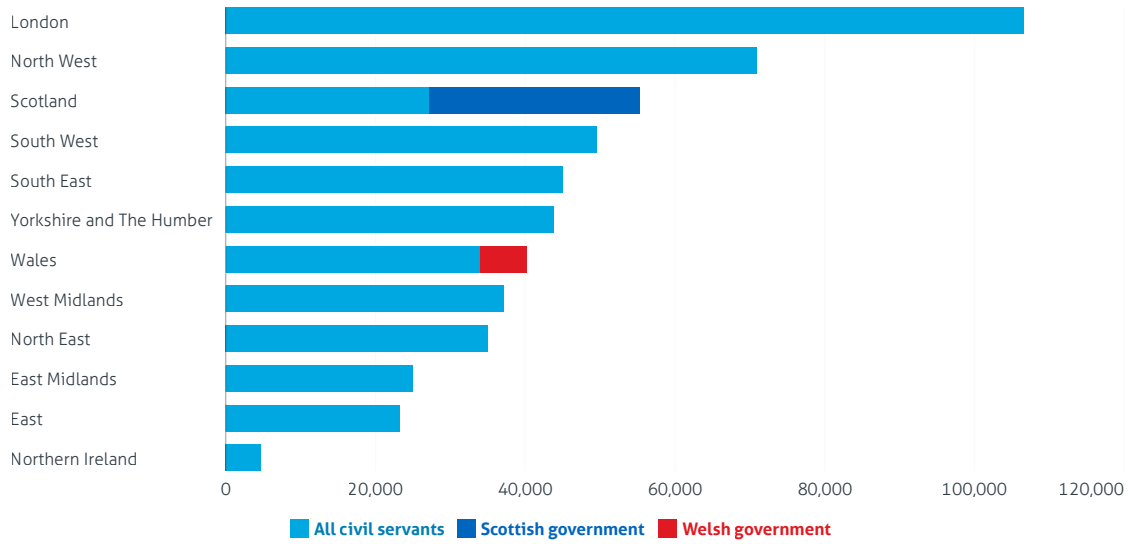
Figure 2.36 **Change in civil servant numbers by region since 2010**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2010–24. Notes: Calculated from headcount figures. Civil servants in the Scottish and Welsh governments excluded.

Overall, this means London remains the region with the highest number of officials, at 106,567. The North West is the second highest, with 70,889. The regions with the fewest civil servants are the East of England, with 23,249 and Northern Ireland, with 4,752.*

Figure 2.37 **Civil servants by region, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2024. Notes: Calculated from headcount figures.

The regional distribution of officials also varies substantially depending on the kind of work they do. The policy profession, for example, remains particularly London-centric. Around 60% of all policy-focused civil servants are based in London – a proportion that has trended downwards since 2021, but is still far higher than elsewhere.

There is therefore still progress to be made in reducing the proportion of policy professionals in the capital. Institute research has previously found that the concentration of policy professionals at the Darlington Economic Campus (DEC) and Sheffield Policy Campus has been important in increasing diversity of thought among officials and introducing regional voices into policy making. Encouraging more regional diversity among policy officials would further benefit the civil service's effectiveness.

The government should learn from where it has been successful so far

As the positive impact of the DEC and the burgeoning influence of the Sheffield campus show, the relocation agenda made meaningful strides over the last parliament. And it can be difficult to shift policy makers outside the capital – some legitimately need to be close to ministers and parliament, while London also has a relatively high proportion of graduates with the skills that policy professionals need.

While the Labour government has not yet set out any detailed policy on relocation, there are signs that ministers may hold similar views to the previous government. In 2022, for example, the Brown Commission on the UK's Future – a report by the former prime minister Gordon Brown, commissioned by Keir Starmer – recommended expanding the target number of officials to be moved outside London to 50,000.[35]

* The Northern Ireland Executive is administered by its own civil service. This number represents all UK civil servants in Northern Ireland, not the total body of civil servants involved in Northern Irish government.

In July 2024, the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, visited the DEC and said: "I know how important it is to have government jobs outside of London and the South East."[36]

As the government considers how to take this agenda forward, it should use the success (so far) of the DEC as a blueprint – something also highlighted in the evaluation report published in October 2024.[37] The Institute has found that the DEC holds key lessons for relocation efforts, including that:[38]

- Ministerial and senior civil service buy-in are essential to success, and for relocated offices to be successful they should host a critical mass of senior roles.

- There are large potential benefits to co-locating departments in a single office outside Whitehall, with the fresh culture and physical proximity of officials helping to break down traditional departmental barriers.

- A 'themed campus', where roles cluster around a single policy area (economics and trade, in the case of the DEC), helps provide staff with development opportunities in a single location, channels their career paths in a way that encourages the development of subject-specific knowledge, and facilitates cross-departmental work because people's roles are more relevant to each other.

- The labour market in the relevant location must meet the civil service's needs, and Darlington helps demonstrate that this can be the case in well-connected towns.

Our recent analysis of the Sheffield Policy Campus echoed how important these factors are.[39] The campus has made the most of its natural advantages – as a long-established civil service centre with a large, suitable labour market and two local universities. But while the campus can point to some clear success stories in which it improved cross-government working, these are isolated cases. The campus would benefit from stronger senior sponsorship, more internal capacity to deliver on its strategic objectives, and – ideally – physical co-location to embed a more consistent culture of cross-departmental working.

Professions and functions

The vast majority of civil servants belong to one of the government 'professions'.* These are groupings of officials with particular skills or knowledge, and serve as a means for developing their skills and defining their career pathways.** While an official's profession does not always loom large in their day-to-day work (civil servants will usually identify far more closely with their immediate team or directorate), they are a useful way of understanding the shape of the civil service in broad terms.

The civil service classifies the professions into four groups: 'operational delivery', 'policy', 'functional professions' (those aligned to, or grouped with, a government 'function', discussed below), and 'specialist professions'. To better understand the nature of the professions, we classify them as follows:

- Operational delivery
- Cross-departmental professions
- Departmental professions.

Officials in the operational delivery profession tend to carry out a very different type of work from the typical image of a 'Whitehall' civil servant – these are 'front-line' roles that include prison officers and Jobcentre staff. We consider a profession 'cross-departmental' if the type of work is necessary in many or all departments (such as policy or digital and data), while 'departmental' professions are those that are mostly concentrated in a single department.***

Most civil servants are in front-line roles

Over half of all civil servants are in the operational delivery profession, concentrated in a few large departments. They represent most of the staff in the MoJ, DWP and Home Office (88%, 78% and 77% respectively),**** largely due to the number of prison staff, Jobcentre staff and immigration caseworkers employed by each respectively. Together, just these three departments make up 68% of all operational delivery officials.

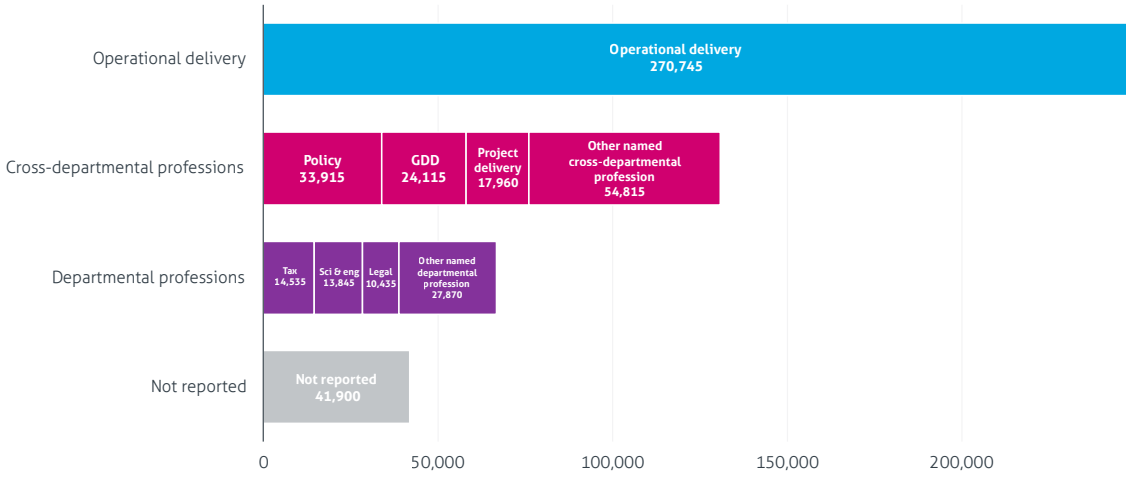
* Some officials may belong to more than one profession.

** It should be noted that a civil servant's profession relates to their role, rather than any qualifications they may have.

*** See Methodology for more detail on how we classify professions, and for a full list of professions.

****These figures represent operational delivery as a proportion of officials whose professions were reported in these departments.

Figure 2.38 **Civil servants by profession, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2024. Notes: GDD = Government Digital and Data. All figures are FTE.

The policy profession is the largest in our 'cross-departmental' grouping and is distributed in similar proportions across all Whitehall departments. There are, however, notably high proportions of the profession in Defra, DESNZ and the FCDO – more than 10% of the profession in each case – particularly given that DESNZ and the FCDO are some of the smallest departments in Whitehall.

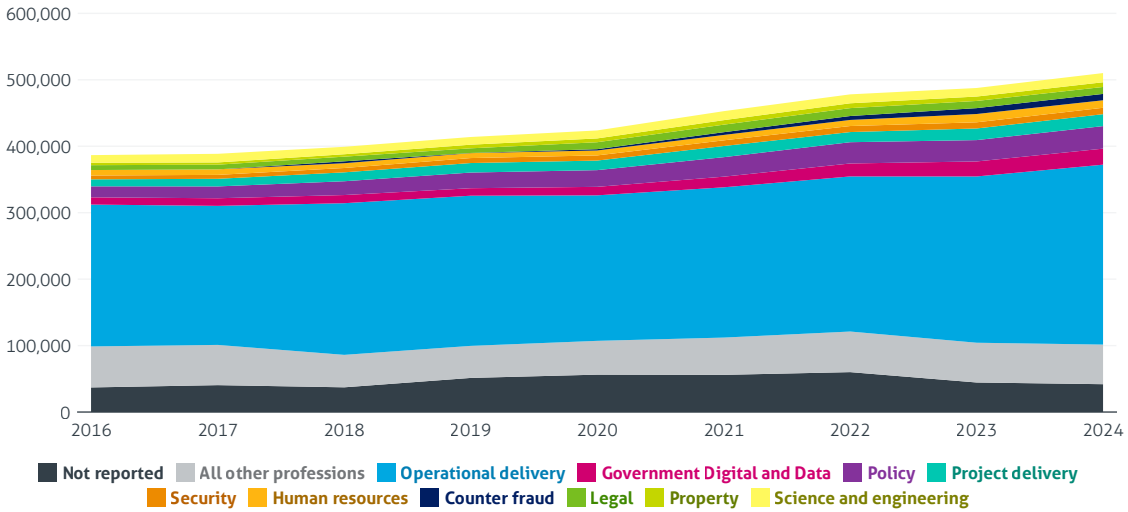
The departmental professions are, by their nature, smaller. These are specialisms generally required only in a small number of departments, or in just one. The most concentrated departmental professions are tax, geography, and inspectors of education and training, which have almost 100%, 97% and 93% of their members in HMRC, the MoD and DfE respectively. By contrast, the legal, internal audit and counter fraud professions are the least concentrated. While most of their members are still to be found in single departments (the Attorney General's Office, HMT and DWP), the rest of their members are spread across several departments.

The expansion of policy and digital and data roles – as well as front-line workers – has boosted civil service numbers since 2016

The growth of the professions sheds more light on how and why the civil service has grown in recent years. Since 2016, the operational delivery profession has added more than 57,000 members – accounting for 46% of the total growth in the civil service. The policy and Government Digital and Data (GDD) professions have seen the second and third highest growth in absolute terms since 2016, adding more than 17,000 and 13,000 officials each.

This looks slightly different on a proportional basis – the growth in the operational delivery profession since 2016 represents an expansion of 27%, for example, while the policy profession has more than doubled in size and the GDD profession has grown by 122%.

Figure 2.39 **Civil servants by profession, 2016–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2016–24. Notes: The professions shown are the 10 that expanded the most, in absolute terms, between 2016 and 2024. The 'Not reported' category includes those reported as 'Other'. Professions data has historically been affected by non-reporting, meaning that trend analysis will not be entirely accurate. See text for more details. All figures are FTE.

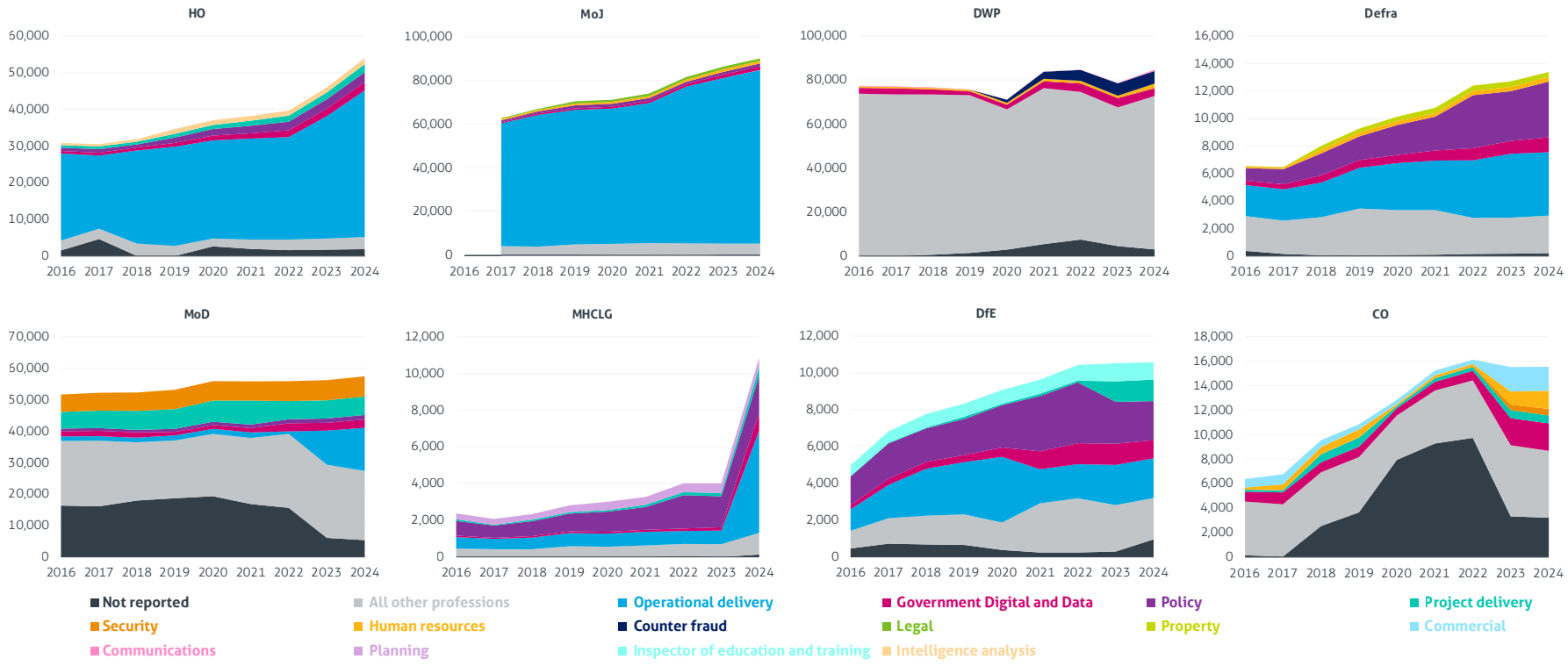
A more detailed story can be seen by analysing trends in individual departments. The departments that grew the most in absolute terms between Q2 2016 and Q1 2024* were the Home Office, MoJ, DWP, Defra, MoD, MHCLG, DfE and the Cabinet Office. Looking at the professions data for these departments over this period shows how they expanded their workforces.

In half of these departments (HO, MoJ, MoD and MHCLG), operational delivery expanded more than any other profession. While more granular staffing data (and therefore the precise reasons for the expansions) are not available, in the Home Office and MoJ at least this would appear to indicate a response to well-documented pressures on front-line services, from prisons to immigration services.[40] In the case of MHCLG, the expansion in the operational delivery profession reflects the move of HM Land Registry into the departmental group in 2023. And as discussed below, in the case of the MoD, the expansion is likely to be an artefact of poor data availability.

The policy profession also expanded markedly, particularly in Defra (in large part to assist the post-Brexit functions now administered by the department), MHCLG and the Home Office. In the latter case, this could also reflect the UK government beginning to administer functions previously carried out by the EU, as well as the focus on immigration and asylum policy in recent years. The growth of the policy profession in MHCLG, meanwhile, appears to be explained by the move of teams responsible for the union and devolution from the Cabinet Office to MHCLG. The date of this move coincides with the addition of 580 policy staff between 2021 and 2022.

* While data on civil service staff numbers is available up to Q3 2024, we have chosen this date range for this analysis because data on the civil service professions is only available for Q1 in each year.

Figure 2.40 **Civil servants by profession, selected departments and professions, 2016–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2016–24. Notes: Scales differ for each department. For each department, the named professions shown are the five that expanded the most, in absolute terms, between 2016 and 2024. MoJ data is shown from 2017 because the professions of most of its staff were not reported in 2016. 'Planning' includes the 'Planning inspectors' profession. The 'Not reported' category includes those reported as 'Other'. See Methodology for how departments and professions were selected. Professions data has historically been affected by non-reporting, meaning that trend analysis will not be entirely accurate. See text for more details. All figures are FTE.

The GDD profession has also contributed significantly to the growth of these departments since 2016, most notably the Cabinet Office, MoJ and MoD. Some trends, meanwhile, are specific to a single department. The counter fraud profession, for example, was established in 2018 and now represents 7% of DWP, the second largest department in Whitehall, with almost 5,700 counter fraud staff in the department.

When analysing these figures it should be borne in mind that the data relies on officials self-reporting their professions in an annual survey. Historically, many have not reported their profession, and the impact of non-reporting can be seen in the data. The increase in the size of the operational delivery profession in the MoD between 2022 and 2023, for example, is likely to be explained by the concurrent fall in the 'Not reported' category. The same is true of the expansion of several professions in the Cabinet Office in the same period.*

An increasing proportion of officials are members of a function, with particular growth in digital and data

While the professions describe groups of officials with particular skills or knowledge, the civil service 'functions' are groupings designed to carry out more specialist work in a consistent manner across Whitehall and in arm's-length bodies.[41] Staff in the commercial function will, for instance, carry out procurement activity in the departments in which they are embedded.

Just over 150,000 civil servants (FTE) reported being part of one of the 14 functions in 2024, an increase of 20% since the figures were first reported in 2021. In that time, the GDD function – to which the GDD profession is aligned – has shown the most notable growth, of 105%. As a result of this growth, the GDD function has been the largest for the last two years, before which the project delivery function was the largest. The GDD function now has 27,000 staff, with its biggest presence (14% of the function) in HMRC. At the other end of the spectrum, internal audit is the smallest function, with 600 staff, more than 50% of which are based in the Treasury.

These trends in the professions and functions – particularly the rising numbers of officials working in operational delivery, policy and GDD – demonstrate the changing needs of the civil service in recent years. Projecting the future path of these trends will be an essential element of more robust workforce planning (discussed below). At the same time, strengthening both the professions and functions – helping officials identify more closely with them, and improving the support they provide around training and career development – will help to create a more agile civil service workforce.

* It should also be noted that in some cases the growth of a profession in a department may be accounted for by a machinery of government change. In these cases, growth in one department will be offset by a corresponding decline in another.

Consultancy and temporary staff spend

Efforts to reduce consultancy and temporary staff spend were derailed by Brexit and the pandemic

The public sector often makes use of both external consultancies and temporary labour, either when capabilities are required that are not available in-house, or to assist in periods of high demand.

Central government is no exception. External consultancies, for example, can bring expertise that the civil service does not or cannot be expected to have in-house – and even help build internal capacity. There are risks, though, and it is important for departments and public bodies to deploy consultancy services strategically and manage contracts effectively from procurement to post-contract evaluation.[42] Resorting too often to consultants – especially if contracts are poorly managed – has the potential to fuel a vicious cycle that undermines efforts to build internal capabilities within the civil service.[43] There are also legitimate uses for contingent labour, especially during emergencies such as the pandemic – but, as we have previously argued,[44] temporary staff should not be used to continuously plug gaps generated by poor workforce planning.

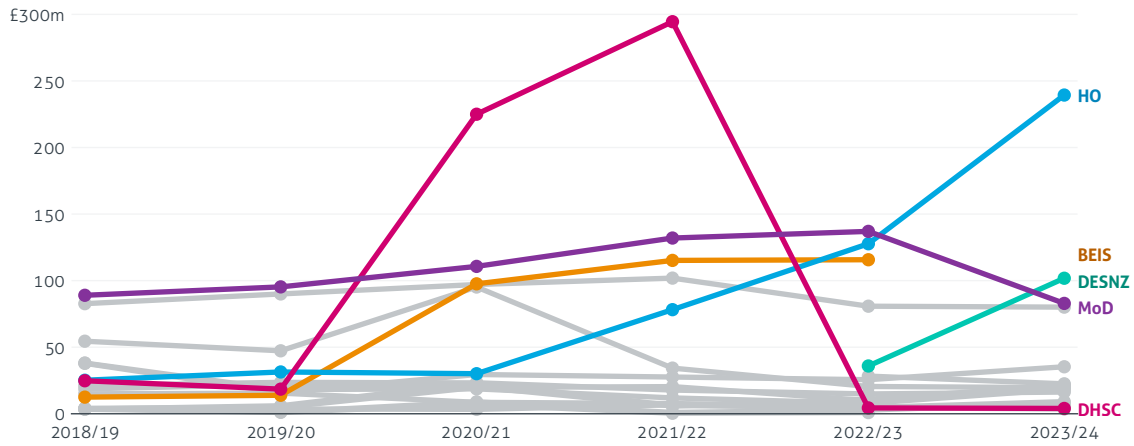
Government use of consultants has varied significantly over time. The coalition government strengthened governance processes around the approval of consultancy spend,[45] and the National Audit Office (NAO) estimated that between 2009/10 and 2014/15 spending on both consultants and temporary staff in the main 17 departments reduced from around £2.7bn to between £1.0 and £1.3bn.[46]

Consultancy spend started rising again after the EU referendum. Between 2015/16 and 2017/18, expenditure on consultancy services is estimated to have increased threefold, though the exact figures remain disputed.[47] Between April 2018 and April 2019, the NAO found that at least £97 million had been spent by departments on Brexit-related consultancy alone.[48] Many of the services provided to central government in this period related to what could be considered to be gaps in civil service capabilities (such as in project and programme management).[49]

Spending on both consultancy and temporary labour also increased during the pandemic. Data from departmental annual reports and accounts suggests that central government consultancy spend peaked in 2021/22, at about £1.6bn (2024/25 prices),* with contingent labour spend reaching close to £8.5bn. Most famously, in 2021, Test and Trace was reported to have paid £1m a day to Deloitte consultants.[50]

* This figure covers the vast majority, though not the entirety of, central government consultancy spend. It covers 16 departmental groups but excludes a series of smaller organisations, most notably the Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland Offices. For more details, see Methodology.

Figure 2.41 **Government consultancy spend by core department, 2018/19–2023/24 (2024/25 prices)**

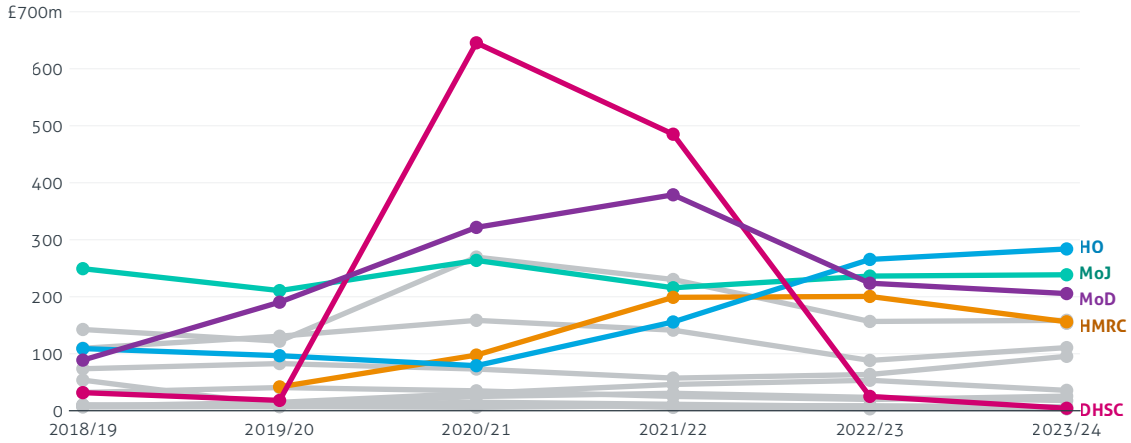


Source: Institute for Government analysis of departments' annual reports and accounts, 2018/19–2023/24. Notes: Figures relate to core departments only, with the exception of HMT, MoJ and the Cabinet Office, where figures are for core department and agency spending. Figures for FCDO before the department's creation in 2020 are the sum of DfID and FCO figures. CO, DHSC, Defra and DBT had not published their 2023/24 annual report and accounts at the time of writing.

Since the pandemic, some steps have been taken to improve how government handles consultancy services. In 2021, the Cabinet Office published the first version of *The Consultancy Playbook* and established the short-lived Government Consulting Hub.[51] Anecdotal evidence suggests that improved internal governance processes around commissioning consultancy services have led to civil servants thinking more strategically about when – and for what purposes – external consultants might be needed.

The consultancy and professional services spend control introduced by the coalition was discontinued in 2023;[52] but a contingent labour spend control was introduced in 2022 and remains in force.[53] In November 2024, the Cabinet Office announced the introduction of a new consultancy spend control across government – further discussed below.[54]

Figure 2.42 **Government temporary staff spend by core department, 2018/19–2023/24 (2024/25 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of departments' annual reports and accounts, 2018/19–2023/24. 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. DBT had not published its 2023/24 annual report and accounts at the time of writing.

Consultancy and temporary labour spend in core departments is still higher than before the pandemic

In 2023/24, consultancy spend stood at £668m* in the 15 core departments for which data was available at the time of writing.** This was higher than the £638m figure for 2022/23, and substantially exceeds pre-pandemic figures (for instance the £409m spent in 2019/20).*** A similar trend can be observed in relation to temporary staff spend – which reached £1.5bn in 2023/24 (for 16 core departments), more than in 2022/23 (£1.4bn) and far above pre-pandemic levels (£991m in 2019/20).

Despite this, the most recent data shows that some departments have made substantial reductions to their consultancy and temporary staff spend. Most notably, after a striking pandemic-induced real-terms increase of 1,114% in consultancy spend and 3,467% in temporary staff spend in the core department between 2019/20 and 2020/21, DHSC seems to have reached levels of expenditure that are lower than before the pandemic in both areas (£4.0m and £4.3m respectively in 2023/24). Most of this drop is attributable to administrative changes (with, for instance, the Test and Trace programme transferring to UKHSA in 2021).[55]

Other core departments have also seen downward trajectories in real terms consultancy spend – including the MoD (from £137m in 2022/23 to £83m in 2023/24) – and contingent labour spend – such as HMRC (from £201m in 2022/23 to £156m in 2023/24). But this is not the case for all departments. Consultancy spend increased markedly in DESNZ, for example, from £36m in 2022/23 to £102m in 2023/24.

* All figures in this section are expressed in 2024/25 prices.

** These departments are the Cabinet Office, DCMS, Defra, DESNZ, DfE, DfT, DHSC, DSIT, DWP, FCDO, HMRC, HMT, HO, MHCLG, MoD and MoJ. DBT had not published its annual report and accounts at the time of writing. DCMS did not provide figures for consultancy spend in the core department in 2023/24.

*** Because of machinery of government changes, as well as irregularities in reporting by departments, there are minor differences in what these figures for total consultancy and temporary staff spend cover in different years, for both "core" departments and departmental groups.

The Cabinet Office saw the steepest real-terms increase in temporary labour spend of all departments between 2022/23 and 2023/24, from £64m to £95m (an increase of 50%). The department said that the rise was "due to recruitment constraints on filling permanent vacancies".[56] Both consultancy and temporary labour spend increased in the Home Office – primarily driven, according to the department's report and accounts,[57] by the need for support in dealing with illegal immigration (principally via small boats and including work on the previous government's Rwanda scheme) and as part of its efforts to reduce violence against women. Consultancy spend increased from £128m in 2022/23 to £239m in 2023/24, and temporary labour spend increased from £265m to £284m. In both cases, the Home Office's spending in 2023/24 was the highest of the departments for which data is available.

It is also possible to look at departmental groups in their entirety, including not just core departments in Whitehall but also arm's length bodies like NHS England. Overall consultancy spend has increased in real terms between 2022/23 and 2023/24 in eight of the 16 departmental groups for which we have collected data. Temporary staff spend has increased in six of these departmental groups.

Plans to further reduce consultancy spend are welcome, but more transparency is needed

Last year, the new Labour government signalled its intention to further reduce consultancy spend, following commitments made in opposition. In July, the Treasury said the government would take "immediate action to stop all non-essential government consultancy spend in 2024-25 and halve government spending on consultancy in future years".[58] In 2024/25 alone, this was projected to lead to savings of £550m.

The government has not made explicit how it is measuring consultancy spend, which makes it much more difficult to assess how feasible its goals are. The latest data available from annual departmental reports and accounts suggests that total consultancy spend (encompassing departmental groups rather than just core departments) reached over £1.5bn in 2022/23 (2024/25 prices). The other major source of data on consultancy is invoices for these services published by departments. But the NAO has noted that consultancy spend estimates from the Cabinet Office (based on invoice-level spend) differ substantially from those in departments' own accounts.[59] Depending on which source is used and how consultancy services (as opposed to professional services, for example) are defined, the government's £550m savings target could account for anywhere between 5% and 40% of total consultancy spend.*

As discussed in previous Institute research,[60] one of the easiest ways for government to reduce spending on consultancy is to not re-tender when contracts come to an end. Indeed according to data from Tussell – a provider of government procurement data – management consultancy contracts worth about £5.4bn are coming to an end between 2025 and 2028.[61] But it is unclear what proportion of these contracts would be classified by the Cabinet Office or individual departments as 'consultancy spend'.

* For more details on definitional and methodological issues in calculating consultancy spend, see Methodology.

In November, the Cabinet Office announced the introduction of new consultancy spend controls to help "save £1.2 billion by 2026, as set out in the Autumn Statement".[62] The new controls require a permanent secretary's approval for contracts lasting over three months or worth over £100,000, and ministerial approval for contracts lasting over nine months or worth over £600,000. This is less stringent than the previous spend control.*

The consultancy spend control was accompanied by the announcement of a new framework agreement managed by the Crown Commercial Service (Management Consultancy Framework Four), preparations for which started under the Sunak government.[63] This follows a succession of frameworks that aimed to streamline the procurement of consultancy services by providing public sector organisations with a centralised list of approved suppliers offering cost-effective services. The government also announced that the value of the framework had been reduced from the planned £5.7bn over four years to £1.7bn over two years.[64]

Taken together, these measures may incentivise civil servants to think more strategically about commissioning consultancy services – though ideally without making the process too cumbersome in cases where external expertise is genuinely needed. In the past, consultancy spend controls have also allowed the Cabinet Office to collect data on how much departments spend on consultants, improving transparency and accountability. The government should ensure that the new spend control does the same.

* The previous consultancy and professional services spend control required ministerial approval for contracts of over £120,000 or lasting for more than three months and Cabinet Office approval for contracts of over £600,000 or nine months in duration.

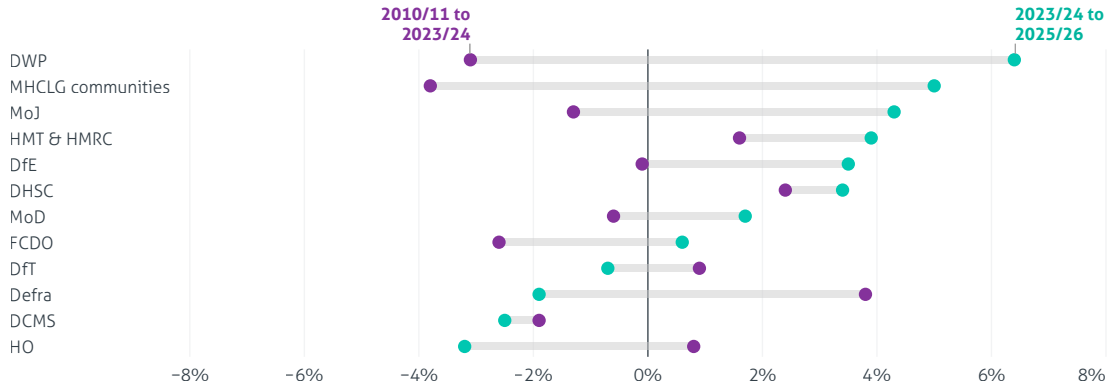
Departmental spending

The change in government has led to significant alterations in departments' spending plans over the next couple of years. And these changes have come alongside a major political row, as the new government accused its predecessor of hiding £22bn of spending demands (a view partially supported by an investigation by the Office for Budget Responsibility).[65,66]

The new government's spending plans relieve some pressure after higher-than-expected inflation

One of the key measures of the autumn budget was a large increase in day-to-day spending both this year (2024/25) and next. Relative to pre-election plans, the government increased day-to-day spending by around £20bn in 2024/25 and £40bn in 2025/26.[67] Rachel Reeves' cash injection was enough to ensure that almost all departments will see real-terms increases this year, and for many the increases will be large. If the money is spent effectively, this should provide an opportunity for some public services to start to fix some of their most pressing problems. It represents the most generous spending round since 2002.

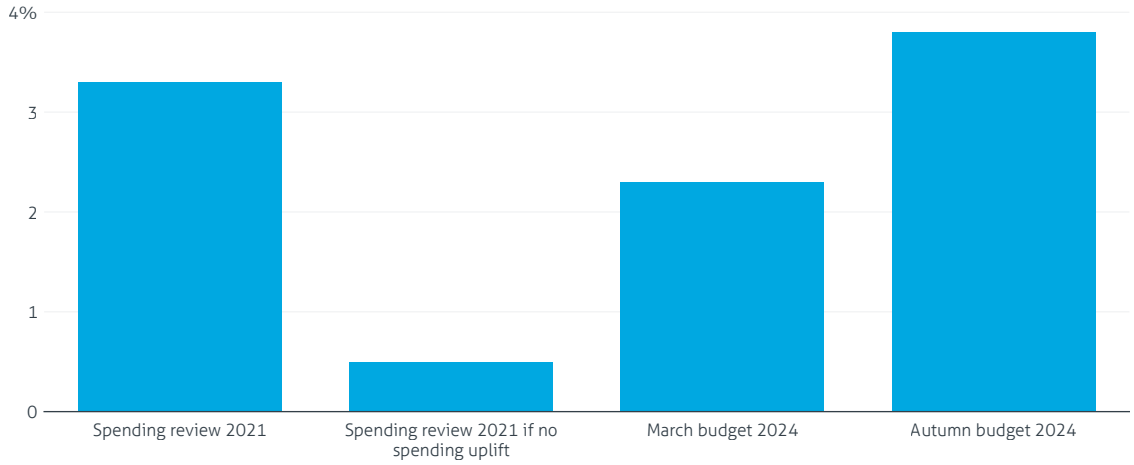
Figure 2.43 **Average annual real-terms change in day-to-day spending by department, 2010/11–2023/24 and 2023/24–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, 'Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses', 2015–24, and HM Treasury, *Autumn Budget 2024* ('Table 1.9: Resource departmental expenditure limits (DEL) excluding depreciation').
Notes: Includes departments with budgets over £1bn in 2024/25 and where the department has existed consistently since 2010. Day-to-day spending refers to RDEL. 'MHCLG communities' is the communities budget in MHCLG, which excludes local government grants.

But compared to what was initially planned at the last spending review in 2021, spending this year is only slightly more generous. The previous government did top up plans in 2022/23 and 2023/24 to partly compensate departments for higher inflation, and in particular the higher cost of pay awards. It did so again for 2024/25, although top-ups this year were much smaller than last. By the time of the general election, plans implied spending would have increased by 2.3% a year on average between 2021/22 and 2024/25, compared with 3.3% initially set out at the 2021 spending review. Reeves' cash injection means spending will increase slightly faster than originally planned in the 2021 spending review, but only by around £7bn (a 3.8% average annual increase).

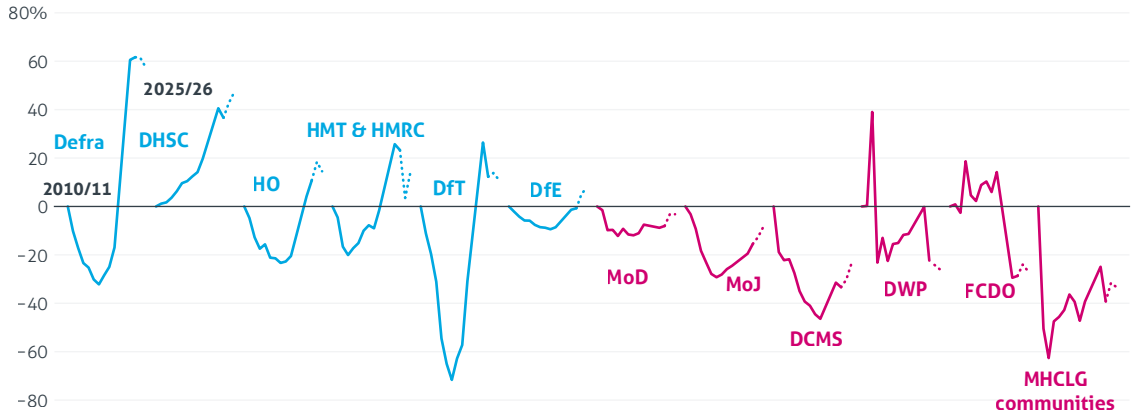
Figure 2.44 **Average real-terms annual increase in day-to-day departmental spending, 2021/22–2024/25, at different fiscal events**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, *Spending Review 2021*, *March Budget 2024* and *Autumn Budget 2024*, and HM Treasury, 'Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses', 2021–24. Notes: Day-to-day spending refers to RDEL. Excludes temporary coronavirus-related spending in the 2021/22 baseline. 'Spending review 2021 if no spending uplift' shows the average annual real increase if spending review 2021 plans had not been topped up in cash terms.

The 2021 spending review also came after a period of big cuts in the 2010s. So even after the large increases that Reeves announced, several departments will still have budgets in 2025/26 lower than in 2010/11 in real terms. Even this understates the scale of the 15-year squeeze: the population is expected to be 10.5% larger in 2025/26 than in 2010/11,[68] and demand has increased substantially for most public services.[69]

Figure 2.45 **Real-terms change in day-to-day spending by department, 2010/11–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, 'Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses', 2016–24 and *Autumn Budget 2024*. Notes: Day-to-day spending refers to RDEL. The chart interpolates spending in 2020/21 and 2021/22 based on spending in the years either side, as spending in those years was higher due to the pandemic. Only includes departments with a budget of over £1bn in 2024/25 and departments that have been in place since 2010. 'MHCLG communities' is the communities budget in MHCLG, which excludes local government grants. Dotted lines indicate forecast spending.

This poses significant challenges for the next multi-year spending review, which is due to report in June 2025. The total envelope for that review has already been set, and spending is only expected to increase relatively slowly beyond 2025/26, so if those plans are not topped up, the government will need to spend money more effectively to achieve the changes it seeks.

As discussed in the mission-led government chapter of this report, the spending review is also a critical opportunity for the government to set itself up to deliver its five missions by ensuring its spending matches its priorities. Previous spending review processes have not always been well set up to deliver on cross-cutting policy priorities, so the government will need to do things differently, including through setting clear objectives, improving how it uses evidence and negotiating multilaterally across departments.[70]

In recent years, departments have required larger in-year top-ups to their budgets

The use of spending reviews to set departmental budgets is only effective if spending does in fact remain within those limits. And in July last year, the government's accusations about a 'fiscal black hole' that the previous government had left brought this issue to the fore.

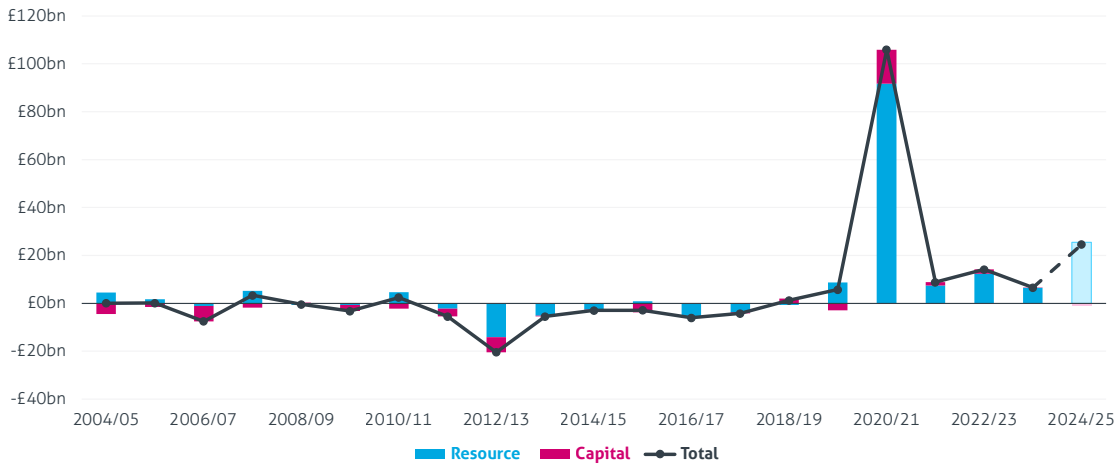
There was some merit to this accusation: at least some of the additional spending identified was inevitable and should have been reflected in budgets already, in particular additional asylum spending. Other elements of the 'black hole' reflected choices that the new government made, but which any government would probably have also had to make. The single largest element of the £22bn total was public sector pay, where the new government accepted pay review body recommendations. Failing to do so would almost certainly have meant more strikes and disruption to public services. As the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) acknowledged in its report on information sharing at the time of the March 2024 budget,[71] it is possible that the previous government would have found savings in other departments to offset these pressures. But the pressures identified were genuine, and it would have been very difficult for any government to stick to the overall budget without making difficult cuts in other areas.

Departmental spending limits are set by parliament, through the parliamentary estimates process. And it is vanishingly rare that departments overspend the limits voted for them in this way. But that does not mean all departments stick to the limits set out at the start of the year. As set out above, plans can be topped up – as the government also did for the current financial year. This occurs through supplementary estimates, which departments publish in February (as well as the main estimates in May), before the financial year ends in April. This presents a more accurate picture of their spending.*

Historically, the Treasury has been effective at resisting calls for top-ups and keeping spending within the overall budgets voted by parliament. Plans always allow for a central 'reserve', usually around 1–2% of total spending, which the Treasury can allocate to departments to deal with one-off spending items, and underspends in other departments can be reallocated. But between 2004/05 and 2017/18, on only four occasions did total departmental spending end up higher than initial plans.

* This is also the process by which departmental spending will be updated to account for the increases announced at the October 2024 budget.

Figure 2.46 **Change in departmental spending between start of year and final outturn, 2004/05–2024/25 (2024/25 prices)**



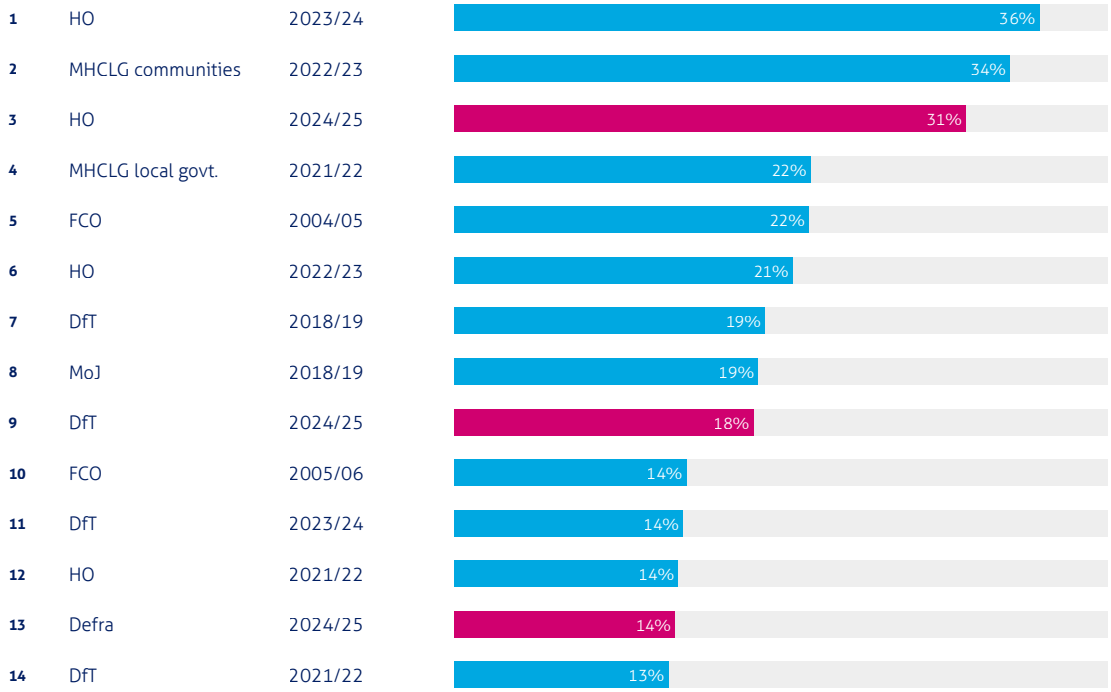
Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, 'Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses', 2005–24. Note: 2024/25 is a forecast based on *Autumn Budget 2024*.

That pattern has shifted in recent years. In every year since 2018/19, spending has ended up higher than originally planned at the start of the year. This partly reflects the crises that have buffeted the UK during this period: spending in 2020/21 was understandably much higher than planned due to the ongoing effects of the Covid pandemic, and spending in 2022/23 and 2023/24 in part reflected the need to address the increase in energy prices and additional spending on the war in Ukraine. The exceptional nature of the past few years is also evident when looking at the top-ups that individual departments have received. Of the 14 largest increases in an individual department's spending relative to its initial budget since 2004/05 (excluding pandemic-related increases), 12 have occurred since 2018/19. The only exceptions are the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's spending increases in the mid-2000s.

These instances also demonstrate that merely setting tight budgets does not guarantee savings. The 2015 spending review, which ran until 2019/20, proved undeliverable and plans were topped up – for example, to provide the NHS with additional funding during the winter. As outlined above, the 2021 spending review has also been regularly topped up as costs have increased more quickly than expected. Based on the October 2024 budget plans, the latest top-up – the annual uplift in 2024/25 – will be the highest outside the pandemic in the past 20 years.

There are some departments that have repeatedly required top-ups. The Home Office, for example, has had its budget topped up in each of the past four years, reflecting the difficulties it has had forecasting and managing the asylum budget. And the Department for Transport appears on the list in three of the past four years, as public transport travel volumes have not recovered since the pandemic as quickly as projected and the central government subsidy has had to increase to make up the shortfall. This suggests that the budgeting process is not working as well as it could in these departments.

Figure 2.47 **Biggest in-year increases in day-to-day departmental spending from initial budget, excluding pandemic-related increases, 2004/05 –2024/25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, 'Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses', 2005–24, and HM Treasury, *Autumn Budget 2024*. Notes: This chart shows the difference between the budget set at main estimates at the start of the year and final outturn. Day-to-day spending refers to RDEL. Excludes 2019/20 and 2020/21 increases related to the pandemic. Excludes departments with budgets smaller than £2bn in 2024/25 prices. 2024/25 values are a forecast based on *Autumn Budget 2024*. 'MHCLG communities' is the communities budget in MHCLG, which excludes local government grants. 'MHCLG – local government' is grants to local government from the department.

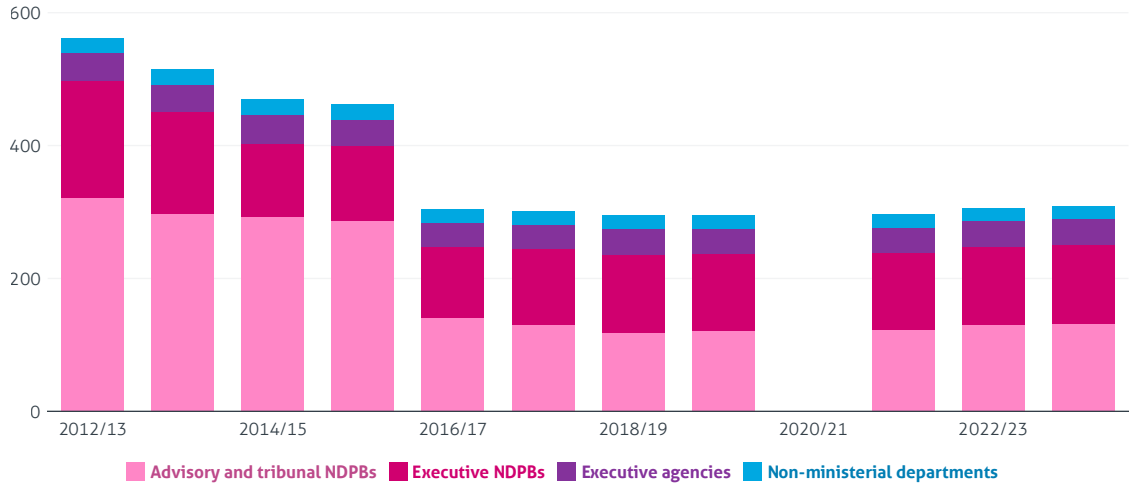
Arm's-length bodies

There have been modest increases in the number, budgets and staffing of arm's-length bodies

The number of arm's-length bodies (ALBs) had held reasonably steady since 2017, but in recent years has been increasing: as of March 2024, there were 309 ALBs in total, a slight increase from 305 in March 2023 and 295 in March 2022. This reflects a shift in focus from government – while the number of ALBs fell dramatically in the early 2010s as the government aimed to cut numbers in the so-called 'bonfire of the quangos', there seems to have been less of a focus on doing so since 2017.

The increase in the number of ALBs in the past year partially reflects the reclassification of other existing organisations into the more strictly defined category of ALB. But new bodies were also established in 2023/24, such as Great British Nuclear.

Figure 2.48 **Arm's-length bodies, 2012/13–2023/24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of the Cabinet Office, *Public Bodies* reports, 2013–20 (2012/13–2019/20), figures that the Cabinet Office supplied directly (2021/22 and 2023/24) and GOV.UK, 'Departments, agencies and public bodies' (2023/24). Notes: NDPB = non-departmental public body. No data was published in 2020/21. Figures are as at the end of the stated financial year.

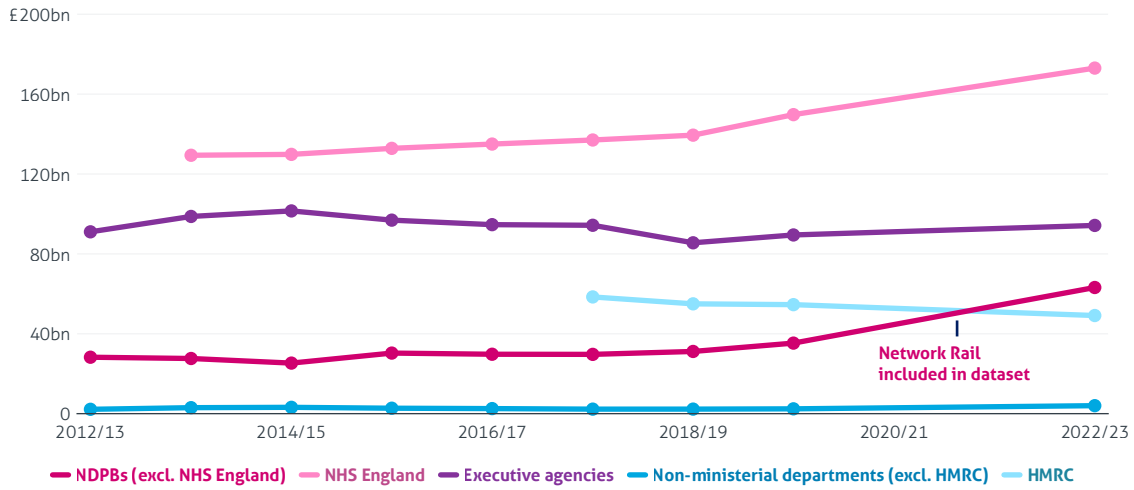
The Labour government has continued this emerging trend, and to some extent appears to have turned to ALBs to deliver its missions. The government has promised almost 20 new bodies, including Great British Energy and Great British Railways,[72] which are now at various stages of being set up.* While the 18 new bodies announced by the end of 2024 appears a high number, when spread over the course of a parliament it would fall within the normal trend of two to 12 public bodies set up per year.[73] And some of the new bodies will not add to the total number of ALBs, because they replace or consolidate the functions of others: for example, the new National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority is absorbing the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA).

* The Sunak government announced some of the bodies now being set up, including the Independent Football Regulator and – albeit with a different remit – Great British Railways.

New public bodies – some of which will clearly be central to the new government's agenda – are hard to set up well. In 2024, the Institute published a report on lessons for setting up public bodies; finding that a clear mission, a strong base of support and the right resourcing and governance from the outset are key to success.[74]

Understanding the arm's-length bodies landscape is important because over half (almost 60%) of day-to-day government spending is channelled through them.* And over 90% of this (in 2022/23, the latest year for which the Cabinet Office's ALB data is available) is accounted for by the largest 10 bodies, dominated by NHS England, and followed by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and HMRC.[75]

Figure 2.49 **Government funding of arm's-length bodies by category, 2012/13–2022/23 (2024/25 prices)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of the Cabinet Office, *Public Bodies* reports, 2013–20 and 2023. Notes: No data was published in 2020/21 and 2021/22. 'Government funding' is the total of resource and capital funding. NHS England consists of funding for NHS England, NHS Improvement and NHS Digital, all of which were executive NDPBs. NHS Improvement and NHS Digital were merged into NHS England in 2022 and 2023 respectively. NHS funding data in 2012/13 is not consistent with other years so has been excluded. HMRC data was included in the dataset for the first time in 2017/18. The HMRC figure in 2017/18 uses expenditure rather than funding data, which was not consistent with other years.

Total ALB budgets increased in real terms from £331.5bn in 2019/20 to £383.6bn in 2022/23 (2024/25 prices) – a rise of around 16%. This increase is largely accounted for by the reclassification of Network Rail, which has a budget of around £20bn, as an non-departmental public body (NDPB), and more funding for the NHS, particularly during the pandemic. Otherwise, funding for ALBs has remained fairly flat in real terms over the past decade (which, notably, includes the period when government absorbed many EU functions).

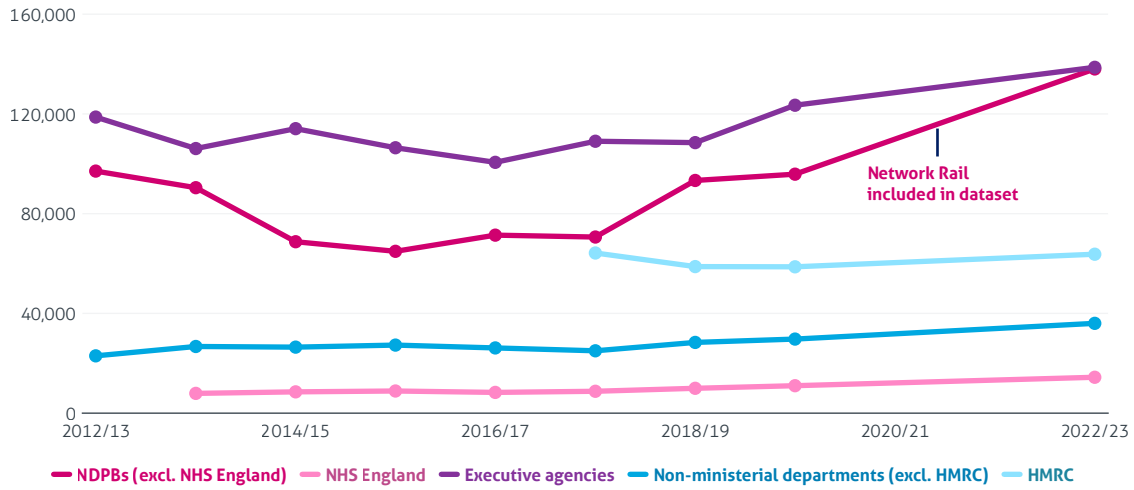
Recent years have also seen increases in ALB staffing levels. The starkest increase was in NDPBs, which are not formally part of the civil service and are staffed by public servants rather than civil servants. This largest category of the overall ALB workforce rose by 43.7%, or around 45,000 staff, between 2020 and 2023.

* Government departments' total RDEL was £494.2bn in 2022/23, and RDEL spending through ALBs was £294.0bn in the same period (both figures expressed in 2024/25 prices). See HM Treasury, 'Public spending statistics: July 2023', GOV.UK, 19 July 2023, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/public-spending-statistics-release-july-2023/public-spending-statistics-july-2023; Cabinet Office, 'ALBs Budgets', Cabinet Office, (no date) retrieved 17 December 2024.

This is mostly attributable to the reclassification of Network Rail as an executive NDPB, which added around 41,000 staff. The remainder largely reflects an increase of over 3,000 staff directly employed by NHS England.

The section of the ALB workforce classified as civil servants (62% in 2022/23) has recently grown slightly more slowly than that of the overall civil service. Between 2020 and 2023, executive agency and non-ministerial department workforces grew by 12–13%, compared to growth in the total civil service workforce of 15.5%.*

Figure 2.50 **Arm's-length body staff numbers by category, 2012/13–2022/23**



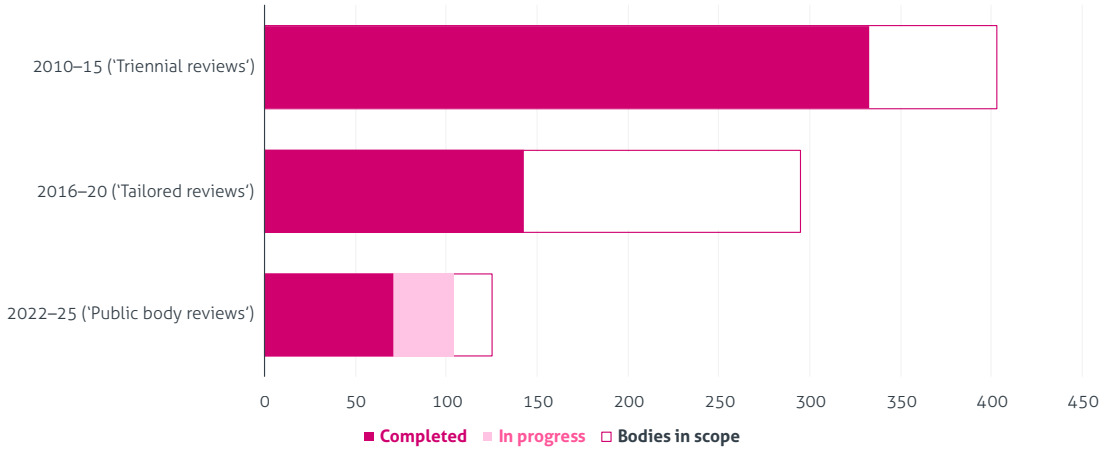
Source: Institute for Government analysis of the Cabinet Office, *Public Bodies* reports, 2013–20 and 2023. Notes: No data was published in 2020/21 and 2021/22. HMRC data was included in the dataset for the first time in 2017/18. All figures are expressed in full-time equivalent (FTE).

The new government has an opportunity to rethink the public bodies review programme

The latest programme of public body reviews[76] was launched in April 2022 to look at the governance, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness of ALBs,[77] building on previous programmes with similar objectives. The programme is scheduled to run until March 2025. By November 2024, 104 reviews had been launched out of a planned 125, and 71 of these had been completed.[78] This amounted to fewer reviews completed than during the previous programme, but a greater proportion of those scheduled, as the programme was more targeted than its predecessor.

* 15.5% represents the change in the size of the civil service overall between Q1 2020 and Q1 2023.

Figure 2.51 **Public body reviews conducted, 2010–25**



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 that the Cabinet Office provided in November 2024 on reviews completed and launched since 2022. Notes: For 2010–15 and 2016–20, data only includes bodies in existence at the end of the review period. Only NDPBs were within the scope of the tailored reviews. Not all ALBs were reviewed as part of the 2022–25 review programme.

The Cabinet Office told us that the 71 completed reviews covered around £14bn in RDEL spending – a small fraction of the £113bn total across all public bodies excluding NHS England. In *Whitehall Monitor 2024*, we raised concerns that early reviews were tending to focus on smaller, lower-spending bodies.[79] Leaving the review of larger, more strategically important bodies to the end of the programme, or excluding them entirely, may have curtailed its impact. It is also unclear whether the reviews changed much beyond the identified efficiency savings.

New Cabinet Office ministers are now determining the ambition and scope of their future work on public bodies. Lessons should be learned from the many previous iterations of the review programme. The most recent iteration, for example, demonstrated the value of having independent lead reviewers, and indeed reviewers external to government in some cases.[80] In addition, there may still be scope to bring the overlap and interactions between bodies, and the role and performance of their sponsorship teams in government departments, into sharper focus, with a view to simplifying the landscape.

Delays in public appointments processes are getting worse

'Public appointments' refer to ministerial appointments, usually for a chair or non-executive director for a board of a public body or for a member of an advisory committee, regulated by the commissioner for public appointments. There is a wide variety of public appointments, ranging from board roles for institutions such as the NHS to regional volunteer roles monitoring local prisons. The effectiveness of the public appointments system has implications for the good governance of ALBs and the effectiveness of the functions they carry out.

The Cabinet Office's governance code on regulated public appointments says that recruitment campaigns should aim to conclude within three months of the advertisement for a role closing.[81] However, appointments still take too long: the proportion of processes conducted within this time limit fell again in 2022/23, with only 16% of the 322 campaigns run concluding within the three-month period.[82] This is a deterioration from 25% the previous year, continuing the figure's fall since its 'high' of 50% in 2018/19.[83,84]

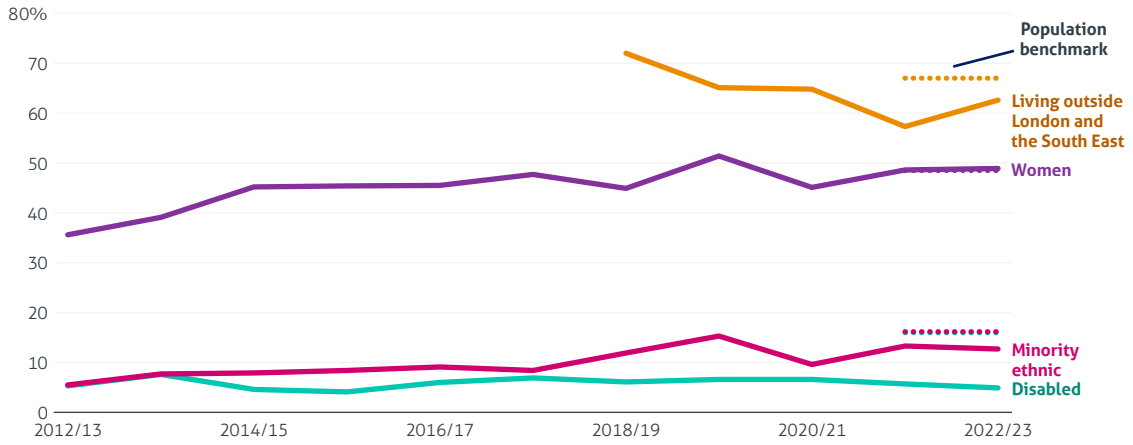
Delays in the public appointments process can lead to gaps on boards, which undermine the governance of ALBs. Long appointment processes can also deter prospective applicants, particularly those from less advantaged groups. They may instead take up private sector posts, where appointment processes seem to compare favourably, depriving government of high-calibre candidates.[85]

A previous investigation by the commissioner for public appointments in 2019 found that most delays occurred after panel interviews, at the stage when ministers decide who to appoint.[86] The commissioner for public appointments pointed to the unusual ministerial churn in 2022/23 as a reason for the worsened delays, but it is not possible to quantify what effect this had.[87] In our 2022 report *Reforming Public Appointments*, the Institute recommended collecting better data on the causes of delays.[88] The Cabinet Office's new applicant tracking system (ATS) has the potential to do this, but the data collected and published is not yet granular enough to inform improvements.

Improvements to diversity in appointments have mostly stagnated

In most of the measured areas of diversity, not much changed between 2021/22 and 2022/23 (the latest year for which data is available). Appointments and reappointments made to women stayed level, continuing to meet the population benchmark for working-age women, but appointments to candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds fell slightly. The previous government did not meet its ambitions on either of these metrics as laid out in the Cabinet Office's 2019 Diversity Action Plan – although it was much closer to doing so for women than for minority ethnic appointees.[89]

Figure 2.52 **Characteristics of public appointees, 2012/13–2022/23**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments, *Annual Reports*, 2012/13–2022/23. Note: Figures relate to public appointees and re-appointees. Before January 2020 candidates were asked a one-stage disability question, but after this data they were asked a two-stage disability question. Census data about disability in 2021 reported the results of the two-stage question. For sources of population benchmarks, see Methodology.

The number of appointees living outside London and the South East increased for the first time since data on this characteristic has been collected, from 57.3% to 62.6%.[90] But the number of appointees who declared a disability dropped from 6.6% in 2020/21 to 4.9% in 2022/23, against a total population benchmark of 16% in the same year.[91] As Figure 2.52 shows, this is not a new problem, and post-Covid changes to improve accessibility by facilitating participation in board activities remotely have not yet shown an impact.

There are prospects for further reform of the public appointments system in the new political context

The Sunak government made some welcome changes to the public appointments system that the Institute had previously recommended.[92] As well as data being recorded through the new applicant tracking system, the commissioner now regulates the appointment of departmental non-executives, increasing transparency and open competition for these influential roles. But some appointments, including board roles in executive agencies such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), remain outside the scope of regulation.[93] The government committed to publishing more information about direct ministerial appointments, but has not yet done so.[94]

The Labour government must now decide what further reforms to make. It has not yet set out its intentions, or confirmed whether appointments will be included in the scope of the proposed new Ethics and Integrity Commission. Public appointments under the new government have not yet received the criticism levelled at some civil service picks (discussed in the 'Recruitment' chapter of this report), but care will be needed to ensure appointments maintain public confidence.

Artificial intelligence, digital and data

Artificial intelligence (AI) – computer systems that can perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence – has the potential to be transformative for the public sector.[95] But government is far from realising a vision of large-scale change – ranging from the automation of rote and administrative tasks to the use of new tools to improve policy making or measure public opinion. As things stand, there are fundamental barriers such as a lack of skills in government and the need to fix legacy systems and datasets.

The government needs to find a balance between an ambitious programme of adoption that achieves much-needed productivity gains and a measured approach that avoids unintended harms to the public.[96] In the months and years ahead there will inevitably be peaks and troughs in enthusiasm around AI's potential – in late 2024, for example, some were talking about the progress of large language models "hitting a wall", until OpenAI's o3 model was released in December, representing a substantial leap forward in capability.[97] But government must retain a long-term commitment to AI adoption, putting itself in a position to harness the opportunities of potentially game-changing innovations that could come in the next few years, while also mitigating the risks.*

Beyond AI, the government also must not overlook continued improvements in digital and data. Programmes such as OneLogin have provided substantial value and digital transformation efforts must continue.[98]

Responsibility for digital, data and AI functions in government have been consolidated within DSIT

In July 2024, central leadership of technological transformation in government was placed in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), in efforts to make the department the 'digital centre of government'. This involved moving three units previously based in the Cabinet Office: the Government Digital Service (GDS), the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) and the Incubator for AI (i.AI).[99] This has since been followed by the formation of a new AI Opportunities Unit in the department, which will implement recommendations from the 'Action Plan' commissioned by the secretary of state.[100]

This is a logical move that could reduce the potential for overlapping functions and confused lines of accountability. It also gives the department with specific technological expertise the opportunity to give standardised guidance and share learning across departments; build frameworks for evaluating and scaling pilots; and have important ethical conversations around AI use.

* On 13 January 2025, as this report went to press, the government announced the AI Opportunities Action Plan. The plan sets out the government's intentions for the use of AI in the public sector, but the plans are not reflected in this section.

Figure 2.53 **Organisations responsible for cross-government AI functions, January 2025**

Name	Department	Date established	Function (with respect to AI)
Government Office for Science	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology	July 2007	Provides rapid technology assessments of technology areas such as AI for policy makers, setting out recent developments, potential applications, and opportunities and risks for government
Government Digital Service	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (from July 2024)	December 2011	Improving digital capability across government. Exploring the deployment of AI on public-facing government digital platforms such as GOV.UK
Artificial Intelligence Policy Directorate (formerly the Office for AI)	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology	January 2018	Overseeing the implementation of the National AI Strategy
Responsible Technology Adoption Unit (formerly the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation)	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology	November 2018	Enabling responsible adoption of AI in the private and public sectors
Number 10 Data Science unit (10DS)	No.10 Downing Street	July 2020	Driving AI innovation by recruiting external talent through the No.10 Innovation Fellowship and upskilling civil servants. Building AI solutions through the Evidence House programme
Central Digital and Data Office	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (from July 2024)	January 2021	Setting the strategy for government on digital, data and technology. Creating the framework for the use of AI by civil servants. Developing capability for its adoption
AI Safety Institute	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology	November 2023	Testing the safety of advanced AI and measuring its impact on people and society
Incubator for Artificial Intelligence (i.AI)	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (from July 2024)	November 2023	Prototyping and delivering applications of AI across government
AI Opportunities Unit	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology	July 2024	Implementing recommendations from the AI Action Plan to accelerate the use of AI in the private and public sector
Regulatory Innovation Office	Department for Science, Innovation & Technology	October 2024	Advising government on the regulatory reform required to support the rapid and safe introduction of developing technologies such as AI

Source: Adapted from National Audit Office, *Use of Artificial Intelligence in Government*, March 2024, with other information coming from GOV.UK.

But building a digital centre of government is more complex than amalgamating teams. The units outlined above must have sufficient authority to co-ordinate and impact cross-government applications of digital, data and AI, and work closely to maximise their impact across Whitehall. It is currently unclear what the scope of the digital centre's work will be, and this is something that the publication of the successor to the 'roadmap for digital and data',[101] which ends in 2025, will help clarify.

DSIT itself can sometimes feel slightly peripheral in Whitehall, and this is a perception it will have to fight to be successful at directing a whole-government agenda. On the other hand, there were previously questions about the Cabinet Office's leverage and

commitment to lead on digital, data and AI initiatives, despite its traditional co-ordinating role and status as a central department.[102] Some feel that DSIT will, perhaps counter intuitively, be an improved location from which to drive this agenda.

Leadership will also be important. The success of the Government Digital Service (GDS) in the early 2010s, for example, is often attributed to Francis Maude's support for it (as well as Mike Bracken's leadership as executive director). Peter Kyle – the science, innovation and technology secretary – is known to have substantial interest in AI and is willing to invest time and energy into promoting the digital centre of government, which he should continue to do. But, as GDS's difficulties post-Maude and Bracken indicate, there is a risk to relying on the patronage of a single politician or leadership of a single official. If DSIT is to be an effective digital centre for the long term, this role must be effectively embedded into Whitehall.

DSIT also has a role in promoting technological innovation in the private sector, both in the UK and worldwide. And in the future it could have a larger role with respect to AI regulation – the approach to which is currently diffused across regulators – as home to the AI Safety Institute (AISI) and new Regulatory Innovation Office. It remains to be seen whether incorporating internally facing functions around adoption will complicate DSIT's external role and lead to tension between its departmental priorities, or whether this juxtaposition could help government align its internal and external strategies, and where applicable learn from the private sector's approach to adoption.

There has been experimentation with AI use cases, but government needs to address barriers to adoption

In recent years, there have been increasing signs of AI use in government. In January 2024, for example, the CDDO published a *Generative AI Framework* for civil servants, which encouraged AI experimentation with a set of guiding principles.[103] In July, the new Labour government appointed Matt Clifford, chair of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, to deliver an AI Opportunities Action Plan, with part of his remit being to drive adoption in the public sector.[104] The Number 10 Data Science unit (10DS) and i.AI have trained hundreds of civil servants in technical skills and organised regular hackathons.*

In the autumn of 2023, the NAO found 74 reported use cases of AI across government.[105] Subsequent developments, including the establishment of i.AI in November 2023 (morphing from its previous incarnation as the Incubator for Automation and Innovation), helped ramp up the government's adoption of AI, meaning that the true number of use cases is certain to be significantly higher now.

Some of the current AI pilots in the civil service include:

- **GCS Assist** – a tool that produces first drafts of communications products, and the first to be approved for use across government

- **Redbox** – a tool that extracts and summarises information from ministers' 'box work' to make it more easily digestible[106]

* A hackathon is an event where people with similar interests (and typically technological skills) collaborate to solve problems.

- **GOV.UK Chat** – a public-facing AI chatbot helping people navigate the government's web pages faster[107]

- **Government People Group's AI tool** – built to optimise job descriptions for those advertising vacancies

- **Lex** – a tool to assist with legislative research and drafting, supported by a database of parliamentary debates, bills, legislation and case law.[108]

While these examples add to the range of use cases for AI identified in Institute for Government research, evidence from practitioners suggests that adoption has been uneven across departments.[109] In its 2023 report on AI in government, the NAO found that less than a quarter of government bodies it spoke to had an AI strategy.[110] To address this, senior officials should routinely commission exploratory work into how AI tools could be beneficial for solving priority problems.

Senior officials should also take a leading role in creating a more permissive structure, which gives civil servants positive licence to consider how AI could help their work. Experience suggests that effective innovations can develop relatively quickly from the 'bottom up'. For example, i.AI's Redbox was initially conceived and prototyped at a 10DS Evidence House hackathon before being scaled. As well as senior officials, units including 10DS and i.AI have an important role in encouraging an ecosystem where pilots like these can be rapidly tested and the effective ones ideally rolled out further.

Doing so will be challenging. Barriers include ineffective procurement processes and legacy IT systems – issues which typically attract little political interest. There is also little systematic way of evaluating pilots, or sharing what has been tried or deployed across government. These are both issues on which the digital centre of government could lead – with a team or unit given specific responsibility for scaling up successful pilots across government. This could help to address a current gap in decision making and funding, particularly where the benefits of an AI use case may be too diffuse for a single budget holder to make a decision to roll out or procure.

Government must consider how to prepare its workforce for widescale AI adoption

Over time, AI could have a substantial effect on the way civil servants work and the way the workforce is structured. While the impact is currently limited, senior officials need to think seriously (and where practical, engage with trade unions) about the potential consequences for the next decade of workforce planning.

The most substantial near-term impact could be the continued decline of administrative jobs as automated tools become more proficient, particularly at tasks such as answering routine queries and parsing public consultations. While keeping a 'human in the loop' – able to oversee and change AI outputs – is vital, and for now AI is likely to be more about augmenting humans than replacing them, in the future, government may need fewer officials to perform its functions. Workforce planning should factor this in, particularly if AI tools gain 'earned autonomy' and need less oversight as they demonstrate their repeated effectiveness.

There will be other impacts on the way civil servants work, with AI tools impacting policy makers and communicators as well. Early use cases such as GCS Assist have shown how AI starts to require officials to have new capabilities, and the importance of coupling adoption of AI tools with relevant training. For example, time savings created by using Assist frees up more time for government communicators to spend on collaborative or creative tasks, emphasising the continued need for these skills alongside effective use of AI.

Over the longer term, these effects could be more profound. If, for example, the Tony Blair Institute's 'National Policy Twin' – a digital replica of the real world in which policy scenarios could be modelled, which it suggests would be "used at every stage of the development process for new policy, as well to monitor and iterate existing policies" – was adopted, it would fundamentally change the policy making process and so the skills needed to be an effective policy maker.[111] Part of designing these sorts of tools must involve co-creation with the people who will use them, so they are as useful as possible and not seen as something to work around.

As well as responding to AI's impact on its workforce, the civil service must grow its capability to both take the associated opportunities and mitigate the risks. The Government Digital and Data (GDD) profession has grown by 88% since 2020, progressing towards the government's target of the profession constituting 6% of all civil service jobs (in February 2024, the government said it had reached 5.4%).*[,112] But more, and more capable, technologists should continue to be recruited – including through industry secondments – to improve the civil service's capability in this area.[113] Doing so effectively will require adjusting the civil service's approach to recruitment and pay. There have been some encouraging first steps – including approving higher salaries for technologists in the i.AI and the AISI, and skill-based pay increments for some officials in the GDD profession – but change should be more widespread.[114]

In some areas, adapting the civil service's approach to risk will also be important. Civil servants are right to consider the risks of using AI, but should also reflect on the risks of not using it. In government, AI tools are often held to higher standards than people are and to some extent this is reasonable. The public also hold AI to a higher standard than humans, and whereas humans generally make mistakes in ways that we can understand, we are still at a point in our understanding of AI where it can make mistakes in ways sometimes incomprehensible to us. But as already mentioned, not adopting AI also comes with risks: it can mean providing citizens with a substandard service.[115] And there are some areas – for example in health care – where citizens are more likely to view the use of AI positively.[116]

Part of encouraging officials to be more proactive and confident in using AI tools is providing sufficient training for them to do so. GCS Assist provides a case study of how guidance can be given to staff. The Government Communication Service provides a mandatory 'AI for communicators' course on responsible use of generative AI before granting access to Assist, and also provides webinars and 'teach-ins' to support its communicators to use the tool effectively.[117]

* This 5.4% figure refers to the proportion of officials in the GDD function. The target initially referred to the proportion of officials in the GDD profession, which is lower, at 4.8%.

AI has the potential to be transformative for government. But the government needs to find a balance between an ambitious programme of adoption that achieves much-needed productivity gains and taking a measured approach that avoids unintended harms to the public – mistakes now will be difficult and expensive to unpick later. It must also put itself in a position to harness the opportunities and mitigate the risks of potentially game-changing innovations that could come in the next few years.

Conclusion

The next year will be pivotal for the fortunes of Keir Starmer's government. Ministers enter 2025 with a large majority and having had time to get to grips with Whitehall. The outline of their agenda is clear – the last months of 2024 saw the prime minister doubling down on mission-led government, and brought more definition to the concept.

The government has also shown an awareness of what is necessary to make mission-led government work, with both Starmer and Pat McFadden explicitly linking its success to Whitehall reform. So there will be little excuse for a lack of progress this year. 2025 will reveal whether the mission boards will work as intended and if McFadden is serious about adopting a 'test and learn' culture. Then by the summer, the spending review will show whether government is truly being reorientated around the missions.

But as this year's *Whitehall Monitor* shows, there are longer running challenges in the civil service that cannot be neglected. The problems themselves – from a poorly managed workforce to ineffective recruitment – are well-aired, as are potential solutions. Likewise, the bright spots where progress must be reinforced, such as improving diversity and experimentation with artificial intelligence, are clear.

This year is therefore an important opportunity for Whitehall reform. A government early in its term, with a large majority and an apparent appreciation of both the problems and solutions, having appointed a new cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, has little reason not to begin work immediately. Time will soon be running short.

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

Publication of data

Our charts draw principally on 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 given above.

Throughout the report

Much of the analysis in this report draws on the Cabinet Office's annual Civil Service Statistics publication. This dataset rounds numbers to the nearest 5, and reports numbers lower than 5 as '[c]'. In our analysis, we replace all figures reported as '[c]' with '3'. Unless otherwise stated, all figures for numbers of civil servants throughout this report are FTE rather than headcount figures.

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 relationships with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland though for simplicity we do not include them in much of our analysis which compares different departments. It also includes the civil servants that the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland employ, 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 officers, teachers, NHS staff, members of the armed forces and 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.

Defining the senior civil service

There are two definitions of the senior civil service. The annual Civil Service Statistics publication (the source of much of the data in this report) contains information on 'SCS level' employees. This measure includes "a number of health professionals, military personnel, and senior diplomats that are not part of the Senior Civil Service".[118]

By contrast, the Cabinet Office collects data on 'the senior civil service' in the SCS database. Because this is not publicly available, by necessity we use the data in the annual Civil Service Statistics publication.

These two measures give different figures for the size of the senior civil service. The 2024 release of Civil Service Statistics recorded 7,535 individuals at 'senior civil service level' (7,295 FTE). While the SCS database is not publicly available, the government's evidence to the Senior Salaries Review Body on SCS pay (published in December 2024) put the size of the senior civil service at 6,740 (6,565 FTE).[119]

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 Department for Education (DfE) departmental group, and not as a separate department, as it is reported in the original Office for National Statistics (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 in the most recent public bodies report (for 2022/23) published by the Cabinet Office,[120] or by government statements – such as on machinery of government changes – to parliament.

Unless otherwise indicated in the notes for a chart, 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 presented below. 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 are available upon request.

List of departments and associated organisations

Initialism	Department	Other organisations
AGO	Attorney General's Office	Crown Prosecution Service; HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate; Government Legal Department; Serious Fraud Office
CO	Cabinet Office	Central Civil Service Fast Stream; Crown Commercial Service; Government Commercial Organisation; Government Property Agency; UK Statistics Authority
DBT	Department for Business and Trade	Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service; Companies House; Competition and Markets Authority; Export Credits Guarantee Department; The Insolvency Service

DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Charity Commission; The 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; Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education; Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation; Ofsted; Standards and Testing Agency; Teaching Regulation Agency
DfT	Department for Transport	Active Travel England; Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency; Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency; Maritime and Coastguard Agency; Office of Rail and Road; Vehicle Certification Agency
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care	Food Standards Agency; Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency; UK Health Security Agency
DSIT	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	Building Digital UK; Met Office; Intellectual Property Office; UK Space Agency
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions	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 Infrastructure Commission; National Savings and Investments; Office for Budget Responsibility
HO	Home Office	National Crime Agency
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	HM Land Registry; Planning Inspectorate; Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre
MoD	Ministry of Defence	Defence Equipment and Support; Defence Science and Technology Laboratory; Royal Fleet Auxiliary; Submarine Delivery Agency; UK Hydrographic Office
MoJ	Ministry of Justice	Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority; HM Courts and Tribunals Service; HM Prison and Probation Service; Legal Aid Agency; Office of the Public Guardian; UK Supreme Court
NIO	Northern Ireland Office	
OSSS	Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland	

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
Welsh Gov	Welsh government	ESTYN; Welsh Revenue Authority
OSSW	Office of the Secretary of State for Wales	

Machinery of government changes

Much of the analysis in this report covers a timeframe in which multiple departments merged or changed names. Wherever possible, we use a department's current name throughout – including for time points at which it had a different name. This applies, for example, to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – which was called the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) until 8 July 2024 – even though the latest data used for much of this report refers to the department as DLUHC.

Where departments have undergone simple mergers, for example the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID) merging to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), we use the sum (for example, of staff numbers or spending on consultancy services) of the predecessor departments for the period preceding the merger.

This is not possible for all departments. For example, while the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) was formed through a simple merger of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), the more complex way in which the department was split up means that the current Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) are excluded from some charts showing longer time series.

Inflation/real-terms figures

For government spending information that spans multiple years, we use the gross domestic product (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 *Autumn Budget 2024*.[121] This is used in Figures 2.41–2.47 and 2.49.

For pay figures, 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. We use CPI figures published in April 2024, as they are being used to adjust data from April in each year. This is used in Figures 1.4, 2.19, 2.20 and 2.21.

Specific sections

The size of the civil service

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 (for example, a person working two days a week as 0.4 FTE); this is more meaningful than headcount, which does not distinguish between full-time and part-time employees.

As with the Cabinet Office's Civil Service Statistics publication , the ONS public sector employment data rounds numbers to the nearest 5, and reports numbers less than 5 as '..'. In our analysis we replace these suppressed figures with '3'.

Our figures exclude temporary Census Field staff. Staff from Central Government Security (formerly Security and Intelligence Services) have also 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.

As stated in the text, in this edition of *Whitehall Monitor* we have altered our methodology for assessing how individual departments have changed in size over time. In previous editions of *Whitehall Monitor* and other Institute for Government analysis, we corrected for reclassifications of staff that were the result of machinery of government changes. For example, this meant that where several thousand staff were transferred from one department to another, we would not include that figure in our calculation of either department's changing size over time. This was done to restrict our analysis to showing the 'organic' change in the size of departments. But this year, given the high number of significant machinery of government changes, we have decided to include staffing transfers to give a more accurate picture of how they have affected the sizes of different departments.

Turnover and leaving route

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 FTE for all staff turnover calculations. Figures relate to the core department and do not include agencies within departmental groups.

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.

Data on civil servants' 'leaving route' comes from Table 42 of the Civil Service Statistics dataset. For simplicity, we have categorised the various kinds of leaving cause reported in the source data (referred to as 'routes' in this report) as such:

- Resignation
- Retirement
- 'End of appointment' (which the dataset records as 'End of Casual, Period, Conditional Or Provisional Appointment')
- Dismissal
- 'Voluntary exit/redundancy', which combines the following leaving causes reported in the source data: 'Voluntary Exit Scheme: With Payment'; 'Voluntary Exit Scheme: With An Unreduced Pension'; 'Voluntary Exit Scheme: Terms Not Recorded'; 'Voluntary Redundancy Scheme: With Payment'; 'Voluntary Redundancy Scheme: With An Unreduced Pension'; 'Voluntary Redundancy Scheme: Terms Not Recorded'.
- 'Other', which combines the following leaving causes reported in the source data: 'Compulsory Redundancy Scheme'; 'Death in service'; 'Transfer Of Function To Private Sector'; 'Secondment To Organisation External To Civil Service'; 'Other Leaving Cause'.

Grade structure and pay

Paybill calculations

For Figure 2.20, 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 hypothetical scenario, where the civil service in 2024 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 numbers (FTE) in 2024. We then estimated the paybill for this scenario by multiplying these estimates for numbers (FTE) by grade with the mean salary by grade in 2024.

In the second hypothetical scenario, the civil service in 2024 again has the same grade composition as in 2010 but wages rise in line with those in 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 ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2010–24). Again, we estimated the paybill by multiplying these estimates with actual numbers (FTE) by grade for 2024.

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.

Comparison of private sector and civil service salaries

For calculations of where civil service salaries at different grades compare to similar private sector jobs, we compare median salaries in each grade category to the distribution of pay in the 'business research and administrative professionals' ONS occupation category. This category includes accountants, consultants, analysts, economists, statisticians and other administrative professionals. It will include some public sector workers in these professions, as well as private sector workers. We compare annual salaries for full-time workers in the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings to civil service statistics. We also compare senior civil servants to the 'chief executives and senior officials' occupation category. This category was redefined in 2020, so we only present comparisons up to 2019.

Diversity

Unless otherwise specified, the representation of a demographic characteristic in the civil service is calculated as a share of the number of staff for which that characteristic is known - i.e. excluding those for whom it is 'not declared' or 'not reported'.

Population benchmarks

For the proportion of female staff in the civil service, the population benchmark is calculated from the ONS's Labour Force Survey (Table A02). To render it as closely comparable as possible to the Civil Service Statistics data (which captures the state of the civil service annually on 31 March), the number of economically active women aged 16–64 in the February–April quarter of every year is divided by the whole economically active population in the same quarter.

The population benchmark for minority ethnic individuals is also calculated from the ONS's Labour Force Survey (Table A09), using non-seasonally adjusted figures. The number of economically active people belonging to 'all other ethnic groups combined' (i.e. not white) aged 16–64 in the January–March quarter of every year is divided by the number of economically active people whose ethnicity is known ('all other ethnic groups combined' and 'white' combined) in that same quarter. The same calculation is performed on the figures for the April–June quarter of the same year. The two resulting figures are then averaged, to obtain a benchmark figure that best covers the 31 March date which is captured by the Civil Service Statistics data.

The population benchmark for disabled individuals is also calculated from the ONS's Labour Force Survey (Table A08), using non-seasonally adjusted figures. The number of economically active people who meet the Harmonised Standard Definition of Disability in the January–March quarter of every year is divided by the number of economically active people whose disability status is known ('Harmonised Standard Definition of Disability' and 'people who do not meet the Harmonised Standard

Definition of Disability' combined) in the same quarter. The same calculation is performed on the figures for the April–June quarter of the same year. The two resulting figures are then averaged, to obtain a benchmark figure that best covers the 31 March date which is captured by the Civil Service Statistics data.

For Figure 2.30, the population benchmark is calculated using the ONS's Sexual Orientation dataset. The number of people identifying 'Gay or lesbian', 'Bisexual' or 'Other' aged between 16 and 64 is divided by the number of people aged 16 and 64 whose sexual orientation is known ('Gay or lesbian', 'Bisexual', 'Other' and 'Heterosexual or straight' combined). The latest figures available are for 2022.

The same methodologies are used to calculate the benchmarks in the arm's-length bodies chapter (Figure 2.52). In that case, however, we have opted for the static version of each benchmark, using only the figures for 2024.

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 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 from 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 that the Social Mobility Commission employs, and used the resulting data to estimate the socio-economic background of officials in each grade.

Relocation

The Institute's view is that headcount (rather than FTE) is a better measure for assessing progress in relocating officials, as relocation requires moving individual staff members, regardless of their working pattern. To that end, we have used headcount data in the Relocation chapter, aside from where it is specifically stated that FTE is used.

Civil servants working for the Scottish or Welsh government are excluded from our analysis, because the UK government has no control over where they work.

Civil servants based overseas are excluded from our analysis, as they are usually in roles in which there is no or limited choice over where they are located.

Professions and functions

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

As outlined in the text, while the civil service groups the professions into 'operational delivery', 'policy', 'functional professions' and 'specialist professions', we take a different approach to grouping them, as listed below. Our groupings are explained in

the text, although we define a 'departmental' profession as one where at least 50% of its membership is in one department.

In two cases, we combine very similar professions. We combine 'planning inspectors' and the 'planning' profession, and 'corporate finance' and the 'finance' profession.

1. Operational delivery

2. Cross-departmental professions

- Commercial
- Communications
- Digital, data and technology
- Economics
- Finance (including corporate finance)
- Human resources
- Intelligence analysis
- Knowledge and information management
- Operational research
- Policy
- Project delivery
- Property
- Social research
- Statistics

3. Departmental professions

- Counter fraud
- Geography
- Inspector of education and training
- Internal audit
- International trade
- Legal
- Medicine
- Planning (including planning inspectors)
- Psychology
- Science and engineering
- Security
- Tax
- Veterinarian

This list of professions – according to successive releases of the Cabinet Office's annual Civil Service Statistics release – does not tally with the list of professions on GOV.UK. The latter includes other professions such as 'actuary' and 'risk management', which are not included in our analysis.

In Figure 2.40, eight departments are shown. These are the eight departments that saw the highest growth in staff numbers (FTE) in absolute terms between Q2 2016 and Q1 2024. We have used this date range to investigate how departments have grown since the civil service overall began growing again after the EU referendum. The range ends in Q1 2024 because the latest professions data is for that quarter. Different datasets are used 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.

For each department, the five professions shown are those that experienced the greatest growth in absolute numbers over the period. We also show the number of officials whose profession was not reported, and group all other professions into an 'all other professions' category. In the case of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), we have analysed the five professions with the greatest growth between 2017 (rather than 2016) and 2024, because the department did not report the professions of most of its staff in 2016.

Professions data has historically been inconsistently reported. We have avoided correcting for this, except for in one instance. The Department for Work and Pensions (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 civil servants self-reporting their profession for this data.

Consultancy and temporary staff spending

In this section, we are primarily interested in consultancy and temporary staff spending by core departments, rather than departmental groups. This is because they offer a better insight into civil service (rather than public sector) capability, by excluding the spending of bodies such as NHS England. The primary source of data on consultancy and temporary staff spending used in this report is departments' annual reports and accounts. DBT had not released its 2023/24 annual report and accounts at the time of writing. We have also not analysed territorial offices. Wherever both restated and original values are available for a given financial year, we used the former.

Some data points are unavailable because departments have not reported consultancy or temporary labour spending in their annual reports and accounts. BEIS did not report temporary labour spending for any of the years between 2018/19 and 2022/23. For years before the merger of FCO and DfID, FCDO's spending is plotted as the sum of DfID's and FCO's. In some years, some departments did not report core departmental spending separately, and instead reported core department and executive agency spending. These departments include the Cabinet Office, the MoJ and HMT. In these cases we have by necessity used figures for core department and executive agency spending.

Precise figures on consultancy spending in particular are difficult to obtain. Although the government's 'common areas of spend' (CAS) guidance provides some terms of reference for classifying services as 'consultancy', especially for procurement purposes,[122] the National Audit Office (NAO) has noted that the boundaries between the 'consultancy' and 'professional services' spending categories are unclear and that the distinction is applied inconsistently across departments.[123] This limits the utility of annual reports and accounts in determining accurate figures for consultancy spend – but they are the only source of such figures that the government publishes consistently.

As outlined in the text, consultancy spending can also be estimated by analysing invoices for payments to suppliers that provide consultancy services, which departments publish. This was the method the Cabinet Office used to produce consultancy spending estimates while the now-abolished consultancy and professional services spend control that the coalition government introduced was in force. Suppliers can be identified as providing consultancy services by their Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code. This is the method that Tussell, a provider of public procurement data, used in previous Institute for Government research.[124] While SIC codes can be used to determine departmental spending with suppliers that provide consultancy services, they do not indicate the reason for the spending on each individual invoice. For example, a department could pay a company that provides consultancy services as per its SIC code, but for another service that is not consultancy related, and this would still count towards figures for consultancy spending. This limits the accuracy of this method.

Departmental spending

Throughout the departmental spending chapter, we focus on departmental expenditure limits. And in all charts except Figure 2.46, we focus on resource departmental expenditure limits (RDEL – day-to-day departmental spending).

To calculate how spending has changed in different departments since 2010/11 (Figures 2.43 and 2.45), we use successive Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses. Departmental boundaries and classifications change over time, but they are consistent within each annual publication, which covers the five previous years. To calculate changes over time for each department, we therefore start with the most recent data (in the 2024 publication, covering back to 2018/19). For every previous year, we calculate spending in that year based on the percentage change between that year and the year after in the relevant publication. So, for example, spending in 2017/18 is calculated as the 2018/19 value in the 2024 publication multiplied by the change between 2017/18 and 2018/19 in the 2023 publication. For this analysis, we only include departments that have existed in broadly their current form since 2010. The exception is FCDO, where we calculate the FCDO budget before the merger as the sum of FCO and DfID budgets. In Figure 2.45 we interpolate the 2020/21 and 2021/22 budgets for departments, because several departments saw very large temporary increases related to Covid spending, which would distort the axis on the chart and make the figure less clear.

We calculate changes in planned spending (Figures 2.46 and 2.47) using successive Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses, which present plans at the start of the year and the final outturn each year. When ranking changes in budgets over time, we exclude those departments with small budgets (below £1.5 billion in 2024/25 prices), and increases in 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22, which were due to Covid-related spending that was inherently difficult to plan for. We include all departments that overspent their original budget by 13% or more.

Arm's-length bodies

Throughout this report we use the term 'arm's-length bodies' (ALBs), which is a narrower subset of 'public bodies'. The category of ALB encompasses non-departmental public bodies, executive agencies and non-ministerial departments. The wider term 'public bodies' includes public corporations, unclassified bodies and parliamentary bodies, which are not included in the Cabinet Office data we rely on in several charts.

The Cabinet Office provided figures for the number of ALBs in 2021/22 and 2022/23 (Figure 2.48). To calculate the number of ALBs in 2023/24, we used information provided directly to the Institute on the number of ALBs up to March 2023 and bodies opened and closed since then, and adjusted for public announcements on the establishment or abolition of bodies according to GOV.UK or each body's own website.

The Cabinet Office provided figures on the number of bodies that have been reviewed as part of the public body review programme (Figure 2.51), and these are accurate as of November 2024.

For details on how population benchmarks for women, minority ethnic individuals and individuals with a disability (Figure 2.52) are calculated, see the 'Diversity' subsection above. To calculate the population benchmark of individuals of working age (aged 16–64) living outside London and the South East, we used the mid-2022 edition of the ONS dataset 'Estimates of the Population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland'.

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