



# Getting the centre of Whitehall into shape

## Why this issue is important

Effective government needs an [effective centre](#) – one capable of taking its responsibilities to direct and support the rest of government seriously. Yet successive governments have failed to get this right.

Working through often ad hoc structures, prime ministers have struggled to provide direction and momentum. [Unlike many other countries](#), there is no prime minister's department in the UK, and No. 10 is not large enough to do all the heavy lifting required. What is more, there has been a tendency by prime ministers to dismantle some of the structures around them on taking office, only to reinvent them once again when they have a better understanding of the challenges they face. This wastes vital energy in the critical period after an election.

Similarly, many centrally-driven attempts to improve how Whitehall works have [floundered](#), being seen by departments as little more than a 'tax' on their time. Yet departments demonstrate common and persistent weaknesses that frustrate governments in delivering their agendas. The need for greater financial and commercial skills, for instance, has been [recognised since at least the 1960s](#). These weaknesses will only be addressed successfully by concerted, cross-departmental action. Unless this happens, the public are likely to be treated to further colourful language from exasperated prime ministers, complaining of ["scars on my back"](#) or the ["buggeration factor"](#).

## Early challenges and how they can be addressed

- **Guarantee a strong 'core offer' of support that can be tailored to the Prime Minister:**

There are parts of the Prime Minister's [support system](#) that are essential to his or her role as head of government. It is the Cabinet Secretary's responsibility to ensure these are available and to tailor them to suit the priorities and preferences of the Prime Minister. This includes:

  - A [private office](#) staffed by civil servants that keeps the Prime Minister on top of what Whitehall is doing. This should be fully functional from day one.
  - A [policy unit](#) that focuses on the Prime Minister's agenda. This should be built up quickly with credible people – a mix of political advisers and civil servants usually works best.
  - [Well-resourced secretariats](#) that can quality assure departmental proposals and allow the Prime Minister to challenge and improve them. Moves to relatively strong secretariats, like the [National Security Council](#), have proved successful.
  - An [implementation or delivery unit](#) that can track the progress of the Prime Minister's immediate priorities, and that can be tailored to suit the Prime Minister's way of working.
  - [Dedicated analytic support](#), which may or may not take the form of a dedicated unit that can address longer-term, cross-cutting, and complex policy issues. There will otherwise be too much 'gravitational pull' back to the urgent day-to-day business of government.
  - Time-limited ['special units'](#) that can challenge business-as-usual in departments, whether by instilling a different way of working or by driving a particular prime ministerial priority (such as troubled families or social exclusion). To function effectively these units need a strong, credible leader and the backing of the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Office should [learn lessons from previous units](#) to ensure their success.

- **Build on what is already there to support the Prime Minister – don't abolish things without thinking it through:** The core offer of support to the Prime Minister should be tailored to his or her preferences, priorities, and style. But it's important not to repeat the mistakes of 2010 when the incoming Coalition abolished and diminished crucial parts of the central machinery – especially the policy unit, delivery unit and strategy unit – only to regret this later. For example, the overstretched No. 10 failed to identify problems inherent in the [NHS reform plans](#) or Defra's plans to "privatise the forests". Capacity had to be recreated mid-term with, for example, the implementation unit set up in 2012 effectively replacing the delivery unit abolished in 2010. Similarly, should we see another coalition government emerge in May, it needs to build on the [structures](#) now in place for the Deputy Prime Minister, which were initially too weak to support effective coalition government.
- **Give political drive to improving how Whitehall works:** Previous governments have often found mid-term that they are failing to achieve the changes they want. Ensuring this does not happen in future will undoubtedly require the whole of Whitehall – both official and political – to improve how it does things. The next government will inherit a host of initiatives that have taken a cross-departmental approach to improving the way Whitehall works. For instance, new initiatives like the [Civil Service Capability Plan](#), the [Financial Management Review](#), and the [Twelve Actions to Improve Policymaking](#) have all led to action on professional skills in Whitehall. Any post-election government [must build on what has gone before](#) – it does not need, and will not have the time, to start from scratch. How the appointment of ministers is made following the election in May 2015 will be a critical indication of whether the necessary political drive exists:
  - The Prime Minister and Chancellor must be publicly and privately committed to making the necessary improvements to ensure Whitehall is capable of delivering their priorities. The Prime Minister must appoint a minister who is clearly responsible for ensuring those improvements are driven by the mission of the government, and that they actually happen.
  - The remit of this minister needs to build on the role played since 2010 by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude. The remit must make clear how central these improvements are to the wider government agenda.
  - It must be clear that this minister will be able to provide sustained and stable political leadership. The minister should remain in post through at least the first reshuffle.

## Longer-term reform priorities

- **Use the centre to join up government:** This has been attempted in many ways, with mixed success. It currently happens through cabinet committees and [ad hoc special units](#) on some issues. Earlier attempts to join up government using [public service agreements](#) and other [performance management frameworks](#) have come and gone. There needs to be a recognised, cross-Whitehall framework for managing performance that can evolve to serve the government of the day. But this mustn't become a party political tool. Where more political methods of joining up government are used, such as appointing cross-departmental ministers, these should be properly supported by similarly cross-departmental performance measures, budgets, and units.
- **Build up the cross-departmental leadership of the Civil Service:** There has been a very welcome, if overdue, move to recognise that cross-cutting functions like finance, commercial, and digital need full-time leaders sitting at the heart of Whitehall. The Head of the Civil Service and the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury need to make sure that the responsibilities of these 'functional leaders' are brought together with those of departmental leaders into a coherent way of running the Civil Service.