



Professionalising Whitehall

Views from the centre

Introduction

It is vital that the civil service has the right skills and capabilities to deliver its priorities, including better public services. Neglecting capability in the past has contributed to high-profile failures such as the IT issues that beset Universal Credit and the cancellation of the InterCity West Coast franchise competition.

In 2013, the leadership of the civil service stepped up reforms to professionalise key government activities – such as financial management and policy making – by taking a more joined-up approach to organising and developing these specialisms.^{*1} This became known as the functional agenda. The Institute for Government has supported these efforts since its inception. In 2017, we published a comprehensive report titled *Professionalising Whitehall* to assess how far the reforms had gone, focusing on eight areas ranging from legal to policy.²

We found that significant progress had been made to attract and deploy high-calibre staff. However, the report also highlighted four priorities that need addressing for the reforms to succeed:

1. Ensuring specialists are better integrated into departmental decision making.
2. Enabling specialists to reach leadership positions at the top of the civil service.
3. Bringing together the reform agendas of each specialism.
4. Introducing more stable funding.

These reforms are more important now than ever. Brexit requires the civil service to deliver its ‘biggest and most complex challenge’ in peacetime history.³ Combined with

* As in our 2017 report, due to slippage in the vocabulary around functions and professions in the civil service, this report refers to ‘specialisms’ instead of ‘functions’. Specialisms are defined by the National Audit Office as ‘areas of expertise that provide professional support and services’, and enable departments to deliver policies and programmes.

fiscal pressures on public services, technological change and ongoing reforms to make the civil service the UK's most inclusive employer, there is a growing sense of urgency in ensuring that high-calibre specialists can inform and improve decision making.

In 2018 and 2019, the Institute for Government convened a series of events in partnership with Oracle to take stock of the functional reforms. The heads of five specialisms – Finance, Human Resources, Operational Delivery, Policy, and Project Delivery – reflected on what their reforms had achieved so far and set out priorities for the future. This paper is based on their insights.

The civil service is making progress in developing its specialists and integrating them into the decision making process. At the same time, our speakers recognised the scale of the challenge. In some cases, this includes specialists moving from administrative roles towards contributing to strategic decision making in departments by helping to prioritise projects. It is critical that the leadership of the civil service maintains momentum for these reforms – and continues to invest in them.⁴

The civil service is making progress in tackling priority areas

The heads of specialisms involved in our events suggested that there has been progress in a range of areas – from ensuring that specialists can reach leadership positions to preparing for the challenge of automation.

Ensuring that specialists can reach leadership positions in the civil service

All speakers highlighted the efforts made to enable specialists to reach the top jobs, including through staff development. Many specialisms have developed career pathways that allow members of staff to identify the skills required for each role, and work out which ones they need to develop to progress to more senior levels. For example, the Human Resources career framework includes four levels of expertise within job families that cover the range of HR activities, from casework to strategic workforce planning, to help civil servants plan their career.⁵ Similarly, the Project Delivery career pathways can take staff from Business Analyst level through to Portfolio Analyst, Senior Responsible Owner* or Head of Profession.⁶

These pathways are crucial to help specialists develop a stronger sense of identity within their specialism. They also help retain them: by providing a clear idea of the range of roles available within their area of expertise, attractive career paths and meaningful progression opportunities, specialists are encouraged to view their career development through the lens of the specialism as a whole, rather than simply their home department.⁷

* Senior Responsible Owners (SROs) are civil servants in charge of overseeing the delivery of projects, establishing effective governance and securing the resources necessary to ensure success. They are accountable to parliamentary select committees for explaining the decisions and actions they take.

Career paths need to be supported by ongoing professional development to progress civil servants with the right expertise.⁸ Most speakers highlighted successes in this area. The Operational Delivery Profession now offers six levels of qualifications, from GCSE to master's degree level. Sir Jon Thompson noted that 22,000 (10%) of the civil servants working in Operational Delivery have registered for these qualifications, and 10,000 have already qualified.

Project Delivery relies on a combination of its Fast Stream programme – the third most popular of the streams in terms of applications per vacancy⁹ – and its Project Leadership Programme and Major Projects Leadership Academy, aimed at senior staff. Over 1,000 project leaders have gone through both, and Matthew Vickerstaff, Head of the Government Project Delivery Function, pointed out that most Senior Responsible Owners have now taken part in the Leadership Academy.¹⁰

The Policy Profession has developed a different strategy; it delivers an Executive Master of Public Policy programme through a unique joint venture with the London School of Economics, which is currently being retendered. Since 2015, four cohorts totalling 111 candidates have attended the course.¹¹

A greater push to integrate specialists into decision making

Having set up training programmes and career paths, leaders also recognised the importance of demonstrating the value of the work specialists do, including through greater co-operation between operational and policy disciplines. Sir Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care and Head of the Civil Service Policy Profession, recalled the value of operational experts' contributing to policy making when he was at the Department for Education. This enabled civil servants to advise ministers that, for example, a given policy aim could be achieved using existing structures rather than a long and expensive programme of change.

Co-operation is an important part of getting departmental executive teams to make greater use of specialists and to seek their input into strategic decisions. This ultimately ensures that specialists are better integrated into departmental decision making.¹²

Beyond training programmes for individual specialisms, the Government is educating senior leaders about the value of involving specialists. This is instrumental to the success of the overall reform agenda as it helps create greater understanding of, and demand for, specialist skills and services. Government Chief People Officer Rupert McNeil highlighted the example of the Civil Service Leadership Academy, which half of the top 4,500 civil servants have attended. It provides training ranging from legal to human resources, and equips leaders with the breadth of expertise they need as well as a greater understanding of what specialists can offer.

Chris Wormald said that policy makers were getting better at involving specialists. He highlighted that the value of policy making was in bringing together and weighing up expert input, which meant that the right experts should be 'in the room' and empowered to speak. His counterpart in the Operational Delivery Profession highlighted

the need for specialists to better understand each other. For example, he noted that HMRC had faced issues by making incorrect assumptions, notably on delivery timescales for its new digital services for taxpayers, despite having taken a team approach to deliver the change. He also pointed to positive developments in the form of the policy partnership between HMRC and the Treasury. The partnership meant that all advice on taxation given to the Chancellor and Treasury ministers commented not only on policy but also on deliverability, providing a greater degree of certainty that any new taxes that are announced can be delivered.

In discussing the advantages of collaboration, Mike Driver, Head of the Government Finance Function, reflected on how strong commercial, finance and human resources specialisms had helped the Government move away from department-by-department solutions towards a more unified approach. This was seen in the wake of Carillion's collapse in 2018, where it was possible to develop contingency plans and co-operate with other operational colleagues across the civil service to minimise disruption to public services. This ultimately helped to avoid further disruption to public services, and the Chief Executive of the Civil Service commented that this type of response "would simply not have been possible even two or three years ago" without specialisms to shape cross-government strategies.¹³

Several speakers also emphasised the importance of co-operation between policy and delivery, notably to cross the 'valley of death' between the two, said Vickerstaff, quoting his predecessor.¹⁴ Both Chris Wormald and Jon Thompson highlighted the crucial importance of co-operation between their staff, the latter arguing that "policy doesn't mean anything unless you can deliver it".

When he took on the leadership of the Operational Delivery Profession, Thompson spoke with leaders from four other specialisms to understand what existing approaches his profession could draw on to develop Operational Delivery professionals. At the same time, Policy and Operational Delivery leaders discussed working more closely together. As a result, new entrants to the Civil Service Fast Stream will need to complete at least one placement in Operational Delivery to better understand the practicalities of delivering policy.

Meeting the challenge of digital and automation

Specialisms are preparing for future technological changes. Speakers agreed that these changes will have an impact on the way civil servants work and could transform the relationship between citizens and the state. Chris Wormald emphasised that policy professionals need to work with new technologies to transform both policy making and the nature of the public debate. He argued that this was not simply about using machines to perform tasks traditionally performed by people, but rather facilitating different interactions with citizens. For example, the Department of Health ran a digital consultation on the experiences of carers that enabled users to contribute as they were fulfilling their caring duties, yielding very different results from a traditional consultation.

Similarly, Jon Thompson noted that introducing new digital services at HMRC transformed the way it engages with the public and pushed leaders to appreciate the skills and contributions of other specialists. For example, digital transactions at HMRC are now more popular than traditional means of contact, including phone and post. In addition, the department is working to become more focussed on customers' needs and used feedback from citizens to change its approach to customer support.

Increased digitisation also offers an opportunity for members of staff to use their skills more effectively. Rupert McNeil emphasised that technological advances such as artificial intelligence (AI) and automation can 'take the robot out of the human' to enable people to spend more time doing rewarding and skill-enhancing work. For example, new HR systems could provide line managers with access to information about skills, performance and objectives, and so enable better management.

An increasingly digital Government could also yield other benefits. For instance, civil servants using modern IT systems that operate similarly to their personal devices could deliver higher levels of productivity due to greater familiarity with these devices or software. This also has the potential to boost staff motivation.

Leaders recognise the scale of the challenge

In spite of the progress made in taking reforms forward, speakers reflected on the challenges they faced in the process of professionalisation and shared their thoughts on areas where further progress is needed.

The importance of setting standards

One recurring theme across discussions was the challenge of getting the basics right. For example, although the Government Finance Function wants to drive decision making and to build up centres of excellence in areas like tax¹⁵ and corporate finance, Mike Driver recognised that it also needs to deliver on its core tasks such as providing financial input into departmental strategies. He recounted that in the 2015 Spending Review, the Ministry of Justice made over-optimistic assumptions about how much revenue it could raise through charging for services and incorrectly assumed that demand for legal aid from the prison population would decline. A greater focus from the outset on the risks these assumptions carried could have prevented later difficulties, he concluded.

Similarly, Matthew Vickerstaff discussed how cost escalations and delays associated with the High Speed 2 and Crossrail projects, respectively, showed that the Project Delivery Profession needed to focus on the basics and embed any lessons learned into the wider project delivery system.

Developing standards to ensure consistency is a major component of getting things right, and was highlighted by several speakers. One of the top three priorities Chris Wormald shared is to deliver policy advice of the same consistency and quality people would expect from medical or legal professionals. To this end, the Policy Profession's

standards set out different levels of expertise across 18 skills (ranging from advising and drafting to finance) clustered around three core areas: analysis and evidence, delivering policy, and the wider political and democratic context.¹⁶ This effort was based on feedback the Profession sought from ministers, who pointed out the inconsistent quality of policy advice. Following the model set by other professions, Human Resources developed standards for its specialists, drawing on those developed by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Different leaders highlighted the challenge of measuring improvements. Rupert McNeil noted the importance – and challenge of – measuring the impact of these reforms, using data showing that before the creation of the Major Project Leadership Academy the Government claimed only 30% of major projects were expected to be delivered on time, compared to 85% now.¹⁷

Measuring quality and improvement is a particular challenge for Policy,¹⁸ which doesn't benefit from having its own professional body like some other specialisms. As Chris Wormald said, it is difficult to judge the quality of a piece of policy advice, let alone quantify the extent to which policy advice improves year on year.

Bridging the gap: reaching specialists at all levels

A persistent challenge facing several of the specialisms is to ensure that reforms reach staff at all levels, rather than just the most junior or senior.

Although the Policy Profession's training and development offer for entry-level and senior civil service staff has improved in the last few years, Chris Wormald recognised that further work was needed to develop mid-career professionals. There is a gap between graduate trainee level and senior civil service, and the Head of Profession noted that Policy had yet to come up with the right development offer for grades just below the senior civil service. It intends to develop an offer to meet this challenge, which applies across the wider civil service.

Similar challenges apply to the Project Delivery Profession.¹⁹ Civil servants joining at Fast Stream level are inducted into the Profession's teaching and ways of working; senior specialists can access the Major Projects Leadership Academy and the Project Leadership Programme. However, Matthew Vickerstaff recognised that more needs to be done for staff in between, including through the increased use of the Project Delivery Academy.

Providing strategic advice into planning and prioritisation

Specialists need to be part of the decision making process, but there are still barriers to achieving this.

If officials are to recognise the value of expert skills, specialists need to be able to add value at a strategic level. Many of the Finance Function's specialists are involved in administrative, transactional activities, but Mike Driver argued that there is an opportunity for them to take on more strategic roles – as well as to demonstrate

greater boldness in showcasing their value to decision makers by proactively involving themselves in the decision making process.

A similar trend is seen in the role of HR, which in many organisations is gradually changing from an operational, administrative function with little influence on the thinking of executives to a core strategic priority. In the last decades, many of the UK's leading organisations have realised the value of employing senior HR experts to ensure they have the right people in place to meet current and future needs.

Specialists and departments need to do more to have ongoing conversations about planning and prioritisation, and the Chief Executive of the Civil Service has made the case for departments to prioritise their projects carefully.²⁰ Mike Driver argued that all organisations should be involved in continuous financial planning. This is already occurring in some instances, but should be the norm so that departments are better prepared for spending reviews.

Similarly, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority is aiming for prioritisation and deliverability to be at the heart of the next spending review, said Matthew Vickerstaff. This involves departments reviewing their portfolio of projects and programmes, and matching projects to available skills and capability, to avoid being stretched too thin. Specialists are at the heart of these decisions and need to be involved in any discussions if only to assess the feasibility of delivering departments' commitments.

What does the future hold for government specialisms?

The functional agenda has now been in place for six years, and it is crucial that the momentum for reform is maintained. However, this agenda is not being implemented in isolation, and needs to adapt to the wider context and priorities of Government.

Harnessing Brexit?

The challenge of exiting the EU provides an unprecedented operating environment for the civil service, but it is also an opportunity to transform the way it works. Speakers indicated that specialisms come into their own when faced with challenges of this nature - supporting the Government in dealing with issues cutting across departments.

Rupert McNeil argued that Brexit presents opportunities to show the value of reforms to professionalise Whitehall. Specialisms play a key role in ensuring that the right expertise is deployed across the civil service, operating consistently and based on high standards. The Head of the Government Project Delivery Function echoed that the sheer volume and complexity of Brexit had already pushed the Government to join up departments and specialisms, and that specialisms had played a key role in this process. For example, there is evidence that they enabled the civil service to have discussions about how to optimise the deployment of specialists in different areas of government to meet priorities such as exiting the EU.

Pushing ahead with diversity and inclusion

The reforms discussed operate in parallel to the civil service's wider commitment to become 'the UK's most inclusive employer by 2020'.²¹ The heads of Operational Delivery, Finance and Policy all highlighted the importance of developing high-performing, diverse organisations that are able to draw on individuals able to think laterally.

Rupert McNeil's ambition is for the civil service to become an environment where background is irrelevant. He highlighted the Government's progress in improving diversity and inclusion: the proportion of female senior civil servants has gone from 35% in 2010 to 43% today,²² and the number of BAME (black and minority ethnic) civil servants has also increased to 12% (though this remains below the 14% proportion for the UK population).²³ Reforms to professionalise the civil service are also pushing for greater diversity in terms of professional background, notably in senior roles.

Securing funding for reforms

Introducing more stable funding is a major priority the Institute for Government highlighted in 2017, which is critical to the success of these reforms. We argued that the core teams supporting reform efforts within each specialism are subjected to different funding regimes. Some receive core funding from the Cabinet Office (HR), whereas others rely on departmental levies (Policy), or mixed funding (Finance). Some of these arrangements mean that year-on-year funding is not guaranteed, which undermines long-term improvement efforts.

The leadership of the civil service needs to ensure more stable funding is available through a small number of well-understood models. The next spending review should provide an opportunity to provide much-needed stability to ensure reforms can go ahead in the longer term.

Fusion: how will the civil service react?

The new Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service Sir Mark Sedwill has set out his vision for greater collaboration across and beyond the civil service, namely 'Fusion'. Through 'Fusion', the UK should deploy "the full set of [its] national security, economic and influence capabilities... against the full set of [its] national security, economic and influence goals". Cross-government teamwork is at the heart of this doctrine. This aligns neatly with ongoing reforms to professionalise the civil service and to bring relevant expertise to bear to deliver priorities or solve complex problems. This presents an opportunity to give further impetus to the Government's agenda to professionalise the civil service.

Our series of events provided insights into reforms that have largely taken place away from the public eye. It showed that specialisms have approached professionalisation differently, while collaborating with and learning from one another. It is important that they keep doing so and have opportunities to share lessons and best practice. This is

vital if the Government is to meet the challenges of Brexit and delivering quality services to the public.

Appendix: views from the centre

- [Jon Thompson - Leading the civil service's largest profession](#)
- [Mike Driver - helping government make better financial decisions](#)
- [Rupert McNeil - forging a career in the civil service](#)
- [Matthew Vickerstaff – Keeping government’s major projects on track](#)
- [Chris Wormald - The future of policy making](#)

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Institute for Government
2 Carlton Gardens, London, SW1Y 5AA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

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