

Improving government effectiveness across the world

Can lessons from the UK's reform experience help?

Caterina Alari and Peter Thomas



InsideOUT

*A series of personal perspectives
on government effectiveness*

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The events support research and learning programmes, and provide platforms for leading international experts to exchange ideas and share new thinking on effective government. The Institute provides practical advice from people with in-depth experience of working inside government to support senior decision makers to improve performance.

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There is little systematic attempt to capture the knowledge and insights of people who have worked closely with government and share them with a wider audience. The Institute for Government is keen to remedy that. Our InsideOUT series gives people with an interesting perspective on government effectiveness an opportunity to share their personal views on a topic that sheds light on one of the Institute's core themes. The Institute for Government is pleased to be able to provide a platform to contribute to public knowledge and debate, though the views expressed are those of the authors.

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Foreword

Governments have always learnt from each other, but these days there is an international market for 'best practice'. Those operating in this market often have an incentive to suggest that government is all science and no art, and to present solutions ready for transplant without reference to local circumstances.

Real learning involves hearing the whole story – what went well and what didn't. It involves understanding context and history, because these determine whether something that has worked in one country might help in another. It also involves building relationships and addressing problems that are relevant to the government in question.

In this report, Caterina Alari and Peter Thomas draw on their extensive UK and international research and practical experience. They explore how far and under what conditions more than 40 years of public sector reforms in the UK can help other countries in their own efforts to improve policymaking.

For the Institute for Government, this report adds valuable insights to our existing work on building a more effective Whitehall. It complements our report on *Civil Service Reform in the Real World: patterns of success in UK civil service reform*, as well as our work on the centre of government, delivery units around the world, and change processes in departments.

This new report deserves to be read widely by those interested in government effectiveness around the world.

Daniel Thornton

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About the authors and their organisations

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Peter Thomas is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government and an expert adviser to the NSGI. His career has switched between senior leadership roles in all levels of public service and researching what works in public service reform with the aim of providing actionable insights for practitioners in the field. As a senior leader he shaped and implemented significant public service reforms, including outsourcing, performance management, customer service improvement, the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU), civil service transformation and capability reviews. Before joining the Institute in 2011, Peter was Director of Strategy and Change at the Ministry of Justice. Previously, he developed and ran the Capability Review programme in the Cabinet Office and was Head of the PMDU. As a researcher he led the Institute's research on civil service reform until 2015. He has published numerous reports on this subject. Earlier in his career he ran research programmes on effective public services at the Audit Commission and was a senior leader in local government in London.

The NSGI is a cross-departmental unit, which forms part of the UK Government's support to countries to help them improve the effectiveness of government and public services. It provides advisory and capacity-building support to governance and centre-of-government reform in developing and fragile states. The NSGI approach is to use serving civil servants, expert practitioners and peers to support a dialogue with counterparts in the recipient government to explore how best, or indeed whether, the principles, methods and practice of reforms in the UK can be adapted to fit with the local priorities and context of governments elsewhere.

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Our thinking and conclusions were shaped by colleagues across Whitehall and the development and public sector reform profession, who agreed to test our initial thinking, in particular: Stefan Kossoff, Claire Vallings, Katie Wiseman and Tim Williams at the Department for International Development (DfID); Piers Cazalet and Benn Ladd at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO); Joanne Peel at the Ministry of Defence (MoD); Mark Bryson-Richardson at the Stabilisation Unit in the FCO; Nehal Davison at the Institute for Government; and Marcus Cox at Agulhas Applied Knowledge.

The views expressed in this report, together with any errors, are those of the authors alone.

Summary

The UK Government is the second-largest funder of international aid in the world, after the United States. The value of much of this development spending will invariably depend on the effectiveness of the recipient government.

One consistent area of demand for UK funding and expertise is for the support of public sector reform and improvement in the effectiveness of government. Politicians and officials across the world frequently look to the UK for practical help to adapt and apply UK reforms to the problems they face – often encouraged by the advocacy of global figures such as Michael Barber and Tony Blair.

This demand is fuelled and often met by big consultancies around the world selling support and advice, and heightened further by the practice of donors and institutions requiring governments to adopt elements of these reforms as part of the overall package of their financial or political support.

Yet there is general consensus in the development literature that, in terms of impact, efforts to improve the effectiveness of governments and to reform public services largely have a patchy record. And efforts to strengthen the centre of governments have the patchiest record of all.

The stories, principles, lessons and models from the wide range of UK reforms provide a rich source of stimulus, encouragement, reality checks and warnings for reformers everywhere.

UK and other reform models should not, however, be prescribed as the one true solution to be adopted off the shelf, which too many global institutions and consultancies have an unfortunate tendency to do.

The extensive experience of public service reform in the UK is a valuable resource to help those in other countries who wish to develop their own distinctive reforms that fit the context and priorities of their government.

For this report the authors used a stocktake of progress, commissioned by Richard Jarvis, Head of the National School of Government International (NSGI), to explore the parallel lessons from their respective experience of reforms in the UK and overseas more systematically. They drew on a mix of their experiences, NSGI practitioner reflection, case studies drawn from the NSGI portfolio, research by the Institute for Government and lessons from research into aid interventions in developing countries (especially centre-of-government reforms).

They ended up with three groups of interdependent success factors that reflect their experiences. These do not represent a linear process; rather, they provide a model approach and series of key questions and recommendations that should be applied throughout an engagement with a recipient government. The success factors are set out below:

Entry, context, local ownership and iteration

- Establish the relationships and trust needed to create entry points for a project
- Take time to understand and adapt to the context, drivers and local political dynamics that influence the pace and direction of change
- Ensure local ownership by making the project relevant to local priorities or problems, brokering local leadership of the changes and working with the politics
- Facilitate an iterative problem-solving process

People, learning and capability building

- Make careful and well-supported use of expert civil servants, advisers and consultants
- Learn by doing, working and reflecting with respected peers
- Build capability by changing patterns of work and behaviour

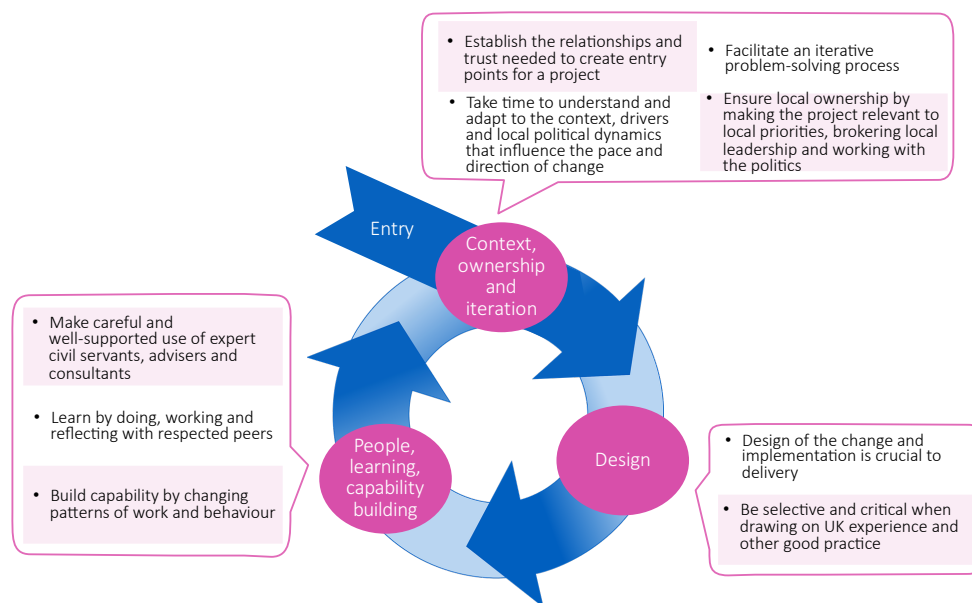
Design

- Design of the change and implementation is crucial to delivery
- Be selective and critical when drawing on UK experience and other good practice

These success factors are neither new nor surprising, but they have proved difficult to put into practice – in the UK as well as overseas. They fit well with the emerging practice of the more successful NSGI projects (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: How the success factors relate to each other

The three elements and success factors are not sequential. Instead, they provide a way of thinking, and key questions and challenges, to guide the NSGI through an engagement.



Source: Analysis by the authors

As UK departments and agencies are increasingly engaging in direct partnerships with counterpart institutions in fragile and developing countries, the success factors and their practical implications offer essential guidance on how to create the most value from such engagement. The energy, ideas and experience of peers and practitioners can play a valuable role.

Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to expect any donor project to support the delivery of a transformed civil service in the recipient government in a few years. It is more realistic to view reform as an incremental, imperfect, episodic, adaptive and opportunistic trajectory, which must learn from and build on successive interventions in a way that cannot be planned.

1. Introduction

It should be no surprise that efforts by donor-funded outside advisers to support public service reform in aid-recipient governments have a mixed record of success. It has proved to be hard and slow to lead successful reform from within the UK Government, despite its possession of a capable civil service that scores highly on most international benchmarks.

The historical reality of civil service reform is that such reform is invariably achieved over decades, even centuries – ‘dependent on economic diversification and the emergence of a middle class with the capacity and interest to organize and push for reforms’.¹ ‘As countries get richer through growth then the quality of political, social and bureaucratic institutions improves ... it took Denmark centuries to get to Denmark. That is the lesson of history’.²

In this report, the two different perspectives of the authors are combined to reflect on the challenge of leading successful government reforms, and the extent to which lessons from the UK can be adapted to help other governments.

While the authors were working together on programmes to improve government effectiveness and strengthen the centre of governments overseas, they were struck by the similarity of many of the insights gained from their respective experiences.

As they exchanged articles and reports from their different worlds, they found that the insights from Institute for Government research into good policymaking, civil service reform, capability and the leadership of change were remarkably similar to lessons drawn out by some of those researching and evaluating donor-funded interventions internationally.

They both have found that the stories, principles, lessons and models from the wide range of UK reforms provide a rich source of stimulus, encouragement, reality checks and warnings for reformers everywhere. UK and other reform models should not, however, be prescribed as the one true solution to be adopted off the shelf, which too many global institutions and consultancies have an unfortunate tendency to do.

A recent stocktake of progress, commissioned by the NSGI, provided the authors with the opportunity to develop further their thoughts on the crossover of the strands of UK and international development experience and research. They drew on:

- a review of relevant research on civil service reform, change, policymaking and capability – drawing heavily on several strands of research by the UK-based Institute for Government as well as comparative research on public management reform by Pollitt and Bouckaert
- a review of the professional development reading packs and topic guides produced by the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre at the University of Birmingham in the UK
- participant observation in three NSGI centre-of-government projects
- two workshops with NSGI staff to reflect on progress, lessons, success factors and challenges from their perspectives
- a workshop with key experts and stakeholders with an interest in this topic.

The remainder of this report:

- outlines the issues and interventions that are in scope in work on the centre of governments

- explores the value of UK reform experience as a stimulus and learning for others
- reflects on the messy reality of efforts to improve government effectiveness
- proposes the key factors that are likely to improve the prospects for success of advisory and capacity-building support to the centre of governments
- looks at what the success factors mean in practice for those leading or supporting reform, illustrated by examples from NSGI projects
- considers how the UK Government could create conditions that are more conducive for funding and commissioning successful interventions.

2. The scope of efforts to improve the centre of governments

What is meant by the centre of government? What issues and interventions are in play? How are the effectiveness and capability of the centre of government best improved? Is it about reform, governance, transformation, change, improvement, delivery, performance, human resources, capability, planning, public management, public administration or policymaking?

Most UK Civil Service reforms and NSGI projects touch on these issues in different ways and in practice the authors have found that the issues overlap and interact. The distinctive language and meanings that accompany each of them can be more helpful in some settings than others. Theoretical efforts to load additional meaning on some terms will inevitably be lost in translation.

Therefore, in describing the scope of work to improve the centre of governments, and government effectiveness, the authors have found it most useful to focus on what politicians and officials do in practice in the name of improving the effectiveness of their governments. Their efforts are invariably a means to an end, more often to multiple ends: 'deliberate changes to the structures and processes of [government and the civil service] with the purpose of getting them to run better'.³ A comparative analysis of public management reforms in 12 countries identified the following ends:

- making savings (economies) in public expenditure
- improving service quality
- making government operations more efficient
- increasing the chances that the policies that are chosen and implemented will be effective.⁴

It also identified some intermediate ends:

- strengthening the control of politicians over bureaucracy
- freeing public officials from bureaucratic restraints that inhibit their opportunities to manage
- enhancing government's accountability to the legislature and citizenry for its policies and programmes.

The analysis also found that there were some symbolic and legitimacy benefits of reform for players in the reform process:

- being seen to be doing something (announcing reforms, criticising bureaucracy, praising new management techniques, restructuring ministries and agencies)
- gaining a reputation or making a career from modernising and streamlining activities.

The interventions and actions that are developed towards these ends are usually managerial in nature:

- finance: budgets, accounts, audits
- personnel: recruitment, posting, remuneration, security of employment
- organisation: specialisation, co-ordination, scale, (de)centralisation
- performance measurement systems: content, organisation, use.⁵

But there are also non-managerial ways to improve government effectiveness:

- political reforms (for example, changes in electoral systems or legislative procedures)
- critical policies (for example, new macro-economic management policies, labour market reforms or fundamental changes in social policy).⁶

The international provenance of the ends that are listed above ensures that some of them will resonate in any setting. All of the ends have been addressed through different initiatives with different degrees of success over the past 40 years in the UK. During his work at the Institute for Government, the second author has validated these themes and issues with the many overseas delegations the Institute receives. The frustration and difficulty of making lasting reform to the centre of governments and civil services seem to be universal.

In practice, both UK Civil Service reforms and the programmes of the NSGI are mainly focused on managerial reforms. This should not be misinterpreted as taking a technocratic approach. Management in government is not 'some neutral, technical process, but rather an activity which is intimately and indissolubly enmeshed with politics, law, and the wider civil society ... It is suffused with value-laden choices and influenced by broader ideologies'.⁷

3. The reality of efforts to improve the effectiveness of government

Transforming the effectiveness of government is a task with a very high degree of difficulty. The institutions of government seem to resist the most ambitious plans of presidents, prime ministers and civil service leaders. This is as true for the long-established civil service of an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member state as it is for a fragile state emerging from conflict.

Transformational reform of the civil service is achieved over decades or even centuries. It is closely linked with economic growth, the emergence of a middle class demanding improvements of social, political and bureaucratic institutions.

There is a general consensus in the development literature that much of the effort to help improve the effectiveness of government and reform public services has had limited impact. And efforts to strengthen effective governance at the heart of government have the weakest record of all:

Despite vast amounts of support from the international assistance community, increased resourcing and improved policies and/or formal systems ... many states and governments across the developing world have remained unable to provide adequately for the well-being of their populations at large.⁸

One group of researchers provides a compelling summary:

The fact that the 'development community' is five decades into supporting the building of state capability and that there has been so little progress in so many places (obvious spectacular successes like South Korea notwithstanding) suggests the generic 'theory of change' on which development initiatives for building state capability are based is deeply flawed.

[R]eform dynamics are often characterized by ... the tendency to introduce reforms that enhance an entity's external legitimacy and support, even when they do not demonstrably improve performance.

[G]overnments constantly adopt 'reforms' to ensure ongoing flows of external financing and legitimacy yet never actually improve.

[C]ountries and development partners get trapped in a cycle of reforms that fail to enhance capability (indeed, may exacerbate pre-existing constraints).⁹

The points above relate most directly to large-scale government transformations. Arguably, the absence of success in many of these transformations is simply a reflection of the difficulty of such changes and the many decades they take to make. It is not to say that there is not a reasonable track record of more technical and sector-specific development supported by donors.¹⁰

Research by the Institute for Government into the alchemy of successful reform in the UK Civil Service found that successive reform efforts had a similarly patchy record. '[T]he most ambitious reform blueprints are no more than partially adopted, let alone implemented ... the majority of individual reforms have limped on, tailed off, or been discarded'.¹¹

Despite the popularity of grand reform plans and programmes among UK prime ministers and Cabinet secretaries, the reality of the process of reforming the UK Civil Service and the process of government is an incremental and chaotic agglomeration of changes:

Typically there is no single design or designer ... just lots of localised attempts at partial design cutting across one another. It is easy to exaggerate the degree of intentionality in many reforms.¹²

Talk of '[reform] strategy' can be seen as an idealization or post hoc rationalisation of a set of processes that tend to be partial, reactive, and of unstable priority.¹³

Despite this fragmented and incoherent pattern of reform, the performance, composition and ways of working changed, were sustained and increased the capability of the UK Civil Service.

Those UK reforms that have achieved varying degrees of success were not tethered to an explicit vision of an improved civil service or a reform plan. Sometimes reforms were designed to consciously build on previous reforms, but rarely did they contribute towards any greater design or direction pursued by the most senior leaders of the Civil Service.

So it is simply unrealistic to expect any number of donor-supported projects to help deliver a transformed civil service in the recipient government in a few years. It is better to view reform as an incremental, imperfect, episodic, adaptive and opportunistic trajectory, which must learn from and build on successive interventions in a way that cannot be planned. The energy, ideas and experience of officials and outsiders play a crucial role.

This reality of reform has little resemblance to the world envisaged by log frames, consulting proposals, neat project plans and attractive reports that are business as usual in international development work.

4. Lessons from more than 40 years of public management reform in the UK

This chapter looks at the UK and the lessons it has learned about reform. The UK is one of the world’s most restless public management reformers. It has as much experience of failure and false starts as it has of successful reforms.

As a result, the stories, principles, lessons and models from the wide range of UK reforms provide a rich source of stimulus, encouragement, reality checks and warnings for reformers everywhere. Such practical insight and experience will be as valuable for dissuading governments from adopting seductive models off the shelf from elsewhere, as it will be for helping the co-design and adaptation of principles and tools from international reforms.

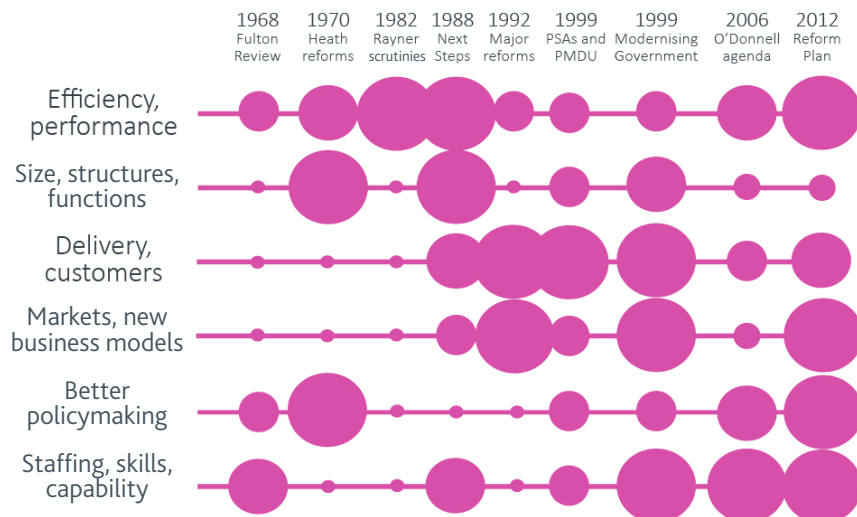
The aims and trajectory of reform in the UK

The rationale for reform in the UK is as consistent as the reform initiatives are frequent. Most reforms over more than 40 years have addressed one or more of six themes (see Figure 2):

- efficiency and performance
- size, structures and functions
- delivery and customers
- markets and new business models
- better policymaking
- staffing, skills and capability.¹⁴

Figure 2: The patterns of UK Government reform

The themes are consistent across successive pulses of reform over more than 40 years, but the focus shifted significantly from pulse to pulse. The bigger the circle, the greater the emphasis on that theme in the particular reform pulse.

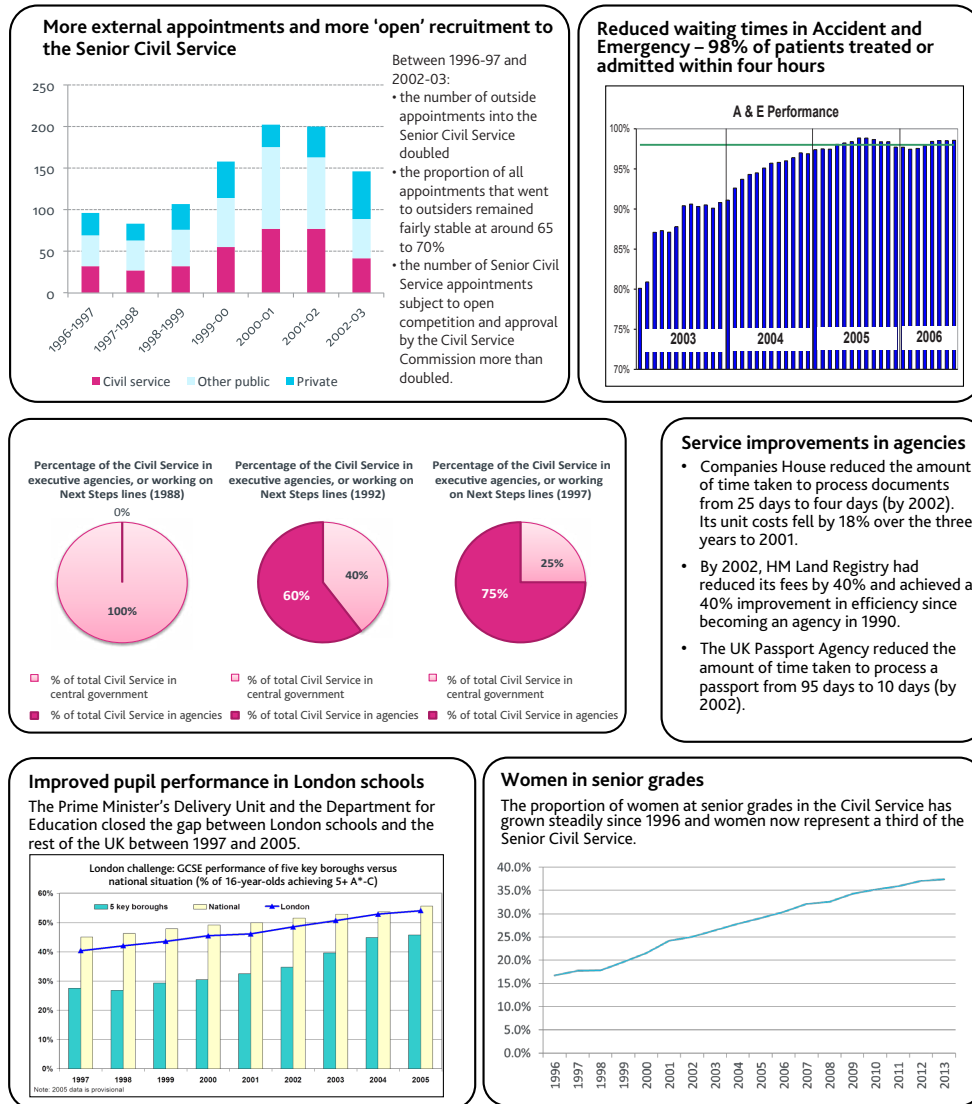


Note: PMDU = Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, PSAs = Public Service Agreements.
Source: Analysis by Peter Thomas

The patterns of action and progress within these reform themes have not been smooth but they have delivered measurable improvements in outputs and outcomes (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Some impacts of successful reforms in the UK

There are many lasting, measurable impacts from UK reforms.



Source: Panchamia, N. and Thomas, P., *Civil Service Reform in the Real World: Patterns of success in UK Civil Service reform*, Institute for Government, London, 2014, pp. 34-5, 45, 60.

In addition to such policy and delivery successes, the agglomeration of key reforms has transformed the capability and culture of the Civil Service in a way that has survived the rise and fall of the leaders, teams, structures and programmes that made up the reforms.

The key aspects of that transformation are:

- a stronger sense of personal responsibility and accountability for delivery – whether of policies, projects, programmes or services
- the use of objectives, performance indicators and measurement to make progress transparent
- more open competition for senior roles in and greater diversity of the Civil Service

- greater value placed on the quality of leadership and management
- a more outward-facing organisation connected to other organisations, perspectives and ways of thinking to inform the policy development process
- learning and adopting new ways of working that have outlasted the reform that introduced them.¹⁵

The reforms that were central to this transformation include:

- **1982–86 Rayner scrutiny teams.** A new way of working across departments to identify efficiencies. These cross-departmental teams were staffed with younger, high-potential staff and worked at pace using private sector methods.
- **1986–97 Next Steps reform.** Within a few years, this reform had moved 85% of civil servants into agencies. But it was not primarily a structural reform. It aimed to give managers more control of inputs, staffing and resources so they could make the best choices about how to improve service delivery and make efficiencies.
- **1991–97 The Citizen's Charter.** This undervalued but very effective programme created a much stronger focus on customers and citizens in local public services and the Civil Service. It established customer service standards and awarded Charter Marks to the best services.
- **1999–2002 Bringing In and Bringing On Talent.** This official-led programme opened up recruitment into the Civil Service, and took action to improve the diversity of the Civil Service. It has helped to create one of the most open civil services in the world.
- **2001–10 The Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU).** This was set up to drive delivery of the Prime Minister's top 17 priorities. The tools, methods and way of working are globally admired and much copied.
- **2005–12 Capability Reviews.** The drive for delivery led by the PMDU created the appetite to look at the wider capability of departments to deliver. The reviews drew explicitly on what was seen to work in delivering service improvements. They have created the agenda for leadership, capability and change in the Civil Service.

There is international interest in these and other UK reforms. And there is demand from politicians and officials too who look to the UK for practical help to adapt and apply such reforms to the problems they face.

Such demand is heightened further by the practice of donors and institutions requiring governments to adopt elements of these reforms as part of the overall package of their financial or political support.

However, Chapter 5 cautions against such off-the-shelf mimicry of reforms designed in a different context, culture and time.

The frequent failure of those projects that mimic UK reforms is explained in part by the lack of understanding of the context of the original reforms and how the process of change was designed and managed. These factors are invariably as, if not more, important as the content or structure of the specific reforms themselves.

The UK case study in the box below illustrates the delicate alchemy of engagement, leadership and collaboration, which research by the Institute for Government found to be a vital factor in the more successful reforms. Such experience is hard to distil.

Case study 1: UK reform – Bringing In and Bringing On Talent, 1999–2005¹⁶

The primary purpose of the Bringing In and Bringing On Talent programme was 'to strengthen leadership of the Civil Service across the board' by cultivating talent and building the capability of staff, as well as accessing a wider range of talent from outside the service. Opening up the Civil Service to outsiders was seen as very new and risky at the time, given the norm of a 'career for life' in one organisation.

The-then Cabinet Secretary, Richard Wilson, wanted to give the agenda some structure and push, but understood that it could not be driven by the Cabinet Secretary alone – it had to be 'owned' by permanent secretaries themselves. In April 1999, he created a working group of permanent secretaries and delegated leadership of the group to the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, until around 2002.

The working group developed a vision of what 'success' would look like in 2005 and worked backwards to operationalise how exactly to get there. In this ideal future state, the senior leadership would contain as many women as men, people from a minority ethnic group, disabled people, people who had taken a career break, people who had worked in local government, the voluntary sector or the private sector and people who had a scientific or technological background. Also envisioned was a 'failure' state: here, the senior leadership would still be largely male, from the same backgrounds and almost entirely white.

The working group developed a strategic plan for getting to the desired future state. This consisted of five objectives:

- to provide the individuals for strategic leadership of the Civil Service with relevant experience
- to create a broader-based, more professional civil service
- to spot and develop talent by providing opportunities for people to gain experience in more than one department or outside Whitehall
- to recruit mid-career people to fill specific posts needing outside experience, such as service delivery posts
- to attract a wider, more diverse group at entry level.

The working group deliberately avoided the imposition of specific rules, targets and progress chasing (although they did track progress against objectives), and instead gave departments a menu of options. The rationale was that if departments did 'at least some of them, the whole thing would move in the right direction'.

More generally, the role of the centre was limited to connecting people and sharing best practice between departments in order to accelerate trends already under way.

Subtle incentives demonstrated the importance of outside experience. People started to see that those who had experience from outside were promoted, while those who didn't were prevented from reaching the senior positions that they were seen to be natural successors to. This had a powerful effect and compelled people to get on board with the agenda of promoting secondments and interchange.

Within a couple of years, there were a number of visible 'quick wins'. By 2002, two-thirds of senior vacancies were filled from outside the Civil Service, an increase of 88% from 2000.

Within just a few years, the diversity of the Civil Service was significantly changed, and the reform actions became embedded. Although the reform project team was wound up swiftly, the reform actions continued to be pursued and were subsumed within new agendas. All the key themes are thoroughly embedded in the Civil Service Capabilities Plan, first published in 2013.*

*For more information, see www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-capabilities-plan

5. Success factors for centre-of-government reforms

The authors developed an initial set of success factors for centre-of-government reforms through desk research and workshops with practitioners and stakeholders. This work drew on a mix of the first author's experience, NSGI practitioner reflection, case studies drawn from the NSGI portfolio and lessons from research into aid interventions in developing countries (especially centre-of-government reforms).

Their desk research looked at governance and centre-of-government reforms from six additional perspectives, with the aim of validating and enriching the success factors. The authors drew heavily on the research base of the Institute for Government, particularly the second author's research into reform, change leadership and capability, but also the Institute's extensive work on policymaking.

The six perspectives were:

- externally supported interventions in developing countries
- civil service reform and leading change in the UK Civil Service
- policy development and implementation in the UK
- comparative public management reform
- capability building and organisational learning
- effectiveness of advisory and consulting models.

Three categories emerged from this work, shown below. The categories interact and do not represent a linear process to be followed. They provide a framework and mindset that needs to be applied throughout an engagement.

- Entry, context, local ownership and iteration
 - Establish the relationships and trust needed to create entry points for a project
 - Take time to understand and adapt to the context, drivers and local political dynamics that influence the pace and direction of change
 - Ensure local ownership by making the project relevant to local priorities or problems, brokering local leadership of the changes and working with the politics
 - Facilitate an iterative problem-solving process
- People, learning and capability building
 - Make careful and well-supported use of expert civil servants, advisers and consultants
 - Learn by doing, working and reflecting with respected peers
 - Build capability by changing patterns of work and behaviour
- Design
 - Design of the change and implementation is crucial to delivery
 - Be selective and critical when drawing on UK experience and other good practice

Some of the success factors make the case for how donors and advisers approach early engagement in countries when exploring possible interventions; others underpin the way of

working throughout an engagement. There are important lessons for how outside advisers assess and improve their practice. There are also implications for how the UK Government prioritises, monitors and evaluates international support for public service reform and governance. Figure 4 shows the validation of the success factors by the six perspectives.

Figure 4: Success factors for centre-of-government reforms – validation by the six perspectives

There was very strong reinforcement of some common success factors across the six perspectives.

	PERSPECTIVE					
	Externally supported interventions in developing countries	Civil service reform and leading change in the UK Civil Service	Policy development and implementation in the UK	Comparative public management reform	Capability building and organisational learning	Effectiveness of advisory and consulting models
CATEGORY 1: ENTRY, CONTEXT, LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND ITERATION						
Establish the relationships and trust needed to create entry points for a project	●	●	●			
Take time to understand and adapt to the context, drivers and local political dynamics that influence the pace and direction of change	●	●	●	●		●
Ensure local ownership by making the project relevant to local priorities, brokering local leadership and working with the politics	●	●	●		●	●
Facilitate an iterative problem-solving process	●	●	●		●	●
CATEGORY 2: PEOPLE, LEARNING AND CAPABILITY BUILDING						
Make careful and well-supported use of expert civil servants, advisers and consultants					●	●
Learn by doing, working and reflecting with respected peers		●			●	●
Build capability by changing patterns of work and behaviour	●	●			●	●
CATEGORY 3: DESIGN						
Design of the change and implementation is crucial to delivery	●	●	●	●		●
Be selective and critical in drawing on UK experience and other good practice	●	●		●		

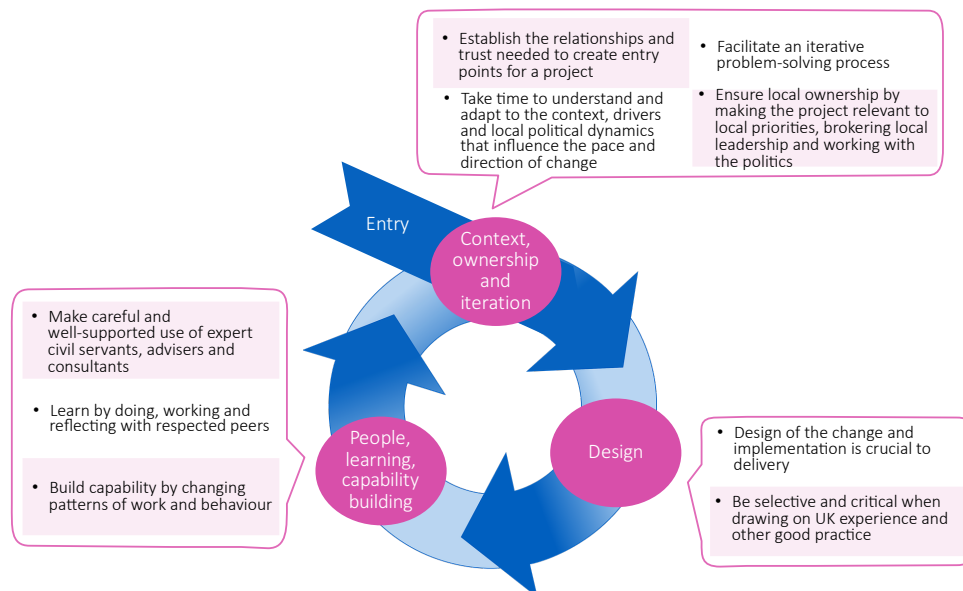
Source: Analysis by Peter Thomas

The success factors map easily onto the three elements of the NSGI approach (see Figure 5). They are widely substantiated by experience and research in the UK and internationally and will be familiar to reform practitioners in the UK and overseas. However, they are too rarely applied. Incentives of donor programmes of support to public/civil service reform often work against such an approach by having:

- rigid programme plans
- log frames
- predetermined ‘problems’ and activities
- unrealistic timescales
- overambitious expectations.

Figure 5: How the success factors relate to each other

The three elements and the success factors are not sequential. Instead, they provide a way of thinking, and key questions and challenges, to guide the NSGI through an engagement.



Source: Analysis by the authors

The remainder of this report explores the nature of each success factor, and how they play out in practice. This is illustrated using examples from the NSGI project portfolio.

Entry, context, local ownership and iteration

Establish the relationships and trust needed to create entry points for a project

If an outside adviser is to develop a project with any prospects of success, they will invariably need project sponsors and individuals within the recipient government and civil service who will be the catalyst for change, and who will own and champion the ambitions of the project. The challenge is to establish relationships and trust with those whose permission, support or action will be needed to agree a focus for a project that will have local salience and local ownership.

Sometimes it is about getting a foot in the door, which then allows the adviser to identify and engage with the right mix of senior leaders. This can be a slow, episodic process often demanding multiple meetings over months, and careful relationship building, often by a resident adviser.

The experience, mindset and values of external advisers, practitioners and experts are a critical factor in creating trust and relationships. The choice to require development and change experience among the core NSGI civil service advisers is designed to provide the right blend of understanding of how change happens in organisations in a development setting. Their mindset needs to be to build relationships, trust, engagement and ownership. They are looking to develop projects that will help to build sustainable capability in the host government. Other civil service peers and experts are selected and coached to respond to local context and politics, and display humility about the value and applicability of approaches developed in the UK.

Donors also need to take a relatively subtle view of 'local leadership' as they identify which relationships are needed to establish a firm foundation for developing a project. '[T]he starting point is a genuine effort to seek out existing capacities, perceptions of problems and ideas about solutions, and to enter into some sort of relationship with leaders who are motivated to deploy these capabilities'.¹⁷

Case study 2: Ghana Ministry of Health – building trust and insight through an embedded practitioner

At the request of the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Ghana, the NSGI managed the recruitment and secondment of a UK Department of Health official as a resident adviser to strengthen MoH stewardship and governance of its agencies, and improve selected areas of the health sector. This request reflected some MoH frustration at previous technical assistance that had not provided sufficient appreciation of how governments work, respecting local priorities and balancing political and technical imperatives. By becoming embedded in the MoH as a colleague and building relationships of trust with officials at all levels, the Resident Adviser became 'one of our own'.

The trust built gave the Resident Adviser access to and insights into the real challenges and windows of opportunity to improve the ministry's business. As a civil servant and under the NSGI non-commercial model, the Resident Adviser took a cautious approach

to mobilising additional technical assistance that would be unlikely to provide value and influenced donors to be more realistic in their expectations about the influence of external actors in delivering systemic change in the absence of a locally led change vision. The Resident Adviser's engagement in specific MoH projects modelled and helped to establish different working habits such as formal reporting, collecting and analysing data, minute writing and (sometimes) follow-up on decisions. Although small in relation to the many systemic challenges of the health sector in Ghana, this approach has increased the capability of MoH civil servants to translate plans into implementation, and take responsibility for their work, which is essential if internally driven change is to be successfully delivered in the future.

It is imperative and unavoidable to work with the politics. At times this might require a degree of challenge to how the politics plays out in practice. External advisers always need to keep key people on board. This demands an understanding of the incentives of players – political and official – at different times and as stakeholders change.

An initial understanding of the local context will need to be deepened by answering some critical questions about the nature of local stakeholders:

- How far are those leading or championing the proposition or idea seen to be actively committed and engaged?
- What are their histories, perspectives, priorities and motivations?
- How far do leaders have the authority and resources needed to exert influence and drive the change required?
- Is there a wider leadership coalition developing around the change so that it is resilient to key transitions in reform leadership?
- Are there the necessary connections, support, alliances and relationships to get the change off the ground?

Frequent transitions in governments, ministers, senior officials and advisers invariably threaten direction, change the leadership coalition and undermine commitment to a course of action:

[E]ven in the most favourable circumstances (unified, centralized state, strong executive, long period in power) conditions may change ... an election intervenes and a new party comes to power. Or political leadership loses interest as other issues press for attention. Or the implementation capacity is insufficient, and well-meant reforms get bogged down.¹⁸

Therefore, it is important not to rely on a single relationship to back a project or change – investing efforts and hope into one relationship is risky. There may be someone who is especially helpful or even critical for early phases of change. Their personal leadership may bring early benefits but could be a fatal weakness later. Furthermore, the most carefully constructed support can disappear overnight due to events, elections and politics.

Continuous assessment and reassessment is needed, especially after major transitions such as elections, as we often have to start again with a new set of key people. The wider the coalition of support and ownership that has been created for a project, the more likely it is to survive such changes.

Case study 3: Ghana – loss of local ownership following a change of stakeholders

The NSGI has provided support to the Office of the President (OoP) in Ghana to strengthen the centre of government to drive the delivery of presidential priorities. During cautious initial engagement in the first year, NSGI core advisers provided advice to OoP officials and the Cabinet Secretary, and facilitated meetings in Ghana and the UK to support the OoP to articulate what ‘problem’ they wanted to solve, what the ‘demand’ for support was and how the NSGI could best provide this support.

Half way through this process the key driver and sponsor of the practitioner-to-practitioner engagement approach within the OoP left and key stakeholders changed. As a result, so did the relationship and dynamics between the parties. The NSGI underestimated the impact of these changes by not reflecting sufficiently on the different incentives and perspectives brought by the new stakeholders. As a consequence, from a ‘demand-driven’ engagement based on mutual trust and the NSGI providing advice as a critical friend to a locally led change process, the relationship became increasingly perceived locally as a ‘supply-driven’ activity imposed by the donor/ NSGI to show results. The practitioner-to-practitioner approach became devalued and the NSGI found itself working primarily with externally engaged local consultants rather than officials from the Ghanaian government.

Trying to pick the right point to propose an intervention or project is invariably a critical judgement call for the NSGI. In practice it can take a long time from the initial engagement – even years – to get to the point of an appropriately defined project or programme.

But in reality the starting point for many projects is a pragmatic imperative to demonstrate results and deliver predetermined programme spend and outputs. External advisers are invariably left trying to maintain an imperfect balance between the value of enduring results and the necessity for quicker deliverables and milestones that reassure donors (and host governments) by demonstrating progress.

Take time to understand and adapt to the context, drivers and local political dynamics that influence the pace and direction of change

Research into development interventions to build state capability, and the Institute for Government’s work on successful UK Civil Service reforms, both emphasise the crucial importance of tailoring interventions and reforms to the local context:

Donors and their partners need to be armed with the best knowledge they can muster about local political economy dynamics (and this needs to be constantly renewed, not limited to undertaking formal analysis as a one-off exercise) ... this includes a sense of history (awareness of what has happened previously in a particular country and in the world); and some in-depth understanding of country and sector context, including embedded structures, local informal institutions, relationships and actors.¹⁹

The single most important finding of our research is that success depends on awareness, understanding and insight. In each of the [successful] reforms we explored, leaders understood the context and environment in which they were operating, set the ambition accordingly and had the right leadership and reform design in place to drive desired changes.²⁰

Context is not just confined to the host government. It includes donors, the UK Government and various departments within the UK Government who may all have quite distinctive perspectives and priorities. Public opinion and political imperatives shape why, where and how projects are developed. These imperatives can often drive commissioners and providers of programmes towards an overly quick definition of project outputs and milestones in a way that is at odds with some of the factors that seem most critical to the success of projects. The challenge is to balance these competing priorities and pressures rather than wish them away.

External advisers will always need to understand the context for and drivers of the initial proposition or idea that has triggered the engagement. This includes:

- where and how decisions are really taken and followed through
- how resources are allocated
- where power, authority and leverage lie in the system.

This knowledge is key to future efforts to mobilise resources, decisions and action in support of an intervention. Formal governance is less the issue than getting appropriate permission and sponsorship.

Some research into successful aid interventions has concluded that it is not possible to work effectively in isolation from politics:

[D]onor agencies [need] to facilitate all the different aspects of thinking and working politically. For example, conducting formal political economy analysis and then trying to bolt it on to conventional donor-led practices will not work any more than trying to promote iterative problem-solving without also facilitating approaches that are politically smart, and locally led.²¹

In many states, there are patronage-driven political systems that are hard to access for those outside the ruling elite: 'Most states (or proto-states) for most of history have been ruled by elites who pursue their own interest and those of their fellow elites, their families and extended groups. Such elites have used and continue to use the bureaucracy as a tool for achieving at least some of their own aims'.²² In such settings it is especially critical to know the role of the government bureaucracy: 'How does the political settlement play out? What does the political elite require of the bureaucracy? Is it a vehicle for patronage? Is it a means to keep the peace? Or is it seen as a developmental tool?'²³

Many donors have bolted political economy analysis (PEA) onto programmes in an attempt to better understand context: 'In some instances, there has been a problematic tendency to view PEA as a comfort blanket – a bounded activity donors carry out to tick a box and move on – rather than as an on-going process of thinking and reflection'.²⁴

But this is insufficient. An ongoing and evolving understanding of context should be at the heart of a programme: '[I]t is beneficial if staff on the ground take part in the analysis, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility in terms of seeing through its implications ... [but] staff in-country ... [need to be] supported and given sufficient time and resources to be able to do it'.²⁵

Case study 4: Cyprus – adapting to a difficult context to create ownership and trust

The NSGI has been supporting the Government of Cyprus to reform its public administration as part of the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding on Specific Economic Policy Conditionality (MoU) – agreed between the Government of Cyprus, the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (the 'Institutions' or more colloquially the 'Troika') – to deliver a set of fiscal consolidation reforms aimed at overcoming short- and medium-term financial, fiscal and structural challenges. The initial focus was a major system-wide human resource management reform programme (in co-operation with the World Bank), local government reform and a review of the Registrar of Companies and Official Receiver. The constructive and collegial relationship built during this first phase resulted in a request for further support to advise on improving the effectiveness and capability of three 'political' ministries: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Justice and subsequently the Ministry of Energy, Industry, Commerce and Tourism.

Understanding not just the local but also the international context within which this intervention was set was critical. While the MoU was agreed by the Government of Cyprus, more broadly the terms were viewed by many as the imposition of a set of reforms aimed at downsizing the state. This, in turn, made understanding the political and cultural dynamics and historical influences even more important. Issues such as levels of political involvement in the Civil Service, culturally embedded practices of granting favours (*Rusfeti*) and high political salience attached to maintaining the 'social dialogue' with trades unions made any reforms, in particular on pay and performance management, difficult to pursue (and these were treated with deep scepticism).

Governance arrangements for the programme – with a heavy emphasis on joint working with 'task forces' made up of representatives of the ministries being reviewed – to a certain extent mitigated the fact that the overall programme was far from locally owned. The NSGI sought to exploit this and worked closely with the task forces and supported a bottom-up and iterative approach to fulfilling the terms of reference for each of the studies. In this respect, the NSGI's employment of UK civil servants to supplement the core NSGI advisory team helped to foster an atmosphere of co-production and ownership. A bi-product of this approach was to build underlying capability within a 'learning by doing' environment, which contributed to the build-up of 'enabling routines'/changing patterns of behaviour as Cyprus implemented these reforms.

The questions developed through the Institute for Government's research into successful civil service reforms provide a good structure for probing the presented issue or problem that is often the trigger for the NSGI's initial scoping of a potential project:

- How clear is the initial proposition or idea, and the rationale for it?
- Is there a credible and influential senior leader who owns it?
- How well does the proposition or idea fit with the interests, concerns and priorities of key players – politicians, officials and other stakeholders (domestic and international)?
- How ambitious is the proposition or idea: scale, pace, scope?

The way these questions are answered in practice is intertwined with the crucial first steps in developing relationships with key people. At this stage, it is more helpful to establish a good sense of the desired direction of travel rather than to encourage or reinforce expectations of the specific form and outputs of a potential project.

Case study 5: Zambia – politically informed stakeholder analysis in action

The NSGI is working in Zambia to support reform and decentralisation of the human resource management and development function in government. At the outset, the NSGI team spent two weeks with the Cabinet Secretary Technical Committee for the reform, working to develop a stakeholder engagement strategy. This helped to surface the relationships between different constituencies and personalities in the Government of the Republic of Zambia and outside:

- Who influences who?
- Who are powerful stakeholders who are not directly in the chain of command but need to be co-opted to support the process?
- Who outside government yields influence at central and decentralised levels?
- What is the role and influence of civil society organisations and parliamentarians?

This exercise provided useful insights into the dynamics of power and influence, which informed the design of the programme. It was important to establish the process in a safe, unthreatening environment, which enabled Zambian colleagues to make their own judgements and share their perceptions about power bases and analysis on those who had interest in/influence over the implementation of the reform. These perceptions will be retested/reviewed as the programme of support develops and dynamics change.

This initial exercise revealed a degree of tension and dysfunctionality in the inter-relationships of senior powerful constituencies, which threatened the successful development and implementation of the reform. By responding constructively and openly to challenges identified by colleagues in government, and being realistic about the ability to change fundamentally such dynamics, the NSGI has established a relationship of trust and openness. The Government of the Republic of Zambia has decided that in implementing this sensitive reform, it does not require support from an external team of expert 'consultants'. It prefers to discuss and find solutions with fellow civil servants who understand government, its tensions and contradictions and respect the 'local pace' of change.

Understanding and adapting to the context is not a one-off exercise. Research by the Institute for Government on the lifecycle of reforms emphasises the need to stand back and take stock of how the context is changing. Even the most successful reforms need to be refocused or refreshed or they will tail off.²⁶

An outside adviser will never have much more than an imperfect and temporary understanding of the context. Throughout the course of a project or programme, it will need to develop and draw on broader networks and contacts to help continually test and reappraise the fit of the project/programme with the different aspects of its context.

Case study 6: Bahrain – collaborative redefinition of a problem to ensure that the right solutions are adopted and owned locally

The NSGI programme in Bahrain provides support to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to help it to reform its court administration systems and improve leadership and policy co-ordination in order to improve the speed and quality of the delivery of justice. The initial programme request was based on delivering a pre-set solution with a weak evidence base or understanding of the underlying problem. Rather than delivering a set of activities that were perceived as a solution, the NSGI and the UK MoJ practitioners worked closely with peers in Bahrain over six months to define and redefine the problem. This engagement resulted in the redesign of the programme of support that now tackles the core problems and aims to find appropriate solutions in a collaborative way.

An example is the improvement of the process of recording the official outcome of a court hearing, including the production, filing and distribution of court orders and directions for any future hearings and, at the conclusion of the case, the judge's verdict.

Initial data showed that this process in the lower civil courts (10 courts in total) was taking between six and eight weeks. Court managers and employees were under pressure to improve the service and could only think of the one solution that they had always practised – that is, to employ more staff and create additional office space. However, this time, due to budgetary constraints this was not possible. The NSGI Resident Adviser (an operations manager from the HM Courts & Tribunals Service in the UK) worked with the court administrators to explore ways to identify other viable options through providing practical support to undertaking a business process mapping exercise of their current practices.

This exercise surfaced aspects of behaviours, customs and practices that had never been explicitly articulated nor questioned. It provided the basis for agreeing to a reorganisation of the roles and responsibilities within the lower civil courts and reduced by nearly 50% the number of teams with officials trained and mentored to become multi-skilled. The Resident Adviser supported the implementation by providing practical advice, coaching and mentoring of the staff, which took five months from the delivery of the training to the implementation of the new working practices. The process time for the recording of the official outcome of a court hearing has been reduced to two weeks at no additional cost to the MoJ.

The process of redesign and practical problem solving has incrementally built trust between the NSGI, MoJ officials and the political cadre, leading to engagement by the NSGI in more 'front-line' and politically sensitive problems in the area of justice administration.

Ensure local ownership by making the project relevant to local priorities or problems, brokering local leadership of the changes and working with the politics

Reform is a messy, imperfect business. Advisers are often brought in at a point where a proposition, idea or project has already taken shape. But what is wanted often isn't what is really meant, let alone what is needed. The presenting idea, problem or reform too often obscures the more fundamental drivers and issues – and usually does not describe what success would really look like.

For almost any issue or problem in government, there are invariably multiple interests, vested interests and a multitude of players. So an open-minded, engaging and collaborative effort to re-scope and reframe the issues in focus is needed in order to develop a project that is seen to be highly relevant to local priorities and problems:

All of the leaders and teams in [the successful reforms] ... either started with or created a shared analysis of what the problems and challenges were and established the need for reform. This usually laid the fundamental basis for gaining wider support and engagement in the design and delivery of the reform. Without this there is little point in proceeding further, although this happens surprisingly often.²⁷

Some of the most influential researchers on the somewhat dismal record of development initiatives to build state capability have concluded that interventions would best begin by identifying high-priority local problems rather than by offering ready-made solutions from abroad:

Efforts to build state capability should begin by asking 'what is the problem?' instead of 'which solution should we adopt?' Focusing on prevailing problems is the most direct way of redressing the bias to externally prescribed forms towards internal needs for functionality; it ensures that problems are locally defined, not externally determined, and puts the onus on performance, not compliance.²⁸

Case-based research looking at patterns of success from aid interventions concluded that they should be:

Locally owned – that is, focused on issues and problems that have local salience, both for potential beneficiaries and for at least some individuals and groups with the power to support, influence or block change ... Addressing development problems as they are posed in context, with the resources available in that context, is a crucial first step in identifying development interventions that have the desirable combination of impact and tractability.²⁹

However locally salient the issues in focus are, the solutions and interventions must also be seen to be locally led. Research into seven relatively successful aid interventions found that:

... in all seven cases, the interventions addressed issues with real local salience and the solutions were locally negotiated and delivered because project managers allowed local actors to take the lead. Formally, this happened in a variety of ways ... but across the cases there was a common willingness of the ultimate funding body to take a back seat. Donors provided external stimulus and had their own vision of the kind of change they were seeking to support, but they avoided dominating either the agenda (in the sense of specifying what to do) or the process (specifying how to do it). This was critical in freeing the front-line personnel to explore pathways towards changes that were both worthwhile and tractable.³⁰

Brokering the right blend of political and official leadership to support a potential intervention is an imprecise and perilous business. There is no universal prescription. Sometimes a project may just need permission or blessing from some senior leaders. In other cases, it may need much more active engagement, championing and sponsorship from others. There invariably needs to be a mix of political and official engagement, and one often helps the other.

While many reforms and interventions are managerial in nature, the role of political leadership must not be ignored – however complicating and messy it may be. Research by the Institute for Government into reform and change found political support – from passive permission to active leadership – to be a critical aspect of success or failure. Many senior civil servants are hard-wired to respond to ministers and leading politicians, so politics is always either a powerful driver of, or barrier to, significant changes:

Being attuned to the concerns, interests and priorities of politicians is critical to making a sound judgment about the extent of political engagement required to make progress. It is important to remain aware of how political involvement can also hinder efforts; it may therefore be necessary to 'disconnect' the reform from particular politicians or parties.³¹

Secretaries of state provide high-level sponsorship and direction for flagship policies... Junior ministers were generally better placed to guide the process of translating broad policy goals into policy that can be implemented, and staying close to – but not on top of – departmental officials... Junior ministers also took on pivotal roles in negotiating the boundaries between new policy and other priorities in the department... Wherever aspects of a policy were contentious, junior ministers with good networks beyond government helped implementation to weather opposition or bumps in the road.³²

Case study 7: Ethiopia – building trust and credibility through practitioner-to-practitioner support

Responding to a demand from the-then Minister of Civil Service in Ethiopia for his team to learn from the UK experience of human resource management and development reform, the NSGI worked with the state ministers in the ministry to discuss how UK experience could add value and support their reform agenda.

A competent, resourced and well-managed Job Evaluation and Grading (JEG) team from the Ethiopian Civil Service (approximately 1.3 million employees) had been working for more than five years on a JEG exercise involving the whole Ethiopian Civil Service. This exercise is extremely ambitious and of a much larger scale than anything embarked on in the UK Civil Service for decades.

The NSGI sourced, briefed and accompanied a team of serving civil servants – JEG policy leads from the UK Cabinet Office – who visited Ethiopia to offer peer support as a critical friend and to provide challenge and validate their reform design and implementation plans. The engagement between peers was designed to facilitate mature and honest 'practitioner-to-practitioner' discussions on issues including methodology, technical aspects and implementation challenges. They also tackled sensitive areas such as stakeholder engagement and management. Ethiopian colleagues fed back that they felt 'more confident' that they were on the right track. They found that the validation from experienced practitioners from the UK strengthened their advice to ministers

for a particular course of action. The relationship allowed them the space to discuss differences in opinion on approach among team members in a non-threatening way and understand each other's viewpoints, and created space to consider more strategic and longer-term issues related to the JEG.

The UK JEG team all modelled UK Civil Service values and had excellent 'soft skills' (listening, coaching and the ability to differentiate what from experience would be relevant to the specific context in Ethiopia) as well as technical competence. These skills were crucial to establishing a long-lasting and credible relationship.

The respect and trust created through this support has led to state ministers requesting the NSGI to provide practitioner support through a government-to-government arrangement to implement Ethiopian Civil Service reform priorities as part of the Ethiopian Growth and Transformation Plan 2.

Facilitate an iterative problem-solving process

A key early role is to translate different points, perspectives and imperatives into a common framing of the key issues. This is a process that needs to be carefully facilitated with key players to help them see the issues from different perspectives, including those of front-line staff and citizens.

This facilitation or brokering is a critical part of both the approach and the value that the NSGI aims to bring. It creates local ownership and aims to establish sufficient local leadership to make the changes sustainable beyond the life of the project.

This is inevitably an iterative process. Time is the crucial variable for such engagement. In an ideal world, the first phase of an engagement would suspend expectations on what success looks like and defer detailed specification of the project that is expected to follow. This would allow time both to scope and re-scope the project – and to frame and reframe the issues.

Research into 'politically smart and locally led' interventions makes the case for a distinctive role for external support, one of facilitator and broker. It sets out three imperatives for such a role:

[a]pproaching an issue or challenge from a different perspective – one that recognises that development is a complex and inherently political process in which multiple contending actors seek to assert their interests in diverse societal arenas;

[e]ngaging with a diverse array of relevant actors (including those that may be outside donors' more traditional comfort zone), trying to reconcile them into shared positive outcomes;

[m]oving beyond being purveyors of funds towards enhancing policy dialogue and facilitating/brokering domestic processes of change;³³

The value of facilitating such a process is reinforced by one commentator's reflections on what makes for useful advice and consultancy:

Any [adviser's] usefulness to an organization depends on the degree to which members reach accord on the nature of problems and opportunities and on appropriate corrective actions. Otherwise, the diagnosis won't be accepted, recommendations won't be implemented, and valid data may be withheld. [Most important is the adviser's] ability to design and conduct a process for (1) building an agreement about what steps are necessary and (2) establishing the momentum to see these steps through.³⁴

But this is likely to be a time-consuming and at times unpredictable process:

A lot of iterative problem-solving involves building relationships with major interest groups – brokering relationships and building alliances around common interests were such critical activities in all seven cases [of successful aid interventions] ... What is particularly striking is the amount of time and effort invested in these processes, and the skill and persistence with which they were pursued.³⁵

In the absence of this initial open-minded phase, it is likely that there will be a messier, wasteful and risky path towards the 'right' project, characterised by a series of false starts, missed milestones and disappointments in the initial stages of a prematurely defined project. This may harm relationships and undermine trust. Sometimes projects just need to be unwound and re-scoped to have better prospects of progress and success.

This collaboration must ideally go beyond government and civil servants in order to really understand the issues and develop sustainable solutions:

[Solutions need to be] locally negotiated and delivered – this means giving priority to local leadership and local capacity in the search for solutions to contextually identified problems ... For obvious reasons, locals (broadly defined) are more likely than outsiders to have the motivation, credibility, knowledge and networks to mobilise support, leverage relationships and seize opportunities in ways that qualify as 'politically astute'. Deliberation and negotiation in local networks and organisations are essential in reaching an adequate understanding of complex development problems, and in finding ways of addressing them that are practical, appropriate and sustainable.³⁶

This iterative and exploratory way of working is a substantial deviation from the default methods of many donor-supported programmes and those who deliver them.

The Institute for Government's research into successful policymaking found an open approach to be essential, but this is not established practice in policymaking:

It seems counterintuitive – not least to politicians who have spent years battling to get their hands on the levers of power – but one of the hallmarks of all these policy successes is the extent to which the policy process has been opened out beyond the confines of Whitehall. The policy making norm – internal inception, policy development within government, formulaic consultation, scantily scrutinised legislation and then imposition – is replaced by a much more porous and inclusive process which is an important part of the building of a new consensus.³⁷

This open collaboration is inevitably an iterative process. Time is a crucial ingredient in successful policy implementation:

[N]ot one of these [very successful] policies followed the traditional method of decide, consult, enact and implement on a rushed timetable. Most gave significant time to involve the people who would have to make the change happen. That process in turn helped to move public opinion and create a constituency which would help embed the change in the future.³⁸

Deliberate iteration and experimentation should not be confused with 'making it up as you go along'. Research into international aid interventions that delivered 'better results' concluded:

[T]he results were achieved by a way of working that started with a significant development problem and searched for a workable solution in an iterative, learning-oriented way. None of the initiatives started with a blueprint, applying a known solution mapped out in advance. Project management involved an element of 'muddling through' but this was purposive muddling, with definite goals in mind. It involved experimentation, but this was not random; it was well informed and strategic.³⁹

People, learning and capability building

Make careful and well-supported use of civil servants, advisers and consultants

It has proved hard to lead successful reform within a government such as the one in the UK with a highly capable civil service that scores highly on most international benchmarks. So it should be no surprise that efforts by outsiders to support public service reform in international governments in a quite different context have a very patchy record of success. The hope that external advisers should succeed where officials and politicians within government have so often failed is faint.

The NSGI often finds that its initial counterparts in government and civil service are teams composed of experts and consultants rather than civil servants. In this case, there is a danger that development interventions end up building the capability of external experts and consultants, rather than the capability of civil servants and government advisers.

The inevitable pressure for progress and outputs increases the likelihood of deploying external support simply to substitute for the lack of local capability. This may deliver some short-term progress towards targets and milestones; but it will not address the underlying capability problem, and means that the system will revert to business as usual as soon as that temporary fix is taken away.

Case study 8: Ghana – the use of consultants by government

As part of the work with the Office of the President (OoP) in Ghana, the NSGI recruited a delivery expert from the UK Cabinet Office to support the carrying out of a pilot 'service review' in a specific priority area of the health sector. The aim was to build the capacity of the centre of government to drive delivery of a presidential priority through engagement in a practical activity where tools, methods and approaches would be co-developed to fit the Ghanaian context and then replicated to other priorities. In the event, the Ghanaian team selected by the OoP to implement the review and work alongside the Cabinet Office civil servant was composed mostly of externally recruited local consultants. Because of the nature of the review team and its internal dynamics (which the NSGI did not appreciate at the outset), there was a limited return in terms of a transfer of skills and knowledge to the OoP, undermining the sustainability and replicability of the model in government as well as the NSGI practitioner-to-practitioner approach. Despite this, the product of the review provided the President with an evidence base with which to engage the Ministry of Health in developing an improved approach to one of the top priorities in the health sector.

In many projects, outside advisers are inevitably reliant on local experts and consultants who are an integral part of the office of government they are supporting.

Sourcing suitable experts and consultants to support projects has proved one of the more challenging aspects of some projects. They should be selected for their skills and way of working, not because they speak the language of the donor. Above all, they should be committed to and capable of working on the project in a way that is consistent with the success factors described in this chapter.

This demands particular capability among external advisers, practitioners, civil service secondees and local recruited staff. Research into more successful aid interventions concluded that such people need:

... a high level of both political information and political astuteness. It mattered that the process of finding solutions was undertaken by individuals who were both knowledgeable about, and skilled at operating in, the relevant context. It was this awareness and ability that allowed them to identify the opportunities and obstacles, and to make good judgments about what was both useful in the particular development context and likely to work.⁴⁰

It is obvious, but by no means always the case, that external advisers and consultants who the NSGI engages should work collaboratively, add value, be seen to deliver results and build the capacity of the client government to sustain the gains from the project. This is often quite different from how experts and consultants are used to being commissioned.

Left to their own devices, such experts and consultants in many cases tend to default to business as usual – focusing on a narrow interpretation of specified products and outputs at the expense of engagement, capability building and impact. At the worst they develop a separate line into the most senior politician or official, bypassing the parts of the civil service whose capability needs to be built.

A common critique of consultancy and advisory business models is that they fail to work collaboratively or build the capacity of the client. This criticism applies just as much to those advising international governments on reform and governance:

[C]onsultants come up with solutions to client problems that intellectually seem to be the answer, but the consultants don't take into account all the changes the client would have to make for the solution to work. The consultant assumes the client will make those changes happen. But, of course, if the client does not have enough competence, skill, and motivation to do so, the ultimate aim of the consultant's project will not be realized.⁴¹

One researcher's 'five fatal flaws of management consulting' echo the criticisms made by many donor-funded development interventions:

- a project defined in terms of the consultant's contributions or products (and not in terms of specific client results to be achieved)
- a project scope based on subject matter logic (and not on client readiness for change)
- a one-big-solution design (rather than incremental successes)
- hand-offs back and forth (instead of client–consultant partnership)
- a labour-intensive use of consultants (instead of leveraged use).⁴²

Continuity of external advisers has been a key factor in successful NSGI projects. It is self-evident that each time a key adviser moves on from a project, relationships, understanding and trust need to be rebuilt.

Case study 9: Cyprus – ensuring that expert civil servant advisers add value

In Cyprus, the NSGI worked with nine UK expert civil servants drawn from different departments to provide peer support to ministries conducting a functional analysis of their ministry. Before travelling to Cyprus, the NSGI inducted the experts on:

- the context and scope of the work and their role
- the facilitative and collegial approach to be used
- when and how to use UK and other international examples
- how to relate to peers in the Government of Cyprus
- the values and behaviours expected throughout the assignment.

NSGI core advisers maintained the relationship with the Office of the Reform and with the Ministry of Finance as programme sponsors and engaged with the Minister and Permanent Secretary of each ministry to:

- secure collaboration and ownership
- hear expectations
- agree the approach and methods of engagement
- identify a representative counterpart team.

NSGI core advisers accompanied the expert civil servants during all visits and worked collaboratively with them. Positive feedback, passed through diplomatic and ministerial channels, was received for this approach and for the outcomes.

Learn by doing, working and reflecting with respected peers

At the heart of the NSGI's practice is the belief that it is in the business of helping people learn through doing, and helping them to reflect on what they have learned through doing.

The NSGI aims to model constructive challenge and honest reflection in how it works with governments. It helps those it works with to learn productive ways of reflecting and learning as a team and across government. The authors think that the dynamics of the practitioner-to-practitioner engagement that the NSGI favours are much more conducive to this than the standard consulting or technical expert models.

Case study 10: Zambia – learning by adapting UK models, co-designing and practising

Development of a 'new human resources case flow process' was identified by the Cabinet Secretary Technical Committee in Zambia as a key driver for decentralising the human resources function to lower levels of government.

The NSGI encouraged the core team established in the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate the implementation of the human resources reform to consider the importance, purpose and outcomes sought from the exercise. Initially the NSGI explored the level of experience and capacity in the team using the staged capacity-building model. Although

the team appeared to have some experience in business process re-engineering, it came to light that an external consultant had taken them through a process and left them a set of complex slides documenting the methodology, which none of them felt confident in replicating.

The NSGI provided some examples of mapping processes in some UK change programmes, emphasising the basic principles rather than detailed methodology. The team, assisted by the NSGI, brainstormed elements of a methodology and considered what would and would not work. This resulted in a locally developed process mapping exercise that was highly visual and included participation from a range of stakeholders from different institutions. The NSGI advisers facilitated the first few exercises, including reflection sessions on the learning from and re-adaptation of the process. Following this, the sessions to introduce this process to colleagues in government were led by members of the core team with some support from the NSGI. After each session, the NSGI and the team continued to reflect on and review the workshop dynamics, the level of engagement of participants, how the facilitation went and changes to the methodology if necessary. After about five weeks of intense activity, the team members' self-assessment of their capacity had changed to one where they saw themselves as confident and skilled to run the exercise independently and they were facilitating the sessions alone.

Some capability-building research provides actionable insights into how organisational capability is built. One researcher looked at some of the ways in which biopharmaceuticals create organisational knowledge and capabilities. He identified 'learning by doing' and 'learning before doing' (modelling and simulation) as the key ways in which organisations learn, with the former usually being more important. 'The seeds of today's capabilities are sown in yesterday's experience', but not all experience produces learning: some experience is more useful than others, and organisational routines play a big part in assimilating that experience into knowledge.⁴³

This resonates strongly with the conclusions drawn by the proponents of the 'problem-driven, iterative adaptation' and 'politically smart, locally led' approaches. They may use different language from the 'routines' of the capability literature but the best of the development research on capability talks of 'bricolage' – the 'process by which internal agents "make do" with resources at hand to foster new (or "hybrid") structures and mechanisms'.⁴⁴ They are describing the same process. They propose that interventions should involve 'active, ongoing and experiential learning and the iterative feedback of lessons into new solutions'.⁴⁵

This kind of experimentation ... is about trying a real intervention in a real context, allowing on-the-ground realities to shape content in the process. This is also not about proving that specific ideas or mechanisms universally 'work' or do not work. Rather, it is about allowing a process to emerge through which attributes from various ideas can coalesce into new hybrids. This requires seeing lessons learned about potential combinations as the key emerging result. The necessary experimentation processes require mechanisms that capture lessons and ensure these are used to inform future activities.⁴⁶

This approach requires permissive leadership and a preparedness to iterate towards a solution rather than set a prescribed path and interventions. It fits well with the imperatives of engagement, collaboration and experimentation that so much of the problem-solving and politically smart, locally led arguments prescribe. It fits less

well, however, with the somewhat theoretical and mechanical processes of assessing, monitoring and evaluating projects.

Institute for Government research into successful policy implementation further emphasises the crucial role that continuous reflection and learning plays:

Being as rigorous as possible in setting out the design of a policy is important but so is recognising that ... '[t]here are only so many things you can fix before you start' ... that not everything can or should be specified at an early stage, and that government needs to continue to learn and adapt as implementation moves forward.⁴⁷

The research concluded that it will not happen by accident:

[L]earning and improvement does not just happen. The best implementation develops strong and consistent mechanisms to get a clear view of what is happening and to inform decisions about what needs to change.⁴⁸

[L]earning occurs by convening teams to share their insights and experiences. This requires conditions in which they can be open about failure, and challenge each other to explain or justify a particular course of action.⁴⁹

The accelerated learning movement in the United States takes a more person-focused approach, drawing on cognitive science to break away from traditional workplace learning methods. Their approach is consistent with the conclusions of capability-building research and boils down to five principles – that people learn best:

- in a positive physical, emotional and social learning environment, one that is both relaxed and stimulating
- when they are totally and actively involved and take full responsibility for their own learning – it is not a spectator sport but a participatory one
- in an environment of collaboration – all good learning tends to be social
- when they have a rich variety of learning options that allows them to use all their senses and exercise their preferred learning style
- from doing the work itself in a continual process of real-world immersion, feedback, reflection, evaluation and re-immersion.⁵⁰

These principles encourage the use of peers and practitioners rather than experts or academics as a source of ideas and insights. They demand collaboration and dialogue between peers as equals rather than a lecture from one to another. While the evidence base is mixed, reflecting the wide range of 'peer-to-peer' interventions,⁵¹ the argument for well-matched peers providing a superior basis for knowledge transfer is convincing if still short on evidence:

[P]eers needed to be specifically chosen and matched—not just appointed to engage. The major factors that they mentioned included facing common problems and challenges and having common goals and tasks. This conclusion is supported by the research literature which shows that these kinds of similarities promote trust and a feeling of comfort and equality among peer learners, which allow for more effective transfer of tacit knowledge between peers (they all feel that their experiences will be understood by the others, and kept in confidence, because they have shared risk profiles and difficulties).⁵²

The approach the NSGI has developed is to use these practitioners, experts and peers to support a dialogue about why and how reforms of interest worked in their context and time in the UK – and to explore how best, or indeed whether, the principles, methods and

practice of those reforms can be adapted to fit with the local priorities and context of governments elsewhere.

The first author has found that this practitioner-to-practitioner dialogue creates the time and confidence that enables recipient governments to borrow, reject, adapt or intelligently apply selectively the principles and practice of UK and other international reforms.

The NSGI is very careful not to prescribe UK models as the one true solution in the way that too many global institutions and consultancies do. Later in this report, the authors reflect on the pitfalls of lifting reforms or models – often poorly understood – and implanting them elsewhere.

Case study 11: Kurdistan Regional Government – learning by adapting and applying UK models to local problems

The NSGI worked with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq for more than seven years. The KRG funded the support by the NSGI directly and sponsorship and direction in the KRG came from the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Planning, the Minister of Finance and the Head of Cabinet, representing the three main parties in government. The NSGI worked on successive programmes to develop the capability of directors-general and directors in ministries and governorates to implement service improvements in priority services. The overall aim was to improve services to the citizens in order to enhance the stability and legitimacy of government.

From 2012, using its practitioner-to-practitioner approach, the NSGI supported KRG officials to build their capability through practical learning, supporting them to:

- identify core problems
- develop options for solutions
- build constituencies of support across the ministries
- present a case for change
- deliver on the chosen solution.

Part of the practical work was a joint 'review' of the frozen and imported food chain, during which the tools and methods used by the UK Prime Minister's Delivery Unit were adapted to the context. The different approaches, methods and working routines were developed through a mixture of formal training, fieldwork and practical improvement projects across government.

Some participants quickly applied what they had learnt in their own ministry. For example, in early 2015, the Minister of Peshmerga [Armed Forces] had become concerned about the quality of food, including cases of suspected food poisoning for its troops on the front line stationed against ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). An NSGI-trained director was asked to investigate the issues and report back. He selected a team of colleagues and, using the methods, tools and routines that he had already practised, they:

- visited the field to understand the problem and its impact first-hand
- gathered information and samples of food from different locations

- audited the food supply chain with the support of colleagues in finance and procurement
- engaged from the start with stakeholders who would need to take decisions
- identified the problems at the different levels
- identified a set of practical solutions.

After just over a month, they presented options and a strong case for change to the Minister and his advisers, who endorsed most of the proposed solutions, resulting in improved transportation, quality and storage of food going to the front lines. Subsequently, the Minister endorsed the proposal to establish a quality control and review team in the ministry, which has since initiated and conducted a number of projects to improve the provision and quality of other goods and services, such as clothing, equipment and boots to the front line.

Note: The relationship between the international team of the National School of Government and the KRG started in 2008, and was originally focused on the provision of training on quality assurance and project management. On the creation of the NSGI in 2012, the engagement evolved to focus on supporting the centre of government to drive service improvements across prime ministerial priorities.

Build capability by changing patterns of work and behaviour

Lasting reform inevitably demands the building of capability that outlasts the immediate reform programme. Research by the Institute for Government into successful reforms found that specific reforms transformed the UK Civil Service by introducing new behaviours, attitudes, routines, assets and ways of working.⁵³

External advisers must aim to design projects as a means to co-develop powerful new ways of working, change behaviour and acquire tools that will build the wider capability of the government. Some of these may be adapted from successful reforms elsewhere in the region or internationally. But they must always be modified to the local context. To do this requires an in-depth understanding of the context in which they were developed and successful, and how that differs from the context into which they are being adopted and adapted.

The relatively neglected literature on capability building draws significantly on behavioural studies of organisations and has coined the term 'organisational routines' – 'repetitive patterns of activity that constitute the ways in which the organisation has learned to co-ordinate its activities'.⁵⁴ 'Behaviours are based on routines; organizations learn these routines by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour – includes structure of beliefs, culture, codes that reinforce those routines. They are capable of surviving considerable turnover in individual actors'.⁵⁵

Researchers have distinguished 'enabling routines', which underpin continuous improvement and even transformation, from 'defensive routines', which perpetuate the status quo.⁵⁶ It is the degree to which people take on new (transformative) routines and apply them, develop them and teach them to others that is most relevant to the design of change and capability-building interventions.

A good example is the way the twin reforms of Public Service Agreements and the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PDMU) in the UK had a lasting impact on the UK Civil Service. Institute for Government research found that this model fundamentally changed many senior leaders' perception of their job and made them feel responsible for delivery. Although

neither structure survived a change in government in 2010, officials nonetheless continue to draw on the same tools, techniques and experiences today; by 2012 the PMDU was resuscitated in the form of an Implementation Unit.⁵⁷

Because of the breadth of UK public service reforms over the past 30 years, there are plenty of examples to draw on of routines that have proved transformative in the UK context. These routines – suitably adapted – are the essence of the value that UK experience can offer.

The authors' experience is that some of the UK routines are highly transferable and require minimal adaptation (other than building capability to use them), for example, the PMDU's priority review method. Meanwhile, others are very specific to the UK context at a point in time, for example, the use of prime ministerial 'stocktakes' under Tony Blair. Even then the principles may apply, or the example can provide a helpful stimulus for local thinking.

Design

Design of the change and implementation is crucial to delivery

The ultimate aim of an intervention is to improve the capability of the centre of government to be effective. It is this impact that will survive the departure of inevitably transient projects, programmes and teams. This perspective should always shape the theory of change and the operating model of external (and internal) advisers.

Research at the Institute for Government into successful UK reforms concluded that the quality of the design of the changes and their implementation is crucial to the short-term impact of an intervention, and determines the extent to which there will be a lasting improvement in the capability of the government:

What resources, people, structures, procedures and practices were established to drive changes and build relevant capabilities? An often neglected, but crucial, element is the extent to which there were any explicit design principles, values or ways of working that underpinned the model. For example, the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) used a whole host of tools and processes such as the stocktake process, trajectories, priority reviews and delivery reports, which maintained a constant pressure on senior officials to improve delivery.⁵⁸

So there are crucial questions to answer as advisers co-design the changes and approach to implementation together with their counterparts in government, if they are to achieve the objectives of an agreed project or programme:

- Do those who will need to act on, drive and implement the proposition or idea have the right capability, skills and mindset – at the centre of government and in departments and agencies?
- Do accountability arrangements within government incentivise desirable behaviour?
- Is there a dedicated, credible and diverse team within government leading the change?
- How far does the government team have the capacity to develop an operating model (including methods, governance, tools and practices) to drive changes and build relevant capabilities in government?
- Is there adequate governance to question and challenge progress, and periodically refresh and rethink the reform?

- What external support and advice are needed to help the government team to build the capability needed to lead the changes effectively?

The first author describes her role at this crucial design point of a project as a mix of facilitation, providing stimulus and sharing ideas. But a significant tension for staff and advisers on projects is how to get the right balance between providing advice, building capability and 'doing work on a project'. 'Doing work' is the right call if it is designed to help those the adviser works with to adopt new, transformative routines and structures that will be sustained once the advice and support end. Sometimes advisers will co-lead specific projects. But it is always the case that ownership and understanding of the project need to be held somewhere within the government and civil service.

In the development world, the notion of a 'theory of change' is well established – if not always well described in practice:

Theory of Change is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or 'filling in' what has been described as the 'missing middle' between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved.⁵⁹

In parts of the UK Civil Service, the language of operating or business models has been embraced for a similar purpose.

The Sunningdale Institute found that the UK public sector too often took a very narrow view of the elements of an operating model – limiting their design to governance (organisational structure and accountabilities), resources (financial flows) and structures. The same is true of many development interventions in the centre of governments. The approach to developing the right operating model should be broader and also include:

- clarity of vision and strategy
- delivery networks
- organisational levers
- systems and procedures
- culture and behaviour.⁶⁰

Too much reform and policymaking are distinguished by a lack of thought about the theory of change and a failure to invest enough time and effort into the detailed design of changes and their implementation:

Too often leaders rush to implement reform without actually being explicit about their operating model – let alone having consulted on, tested or improved it.⁶¹

However ambitious and far-reaching the reform is, leaders must genuinely test and iterate the design so that it chimes with the prevailing interests, concerns and priorities of officials rather than challenging them directly. This is not a 'nice to have', but critical to designing the right operating model, governance and incentives to drive desired changes.⁶²

Case study 12: Kyrgyzstan – taking time to scope, engage and co-design a programme

In response to a request by the Department for International Development (DFID) office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the NSGI has recently been engaging with the Head of Government Apparatus in the Office of the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan to test the demand for support to improve the delivery of prime ministerial priorities. The NSGI has carried out two extensive scoping visits, engaging with key stakeholders in government, civil society, local experts and donors to understand the 'problem' that the government would like to solve and test the willingness of key Kyrgyz officials to engage in designing an appropriate solution. By the end of the second visit, the DFID, as the UK sponsor of the NSGI engagement, and the government of Kyrgyzstan both saw a great merit in co-designing the programme of support and of piloting and testing methods and approaches over a period of three to six months. As a starting point, the NSGI will test the theory of change it developed through the initial scoping and exploration phase with colleagues in Kyrgyzstan to build a shared understanding, ownership and mutual accountability for implementing activities and achieving expected results.

Sometimes a mechanical version of programme management and governance can get in the way of an effective operating model. Formal governance is less the issue than getting appropriate permission and sponsorship. It is critical to know where decisions are taken that matter to the programme under development. 'Counter intuitively, formal governance and programme management arrangements can act as a barrier, rather than an enabler of reform. Instead, personal accountability of ministers and officials for progress against reform goals must be integral to the reform design to encourage buy-in and action'.⁶³

Large interventions will often demand a dedicated core team – most often at the centre of government. This has to be embedded within the civil service. For example, if the NSGI's advisers, practitioners and experts do not have counterparts inside government, they have nobody to work with. The extent to which a standing team is required – whether in the centre of government or in departments – depends on the scale of the programme and reforms being envisaged. Small, dedicated central teams often played a key role in significant reforms of the UK Civil Service. These teams were successful when they worked in a highly collaborative and iterative way. Their way of working was a crucial part of the design of the change: 'The values and ways of working from the centre were intentionally different from the norm: the emphasis was on sharing responsibility for progress and working collaboratively with departments to solve problems rather than just telling them what to do'.⁶⁴

Be selective and critical when drawing on UK experience and other good practice

Although the drivers and content of reform are similar around the world, the UK stands out as perhaps the most hyperactive, impatient and experimental. This provides a rich body of experience of success and failure on most dimensions of public sector reform.

The Institute for Government has concluded that most grand reform plans and blueprints in the UK over the past 50 years have been largely irrelevant to the messy reality of the interventions and individual reforms that have led to a transformation of the UK Civil Service.⁶⁵

Practitioners and those who were involved in these reforms in the UK understand the origins and context in which the reforms flourished and faded, and can use that knowledge to help others borrow, adapt and intelligently apply selectively the principles and practice of UK reforms.

The NSGI is rightly very careful not to prescribe UK models as the one true solution in the way that too many global institutions and consultancies do.

Instead, its approach is to use civil service practitioners and experts to support a dialogue about why and how reforms of interest worked in their context and time in the UK and to explore how best, or indeed whether, the principles, methods and practice of those reforms can be adapted to fit with the local priorities and context of governments elsewhere.

Through its staffing model of serving civil servants and expert practitioners, the NSGI is able to access those who led, developed and experienced a wide range of reforms and innovations. They bring the essential understanding of the origins of reforms and the context in which they took off, tailed off, flopped, flourished or faded.

Research into the effectiveness of aid interventions challenges the unthinking promulgation of supposed best practice or models and methods developed outside of the country in receipt of aid. 'Many mainstream donor practices ... [encourage] poor choices based on imagined universal solutions and international "best practices". Such practices undermine local ownership, initiative and capacity to find solutions'.⁶⁶ Instead, these factors demand 'an approach which starts from where governments are, with the problems they are trying to solve, rather than starting with the latest reform "widget" (and forcing the square peg of government into the widget's round hole'.⁶⁷

But this is not an argument for introversion. There is huge value in stimulus, inspiration, examples, models and lessons from other countries, but only if those drawing on them understand the context in which they were developed and used, and display humility about the extent to which they may be relevant elsewhere. '[G]overnments don't reinvent the wheel, but draw on current international models. Problem-solving does not abolish "best practice". On the contrary, it makes knowledge of a broad range of models indispensable'.⁶⁸

A unique feature of the NSGI is the easy access it has to experts and practitioners steeped in the wide portfolio of UK public sector reforms. Part of its value is to bring this as a stimulus and inspiration without commercial imperatives to the local development of projects.

6. Creating conditions more conducive to the wider application of success factors

The UK's Department for International Development has been a significant investor in research that makes a compelling argument for a new generation of state capability-building interventions that aim to improve the mixed record of many of their predecessors.

For such interventions to emerge and prosper, agencies and donors will need to create quite different conditions: 'Iterative, adaptive problem-solving requires an underlying relationship of trust between the funder and front line operators: the funding agency must show some willingness to let go, and to refrain from detailed pre-programming'.⁶⁹

But despite widespread acceptance of the need for locally relevant and politically smart interventions, it has proved more difficult to turn that acceptance into practice:

There is a growing acceptance of the importance of taking context into account, and a growing acknowledgement of the need to work in more iterative, adaptive and flexible ways. Yet making a jump from more technical approaches, based on standardised one-size-fits-all models of change, to more politically aware programming, grounded in local realities, has proven considerably more challenging in practice.⁷⁰

When the elements of iterative, problem-driven, politically smart and locally led development are accepted in agencies, it seems to be as little more than a rhetorical wrapper on the traditional frameworks for business cases, assessment and evaluation.

The drivers and incentives in agencies and donors continue to push interventions into a traditional formulation:

Pressure to disburse aid and a narrow concern for quick and visible results (which development actors tend to emphasise so they can be accountable to their home publics) do not always provide the foundations to engage with contextual realities and institutional dynamics of change, and instead tend to encourage a focus on (short-term) outcomes that are least transformational or substantive (e.g. holding x number of workshops in a year without concern as to their actual effect).⁷¹

Significant aspects of current practice undermine iterative, local problem-solving. These include a focus on achieving direct, short term results based on project designs that over-specify inputs and expected outputs; pressure to spend that makes relationships with partners aid-centric and allows insufficient time for iterative learning; and squeezes on expenditure deemed 'administrative' which, when coupled with high staff turnover, impede the acquisition of in-depth political knowledge and the application of skills.⁷²

In practical terms, this poses some challenges for those who would want to put the success factors that have been identified in this report into place more often.

It is pointless to simply wish that the world was different. It is unrealistic to expect the stewards of UK investment in development to stop demanding objectives, log frames, measures, evaluation, milestones and business cases. In an era of substantial reductions in public spending, the UK Government will continue to need the means to make the case for the value and impact of development spending.

The value of measures, objectives, accountability and challenge is clear from Institute for Government research into successful reform and policy successes. It would be unhelpful to the prospects of problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) and 'politically smart, locally led' type interventions to reject or neglect such mechanisms:

[M]anagers of interventions that are innovative in terms of ways of working have often paid insufficient attention to defining objectives that are susceptible to measurement, albeit *ex post*, and that withstand scrutiny in regard to sustainability and attribution. They have been satisfied with targeting broad changes in institutional relationships on the assumption that these are necessary steps towards results of a more tangible kind in the longer term.⁷³

Instead, the NSGI and others need to work with UK Government departments to help refine approaches and frameworks for commissioning, assessing, monitoring and evaluating interventions or projects in order to create more conducive conditions for proposals that are taking the success factors to heart. This work needs to:

- create more agile and flexible means for approval and sign-off of phases of projects
- package proposals in a way that there is space and resourcing for an open phase of early engagement, and initial work that enables the first four success factors to be put into early practice before determining more specific proposals for further phases
- projectise and describe the value (in terms of soft power, relationships, building trust and contributing to the development of a good platform for the UK's other engagements with the government) that stems from the messy early phase of engagement and iteration
- develop measures and milestones that meaningfully describe progress and provide assurance of future success and impact as well as symbolic tangible deliverables on governance and centre-of-government projects.

There are lessons from elsewhere in the public and private sectors that help us to move from a traditional technocratic framework to a more flexible and adaptable one that reflects the reality of civil service reform and building effective government.

One surprisingly promising source of inspiration may be the much-maligned world of major information technology (IT) projects in government. The critique of traditional approaches to IT government projects chimes with many elements of the critique of donor-funded governance interventions:

Traditional linear IT project approaches assume that the world works in a rational and predictable fashion. Specifications are drawn up in advance, 'solutions' are procured, and then delivery is managed against a pre-determined timetable. In reality, priorities change rapidly and technological development is increasingly unpredictable and non-linear. Most government IT therefore remains trapped in an outdated model, which attempts to lock project requirements up-front and then proceeds at a glacial pace. The result is repeated systemwide failure.⁷⁴

The agile prescription resonates with the arguments made by champions of problem-driven, iterative and locally owned aid interventions:

At its most basic level, agile techniques are about becoming much more flexible, responsive to change and innovative. Development is modular and iterative, based on user involvement and feedback. Early delivery of core working functionality is the priority. Proponents of projects of agile methods argue that they can deliver better outcomes at lower cost more quickly. Agile projects accept change and focus on the early delivery of a working solution.⁷⁵

In general, agile projects follow four main principles:

- modularity
- an iterative approach
- responsiveness to change
- putting users at the core (see the box below).

Are agile methods for IT projects a useful analogue?

Proponents of projects of agile methods argue that they can deliver better outcomes at lower cost more quickly. Agile projects accept change and focus on the early delivery of a working solution.

In general, agile projects follow four main principles: modularity, an iterative approach, responsiveness to change and putting users at the core:

- **Modularity.** Modularity involves splitting up complex problems and projects into smaller components and portions of functionality, which can be prioritised. Each module should be capable of working both in a standalone fashion and in concert with other modules. This can reduce the time to delivery, enabling users to access the functionality of modules developed early, without necessarily having to wait until all of the original specification has been built. It can also make upgrades and changes easier as systems can be altered module by module or new modules can be added to the original design.
- **An iterative approach.** An iterative and incremental approach acknowledges that the best solution and means of delivering it are not always known at the start. By trialling in short iterations, receiving feedback and learning from mistakes, a much more successful system can evolve than if everything is planned and set in stone at the outset.
- **Responsiveness to change.** Shorter iterations and regular reviews provide opportunities for changes to be made and priorities adjusted within an agile project.
- **Putting users at the core.** Agile projects ensure that users or business champions are embedded within the project team. This enables the business to provide continuous input and refinement, ensuring that what is delivered meets their needs. It also demands that business users become closer to IT development than has sometimes been the case.

Source: Stephen, J., Page, J., Myers, J., Brown, A., Watson, D. and Magee, I., *System Error: Fixing the flaws in government IT*, Institute for Government, London, 2011, p. 13.

There are, of course, substantial barriers to adopting such a different approach to IT in government: 'changing organisational cultures to support agile techniques; governance issues, including approval processes and Gateway reviews; and commercial complications, particularly in relation to procurement'.⁷⁶

These barriers are familiar. If you substitute assessment, evaluation and monitoring for gateway reviews, and commissioning for procurement, then they apply just as well to the types of projects this report has looked at. The fact that in many instances these barriers

have been overcome for UK Government IT projects gives grounds for optimism that donors, agencies and governments can overcome the barriers to the adoption of approaches that enable the line of attack that is demanded by the success factors that have been identified in this report.

7. Conclusions

As UK departments and agencies are increasingly engaging in direct partnerships with counterpart institutions in fragile and developing countries, the success factors identified in this report and their practical implications offer essential guidance on how to create the most value from such engagement. The energy, ideas and experience of peers and practitioners can play a valuable role.

It is unrealistic to expect any donor project to deliver a transformed civil service in the recipient government in a few years. It is more realistic to view reform as an incremental, imperfect, episodic, adaptive and opportunistic trajectory, which must learn from and build on successive interventions in a way that cannot be planned.

However, the iterative, adaptive and problem-solving approaches that underpin locally relevant and politically smart interventions that may support this at the centre of government are often precluded by traditional donor frameworks. The experience of projects using the agile prescription may provide a fertile ground for a fresh look at the way such intervention can be enabled within donor frameworks.

Annex: The National School of Government International

In 2012, the National School of Government International (NSGI) was created as a cross-departmental unit sponsored by the Department for International Development (DfID), the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office. It was envisaged to be a small, agile, cross-government unit supporting civil service reform outside of the UK, using UK civil servants from a range of departments in both short- and long-term advisory roles. Since April 2015 it has been situated within the Stabilisation Unit, accountable to the National Security Council.

The NSGI is acutely aware of the challenges related to supporting reform at the centre of government. Experience both in the UK and overseas has taught the NSGI that civil service reform is complex, messy, non-linear and most importantly political. Therefore, it looks for entry points in partners' institutions and works to build relations of trust and mutual respect through providing quality advisory support. Through this process, the NSGI incrementally gains the 'political space' to get closer to the root causes of problems and find relevant and appropriate solutions with partner governments.

Because the NSGI uses serving civil servants, it offers current and objective advice to partner governments who request support. These practitioners share their experience as peers to colleagues in partner governments in negotiating, shaping and implementing reforms. They engage in a dialogue with counterparts to explore how best, or indeed whether, the principles, methods and practice of UK and other countries' reforms can be adapted to fit the local priorities and context of the partner government.

The way the NSGI works with partners is practical and iterative. Typically, the NSGI supports building capability through 'doing activities' with colleagues in partner governments, introducing new tools, skills, processes and work habits in a practical setting and supported by practitioners. It aims to create a continuous loop of acting, reflecting, learning and adapting to support change and problem solving and foster a learning habit in partner institutions. The value of working with peers is to break away from a technical assistance approach to one that is supportive, locally owned and based on nurturing skills rather than displacing capacity. Because the NSGI is not driven by commercial imperatives, it can act as a critical friend and sounding board to validate the direction of travel of locally led reforms. Officials in partner governments appreciate the opportunity to engage with colleagues from a civil service that they often admire, and to discuss the issues, challenges and frustrations inherent in government.

The approach taken by the NSGI can play a valuable role in the support of multiple policy priorities and contexts, from conflict prevention to promoting stability and prosperity and supporting developmental goals. The need to understand what works, where, how, under what conditions and in what timeframe in the 'business' of facilitating and supporting change through peer-to-peer engagement has prompted the NSGI to reflect on its experience to date and on sharing its findings internally, across Whitehall and with partners in the UK and overseas.

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