



All in it together

Cross-departmental responsibilities for improving Whitehall

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Contents

Executive summary	1
Ensuring momentum for further developments	2
Why does this matter?	4
The incoming government, whatever the political colour, will face big challenges	4
What's happened so far?	8
Any government will be able to build on many specific initiatives.....	8
What needs to happen next?	11
Ensure this progress continues by building on three aspects of the approach taken so far.....	11
Responsibilities of cross-departmental leaders.....	13
Responsibilities of the civil service leadership	15
Responsibilities of ministers	17

Executive summary

The incoming government, whatever its political colour, will face big challenges.¹ Any government will want to deliver on its manifesto promises – which could range from large construction projects like HS2, to reforming public services like the NHS, to building more homes. It will also want to improve the day-to-day workings of government, to ensure that money is not wasted.² And it may need Whitehall to fundamentally change how it works – because of power being decentralised, or because of a new focus on prevention, or because of new approaches like ‘nudge’ being taken to the next level.³

However the government responds to these challenges, the capacity to deliver on its promises effectively will be essential. Previous governments have often found mid-term they are failing to achieve the changes they want, leading prime ministers to make colourful comments about scars on my back’, and most recently the ‘buggeration factor’. Ensuring this does not happen in future will undoubtedly require the whole of Whitehall – both official and political – to improve how it does things. This takes time and persistence. The tasks involved, and the political and official leadership necessary, only make sense if they are organised on a cross-departmental basis. The leaderships of our 17 main departments could work independently to improve, but this would be less effective and some changes would prove impossible.

Key cross-departmental areas include:

- Getting people with the right skills working on priorities across Whitehall.
- Ensuring it is possible to track how effectively priorities are being implemented – and having capacity to intervene to address major issues and accelerate progress.
- Making sure areas of waste can be identified through benchmarking and then eliminated, for example by removing duplication and exploiting economies of scale.
- Adopting the innovative ways of working demanded by changes like decentralisation that affect the whole of Whitehall.

Over the last few years, a host of initiatives have taken a cross-departmental approach to improving the way Whitehall works.⁴ New initiatives like the *Civil Service Capability Plan*, the *Financial Management Review* and the *Twelve Actions to Improve Policymaking* have all led to action on professional skills in Whitehall. The Major Projects Authority has greatly enhanced Whitehall’s ability to make sure projects stay on track. Spending controls have helped eliminate waste, accompanied by the centralisation of many back-office services building on efforts to cut administration costs by departments. And ‘hothouse’ approaches have been used in the Behavioural Insights Team and the Government Digital Service to drive forward new ways of working.

¹ Institute for Government, *A Programme for Effective Government: What party manifestos must address in 2015*, Institute for Government, September 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/programme-effective-government-1>>

² The Treasury, The Efficiency and Reform Group & The Cabinet Office, *Efficiency and Reform in the next Parliament*, 3 December 2014, Gov.UK, retrieved 13 March 2015 from <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/efficiency-and-reform-in-the-next-parliament>>; The Labour Party, *Labour’s Zero-Based Review*, (n.d.), retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/agenda-2015/policy-review/zero-based-review>>

³ Powell, L., Speech to GovernUp’s Conference in February 2015, to be published on <www.governup.org>; Letwin, O., *A Keynote Speech On The Role of the State*, Institute for Government, 13 May 2014, retrieved 13 March 2015 from <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/rt-hon-oliver-letwin-mp-keynote-speech-role-state>>

⁴ This paper does not look at how to make and implement cross-department policy, which is itself an important issue in many complex policy areas.

While there has been much progress, the emerging model remains immature. There is relatively little coherence between the different approaches, and many individual initiatives have yet to deliver their potential. The government faces the risk of repeating a common cycle in government of initiating new ideas, facing teething problems with developing them, then stopping progress and starting something new just when improvements are starting to get traction. This has happened in this government and its predecessors, for example in areas like the management of IT.⁵

Ensuring momentum for further developments

Any government must build on what has gone before - it does not need, and will not have the time, to start from scratch. Fortunately, alongside the many specific initiatives, there are three imperatives from the emerging approach that can provide the drive to ultimately change how people throughout Whitehall go about their jobs. These are:

1. build on the current approach of stronger professional 'functions' required across government, such as finance, digital, and major projects.
2. recognise that behaviours matter as much as structures – if not more so.
3. ensure cross-departmental responsibilities are clear, and aimed at adding value to what government as a whole is doing.

There are three distinct groups with responsibilities which must be made clear.

Cross-departmental leaders

First, there needs to be clarity about who Whitehall's cross-departmental leaders of professional 'functions' are – and that being one is a full-time position that should usually sit at the heart of Whitehall rather than in a particular department.

Their job is to change how people work across Whitehall. This means playing several different roles, from 'I would advise you to do this' to 'you have to do it this way'. It is therefore essential that the rest of Whitehall is clear about the roles being played. Too often, the failure to differentiate these roles results in a central leadership that is seen as an apologist for poor-quality centralised services and scrutiny. Fundamentally, cross-departmental leaders must ensure that what they do adds value to government.

Civil Service leadership

Second, the cross-departmental leaders of professional functions need to be seen to be part of – and involved in – the overall leadership of the civil service. This will involve overcoming the divided nature of the centre of Whitehall, and making sure the Cabinet Office and the Treasury – organisations with very different cultures – are working together on a common agenda.

It will also involve connecting policymaking to the other functional strategies. If good policy is to be affordable, legal, and implementable, it needs to be developed and implemented by experts from other disciplines than mainstream policy, including communications, legal, finance, and project management. And the Head of the Civil Service needs to hold departmental permanent secretaries to account for how seriously they take efforts to improve the Civil Service as a whole.

Ministers

Third, political leaders also have to take this agenda seriously, because the success or failure of the government will depend on it. The Civil Service cannot make sustained progress on its own without

⁵ Stephen, J., Myers, J., Brown, A., Watson, D., Magee, I., System Error: Fixing the flaws in government IT, Institute for Government, 2011, retrieved 18 March 2015, < <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/system-error> >

political support. However serious Whitehall might be, immediate political priorities trump internal civil service reform efforts – so the two need to be aligned.

The appointment of ministers following the election in May 2015 will be a critical indication of whether the political drive to advance progress will continue. Four tests will show whether this political drive exists.

1. The Prime Minister and Chancellor will be publicly and privately committed not just to their priorities, but to making the necessary improvements to ensure Whitehall is capable of delivering those priorities.
2. The Prime Minister will appoint a minister who is clearly responsible for ensuring those improvements are driven by the mission of the government, and that they actually happen.
3. The remit of the minister needs to build on the role played since 2010 by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude. The remit must make clear how central these improvements are to the wider government agenda.
4. It must be clear that the minister will be able to provide sustained and stable political leadership. The minister should remain in post through at least the first reshuffle. The position should not be used as a staging post for people waiting for a future promotion or moving out of government.

Without clear political leadership from the outset, whoever forms the next government runs the risk of having to revisit this agenda after losing the momentum and progress that has built up over the last five years.

It will be clear whether this has happened within days of the formation of the post-election government.

Why does this matter?

The incoming government, whatever the political colour, will face big challenges

In the Institute for Government's *Programme for Effective Government*, we outlined some of the big challenges that will face whoever is in government after May 2015. They will be looking to achieve sustained growth and reduce the deficit, address complex social and economic problems, and govern in a world where power is held both more globally and more locally.⁶

The exact responses to these challenges will vary depending on who wins power, but even before the May election, some things are clear.

- Any government will have **major priorities that it wishes to implement**. These priorities could range from large construction projects, to further moves to bring market disciplines in the provision of public services or increasing the provision of housing. For example, the coalition parties and Labour are committed to building HS2, Labour has announced plans to build 250,000 houses a year (the Liberal Democrats have promised 300,000), and the Conservatives are looking to generate up to £10bn of efficiencies through measures like the further digitisation of public services.
- Similarly, the incoming government will want to improve the day-to-day workings of government, **to ensure that money is not wasted** by, for example, paying more than necessary when buying goods and services; doing things many times when they could be done just once; or holding more property than the public sector needs.⁷
- Finally, any government is likely to need Whitehall to **fundamentally change how it works**. This will present major new challenges for Whitehall. For example, all the parties are committed to greater decentralisation of power, Labour has a new focus on 'prevention', there is widespread interest in digitising services, and Oliver Letwin has argued for new approaches like 'nudge' to be taken to the next level.⁸

However the government responds to the challenges, it is essential that the machinery is in place to enable them to. One part of this is to improve the support available to the Prime Minister. As the Institute for Government set out in *Centre Forward*, any prime minister should be able to take for granted that the Number 10 machine, supported by Cabinet Office, can co-ordinate and drive their agenda.⁹

As well as effective support to the Prime Minister, the capacity to implement the government's policies will be essential and will require the whole of Whitehall – both official and political – to improve how it does things. These improvements could be undertaken by the leaderships of our 17

⁶ Institute for Government, *A Programme for Effective Government: What party manifestos must address in 2015*, Institute for Government, September 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/programme-effective-government-1>>

⁷ The Treasury, The Efficiency and Reform Group & The Cabinet Office, *Efficiency and Reform in the next Parliament*, 3 December 2014, Gov.UK, retrieved 13 March 2015 from <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/efficiency-and-reform-in-the-next-parliament>>; The Labour Party, *Labour's Zero-Based Review*, (n.d.), retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/agenda-2015/policy-review/zero-based-review>>

⁸ Powell, L., Speech to GovernUp's Conference in February 2015, to be published on <www.governup.org>; Cruddas, J., *A keynote speech on effective government in 2015 and beyond*, Institute for Government, 27 November 2014, retrieved 19 March 2015 from <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/ion-cruddas-mp-keynote-speech-effective-government-2015-and-beyond>>; Maude, F., *Sprint 15: Francis Maude Speech*, GOV.UK, 4 February 2015, retrieved 19 March 2015 from <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/sprint-15-francis-maude-speech>>; Letwin, O., *A Keynote Speech On The Role of the State*, Institute for Government, 13 May 2014, retrieved 13 March 2015 from <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/rt-hon-oliver-letwin-mp-keynote-speech-role-state>>

⁹ Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the Prime Minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/centre-forward>>

main departments acting independently. However, many improvements would be best done, and some can only be done, on a cross-departmental basis. For example:

- Getting implementation right involves getting the right people with the right skills working on government priorities. This is best done by looking across the whole [400,000] workforce of the civil service, rather than hoping the right people are already in the right department when the government takes office.
- Getting implementation right also means being able to check how priorities are progressing and intervene rapidly when things go wrong. For the biggest priorities of government, absorbing the energies of one or more departments, this checking and intervention can only be done properly from the centre of Whitehall.
- Eliminating waste often involves day-to-day improvements in how things work. Figuring out where the waste is, deciding the best way to eliminate it and making sure it is actually eliminated are all tasks that are unlikely to be done efficiently if they are repeated in 17 different ways by 17 departments.
- Finally, changing fundamentally how Whitehall operates takes time and persistence. The tasks involved, and the political and official leadership necessary, only make sense if they are organised on a cross-departmental basis.

We look at each of these improvements, highlighting some of the main issues they involve.

The right people with the right skills

Getting implementation right means getting the right people with the right skills working on government priorities long enough to actually make them happen. This in turn means the government has to:

- Get experienced leaders in place, who have a track record of delivering that particular type of project. Government projects vary greatly in their nature, from Olympics-style construction tasks, to digitising basic services (like road tax), and helping professionals in thousands of sites across the country (like teachers, doctors or nurses) to work differently.¹⁰ The right leadership is an essential component of success.¹¹ It makes sense to look as widely as possible for potential leaders with the required experience to lead on government priorities. This means— at the very least looking across the Civil Service, rather than just within a particular department.
- Assemble skilled teams around the right leaders once they are found. Teams should have the appropriate mix of complementary skills, and be required to stay in place as long as necessary.¹² Beyond leadership, other skilled people are needed for the successful delivery of major projects. These include those with professional skills, such as financial and commercial knowledge, technical skills in technology, digital and contracting, and more traditional civil service skills such as policymaking and establishing new regulatory bodies. Without sufficient control over career paths within Whitehall – so people can be moved to

¹⁰ Gold, J., *International Delivery: Centres of government and the drive for better policy implementation*, Institute for Government and the Mowat Centre, 2014, pp. 23-24, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/international-delivery-centres-government-and-drive-better-policy-implementation>>

¹¹ This is a key finding from the Institute for Government's research into policy implementation. Institute for Government, *Improving Policy Implementation*, Institute for Government, (n.d.), retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/better-policy-making/improving-policy-implementation>>

¹² Gold, J., *International Delivery: Centres of government and the drive for better policy implementation*, Institute for Government and the Mowat Centre, 2014, pp. 38-39, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/international-delivery-centres-government-and-drive-better-policy-implementation>>; Norris, E., Rutter J. & Medland, J., *Making the Games: What government can Learn from London 2012*, Institute for Government, 2013, p. 6, pp. 39-43, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/making-games>>

key priorities and progress in their career without having to move on – it is hit-or-miss as to whether the appropriate teams can be assembled, and we will continue to see the remarkable levels of “churn” exhibited in a supposedly “permanent” Civil Service. Andrew Adonis recalled that as a minister he had eight directors for the academies programme in 10 years.¹³

- Create a much stronger pipeline of talented professionals coming through the ranks of the Civil Service. Truly-skilled people are always difficult to find, and this is certainly the case in Whitehall.¹⁴ So any government that wants to deliver major change over a five-year term will require its skilled people to be continually developed. Whitehall needs to build an effective pipeline of people, so that as projects move from design to actual delivery, the number of skilled people available is increasing.

Checking progress and intervening to get back on track

Getting implementation right also means being able to check how priorities are going, and being able to intervene quickly when, as will happen, things go wrong. Many implementation problems are caught and put right by the team leading a project. But this does not always happen. There is always a danger that a good-news culture takes hold, and by the time weaknesses eventually become public they have already caused major problems for the delivery of the project. This happened with the development of Universal Credit, for example, when emerging problems with its implementation were not clearly communicated.¹⁵

Since they ultimately hold the political risk for the government of things going wrong, any Prime Minister will want some cross-departmental machinery that is capable of checking and improving what government is doing.¹⁶ This must be capable of looking beyond the small number of issues to which the Prime Minister can devote personal attention. And it's not enough for those checking progress to simply raise concerns – they must also be able to help get things back on track.

This process of checking and improving implementation must be there from the start of any policy. In many projects, problems in delivery can be traced back to the initial policy design phase – or the lack of one.¹⁷ There is also a common tendency towards optimism bias. For example, the Department for Education Permanent Secretary, Chris Wormald, has said that recent problems with academy accountability come from the failure to think this through at the start. ‘These things have grown up piecemeal ... so we accept that nobody sat down and planned these structures’.¹⁸ This means capacity is needed to ensure that departmental plans are robust at an early stage.

¹³ Halfon, R. & Adonis, A., *Corrected Transcript of Oral Evidence: Q.204*, Parliament.uk, 2013, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmpubadm/c664-iii/c66401.htm>>

¹⁴ Page, J., Pearson, J., Panchamia, N., Thomas, P. & Traficante, J., *Leading Change in the Civil Service*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp. 28-9, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/leading-change-civil-service>>

¹⁵ Public Accounts Committee, *Universal Credit: Early Progress*, (2013), p. 6, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpubacc/619/619.pdf>>

¹⁶ Gold, J., *International Delivery: Centres of government and the drive for better policy implementation*, Institute for Government and the Mowat Centre, 2014, pp. 27-32, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/international-delivery-centres-government-and-drive-better-policy-implementation>>; Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the Prime Minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp. 67-72, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/centre-forward>>

¹⁷ Hallsworth, M., Parker, S. & Rutter, J., *Policy Making in the Real World*, Institute for Government, 2011, pp. 42-43, retrieved 16 March 2015 <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/policy-making-real-world>>; Norris, E., Kidson, M., Bouchal, P. & Rutter, J., *Doing them Justice: Lessons from four cases of policy implementation*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp. 12-13, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/doing-them-justice>>

¹⁸ House of Commons, *Oral Evidence to the Public Accounts Committee: Recall on EFA and DfE financial statements/Durand Academy investigation*, HC 924, Monday 26 January 2015

Improving the day-to-day running of government to eliminate waste

Front-line politics inevitably concentrates on the ‘new and the shiny’ of big initiatives and new ideas. However, much of what government does is not new but ongoing administration, and it is not always clear whether this is efficient or not. Many in government think there is much further to go on reducing wasteful spending – and it’s a political target for both main parties. At the Conservative party conference in 2014, Francis Maude rearticulated the Conservative mission to ‘clamp down on waste’ through reducing spending on consultancy, procurement and property.¹⁹ Ed Balls, Shadow Chancellor, promised that Labour’s ‘zero-based review’ in opposition was ‘examining every pound spent by government to cut out waste’.²⁰

So any incoming government will want to make sure that public money is being put to the best possible use, and not being wasted – especially as it will also be trying to reduce the deficit. But this will not happen by itself. Actually eliminating waste involves:

- Understanding where the waste is. This is a difficult task both in Whitehall and front-line service delivery. It is made more complicated by government not knowing where this waste is, or how to bring about actual savings.²¹ Comparisons are therefore vital. How do you know if you are paying above the odds? What are others paying for the same thing? For effective financial and commercial people, this is just the basics. It is essential to look across Whitehall and beyond to benchmark costs and performance.
- Deciding on the best strategy for eliminating the waste. Once waste has been identified, there will be different strategies for eliminating it. In straightforward cases, the direct approach of strong financial controls can be used – ensuring that money cannot be spent until it has been centrally checked. In the longer term, the best route may be through professional standards – making sure that across Whitehall staff themselves are taking responsibility for reducing waste. Where there are economies of scale, the opposite approach may be appropriate. Centralising activities like basic procurement could secure the best prices for the whole of Whitehall.
- Making sure the waste is actually eliminated. Whatever strategy is chosen to eliminate waste, it is vital that somebody is checking the strategy is working. It is very easy to generate numbers that claim that waste is being eliminated, even when little has changed.²² If the government wants real savings, it needs to make sure that there is clear divide between the execution of the strategy and the verification that it is working. This is especially true when an activity is being centralised.

Adopting innovative ways of working

All the parties have plans that involve Whitehall working in innovative ways and developing new approaches to long-standing problems. For example, Labour has talked about a preventative agenda; the Conservatives have suggested further marketisation of public services; and both are committed to greater decentralisation. Making a reality of these plans is even more difficult than

¹⁹ Maude, F., Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://press.conservatives.com/post/98724443430/francis-maude-speech-to-conservative-party>>

²⁰ Balls, E., Speech to Labour Party Conference, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://press.labour.org.uk/post/98137818419/speech-by-ed-balls-mp-to-labour-party-annual>>

²¹ McCrae, J., Stephen, J., Guermellou, T. & Mehta, R., *Improving Decision Making in Whitehall: Effective use of management information*, Institute for Government, 2012, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/improving-decision-making-whitehall>>; McCrae, J. & Bouchal, P., *Financial Leadership for Government*, Institute for Government, 2013, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/financial-leadership-government-0>>

²² Bouchal, P., ‘Government Savings: The figures behind the headlines’, *Institute for Government blog*, 17 June 2014, retrieved 13 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/8192/government-efficiency-savings-the-figures-behind-the-headlines/>>

implementing traditional major projects, because they require many parts of Whitehall to adopt skills and approaches they have no experience of.

Changing fundamentally how Whitehall works takes time and persistence; innovation is not easy.

- Priorities must be clear, whether they concern Whitehall delivering services through markets, or considering preventative approaches. Clear priorities are important so that Whitehall can invest in developing new ways of working where they are needed – rather than trying to be ‘innovative’ for its own sake.
- The next step is to have a clear strategy on how new skills and approaches can be introduced. This will certainly require developing existing staff to help them approach their work differently. Change on this scale may involve people from outside Whitehall. They may be familiar with the new ways of working, but only have little knowledge of how Whitehall works. This can be a difficult process, and it is important that it is managed well.²³ In some cases, a more systematic approach, creating centres of expertise, may be needed. Concentrating those with new skill-sets in one place prevents them being overwhelmed by the system, and helps them support colleagues in departments who are trying to change how things are done.
- Clear rewards for innovation motivate people to work in new ways. Innovation must be encouraged and those taking up the agenda should know they will be rewarded if they can make the innovation succeed. There needs to be a relationship between how Whitehall is managed and career paths.

In all these areas – getting the right people with the right skills, making sure priorities are kept on track, eliminating waste, and ensuring Whitehall adopts innovative ways of working – cross-departmental approaches are the best, and are often the only, way forward.

Making sure Whitehall can support the government’s agenda does not just mean letting individual departments sink or swim. Any government that ignores this fact is unlikely to be able to achieve its agenda.

What’s happened so far?

Any government will be able to build on many specific initiatives

Over the last few years, there have been a host of initiatives that have started to take a cross-departmental approach to improving how Whitehall works.

Skilled people

In terms of skilled people, there have been a series of important developments.

The *Civil Service Capabilities Plan* identified four key areas for action: commercial; programme and project management; digital; and leading change.²⁴ Few disagree with the notion that Whitehall

²³ The UK could adopt strategies that have been used in other countries, such as the approach in Australia. Rutter, J., ‘Lessons from a land down under...’, *Institute for Government blog*, 13 June 2012, retrieved 12 March 2015,

<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/4527/lessons-from-a-land-down-under%E2%80%A6/>

²⁴ Maude, F & the Civil Service, *Civil Service Capabilities Plan 2013*, Gov.UK, retrieved 12 March 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-capabilities-plan>

needs to develop these particular skills.²⁵ In line with the plan there have been a series of initiatives, most noticeably the setting up and investment in a new Major Projects Leadership Academy, the creation of the Commissioning Academy, and the establishment of a digital 'recruitment hub' for sourcing specialists from outside the Civil Service. Important steps have been taken towards building career paths in professional functions. For example, new dedicated corporate Fast Stream programmes have been created for HR, commercial, communications and digital.

The *Financial Management Review* identified the need for finance professionals to play a greater strategic role in Whitehall.²⁶ It particularly focused on the skills necessary to take analytical information and ensure that it is used effectively in decision making. It also identified the need for Treasury itself to improve its financial skills. In tangible terms, the top jobs on the spending side of the Treasury are now held by people with financial qualifications, and a significant number of their deputy directors have also begun professional finance qualifications.

The *Twelve Actions to Professionalise Policymaking* has led to action in crucial areas.²⁷ There is now clearer leadership, with heads of the policy profession in each department responsible for raising the quality of policymaking. Departments are developing clearer standards that set out what good policymaking looks like. And there is a renewed focus on developing skills and talent at all levels of the Civil Service.

Keeping priorities on track

In terms of keeping priorities on track, there now seems to be recognition that the Prime Minister needs some capacity to check progress in areas where they can invest time. The steady downgrading and eventual abolition of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit has been reversed by the creation of the Implementation Unit.²⁸

The Major Projects Authority (MPA) has also greatly enhanced Whitehall's ability to systematically review progress on big projects that no Prime Minister can personally spend time reviewing.²⁹ There remain some questions about the MPA's effectiveness, which has not been helped by the very high level of turnover in its leadership. And it is not clear that the MPA yet has the ability to intervene effectively, especially as it lacks any hard power to attach consequences to projects it rates poorly. Politicians and departments can therefore, if the prime minister lets them, effectively ignore the red ratings their projects are given.

Eliminating waste

Early in this parliament, the government implemented a clear strategy to centralise certain spending controls and negotiations with major suppliers. The new Crown Commercial Service has been established, centralising the procurement of many goods and services on behalf of government

²⁵ See, for example, the panel discussion hosted by the Institute for Government with Andrew Adonis, Stephen Kelly, Andrew Turnbull and Sara Weller where, despite very different backgrounds, all agreed improvements in these areas where necessary. Video of the discussion is available from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/future-whitehall-how-lead-transformation-centre>

²⁶ The Treasury, *Review of Financial Management in Government*, 2013, Gov.UK, retrieved 13 March 2015, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-financial-management-in-government>>

²⁷ Civil Service, *Twelve Actions to Professionalise Policymaking: A report by the Policy Profession Board*, Gov.UK, 2013, retrieved 13 March 2015, <https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/twelve_actions_report_web_accessible.pdf>

²⁸ Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the Prime Minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/centre-forward>>; Gold, J., *International Delivery: Centres of government and the drive for better policy implementation*, Institute for Government and the Mowat Centre, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/international-delivery-centres-government-and-drive-better-policy-implementation>>; *Delivery*, and also Thomas and Panchamia, *Civil Service Reform in the Real World*, all Institute for Government available from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/>

²⁹ Gold, J., *International Delivery: Centres of government and the drive for better policy implementation*, Institute for Government and the Mowat Centre, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/international-delivery-centres-government-and-drive-better-policy-implementation>>

departments and acting as a single customer with key suppliers. Similarly, many 'back-office' activities, like the administration of payrolls, have been centralised with departments now choosing between two different suppliers of these services.

Alongside these moves, there has been a much higher level of transparency around government savings. The Cabinet Office has gone to great lengths to develop clear methodologies about what counts as a saving. The National Audit Office (NAO) provides assurance these are being consistently applied and the Cabinet Office is open with external commentators who take an interest. Dispelling the illusionary nature of efficiency numbers is the starting point for creating real incentives for actually eliminating waste.³⁰

Innovative ways of working

This government has had a number of priorities around innovation, in particular:

- the use of behavioural insights ('nudge')
- by promoting a 'digital by default' agenda for government services
- the use of market mechanisms to improve public services.

The government has adopted different approaches on each of these.

The Behavioural Insights Team, a central unit, was set up in Cabinet Office in 2010. It works with government departments to apply insights from behavioural science to policy. In February 2014, the Behavioural Insights Team became a joint venture between the Cabinet Office, the team's staff, and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA). A series of departmental units have also been established.

The Government Digital Service (GDS) was established in April 2011 following Martha Lane Fox's 2010 report on the future of government digital services.³¹ Initially, GDS focused on unifying all central government websites to create GOV.UK. More recently it has transformed services and established cross-departmental platforms, for example 'GOV.UK Verify', which verifies the identities of people using online services.³² GDS has become a large organisation of about 500 staff within the Cabinet Office.³³

On market mechanisms, there has been very little in the way of a central or consistent approach. Individual departments have approached issues in bespoke ways and rarely draw on the skills or capabilities of others with expertise. As a result, the risks inherent in using market mechanisms have been increased. Cross-departmental activity has mostly been limited to knowledge sharing networks, a Commissioning Academy (with a similar knowledge-sharing focus) and Crown Commercial Service (CCS) scrutiny of some contracts and supplier relationships. It remains unclear if these changes have succeeded in even their limited ambition.

While there has been much progress, the emerging model remains immature. There is relatively little coherence between the different approaches, and many individual initiatives have yet to deliver

³⁰ McCrae, J., '£14.3bn of efficiency savings: Good or bad?', *Institute for Government blog*, 10 June 2014, retrieved 12 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/8102/14-3bn-of-efficiency-savings-good-or-bad/>>

³¹ Lane Fox, M., *Directgov 2010 and beyond: revolution not evolution*, 2010, retrieved 12 March 2015,

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/directgov-2010-and-beyond-revolution-not-evolution-a-report-by-martha-lane-fox>>

³² Government Digital Service, 'Identity Assurance and Gov.UK Verify', *Gov.UK blog*, (n.d.), retrieved 16 March 2015,

<<https://identityassurance.blog.gov.uk>>

³³ Government Digital Service, *About us page*, Gov.UK website, (n.d.), retrieved 16 March 2015,

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-digital-service/about>>

their potential. It is vital that any government builds on what has gone before – it does not need, and will not have the time, to start from scratch.

The government faces the risk of repeating a common cycle of initiating new ideas, facing teething problems with developing them, then stopping progress and starting something new just when improvements are starting to happen. This has happened in this government and its predecessors, for example with IT.³⁴

The government will need to pull these initiatives together and make sure they actually deliver the results it needs. This will be in its own interests – without a sustained drive any government risks being frustrated mid-term when it becomes clear that it has not made the investments necessary to ensure Whitehall is capable of delivering its agenda.

What needs to happen next?

Ensure this progress continues by building on three aspects of the approach taken so far

Fortunately, alongside the many specific initiatives, there are three aspects of the emerging approach that can be built on to provide the necessary coherence and drive for results. These are:

1. the ‘functional’ approach, which can clarify how the various strands are organised
2. recognising that this is not simply about structures and controls, but about changing the way people behave throughout Whitehall
3. realising that the starting point is to clarify cross-departmental responsibilities – and that all of these must be aimed at helping departments do their jobs better – rather than debating the centralisation or decentralisation of particular powers and activities.

The functional approach

First, the current approach of building up capability of specific professional functions that are required across government, such as finance, digital, and major projects. The identification of specific professional functions has been a major development in recent years.³⁵ This “functional approach” is standard in many organisational settings, and can build on well understood professional disciplines. It also allows a clear differentiation between cross-departmental functional leaders (who are responsible for ensuring there is a cross-departmental strategy for how these functions should develop) and departmental leaders (who are responsible for actually delivering the government’s priorities).

A new post of Chief Executive of the Civil Service was created by the Prime Minister and the Head of the Civil Service, Sir Jeremy Heywood, in October 2014. John Manzoni, the first holder of this role, is responsible for bringing together various functional agendas, so they can work together to

³⁴ Stephen, J., Myers, J., Brown, A., Watson, D., Magee, I., System Error: Fixing the flaws in government IT, Institute for Government, 2011, retrieved 18 March 2015, < <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/system-error>>

³⁵ ‘Functional leadership’ was absent from the first *Civil Service Reform Plan* in 2012, but the *One Year On* report promised ‘stronger corporate functional leadership’ – a move welcomed by the Institute. A year later, the *Progress Report* named eight ‘cross-Government professional services’ being developed under the ‘Functional Leadership’ programme, a programme which has been taken up by the new Civil Service chief executive. Civil Service, *Civil Service Reform: One Year On*, Gov.UK, 2013), p. 32, retrieved 16 March 2015, < <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-reform-plan-one-year-on-2>>; Thomas, P., Kidson, M. & Wright, W., *The Civil Service Reform Plan: One Year On*, Institute for Government, 2013, p. 14, retrieved 16 March 2015, < <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/civil-service-reform-plan-2012-one-year>>; Civil Service, *Civil Service Reform Plan: Progress Report*, Gov.UK, 2014), pp. 22-25, retrieved 16 March 2015, < https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360637/Civil_Service_Reform_Plan_-_Progress_Report__web_.pdf>

support departments. His post creates the potential for stronger leadership over key professional functions and efficiency and reform.³⁶

Changing behaviour

Second, it is important to recognise that this is not just about changing structures, but fundamentally about changing behaviour. The ultimate goal is to change how people throughout Whitehall go about their jobs. Changing behaviour often requires a mix of incentives and standards. 'Hard powers' such as spending controls can be used as a backstop, but 'soft powers' – to inspire and bring people along with the direction of change – are vital.³⁷ Getting this mix right is tricky, and one of the key tasks of any leader. Hard powers like spending controls can put a stop to existing practices and get initial engagement, but are a blunt (and sometimes misused) tool. They can only be part of the solution. As it matures, the relationship should move beyond relying on simple control mechanisms.

Changing behaviours in abstract is impossible. An effective way of doing it is to get people working differently on substantive issues that they really care about, and which are crucial for delivering government priorities, such as the next spending review which given the scale of the fiscal challenge must be more of a proper planning process than previous reviews.³⁸ Another opportunity is to develop new career paths which incentivise different behaviour. So, for example, John Manzoni has said he is committed to improving the offer the Civil Service makes to talented young people who want to build a career in delivering major projects, and he has set out a vision of creating coherent career paths from entry to senior levels in professional functions. As Manzoni notes, the Civil Service should be 'the best sweet shop in the country in terms of opportunities' for people interested in such careers.³⁹ Attracting people who want to build alternative careers in the Civil Service, rather than policy generalists, and aligning career paths, pay and incentives accordingly, is another powerful way to change behaviour in Whitehall.

Clarifying responsibilities

Third, cross-departmental responsibilities must be clarified – and aimed at helping departments do their jobs better – rather than debating the centralisation or decentralisation of particular powers and activities. Historically, this debate has been characterised as a zero sum conflict between departments and the centre over whether responsibilities should be centralised or decentralised. There is now a growing recognition that this debate is pointless. The aim is to support departments in their tasks.⁴⁰

³⁶ Institute for Government, *IfG statement on appointment of John Manzoni as Chief Executive of the Civil Service*, Institute for Government, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/news/latest/ifg-statement-appointment-john-manzoni-chief-executive-civil-service>

³⁷ In his 2007 report of the Cabinet Office, former head of the Performance and Innovation Unit, characterised the leadership activities of the centre along a spectrum from 'checking' to 'telling'. Since 2010, the Cabinet Office has adopted the terminology of a 'tight-loose' operating model, from minimal guidance to mandatory controls. Chakrabarti, S., *Role of the Cabinet Office: Leadership Through Effective Collaboration*, Cabinet Office, 2007, p. 9; National Audit Office, *The Centre of Government*, NAO, 2014, p. 22, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-centre-of-government.pdf>>

³⁸ Harris, J. & McCrae, J., *Preparing for the next spending review: A briefing note*, Institute for Government, September 2014, retrieved 13 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/preparing-next-spending-review>>

³⁹ Harris, J., 'John Manzoni sets out his priorities as chief executive of the Civil Service', *Institute for Government blog*, 4 February 2015, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/10316/john-manzoni-sets-out-his-priorities-as-chief-executive-of-the-civil-service/>>

⁴⁰ A vital component of successful cross-departmental change is the capacity to help departments achieve their own goals. Thomas, P. & Panchamia, N., *Civil Service Reform in the real world: Patterns of success in UK civil service reform*, Institute for Government, 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/civil-service-reform-real-world>>

Whether it is managing people's careers, buying goods and services, or checking things are on track, responsibilities must be clarified on a cross-departmental basis and done well. As John Manzoni put it, 'We could leave this to departments, but it's far more powerful to do it centrally'.⁴¹

It follows from this that the agenda is fundamentally about defining the centrally-held responsibilities for improving how Whitehall works. Getting these clear – and ensuring proper accountabilities are in place – is important to avoid repeating in this area the classic Whitehall cycle of new initiatives being created then wound down before improvements got traction. Only when there is clarity about how these responsibilities fit with those of departmental leaders, should the discussion move on to the powers and structures needed to discharge them. We therefore consider the responsibilities of three distinct groups:

- emerging central leaders of functions and professions
- leadership of the Civil Service as a whole
- ministers.

Responsibilities of cross-departmental leaders

Over the last few years, there has been a concerted effort to clarify the responsibilities of cross-departmental leaders. This has involved Whitehall in asking some fundamental questions about how it operates.

- Who are Whitehall's cross-departmental leaders?
- What role do those leaders have?
- How should those leaders operate in relation to departments?
- How should those leaders operate in relation to each other?

We look briefly at each of these questions.

Who are Whitehall's cross-departmental leaders?

If something needs to happen, it is essential to first identify the leader responsible for making it happen. In most complex organisations, the starting point is to look at professional functions, that is, clearly-recognisable roles within organisations that are underpinned by a set of professional skills.

Many of these are instantly recognisable in any reasonably large organisation, for example the finance, HR or legal functions. Others are rapidly evolving in response to new technologies, such as most obviously, the digital function. In the case of Whitehall, the dominant function is policymaking. This is beginning to be recognised through a determined drive to understand what professional policymaking looks like.

It is vital to be clear that functions are there to support, rather than substitute for, the general leadership of any organisation. So for example, the classic question in diagnosing the financial maturity of an organisation is to ask 'Who is responsible for financial management?' If the answer is 'the finance function', then you know you have problems. The only credible answer to the question is 'the overall leadership of the organisation'; the finance function is there to support this leadership in undertaking financial management. Cross-departmental leaders are there to support the leaderships within individual departments – ensuring they have support from people and services that are up to the job.

⁴¹ Manzoni, J., Speech at Institute for Government, 2 February 2015, as quoted in Harris, J., 'John Manzoni sets out his priorities as chief executive of the Civil Service', *Institute for Government blog*, 4 February 2015, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/10316/john-manzoni-sets-out-his-priorities-as-chief-executive-of-the-civil-service/>>

These functions are extremely important, as is their role in driving improvements in the way Whitehall operates. Cross-Whitehall leadership is a full-time role that should usually be at the heart of Whitehall rather than based in a department. There has been a very welcome, if overdue, move to recognise this. For example, there is now a full-time head of Government HR, Chris Last and the full-time head of the legal service, Jonathan Jones, now directly employs the lawyers in almost all departments. The communications function, headed by Alex Aiken, has embarked on a second major programme of improvements as a 'single profession'.⁴² The Treasury has taken back responsibility for the finance function, with the head of the finance profession, Julian Kelly, once again a senior Treasury official. There are still some noticeable exceptions, particularly in policymaking: the Head of the Policy Profession, Chris Wormald, is also permanent secretary of the Department for Education.

What role do cross-departmental leaders have?

Fundamentally, the job of cross-departmental leaders is to change how people across Whitehall are going about their jobs. As noted above, this is a very tricky task which means cross-departmental leaders may have to vary their approach and play several different roles. For example:

- sharing expertise – 'I would advise you to do this'
- sharing skills – 'here is someone who can do this for you'
- checking – 'I am making sure this is working'
- service provision – 'I can do this for you'
- regulation and standard setting – 'you have to do it this way'.

To change behaviour in Whitehall, it is often essential to vary the approach and play several roles at the same time. So, for example, the move to have all lawyers in Whitehall directly employed by the Treasury Solicitor's Department combines a skills approach – 'here's someone who can do this' – with a service provision and regulatory approach – 'you have to use the people we provide'. This could of course be confusing so it is essential that each cross-departmental leader ensures that the rest of Whitehall is clear about the strategy they are pursuing.

It is also essential that various responsibilities don't get confused. For example if the strategy calls for the centralisation of activity, it is dangerous for the cross-departmental leader to be both responsible for the delivery of that centralised activity and responsible for checking its quality. Too often, the failure to differentiate these roles results in a central leadership that is seen as an apologist for poor centralised activity. This is fatal. Whatever cross-departmental responsibilities are put in place, it is essential that proper accountability ensure their quality and capability.

How should cross-departmental leaders operate in relation to departments?

There is much more to cross-departmental leadership than structures. The basic behaviour of any cross-departmental leader matters – and they need to take responsibility for the quality of what their function is doing.

Like many large organisations, Whitehall tends toward what some have described as a 'big beast' or 'silverback' model of leadership, with individually-strong leaders dominating colleagues across Whitehall. Sometimes this model of leadership is a conscious choice, when the only way forward is to challenge engrained but ineffective practices. However, the risks of pursuing this type of leadership over the longer term are well recognised.

⁴² Aiken, A., 'Delivering today, preparing for tomorrow', [Government Communications Service blog](https://gcn.civilservice.gov.uk/blog/2015/01/23/delivering-today-preparing-for-tomorrow/), 23 January 2015, retrieved 13 March 2015, <<https://gcn.civilservice.gov.uk/blog/2015/01/23/delivering-today-preparing-for-tomorrow/>>

Cross-departmental leaders must be credible people with sufficient experience and the authority to get the job done. However, over the longer term, there is a problem if cross-departmental leaders adopt a competitive or merely-disinterested attitude towards departmental leaders. This might be what John Manzoni has in mind when he speaks about wanting ‘big leaders’ in Whitehall – people who are confident and prepared to take bold decisions within their responsibility, but are not going to trample over what others are doing.

Ultimately, cross-departmental leaders have to take responsibility for the quality of what happens on their watch. Currently there are too many areas where cross-departmental structures and ways of working lack capability. The unintelligent and ineffective interventions that they sometimes impose are seen by the rest of Whitehall as a ‘tax’.⁴³ This is unacceptable. One fundamentally important responsibility of central leaders is to ensure cross-departmental activity adds value to what government is doing – and how it is delivering government priorities – and avoids adding unjustifiable burdens to government departments.

How should those leaders operate in relation to each other?

Cross-departmental leaders must also pursue strategies that are joined up with each other. Uncoordinated central intervention leads to confusion and disruption, subtracting value from what government is doing. It is therefore essential that the functions currently being developed are joined up. Otherwise, there is a risk they develop in silos. This wouldn’t necessarily be surprising: siloisation is a constant danger in Whitehall with respect to departments and is ingrained in the culture.⁴⁴

For example, at a relatively trivial level, it’s obvious the centre is disjointed when it requests similar information from a department several times. This is needlessly irritating to those working in the department, wasting their time and effort.⁴⁵ The problem is even worse if each function wants an entirely unique relationship with the department, regardless of what other functions are doing.

It is also important that distinctions in approach are clearly understood and articulated. For example, it is striking that policymaking is following a much more federated approach than the other professions. It is not immediately clear why this is the case, and whether there is a clear understanding between the various leaders of the implications of these different approaches.

Ultimately, while individual cross-departmental leaders are responsible for working together, the civil service leadership must make sure that they are. The next section looks in detail at how this leadership is structured, and what responsibilities it needs to improve Whitehall.

Responsibilities of the civil service leadership

Cross-departmental leaders of professional functions need to be seen to be part of – and involved in – the overall leadership of the civil service. The incoming government should focus on three issues:

1. how to cope with the divided nature of the centre of Whitehall

⁴³ Kidson, M., *Civil Service Capabilities*, Institute for Government, 2013, p. 15, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/civil-service-capabilities>>

⁴⁴ Page, J., Pearson, J., Panchamia, N., Thomas, P. & Traficante, J., *Leading Change in the Civil Service*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp. 30, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/leading-change-civil-service>>; Institute for Government video, *Transforming Whitehall Departments*, 2012, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/transforming-whitehall-departments>>; Riddell, P., *An Open Letter: Two challenges and an opportunity*, Institute for Government, 2012, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/open-letter-two-challenges-and-opportunity>>

⁴⁵ This is a long-standing problem in Whitehall. See, for example, Hogwood, B., Judge, D. & McVicar, M., ‘Agencies, Ministers and Civil Servants in Britain’, in Peters, B., Pierre, J. (eds), *Politicians, Bureaucrats and Administrative Reform* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 38-9

2. how to ensure that improvements in policymaking connect to improvements in other functions
3. how to ensure that departmental leaders' responsibilities to help build the capability of the whole Civil Service are taken seriously.

We consider each of these three issues.

First the divided nature of the centre of Whitehall, split between the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, presents particular issues. This is less about structures, than about different cultures. The two organisations are very different in their main approach to issues, their internal coherence, and their relationships with the rest of Whitehall.

On the Cabinet Office side, the appointment of John Manzoni as Chief Executive of the Civil Service brings much needed coherence to the leadership of many of the functions now based there – and joins them up with functions that are based elsewhere, like legal and internal audit. There is now a clear point of responsibility for ensuring the plans of the different functions come together into something that coherently supports departments.

For one key function, finance, its leadership is rightly based in the Treasury, rather than the Cabinet Office. While it is early days, the Treasury has adopted an open approach to improving the finance profession. This appears to be supporting the necessary working relationships, at least in terms of co-ordinating the development of functions, between the Treasury and Cabinet Office.

There is speculation that Treasury will seek to take over some responsibilities currently based in Cabinet Office after the election. Any such moves should be driven by the priorities of the incoming government about how they want to improve Whitehall.⁴⁶ There is long-standing institutional tension between the Treasury and departments, and the Treasury and the Cabinet Office. Functions cannot be transferred in or out of the Treasury without taking this into account. For example, the Treasury may seek to take responsibility for controlling whether departments can proceed or not with a major project. But the more fundamental responsibility is about developing the experienced leaders who can successfully lead such projects. It is unlikely the Treasury would want, or be well equipped, to take on this responsibility. The new government will want to decide if it is sensible to separate the 'hard power' associated with control from the more important responsibility of helping improve Whitehall.

The ultimate test of any improvement agenda will be how well it is connected to the post-election spending review, which will fundamentally allocate resources and draw up plans driven by political priorities.⁴⁷ It would be a missed opportunity to carry out the spending review without using some of the capability developed at the centre since the last full review in 2010. Expertise from all the professional functions could help drive value for money through this process if a proper financial planning exercise is undertaken. For example, the Major Projects Authority could be used to test proposals put forward as part of departmental plans, and commercial and digital expertise could add value to a simple fiscal lens when developing department spending plans.

⁴⁶ For example, the Treasury may seek to take responsibility for controlling whether departments can proceed or not with a major project. But the more fundamental responsibility is about developing the experienced leaders who can successfully lead such projects. It is unlikely the Treasury would want, or be well equipped, to take on this responsibility. The new government will want to decide if it is sensible to separate the 'hard power' associated with control from the more important responsibility of helping improve Whitehall.

⁴⁷ Harris, J. & McCrae, J., *Preparing for the next spending review: A briefing note*, Institute for Government, September 2014, retrieved 13 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/preparing-next-spending-review>>

The Treasury remains the most important department in relation to improving the working of the Civil Service. Institute for Government research found the Treasury can ‘electrify, undermine or suffocate any reform’.⁴⁸ Therefore, part of the Treasury’s permanent secretary’s job must be to work with the Head of the Civil Service (HCS) to make sure improvement happens.

Second is the question about how improvements in policymaking are connected with other functional strategies. If good policy is to be affordable, legal, and implementable, it needs to be developed and implemented by experts from other disciplines than mainstream policy, including communications, legal, finance, and project management. But there does not currently seem to be a point where the HCS, Head of Policy Profession, and Chief Executive, decide how the improvements to policymaking and the other functions should work together. This is symptomatic of a prevailing approach which views policy as distinct and separate to other, more ‘corporate’ functions. But as these other functions exist to deliver the government’s priorities, policy must be included. Otherwise this is a missed opportunity.

Third, the line management of permanent secretaries is the responsibility of the HCS and this process should reflect the importance of Whitehall-wide improvements. Permanent secretary objectives now contain clear statements of their individual responsibilities towards the capability of the Civil Service overall.⁴⁹ The next stage is for the HCS to ensure these responsibilities are taken seriously as part of the Civil Service delivering the whole government’s agenda – including departmental responsibilities to their secretary of state.

The need for the civil service leadership as a whole to drive improvement is obvious. It is also very obvious to those inside Whitehall, and indeed outside, when various civil service leaders are failing to support each other’s initiatives. This has happened too often in the past, and it is important it is not repeated in the future.

Responsibilities of ministers

Political leaders must take this agenda seriously, because the success or failure of the government depends on it. Any improvement in Whitehall requires sustained drive over several years. Former government lead non-executive, John Browne, commented recently that good progress in Whitehall ‘can be undone as quickly as it is made’.⁵⁰ But the Civil Service cannot make sustained progress on its own without political support. However serious Whitehall might be, immediate political priorities trump internal civil service reform efforts, so the two need to be aligned.

Ensuring the right degree of political support is in place is, therefore, essential to success.⁵¹ Sometimes active engagement is necessary to overcome resistance from ministerial colleagues as much as civil servants. But sometimes political involvement can hinder efforts. Reform needs space from active political engagement without becoming disconnected. Ensuring the right civil service leaders are in place, and supporting them while holding them to account, is an important judgement

⁴⁸ *Leading Change in the Civil Service*, p.33

⁴⁹ McCrae, J., ‘Clarifying Accountability: The latest objectives for permanent secretaries’, *Institute for Government blog*, 11 July 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/8398/clarifying-accountability-the-latest-objectives-for-permanent-secretaries/>>; Freeguard, G., ‘An Objective View: Permanent secretary objectives 2014-15’, *Institute for Government blog*, 22 July 2014, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/8617/an-objective-view-permanent-secretary-objectives-2014-15/>>

⁵⁰ Ross, M., ‘Boards are up and running, says Lord Browne: now for the heavy lifting’, *Institute for Government blog*, 2 February 2015, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/10259/boards-are-up-and-running-says-lord-browne-now-for-the-heavy-lifting/>>

⁵¹ Thomas, P. & Panchamia, N., *Civil Service Reform in the real world: Patterns of success in UK civil service reform*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp.84-87, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/civil-service-reform-real-world/>>; Page, J., Pearson, J., Panchamia, N., Thomas, P. & Traficante, J., *Leading Change in the Civil Service*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp. 34-35, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/leading-change-civil-service/>>

to get right. Ministers need to take responsibility for ensuring progress continues and for holding the civil service leadership to account for it.

The appointment of ministers following the election in May 2015 will be a critical indication of whether there will continue to be political drive behind continued progress. There are four tests for judging whether this political drive exists:

1. The Prime Minister and Chancellor are publicly and privately committed not just to their priorities, but also to making the necessary improvements to ensure Whitehall is capable of delivering those priorities. Almost all of the most successful reforms in the Civil Service of the last 50 years had significant sponsorship or active support from the Prime Minister.⁵² This is important not just at the start of the parliament, but on an ongoing basis too – especially when those leading reforms encounter obstacles or opposition from officials or other ministers.
2. The Prime Minister will appoint a minister who is clearly responsible for ensuring those improvements are driven by the mission of the government, and that they actually happen. This minister needs to be genuinely interested in carrying out this responsibility – rather than using the job solely as a springboard for their career elsewhere in government.
3. The remit of the minister needs to build on the role played since 2010 by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude. The remit must make clear how central these improvements are to the wider government agenda. This could be achieved in many different ways – for example by combining the policy and improvement roles currently undertaken by Oliver Letwin and Francis Maude, or giving the minister charge of new structures like the ‘Office of Budget and Management’ proposed recently by GovernUp.⁵³
4. It must be clear that the minister will provide sustained and stable political leadership. The minister should remain in post through at least the first reshuffle. The position should not be used as a staging post for people waiting for a future promotion or moving out of government. Until Francis Maude occupied the post of Minister for the Cabinet Office for the five years since May 2010, the average tenure of his 11 predecessors since 1997 was 13-and-a-half months.⁵⁴

Without clear political leadership from the outset, whoever forms the next government runs the risk of having to revisit this agenda after losing the momentum and progress that has built up over the last five years. It will be clear whether this has happened within days of the appointment of new ministers.

⁵² Page, J., Pearson, J., Panchamia, N., Thomas, P. & Traficante, J., *Leading Change in the Civil Service*, Institute for Government, 2014, pp. 34, retrieved 16 March 2015, <<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/leading-change-civil-service>>

⁵³ Wheatley, M., *Repurposing Whitehall*, GovernUp, 2015, retrieved 5 March 2015, <<http://www.governup.org/repurposing-whitehall>>

⁵⁴ The average tenure of the Minister for the Cabinet Office between 1997 and 2010, based on Institute for Government analysis, was 413 days.