



The future of policy making

Keynote speech by Sir Chris Wormald KCB

The civil service's policy profession aims to become more open, consistent and professional. It plays a crucial role in involving relevant experts in decision-making.

In a keynote speech at the Institute for Government, Sir Chris Wormald – Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care and Head of the Civil Service policy profession – reflected on the successes of the policy profession and set out the priorities for high-quality policy making after Brexit.

What do we mean by policy?

"Policy is one of those words we use but very rarely define", Wormald began. Policy making sits at the intersection of three major components: analysis of the evidence, understanding of the political and democratic context, and an assessment of whether the policy can actually work. The role of the policy maker is to bring these elements together – not to be the expert in any of the individual domains – and this is part of the added value of policymaking, Wormald argued.

Policy is not a profession but it has professional standards

There are only around 20,000 policy professionals, making up a relatively small fraction of a 440,000 strong civil service. Wormald emphasised that policy is "categorically not" a profession: it does not have entry barriers, and Wormald was emphatic that it never should. "We do not want an elite cadre of policymakers" he argued, stressing that getting many different perspectives into the policy making process was vital to its success. But even if the policy profession lacks barriers to entry, this does not mean it lacks professional standards.

The role of the policy professional is to advise on policy in an open, professional and consistent manner. Crucially this does not entail making value judgments about

whether the policy is good or bad. That assessment is “rightly for ministers, for public debate, for manifestos... the substance of policy is a matter for public debate”. The key question for policy makers is how to provide good advice. What constitutes good advice is hard to define, although Wormald believes that it should be “honest and fearless”.

Aiming to provide consistent, high-quality advice

There is no way to uniformly standardise the policy making process across the whole of Government, as the type and form of advice will vary between situations. The Department for Transport requires different approaches to the Ministry of Defence, for example. However, there is a professional standards framework for policy advice that ensures quality, and there are several ways that the Government is using standards to drive high standards in the provision of advice.

Training is a key component. Currently there is an induction for all new entrants into the civil service, as well as an executive master’s degree in public policy for senior officials. There is currently a gap in the training offer for mid-career civil servants: addressing this is a key priority for the policy profession.

Measuring the quality of policy advice is hard

While the substance of policy is debated endlessly, the question of how to actually make policy receives far less scrutiny. The quality of advice is hard to measure, “there’s no way to say that the policy advice we gave this year was 8% better than last year” Wormald remarked.

Yet he went on to cite the recent INCiSE study¹ which ranked the UK highly among all developed nations for the effectiveness of its policy making. He commented that “while this is a crude measure, it gives us a basis”, arguing that the index affirmed the belief among the leadership of the civil service that it performs performed well, although there is always room for improvement.

Policy making must be open

Developing an inclusive group of officials to provide policy advice is also important. Here the civil services doesn’t see diversity as a box-ticking exercise; bringing a wide range of viewpoints to bear and avoiding groupthink will support better policy advice. This diversity also includes officials from outside the policy profession, and Wormald was keen to emphasise the importance of bringing people who work in operations – those who will actually have to implement the policy – into the process of policy development. This helps to build trust between teams and ensures better outcomes.

¹ Oxford University Blavatnik School of Government and Institute for Government, *The International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) Index 2019*, www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about/partnerships/international-civil-service-effectiveness-index-2019

Policy making is never done, and there are big challenges to be faced

“Policy making has to be iterative – a conversation with the country that keeps us heading in the right direction” said Wormald. This includes an iterative conversation about how to improve policy advice. Currently, significant policy issues that cut across multiple departments are proving to be a challenge – Wormald mentioned that this was a particular concern of the Cabinet Secretary. Policy advice for issues that sit neatly within one of the existing government silos are well-served. However, for other issues, like environmental sustainability, it is more difficult to join up advice; this is a challenge that the policy profession needs to confront.

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