

# Opening up

How to strengthen the civil service  
through external recruitment



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## About this report

The effectiveness of the civil service depends on the quality of civil servants. But while the civil service contains many excellent people, it lacks technical expertise and cognitive diversity – to the detriment of how the UK is governed. Increasing external recruitment, particularly of specialists, would help to solve this problem. This paper recommends precise changes to fulfil long-held but unmet ambitions to open up the civil service.

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# Summary

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The effectiveness of the civil service and, consequently, how well government is run depends on the quality of civil servants. Structures are important but ultimately it is the people working within those structures who shape UK government.

For more than 50 years, the civil service has committed to being better at external recruitment. But it continues to fall short at attracting, retaining and properly using the knowledge and skills present in wider society. This paper identifies the problems with the civil service's current approach and suggests specific changes to help it open up to external recruits, fulfilling long-held but unmet ambitions.

The civil service is particularly poor at bringing in specialists, especially into senior roles. More external recruitment of specialists would be especially beneficial for two main reasons. First, it would increase the technical expertise available to the civil service, making it better equipped to deliver ministers' priorities. And second, partly as a result of hiring people with different professional experience, it would increase the cognitive diversity of the civil service, which a convincing body of research suggests would improve the way it functions.<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that the civil service is about to enter a period of retrenchment, characterised by staff cuts and other efficiency savings. But that is not a reason to abandon plans to increase specialist external recruitment. It is a reason to press forward. These are the people who will provide new capability to the civil service and who – if used properly – will be able to improve the way government runs, saving money by improving public administration and so paying for themselves many times over. Reducing efforts to enhance the quality of civil service recruitment and improve the interchange between the government and other sectors would be prioritising marginal short-term efficiencies over more substantial long-term improvements.

## Recommendations in brief

- The biggest barrier to the external recruitment of specialists into the civil service is a lack of specialist roles, particularly at senior levels. New senior specialist roles that allow experts to contribute their technical expertise to government should be established to provide an avenue to bring in and properly use people who can improve policy, operations and more.
- For some jobs, civil service pay is simply not high enough to consistently get the best talent into government. The impending reduction in the number of civil service roles is an opportunity – some of the relatively small amount of money saved would be well spent increasing salaries where doing so would help to attract in-demand talent to particular roles. The modest cost would pay dividends through more effective administration. The government should also take the opportunity to reform civil service contracts to better reward individuals for success and better incentivise high performance and the right behaviours.

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- External specialists worry that their expert recommendations for achieving ministers' political goals will be disregarded and they will be forced to defend decisions they disagree with, damaging their professional reputation. This can lead to experts avoiding roles in the civil service. To address these concerns, as well as more directly holding civil servants to account for the recommendations they provide to ministers, the government should conduct a review to establish how it can publish certain types of civil service advice – after an appropriate period and with safeguards – and implement the findings.
  - The civil service's 'employer brand' is poor among the sort of people it needs to attract, partly because of high-profile ministerial criticism and partly because the civil service has not done enough to present an alternative, positive vision of itself. More must be done to show high performers that the pace, scale and complexity of working in government provides the kind of challenge they enjoy and to show employers the benefits to employees of time in the civil service, to help facilitate secondments and other opportunities. The civil service should more assertively communicate the opportunities on offer and establish a director-general level chief talent officer with a remit including the external recruitment of senior civil servants. Ministers should recognise that aggressive briefings against the civil service make it harder to recruit good officials.
  - The application process discourages external candidates. It should be overhauled so it takes less time, gives hiring managers the information necessary to make good decisions (including by giving them access to internal candidates' performance reviews), evens the playing field between internal and external candidates (including through better job adverts) and tests more robustly whether applicants have the skills they say they do (including by replacing success profiles). A review of secondments should take place to identify why they are so difficult to make happen. And the Civil Service Commission should amend its recruitment principles to allow hiring managers to 'poach' exceptional external candidates for permanent jobs without a full recruitment process. A permanent secretary should validate candidates' credentials and this entry route should be tightly regulated by the commission, which needs more resources. But the private sector has proven this can work and it will make the civil service a more viable destination for the very best external candidates while lessening the opportunity cost of hiring externally.
  - Onboarding takes too long and external applicants do not get a proper induction, preventing new hires from hitting the ground running. The civil service's chief operations officer should set a target of 100% of external applicants receiving all of their equipment on their start date and hold departmental human resources (HR) departments to account for meeting it. The Government Skills and Curriculum Unit's six-hour online induction should be expanded; the government should implement the Baxendale report's recommendations of a standard five- to ten-day induction, which all external senior hires attend. Every external recruit should be formally connected with an experienced mentor. And senior external entrants should be given the opportunity to shadow existing civil servants for two to four weeks before joining, to give them first-hand experience of how the civil service operates.

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- Civil servants, politicians and the public do not trust that the system to manage conflicts of interest is robust and capable of protecting government from bad actors. And prospective candidates do not trust it to fairly regulate their post-government employment. It must be completely overhauled. The civil service's ability to regulate conflicts of interest while officials are in role should be enhanced with a more robust and transparent system. And to regulate post-employment activity, the civil service should move to a system of 'restrictive covenants' written into officials' contracts, agreed by departmental HR teams and signed off by a permanent secretary where necessary. The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOBA) should be overhauled and rebranded to monitor how the system is working, advise departing civil servants whether their proposed post-government activities are consistent with their obligations and take enforcement action if a former civil servant breaches their contract. Every attempt must be made not to place an unreasonable burden on people's post-government pursuits but the government must also ensure that officials are not able to improperly influence government activity while a civil servant or afterwards.
  - To improve the civil service senior leadership's ability to hold their colleagues to account and help external stakeholders scrutinise the government's progress, the civil service should publish detailed data on its recruitment, onboarding and induction processes.

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# Introduction

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Lee Kuan Yew, the long-time Singaporean prime minister, once wrote that you “need good [people] to have good government”.<sup>1</sup> He was right. The quality of its people is, in the words of an interviewee for this project, the “number one meta-input” that determines how well a country is governed. For government to work effectively, having the right systems and structures in place is very important. But it is ultimately the people within them – ministers and civil servants – who are responsible for making the decisions and operationalising the ideas that help shape the present and future of the country.

## **Better defining civil servants’ roles will help the government target external recruits to the areas they are needed most**

To write this paper we conducted extensive interviews with current and former officials and other experts, alongside hosting two roundtables at the Institute for Government. There was broad agreement that currently the civil service is not good enough at attracting, retaining and properly using the knowledge and skills present in wider society.<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason is that there has not been enough focus on the jobs to which it is crucial for the civil service to attract external talent.

It is conventional to separate government officials into ‘generalists’ and ‘specialists’. But the generalist label can be misleading. It is a skill to be able to marshal experts and evidence and translate expert advice into deliverable policies that achieve ministers’ political goals. And it is a skill to manage policies through the system on behalf of ministers. These skills are seen as ‘general’ only because they are more commonly developed in the civil service than elsewhere.

Meanwhile, ‘specialist’ is often used as a catch-all term, but refers to three distinct types of people, all with different technical skills and suited to different types of government roles:

- those with expert knowledge of a policy area, often accumulated by working in it for years in a practical or academic environment
- people with high-quality hard skills – for example, data gurus and accomplished scientists
- operations experts who have proven themselves excellent at managing the delivery of big, complex projects.

There is a need to reframe our understanding of the types of people the civil service needs. The differences between generalists and specialists should be understood as differences in the types of work they specialise in. And ‘specialists’ are not a homogenous group – they are different types of officials suited to different roles.

There is also another cog in the government machine – special advisers. Temporary civil servants permitted to engage in party political activity, they play a crucial role in Whitehall, from using the authority of their minister to move things along to providing an important source of political input in decision making processes. Some of the arguments in this paper also apply to SpAds – they often influence decisions on highly technical issues without having sufficient experience or expertise in the area. While special advisers are outside the scope of this paper, which focuses on the core civil service, improving the way they are recruited so that they have more technical knowledge is also important to making government work better.

Assessments of the different roles within the civil service vary considerably. For the purposes of this report we classify them as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 **Types of role within the civil service**

Type	Role	Description	Example of role
Generalist	Private office	Acts as a bridge between a minister and their department, transmitting the minister's views to the department and vice versa	Principal private secretary
Generalist	Policy generalist	Marshals policy specialists, synthesises policy advice and manages policies through the system, helped by literacy (but often not direct expertise) in a policy area	Director or deputy director of a policy team
Specialist	Policy specialist	Gives advice on a specific area of policy based on their deep subject expertise	Policy adviser with expertise on a particular topic



Specialist	Specialist professional	Uses science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), legal or other equivalent skills to offer a specific or different perspective when providing advice; builds tools to assist with delivery	Chief data officer Chief scientific adviser Legal adviser
Specialist	Operations expert	Translates what ministers and policy officials want to happen into changes in the real world, including by managing people and projects	Senior project manager Chief executive of an operationally focused public body Chief commercial officer
Political	Special adviser	Gives party political advice to their minister and works with the civil service to shape advice	Special adviser to the secretary of state

## The government should focus on the external recruitment of all types of specialists

The civil service contains many excellent people and is particularly good at developing high-quality generalists, able to respond to ministers, balance competing demands in the messy process of policy making and help ministers manage their political objectives through the system.<sup>3,4</sup> Such people are crucial to the good functioning of government, most visibly in ministerially facing roles such as in private offices and when leading policy teams at senior levels to corral, test and shape advice. Indeed, their role is “intrinsically governmental”, and while that does not preclude external talent from being able to perform it nor diminish the value of generalists spending some time outside of the civil service, their skillset is often best developed through spending substantial time in government.<sup>5</sup>

But the civil service lacks specialists, particularly in senior roles. And the skills necessary to be an effective specialist can sometimes be best developed outside government. Developing deep knowledge of the financial markets or getting to grips with complex artificial intelligence alignment problems, for example, is better done working in the relevant field outside the civil service than within it. But people with technical skills who have had successful careers outside government are too rarely brought into the civil service and so it lacks the capability that it needs. Externally recruiting specialists is the area the civil service needs to particularly focus on.

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There are also benefits to be derived from more external recruitment beyond the addition of needed technical capability. A large body of research shows that cognitively diverse groups are better able to identify problems and find and operationalise solutions.<sup>6</sup> By relying too heavily on staff who excel at thinking about problems in a particular way, possess a similar set of skills and have relatively little career experience outside Whitehall, the civil service does not benefit from the advantages of such diversity. Hiring outsiders with different professional backgrounds will help to introduce different ways of thinking into the service.

Finally, while very much a tertiary benefit, having more people outside of the civil service who understand how it works would be beneficial in the many situations where the government has to engage with wider society to deliver its aims.

### **The civil service has long recognised the benefits of more external recruitment, but progress has been too slow**

The need for the civil service to open up to external recruits has been recognised over the years. The 1968 Fulton report argued that “people in business, the professions, nationalised industry, local government and the universities whose experience would be most valuable to the Service” were not being attracted into government in sufficient numbers.<sup>7</sup> *Modernising Government*, published in 1999, simply stated that there was a need to “bring more people into the civil service from outside”.<sup>8</sup> The 2012 *Civil Service Reform Plan* argued that a “greater interchange of people” between the private sector and the civil service would benefit government.<sup>9</sup> In 2014, the government commissioned the Baxendale report, looking at how external recruitment to the senior civil service (SCS) could improve.<sup>10</sup> The *Declaration on Government Reform*, launched in June 2021, committed to “improving the way we recruit... to attract a broader range of people to the privilege of public service”.<sup>11</sup> And the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, wrote in November 2021 that the government was intent on “bringing in more outside expertise from business, industry and academia”.<sup>12</sup>

There has been some change, but there remains a sense that the civil service does not quite appreciate the scale of the challenge, nor the potential consequences if it continues to fall short. That the same commitment was repeated in reform plans spanning more than 50 years is indicative of a lack of progress, with rhetoric not followed up by reforming energy. The *Declaration on Government Reform* pledged to ensure Britain has “the best people leading and working in government” and committed to new entry routes for professionals outside government and entrants with “specific, high demand skills”.<sup>13</sup> But a February 2022 update on the declaration’s progress, authored by Steve Barclay, then chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, showed that little progress had been made on this ‘porosity’ agenda.<sup>14</sup> Only 18% of new entrants to the senior civil service in 2020–21 were external recruits, down from 20% the previous year.<sup>15</sup> As one interviewee for this paper put it, the recent evidence continues to suggest that “the civil service’s commitment [to increasing external recruitment] is deeply uneven at best, while ministers are also not entirely committed and have not maintained a consistent interest in the agenda”.

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Problems with recruiting staff with professional backgrounds outside the civil service interact with problems in the way the civil service tends to use these people. Often when they enter the civil service they experience what Lord Maude termed “tissue rejection”, unable to function within the deeply entrenched culture and structures of the service – a phenomenon reflected in the consistently higher turnover rates among senior civil servants recruited externally.<sup>16,17</sup> As one interviewee put it, while “the civil service is generally really good at allowing people to express themselves at work, they aren’t great at doing this in intellectual terms... [it needs] more people who think differently”.

In particular, all kinds of specialists find that they are not used in a way that makes the most of their talent, particularly as they get more senior. Within the civil service there is a deeply entrenched conception of what a senior role is: you manage a lot of staff and spend a sizeable amount of your time speaking to ministers.<sup>18,19</sup> This model suits the ambitions and strengths of some, but does not support the preferred career paths of others.

### **More external recruitment is crucial to maintaining an effective civil service**

If the civil service is not able to get the right people in the right roles to enact ministerial priorities and deliver good government, it will suffer potentially profound consequences. The increasingly blunt instruments ministers are using to try to open up Whitehall – most recently, acquiring the power to prevent roles in the senior civil service being filled without external advertisement – is one illustration of the frustration they feel.<sup>20</sup>

To provide a better service to ministers and the country, the civil service should seek to transition to a more ‘mixed economy’, with senior roles populated by external talent as well as staff recruited at junior levels. There should be a greater emphasis on recruiting externally for more specialist capability in particular. Improving the way that the civil service externally recruits generalists (and uses stints outside government to further their career) would be helpful, but making it easier to bring in specialists to give the civil service the capability that it currently lacks is where change would be most valuable. This paper provides a blueprint for doing so.

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# Why the civil service needs to be better at attracting, retaining and using specialist external talent

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More external recruitment of specialists would be particularly beneficial for two main reasons:

- It would increase the **technical expertise** available to the civil service, increasing officials' cumulative levels of knowledge and expertise, making the service better equipped to advise ministers, deliver their priorities and run government effectively.
- Partly as a result of hiring people with different professional experiences who have been trained to approach problems in different ways, it would increase the **cognitive diversity** within the civil service. A large and convincing body of research suggests this would improve the way it identifies problems and operationalises solutions.<sup>1</sup>

There are ways for the civil service to improve its access to technical expertise and levels of cognitive diversity that do not involve hiring people to be civil servants. The Institute for Government has previously recommended setting up 'expert networks' to help officials find relevant academics whose expertise can be drawn upon.<sup>2</sup> Expert advisory committees and ad hoc panels can be used both to test new policy and act as a 'challenge function' for internal work. Informal relationships with prominent figures in a field can prove a useful source of advice. Policy reviews headed by an outsider have become a more common way for departments to solicit external input on policy questions. Hiring outside consultants can be a useful lever to help solve thorny problems. Citizen engagement can be an effective way to get a range of perspectives. And commissioning bespoke research can help government understand the nature of a problem and its potential solutions, and assess the efficacy of policies.

Properly engaging with public bodies can also give the civil service access to technical expertise. As delivery-oriented organisations focused on a specific area, they will often employ specialists able to assist with issues that the civil service is dealing with. Furthermore, being closer to delivery can give them a different perspective to that of policy makers in Whitehall. Engaging with them is an important way to increase the cognitive diversity brought to bear on a given issue.

However, most of the business of central government is done by the civil service, the institution with the – poorly defined, but generally understood – objective of administering the state. Directly hiring a specialist to work full-time, even if on a fixed-term contract or through a secondment, creates opportunities that ad hoc access to them does not. Direct recruitment is often a lot cheaper than paying consultancy

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rates to access a type of expertise and buying expertise from consultants can cause an expensive 'doom loop' – in situations where those skills will be needed again, the government bakes in capability gaps and so further consultancy spend in the future.<sup>3</sup> And while engagement with public bodies is important, using them as the sole government-employed repository of technical expertise would be a mistake. Indeed, one of the important roles of public bodies, which are often more similar to private sector organisations than the civil service is, should be as a 'stepping stone' for external experts who want to work in core departments. Because core departments need direct expertise in part to interrogate and engage with other public bodies. And clustering policy specialists in public bodies creates distance between them and policy generalists, causing problems in communication and co-ordination, and preventing them from working in lockstep.

In particularly sensitive situations – often the most important to get right – it can be difficult to solicit external opinions. And while consulting externally is useful, external partners will have their own incentives that may cut across government's – for example, a consultant is incentivised to make money and an academic is incentivised to enhance their prestige within their field.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, to combat groupthink it is more effective to hire cognitively diverse staff and embed them deeply in decision making processes than to call on them for a limited period of time to provide input on a specific problem.<sup>5</sup> The extent to which getting things done in government relies on cultivating strong networks means full-time staff are likely to be able to engage more effectively with the Whitehall machine than those working for a few hours a week.

Seconding existing officials out of the civil service, so they can learn new skills, is another way to develop its technical capability. It can also help to increase its cognitive diversity by exposing staff to new professional environments with different ways of working. This is certainly helpful, and the government should do more to make outward secondments happen, but there is only so much that a 6-, 12- or even 24-month secondment can do to equip civil servants with new skills and perspectives compared to external entrants who, in some cases, will have spent their entire career outside government, honing technical skills and absorbing different ways of doing things.<sup>6</sup> In a truly 'mixed economy', secondments could not replace substantially more external recruitment.

Similarly, while giving officials experience of a greater breadth of central government roles both across the civil service and in public bodies as a matter of routine would help, and the civil service should seek to ensure this happens, interviewees stressed that working outside central government offers a genuinely different professional perspective and that there are some skills that can be acquired outside it but not within it. The distinctive approach to problem solving that comes with advanced practical scientific experience, or the domain expertise in relation to financial markets that comes with close exposure to them over a long period, is not easily acquired in government.

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Bringing in more external entrants, therefore, is an important and effective route by which the civil service can increase its technical capability and cognitive diversity. This does not mean that the government should not use the other mechanisms set out above – they are all useful. But more external recruitment would have a major impact on improving the civil service’s performance.

## **The civil service needs more people with technical expertise**

In 2014, in response to a lack of technical expertise in key areas, the government – led by Francis (now Lord) Maude, Sir John Manzoni and Sir Jeremy (subsequently Lord) Heywood – further developed the civil service’s ‘functional’ model. Existing structures were expanded and strengthened, with cross-government heads appointed to oversee the recruitment and management of staff from various specialisms.<sup>7</sup>

Several ad hoc pushes over the past decade have also increased the amount of technical expertise in the civil service. In parts of the civil service, ‘hotbeds’ of technical expertise like UK Government Investments have emerged, although where they have done so is largely an “accident of history”.<sup>8</sup> And there are people with high-level business, scientific, and digital and data acumen and experience dispersed across teams and departments. These people occupy roles like chief scientific advisers, data scientists and analysts – although often they are not used as well as they should be, in part because the data collected on who has these skills and to what level of competence is poor.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, some departments have internal challenge functions designed to draw on outside expertise, such as the Foreign Office’s policy planning staff, many of whom are external recruits.<sup>10</sup> And appointing ‘tsars’ has become a common way to get outside expertise into government to advise or lead on a specific issue.

The functions gave government an avenue to acquire technical expertise in areas that generalists previously staffed. They have considerably improved the way the civil service attracts talent in areas including finance, procurement, project management, digital, data and technology (DDaT) and more. To take one example, in the mid-2000s only a quarter of government departments had qualified finance directors, with generalist civil servants holding the rest of the roles – something unthinkable today, with a financial qualification an essential requirement for the post.<sup>11,12</sup>

But while progress has undoubtedly been made, many of the functions still have plenty of scope to improve. For example, the DDaT function has sometimes struggled to attract the best talent and as technological change continues apace, it will need to employ people with more advanced digital and data skills.<sup>13,14</sup> And the communications function continues to have work to do in its efforts to recruit the best experts, particularly in digital communications.<sup>15</sup> In areas of expertise not represented by a function, there is also room for improvement. The science and engineering profession, for example, contains many excellent STEM-focused officials but, as government chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, put it:

**“Science is not embedded in the [civil service]. We are relatively short of people trained in science, and the reflex to call for science to help solve problems or give new insights is not well developed.”<sup>16</sup>**

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A lack of technical expertise is particularly acute in two areas: policy and operations. Some policy officials are in roles where possessing a generalist skillset is entirely appropriate. Some hold private office roles, while others are 'policy generalists' who do things like lead a policy team. Both roles do not require technical expertise, but expertise of a different sort – the ability to reconcile tricky trade-offs, finesse the available options to suit ministerial preferences and judge between competing claims. An informed, intelligent but neutral perspective is beneficial, and being a deep technical expert in an area under discussion would in some ways be detrimental. A specialist with a background in environmental conservation would find it difficult to satisfactorily assess the competing claims of an economist who argued that one of the biggest barriers to growth is the over-emphasis of environmental protections in the planning system, for example.

That is not to say that generalist officials do not need subject knowledge of the area in which they work. A good policy generalist needs to be literate in the relevant technical detail so they can render down expert advice into deliverable chunks of policy – which is why the Institute for Government recently argued that they should anchor their career in specific areas and move jobs less frequently in a more planned fashion to develop greater domain knowledge and preserve institutional memory.<sup>17</sup> But the literacy of a good policy generalist is different from the technical expertise that an outsider who has spent years in a given field can bring.

This type of expertise is one that ministers often complain they do not have enough access to. They often feel that officials, even ones responsible for small chunks of technical policy areas, are overly generalist, and that when they need specialist policy advice the civil service is unable to provide it. Sir David Lidington summed up this perspective in telling the Institute that after four years as minister for Europe, "I would sometimes know the stuff more than [my officials] did".<sup>18</sup>

Even in policy making roles that rely on a grasp of complex technical detail, officials are often expertise-adjacent policy generalists rather than specialists themselves. For example, our research into the Treasury's performance during Covid found that many of the staff providing economic advice were generalists rather than economists.<sup>19</sup> This has consequences for the way civil servants interpret evidence and develop policy. As one interviewee put it:

**"The civil service takes evidence-based policy very seriously but doesn't have the expertise to distinguish between good and bad evidence. You need lots of technical expertise to actually be able to, for example, interrogate a research design in a piece of research and know if it's using an appropriate methodology for the data it's analysing."**

The civil service's cumulative lack of technical knowledge encourages a faux credentialism, where officials use relatively basic qualifications – a master's in artificial intelligence from 15 years ago, for example – to claim domain knowledge in areas of high technical complexity, when what they actually have is useful entry-level knowledge of a policy area that is no substitute for technical expertise.<sup>20</sup>



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And where genuine specialists do exist within the policy profession, they often occupy the same junior role for years, because climbing to a more senior role would usually mean leaving their area of expertise and/or accepting greater distance from the technical detail in favour of more management responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> For example, if you are a grade 7 with expertise in nuclear energy policy, and there is no grade 6 role that deals directly with the same topic, you must either eschew promotion or leave your specialist domain in order to achieve it.

Staffing technical roles with policy generalists can also mean that external stakeholders disproportionately influence government. Reflecting different external views to ministers is important but must be balanced by in-house expertise capable of making definitive arguments as to what should be done, otherwise civil service advice becomes a second-hand reporting exercise unduly influenced by outside noise. Too often, civil servants with few views of their own about the policy area for which they are responsible see their role as only to balance the competing perspectives of external stakeholders, or – at worst – to uncritically champion the most vocal ones.<sup>22,23</sup> And the current model by which generalists in the civil service develop expertise – staying in the same, often junior, role for years – can also lead to external capture as well as resistance to new ideas or ways of working (further contributing to the groupthink described below).<sup>24</sup>

There is room in government for both policy generalists and policy specialists. Their expertise complements each other; an effective policy making process would see specialists provide expert advice to generalists who marshal that evidence, synthesise it with ministers' political preferences and manage the resulting policy through the system. And there is a lot of value in getting them to co-create policy in structures like multidisciplinary teams or evaluate each other's work through 'red teaming'.

But there is currently an imbalance in favour of generalists. And while the civil service is doing work to improve the subject knowledge of existing civil servants – for example, through the 'domain knowledge' strand of the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit's training – in most cases this improves the literacy of policy generalists, rather than giving them the skills necessary to be specialists. Often, developing expertise in technical policy areas – an example that an interviewee gave was food security – requires years of study and/or professional experience, allowing people to critically engage with the latest evidence rather than simply being aware of it. And civil servants are simply too busy for such training to be anything but a small adjunct to their daily life. As one interviewee put it, civil servants "are often out of date, partly because they do not have time to get up to date", not least because of the pace at which new research is produced, updating the evidence base for policies.<sup>25</sup>

The way to resolve this problem is to hire externally for specialists who are up to date, giving the civil service the capability to make properly informed decisions about what is good and bad evidence, as well as injecting a new cognitive perspective and stimulating greater emphasis on adhering to the latest evidence across the whole civil service.



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There is also a lack of technical expertise in operations. Jobs with a primary focus on 'doing' rather than 'knowing' are often considered lower status within the civil service and too often there is not enough focus on ensuring that those occupying senior roles are the most operationally competent people who could be found.<sup>26</sup> As a National Audit Office report on the operational delivery profession argued, there is a "lack of technical and leadership capability", causing "repeated problems with service quality and inefficiency", and while government "needs people who can lead, manage and work in complex systems... much of government continues to lack these capabilities".<sup>27</sup> This is to the detriment of the state's ability to operationalise policy decisions.

For example, at the outset of the pandemic, some areas of operations were under-equipped to get things done in a fast-moving and turbulent situation. The government had to scramble to bring in external operations experts, including former military commanders, to grip the situation.<sup>28</sup> Successful schemes like the ventilator challenge were often reliant on a small clutch of people who were single points of failure because there was not a depth of effective operations expertise that could be called upon.<sup>29</sup>

In some areas, a detrimental lack of operations expertise was a theme throughout the pandemic. Reflecting on her efforts leading the Vaccine Taskforce, which sought to establish the UK as a strong partner to pharmaceutical companies by joining up academic and industrial expertise and scaling up firms' manufacturing operations, Dame Kate Bingham argued that "operationally, there were very few people in government with the experience and knowledge to assess, support or indeed challenge our work".<sup>30</sup> Her experience was of working across two departments – the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) – which both deal with operational challenges even in normal times and should have had more relevant expertise in-house.

Once the pandemic was under way, the civil service was broadly effective at operationalising decisions where existing systems were available.<sup>31</sup> But it could have been better at doing so across the board, particularly in the early days, if it already had enough technical expertise in-house.<sup>32</sup> It is inevitable that the UK will experience further crises that require highly competent operational responses in the years to come and, if left unaddressed, this lack of expertise will cause serious problems.<sup>33</sup>

## **The civil service lacks cognitive diversity**

There is a wealth of academic and practical evidence showing that the more cognitively diverse a team or organisation is, the better it performs. Different perspectives make groups better at spotting problems and delivering solutions by enhancing the number of ways they are capable of approaching a situation.<sup>34</sup>

Some of the world's highest-performing and most innovative companies have successfully operationalised this concept. It has also not gone unrecognised by the government. The civil service's diversity and inclusion strategy includes a commitment to "[value] diversity of teams – challenging groupthink and inspiring a greater diversity of thinking".<sup>35</sup> The *Declaration on Government Reform* committed to "support and

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encourage multidisciplinary teams” – a type of team where people with diverse skillsets and perspectives collaborate to solve problems.<sup>36</sup> And the civil service’s chief operations officer, Alex Chisholm, has said that improving the civil service’s cognitive diversity is one of his priorities.<sup>37</sup>

It is good that the government has these aspirations. But despite them, interviewees noted that the civil service remains an environment prone to groupthink. As one put it: “People talk about the civil service monoculture – and unfortunately they’re right.” Outside observers continue to identify a lack of cognitive diversity as a problem – for example, the think tank Reform recently argued that there is a civil service-wide “single mindset bias”, with most officials thinking the same way.<sup>38</sup>

It is hard to measure groupthink or identify its impact, but interviewees often couched their analysis in similar terms to Michael Gove’s Ditchley lecture on government reform, in which he argued that “when you get a critical mass of people in any organisation who have got similar outlooks, biases and preferences, the minority who may dissent become progressively more uncomfortable about doing so”.<sup>39</sup> As one interviewee put it, the civil service “prizes people who have learnt to speak a script”. This corroborates evidence from the 2021 Civil Service People Survey, which showed that only 55% of civil servants agreed they felt “safe” to challenge the way things are usually done in their organisation.<sup>40</sup>

This bias towards conformity is most apparent in areas where dissenting opinions are most valuable. One interviewee gave the example of the government’s poor record of identifying and managing extreme risks.<sup>41</sup> As they described it: “One of government’s terrible burdens is assuming that tomorrow will be like today and so not [future-proofing] accordingly. We all have blind spots but the monoculture in the civil service accentuates it.”

The government’s response to the pandemic showed these failings clearly. A Health and Social Care Select Committee report into the lessons learnt from the pandemic response found that the UK followed the “wrong policy” early in the pandemic in part because “a degree of groupthink was present... which meant we were not as open to approaches being taken elsewhere... as we should have been”.<sup>42</sup>

This echoed the findings of a Social Mobility Commission report, which argued that the civil service’s behavioural norms can often disincentivise disagreement. As one serving civil servant quoted in its report put it:

**“There’s this thing about ‘bringing your whole self to work’. But, I think most people don’t actually do that. Because, I would have thought if people are actually bringing their whole selves to work, there would be less consensus [laughs].”<sup>43</sup>**

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Senior civil servants have also recognised this as a problem and identified more external recruitment as a solution. For example, in April 2020, the former permanent secretary, Clare Moriarty, reflected that the civil service was “clearly still acting out of discomfort with those who don’t fit the norm”.<sup>44</sup> Four years earlier, she had praised extended ministerial offices because they “allowed us to access a different group of people who can come in and ask questions – who see the world in a different way... injecting a bit of different thinking”.<sup>45</sup>

It is entirely normal for large organisations to have a strong internal culture. In many ways it is positive that the civil service has such a strong sense of organisational identity. But the extent to which its behavioural norms encourage groupthink is counter-productive and it would benefit from an infusion of fresh perspectives via more outside recruitment.

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# Why does the civil service struggle to attract, retain and use specialist external talent?

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## **There is a lack of specialist roles in the civil service, particularly at senior levels**

The biggest barrier to the external recruitment of specialists into the civil service is that there are not enough appropriate roles for them to occupy. This is particularly notable at senior levels and results from the fact that “the civil service grading system rewards generalists not experts”.<sup>1</sup>

The civil service’s career structures “do not allow... experts to progress unless they also [take] on management responsibilities”.<sup>2</sup> Senior roles in the civil service are overwhelmingly those with responsibility for managing staff and communicating with ministers; deep engagement with technical detail is often considered a ‘nice to do’. Although taking on these roles suits the strengths and desired career paths of policy generalists and some types of operations specialists, it does not accord with others’. As one interviewee described it, it can “create a fairly hard cap on how senior you can go if you’re someone purely interested in technical things”.

For example, departmental chief scientific advisers tend to have substantial management duties. Their most valuable skill, and the reason they are ultimately hired into the civil service, is their scientific knowledge and ability to inject that into the way government operates. But as one interviewee put it, they “can end up being literally one person basically managing a thousand people”, compromising their ability to add value as they spend too much of their time managing others and dealing with ‘handling’ problems.

Specialist roles also tend to be less senior. For example, chief scientific advisers are the most senior scientific experts in their department and yet many are directors or below who are not accorded parity of esteem with senior policy professionals, who occupy director-general level posts. This is so even in departments where scientific expertise is crucial to the effective discharge of duties, like the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), where it is integral to development policy among other things, and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), where it is critical to decisions made on digital infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> There are scientific grades in some departments, but they tend to be disproportionately concentrated at junior levels.

Similarly, despite taking on a leadership role comparable with departmental permanent secretaries, many of the cross-government heads of function are directors general, once again reflecting an incongruence between the way generalist and specialist roles are treated.

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Furthermore, as noted above, jobs that should be filled by specialists are often not, particularly in the policy profession. With most senior policy roles largely focused on management and higher-level oversight of work beneath them, it is roles outside the senior civil service, and particularly grade 6s and 7s, who tend to engage most with technical detail. But often these people are more junior policy generalists who do not have any substantial background in the area they are working on and want to eventually progress to generalist roles in the SCS. To do so, their incentives are to get up to speed as quickly as possible, do a decent job for 18 months, move jobs and repeat the process a couple more times, before being promoted higher up the career ladder.<sup>4</sup>

Put simply, the civil service does not offer enough specialist roles through which experts who do not have the skills or inclination to manage others can contribute to government by doing what they are good at. And often the specialist roles on offer are too junior to attract the most accomplished experts anyway. If you are a high-calibre specialist, you have “certain expectations around... your seniority and freedom to act which government has to try and meet”.<sup>5</sup> But the civil service’s grade structure does not offer technical experts parity of esteem. This severely dents its ‘employer proposition’. As one interviewee put it, echoing the views of many others: “Attracting [an accomplished specialist] to government all starts with feeling like you will have an impact, that you are going into a genuinely senior role. That’s of primary importance – everything else is secondary.”

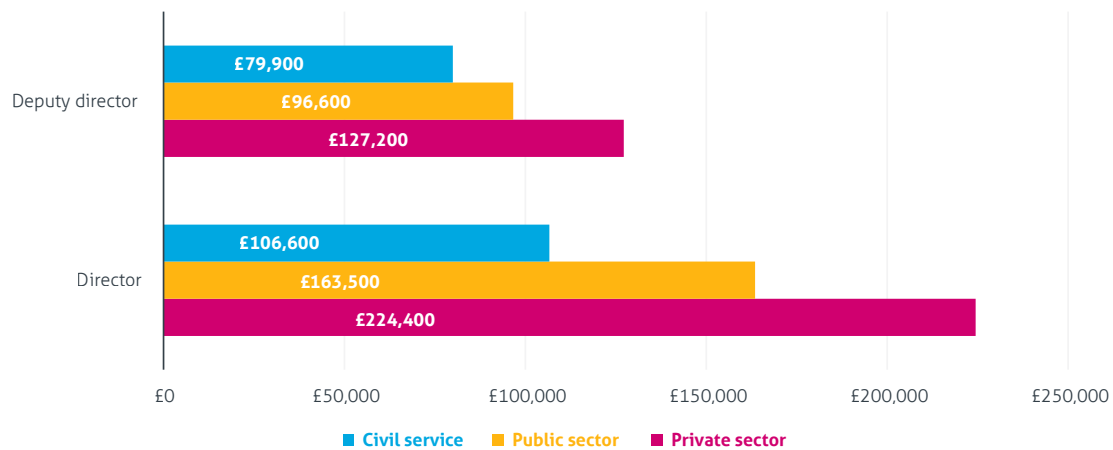
## **Civil servants are not paid enough to attract the best external talent**

The level at which the civil service remunerates specialist talent substantially limits its ability to recruit them.

It will always be politically difficult to increase civil service pay. But the government must recognise that it gets the civil service that it pays for. There will always be some high-quality specialists who, through a sense of public service, a lack of interest in making lots of money or some other motivation, will be content to work for central government on a salary well below their equivalents in the private or wider public sector.<sup>6</sup> But “there is only so far you can stretch the elastic”.<sup>7</sup>

As Michael Gove acknowledged during his June 2020 Ditchley lecture, “many of those who work... in the civil service could command higher salaries, and indeed face less stress, in other fields”.<sup>8</sup> For example, industry benchmarking puts the average executive-level data scientist’s salary at £196,000 a year and the top data scientists at the best firms can earn hundreds of thousands of pounds more, yet the latest available data, from September 2021, shows that the executive director of the Central Digital and Data Office earned between £155,000 and £159,999 a year.<sup>9,10</sup> Permanent secretaries earn approximately 10% of the median FTSE 250 chief executive.<sup>11,12</sup> And the latest benchmarking that the Cabinet Office has published shows that the median director-level civil servant’s base salary is less than half of their private sector equivalent and only 63% of an equivalent in the wider public sector – not accounting for often substantially smaller civil service bonuses.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1 **Cabinet Office benchmarking of director and deputy director median base salary**



Source: *Government Evidence to the Review Body on Senior Salaries on the Pay of the Senior Civil Service*, Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 29. Senior civil service figures are from April 2021 and private and public sector figures are from October 2020. Comparison figures for SCS3 and SCS4 level are not available.

The civil service’s comparatively high pension goes some way to closing this gap. For example, previous Institute for Government research found that someone on an SCS1 median salary of £78,500, leaving the civil service for the private sector at the age of 52, would need a salary of £96,800 to be equivalently well off (in terms of their total annual remuneration from pay and employer pension contributions) after doing so.<sup>14</sup> But the civil service’s lower-pay, higher-pension offer is atypical across the wider economy and many find it unattractive in comparison with the private sector, where not only are there higher overall remuneration packages but also a greater proportion of them are paid up front.<sup>15</sup> And to some extent, the impact of higher pensions is balanced out by the private sector’s tendency to offer employees benefits in kind – like gym memberships, private health care or free meals in the office – which also do not show up on headline salary figures but can be of substantial financial value.

In some areas, even top-end civil service pay is not adequate to attract people with in-demand skills. For example, it took almost three years to recruit a chief digital officer, with the civil service chief operating officer, Alex Chisholm, telling the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee that while the proposed salary was “top whack” for the civil service, market research showed that “the sort of people we are looking for would be earning multiples of what we are able to pay” outside government.<sup>16,17</sup> The reduction in global energy security stimulated by the Russia–Ukraine war has increased the market value of energy experts, many of whom have been leaving government for higher-paid jobs elsewhere during the subsequent energy crisis.<sup>18</sup> The salaries on offer in the Government Communication Service are not adequate to attract and retain enough of the best communications professionals.<sup>19</sup>

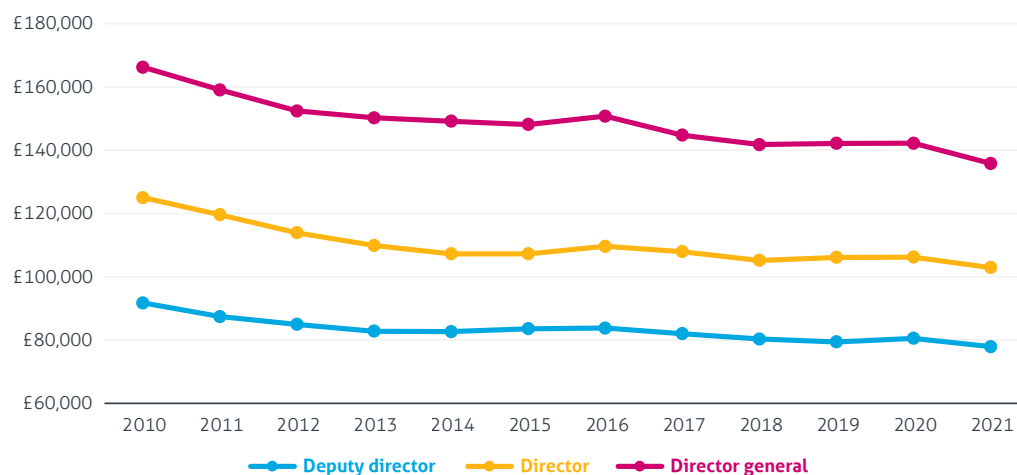
Quite simply, the uncompetitive nature of the civil service’s remuneration packages impacts the quality of talent it is able to hire. As one interviewee put it: “Pay shouldn’t be the reason you come and work in government – but it genuinely is a huge barrier to getting the right people in.” The 2022 Senior Salaries Review Body report warned that: “The government’s focus on keeping the annual pay increase low is eroding the

attractiveness of the SCS proposition, which in turn will impact on the quality of those joining and remaining.” And the fact that when talented specialists leave the civil service, they frequently do so citing pay reasons, further reinforces that remuneration is a genuine issue.<sup>20</sup> It is no coincidence that the bits of government that have been most successful at attracting specialist outsiders – like the commercial function, or the Government Digital Service ‘skunkworks’ of the early 2010s – have tended to offer substantially higher remuneration than normal and bound proportionally less of it in their pension package.

The difficulty of getting external specialists into government under existing civil service pay arrangements is something that the government seems to recognise intermittently. It is common to see external entrants to the civil service offered higher salaries than internal candidates – in part because, while internal candidates have shown a willingness to be paid well below the market rate to do a civil service job, external candidates often have different minimum expectations around pay that need to be met for them to apply for and/or take up a role.<sup>21</sup> A recent advert for the role of chief executive of the Competition and Markets Authority made this practice explicit. It pledged a salary around £75,000 higher should the successful candidate be external.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the civil service provides a ‘pivotal role allowance’ allowing departments to pay higher salaries to “retain major project leaders and those in highly specialised roles” – although this can be difficult to use and as of July 2022 had been deployed only 222 times since its introduction in 2013.<sup>23</sup>

After more than a decade of real-terms cuts in salary – median senior civil service salaries fell in real terms by 15–18% for each pay band between 2010 and 2021 – that has led to a “growing pay gap with the external market”, the civil service’s ability to offer the remuneration necessary to attract the external specialists that it needs has been severely diminished.<sup>24</sup> At this point it is a big barrier to encouraging them to join government.

Figure 2 **Median senior civil service salaries in real terms, 2010–21**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of *Government Evidence to Review Body on Senior Salaries on the Pay of the Senior Civil Service*, Cabinet Office, 2022, p. 84. Real-terms figures calculated using Consumer Price Index with Housing costs (CPIH) inflation as the Office for National Statistics uses in its estimates, 2021. Salary figures are counted on a full-time-equivalent basis. Figures are rounded to the nearest £100. Data for SCS4 level is not available.



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## External specialists perceive reputational risks to entering the civil service

The role of the civil service is to support the government of the day. Current constitutional arrangements do not permit it to have a voice independent of the ministers it serves – other than the rare occasions when ministerial directions are requested because a permanent secretary believes a proposed policy breaches the criteria of regularity, propriety, value for money or feasibility.<sup>25</sup> As Margaret Thatcher famously put it, “advisers advise, ministers decide”.<sup>26</sup>

To many external experts, the prospect of losing their independent voice is unappealing. If an external expert feels unable to work to achieve the government’s political goals, they cannot be a civil servant at that moment in time. But many worry that should their expert recommendations for achieving ministers’ stated aims be disregarded, they will subsequently be linked with a decision with which they disagree, damaging their personal reputation. This may be particularly problematic and professionally embarrassing if they are on public record advising a different course of action to the one a minister decides to pursue. This is felt especially keenly by those coming from academia, a field where success is particularly reliant on peers’ external perceptions of their work.

As a result, experts and those with strong opinions can avoid taking roles in the civil service, resulting in the service ending up with too many people who have what Sir John Kingman described as a “civil service temperament: a willingness to tolerate and relish the complexity and variety of being part of a big system but being sufficiently dispassionate – and resigned – to accept and adapt to the changing whims of successive ministers”.<sup>27</sup> As one interviewee put it: “Many civil servants – including too much of the civil service leadership – conflate the important idea that the civil service must be politically neutral with civil servants not being able to argue a point of view very emphatically. In fact, most of the best ministers highly value having a rigorous policy debate.”

This is to the detriment of the quality of advice that civil servants put to ministers and the civil service’s internal rigour as an institution designed to provide expert administrative capability that translates ministers’ political ambitions into reality.

External experts also have more general concerns about joining the civil service, arising from the state of the civil service’s ‘employer brand’ – which more than one interviewee described as “battered”.

In part this has been caused by high-profile ministerial criticism of the civil service. This is not a new phenomenon – the phrase ‘not fit for purpose’ was popularised by a frustrated minister referring to his department – and civil servants understand that sometimes they will be blamed publicly for blunders, real or perceived. But under the Johnson government these attacks intensified and helped cement an external perception of an environment in which employees were under siege from their leadership.



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The fact that the civil service has not tried to present a different vision of itself has further exacerbated this negative perception. There is no reason why the civil service could not make a positive case to the public for itself as an employer; to impartially present what it does and will do to support ministers, public services and citizens. But a nascent attempt at doing so, the 'here for you' campaign launched in 2020, fizzled out and was not replaced.<sup>28</sup>

Current and former officials interviewed for this paper unanimously stressed that the civil service provides a breadth of opportunity for professional development and that jobs are challenging, interesting, fast-paced and feel important. But, as one interviewee put it, from the outside the civil service seems "dry and static" and that "if you're a person from a background where people are prized for innovating, creating change, shaping the future, you don't want to go there". More needs to be done to show that this is exactly the kind of person that can and should thrive in the civil service, and to show the breadth of opportunities and challenges that working in the civil service offers. And more needs to be done to convince employers of the benefits to their employees of time in the civil service, to help facilitate secondments and the recruitment of people who want a shorter tour of duty as an official before returning to the private or wider public sector.

The importance of a strong employer brand can be seen in the success of private companies that have consciously curated their brand and been rewarded with an ability to attract industry-leading specialist talent. For example, one interviewee, who is part of the senior leadership team at a UK start-up valued at more than \$500m, described how: "we explicitly market ourselves to prospective employees as a highly talent-dense environment; we find that the higher we make the quality bar, the more attractive we are to the most talented people."

Some parts of government have also strengthened their employer brand and attracted high-calibre specialists. One such example is the government commercial function, which has a comparatively good record of attracting strong candidates from the private sector into the civil service.<sup>29</sup> In large part this has been because conscious effort has gone into curating its brand and cultivating an external perception that it is a high-performing area of government. By emphasising the high standards required to be a commercial professional in government (including through requiring staff to pass an accreditation process, which people can and do fail), the challenging and purposeful nature of the job, the prospects for professional development (including by publishing a career framework) and the sense of community within the function, it has been able to attract capable people from the private sector.<sup>30,31</sup> Although it is early in its existence, the departments based at the Darlington Economic Campus appear to be having success based on similar dynamics, having presented the campus as a new and exciting enterprise invested in hiring top-quality talent with backgrounds different from those typically found in the civil service.<sup>32</sup>

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## The application process disadvantages external candidates

Even if the above three problems were fixed, or an external expert was willing and able to enter the civil service despite them, they would find it hard to do so because the civil service's application process puts them at a disadvantage.

First, civil service job adverts are not designed with external candidates in mind. They are often filled with jargon, which can be difficult to interpret if candidates are not familiar with the inner workings of government and can leave them unsure what a role actually entails. High-performing people want to work under and with people who they admire, and get enthused by the prospect of working in a talent-dense environment, but job adverts fail to explain who candidates will work with and what they will learn as a result. The civil service's grade structures are not self-evident, but adverts often fail to make clear the level of responsibility entailed in a given job. Being a civil servant requires people to work in a political environment without expressing party political opinions, but this is poorly signposted to prospective applicants. And too many roles are only advertised on GOV.UK. These all reduce the chances of appropriate candidates external to and unfamiliar with the civil service becoming aware of and enthused by the opportunities available, and if they are, applying to roles suitable to them – a problem that has become particularly apparent in areas with newly relocated offices like Darlington. Talented local people unfamiliar with the civil service have been put off applying for jobs because of unintelligible adverts. As one interviewee put it: "The job advert lost me, so I lost interest in the job."

Second, the interview process is poorly constructed. The current system used for civil service jobs, known as 'success profiles', is highly mechanistic, impersonal and relies on candidates knowing how to answer questions in a way that earns them marks on a set schema – something that gives internal candidates who have previously experienced such interviews a substantial advantage.<sup>33,34</sup>

Furthermore, it is a process where candidates are fundamentally judged on the eloquence with which they can talk about their previous experiences in a way that shows they possess key 'behaviours'. Hiring managers rarely verify the examples given in interviews and so sounding convincing is rewarded while genuine expertise is, in practice, not tested for. And the behaviours that the civil service wants candidates to describe are based on an analysis of the qualities that successful civil servants demonstrate in their role, which in practice means that applicants are more likely to be able to draw persuasively on past examples showing they possess key behaviours if they have previously done civil service work.

Third, from start to finish, the application process takes too long. It is not uncommon for the gap between applications closing and a job being offered to be in excess of three months. As one interviewee put it: "For a busy and successful person, investing that much time and energy into a really drawn-out process is very unattractive."

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Fourth, and on a related point, there is no formal avenue through which exceptional external candidates can be 'poached' and fast-tracked into a permanent role. Often, private companies have processes that allow for hiring managers to exercise discretion to abridge or even do away with full hiring processes if that is what it takes to hire an outstanding external candidate to a full-time job in the organisation (as long as doing so complies with employment law). The civil service has shown itself happy to apply discretion in certain circumstances – such as when it is judged that external advertisement of a role is unnecessary or when recruiting through 'expressions of interest'.<sup>\*</sup> But the Civil Service Commission's recruitment principles do not give hiring managers the scope to do so when it comes to getting the best senior external talent into permanent roles in government – unless the candidate has been a civil servant within the past five years and is being brought back at the same grade they left at, or lower.<sup>35</sup> Even in cases where an exceptional external candidate has been informally identified as the right person for the job, hiring managers oversee a Potemkin hiring process that takes months, leads to the initially identified candidate being appointed and wastes everybody's time. Sometimes the external candidate is unwilling to spend months going through the charade, ultimately meaning they are lost to the civil service or have to be brought in for a shorter, fixed-time period instead.

Using secondments and fixed-term contracts to poach external experts does not tend to fare much better. The Civil Service Commission's recruitment principles do allow for secondees or entrants on fixed-term contracts to be brought in without a full recruitment process for up to two years (which can be extended with permission from the commission), although it prevents them from going straight into another job in government after that period has elapsed unless they are appointed through a full recruitment process.<sup>36</sup> But interviewees suggested that it remains an intensely bureaucratic process to arrange these and that it sometimes simply proves impossible – although it can be easier in a crisis or when a senior figure provides personal impetus.

Finally, internal applicants' previous performance appraisals are not accessible to hiring managers when they apply for a new role. As well as being contrary to the principles on which most successful organisations run, where accrued knowledge about internal candidates' abilities is considered vital to hiring the right person for the job, this combines with the existing application process's favourability to internal candidates to mean that internal candidates who performed poorly in their last role are more able to get jobs ahead of better external applicants.

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\* A process whereby a vacancy is filled temporarily by an existing civil servant, often one who held a permanent job at the grade below and so is appointed on 'temporary promotion', via an abridged and largely informal hiring process while a full recruitment process is carried out. Temporarily promoted civil servants tend to apply for the permanent job and are often successful.

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## **The gap between an external candidate being offered a job and starting it is too long**

It is often months from the point at which a job is offered to an external candidate to the point at which they begin their role. Long delays are common, often far longer than candidates' notice periods require, particularly as a result of security checks.

Not only is it unappealing for a candidate to have to wait this long to begin a job once they have accepted it – particularly after the already drawn-out application process – but interviewees reported numerous instances of candidates taking up other job offers during the long wait between accepting a civil service job in principle and starting it in practice. As a result, hiring managers have to spend increasing amounts of their time 'keeping candidates warm' and engaging with slow-moving bureaucracy, distracting them from their day job. One interviewee who had been a hiring manager described this process as "harrowing".

Even once an external entrant has entered the civil service, there is no guarantee that the operational basics will be done properly to allow them to hit the ground running. Little appears to have changed since 2014, when the Baxendale report noted that "many absolute basics were missing getting new recruits off to a bad start".<sup>37</sup> Interviewees reflected on numerous instances when new hires did not receive simple things like their security pass and government laptop on time. As one interviewee, reflecting on their experience running a scheme that targeted external applicants, put it: "The operational side of things is a significant barrier. The onboarding, IT, contracts – all of that took way longer than it should."

### **Long delays create big opportunity costs**

Combining the application and onboarding processes, it is not uncommon for successful external candidates to wait for up to six months between first applying for a role and starting work in it.

Such long delays create substantial opportunity costs. If an external entrant is bringing technical expertise to their new role, then not having them in government for those six months is detrimental to the administrative capability of the civil service. And more fundamentally, if a team needs to fill a vacancy in January but does not have anyone in post until June, its capacity to fulfil its duties is reduced.

As a result, hiring managers are often biased towards hiring internal candidates, frequently recruiting using expressions of interest or running internal-only competitions because this allows them to fill vacancies faster, especially in cases where no new security clearance is necessary. Not only does this prevent the civil service from accessing external talent in the way that it should, but it also exacerbates the churn of existing officials between jobs.<sup>38</sup>

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## **Ethical safeguards to manage the 'revolving door' are ineffective and off-putting**

It is not just long delays that encourage hiring managers to recruit internally. Civil servants do not trust that the system to manage conflicts of interest is robust and capable of protecting them from bad actors using specific knowledge acquired in government for private gain, or manipulating public policy for personal or corporate advantage.

A series of problems – brought to the fore by revelations that Lex Greensill leveraged his government role to build the financial services company Greensill Capital and that the former government chief commercial officer, Bill Crothers, acted questionably by 'double jobbing' as a Greensill adviser – show that the system has been ineffective at preventing malpractice. As previous Institute for Government research and the September 2021 Boardman review made clear, there is not sufficient oversight of civil servants' activities while in government or transparency about what they are allowed to do and the steps being taken to prevent wrongdoing.<sup>39,40</sup> There is also severely limited oversight of and transparency over the post-employment restrictions agreed by leavers at director level and below, who do not have to go through the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOBA) process.

Furthermore, there remains a suspicion that civil servants (and ministers) can move from being the regulator to the regulated with excessive ease, with no effective enforcement mechanism for those who breach their conditions of exit. For directors general and above, the worst they can receive is a public slap on the wrist from ACOBA. For directors and below, ACOBA has no role and so public criticism is not even an option. As such, some hiring managers have become more cautious about recruiting external candidates, due to their scepticism that the right ethical safeguards are in place and concern that improper behaviour cannot be easily detected and dealt with – not helped by examples like the Greensill scandal, which have visibly demonstrated the failings of the system.

The existing system of ethical safeguards is also off-putting for potential new recruits. Uncertainty about whether ACOBA will approve post-government employment and a sense that it might advise them against undertaking legitimate business activity for up to two years because it is in the same area they worked in while in government – often their field of expertise, in which they reasonably want to work in the future – is a disincentive to senior applicants. A further disincentive is the idea that they might have to wait months to get clearance for a new role. It is unreasonable to expect people to wait that long to accept a new job, especially as they rightfully do not expect their prospective employer to keep an offer open for anywhere close to that length of time.

It also strikes many as unviable and unfair that civil servants advised to take a waiting period might not be paid during that time. And that the prime minister formally makes the final decision on post-employment restrictions is off-putting to some, who feel it would undermine their ability to provide honest and, where necessary, strong challenge to ministers.

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## **External entrants are not properly inducted into the civil service**

Even if an external entrant does successfully apply to a role, navigate the onboarding process and receive all of their basic equipment in good time, they are unlikely to receive something crucial to being effective in any organisation – a proper induction. Multiple interviewees who had been external entrants into the civil service bemoaned the lack of introductory training on how government actually worked and how to get things done within it, describing how they were left to their own devices to work out these things for themselves. One interviewee unfavourably compared the comprehensive training offered to new Fast Streamers with the lack of accessible training for more senior outside entrants who were just as new to the civil service and occupied more immediately influential roles.

The absence of a proper induction creates big barriers to the effectiveness of external entrants. It also makes these entrants feel less comfortable within the civil service and so less likely to fully contribute to decision making. Many things that career civil servants take for granted are not obvious and by failing to provide information about them, external entrants are being set up to fail. This goes for both the basics – ranging from what a civil servant’s duty to the four core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality means in practice, to what a submission is and how to write one – and softer cultural norms, like the extent to which getting things done in government relies on networking and building coalitions behind certain ideas. While a big cause of the “tissue rejection” of external applicants is the groupthink in the civil service, the failure of the service to formally explain its rules and norms to outside entrants does not help. The recent work of the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit to develop and launch a short online induction is a step in the right direction, but there is much more to be done.

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# How can the civil service get better at bringing in specialist talent?

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The civil service has been talking for more than half a century about improving outside recruitment to increase its technical capability and bolster its cognitive diversity, but progress has been slow. Some precise but radical changes are necessary to finally open up the civil service and fulfil these long-held but unmet ambitions.

## **Establish more specialist senior roles**

The civil service does not currently include enough senior specialist roles that allow experts to contribute to government purely through their technical expertise. Establishing more such roles would provide an avenue for the civil service to bring in and properly use people with the expertise to improve policy, operations and more. Generalists play a crucial role in the civil service and this proposal is not to replace them with specialists, nor to play down the need for them to develop more expertise themselves. It is to find a way for their complementary skillsets to properly co-exist.

Extended ministerial offices (EMOs) are one previous mechanism used to bring more specialists into government. Introduced in 2013 and abolished in 2017, they allowed ministers to appoint a small group of expert policy advisers into their private offices as temporary, non-political civil servants. Although take-up was low – at their peak, only five departments had an EMO – they had some advantages.<sup>1</sup> In particular, they gave ministers an easy way to access policy expertise to help with key priorities (in cases where the ‘experts’ were indeed experts and not just additional political advisers).

But they also had downsides. In particular, they could isolate ministers from their departments by creating what the former minister David Willetts described as a “second structure of mini experts within your own private office”.<sup>2</sup> They undermined the primary role of the private office to act as a bridge between a minister and their department, transmitting ministers’ political priorities into the department and curating departmental advice to present to ministers. This was detrimental to effective government.

But more fundamentally, EMOs gave only a specific type of specialist – those with deep knowledge of a policy area – a route into government. They offered no real avenue for specialists with in-demand professional skills or who were exceptionally operationally competent to contribute. And while it gave ministers a route to access expertise in areas considered top ministerial priorities, the need for experts to fit into the private office structure meant that only a small number of them could be employed at any one time. Part of the reason some ministers liked them is because they were able to access more political advice, but if that is the objective then the solution is to appoint more special advisers – the Institute for Government has previously recommended that ministers should be allowed teams of up to five.<sup>3</sup>



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It would be a mistake to simply reinstate EMOs. But the problem they were, at least in part, intended to solve – a lack of technical expertise in government – remains. To help solve it, all departments should establish a cadre of specialist roles in priority areas where they feel deep expertise is likely to be needed. Their occupants should be valued for their specialist contributions – whether that be through deep knowledge of a policy area, hard skills or exceptional operational competence – and so should only have the managerial responsibility necessary to contribute effectively. In some cases this might be substantial, like if an external expert is brought in to manage a specialised procurement process or rollout of digital infrastructure, while in other cases it might be none at all, like if a specialist was brought in to expertly advise on policies helpful to enhancing energy security or growing the economy. The roles would exist to fulfil specific needs and so exist outside the functional structure, which caters to more general cross-government requirements, although there would of course be extensive communication and collaboration.

The roles should be advertised externally by default, with recruitment managed by the civil service, taking into account informal input from the relevant minister(s) as is currently the case with the appointment of permanent secretaries and directors general. While they should be full-time roles, the civil service should endeavour to be flexible as to whether the successful candidate occupies the role permanently, is given a fixed-term contract or is brought in on secondment. As specialist roles, often the best person to fill them will be someone who has spent substantial time focusing solely on the relevant area in industry or academia. For example, a specialist in BEIS working on improving the innovation ecosystem might have spent time at an industry-leading venture capital firm or start-up accelerator, been senior in a highly successful small or medium-sized business themselves, or conducted widely cited academic research on how government policy can help to foster innovation. A position in the Treasury advising on changes to the EU's Solvency II regulations would be best filled by someone with the heavyweight actuarial expertise that is hard to acquire in government but can be built up through a successful career in the insurance sector. An adviser in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities working on co-ordination between central government and the wider public sector would be well served to have at least some first-hand experience of the intricacies of these relationships from a vantage point outside Whitehall – through a previous role in local government, for example.

That is not to say that an external candidate will always be the best person for these roles. There is specialist talent in the civil service and in some cases an existing official might be the right person for the job. There is no reason why a specialist position in the Department for Work and Pensions overseeing an overhaul of data collection in the benefits system, for example, might not be suited to an exceptional official in the digital, data and technology profession who has previous experience of overhauling large data collection operations in government. And there may be people who have done a stint outside the civil service earlier in their career, which, alongside their career in government, has given them the technical skills necessary to do a specific job. Indeed, a core benefit of creating specialist senior roles is that it provides a pathway for the specialist talent already in the civil service to reach its highest echelons.



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What is important, however, is that the person taking up a specialist position is a genuine specialist in the area in question. Given that some of these roles will require expertise that is difficult to acquire in government, if recruited for properly they will contain a large proportion of external entrants.

The precise nature of each department's specialist roles should be flexible, changing to suit whatever is most needed at the time. In some areas, it is likely that there will be permanence to the post – BEIS's expert on innovation might be an example of this, given they would contribute to the department's core remit. In other cases, roles might be more temporary. A short-term need would be identified and a recruitment process undertaken to find a specialist who could fulfil it, potentially via secondment or a fixed-term contract. Hired to contribute to a specific objective – for example, the rollout of a new flu vaccine, the delivery of a set of emergency financial packages in the midst of a financial crisis or urgent advice on boosting energy supplies in an energy crisis – they would do so before the role was abolished (and they most likely left the civil service) at the point their expertise was no longer deemed necessary. Conversations with interviewees suggested that these short-term roles might actually be more desirable to external experts, who may want to minimally disrupt their existing career plans while still getting the opportunity to take on a challenging, interesting and fulfilling job inside government.

While the civil service has some rare examples of senior, purely specialist roles, the concept has not been adopted at scale. This is in contrast to the private sector, where it is common. Google, for example, has a senior vice-president, reporting directly to the chief executive, who plays a hands-on role in designing new products. The 'Big 4' professional services firms have a cadre of 'technical directors' who are valued for their expertise and do not have to manage others.<sup>4</sup> And the FTSE 100 company Legal & General has a vast roster of technical experts in specialist roles. Even some other parts of the public sector, like the Bank of England, have a separate career track for technical experts.

Specialists doing work that requires deep technical expertise would free up generalists to do what they do best – synthesise evidence, adapt it to the political context, communicate it to ministers so they can make better decisions and manage the resulting policies through the civil service. This role is critical to the smooth running of government and is enhanced by access to better expertise and more competent operational capability, not diminished.

In addition to the establishment of new departmentally based specialist roles, the government should promote the cross-government heads of function to second permanent secretary grade – in line with Lord Maude's recommendation to increase their status in his 2021 *Review of the Cross-cutting Functions and the Operation of Spend Controls* – and elevate all departmental chief scientific advisers to directors general.<sup>5</sup> Increasing the seniority of these roles would help to ensure parity of esteem between technical experts and generalists and make these roles more attractive to the most capable candidates, including those outside the civil service.

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## More pay flexibility for the civil service

The evidence gathered for this paper shows that pay is a big barrier to getting the best specialist talent into government. While it will be politically difficult to do so, it must be addressed.

To attract the best external talent, the salary of newly created senior specialist roles should be individually benchmarked against the pay that an equivalent role would receive in the private sector. In some cases these figures will be extremely high and government will not be able to match them. But the salaries on offer must not be “derisory” compared with an individual’s earning potential outside government.<sup>6</sup> As one interviewee put it: “It doesn’t have to be on par with the private sector, but it needs to be at a level that people are prepared to take.”

More generally, with the government cutting the number of civil service roles, there may be an opportunity – despite the government’s current plans to cut spending – to redistribute the money saved to increase remuneration packages closer to the market average for jobs where doing so would be helpful to attracting in-demand talent, something especially important in the extremely tight post-Covid labour market.<sup>7</sup> There have recently been some small steps towards this – for example, the civil service is running a pilot scheme allowing the DDaT profession to offer higher remuneration packages in 10 SCS1/SCS2 roles – but much more should be done.<sup>8</sup>

If the government is to increase civil service salaries, it should also take the opportunity to reform civil service contracts to better reward individuals for success and incentivise them to model the right behaviours. Capability-based pay, allowing officials to increase their base salary as they get better at their job, should be implemented across the service – just as the *Declaration on Government Reform* pledged.<sup>9</sup> Some pay should be linked to past performance and the existing system of bonuses should be overhauled and expanded to further incentivise good performance, addressing what the SSRB described as a “weak link between reward and outcomes”.<sup>10</sup> These changes should take place in concert with a revamped system of performance management, as the *Declaration on Government Reform* also promised.<sup>11</sup> The proportion of overall remuneration offered as a pension should be reduced. And there should be stronger incentives for officials to stay in post for longer to reduce levels of churn, particularly if they are a single responsible owner for a project lasting longer than a couple of years – whether that be in the form of bonuses for reaching a project milestone or financial penalties, agreed when taking on a new role, like repaying a proportion of the previous year’s bonus if leaving earlier than the expected tenure length.

## Make clearer what the civil service has advised and what a minister has decided

The Institute for Government has previously argued that carefully publishing certain types of civil service advice would support more effective government.<sup>12,13</sup> Making advice public incentivises the civil service to be more rigorous in the recommendations it provides to ministers and for ministers to account for themselves when they disregard civil service advice – and evidence from local government and

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New Zealand suggests that the expectation of publication does not produce a 'chilling effect', which prevents officials from writing advice down.<sup>14</sup> But evidence gathered for this paper suggests another benefit – reassuring external specialists that their professional reputation will be respected.

By making clear what civil servants have advised and when ministers have ignored that advice, experts who would otherwise be reticent to join the civil service for fear of being associated with ministerial decisions that went against their recommendations would feel more able to do so, particularly if their personal perspective was recorded in relevant submissions. Publishing advice carefully, at an appropriate time and with appropriate safeguards, would not fundamentally alter the dynamic between ministers and their civil servants – the principle that the civil service should implement the decisions of democratically elected ministers even when they go against officials' advice would remain.<sup>15,16</sup> But it would make clear when civil servants had advised a different course of action to the one ministers chose, helping to alleviate experts' fear that as a civil servant with a particular reputation in their field of expertise they may suffer reputational damage should ministers decide to reach their political goals in ways they do not agree with.

The exact process by which advice is published would have to be thought through carefully. It would be sensible to include a delay between advice being given and that advice being published to avoid a second-guessing of ministerial decisions and contributing to a 'gotcha' culture. And it would be inappropriate for some types of advice to be published at all. Before making any changes, the government should conduct a comprehensive review establishing exactly what advice should be published, when it might be disclosed and how officials could protect the private space that ministers need to take decisions, and implement the review's findings.

### **Reform the civil service application process and make it possible to permanently appoint external candidates by exception**

The current application system takes too long and so has substantial opportunity costs, biases internal candidates over external ones with poorly and narrowly advertised jobs and rewards people capable of speaking eloquently about past experiences while failing to test whether they have the skills for the job. It should be overhauled so it takes less time, evens the playing field between internal and external candidates, and more robustly tests whether applicants have the skills they say they do.

To equalise opportunity between internal and external applicants, the Civil Service Commission should set standards on how job adverts are written so they are intelligible to external candidates. It should also set standards on where a job must be publicised to qualify as externally advertised – advertising only on GOV.UK is not good enough. And to more robustly test candidates' skills and further reduce the bias towards internal applicants, success profiles should be replaced.

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Furthermore, it should once again become common practice for hiring managers to have access to internal candidates' previous performance appraisals, which aside from anything else has allowed poorer internal candidates with a track record of less effective performance to get jobs ahead of better external applicants. The Civil Service Commission's recruitment principles state that:

**"The evidence collected to assess candidates must be broadly equivalent in substance and depth, accepting that there may be some differences in the type of evidence available for internal and external candidates"** (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup>

There is no reason why this should not be interpreted to mean that a practice permissible in practically every other successful large organisation in the country should also be so in the civil service.

However, the Civil Service Commission should amend the recruitment principles to allow hiring managers to make permanent external appointments 'by exception' (that is, without a full recruitment process), which is currently only allowed when the candidate in question is a former civil servant who left within the past five years. A change compatible with the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, this would allow hiring managers to exercise their discretion to recruit exceptional external candidates in a way that many successful companies have proven can work – and make the civil service more attractive to those candidates, who would no longer need to partake in lengthy recruitment processes with a predetermined outcome. It would also reduce the disparity in the opportunity cost of recruiting external candidates as opposed to internal ones. In practice, hiring managers can and do give internal candidates full-time roles by exception by appointing them via an expression of interest and then giving them the job full-time – getting a candidate in post far quicker than the months it would take for an external entrant. Allowing external candidates to be appointed by exception would close that gap.

This practice would obviously need to be tightly regulated to prevent impropriety. Before their appointment was confirmed, a permanent secretary would need to validate the candidate's credentials. The Civil Service Commission would have to be satisfied that the candidate's ability was exceptional enough to truncate a recruitment process and that there was a persuasive case for hiring them permanently rather than bringing them in for a fixed term or on secondment. It would need to ensure that this method of recruitment was used only when genuinely appropriate, was completely compatible with merit-based appointment and not to the detriment of demographic diversity. And it may also need to set an annual cap for the number of appointments that could be made this way to prevent it from becoming a default for hiring managers who in every situation could find colourful ways to justify it. All appointments made via this route should also be transparently published in departments' annual reports and scrutinised by the relevant select committee, as well as reported in the head of department's compliance statement to the commission.

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Making this possible would also rely on fixing problems with slow security checks for external candidates. Allowing hiring managers to shorten the application process, only for candidates to wait months to receive security clearance, would not make the civil service much more attractive or substantially mitigate the opportunity costs of the current system. But if the government could speed up this process, as well as put in place appropriate ethical safeguards, allowing this form of external recruitment would make it easier and more attractive for the very best external talent to join the civil service – including, but not limited to, in the senior specialist roles described above – and play a crucial role in encouraging the development of a mixed economy of officials.

For the commission to exercise the proper oversight crucial to enabling this change, its resources should be increased to allow senior staff to more consistently exercise intelligent judgment on individual recruitment cases. The commission is already thinly stretched, with the latest available data showing it is staffed by fewer than 22 full-time-equivalent civil servants.<sup>18</sup> There is a strong case for increasing its staff numbers and budget as it is; adding to its regulatory workload would make this a necessity.<sup>19</sup>

### **Conduct a review into why it is hard to make secondments and fixed-term appointments happen**

Multiple interviewees expressed frustration with how difficult it can be to bring in secondees and fixed-term appointees. There was a sense that despite them being permissible in theory, making them happen in practice is intensely bureaucratic. Secondees' security checks can take as long as the proposed length of their secondment. And the rules around conflicts of interest often prevent the most qualified outside experts from entering government, because they could stand to gain from doing so once they return to their permanent job.

Like all external recruitment, improving secondments relies on fixing problems with slow security checks, which must be a priority. And, as part of her recently initiated internal review of the end to end recruitment process, the government chief people officer should specifically review why it is hard to make secondments happen, including a focus on how conflict of interest rules could be changed to make it easier to bring in secondees while retaining all necessary ethical safeguards, and its findings should be implemented. The civil service has previously set a target of 2% of roles at grade 7 and above being filled by secondees by 2023, which on current evidence it is likely to miss.<sup>20</sup> Reform is urgently needed.

### **Develop a new system for managing conflicts of interest**

The system establishing ethical safeguards for interchange between central government and the private sector must be completely overhauled, taking into account the 2021 Boardman review's recommendations.<sup>21</sup> A well-constructed system is crucial to enabling the civil service to hire more externally recruited staff through a wider variety of routes without fear of impropriety. Reforms should ensure that post-employment restrictions are predictable and clear at the start of someone's time in the civil service, and that conflicts of interest are managed directly in a way tailored to each individual civil servant's interests and circumstances.

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This means that as the Boardman review recommended, all officials, regardless of grade, should have an agreement (known as a 'restrictive covenant') written into their contract as to how restrictions on their activity will work after they leave the civil service. In general, more stringent conditions should apply to senior civil servants than more junior officials to reflect their greater exposure to potentially commercially sensitive information. If civil servants change role then it should be a condition of continuing employment that these restrictions are updated. When senior civil servants leave government, the restrictions that apply to them should be published.

These restrictions must take into account that professionals with knowledge and experience in a certain area are likely to want to work in that area after their time in government and that people will be put off entering the civil service if they think their career trajectory will be stunted as a result. Every attempt must be made not to place an unreasonable burden on people's post-government pursuits and people should be paid a previously agreed sum during any contractual waiting period.

But these restrictions must also ensure that officials are not able to influence government activity improperly while a civil servant or afterwards – particularly if their job in the civil service involves regulatory oversight, the awarding of contracts or influence over policies in a particular area. Mirroring best practice in the private sector, contractual restrictions should prevent civil servants from working for competitors and communicating with previous contacts for an appropriate period of time after leaving government.

These restrictions should be agreed by departmental HR teams, who are closest to the individuals in question and so are best placed to apply intelligent judgment to determine the appropriate restrictions. For senior civil servants, they should be signed off by the relevant permanent secretary.

This process must be overseen by a central unit based in the Civil Service Commission, with enough resource to monitor how the system is working, quickly advise departing civil servants whether their proposed post-government activities are consistent with their contractual obligations and take enforcement action if a former civil servant breaches their contract. ACOBA should be overhauled and rebranded to fulfil this function, in a way compatible with previous Institute for Government recommendations on strengthening the system for former ministers.<sup>22</sup>

The civil service's ability to regulate conflicts of interest while officials are in role should also be enhanced. The government should implement previous Institute recommendations, some of which were echoed in the Boardman review, that:<sup>23</sup>

- departments should record details of all civil servants who have accepted paid additional employment, and publish this information for all members of the senior civil service



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- civil servants should declare all their interests in private sector companies to their departments, and the interests of those in the senior civil service should be published
  - the Civil Service Commission should hold permanent secretaries accountable for their department's transparency returns being published punctually and for ensuring that officials in their department receive appropriate training and guidance on managing conflicts of interest.

The Civil Service Commission should inform the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee if it disagrees with a permanent secretary's approach to managing conflicts of interest and any permanent secretary whose department does not punctually publish their transparency return should have to explain why to their departmental select committee.

The government should also particularly focus on implementing the Boardman review's recommendations to:<sup>24</sup>

- establish a cross-government compliance function with investigation and enforcement powers in relation to civil servants, replicating the model of most other large organisations
- establish a regular cycle of compliance reviews, which assess compliance rules and processes to keep them up to date
- expand and strengthen the civil service's whistle-blowing processes to better allow officials to report concerns about bad actors.

### **Sort out the onboarding and induction of external candidates**

Slow, chaotic onboarding and the absence of proper inductions make it more difficult for external recruits to be successful in the civil service.

The current problems with onboarding are inexcusable and it should not be difficult to fix them. Security checks need to be completed much faster, not only to facilitate permanent external appointments by exception (as described above) but also to avoid long delays between external candidates accepting a job and taking it up, which creates opportunity costs and disincentivises both candidates and managers from making external recruitment happen. And the civil service's chief operations officer should set a target of 100% of external applicants receiving all of their equipment on their start date and hold departmental HR departments to account for doing so.

Given that many interviewees for this project did not receive any induction, it should be relatively easy to improve things on that front as well. There is a large amount of low-cost, low-hanging fruit. As one interviewee put it: "Even a handbook of civil service jargon would help." The Government Skills and Curriculum Unit should be

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supported to enhance and expand its work in this area and the government should go further. The unit's recently launched mandatory induction amounts to roughly six hours of online content – while undoubtedly useful, the government should set its sights higher.<sup>25</sup> The chief people officer should ensure new hires get a more comprehensive offering and that the government follows through on the Baxendale report's recommendations of:

- developing a standard five- to ten-day induction that all senior external hires attend
- formally providing every external hire with an experienced mentor
- making it clearer that line managers have a responsibility to ensure new hires' successful transition.<sup>26</sup>

While this may not always be possible, the government should also try to give new senior entrants the opportunity to shadow existing civil servants for two to four weeks before joining to give them first-hand experience of how the civil service operates.

Baxendale's recommendation that external entrants attend a formal feedback session after their first month or six weeks in their new role is also a good one. It would provide an avenue for obtaining feedback about the recruitment process, which does not currently exist. In addition to this initial meeting, one should take place after six months to see if they have noticed anything initially striking about the way the civil service works that they feel could be improved by importing best practice from elsewhere.

### **Make a more assertive case for the civil service as an employer**

Working in the civil service gives people an opportunity to contribute to the future of the country. The pace, scale and complexity of working in government provides exactly the kind of challenge that high performers enjoy. But, too often, people outside the civil service do not appreciate the opportunities available within it.

To help rectify this, the civil service should communicate the opportunities on offer more assertively and make clear that people outside of it should seriously consider it as a career option. It should target people with the technical skills it lacks and aim to persuade not only them but also their employers of why time in government would be a positive step. For example, one audience might be deep subject experts who have recently achieved a PhD and are looking to spend some time outside of academia before deciding on their next step, or postdoctoral researchers looking to expand their horizons before committing to a career in the academy. But alongside targeting these people, the civil service should also seek to persuade universities that academics benefit from time spent in government – a sentiment that is often lacking. Echoing previous Institute for Government research into academia, interviewees suggested that one of the things preventing academics from contributing to the civil service full-time was the perception that doing so was a "one-way ticket" – that breaking their track record of publication and teaching meant that they would not be able to return



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to academia.<sup>27</sup> Making an assertive case for itself as an employer would involve the civil service explaining to universities why they would benefit from letting staff go into government and subsequently hiring them back.

Ministers must also play their part. Constant attacks on the civil service puts off people who the government could greatly benefit from attracting. Tensions between politicians and the administrative machine are part and parcel of how Whitehall works, but ministers must realise that briefing so aggressively against the civil service runs counter to their own interests.

Being assertive need not be merely about communications. Previous Institute for Government research recommended that the government should appoint a chief talent officer to engage proactively with talented candidates outside government and disseminate best practice on candidate outreach for senior roles in public bodies. To facilitate better recruitment within the civil service, encourage a joined-up approach to outreach and promote jobs in government to talented outsiders, this position should be expanded to cover senior civil servants as well and made into a director-general level role.<sup>28</sup> And when it comes to academia, the government could also alter incentives through hard levers. For example, the next Research Excellence Framework, used to evaluate the research that UK higher education institutions conduct, could better reward universities for developing specialist researchers who at some point spend time as a civil servant. This could help to stimulate the nascent attempts by some universities to make the 'high-impact career' an attractive career path.<sup>29</sup>

### **Make the recruitment process more transparent**

To improve the civil service senior leadership's ability to hold their colleagues to account and help external stakeholders scrutinise the government's progress, civil service HR teams should publish data from each department showing:

- the proportion of vacant or newly created jobs advertised externally
- the proportion of applicants to each job who applied from outside the civil service and the relative success of external candidates compared with internal candidates at every step in the hiring process
- an annual breakdown of the proportion of roles in the civil service to which external entrants were appointed, with separate breakdowns allowing for analysis by grade, function and profession, and department; if the senior specialist roles described above are implemented, a separate breakdown should be available for these
- an annual department-by-department breakdown of the mean and median length of time between a hiring process starting and an appointment being made, with a separate breakdown for external entrants
- an annual department-by-department breakdown of the mean and median length of time between an appointment being made and the appointee starting their role, with a separate breakdown for external entrants

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- an annual breakdown of the percentage of new starters who received all their equipment on the day they started their new role, with a separate breakdown for external entrants.

The contents of recent Senior Salaries Review Body reports show that some of the above information is already collected but not published.<sup>30,31</sup> The collection and publication of all of this data should become an embedded practice. When it is, the civil service should develop analytics that track the career paths of external entrants into the civil service and career civil servants who move outside of government. This would help to identify patterns that would improve its approach to recruitment, retention and professional development.

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# Conclusion

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The government has been pledging to open up the civil service to external entrants for decades. But while some progress has been made, there remains much more to be done. The civil service continues to lack technical expertise and cognitive diversity. Hiring more specialist external talent would improve its performance on both counts.

The reforms set out in this paper would go a long way towards improving the way the civil service works. A more effective civil service would be one with a cadre of senior specialists providing the technical expertise that it currently lacks; well-designed recruitment, onboarding and induction processes; salaries that are high enough and an employer brand that is good enough to attract the best external talent; a stronger and more transparent system of ethical standards; better data about recruitment; and that carefully publishes civil service advice.

Part of the reason that more than 50 years' worth of promised reform has gone unrealised is because ministers and senior civil servants have not sustained a serious interest in making change happen. But a lack of technical expertise and cognitive diversity is becoming an increasingly serious barrier to maintaining an effective civil service. Now is the time for senior leaders to act decisively to open up the civil service.

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Jordan is a researcher at the Institute for Government, working in the civil service and policy making team. He has a first-class undergraduate degree from the University of Cambridge, and has co-authored a journal article in Political Studies. He previously co-founded GovTracker, an initiative which tracked the progress of the government's manifesto pledges, and interned at Full Fact.

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