

Whitehall Monitor 2021



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About Whitehall Monitor

This is the eighth edition of *Whitehall Monitor*, which each year gathers and analyses data on the UK government to assess its performance. We aim to help those in government manage it more effectively and those outside to scrutinise it more easily.

In a year in which government actions have had such dramatic impacts on the everyday lives of people around the country, understanding what it has done – and not done – is essential.

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Overview: Whitehall in an extraordinary year

On 2 January 2020 Boris Johnson tweeted: “This is going to be a fantastic year for Britain.” Three weeks earlier he had decisively won the 2019 general election. His campaign pledge to “Get Brexit done” delivered an 80-seat majority and the chance for him to change the country: completing the UK’s exit from the European Union, ‘levelling up’ the economy and reforming the civil service. But on 31 January, the day the UK finally ended its 47-year membership of the EU, the first cases of Covid-19 in the country were confirmed – and the government’s priorities for the year changed completely.

Since then, the pandemic has dominated the work of government with huge implications for health, economic and social policy. There have been many successes, including the rapid creation of schemes to support the finances of households and businesses. But there have also been times when ministers and officials have done something quickly at the height of a crisis – understandably – but have then failed to learn from their mistakes the next time a similar situation arose. Most strikingly, the prime minister has repeatedly declared stringent lockdowns days or weeks after saying he would not do so.

This report looks at how the events of 2020 changed the workings of government and assesses the impact of those changes. In reacting to the pandemic, the government has created new processes and new ways of doing things, including wage support for millions of private sector employees, regular prime ministerial press conferences and expedited procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE). Coronavirus has made the government a much larger feature in the lives of the public than is usually the case and has seen a severe restriction of personal liberties in the name of the greater good, transcending many traditional political views about the role of the state.

But although 2020 was dominated by the pandemic, Johnson and his ministers have still been able to begin working towards achieving their other priorities. Talks with the EU have not attracted as much attention this year as might have been expected. Nevertheless, negotiations with the UK’s largest trading partner and preparations for leaving the single market and customs union, with or without a deal, continued to dominate the business of government. While the government has now struck a deal with the EU, the events of recent weeks have shown that the Brexit story is not over.

Despite the immediate impact of the pandemic, it is still likely to be the decision to leave the EU that has the biggest long-term effect on the UK economy: official economic forecasts assume that the new relationship with the EU will lead to output being 4% lower in the long run than it would otherwise have been; the coronavirus crisis is predicted to leave the economy 3% smaller in the long run than it would have been had the pandemic not occurred.

The pandemic has forced the government to do things differently

In April 2020 the UN secretary general, António Guterres, described the Covid-19 pandemic as “the biggest challenge for the world since World War Two”.¹ Facing such a challenge, it is no surprise that the government has changed the way it has gone about things. Chief among these has been a huge increase in the amount of money it spends and a change in the things it spends that money on. Government spending will top £1 trillion for the first time in 2020/21, more than a £200 billion increase on the previous year. Extra spending in response to the pandemic includes £147bn supporting households and businesses across the UK in the form of the furlough scheme, business loans and increased welfare payments. It also includes £127bn on public services, of which £52.4bn has been spent on health-related measures in England. This includes £22bn on test and trace, £15bn on PPE and £12.5bn on other health-related spending including the Nightingale hospitals, new equipment and additional staff and overtime. The devolved administrations have received a proportional increase to their budgets as a result as well.

Coupled with a big downgrade in the forecast for tax receipts, now expected to be 12% lower than anticipated in March 2020 – mainly as a result of the drop in economic activity – this extra spending has pushed the deficit to its highest level since the Second World War.

The way the government has spent these huge sums is even more notable than the amounts themselves. The furlough scheme, established in March, has paid up to 80% of the wages of employees in the private sector who could not work because of the lockdown rules, aiming to keep people in jobs and thereby accelerate the eventual economic recovery. Despite mooted changes in the summer and autumn of 2020, the scheme has been repeatedly extended and currently runs until April 2021. The government has also provided billions in loan guarantees to businesses: the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, which provided loans to small businesses, is expected to cost £26bn in loans that will not be paid back.

Only 1% of the £17.3bn spent on coronavirus-related contracts during the crisis has been awarded through competitive tendering. Around 38% was awarded through existing framework agreements designed to allow government to procure goods and services quickly when needed. But the remaining 61% has been awarded directly to contractors, that is with no competition, which can result in poorer value for money.

As well as agreeing a substantial proportion of contracts through direct awards, the government has become less transparent about where the money is going: only 16% of departmental information releases on spending over £25,000 were published on time in 2020. The National Audit Office (NAO) also found that the reasons why contracts were awarded to specific suppliers were often not documented, leaving the government open to charges of cronyism.

Spending quickly was sensible at the beginning of the crisis, to shore up the economy and to secure the goods and medicines needed to manage the effects of coronavirus. But some policies were poor value for money because they were poorly targeted, subject to fraud, or both. When the second coronavirus wave came, the government's economic response mirrored the first wave, incorporating the same poor targeting. This suggests that the Treasury failed to forecast, or failed to plan for, a resurgence of the virus even though many medical experts thought it was likely. Poor value for money is much less excusable six months later and second time around.

As well as spending more quickly, ministers have had to make decisions more quickly, as the government has reacted to developments in the pandemic. At the beginning of the crisis ministers made much of the fact that they were 'following the science'. But since then other factors – including, but not limited to, the economic impact of lockdowns and other measures to control the spread of the virus – have also, rightly, formed part of decision making.

As scientists around the world have learnt more about Covid-19, the government has updated its policies. This has led to a high number of U-turns, when ministers have reversed a previous decision. Changing policies as events and information change is, of course, entirely sensible, particularly given the severity of the crisis. But many of these U-turns have happened after ministers have committed, unnecessarily, to one particular course of action that later proved unwise. Most prominent among these have been changes to the severity of Covid restrictions, including the move to Tier 4 shortly before Christmas and the national lockdown in England in January 2021, both of which took place just a matter of days after the prime minister said he would not take such drastic measures. Other issues have also seen U-turns driven by public and/or political pressure, including on support for children who would normally receive free school meals and – beyond the pandemic – the decision in May to preclude the Chinese multinational Huawei from providing infrastructure for the UK's 5G upgrade.

Alongside a large number of U-turns, 2020 has seen the highest number of 'ministerial directions' – formal instructions to officials that they should continue with a policy despite their concerns about its value for money or feasibility – in recent years. This in part reflects the fact that the government has moved quickly and has innovated, and therefore has not always been able to justify new policies on value for money grounds, despite the fact that they were apparently the right thing to do at the time.

During 2020 the civil service has adapted to focus on the new priorities revealed by the pandemic. Almost 10,000 civil servants joined the government between December 2019 and September 2020, a continuation of the growth in the civil service since the EU referendum in 2016; nearly half of the cuts to personnel numbers introduced by the coalition government have now been reversed. But the focus of these new civil servants has changed; the Department of Health and Social Care has grown by 23% as the civil service has focused on the pandemic. And the government has redeployed thousands of civil servants from other areas of work, including Brexit preparations, to deal with the Covid crisis.

As well as changing what civil servants work on, the pandemic has forced officials to change how they work. When the UK first went into lockdown in March, over 90% of civil servants in every department except DWP began to work from home, compared to an average of less than 3% before the pandemic. Departments and organisations used varying software and it was not until 15 July that officials at all departments were able to easily communicate with each other remotely. As well as changing the working arrangements of civil servants, officials and the wider public sector have adapted many public services to deliver online. Existing services like courts have moved online – although not with the same capacity as before the pandemic – and new services like the furlough scheme have been delivered entirely online.

The pandemic has also led the government to change the way it communicates with the public, most notably with regular press conferences hosted by ministers and scientific advisers. At their peak in May 2020 the prime minister's daily press conferences attracted 27.5m viewers. During the summer the frequency of government press conferences dropped but picked up again in the autumn and winter as cases of the virus increased.

As well as the press conferences, monthly spending by the Cabinet Office on advertising related to the pandemic hit £33m in July 2020 – much of it to inform the public of the rapidly changing restrictions. The department also stepped up advertising campaigns to businesses about how trading arrangements would change after the end of the Brexit transition period (an earlier version of which, the 2019 'Get Ready for Brexit' campaign, had drawn criticism from the NAO for failing to show that it had led to greater Brexit preparedness).

The public appetite for information has also led to greater transparency about the advice that the government itself has received. In late May it began publishing the minutes from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) meetings, so the public could understand the scientific advice on which the government was basing its decisions. This increase in communication and transparency (on government advice, if not its spending) is welcome, particularly as so much of the response to this crisis relies on encouraging people to change their behaviour. But as well as communicating more often, the government also needs to communicate more clearly – something it has not always been able to do, with regularly changing guidance and rules often failing to land with the public.

Boris Johnson and his team are taking the opportunity to change how the government works

While the pandemic has been the priority for the government, its 80-seat majority has meant that the prime minister has been able to get on with other things. As a fairly new government with a sizeable majority, Johnson and his ministers have set about making other, more substantial changes to the way the government works.

One of this government's priorities was expected to be civil service reform, the subject of a major speech in July 2020 by Michael Gove, minister for the Cabinet Office, and a recurring theme in many of the blogs written by Dominic Cummings, until November the prime minister's chief adviser. Ministers want to professionalise the civil service – bringing in more skills – and ensure that it is more representative of the country at large.

But so far, the most notable change to the civil service has been that seven departmental permanent secretaries, as well as Sir Mark Sedwill, the cabinet secretary, have left the government. Of these, four had come to the end of their five-year terms. Some of the others stepped down early, including Sir Philip Rutnam, formerly head of the Home Office, who is pursuing a claim for constructive dismissal. The government also dismissed Jonathan Slater from the Department for Education, citing a “need for fresh official leadership”, following the summer exams fiasco. Another departure has been Sir Jonathan Jones QC, head of the government legal service, who expressed concerns about the government’s disregard for international law.

These departures drew a lot of attention and their circumstances made civil service reform seem like a political issue. But beyond name changes at the top of departments, ministers have yet to make much progress on the reforms they have pledged. Delivering these commitments will inevitably take time. It is understandable that progress has been slow as the government as a whole has been focused on the pandemic. But the diagnosis that ministers and their advisers made was sensible – there is much that can be done to improve how the civil service works. Now that Cummings has left the government, it is unclear whether this issue remains a priority. While it now falls to Alex Chisholm, chief operating officer of the civil service, to take this agenda forward, continued ministerial focus will be needed to maintain momentum.

While there have been high-profile departures from the top of the civil service, the senior ranks of ministers have remained broadly the same since Johnson became prime minister in July 2019. Bar the surprise departure of Sajid Javid as chancellor in the February 2020 reshuffle, no ministers resigned from the cabinet in 2020 (though Alok Sharma stepped down as business secretary to focus on his role as president of the COP26 climate conference, he still attends cabinet).

This staying power among cabinet ministers is in part because they were chosen for their loyalty to the prime minister and his view of Brexit – an explicit requirement for those joining the cabinet in July 2019. This has meant that Johnson’s government has been rocked by fewer cabinet-level resignations than Theresa May’s (Johnson himself publicly resigned as foreign secretary under May), although his government has seen a higher rate of junior ministerial resignations than hers had at the same point.

Johnson has also displayed a strong loyalty to senior members of his ministerial team and has shown that he is unwilling to bow to external pressure to take action when ministers are publicly deemed to have made policy mistakes, like Gavin Williamson, or accused of exhibiting poor behaviour, as the prime minister’s independent adviser on the Ministerial Code found in the case of bullying accusations against Priti Patel. Johnson’s decision to override the findings of his independent adviser and declare that he did not agree that Patel had broken the Ministerial Code has called into question whether the system that governs the behaviour of ministers is fit for purpose.

The prime minister has also made big changes to the structure of central government, particularly the departments that present the UK to the rest of the world. The Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), always expected to be a temporary department, was disbanded on 31 January 2020, the day the UK left the EU. A bigger change was the creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in September, bringing together the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

and the Department for International Development (DfID). The prime minister had floated this change when he was on the backbenches and confirmed it in June 2020. As well as managing the inevitable disruption from the reorganisation, the FCDO also had to deal with a significant cut to its budget, with the amount spent on official development assistance (ODA) cut from 0.7% of national income to 0.5%. It remains to be seen whether undertaking such a big change a few months before the UK takes on the G7 presidency and hosts COP26 was the right choice.

Beyond the detailed changes to how government works, who runs government departments and indeed which departments are responsible for what, bigger changes to the functioning of the UK may be yet to come. The new trade deal agreed with the EU – which prioritised ‘sovereignty’ over market access – marks the end of the Brexit process and creates the opportunity for ministers to change how the UK legislates and regulates many more aspects of daily life, if they choose to take it.

At the same time, uncertainty surrounds the future of the union between the four nations of the UK. The pandemic was the first time many people in England realised the extent of the powers given to the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales (Northern Ireland has had separate arrangements for longer) and has seen calls for more. Support for Scottish independence has grown throughout the year and the planned May 2021 elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments will be an important test for Johnson’s government. While the pandemic has thrown many plans off course, it is the decisions that Johnson and his ministers take in 2021 and beyond that will define the legacy of his government.

This report

The rest of this report looks at these issues in more detail, and comprises five chapters:

- 1. Finances:** the effect of the pandemic on the public finances, and how the government has spent the billions it has mobilised to support public services, households and businesses.
- 2. Ministers:** how the prime minister has reorganised his top team in the past year and what ministers have spent the past year doing.
- 3. The civil service:** how the civil service has changed in the past year, who works in the civil service and the progress that ministers have made in reforming the service.
- 4. Digital:** how the government has used digital technology to respond to the pandemic.
- 5. Communications and transparency:** how the government has communicated during the pandemic and the impact of Covid on the government’s already poor performance on transparency.

The report concludes with a short section looking ahead to the big issues the government faces in 2021.



1 Finances

The UK's public finances have been severely affected by the coronavirus crisis. A sharp contraction of the economy in 2020 has meant much lower tax revenues, while the government has spent record sums to support public services, households and businesses. The second wave of the virus and associated lockdowns through autumn and winter have stalled any economic recovery and worsened the picture further. The UK public sector is forecast to borrow £394 billion, or 19% of GDP, in 2020/21 – the highest in the UK's peacetime history.

The government was understandably generous during the crisis so as to protect people's livelihoods and the long-term health of the economy. But in some of the support packages for households and businesses, as well as in how services and personal protective equipment (PPE) have been procured, there is evidence that it has not always spent money effectively – both by paying over the odds for the outcomes achieved and by spending money in ways that achieved no clear policy objective.

When events were moving fast in March and April, the urgent priority was to achieve the required outcomes (such as procuring PPE and getting money to businesses and households to avert acute financial hardship); under those circumstances, it was understandable that achieving value for money was deprioritised. But as the months have passed, the government has had time to assess where the money has gone and examine whether schemes are as well-targeted and achieving maximum bang for their buck. Despite clear evidence that some spending programmes have significant deadweight cost and are delivering poor value for money, they have not been reformed. Accusations of 'cronyism', with large government contracts being awarded with little scrutiny, sometimes to personal contacts of ministers, have also raised questions about the Johnson government's management of public funds.

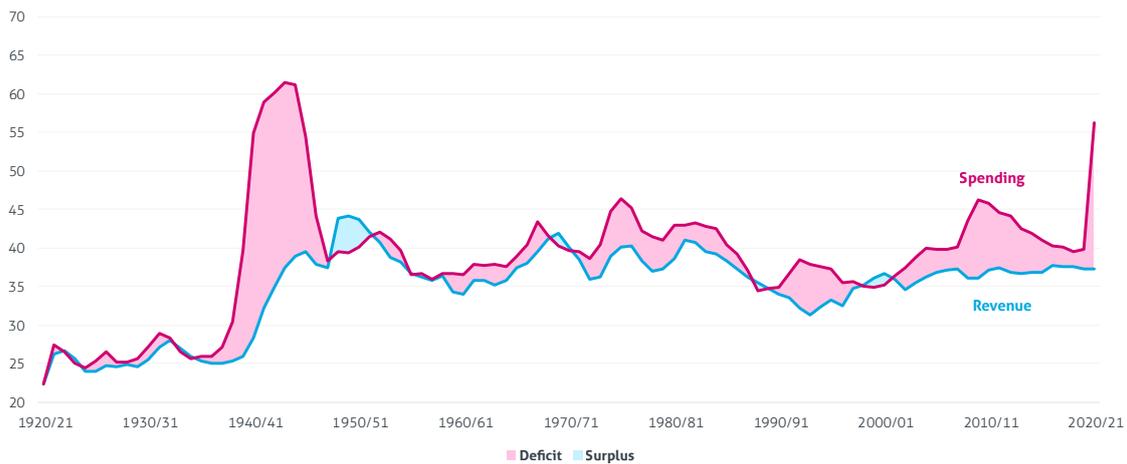
The deficit will reach its highest level since the Second World War

The UK's independent official fiscal and economic forecaster, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), expects that the UK economy contracted by 11% in 2020, the biggest annual fall in GDP since the recession caused by the Great Frost of 1709.¹ The government has also spent more than £250bn supporting businesses and households through the shock. As a result, the OBR expects the deficit to be 19% of national income this year. This is the highest level since the Second World War.

As a share of national income, the increase in the deficit is driven mainly by a huge expansion in the size of the state relative to the economy. Government spending will exceed 50% of GDP for the first time in the UK's peacetime history, shooting up to 57% this year. This includes spending by the whole public sector (that managed by the devolved administrations and local authorities as well as the UK government). Unless otherwise specified, all figures in this chapter are for the whole UK public sector.

The spike in the deficit and public spending as a share of GDP comes after a decade in which both have been falling relative to GDP. Indeed, in the 10 years up to 2020 the state barely grew in real terms.

Figure 1.1 **Public sector spending and receipts since 1920/21, % of GDP**

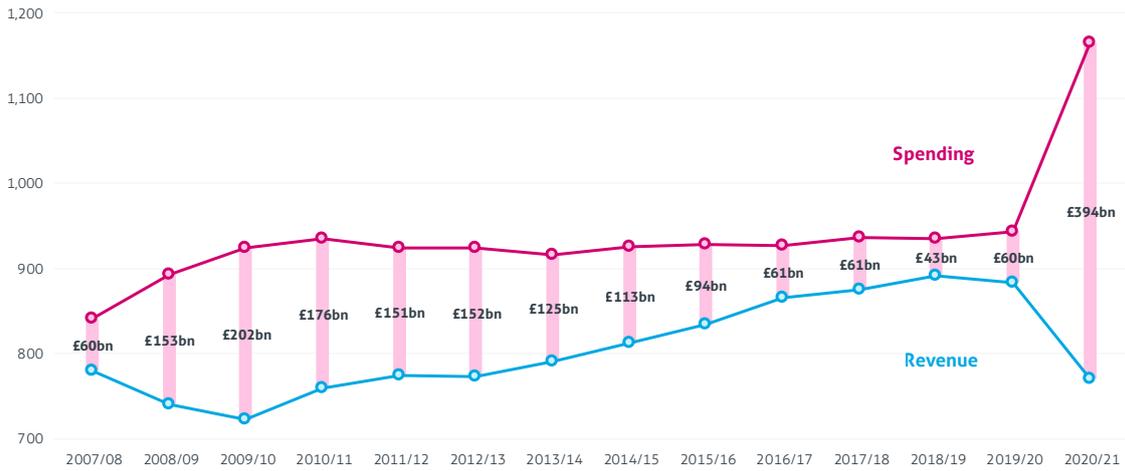


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for Budget Responsibility, 'Public finances databank', December 2020.

That increase in the size of the state relative to the economy has been caused both by a larger state and a smaller economy. Government spending this year will top £1 trillion for the first time, more than a £200bn increase on last year. A smaller economy means that spending as a fraction of GDP will increase by even more.

Tax revenues have remained stable as a share of national income but that still equates to a big fall in revenues in real terms – more than £100bn lower than last year and the lowest level since 2010/11.

Figure 1.2 Public sector spending and receipts, real terms (2020/21 prices)

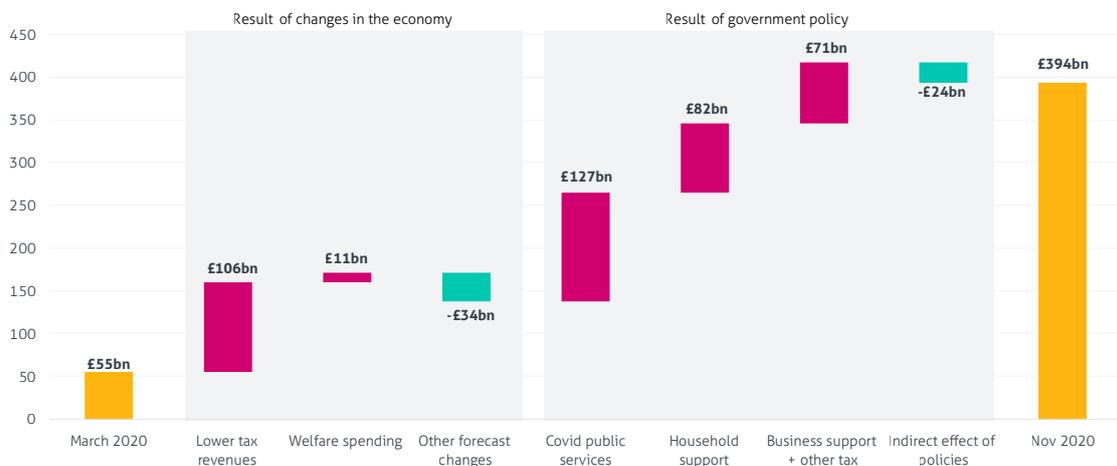


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for Budget Responsibility, 'Public finances databank', December 2020. Numbers deflated using GDP deflator.

Before the onset of the coronavirus crisis, the government expected to borrow only £55bn in 2020/21, but by November the OBR's forecast had risen to £394bn. Figure 1.3 breaks down this change in forecast borrowing. It shows that around one third of the increase in the forecast deficit is expected to arise 'automatically' – that is, when poor economic performance leads to lower tax revenues at the same time as falling household incomes leads to more welfare spending. The remainder is a result of policy choices. Additional spending in response to coronavirus has been relatively equally split between more funding for public services, supporting households and supporting businesses.

At £394bn, the latest OBR forecast for borrowing this year is even higher than the £372bn that the watchdog predicted in July.² This is despite the fact that the economy actually outperformed the OBR's pessimistic July projection. This is primarily due to the onset of the second wave of coronavirus, which worsened the economic outlook over the winter and meant that the government spent more money supporting households.

Figure 1.3 Change in forecast for 2020/21 public sector net borrowing, March to November 2020



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for Budget Responsibility, 'Economic and fiscal outlook', November 2020.

In the remainder of this chapter, we look in more detail at the government’s economic response, first addressing changes in tax revenues before examining how the governments of the UK have spent money in response to the coronavirus crisis.

A smaller economy means lower tax receipts

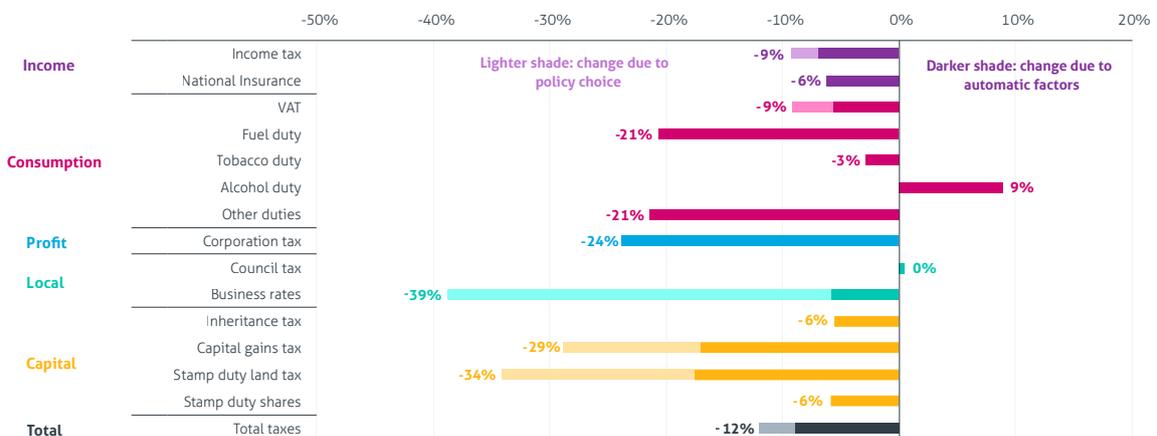
Tax is the simpler story. In general, when economic activity falls, so do most tax revenues. Incomes are lower, so income tax and National Insurance contributions (NICs) fall; consumption is lower, so VAT receipts fall, and so on. This crisis has been no different. As Figure 1.3 shows, the OBR now forecasts that most taxes will be lower in 2020/21 than it expected back in March, mostly due to ‘automatic’ effects.

The figure sets out how the forecast for UK public sector tax revenues in 2020/21 has changed, splitting that change between those that would have happened automatically and those attributable to tax policy changes. For example, receipts of stamp duty land tax (SDLT, which includes land and buildings transaction tax, LBTT, in Scotland) are forecast to be £9bn in 2020/21, 34% below the forecast in March 2020. Part of this fall was a result of active policy choice: the threshold for paying stamp duty has been raised to £500,000 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, while the Scottish government has increased the LBTT threshold to £250,000. But even in the absence of that policy, the fall in housing transactions as a result of Covid would have left the November forecast for receipts 17% lower than March.

Thanks in large part to government support, household incomes and spending have held up relatively well during the crisis, which means that forecast revenues from taxes on income and consumption have fallen by less than average and less than would normally be expected given the scale of GDP loss. The outliers in these categories are fuel duty revenues (which have fallen much more as people travel less) and alcohol duties (which have been the only category to outperform the March forecast as people have been drinking more). Taxes on profit and capital have fallen much further than average, which is often the case in recessions.

Council tax is based on the number of occupied residential properties, which has not changed during the pandemic and therefore forecast council tax revenues are also unchanged.

Figure 1.4 **Change in forecast 2020/21 tax revenues, March to November 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for Budget Responsibility, ‘Economic and fiscal outlook’, March and November 2020. Stamp duty land tax also includes land and buildings transactions tax (LBTT) in Scotland. Corporation tax also includes bank surcharge and bank levy.

One quarter of the fall in forecast tax revenues is a result of active policy choices. By far the biggest was the business rates holiday provided to all leisure, hospitality and nursery businesses in England. Very similar policies were also adopted in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland by their respective governments.* The other tax policy changes have been cuts in VAT for hospitality and medical supplies, extended time to pay for self-assessed income tax and capital gains, and the cuts in SDLT and LBTT. But tax cuts amount to only a small fraction of total coronavirus-related policy measures. Of the £280bn of coronavirus-related support set out in Figure 1.3, only 10% (£26bn) is via tax cuts.

Government has spent freely to support households, businesses and public services

The government’s response has mainly taken the form of spending increases. For 2020/21 as a whole, the OBR forecasts £127bn of coronavirus-related spending on public services and £147bn supporting households and businesses. Full-year budgets are not available for the devolved administrations. In its forecast, the OBR assumes that coronavirus-related spending by the devolved administrations matches the UK government allocation (so the additional grants provided to Scotland owing to higher public service spending in England is also spent on public services in Scotland). The devolved administrations could instead spend the grant on household or business support, but in practice we know that these administrations have taken a similar approach to individual and business support as the UK government.

This is much more additional public spending than has occurred in previous recessions. This reflects both the scale and the nature of the crisis. The pandemic required additional spending to help public services cope with surging demand while protecting businesses and households as they were required (temporarily) to refrain from some economic activity.

Figure 1.5 Coronavirus-related policy measures in 2020/21, £bn



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for Budget Responsibility, 'Economic and fiscal outlook', November 2020. CJRS = Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. SEISS = Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.

* In Wales, the holiday was only available to businesses with a property of rateable value below £500,000. In Scotland, the relief was also made available to airports. In Northern Ireland, all businesses received a four-month rates holiday and those in retail, leisure, hospitality and nurseries received 12-month holidays.

While the government has had to move quickly, some business loans and self-employed support represent poor value for money

Support for households and businesses has been generous, and necessarily so. The pandemic has required putting parts of the economy on ice to reduce contact between individuals and maintain social distancing. This has led to many businesses becoming unprofitable in the short term, even if their long-term (post-pandemic) prospects are good. Without government intervention, many sustainable businesses would have gone bust and people in otherwise viable jobs would have become unemployed.

The available evidence suggests that the policies implemented to support long-term viable businesses and jobs have been successful. Nine in ten of those who have left the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS, or 'furlough' scheme) have returned to their previous job.³ And substantial business support means that bankruptcies were more than 30% lower between April and November 2020 than they were in the same period in 2019.⁴

However, while generous and bold support is to be welcomed, there are examples of policies that have been poor value for money because they were poorly targeted, subject to fraud, or both.

- The **Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)** offers grants to self-employed people worth 80% of their 2018/19 profit so long as that income does not exceed £50,000. While it was designed as the self-employed equivalent of the furlough scheme, self-employed recipients could keep trading and received a big grant even if they were not badly affected by Covid. Conversely, analysis has shown that the money is poorly targeted at those who *are* adversely affected by Covid.⁵ It is set to cost more than £20bn this year, more than one third of the cost of the CJRS.
- The **CJRS** itself is not as well targeted as it could be because it provides equally generous support to businesses badly affected by coronavirus and those that are not. This means that money is wasted supporting unviable jobs in otherwise economically healthy sectors. Previous [IfG research](#) has proposed a sector-by-sector approach to improve the targeting at long-term viable jobs.⁶
- The **Bounce Back Loan Scheme**, which provides a 100% guarantee to loans offered to small businesses, is forecast to cost the government an astonishing £26bn (most of the £31bn of loans and guarantees in Figure 1.5). This means that, of £80bn of loans, £26bn is expected never to be paid back.⁷ Acquiring a loan is possible with minimal checks. This has achieved a goal of the policy – getting money out of the door quickly to businesses in need – but at an extraordinary cost.⁸ The cost is so high because some of the businesses receiving the loans are expected to default and because minimal checks have left the scheme open to fraudulent claims. The National Audit Office (NAO) judges the fraud risk as 'very high', including the risk of multiple applications by one borrower, impersonation of businesses and links to organised crime.⁹

At the start of the crisis, when the government needed to act quickly, it was reasonable to prioritise speed over value for money. Indeed, the slow procedures for other loan regimes were the reason bounce back loans were introduced in late April.¹⁰ However, by the autumn, more than six months into the crisis, schemes designed quickly in March were not improved, despite mounting evidence that some offered unnecessarily poor value for money. When the second coronavirus wave came, the government's economic response mirrored the first wave, incorporating the same poor targeting. Poor value for money is much less excusable six months later, and second time around.

Extra spending on public services has mainly been health-related

Additional spending on public services has been almost as large as the combined additional support for households and businesses. The UK government has spent additional money on UK-wide public services (such as support for people finding jobs) and on public services in England where that service is devolved (including health and education).

When the UK government spends more in England on devolved services, it pays a grant to the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland governments according to the Barnett formula, which provides an equivalent increase in spending on public services. The devolved administrations have complete freedom to spend this money how they want: on the same public service, on a different public service, or on something other than public services (for example, on business support). We do not have full-year budgets for the devolved administrations, so it is not possible to identify exactly what the devolved allocations have been and will be spent on.¹¹

Additional public service spending by the UK government, including grants provided to the devolved administrations under the Barnett formula and to local authorities, is set out in Figure 1.6. Some additional spending has been on transport (in particular, to bail out providers), local government (in the form of grants to address their lost income), job centres and for free school meals. However, by far the largest amount has been on health-related spending: 67% of the additional spending allocated to public services in England has been spent on health-related activities. This is also the case for the devolved administrations – as of the end of November, 73% of additional public service spending in Scotland had been devoted to health.¹²

This is not surprising. The pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis. Even so, the amounts spent on specific items are remarkable. Some by their nature are new: before this year, the UK did not have a large-scale test and trace operation. This year the UK government plans to spend £22bn on its system in England. That is equivalent to 1% of GDP, as much as the public sector spends annually on adult social care in England.

Others are not new, but drastically inflated. Spending on PPE, for example, has now reached £15bn. In a normal year, the NHS spends only £146m on PPE.¹³ If the same volume of PPE had been purchased in 2019, the NAO estimates that it would have cost only £2.5bn,¹⁴ implying that those items have been six times more expensive this year. The £12.5bn spent on 'other' aspects of the health response includes the cost of the Nightingale hospitals, new equipment and additional staff and overtime.

As with support for households and businesses, it is reasonable that the government was willing to spend substantial amounts to deliver a test and trace system and to provide PPE. But equally, it is still important that, where possible, the government gets good value for money and learns during the crisis.

Figure 1.6 **Coronavirus-related public service spending in 2020/21, £bn**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Table 2.1 of HM Treasury, *Spending Review 2020*, November 2020.
 * = Spending is for England only. ** = Spending is for England and Wales, + Spending is for England, Wales and Scotland.

Effective procurement has been difficult but procedures have not followed best practice

Much of the additional spending on PPE and test and trace has been the procurement of goods or services.

The government was in a difficult position, especially at the start of the crisis. The available evidence shows that contracts that have more bidders result in better value for money – around 2.5% lower cost per additional bidder.¹⁵ If a contract is awarded directly, or with no other bidders, there is therefore a higher risk that the government will have paid more than the price that a supplier might have been willing to deliver the same good or service. We would therefore expect contracts that are directly awarded without a competition or are uncontested (only one bid) would offer worse value for money, on average, for the government. However, in March and April there was a need to procure at speed, especially for goods like PPE that were scarce internationally. It is much easier to procure quickly with direct awards.

Since the crisis began, almost all of the coronavirus-related awards the government has made have been direct. Of £17.3bn of new contracts awarded by central government up to the end of July, £10.5bn were through new direct awards and £6.7bn were direct awards through existing framework agreements (lists of pre-approved suppliers).¹⁶ Only 1% of new awards were through competitive tenders.¹⁷

There is little evidence that the use of direct awards at the start of the crisis has waned as the crisis has gone on. Almost all of the contracts up to the end of July were by direct award. And even though many of the test and trace contract awards have come later in the pandemic, those contracts have been just as likely to be direct awards.

These contracts would likely not have attracted many bidders on a tight timeframe given the specialist nature of the service. But the government could have conducted a competitive process that would likely have induced some bidders and may have led to a lower price even if the same company had ultimately been awarded the contract. The case for direct awards – specifically the need to act at speed to procure scarce items – was stronger at the start of the pandemic, and yet the government has not made use of competitive tendering, which is more likely to provide better value for money.

A further complaint, mostly anecdotal, has been that the chaotic process for awarding contracts led to inexperienced or inappropriate suppliers winning big contracts.¹⁸ One prominent example is the £108m PPE contract offered to PestFix, a small pest control company with no prior track record.¹⁹ Furthermore, the NAO found that businesses allocated to the 'high-priority line' for PPE contracts were 10 times more likely to get a contract than others. Businesses were allocated to this group based on leads from ministers and officials. The NAO found that the reasons for particular awards were often not documented, leaving the government open to charges of cronyism.²⁰

As addressed in Chapter 5, data on contract awards has been published much more slowly during the pandemic. However, based on the contracts that have been published to the 'Contracts Finder' database up to the start of December, collated by Spend Network, we can provide two further insights that provide broader evidence for the claim about small and inexperienced suppliers. Almost one third of coronavirus-related contracts, and 45% of PPE contracts, were awarded to suppliers who had not won a government award in the past three years, compared with less than one quarter of non-coronavirus contracts. Coronavirus-related contracts are also more likely to have been awarded to small and medium-sized businesses, consistent with the claims that some smaller and inexperienced suppliers have been more likely to win these contracts.*

It is understandable that procurement would operate differently in a pandemic, and the government has been in a difficult position as it has needed to procure scarce items at speed. But the UK has been unusual in Europe in making such widespread use of direct awards,²¹ and yet this is still the way it is predominantly procuring goods and services. While this has enabled rapid procurement, the lack of competition in the tendering process increases the risk that the government will have received poor value for money with some or much of its procurement.

Spending on Whitehall has increased by much less than spending by Whitehall

As Chapter 3 outlines, the pandemic has placed many additional demands on the civil service. The extraordinary economic response has itself required a lot of work. For example, HMRC developed the systems required to get the CJRS and SEISS payments administered quickly: [a notable success story](#).²²

At first glance, the increase in spending on Whitehall 'administrative' activities (which includes civil service pay) this year – 10% over 2019/20 – seems sizeable. However, a 6% increase was already planned for this year, reflecting already expected increases in demands on the civil service. For example, the Department for Environment, Food

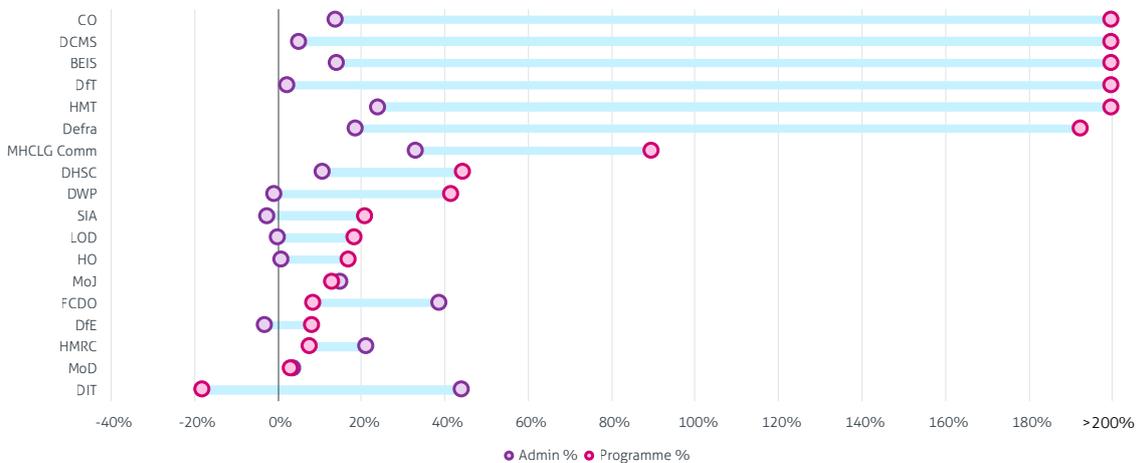
* The source for analysis in this paragraph is Institute for Government analysis of Spend Network data based on contracts published to the Contracts Finder database.

and Rural Affairs (Defra) budget was already set to grow substantially as the department expanded in anticipation of more responsibilities at the end of the Brexit transition period. In some departments, administrative spending is even set to fall this year – for example in the Department for Education (DfE), despite the disruption that coronavirus has wrought to the education system.

Overall administrative spending remains 20% lower in real terms than it was in 2012/13 as the civil service made large administrative savings as part of 'austerity'.²³ This means that additional activity in Whitehall, including the delivery of major economic projects to support businesses and households, was funded broadly from existing budgets that have been depleted since earlier in the decade.

The civil service doing so much on reduced budgets suggests substantial efficiency gains in Whitehall over the past decade. And this year it has managed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic without a big increase in spending on its activities, showing an admirable ability to reprioritise. However, lower administrative spending does also bring risks and may lead to higher costs elsewhere. For example, a bigger and better-funded core civil service might have been able to undertake more work in-house. In particular, the UK is again unusual internationally in making such widespread use of often expensive consultants in its test and trace system rather than relying on in-house expertise.²⁴

Figure 1.7 **Growth in administrative and programme day-to-day spending, 2019/20 to 2020/21**

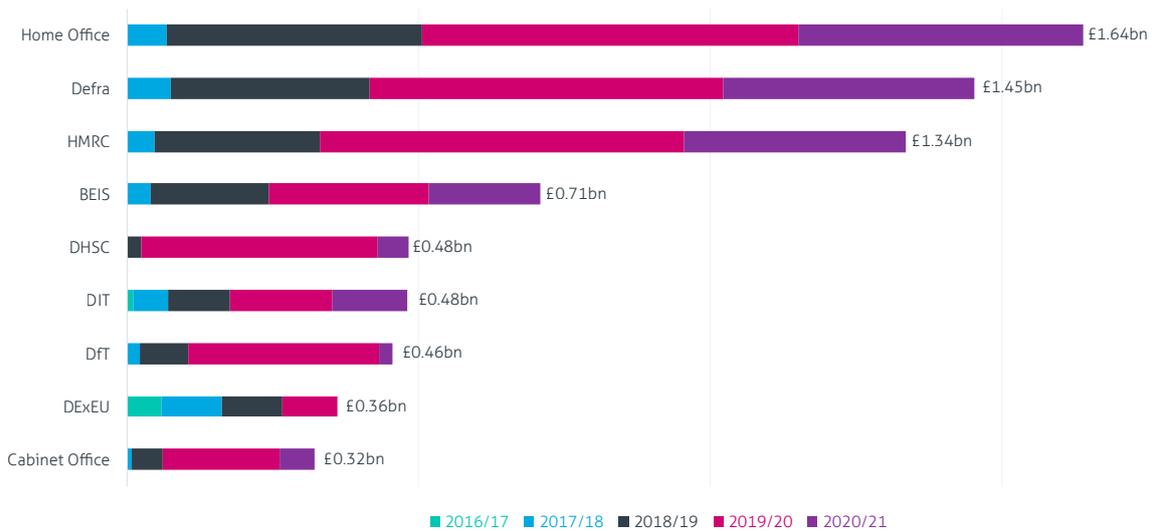


Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, *Spending Review 2020* and HM Treasury, public expenditure statistical analyses, July 2020.

Spending on Brexit preparations continues

While the focus of government spending this year has understandably been on containing the coronavirus pandemic, preparations for the end of the Brexit transition period have continued. Spending in 2020/21 has topped that in 2019/20, the previous high, and has been largest in the Home Office and HMRC (who are responsible for activities at the border) and Defra (which will take on more responsibility for agricultural support from 2021 and also has significant border and other environmental responsibilities).

Figure 1.8 **Brexit funding allocated to departments (2016/17–2020/21), 2020/21 prices**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, European Union finances 2019. Does not include announcements since July 2019. Figures deflated using GDP deflator.

While the transition period has ended and Brexit has, by any definition, happened, further 'Brexit spending' will be inevitable, as businesses – many of whom at the end of 2020 were not adequately prepared and were (and are) also managing the effects of the pandemic – and the public adjust to new circumstances.

Looking ahead

The government has borrowed hundreds of billions of pounds since the start of the pandemic to strengthen public services and support households and businesses. One of its main aims in spending so much this year has been to enable a rapid economic recovery once the pandemic has passed. The trajectory of the economy – affected by new trading terms with the EU as well as recovery from the pandemic – will determine how much the public finances position constrains the government as it looks to deliver its agenda. The government might find it has even less wiggle room for new spending programmes if some of the additional 'one off' spending, both on public spending and household support, proves to be more permanent than planned.



2 Ministers

A reshuffle in February 2020 saw big changes to the top team in government, but since then the cabinet has been relatively stable, particularly compared to the turmoil of Theresa May's government. But that stability has not spared it from controversy, with several prominent secretaries of state drawing sustained criticism throughout the year.

This has led to questions over accountability, with even ministers who have faced the most substantial public criticism – for policy mistakes, like Gavin Williamson,¹ or poor behaviour, like Priti Patel² – not having resigned or been moved. Ministerial stability is generally a good thing³ but it is also part of the prime minister's role to make sure his team is effective and held accountable for their actions. Boris Johnson, however, has chosen to stick with members of his team – even when, in Patel's case, his independent adviser found that she had broken the Ministerial Code.⁴

Below the top team, while most junior ministers remained in post, there has been a higher rate of resignations than in the first year of May's government. And many special advisers⁵ have moved between departments – or out of government. The prime minister has also frequently restructured the cabinet committees where key decisions on coronavirus have been made.⁶

As well as changing ministers, the government has made regular policy swerves, with U-turns on free school meals, the various job support schemes, rules on mask-wearing and other issues. And a much higher number of ministerial directions – formal instructions to officials to continue with a policy in spite of concerns about value for money – have been issued in 2020 than ever before.⁷ Both trends show that the government has been acting at speed, at times learning from past mistakes while at others failing to anticipate problems.

The pandemic was also the first time many people in England understood the extent of the powers exercised by the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Governments across the UK took different approaches to their pandemic responses while, in England, clashes between Westminster and local government leaders over lockdown 'tiers' became fraught. Developing better ways to work collaboratively, and smooth tensions between levels of government, should be a key aim for 2021.

The membership of the cabinet has been more stable under Johnson than it was under May

Theresa May's time as prime minister, particularly after the 2017 election, was characterised by serious disagreements among her ministerial team and frequent resignations⁸ – including, of course, Boris Johnson, who resigned as her foreign secretary in July 2018.⁹ When Johnson entered Downing Street as prime minister a little over a year later, he had a major clear out of ministers, installing a new top team who would be loyal to his main priority of "getting Brexit done".¹⁰ This came, however, at the expense of experience: many of the most experienced members of May's cabinet did not join Johnson's government, and changes since July 2019 have meant that only a handful of the current cabinet have more than around 20 months' ministerial experience that is relevant to their role.¹¹

There was little change in the cabinet after the 2019 election.¹² But in the reshuffle in February 2020 Johnson made many changes to his ministerial team. Most notably he brought in a new chancellor after Sajid Javid resigned from the government rather than accept a team of special advisers chosen for him by the prime minister and his aides. Rishi Sunak, previously chief secretary to the Treasury, replaced Javid.¹³

Six other ministers moved to new posts in the cabinet: Alok Sharma to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; George Eustice to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Brandon Lewis to the Northern Ireland Office; Oliver Dowden to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Anne-Marie Trevelyan to the Department for International Development (later merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to create the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office);¹⁴ and Amanda Milling as party chairman and minister without portfolio. The number of ministers attending cabinet without being full members decreased at the February reshuffle, from 10 to four. There are still 26 attendees at cabinet, meaning it can be an ineffective forum for real discussion and decision making.¹⁵

Figure 2.1 Secretaries of state (or equivalent) at each department since May 2010

Department	Post holders								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
DCMS	Hunt	Miller	Javid	Whittingdale	Bradley	Hancock	Wright	Morgan	Dowden
MoJ	Clarke	Grayling	Gove	Truss	Lidington	Gauke	Buckland		
DWP	Duncan Smith	Crabb	Green	Gauke	McVey	Rudd	Coffey		
Defra	Spelman	Paterson	Truss	Leadsom	Gove	Villiers	Eustice		
CO	Maude	Hancock	Gummer	Green	Lidington	Dowden	Gove		
NIO	Paterson	Villiers	Brokenshire	Bradley	Smith	Lewis			
MoD	Fox	Hammond	Fallon	Williamson	Mordaunt	Wallace			
Wal	Gillan	Jones	Crabb	Cairns	Hart				
Scot	Alexander	Moore	Carmichael	Mundell	Jack				
DCLG / MHCLG	Pickles	Clark	Javid	Brokenshire	Jenrick				
DfT	Hammond	Greening	McLoughlin	Grayling	Shapps				
DfE	Gove	Morgan	Greening	Hinds	Williamson				
HO	May	Rudd	Javid	Patel					
HMT	Osborne	Hammond	Javid	Sunak					
BEIS	Clark	Leadsom	Sharma	Kwarteng					
DH / DHSC	Lansley	Hunt	Hancock						
DIT	Fox	Truss							
FCDO	Raab								
DfID	Mitchell	Greening	Patel	Mordaunt	Stewart	Sharma	Trevelyan		
FCO	Hague	Hammond	Johnson	Hunt	Raab				
DExEU	Davis	Raab	Barclay						
DECC	Huhne	Davey	Rudd						
BIS	Cable	Javid							

Key

- Appointed by Boris Johnson
- Appointed by Theresa May
- Appointed by David Cameron
- Liberal Democrats

Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG ministerial database, using sources including GOV.UK and news reports.

Since the February reshuffle, the top team in government has been broadly stable. Just two changes have been made: Anne-Marie Trevelyan's move from the cabinet to a junior ministerial role, via the backbenches, after DfID's merger in September 2020;¹⁶ and, most recently, Kwasi Kwarteng's appointment as business secretary as Sharma took on the role of full-time COP26 president in January 2021.¹⁷

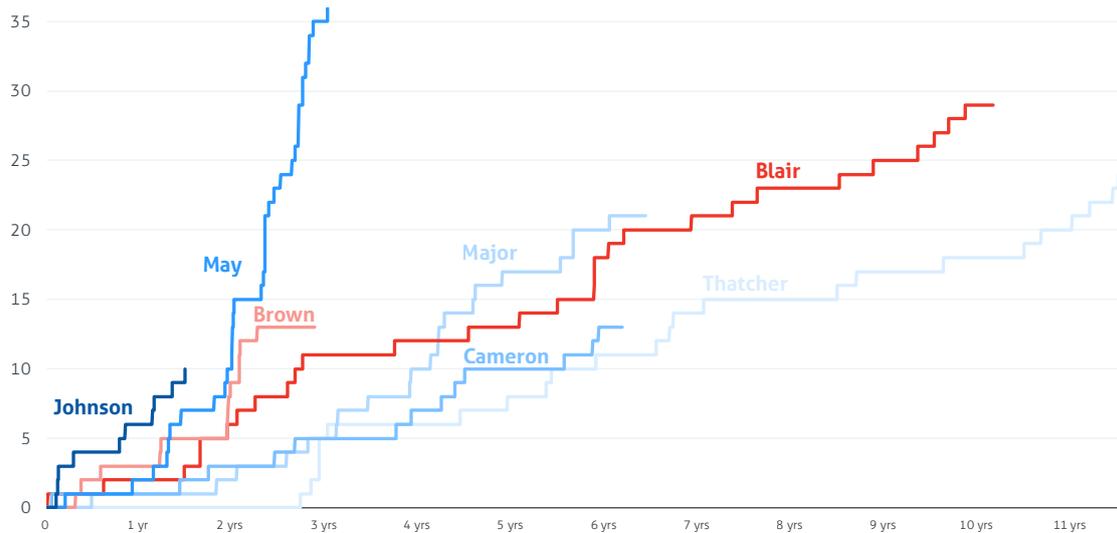
Generally, stability in ministerial ranks is a good thing for the government. It means ministers can gain a proper understanding of the issues they are responsible for, and build useful relationships with the businesses, public sector organisations and others affected by their decisions.¹⁸ And when the government is dealing with a crisis, such as the coronavirus pandemic, it makes even more sense not to move people too often.

This in part also reflects Johnson's preference as a prime minister. He has shown an unusually strong desire, compared to predecessors, to hold on to his team, even when (or particularly when) they face stringent criticism from the media and the opposition. For example, Gavin Williamson, who as education secretary oversaw the chaotic assignment of exam results to secondary school students in the summer of 2020 and the last-minute closure of schools in January 2021, faced calls to resign, including from teachers¹⁹ and the Institute for Government.²⁰ And Robert Jenrick, housing and communities secretary, also faced down criticism during 2020, stemming from concerns around his relationships with party donors²¹ to decisions he made about disbursing emergency funds for local authorities.²²

In another case the home secretary, Priti Patel, was found by the prime minister's independent adviser to have broken the Ministerial Code by bullying civil servants working for her,²³ but Johnson disagreed and kept her in post. While ministerial stability is important, ministers whose performance does not meet the high standards expected, or who oversee failures in policy that affect people across the country, should be held to account for their decisions and the prime minister should uphold, and be seen to uphold, that principle.

While the top level of government has remained broadly unchanged since early 2020, resignations from lower ranks have continued – at a higher rate than at the beginning of May's time in government. Of the 10 ministers who have resigned from Johnson's government outside reshuffles (so far), six have done so because of disagreements over politics or policy (including the prime minister's brother, Jo Johnson) or because of the prime minister's support for his former senior adviser, Dominic Cummings. The other four have resigned for personal reasons or because of concerns over their behaviour.²⁴

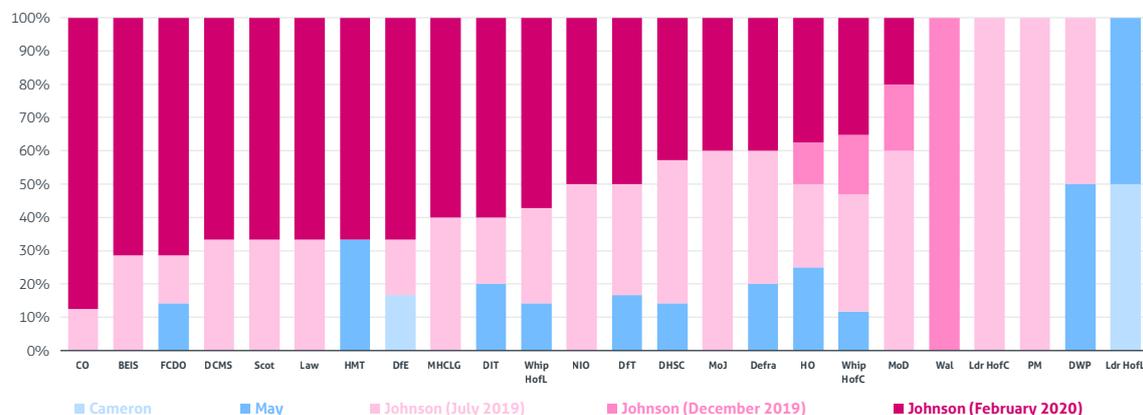
Figure 2.2 Number of ministerial resignations outside reshuffles by prime minister (1979–2020)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of sources, including Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*; House of Commons Library; King A and Allen N, 'Off with their heads: British prime ministers and the power to dismiss', *BJPoLS*, 2010, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 249–278; and IfG ministerial database. We have excluded those resignations announced before a reshuffle but effectively taking place during it, e.g. Hurd (1995), Smith/Bleas/Hughes/Watson (2009), Dunlop (2017), and sackings.

These and earlier changes mean that most ministers have been in office for a maximum of 20 months. Many former ministers have told the Institute's Ministers Reflect programme about the benefits of staying in one post for at least two years, as it allows them to fully understand the issues they are dealing with.²⁵

Figure 2.3 Proportion of ministers per department by appointing prime minister



Source: Institute for Government analysis of GOV.UK. A list of departmental initialisms is found at the end of this report.

Of course, even long-serving ministers can still face problems, particularly in difficult circumstances like the pandemic. Nick Gibb, minister for school standards at the Department for Education (DfE), has been in the department since 2014. Despite being warned that the government's plan to award exam results by algorithm would disadvantage poorer students, Gibb and his boss, Gavin Williamson, pressed ahead with the plan, partly due to reassurances they received from DfE officials.²⁶ They then said that exams would go ahead in 2021 as usual before being forced to cancel them again in January after the beginning of the third national lockdown in England and the subsequent closure of schools.²⁷ Longevity in a role is not the only characteristic of

an effective minister – they must question the advice they receive and their own assumptions, as well as learn from previous mistakes, to reach the best policy outcomes.

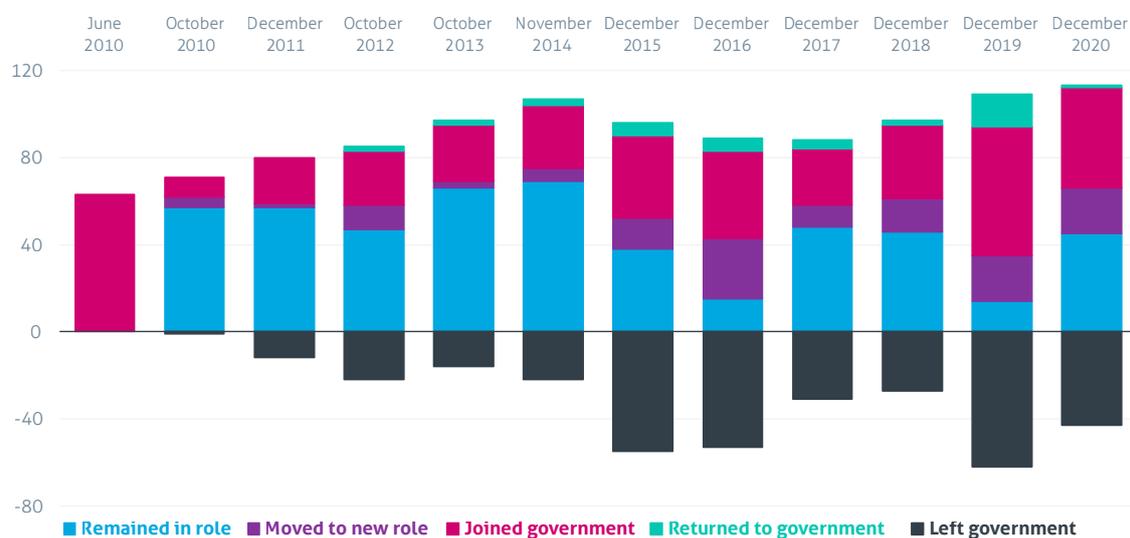
2021 presents an opportunity for Johnson to build a team that can last the rest of the parliament. Now that the negotiations on the future relationship with the EU are over, the prime minister can appoint a top team based on competence, not loyalty to Brexit. If the third lockdown and the vaccine roll-out through the spring are successful, the prime minister should use a reshuffle later in 2021 to bring in ministers who can do the job rather than just agree with him.²⁸

There has been more turnover among special advisers

Special advisers play a key role in every government. But, as an [Institute for Government paper](#) published last year showed, advisers have played a particularly central role in Johnson’s government, with the prime minister using the adviser network to oversee – and control – the work of other departments much more closely than his predecessors.²⁹

While Dominic Cummings’s controversial time as the prime minister’s chief adviser – not least his infamous lockdown trip from London to the north-east of England – made him by far the most well-known adviser in the Johnson administration, he was just one of more than 100 special advisers who work for ministers across government. Under Johnson, the number of special advisers has grown to its highest level ever, with 116 advisers in government as of 15 December 2020.³⁰

Figure 2.4 Turnover of special advisers, October 2010 to December 2020



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office special adviser data releases, June 2010 to December 2020. Turnover calculated as change from previous data point, except October 2010, calculated as change from June 2010.

While turnover among cabinet ministers has been relatively low, turnover among advisers in 2020 was the highest of any recent year without an election or change of prime minister. This was largest at the February reshuffle, when Sajid Javid’s resignation also saw his advisers leave government. As well as advisers leaving government, between December 2019 and December 2020 some 21 advisers changed post. Our earlier research found that the ability to direct special advisers and appoint them to work with a specific minister means that the team in No.10 has had a greater degree of control over the wider network than in the past.

But this set-up changed at the end of 2020, when Lee Cain, director of communications at No.10, resigned from the government. He was followed by Dominic Cummings.³¹ In November 2020 the prime minister appointed a new chief of staff, Dan Rosenfield, who took office at the start of this year.³²

High turnover among special advisers is not unusual in itself – the job is difficult and inherently insecure, as it ends when an adviser’s ministerial boss leaves the government. However, the higher than usual rate of turnover in the past year makes it harder for both ministers and advisers to build a close working relationship, which in turn leads to disempowered ministers and less effective government. It is yet to be seen if Rosenfield’s arrival will herald a return to the more traditional style of special adviser management seen under Theresa May and David Cameron.

The number of ministerial directions has rocketed

Ministerial directions are formal instructions from a secretary of state to the permanent secretary in their department to implement a decision despite the concerns of the civil service that the policy decision is questionable on any of the following grounds:

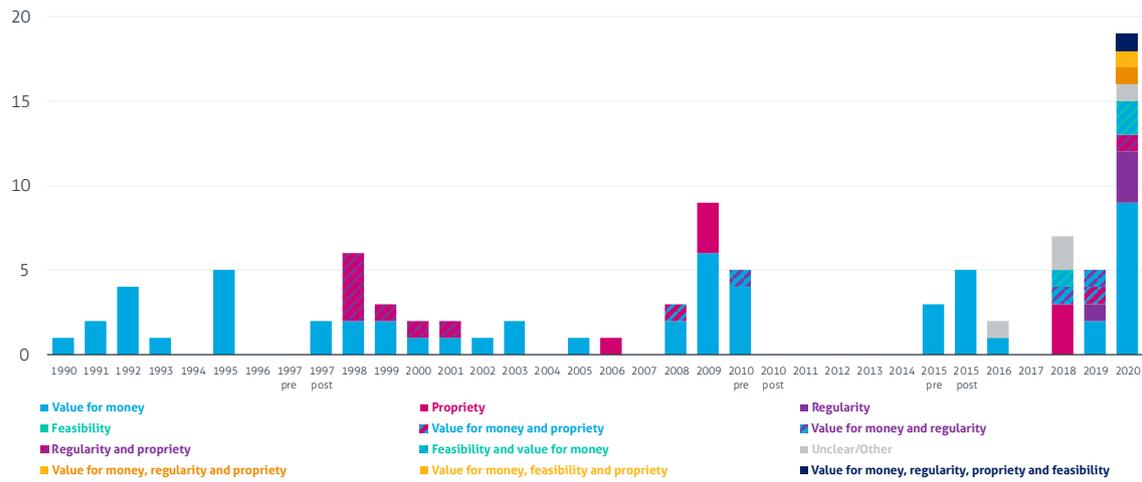
1. Regularity – if the proposal is beyond the department’s legal powers, or agreed spending budgets.
2. Propriety – if it doesn’t meet “high standards of public conduct”, such as appropriate governance or parliamentary expectations.
3. Value for money – if something else, or doing nothing, would be cheaper and better.
4. Feasibility – if there is doubt about the proposal being “implemented accurately, sustainably or to the intended timetable”.³³

The number of directions has been growing in recent years as a result of preparations for leaving the EU. Many of these were classified as ‘technical directions’, when departments were required to spend money before parliament had given them the legal power to do so, but when this was expected in due course.*

However, the response to the coronavirus pandemic has seen the number of directions issued by ministers to their departments increase rapidly, with 19 issued in 2020 compared to just five in 2019 and seven in 2018. The bulk of these have concerned spending to support businesses during the pandemic and so have been issued by the business secretary. The increase in directions shows the speed at which the government has been reacting and the extraordinary nature of the interventions that would be unthinkable in normal times – both things that are welcome in a crisis like the pandemic. And the numbers do not tell the whole story: given the unprecedented nature of the crisis, as explained in Chapter 1, some things will have been done that were difficult to justify on strict value for money criteria but which were still the right thing to do at the time.

* For more information on ministerial directions, including technical directions, see the Institute for Government’s explainer, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/ministerial-directions

Figure 2.5 Ministerial directions since 1990 by year (pre- and post-election) and grounds



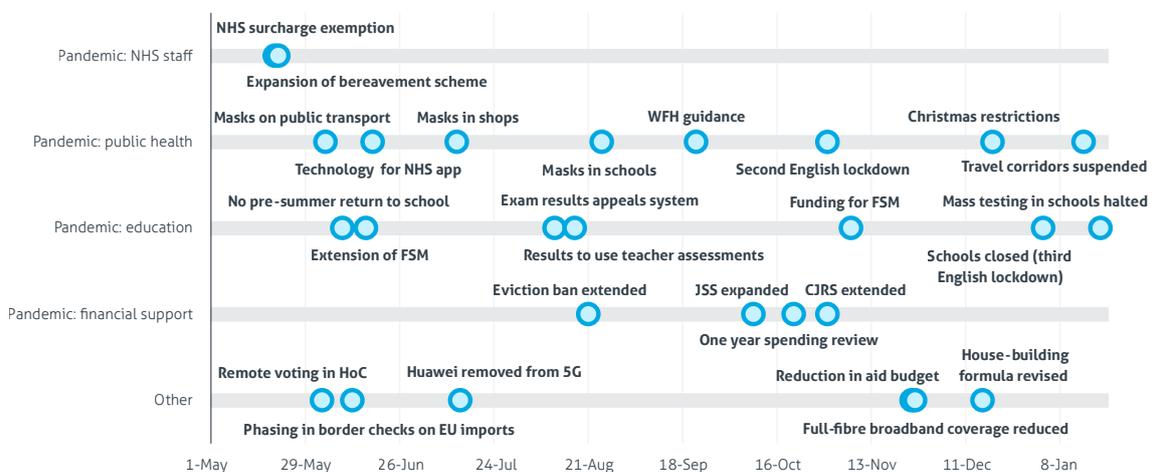
Source: Institute for Government analysis for [Following the Pound: Accounting officers in central government](#), IfG, 2013, based on correspondence with HMT, and of GOV.UK since.

Under previous governments, a ministerial direction would receive a lot of scrutiny from parliament. In contrast, the recent increase in the number of directions means that they have individually attracted less attention. While the increase in directions is understandable given the fast-moving nature of the pandemic response, it is also important that they are properly scrutinised so parliament can understand why a minister felt the government should go ahead with the spending despite the concerns of civil servants. This may have been because ministers judged it was the right thing to do despite the value for money assessment. Parliament – particularly the Public Accounts Committee – should continue to devote time and attention to this.

The response to the pandemic has seen many U-turns

The government has changed its policy on many issues in 2020 and on some issues has 'U-turned' more than once. Some of these have taken place after more evidence has come to light on how the virus behaves, while others have been as a result of political pressure – occasionally from the opposition but more often from the public, the government's own backbenches and the media.

Figure 2.6 UK government policy U-turns, May 2020 to January 2021



Source: Institute for Government analysis of GOV.UK and news outlets.

Of course, during a pandemic of a new virus it is inevitable (and sensible) that policies will change as new evidence comes to light. The changes to the policy on face coverings are an example of this. In the early stages of the pandemic the government did not recommend that people wear face coverings in public settings, waiting instead for concrete evidence that the measure would reduce transmission substantially.³⁴ But as a result of its desire to 'follow' the science, the UK often lagged behind other European countries – France made face coverings mandatory on public transport from May,³⁵ but it was not until June that this happened in the UK.³⁶

Other U-turns have arisen as a result of over-optimism by ministers. Education secretary Gavin Williamson had set an ambition for primary schools to provide a month of in-person teaching for children between the first lockdown and the summer holiday, before later admitting this would not be feasible.³⁷ He instead introduced a slower, phased reopening, with the focus on students returning in full in September.³⁸ Johnson later ridiculed Labour's proposal of a short-term shutdown in mid-October as "the height of absurdity", before going on to announce a (longer) month-long national lockdown in England shortly afterwards, in November, after cases continued to rise.³⁹ It later emerged that the government's own science advisers had recommended an earlier lockdown but that Johnson had disregarded this advice.⁴⁰

Other U-turns were caused by ministers' political misjudgements. The government has twice changed its policy on free school meals, both times following a campaign led by footballer Marcus Rashford.⁴¹ And U-turns driven by politics have not only been related to the pandemic. In July 2020 Oliver Dowden announced that Huawei will be removed from the 5G network by 2027, contrary to the decision in January⁴² – as a result of international and domestic political pressure, particularly from Conservative backbenchers.

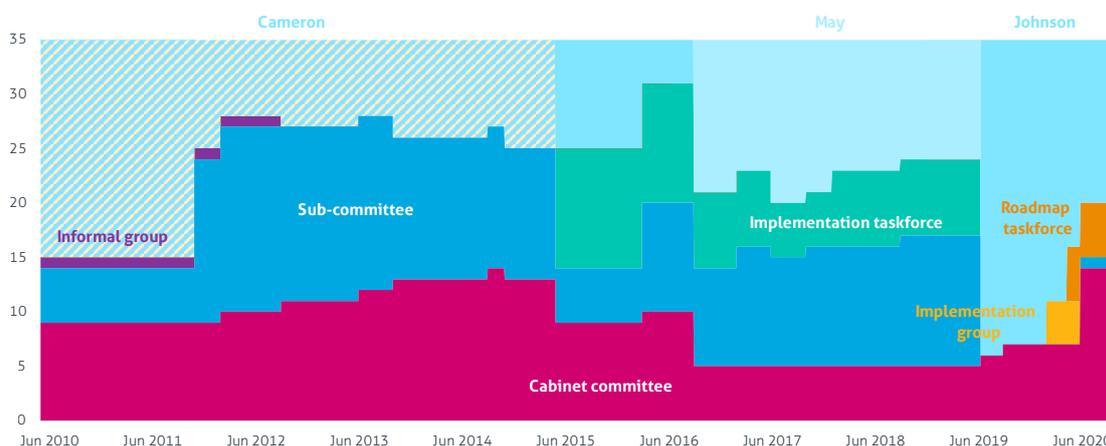
Sometimes U-turns are sensible decisions, as new evidence emerges or facts change. But when ministers repeatedly go back on statements they have made, the government begins to lose credibility. The prime minister opened himself up to criticism at the start of the new year when, just a day before announcing that all schools were to close on 5 January 2021 he appeared on television stating they would remain open.⁴³ These repeated errors also open the government itself up to more potential U-turns as backbenchers and the opposition seek out new weaknesses.

Acting sooner rather than later – getting ahead of both the politics and the scientific evidence – would mean the government might attract criticism for going too far but would also mean it would avoid having to play catch up with the science or with public opinion. Learning from its U-turns in 2020 will help the government to make fewer in 2021.

The prime minister has reorganised cabinet committees frequently throughout the crisis

Cabinet committees are groups of ministers that can “take collective decisions that are binding across government”.^{*} When Johnson became prime minister in July 2019, he reduced the total number of committees to just six. Since late 2019, however, the number of committees and other structures under the cabinet has steadily increased, with changing remits, as the government has adapted its response to the pandemic.⁴⁴

Figure 2.7 **Cabinet committees, by type, June 2010 to November 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, 'List of Cabinet Committees', June 2010 to November 2020, and GOV.UK press releases about climate change committee in October 2019, implementation committees in March 2020 and roadmap taskforces in May 2020.

In March 2020 Johnson set up four new ministerial implementation groups (MIGs) focused on different aspects of the response and included attendees from the devolved governments.⁴⁵ Each was chaired by a senior minister, each of whom also attended a daily 'C-19 meeting' of the prime minister, key ministers and senior officials, to discuss the Covid-19 situation. In June 2020 these groups were replaced by two new Covid-related cabinet committees – COVID-19 Strategy and COVID-19 Operations. This meant that there was no longer a regular forum for ministers in the devolved governments to interact with the UK government.

As well as the response to Covid, the prime minister has reorganised the committee responsible for overseeing the government's response to climate change. In October 2019 he created the Climate Change Committee,⁴⁶ although this did not meet until March 2020.⁴⁷ In June 2020 he replaced this with the Climate Action Strategy and Climate Action Implementation Committees.⁴⁸

The frequent reorganisation of cabinet committee structures suggests that the prime minister has been testing what works. He has now settled on the 'strategy' and 'operations/implementation' split, which follows the perceived success of the EU Exit Strategy and EU Exit Operations committees in 2019.⁴⁹ Previous research by the Institute has found that these structures were effective in preparing for a possible no-deal Brexit in 2019 and early 2020 and that, despite challenges around the workload they create for both ministers and officials, they could form a useful model for other government priorities.⁵⁰

* For more information on cabinet committees, including the subjects they cover and who sits on them, see the Institute for Government's explainer, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/cabinet-committees

Now that the prime minister has found a model that works, he should refrain from further reorganisation and focus on ensuring the committees have the right cast lists and information to make the decisions they need to.

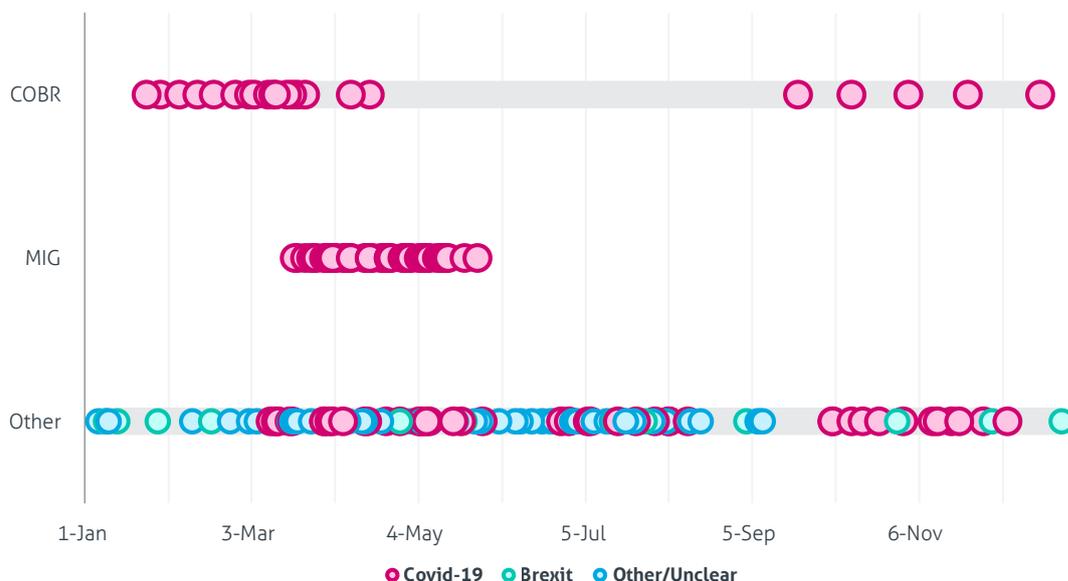
Ministers' relationships with devolved and local governments have been difficult

In the early phases of the pandemic, the usual mechanisms for discussion between the leaders of the UK and devolved governments – particularly the Joint Ministerial Committee – were not mobilised. Instead, ministers from the devolved governments attended some Civil Contingencies Committee (or COBR) meetings, where decisions about the response were taken.* Additionally, ministers from the devolved governments joined the MIGs established in March. There were also ad hoc phone calls, meetings and letters between the governments.

Johnson's decision in June to replace the MIGs with two cabinet committees meant that there was no regular, formal forum for ministers from the devolved governments to interact with their counterparts in the UK government. COBR did not meet at all between 10 May and 22 September. Mark Drakeford, first minister of Wales, said he had only "one 'brief' phone call" with the prime minister during the summer.⁵¹

However, other ministers in the devolved governments continued to meet their counterparts in the UK government throughout the summer and into the autumn, when COBR meetings resumed with devolved presence. In the autumn and winter Michael Gove, the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, was responsible for discussing the response to the pandemic with the devolved governments.⁵²

Figure 2.8 Meetings between UK cabinet ministers and ministers from devolved governments, 2020



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ministerial engagement data releases from Scottish and Welsh governments, January to August 2020 and January to September 2020 respectively. Supplemented with analysis of Freedom of Information responses from HM Treasury, Northern Ireland Office, Wales Office, Northern Ireland Department of Health, and announcements on GOV.UK.

* For more information on COBR, see our explainer, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/cobr-cobra

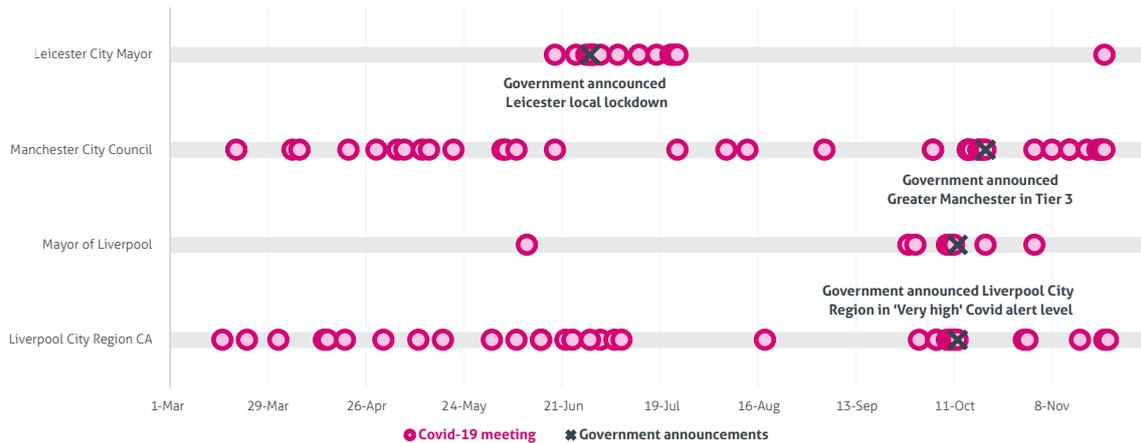
These conversations did not stop the different governments in the UK diverging at times from each other's approaches to the pandemic. At its most extreme, this led to the Welsh first minister "closing the border" to people travelling from parts of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, after the governments were not able to reach agreement on travel rules for people living in areas with high Covid case rates.⁵³ The four governments did work together to agree the initial rules for family gatherings during the Christmas period,⁵⁴ but these were scrapped in large parts of the country when the new variant of the virus was found to be spreading rapidly.⁵⁵

As an earlier report from the Institute found, it has been political decision making – in terms of the difficult trade-offs between public health, the economy and wider societal factors – that has driven much of the divergence between the different governments, rather than any fundamental differences in the scientific advice they have received.⁵⁶ The devolved governments have also used the pandemic to score political points against Westminster. A return to the co-operation seen at the beginning of the pandemic will help avoid public confusion and secure public consent for any new measures.

Ministers' relationships with English local government officials have also been particularly fraught at times across the year. This led to vocal criticism from many metro mayors and local authority leaders. Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, attended COBR meetings from 9 April 2020, but was the only leader of a sub-national government to do so.^{57,58} After the first national lockdown ended in the spring, the government placed various parts of England, including Leicester, Manchester and Liverpool, into local lockdowns, which varied in their severity. Following rising infection rates in the city, Leicester remained in lockdown while the rest of the country moved to the less severe restrictions on 4 July.⁵⁹

Later in the year, when the government had established the 'tiers' system, Manchester was placed into Tier 3 despite the concerns raised by its metro mayor, Andy Burnham, that the government was not providing sufficient support to businesses affected by the new rules.⁶⁰ After the second national lockdown in England ended on 2 December, the government assigned local authority areas to the short-lived new tiered system with no negotiations.⁶¹ Discussions between central government and local government continued throughout the year but these were not enough for local leaders to get what they wanted, meaning they continued to criticise ministers' approach to local lockdowns.

Figure 2.9 Meetings related to Covid-19 and Brexit between central government and certain local authorities



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Freedom of Information responses from Leicester City Council, Manchester City Council, Liverpool City Council and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. We also sent an FOI request to Kent County Council but did not receive a response in time for publication.

Communication between authorities of different political parties will always be fraught to some extent. But many of the areas in England with the highest Covid rates are run by Labour councils and/or combined authorities. This, combined with the government's combative approach, means that there have been regular disagreements over how to deal with the pandemic. It is in both central and local governments' interests to work more closely together to tackle the pandemic. Ministers should explain to local councils why they have made the decisions they have and take into account local knowledge and understanding when making those decisions.

The prime minister has expanded the Foreign Office but steered clear of other changes to departmental structures

The number of government departments shrunk by two during 2020. The Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU) was wound down at the end of January 2020, when the UK left the EU, and its secretary of state, Steve Barclay, became chief secretary to the Treasury in the February reshuffle.⁶² In June 2020 the prime minister announced that he was merging DfID and the FCO.⁶³ The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) officially came into being on 2 September 2020, with the foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, at its head.⁶⁴ This was a big change to the landscape of Whitehall but not as radical as had been briefed when Johnson first took office, with mooted changes to the business and trade departments not taking place.⁶⁵

Both these departmental changes reversed previous structural changes – DfID and DExEU had both been created by taking parts of the FCO and Cabinet Office respectively and expanding them. DExEU was always intended to be a temporary department, created by Theresa May when she became prime minister.⁶⁶ But DfID had existed much longer, having been created by Tony Blair in 1997.⁶⁷ Johnson's decisions to re-merge DfID with the FCO followed the pattern of the late 20th century, when Labour governments created a standalone development ministry and Conservative governments preferred development policy to be run from the Foreign Office, seeing it as an arm of foreign policy rather than a separate agenda.

Looking ahead

When he became prime minister in July 2019 Boris Johnson chose his first cabinet to “get Brexit done”. Since then the UK has been plunged into the Covid-19 pandemic but, other than a few departures and changes to the structures of government, the top team has remained remarkably stable, despite several high-profile controversies. In 2021 Johnson has an opportunity to build a new team of ministers that can deliver on their manifesto promises and steer the UK out of the current crisis.



3 Civil service

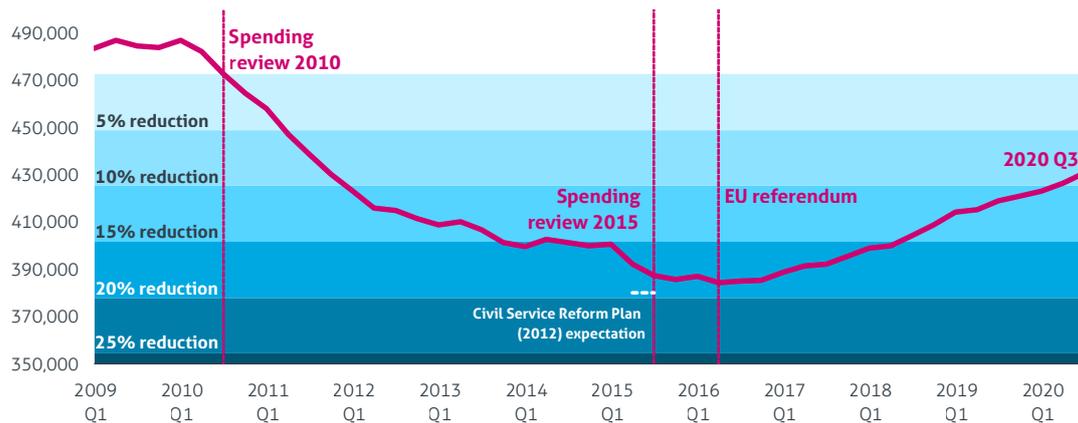
In the past year, the civil service has faced the dual challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and Brexit preparation. Despite a major increase in its workload, it has shown how quickly it can adjust to new priorities. The experience and skills the civil service has developed over the past four years to deal with Brexit proved especially useful in its tackling of the coronavirus crisis.

But the pandemic has also highlighted longer-term problems in the civil service. The lack of readily available skills in areas including procurement or science and engineering contributed to an expensive use of consultants during the pandemic – reinforcing the Johnson government’s desire for civil service reform. Yet ministers and senior officials could do more to better understand and use the skills of existing civil servants. Those leading reform programmes should also ensure that their focus on diversity of skills and perspectives is matched by further progress on other forms of diversity. These include gender and ethnicity – where the civil service has made real strides in recent years – and socio-economic background.

Ministers are also seeking to decentralise the civil service. At the March 2020 budget the chancellor announced plans to move 22,000 roles out of London over the next decade. This is to ensure that “government will make decisions differently in future”.¹ It is not the first time that politicians have sought to move civil servants. For moves to work, civil servants at the most senior levels will also need to move away from London. Ministers will need to consider how best to do this for a civil service with a rising average age and increasing numbers of staff at the most senior grades.

Coronavirus has made progress on ambitious reforms harder, as have clear public tensions between ministers and senior civil servants. The departure of the prime minister’s controversial chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, a driving force behind reform, removes one source of tension. It also raises questions about whether the impetus for reform plans can be maintained. It is clear that there is some appetite for change among the civil service leadership, including chief operating officer Alex Chisholm and the new cabinet secretary, Simon Case.

Figure 3.1 Civil service staff numbers (full-time equivalent, FTE), March 2009 to September 2020



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS public sector employment data (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2020.

In September 2020, there were 430,750 civil servants. This was an increase of 7,700, or 2%, on the first quarter of the year. In the third quarter of 2020 alone – the three-month period between July and September – **staff numbers** increased by 4,260. Here we define civil servants as officials working in the UK Home Civil Service, which supports the work of the UK’s central government departments. This includes the agencies that employ civil servants such as executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and some non-departmental public bodies. Our definition also covers staff of the three Whitehall-based territorial offices that manage the UK’s relationship with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also include the civil servants employed by the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland in our overall numbers, but not the staff of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which is administratively distinct.^{*} We do not include the UK’s diplomatic service in our analysis since it too is administratively separate from the Home Civil Service.

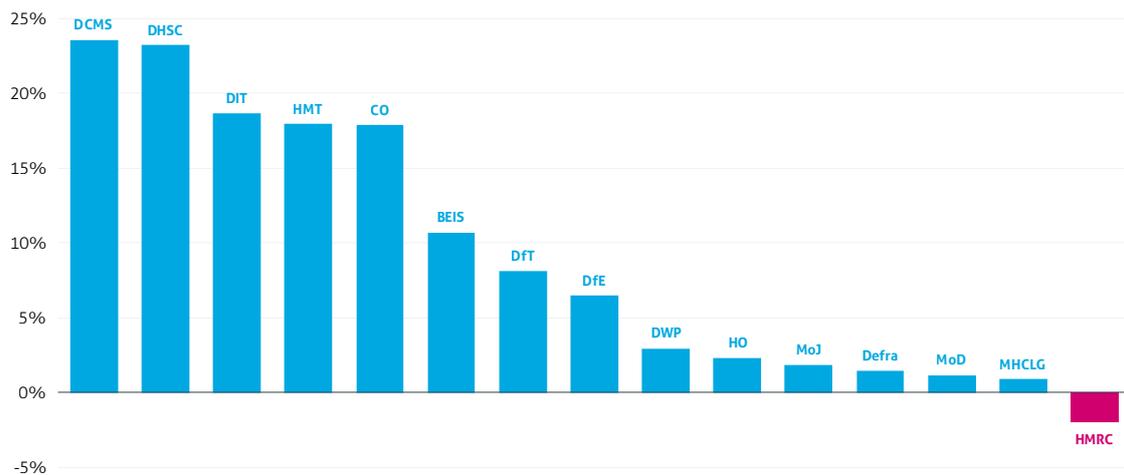
Coronavirus was one of the main reasons for rising staff numbers during 2020. The civil service held three intensive recruitment ‘sprints’ – discussed in greater detail below – throughout the year, in addition to ongoing recruitment campaigns.

But this growth was also part of a longer-term increase since the 2016 EU referendum. One study by the National Audit Office (NAO) found that, in the aftermath of the referendum, the May government identified more than 310 Brexit-related workstreams across all departments.² Driven by this greater workload, the civil service has been steadily growing since the third quarter of 2016. This has reversed nearly half (45%) of the staffing cuts made between 2010 and 2016 – though the civil servants hired in the past four years have tended to be more senior than those let go before 2016. This has increased the number of civil servants in policy roles directly advising ministers but is likely to contribute to an increase in the civil service’s pay bill.

The post-referendum growth in staff meant that by spring 2020, when coronavirus work intensified, the civil service already had higher staffing levels than at key Brexit crunch points.

* Workers in the broader public sector, such as doctors, teachers, police, local government officials, or members of the armed forces, are not classed as civil servants and are therefore not included in our analysis. For detail on how we classify and count the staff of government agencies, see Methodology.

Figure 3.2 Percentage change in staff numbers by department, December 2019 to September 2020



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, public sector employment data (Table 9), Q4 2019–Q3 2020. 'Department' includes public bodies that are directly line-managed by the department. FCDO excluded owing to 2020 FCO/DfID merger. This figure does not take into account reclassification of staff from one department to another, such as the transfer of around 1,200 staff from DExEU and the MoD to CO during 2020.

Since the end of 2019, every department except HMRC has seen staff levels rise. Many of these departments were affected by coronavirus. For example, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), which has played a key role in the government's response to the health crisis, gained almost 400 staff in the first three quarters of 2020 – an increase of 23%. Most of these new staff, some 320, joined DHSC in the three months from June 2020, as the department worked to develop NHS Test and Trace. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, a much larger department to begin with) added 2,040 staff (3%) between December 2019 and September 2020, the vast majority of whom joined in the six months from March 2020. This is likely due to the expansion of Universal Credit and accompanying large rises in the number of applicants as the economic impact of the lockdown became more keenly felt. The Treasury, which similarly has had to respond to a coronavirus-addled economy, grew by 18% in the first three quarters of 2020.

Growth in other departments reflects other government priorities. For example, departments with key Brexit responsibilities added staff over 2020, as the UK prepared for the end of the transition period in January 2021. The Department for International Trade (DIT) grew by 19% in the first three quarters of 2020, as it worked to 'roll over' (continue as UK trade agreements) existing EU trade agreements with nations such as Japan and Canada. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), in large part responsible for Brexit business preparations, as well as the major COP26 UN climate conference the UK is set to host in late 2021, grew by 11%.*

* In January 2021, the government announced that the business secretary, and president of COP26, Alok Sharma, would leave his role at BEIS to focus full-time on the COP26 summit.

Brexit helped the civil service be better prepared for coronavirus

As of April 2020, around 1,300 civil servants had been 'surged' – rapidly redeployed between departments – to deal with coronavirus, though this is only a fraction of the thousands who have worked on the pandemic response over the past year, and this figure has gone up since. The pandemic added to the civil service's workload, coming on top of preparations for the end of the Brexit transition period in January 2021. But the post-2016 recruitment drive and the experience of its no-deal planning in 2019 meant that it was in better shape to deal with coronavirus than it might otherwise have been, and the civil service has demonstrated "real innovation" in managing both concurrently.³

When the pandemic hit the UK in early 2020, the civil service was already at its largest since 2016. It also had recent experience of rapidly redeploying officials to work on emergency planning – as twice in 2019 no-deal contingency plans were stepped up amid political drama in Westminster. In October 2019 alone, around 1,500 civil servants were redeployed,⁴ made easier by newly embedded systems, including a 'hub' in the Cabinet Office bringing together departments whose work was more- and less-affected by Brexit to share staff.

This helped the civil service to quickly identify teams suitable for redeployment within and between departments when the pandemic struck. For example, it quickly transferred staff from the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU, wound up at the end of January 2020) to DHSC. Other staff whose work had been delayed due to coronavirus – such as those working on COP26, delayed to 2021 – were also moved.

Even before coronavirus struck, though, the hub in the Cabinet Office had already begun to pursue a new approach to resourcing that relied less on simply moving staff between departments. When coronavirus hit, affecting almost every aspect of government, even more so than Brexit, the civil service rapidly realised that trying to partner more- and less-affected departments would not work. Instead, Civil Service Human Resources (CSHR) worked to encourage departments to internally 'surge' their staff, as well as move them into other departments. The civil service adopted other strategies to boost capacity, including recruitment and partnerships with furloughed workers in the private sector (the Industry Partnering Voluntary Scheme).

Brexit also boosted certain skills in the civil service that proved helpful in coronavirus response. The skills needed for no-deal preparation – analysis, project management, policy – were also key to dealing with coronavirus. In some cases, no-deal plans even ended up being directly applicable to coronavirus, such as those addressing mass unemployment. Former secretary of state for work and pensions Amber Rudd said that:

"As part of no-deal preparations under Boris, my no-deal preparations were that there was going to be mass unemployment... So fortunately, the DWP was completely ready for Covid... we kept all the staff there to deal with the rise in unemployment that we were expecting."⁵

While the civil service drew on the staff and skills readily available among its workforce, officials also boosted their recruitment efforts. This also involved an innovative approach. Recruitment took place throughout 2020, including through three major recruitment 'sprints' based on the government's priorities: one for test and trace, one for the Brexit transition, and one in preparation for winter and coronavirus.

Recruitment campaigns also sought more senior civil servants than usual. For example, one round looked for 78 senior civil servants, while another aimed for 700 senior policy advisers at the middle-management Grade 7 and HEO level.*

All these elements displayed the best of the civil service, namely its ability to deal with multiple major challenges. Core aspects of government work continued, even as civil servants quickly designed new policies and ways to administer them. The furlough scheme, for example, went from announcement to operation within just 30 days.⁶ But the stresses on the civil service in 2020 also highlighted areas of concern, chief among them a lack of necessary skills such as science and digital, reinforcing the government’s desire for reform.

The civil service could use its existing skills more effectively

Figure 3.3 Professions of civil servants (FTE), 31 March 2020



Civil service

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, annual civil service statistics, 2020. DDaT = Digital, Data and Technology profession.

Improving **civil service skills** is a key part of the Johnson government’s reform agenda. Even before the pandemic, the prime minister’s then chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, called for reform of the civil service, albeit in an unconventional manner, inviting applications from “weirdos and misfits with odd skills” to ensure “genuine cognitive diversity”.⁷ In June 2020, Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove further noted that successive governments have “neglected to ensure the Civil Service has all the basic skills required to serve Government, and our citizens, well”.⁸

While Cummings has since left government, ministers have argued the experience of coronavirus proved his core point about the need to improve the civil service’s skills and capability – notably to improve delivery. Both ministers and officials pointed to skills or capacity gaps in mathematics and statistics, procurement, science and engineering, and expertise in certain policy areas.^{9,10,11}

In response to these perceived gaps, the government has relied on consultants and contractors for work on both its Brexit and pandemic responses, among other areas. More than £175 million has been spent on contractors and around 90 consultancies and companies during the pandemic.¹² The Cabinet Office and DHSC made particular use of consultants in areas such as test and trace, and personal protective equipment

* For more information on civil service grades, see our explainer: www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/grade-structures-civil-service

(PPE) procurement. Speaking about Brexit, the director general of public spending at the Treasury, Cat Little, said: "It is fair to say that we have used consultants as substitutes for civil servants where we did not have the capacity or skills in some areas."¹³ Using consultants or temporary staff enables the civil service to access specialist skills it does not need to hold in-house on a permanent basis. But this comes at a cost: in 2016 the National Audit Office (NAO) found that doing so can cost the civil service twice as much as using its own staff.¹⁴

The civil service has begun to address this, although there is little publicly available information on the specific plans being put in place. In 2020, a Civil Service Modernisation and Reform team, which reports directly to the permanent secretary of the Cabinet Office and civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm, was established. The government has also introduced reforms to improve specialist skills, including policy making, and set up a new Government Skills and Curriculum Unit within the Cabinet Office.

This is not the first time that the civil service has tried to improve its skills. In particular, since 2013 it sought to professionalise the way that it conducts key 'functions' such as negotiating and managing government contracts.* Although there is little public information about the progress of these reforms, the efforts are reported to have helped the civil service to deal with Brexit and coronavirus in the past year.¹⁵ For example, the commercial function helped procure ventilators for the NHS at short notice via its Ventilator Challenge programme in early March (although it received criticism for buying some ineffective ventilators).^{16,17} The functions also co-ordinated recruitment across departments for roles including policy and project management, and helped develop 'hubs' to manage staff redeployment.^{18,19,20}

Government also overhauled and centralised its communications. It announced in July that departmental communication teams would be cut to 30 employees and managed by the Cabinet Office rather than by individual departments. These changes are unlikely to take effect before April 2021.²¹ Communications professionals will be functionally managed by a central organisation within the Cabinet Office, similarly to how the Government Commercial Organisation employs senior commercial professionals at Grade 7 and above across government.²² While this could be an effective way of deploying experts where they are most needed, by ceding greater control of communications to No.10 departmental press officers may find they are less able to maintain relationships with important external partners.²³

Fundamentally, though, the civil service is not currently using the skills it already has effectively. On paper, it is not short of experts in many of the areas where ministers said capability was lacking. There are more than 12,000 civil servants in science and engineering jobs, more than 5,000 in analytical posts and 4,800 commercial staff. Yet it is unclear whether officials with professional or specialist qualifications are deployed to the roles where their skills are most effective. This is not a new problem. A 2012 survey of civil service scientists and engineers revealed that only around a third (37%) of respondents worked primarily in science and engineering roles, and that around 40% felt their skills were underutilised or undervalued.²⁴

* Functions complement – and overlap with – the civil service's existing 'professions', but there are some differences between the two. Professions focus on people and *skills*, bringing together officials with similar expertise or specific skills, such as veterinarians. Functions are focused on *activities* that occur across departments, such as commercial or project delivery.

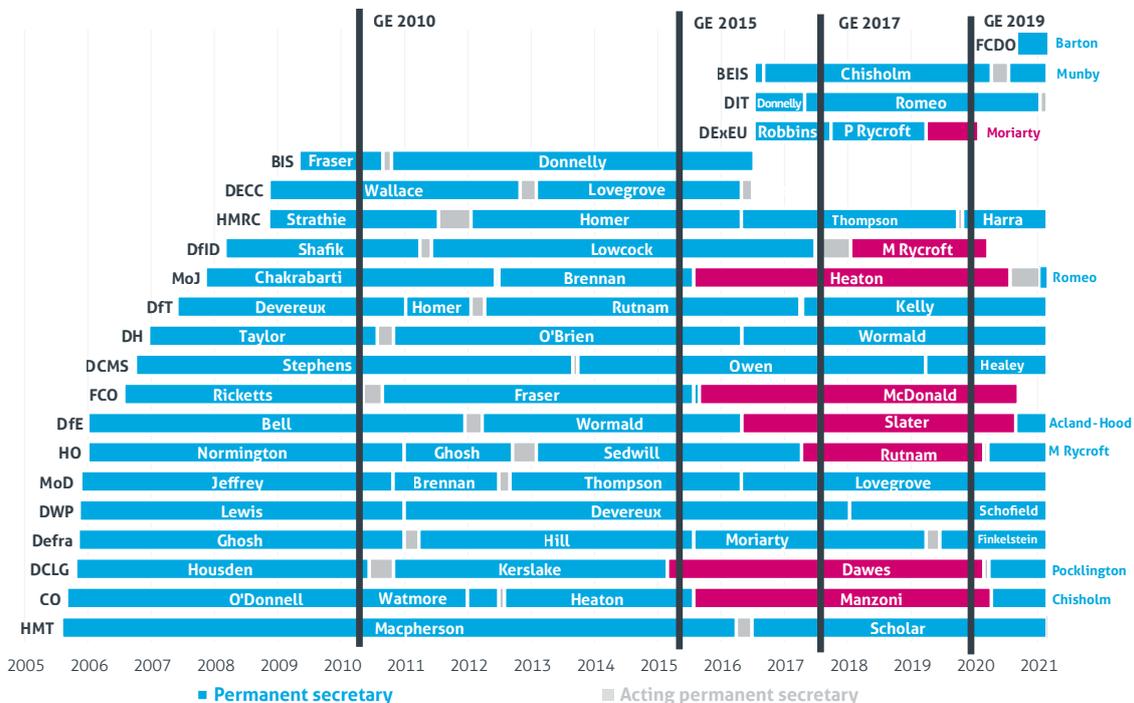
At least some of these issues stem from poor, or poor use of, data. The government often lacks the data it needs to effectively manage and use its staff – it does not, for example, know what profession a quarter of civil servants belong to (up from 10% last year).^{*} Where this data is available, it is of varying quality and it is unclear to what extent the civil service is using it to inform detailed future workforce planning.^{25,26}

The civil service does not systematically collect the data it needs to redeploy staff with the right skills in specific roles, for example in a crisis. Instead, the civil service’s data on professions relies on the role description and staff self-identification rather than the actual qualifications and skills of the official in post. Only two of the civil service’s specialisms – commercial and project delivery – have begun collecting information on individual staff’s skills and proficiency. The government’s chief people officer has said that in the next few years the civil service will find ways to “identify the skills that an individual civil servant carries with them, so that we can know where they can be best deployed”.²⁷

This government’s desire to improve civil service skills is welcome, as is the £30m funding for the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) pledged at the 2020 spending review to “reform project delivery capability across government”.²⁸ But the civil service should not lose sight of the fundamentals, and there are changes it could make right away. Better data, before any spending pledges or reform agendas, will help it deploy its workforce more effectively.

Ambitious civil service reform plans were overshadowed by permanent secretary dismissals and resignations

Figure 3.4 Permanent secretaries, May 2005 to January 2021 (those who left or changed roles in 2020 highlighted)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of GOV.UK, permanent secretary appointments, 2005 to 2021.

* This is partly because DWP did not submit this data to the Office for National Statistics and was excluded from government’s analysis.

In the past year, eight departmental [permanent secretaries](#) left or changed roles – as did the head of the Government Legal Department, the [cabinet secretary](#) and the directors of MI5 and MI6. Early on under a new government, some turnover of permanent secretaries is to be expected. For example, new prime ministers will often make changes to the structures of government, as seen with the abolition of DExEU in January 2020 and the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in September. These changes led to three permanent secretaries leaving government or moving departments.

Turnover can also occur to encourage fresh thinking in departments. In 2014, reforms made by Francis Maude meant that permanent secretary contracts had to be renewed after five years. Ministers under Boris Johnson, who became prime minister five years later, in 2019, have tended not to renew contracts, perhaps as a way of speeding up turnover (although the recent re-appointment of Sir Tom Scholar at the Treasury suggests that this may be changing).

Over the past year several departures have related to tensions between ministers and civil servants. One exit stemmed from concerns about ministerial behaviour, when Philip Rutnam resigned from the Home Office and decided to pursue a claim for constructive dismissal. Another suggested disagreement with the government's apparent willingness to break international law when non-departmental permanent secretary Sir Jonathan Jones, the head of the Government Legal Department, resigned after the introduction of the Internal Market Bill included provision for the government to breach its legal obligations.* The government also dismissed one permanent secretary, Jonathan Slater, citing a "need for fresh official leadership", following the summer exams fiasco – though the minister involved kept their position.²⁹

Though at times dramatic, these changes have limited effect in practice. Although they have meant departments and ministers need to get used to new senior civil servants, the continuity of staff at director-general level has ensured stability. Our analysis finds that, as of September 2020, in six of the eight departments that lost their permanent secretaries in 2020, directors-general had been in their roles for an average of 28 months. In both the Home Office and Cabinet Office, directors-general had been in their roles for an average of almost three years.** Almost all of the departing permanent secretaries were replaced by experienced civil servants.

More important is whether these changes represent a breakdown of trust between ministers and civil servants. The noise associated with permanent secretary departures has overshadowed much of the government's civil service reform agenda while coronavirus has pulled the government's attention elsewhere. 2021 may be the year that the government sees the benefits of a return to a systematic programme of reform to improve the capability of the civil service.

* The clauses providing for this were later removed from the Internal Market Bill.

** This covers those civil servants at DG and equivalent level for whom data was publicly available. For further details of how this analysis was conducted, see Methodology.

The government aims to relocate civil servants

In the March 2020 budget, the government committed to moving 22,000 civil servants out of London by 2030. As it begins this process in earnest, it should closely consider several demographic and administrative factors that will affect the success of any relocations.

Most senior civil servants remain in London

The civil servants who have the most influence on key government decisions are mainly [based in London](#). Around 75% of civil service economists and 64% of those in policy roles work in the capital.³⁰ Although London represents only 13% of the UK's population, it hosts 68% of senior civil servants (SCS). This is 10 times as many as the next two regions with the highest numbers (Scotland and the South West).³¹ The civil service's corporate functions, such as digital, commercial or finance, are more evenly spread around the country, with only one (communications) having more than 50% of its staff in London.³²

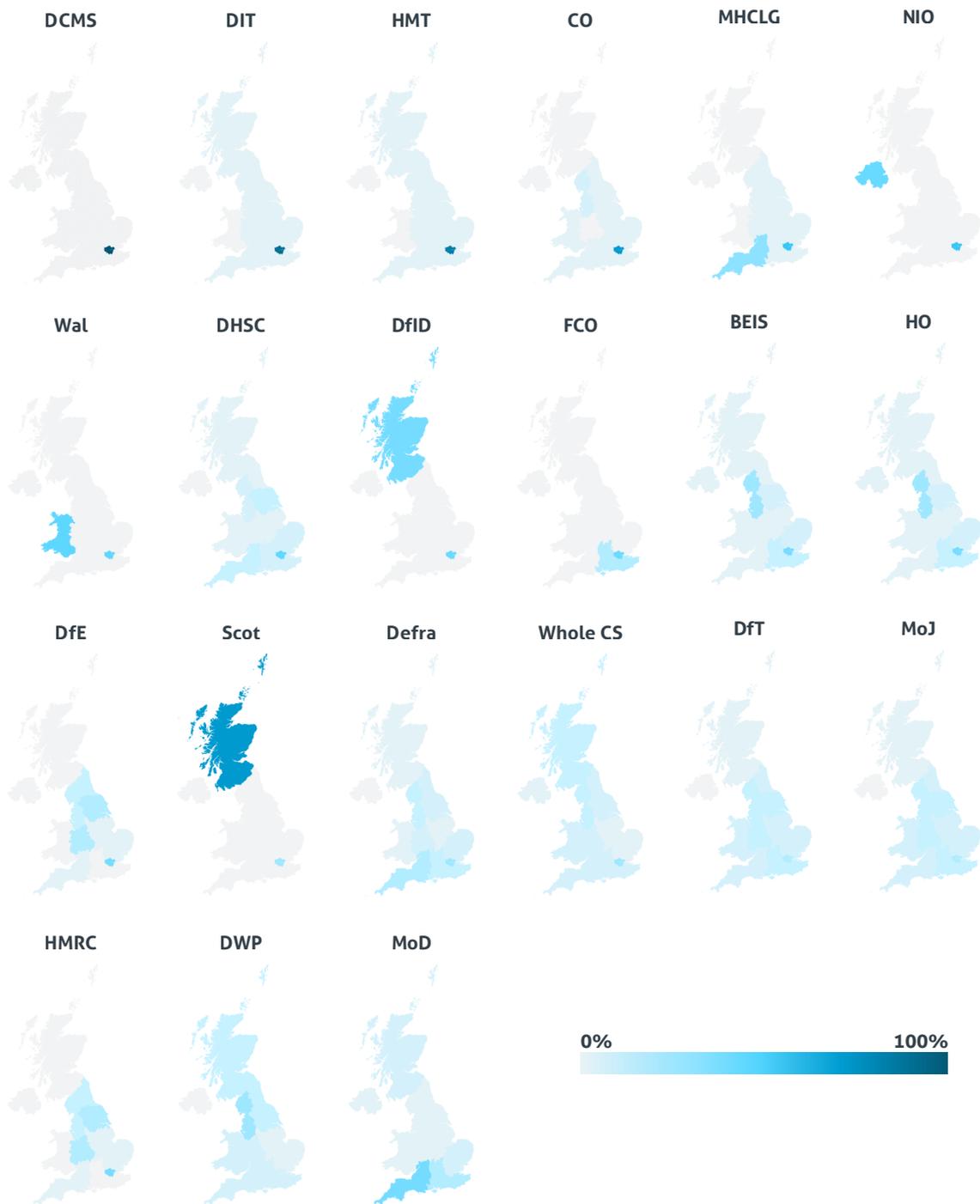
Figure 3.5 **Location of civil servants by grade (percentage of grade in each region, headcount) 2020**

Region	Whole civil service	AO/AA	EO	SEO/HEO	Grades 6 and 7	SCS
London	20%	9%	16%	26%	45%	68%
North West	12%	15%	14%	10%	7%	3%
Scotland	10%	12%	11%	10%	8%	5%
South West	9%	6%	8%	13%	10%	5%
South East	9%	10%	10%	8%	6%	3%
Wales	8%	9%	8%	7%	5%	5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8%	8%	9%	7%	6%	3%
West Midlands	6%	7%	7%	6%	4%	3%
North East	6%	10%	6%	5%	3%	2%
East	5%	6%	5%	4%	2%	2%
East Midlands	5%	6%	5%	4%	2%	1%
Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, civil service statistics, 2020. AO/AA = administrative officer/assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior/higher executive officer; SCS = senior civil servants.

Departments that focus mainly on making policy are largely concentrated in London. For instance, all of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) staff are based in the capital, as is between 75% and 85% of HM Treasury (HMT) and Cabinet Office (CO) staff. In contrast, departments that directly deliver services to the public employ staff all around the UK: only 13% of HMRC staff work in London.

Figure 3.6 Location of civil servants by departmental group, 2020 (percentage of staff in each region, headcount)

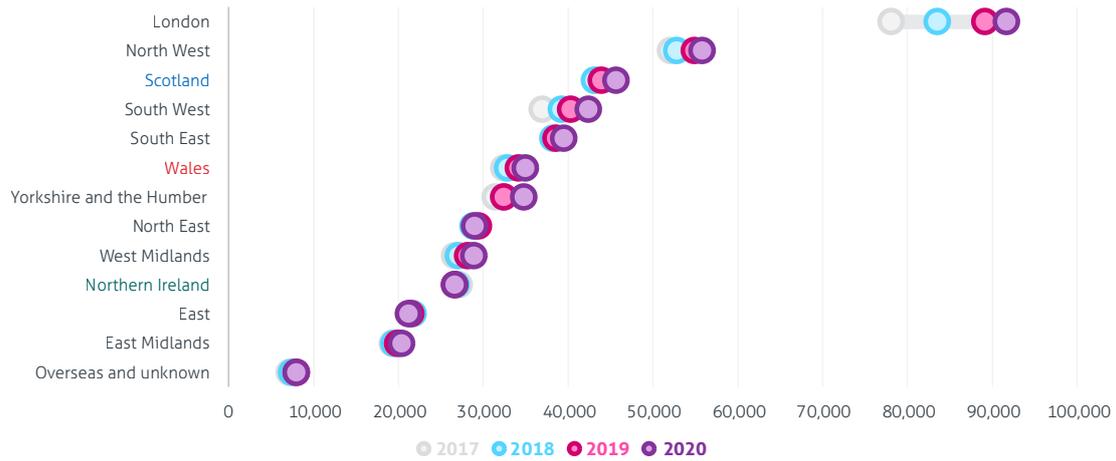


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, civil service statistics, 2020. Directed by highest percentage of staff in London to lowest. Departments include their civil servant staffed public bodies. A list of departmental initials can be found at the back of this report.

Civil service numbers in London are rising less quickly than in previous years. More civil servants are working in other regions. Between 2019 and 2020 the number based in the capital increased by 2,560 – around half of the increase in the two previous years. The number of home civil servants* based in other regions of the UK including the South West, Scotland, the South East has also gone up compared to last year.

* Home civil servants are those who support the UK government, as opposed to those who work for the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Figure 3.7 Number of civil servants in each region, 2017–2020 (headcount)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, annual civil service employment survey, 2017 and 2018. Cabinet Office, civil service statistics, 2019 and 2020; NISRA, Northern Ireland civil service employment statistics, 2017–2020. Northern Ireland includes home civil service and Northern Ireland civil service.

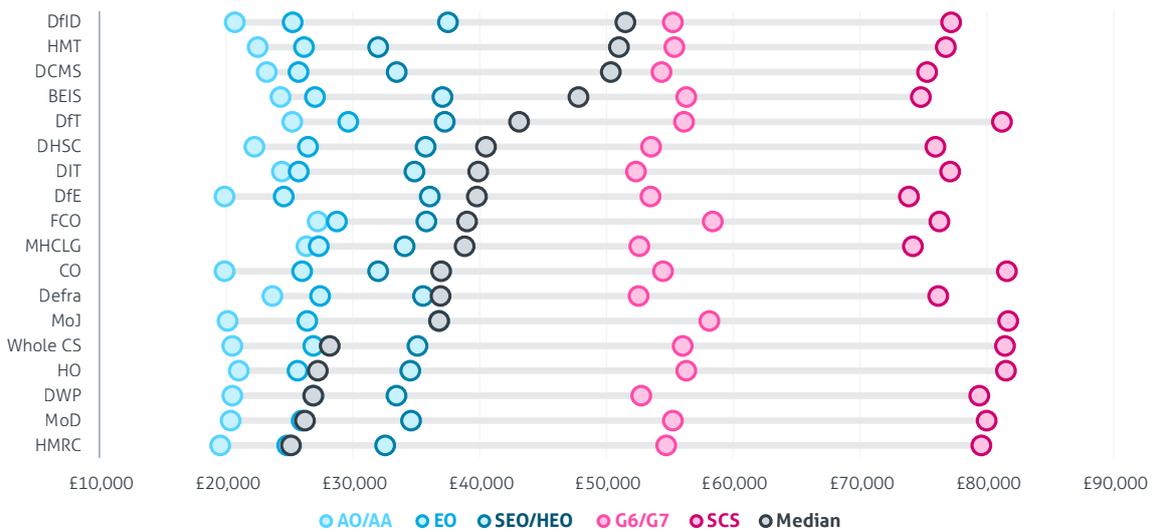
Successive governments since the 1960s have sought to transfer civil servants outside London, but it has proven particularly difficult to move policy experts or senior officials to other locations. When the Office for National Statistics (ONS) moved from London to Newport in Wales around 2005–06, it lost some 90% of its staff. This had an impact on its analytical capability owing to the challenge of recruiting economists with the right expertise in that part of the UK.³³

Johnson has now clearly set out his ambitions to “literally reduce the distance between government and people by relocating government decision-making centres” around the UK.^{34,35} This aim is part of his government’s stated ‘levelling-up’ agenda, which seeks to improve economic performance outside the south-east of England. In the March 2020 budget the chancellor pledged to move 22,000 civil servants out of London by the end of the decade.³⁶

Yet the limited evidence available suggests that moving civil servants will have only a minimal impact on ‘levelling up’. Relocation and devolution are not interchangeable. The benefits of relocation – simply moving offices and officials to new sites around the country – are likely to be limited to relatively small and specific local areas, whereas the devolution of powers to regions of England could lead to more widespread changes.³⁷

Pay is rising across the civil service – especially in some departments

Figure 3.8 Median pay by government department and grade, 2020



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, civil service statistics, 2020.

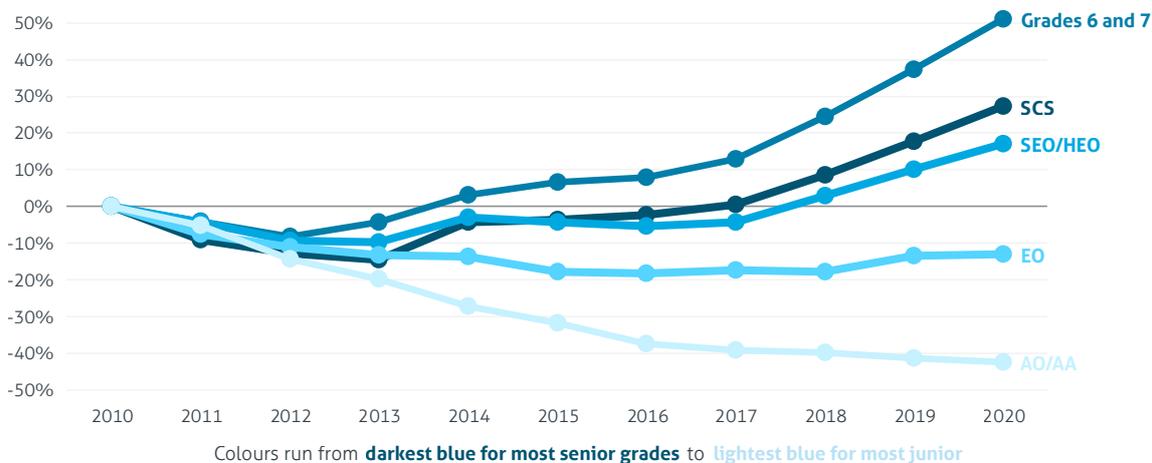
In March 2020, median pay across the whole civil service was £28,180 – an increase of £1,100 (or 4%) from the previous year.* But average salaries have increased by far more in some departments. At the Treasury, median pay rose by more than a third between 2019 and 2020, from £38,000 to £51,000, driven by rising salaries and a greater concentration of staff at the top of the department. In 2019, senior civil servants in the Treasury earned an average of £72,080, and staff at Grades 6/7 £52,240. By 2020, these figures had risen to £76,770 and £55,360 respectively. Salaries at the more junior grades at HMT remained more consistent over the same period.

There is a complicated relationship between civil service pay, grade and location. Departments that focus on policy, rather than delivery, tend to have a higher median wage, reflecting their typically higher proportions of senior staff. This means that departments such as DfID (now merged into the FCDO), the Treasury and DCMS have higher median pay than more delivery-focused departments like HMRC and DWP. But the staff of policy-focused departments, as highlighted above, are more likely to be based in London. As the government goes ahead with plans to relocate 22,000 civil servants outside the capital by 2030, it will have to carefully consider pay and benefits, including pensions – especially if it wants to ensure that more decision-making roles move outside the M25.

* These figures are not adjusted for inflation.

Civil servants are, on average, older and more senior

Figure 3.9 Percentage change in civil servants at each grade, 2010–2020 (headcount, where known)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, annual civil service employment survey, 2010–2020. SCS includes civil servants at equivalent level.

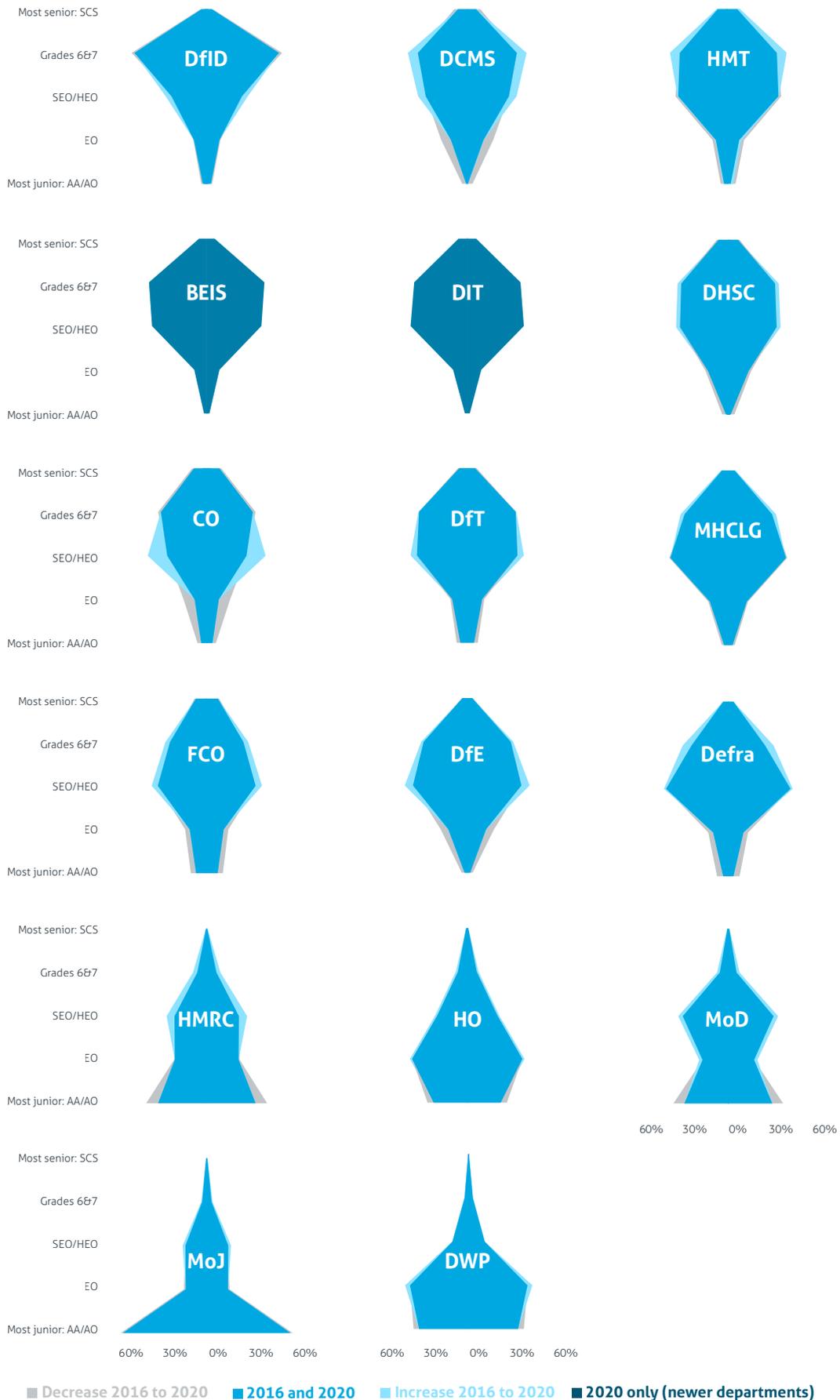
Differences in **grade** – or seniority – and **age** across departments may have an impact on government’s plans for relocating civil servants around the country and for improving skills.

The civil service is becoming more concentrated at senior levels. There are 1,380 more senior civil servants (SCS) or equivalent (military personnel, health professionals and senior diplomats) than in 2010. The number of staff in Grades 6 and 7 – officials below senior civil service level but with significant policy responsibilities – has grown by 50% (18,680) since 2010. This likely contributed to building up the skills of the civil service. It has also likely meant a higher staff pay bill in some departments.

At the same time the number of junior officials has fallen. AO/AA-level staff who work on administrative tasks or operational delivery (for example, processing benefits) make up a third of the civil service workforce (32%), down from nearly half (47%) in 2010.

This changing grade profile reflects wider technological transformation. The civil service needs fewer people in administrative roles as it automates or digitises some back-office processes. Departments are increasingly ‘diamond-shaped’, with fewer junior staff and more civil servants in senior roles.³⁸ If this trend continues, it could result in more civil servants focusing on policy making, with some delivery roles requiring fewer staff.

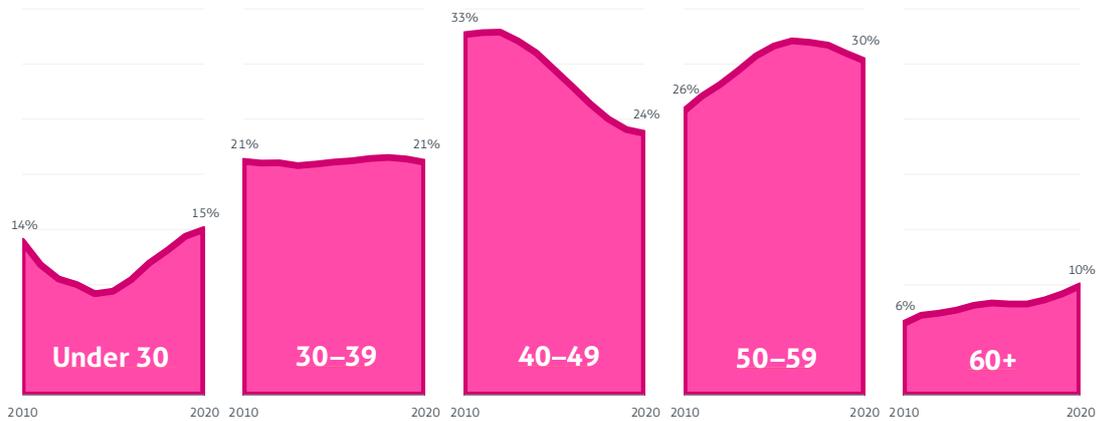
Figure 3.10 Grade composition by department, 2016 to 2020 (percentage of staff at each grade, headcount)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS/Cabinet Office, annual civil service employment survey, 2016–2020. Ordered by percentage of SCS and Grade 6 and 7 civil servants. SCS includes civil servants at equivalent level.

The government will need to carefully consider whether the areas to which it wants to relocate departments or public bodies have workers that can provide the right expertise, sometimes in niche or skilled areas. Past reviews found that it may be easier for the civil service to find and attract both the policy and delivery expertise it needs in large cities with a highly skilled workforce.^{39,40}

Figure 3.11 **Percentage of civil servants in each age group, 2010–2020 (headcount, where known)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, annual civil service employment survey, 2010–2020.

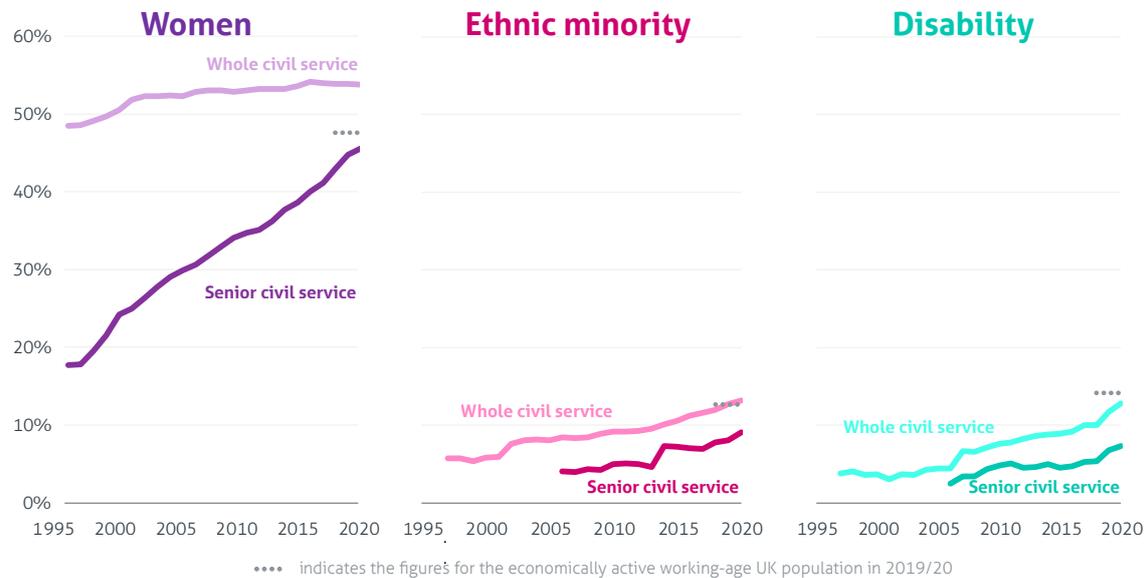
Age affects the skills mix and institutional memory of the civil service

A growing proportion of staff in senior roles has led to the median age of civil servants rising by two years over the past decade. The median civil servant is now 46 years old. At the same time, the number of civil servants below the age of 30 has gone up in the past six years, reversing the impact of civil service recruitment freezes in the early 2010s. The age profile of individual grades has changed; for example, the number of staff under 30 at Grades 6 or 7 has more than doubled between 2010 and 2020.

The age profile of the civil service matters because it can influence both the skills of the workforce and institutional memory. Younger staff are more likely to have digital skills, which can benefit their departments, but naturally lack experience. This can also lead to higher turnover, as some younger civil servants seek to move roles and departments to further their careers. Departments such as the Cabinet Office and DExEU had younger-than-average workforces and lost a quarter and a third of their staff respectively in 2018/19.

The civil service is increasingly diverse – but has more work to do to reflect the UK population

Figure 3.12 Diversity in the civil service, 1997 to 2020 (headcount, where known)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, annual civil service employment survey, 1997–2018; Cabinet Office, SCS database 1996–2006; Cabinet Office, civil service statistics, 2020; ONS, labour force survey: economically active total population and female population (UK, aged 16–64, thousands); ONS, labour market overview, UK (Table A08: Economic activity of people with disabilities aged 16–64: levels, UK, GSS standard levels (people) and Table A09: Labour market status: economically active by ethnicity: People (not seasonally adjusted)), November 2020. The population benchmarks were calculated by dividing the averages from the last four quarters, namely 2019 Q4 to 2020 Q3 – the latest published data at the time of writing – to seasonally adjust the data.

In the past year, there has been a renewed focus on the diversity and inclusivity of many major institutions. Several civil service workforce plans, many of which began under the late cabinet secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, culminated in 2020. These included plans to increase diversity and to ensure “a brilliant civil service that helps to keep the United Kingdom prosperous and secure”.⁴¹

On three key measures of diversity – [gender balance](#), [ethnicity](#) and [disability](#) – the civil service has made considerable progress. By March 2020, 13.2% of civil servants who declared their ethnicity identified as Black, Asian, or minority ethnic. This is higher than the proportion of the economically active UK population that comes from an ethnic minority (12.8%), and is a considerable improvement on a decade ago when the figure was fewer than one in ten. Some 12.8% of civil servants identify as having a disability, compared to just 7.6% a decade ago and 10% in 2018 – though this remains below the proportion of disabled people in the working-age population. More than half of civil servants are women, well above the proportion of women in the working-age population; this has remained relatively constant over the past decade.

Despite these improvements across the civil service, women, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and civil servants with a disability remain under-represented at the most senior levels – where decisions are made. Generally, the proportion of civil servants with each of these characteristics decreases at every step up in grade. While 12.8% of staff at the most junior AO/AA grades are from ethnic minorities, the figure drops to 9.3% at SCS level. Similarly, the proportion of civil servants with a disability at SCS level is three percentage points below what it is across the whole civil service.

And the 57% of female AO/AA staff is more than 10 percentage points above the 46% at SCS level.

Although the civil service has improved over the past decade, there is more to be done – particularly at the most senior levels. Alex Chisholm, chief operating officer of the civil service, has said: “We are hugely better than we were when I first joined the civil service, a long time ago, but we are not quite as good as we would like to be, particularly in the more senior ranks. That is where we need to finish the job.”⁴²

The civil service can also do more to improve the socio-economic diversity of its workforce. Data on the social and economic background of civil servants – for example, whether they were educated in state or private schools – is not published consistently over time. The data that is available indicates that civil servants, particularly in more senior roles, are disproportionately likely to have been privately educated. A Freedom of Information (Fol) request made in January 2021 showed that, in the year to January 2019, privately educated applicants to the Civil Service Fast Stream – a pipeline for senior roles – had a success rate of 7%, compared to just 3% among applicants from state comprehensives.⁴³ Michael Gove, the minister for the Cabinet Office (and a former education secretary), has previously called for the publication of this data. This is a welcome sign that ministers and civil servants are seeking to address the issue, though progress is slow.

Ministers and officials are now seeking to improve another aspect of diversity, namely what Cummings called “cognitive diversity”⁴⁴ – or the range of skills and perspectives that civil servants have. In his Ditchley lecture in 2020, Gove also emphasised the importance of a “diversity of views”. But it is important that their plans for this continue to embrace all forms of diversity – and that the civil service considers how they may sometimes come into tension. For example, relocating departments outside London may mean a less ethnically diverse population to draw on – though cheaper living costs may help to encourage better socio-economic diversity. Thinking through these tensions will help “to get a civil service that looks, feels and operates geographically more like the country it serves”.⁴⁵

Coronavirus and Brexit are not the only challenges facing civil servants in 2021

Managing both coronavirus and Brexit has not been easy for the civil service. Alex Chisholm noted that civil servants have had to

“pivot towards being able to deal with the pandemic. In almost all cases they were working from home during that time as well, adjusting to remote working to deal with a whole new and initially poorly understood set of challenges in relation to the pandemic, without losing sight of the need to be ready for EU transition at the end of the year.”⁴⁶

Senior civil servants recognise that many officials worked evenings and weekends to quickly set up new systems in response to coronavirus, and that the spring of 2020 in particular was a “very intense period”.⁴⁷ The FDA, the union representing many civil servants, found in a survey of their members that 69% have been working longer hours while working from home.⁴⁸ With increasing coronavirus infections and deaths in early 2021, workloads – and hours – are likely to remain high.

This places considerable strain on civil servants, who may have cycled between working on Brexit and coronavirus – both intensive and difficult projects – over the past year. Half (51%) of those responding to the FDA’s survey reported that their mental wellbeing has deteriorated.⁴⁹ Departments have dealt with this by surveying and consulting staff to understand the problems they face.⁵⁰ At the same time, working on these kinds of major national challenges can help foster a sense of purpose, of ‘rallying round the flag’, as well as achievement. Anecdotally, morale has been “quite high”, with Chisholm emphasising the “terrific sense of pride and achievement felt by many civil servants”.⁵¹

Looking ahead

As Chisholm has said, dealing with coronavirus – and Brexit – is “a marathon, not a sprint”. The roll-out of coronavirus vaccines offers the hope of an end to the pandemic, though brings with it a huge logistical challenge. And while the trade deal with the EU – signed on Christmas Eve and agreed to by parliament, albeit with little scrutiny, shortly before the new year – gives officials some greater certainty about the future, its effects will continue to be felt. In 2021, ministers may be inclined to turn their attention to delivering on their manifesto commitments, but coronavirus and Brexit will remain key issues for the foreseeable future. The civil service – which has already been asked to deliver major changes to health, economic and trade policy, as well as set up new systems, often at pace – is unlikely to see its workload decrease.



4 Digital

Digital technology made it possible for all parts of government to respond more effectively to the coronavirus crisis. In 2020, government's investment in people with digital skills, technology platforms and commercial relationships – often over many years – paid off. Many new services were delivered in record time and the work of central government continued with only some minor snags. But there were also several high-profile failures, from abortive first attempts at a contact-tracing app to flawed school exams algorithms, which undermined this progress.

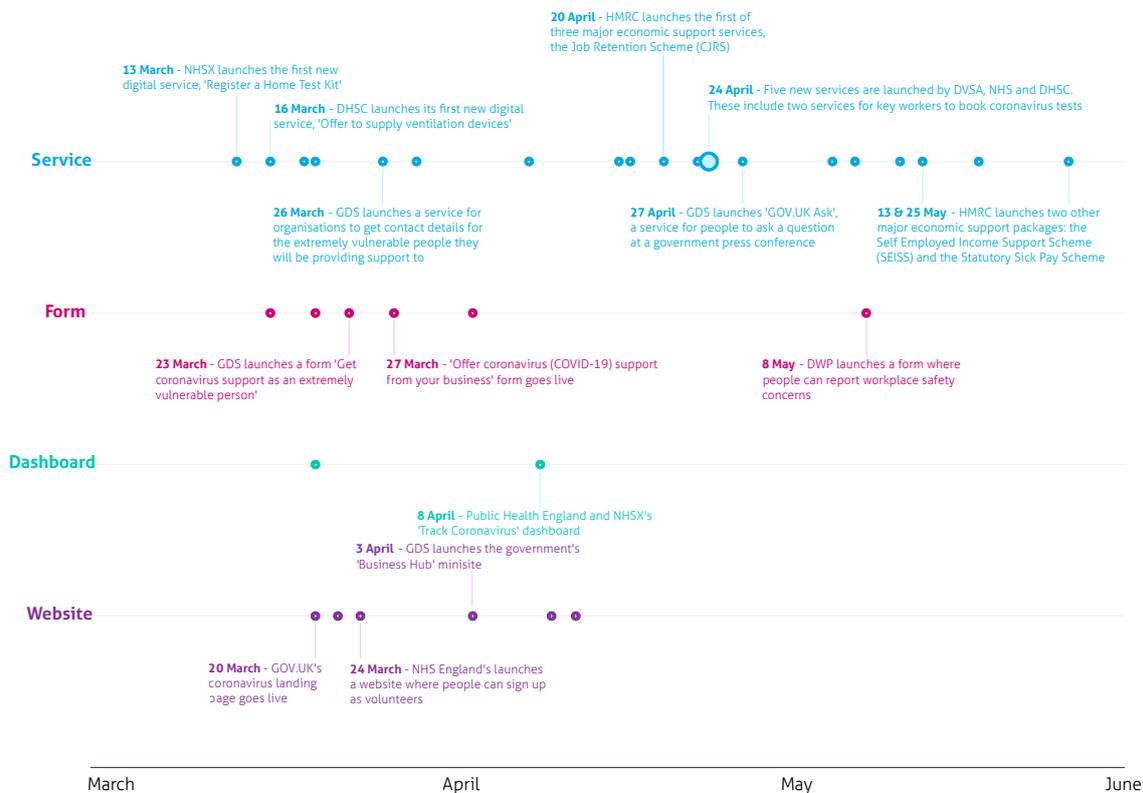
The government struggled when it tried to use digital technology to do new and untested things. The failures of both the contact-tracing app and exam algorithm stemmed from an attempt to solve a problem using a preferred technology as a starting point, rather than actually working from the problem and considering how best to use technology to solve it.

More and better use of digital technology will be vital if the government is to manage the problems it will face in 2021. To do this it needs to not just sustain but increase the investment it has made in people, platforms and relationships. The government has given this initiative a boost with the appointment of a new chief executive for the Government Digital Service (GDS), and by establishing a the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO). It will need to quickly and carefully ensure that this new body finds its place. CDDO will draw together many strands of digital transformation across government but must avoid adding confusion by being yet another body with responsibilities for digital.

Departments must learn from what went well, and what did not, during the crisis in 2020. If the government continues to make serious mistakes in its use of data and technology, it will squander public trust and with it the opportunity to benefit from these new tools and techniques. Above all, ministers need to recognise that while technology can deliver 'quick wins', these successes are built on years of careful work, often behind the scenes. The pandemic has shown that technology on its own, while valuable, is no panacea for all of government problems. Departments need to make thoughtful, long-term investments in the skills and platforms that will enable better use of it in future.

Digital government supported a more effective response to coronavirus

Figure 4.1 Timeline of new digital services in the first three months of the Covid crisis



Source: Institute for Government analysis of list of new digital services provided by the Government Digital Service. A list of departmental initialisms is found at the end of this report.

The government used [digital technology](#) well early in the crisis to manage emerging, often novel challenges.¹ The first new service – to register a home Covid testing kit – was launched by NHSX* on 13 March and others rapidly followed. Most of these new digital public services are transactional; they have made it easier for people and businesses to exchange information, money or permissions with government, for example to request information about customers who might be clinically vulnerable.

The most significant of these new online services were HMRC's trio of economic support schemes: the [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#) (CJRS, or 'furlough'), the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and the Statutory Sick Pay Scheme (SSPS). These were built within a matter of weeks and launched smoothly – between March and December 2020, they managed payments worth more than £69.4 billion.²

GOV.UK is the unified online domain for the UK government. Its overarching architecture and built-in tools are maintained by GDS, while individual departments and public bodies are responsible for the actual content on the site. GDS is a unit of over 750 people within the Cabinet Office, and is responsible for leading the digital transformation of government. It does this through its stewardship of the digital data and technology (DDaT) profession, by setting standards for government technological innovation and its use of data, and by providing common platforms, services,

* NHSX is a unit within government that is responsible for leading the digital transformation programme for healthcare. NHS Digital is a separate body responsible for building and maintaining the technological infrastructure that the NHS relies on to operate day to day. It also oversees the management and publication of NHS data.

components and tools which organisations across government can use to transform their operations.³ Increasingly other units in government are leading on the transformation that follows the use of other, novel types of digital technology. These include Government Business Services, which is leading on the [automation](#) of many back-office functions, and the Office for AI, which helps guide the government's use of 'intelligent computing'.

During the crisis, organisations across government have built new websites and hub pages within GOV.UK to help people find information more easily and developed web-based dashboards which provided real-time information to both officials and the public.

By the end of May the government had launched 69 new 'services', a broad term which includes the CJRS and the information dashboards.⁴ Early versions of many services, such as the public-facing coronavirus dashboard, were very limited and were improved upon over the following months. The dashboard began with just national case numbers; it now provides an interactive map, postcode search and more in-depth data. Most of these new services had narrow functions that met new and specific needs. For example GOV.UK Ask, a service that allows people to submit questions for ministers during press conferences.⁵ Further services, including many at more local levels relating to test and trace programmes, launched over the summer.

Making government digital had many advantages during the crisis. New services could be built quickly and could 'scale up' more easily, and digital services are typically cheaper to administer than non-digital alternatives.⁶ These benefits were magnified during the crisis by the fact that the majority of the population were physically isolated for periods and were unable to access more traditional, face-to-face services. But making a success of [digital government](#) required skilled people, access to tools and other resources, and a culture that promotes innovation and design.⁷

The government was able to achieve what it did during the crisis because of its growing pool of digital experts that comprise the DDaT profession within government, assembled in the years preceding it.⁸ This group is a mix of programmers, designers, developers, data analysts, data scientists and data engineers, user researchers, security experts and others.⁹ These civil servants are mostly clustered in a few large departments – HMRC, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Home Office (HO) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in particular, which have the capability to do more ambitious things with digital technology.

HMRC and DWP demonstrated their relative strength – above and beyond their sheer size as departments – in the way that they were able to move quickly and successfully deliver new or improved digital services in response to the crisis.¹⁰ But smaller organisations, for example the Royal Voluntary Service, were able to deliver new digital solutions too, in part thanks to tools and standards provided by the GDS.

The government's digital platforms have come into their own during the coronavirus response

A set of common tools and standards, developed by GDS, made it easier for organisations at every level of government, from central departments to local authorities, to respond to the crisis more quickly and effectively.¹¹ Since its establishment in December 2011 GDS has developed a set of standard digital components and processes that it calls 'Government as a Platform'. These include the overarching architecture of the GOV.UK site, tools that make it easy to build online forms, and standards that guide digital design. Government as a Platform also includes components that add specific functions to other services, in particular Notify (automated messaging), Pay (payment handling) and Verify (identity assurance).

Figure 4.2 **GOV.UK Verify, new registrations (weekly), January 2018 to December 2020**

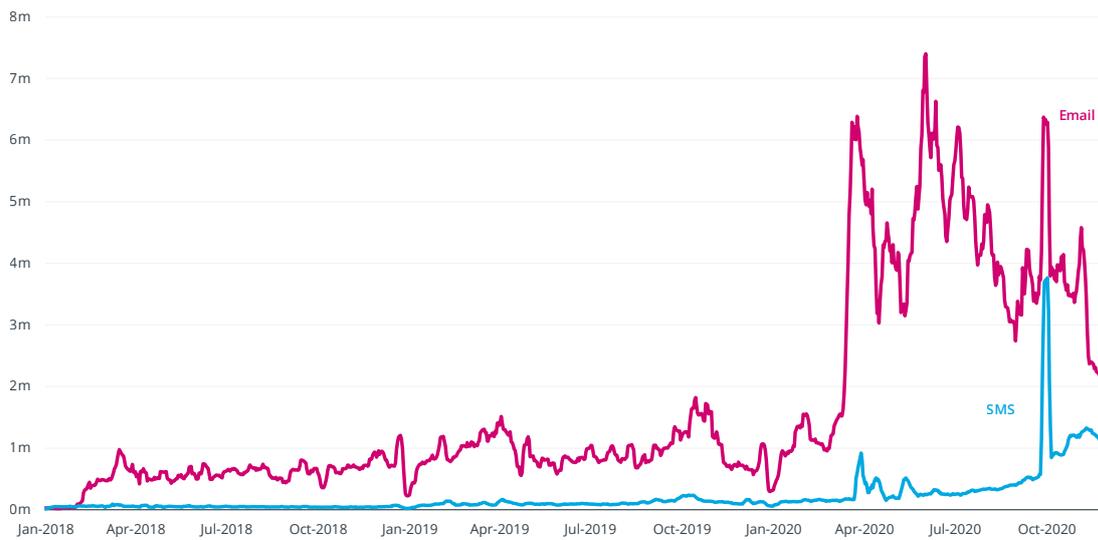


Source: IfG analysis of service data from the GOV.UK Verify performance dashboard.

These components have had a mixed track record but have really shown their value during the crisis. In the past, Verify struggled to live up to its objective of being the single identity assurance system for the whole of government. Its user base has grown slowly over time, but well below the projections that informed its original business case. Yet during the crisis it was able to absorb the shock of a sudden surge of new registrants for Universal Credit, critical at a time when so many people suddenly found themselves out of work.^{12,13} Over the first 11 weeks of 2020 it had an average of 40,500 new sign-ups per week – slightly below the average for 2019. In the week of 16 March – as the economy began to shut down in advance of the national lockdown – this surged to 118,000, and then around 160,000 for each of the next two weeks.

Notify has been a more consistent success story. It allows public sector organisations to send automated messages using their own digital services. These services vary widely and include reminders from sources as varied as, for example, Oxfordshire County Council's libraries and Transport for London's 'Dial a Ride' service. In February 2020 it was a component in 1,785 different services being provided by 521 different organisations. During the crisis the number of services using Notify more than doubled: by the end of November 2020 almost 900 government organisations were using Notify as a key component in almost 3,700 different digital services.¹⁴

Figure 4.3 Volume of messages sent using GOV.UK Notify (seven-day rolling average), January 2018 to December 2020



Source: IfG analysis of service data from the GOV.UK Notify performance dashboard.

Many of these were directly related to the pandemic – around one in ten of those created since the start of March 2020.* The majority of these services (74%) belong to councils or health care providers, in particular those supporting vulnerable people or local Test and Trace efforts. As these services came online the volume of messages sent using the system shot up to unprecedented levels. As such Notify played a valuable role in helping parts of government (and the wider public sector) with less digital capability than major departments reach the public in support of their pandemic responses.**

The common components, like Verify and Notify, created by GDS reduce duplication of effort and help to ensure a common standard for user-facing aspects of services. But during the crisis the government has also procured essential services, like server capacity and payment processing infrastructure, from the private sector. This helped, for example, DWP keep Universal Credit running despite a drastic surge in demand and HMRC to ensure its trio of new services would cope with similarly high levels of use.¹⁵

* Of the 1,899 services created between 1 March and 1 December 2020, 206 include one of the following terms in their name in a way that is clearly linked to the crisis response: COVID, coronavirus, C-19, C19, CV19, vulnerable, test, vaccine, shielding, PPE, swab, contact, trace, tracking or lockdown.

** Currently around 41% of all services using Notify are owned and operated by local authorities. A further 15.5% of these services are provided by small organisations and institutions working at the local level, such as schools, colleges, GP clinics, and fire services.

Government found success using technology to keep courts, and outpatients and GP clinics running

The crisis accelerated many transformation efforts across the wider public services landscape.* The experience of the crisis shows that there are common benefits and challenges that every part of government faces when [using technology to transform](#) its activities.

Across the public sector, organisations needed technology to help ensure continuity. There were notable successes. Courts in England and Wales have digitised a range of their functions and services recently. These include making divorce or probate applications, paying fines, and submitting tax or benefits appeals.¹⁶ At the end of April 2020 HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) started rolling-out new video conferencing tools to enable virtual court hearings and other proceedings.¹⁷ Small-scale pilots had been run previously in 2019, but only around a third of courtrooms were a part of this.¹⁸ In late March and through April, while the total number of hearings fell substantially, this existing technology was used to facilitate up to 90% of the hearings that did still happen.¹⁹

Given the urgent need for a solution, HMCTS chose to procure software – Cloud Video Platform (CVP) – rather than building its own.²⁰ This decision reflects the complexity of building a system that met HMCTS’s security requirements, especially in such a short space of time. HMCTS started deploying this technology in late April, initially aiming to get it into 48 of 77 crown courts and 60 of 323 magistrates courts in England and Wales.²¹ By 1 July it was being used in 60 crown courts, having been used for over 3,600 hearings,²² and 93 magistrates courts.

Substantial concerns have been raised about virtual proceedings, in particular in criminal courts, including issues of fairness while using technology, the difficulty of assessing the credibility of witnesses over a video link, and the fact that their use in proceedings that involve juries has been more challenging.^{23,24,25} For routine administrative hearings, the overall reaction to this use of technology to enable courts has been more positive.²⁶ The benefits, many of which were discussed prior to the pandemic,²⁷ include reduced costs, in particular those relating to travel, easier access to documents and other evidence.^{28,29,30} The major downside was the way that poor connections made it harder for lawyers to work with their clients, particularly vulnerable defendants.

In the future, technology offers the potential to scale up the work of courts, enabling them to be more productive – although HMCTS should proceed with caution and ensure that a proper evaluation of the risks and benefits of virtual courts is done. As the courts return to in-person hearings, technology will play an increasingly prominent role and HMCTS’s reform programme for courts has incorporated lessons learned from the crisis.³¹

The NHS has also done a lot to use technology to integrate its work and deliver a more efficient and effective healthcare service. One key innovation has been the ongoing development of NHS Pathways. This system was first developed in 2008 and has been in widespread use since 2011.³² Pathways is an automated triage system that sits behind NHS 111 online, and the 111 and 999 emergency numbers.³³ It uses a series of linked algorithms to help patients find the appropriate clinical help they need.

* We discuss the longer-term performance implications of technology for public services in more depth in the most recent edition of [Performance Tracker](#).

The system typically handles around 50,000 inquiries daily – all the emergency calls to 111, 999 and inquiries through 111 Online.³⁴ As inquiries relating to coronavirus began to spike in mid-March the NHS reworked Pathways to make it easier for people to access 111 services digitally, adding specific Covid-19 routing into the algorithm on 26 February.³⁵ At its peak the system was automatically handling over 20,000 inquiries daily, more than 40% of the total. This helped people with Covid-19 symptoms find the support they needed more quickly and reduced the overall cost to provide the service.^{36,37}

However, at times simple solutions proved more effective than high-tech ones. For GP clinics and outpatient departments it was phones, not video conferencing, which carried the day during the crisis. In February 2020, just 14% of appointments were conducted over the phone (81% were face to face).^{*} By April 2020 this had risen to almost half (48%), and this remained the main mode of engagement until July.³⁸

But technology wasn't enough to make remote learning or contact tracing work well

Other efforts to support continuity in public services were far less successful. Ministers pushed schools to deliver education online, but many students lacked the hardware, or the broadband access, or both, to participate in virtual classes. Resolving this lack of access to digital technology was the first challenge for the Department for Education (DfE).

The department set up a programme ('Get Help with Technology') to provide laptops, tablets and wireless routers to disadvantaged students and families, to help them access education remotely. An initial order of more than 200,000 laptops and tablets, and 50,000 wireless routers, was made on 15 May, two months after schools had closed. The government had a target of distributing 230,000 laptops by the end of June.³⁹ But it missed this and as of 26 August, after the end of the school year, only 220,494 laptops and tablets, and 50,984 wireless routers had been distributed to local authorities and academy trusts.⁴⁰ In September DfE ordered a second round of devices, delivering a further 105,508 laptops and tablets, and 1,000 routers.⁴¹

However, the Children's Commissioner calculated that around 540,000 children were eligible for support through the scheme, meaning the allocation covered less than half that number. And, when based on the number of children eligible for free school meals, the true number of children needing support is closer to 1.34 million; the actual number of children without home access to a computer or tablet device is even higher.⁴²

Widespread evidence from both the UK and other countries suggests that remote schooling has failed to even come close to the effectiveness of in-person classes.⁴³ But even if we allow for the contingency that this crisis imposed, this episode shows how relying on technological solutions without accounting for the situation of families around the country can lead to, or compound, failure.

* Many GP practices are unable to code appointments properly, and the processes for handling patients have changed as a result of the crisis. The number of appointments which are conducted online or via video is almost certainly being under-counted. However even if we allow for this the data still suggests that phone consultations have been the dominant mode for GPs since March 2020.

Another technological failure was seen in the algorithm designed to assign A-level results to students who were unable to take their exams as normal. Algorithms are automated decision-making methods administered by digital systems; their use in government is set to grow in the future. Ofqual – England’s regulator of exams and qualifications – opted to use an algorithm to allocate grades to students – without exams – so that universities could assign places to applicants, something that has never been done before.⁴⁴ The underlying model Ofqual developed that informed the algorithm was complex and had to accommodate challenges including recent changes to subject curricula, and the less-than-perfect relationship between past and future student performance in exams.⁴⁵

Ultimately while the algorithm worked exactly as it had been designed, the problem was that the design was poor.⁴⁶ In particular, the way it applied national-level distributions of grades within a subject to school-level cohorts meant that in some cases students were assigned grades far lower than those assessed by their teachers. This approach treated students as blocs rather than individuals, which was fundamentally unsuited for something as individual as an exam grade.⁴⁷ Another problem was that decisions were made using a narrow range of measures. Some of these were problematic, most notably teachers were asked to produce a rank-ordering of the students in their class, something that was often impossible to do in a fair or consistent way.⁴⁸ The end result was a system that disproportionately penalised specific categories of student, including those taking less-popular subjects, those from larger schools, and those with larger classes sizes.⁴⁹

There are several root causes of the problems with the algorithm. Political choices placed the emphasis for decisions on technology and marginalised the expertise and understanding of the actual teachers working with students. And the process for developing the algorithm did not engage well with external experts – the aggressive use of non-disclosure agreements to prevent people developing an unfair understanding of the system made it difficult for people who could have helped to contribute to the process.⁵⁰ In contrast to services such as HMRC’s economic relief package, this was a problem that the government had some time to solve. The department’s failure to consult well, political enthusiasm for technological solutions, the decision to take a radically new approach during a crisis when alternative and familiar approaches existed, and the general lack of transparency all conspired to create chaos.

The government also looked to technology to solve the challenge of contact tracing for people who tested positive for coronavirus. But the app it designed and built was beset by problems from the outset. The government initially planned to build a centralised system,⁵¹ where all contact data would be held in a central database, unlike the approach taken by other governments and, crucially, Google and Apple.⁵² The government’s centralised system was both more difficult to develop and raised serious questions about privacy and data protection. The government abandoned its first attempt to deliver an app in June, at the cost of £10.8m, although around £6.8m of that cost was in development that was necessary for any app, and carried over to the second iteration.⁵³

The government then launched a new app, based on the *de*-centralised technology used by Google and Apple, across England and Wales on 24 September.⁵⁴ This subsequent app has been more successful. As of 31 December it had been downloaded over 21m times. However, this still only represents around 57% of the adult population who own a smartphone, or 45% of all adults, making it unavoidably limited in scope.⁵⁵ The further costs of the second phase of app development were around £25m,⁵⁶ which is similar to the €20m that the German government spent developing its own equivalent (at the first attempt).⁵⁷ NHS Scotland and Health and Social Care Northern Ireland developed their own apps.^{58,59}

Both episodes revealed the hazards of applying a new technological approach to a new problem. Successful digital solutions work when either the technology or the problem is already well understood. If both are new there is an increased risk of failure, especially when acute time pressures apply, as they have in 2020. This fundamental challenge for digital transformation was exacerbated by ministerial enthusiasm for specific technologies as the solution, which additionally meant that the government had to work backwards from its chosen solution (an app, an algorithm) to fix its problem rather than working from the problem and choosing the most appropriate solution to fix it. In the future departments should be free, even actively encouraged to experiment with new technology. But they need to learn what the best applications are, and then assess whether to build or buy the right solutions to fit. In every case the starting point should be the problem, never the technology.

Technology was central to the government's transition to remote working

As the UK went into lockdown, ensuring business continuity became a priority for every department and here technology helped to fill many gaps. In some cases departments could rely on existing processes and technology, but in other areas they had to rapidly shift their approach to keep delivering their services.

The key challenge early on was enabling officials to work remotely. Departments had to adjust on an unprecedented scale. Although all departments had remote working arrangements, prior to the crisis no more than 2.9% of civil servants worked from home on any given day. This rapidly went up to over 90% for every department except DWP, a large operational department which took longer to make the shift.⁶⁰ A range of problems rapidly emerged.

Figure 4.4 **Accessibility of video conferencing tools used by government organisations, 1 May and 15 July 2020**

Organisation	1 May							15 July						
	Default	Google Meet	MS Teams	Cisco Webex	Zoom	Skype	BlueJeans	Default (where new)	Google Meet	MS Teams	Cisco Webex	Zoom	Skype	BlueJeans
BEIS	MS Teams													
CO	Google Meet													
DCMS	Google Meet													
DfID	MS Teams													
DHSC	Skype							MS Teams						
DIT	MS Teams													
Defra	MS Teams													
DFE	MS Teams													
DfT	MS Teams													
DWP	Skype													
FCO	MS Teams													
GDS (CO)	Google Meet													
GSS (CO)	Google Meet													
HMRC	Skype													
HMT	MS Teams													
HO	Skype													
MHCLG	MS Teams													
MoD	Skype							MS Teams						
MoJ	MS Teams													
No.10	MS Teams													
NICS	Cisco Webex													
ONS								Google Meet						
Parliament Digital	MS Teams													
PHE	Skype													
Scot Gov	Vscene													
Wal Gov	MS Teams													

Can use Restricted Cannot use Unknown

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Government Digital Service, Make video conferencing tools work across government, 23 June 2020, GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/make-video-conferencing-tools-work-across-government>

A critical problem was the lack of a standard platform for video conferencing across the whole of government. At least five different platforms were the default in different parts of government, and many departments were actively blocking their staff from using platforms used by others. GDS launched 'Project Unblock' to resolve this and make it easier for officials to talk to each other.⁶¹ By 15 July many channels had been unblocked, and crucially there was now a single platform (Microsoft Teams) which officials in every department could access.

These technology platforms enabled new forms of remote collaboration that helped teams within government to work more effectively. To develop its trio of new economic support services, HMRC started using technology to virtually 'bring more people into the room', something not tried previously, and was able to link the work of teams based in different locations across the UK in a way that would not be feasible without collaborative tools.⁶²

Getting civil servants the equipment they needed to work from home was also an issue. Many departments, such as HMRC, had already switched the majority or entirety of their staff over to laptops in recent years. But for others this was not the case. DWP was one of the slowest to transition to remote working. This is due in part to the fact that many of its roles are widely distributed across the UK, often away from hubs, making it physically more difficult to get equipment to staff.

Looking to the future it seems likely that remote working will remain a key feature in how the civil service operates. The crisis has proven that a more [distributed model of work](#), enabled by new technology, is viable. People's expectations have also shifted and some officials may well be keen to make use of this newly established flexibility to continue working remotely for some or even all of the time, even as offices reopen.

As in all workplaces, this will bring challenges with it. Departments will need to adapt to 'hybrid' working, with teams incorporating staff members based both in the office and at home. This will also shape the equipment that departments and public bodies supply to staff – the HMRC model of only using portable devices should become the standard for the whole of government. Civil Service HR will need to work through the government's offer to current and potential employees, and what new ways of working actually look like in practice. There will be substantive questions such as whether departments need to rethink working patterns, whether to time-shift some activities, and how changes here can support both organisational productivity and employee wellbeing.

But there are also many potential benefits. Greater flexibility around remote working could help the government's stated 'levelling-up' agenda, making it easier to either recruit new officials outside London or enabling existing officials based in the capital to relocate.⁶³ Using technology to enable remote working could drive a more connected government. This can offer many benefits for government effectiveness, including better data sharing within and between departments.

New leadership of digital government is welcome

The appointment of a new chief executive for GDS is a welcome, if [long-overdue](#), step.⁶⁴ GDS has come a long way in the past 10 years and has provided key support across government that enabled a better response to the crisis.⁶⁵ But it needs to clarify its direction. It must also establish clear boundaries between its work, and the growing list of other large organisations within government with a stake in digital transformation. These include Government Business Services, the Office for AI, NHSX, and the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation. Leadership around the use of automation and other new technologies and new strategic thinking about the impact of these technologies on the government's workforce and operations will be crucial.⁶⁶

In January 2021 the government made the unanticipated decision to establish a new council-like body instead of appointing a government chief digital officer (GCDO).⁶⁷ The Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) will also have to find its place in the mix of digital-focused organisations. Hopefully it can fulfil the high-level co-ordinating role that GDS has never quite managed. While much of the government's success in digital has come from allowing departments and public bodies to innovate with technology, the lack of standard approaches to some core functions – such as digital identity – has caused problems and excess costs.⁶⁸

Elevating the government's focus on the DDaT profession, which has been well-managed by GDS, should pay off in the long run, especially having seen the benefits that having a cadre of skilled digital professionals offered to government departments such as HMRC and DWP during the crisis. Similarly CDDO's focus on working with the commercial function and the Crown Commercial Service will be important as the government increasingly buys technology rather than builds it – as it should.⁶⁹

The appointment of an experienced Chair and COO will help this organisation get going. But it will need to fill the rest of its staff quickly and prove that it is more than just a high-level talking shop.

Looking ahead

The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the digital transformation of government. New services have been delivered, often at speed, and technology enabled the civil service to transition to remote working en-masse. But as both the ambition for digital transformation, and the range of applicable technologies have both grown, the landscape of digital governance has fragmented. While it is important for government to promote innovation from within, blindly pursuing new technologies has led to failures during the crisis and may do so again. Delivering the next wave of digital transformation will require careful and patient effort, and an ability to think and act in the long term.



5 Communications and transparency

The coronavirus crisis has created new and heightened demand for government information. Visits to the government website, GOV.UK, skyrocketed in 2020, and the government generated new information on everything from the progress of the pandemic to national and local restrictions. Meanwhile, there was an increase in parliamentary questions in the Commons, with many focused on the pandemic.

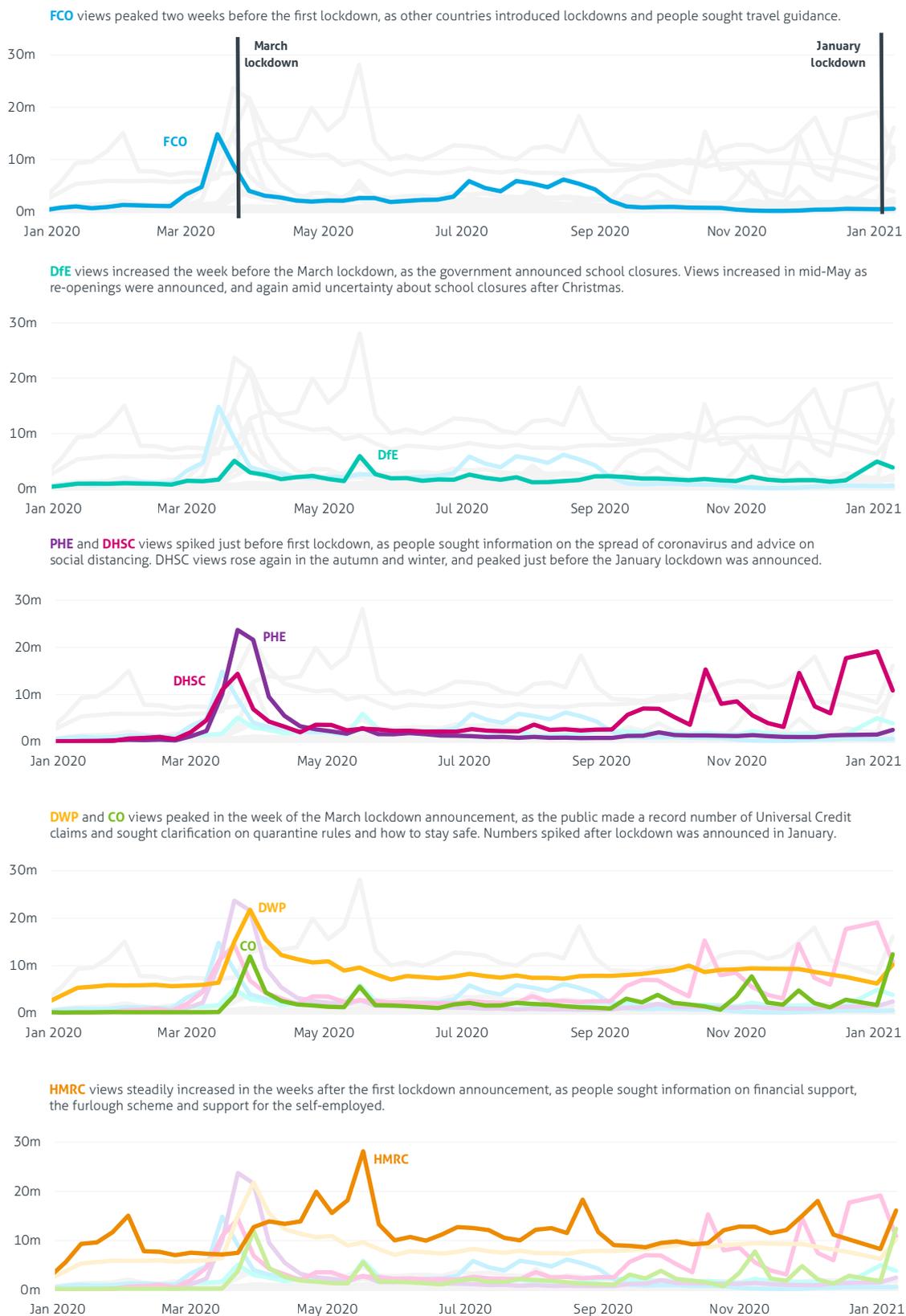
Coronavirus, alongside Brexit planning, has also required a more direct style of government communication. Cabinet Office spending on advertising campaigns increased sharply compared to 2019 and, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, ministers used press conferences rather than addresses to parliament for key policy announcements.

But more direct communication is not the same as better or more transparent communication. The government has not always shared information about coronavirus in a way that seemed designed to encourage desired changes in public behaviour. For instance, key details were sometimes published late, causing confusion and uncertainty. Despite localised restrictions being introduced in July, a postcode search tool allowing people to see the restrictions that applied to them was not available until 13 October.¹ Information was also hard to use or understand: the government was criticised for the confusing charts its scientific advisers used at a key press conference in the lead up to the second national lockdown in November.²

On the transparency front, a welcome innovation from late May onwards was the publication of advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), for the first time during an ongoing emergency, albeit well after key decisions were taken on the first lockdown and in response to media pressure. But departments are taking longer to respond to Freedom of Information (FoI) requests, even as the number of those requests remained at similar levels to previous years. They have also been slow to publish information about their spending, failing to meet transparency commitments made by previous governments, even as that spending comes into greater focus with the enormous cost of responding to the pandemic and suggestions that companies with political connections have benefited from contracts awarded without competition. Departments have said the pandemic has caused them to divert resources away from publishing transparency information. While reprioritisation is understandable, it does make it harder for parliament and the public to assess the government's pandemic response and whether its spending represents value for money.

The pandemic has increased demand for government information

Figure 5.1 GOV.UK unique departmental pageviews, January 2020 to January 2021

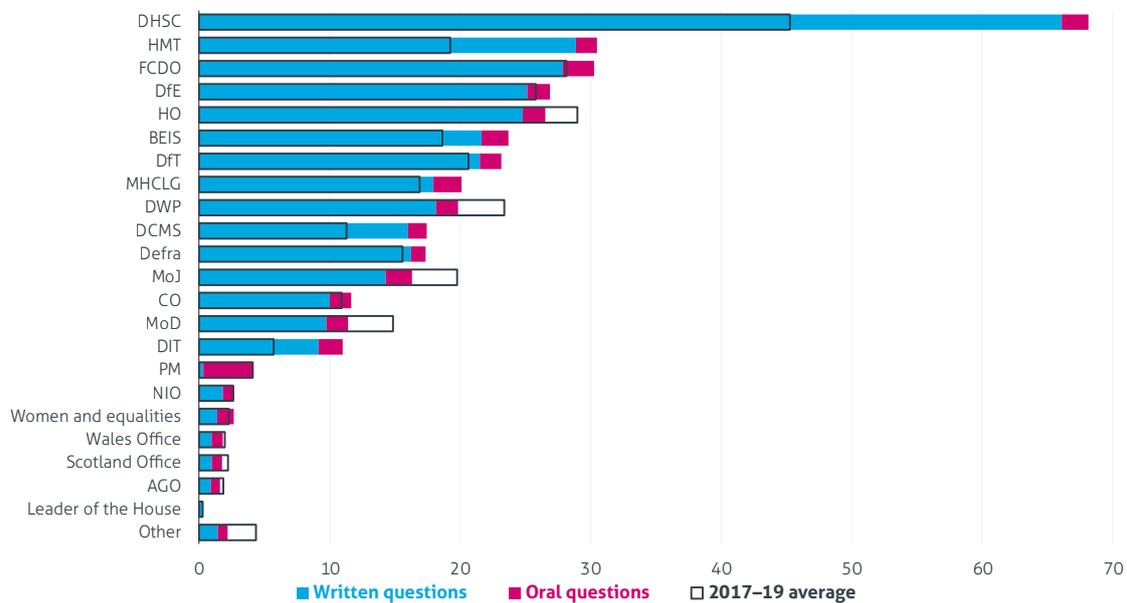


Source: Institute for Government analysis of GOV.UK, Performance Platform data on departmental pageviews, January 2020 to January 2021.

As coronavirus cases began to mount in the UK and the government introduced restrictions, the public sought information about how the virus was spreading, what they needed to do to comply with new restrictions and how they could get support, for example, through Universal Credit. They did so in record numbers. The week following the first lockdown in March saw more than 29 million unique users visit GOV.UK, almost double the 2019 weekly average,³ while the site saw its busiest hour ever when the prime minister announced a further national lockdown on 4 January 2021.⁴

Figures for individual departments show a correlation between page visits and major policy changes or announcements in their area of work. For example, views for the Department for Education (DfE) spiked the week that schools closed in March while the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) peak came in the week of the March lockdown announcement as the public made a record number of Universal Credit claims.

Figure 5.2 Average number of parliamentary questions tabled in the House of Commons per sitting day, January to December 2020



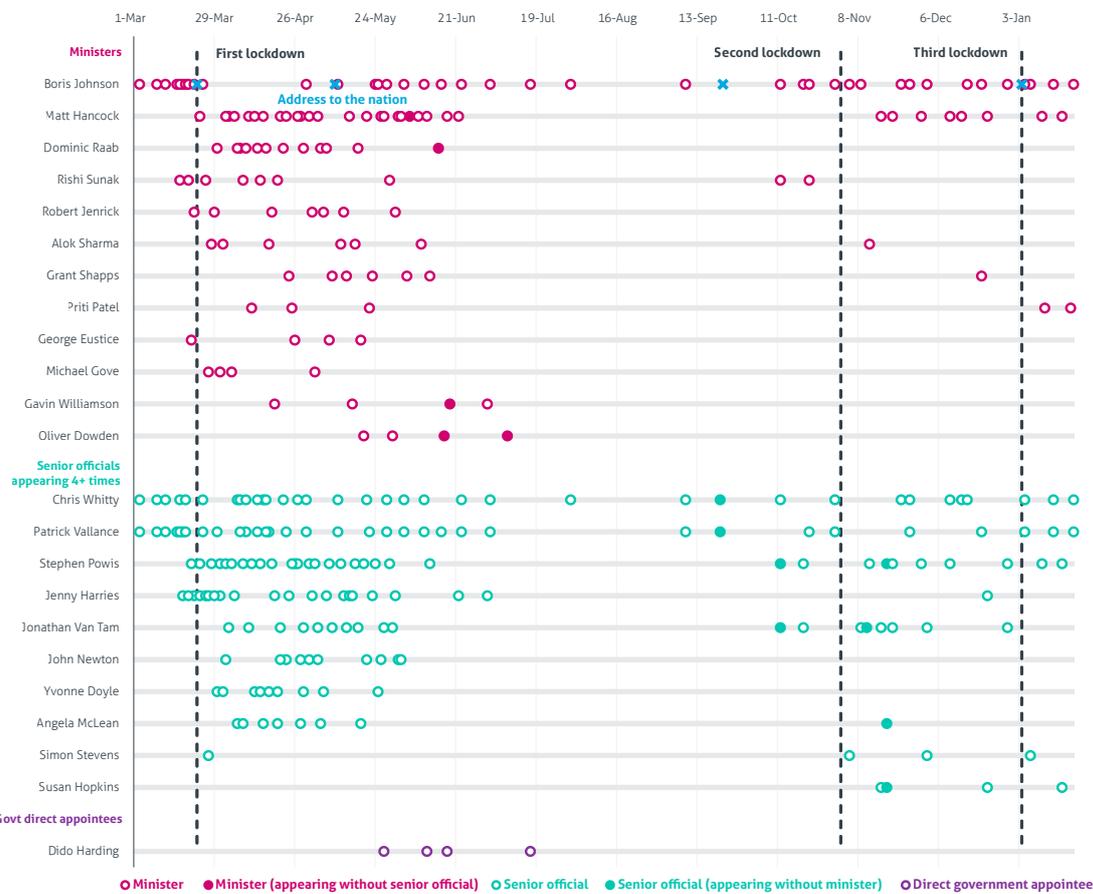
Source: Institute for Government analysis of UK parliament written question search results and data.parliament.uk oral question search results, 2017–2020.

Parliamentarians have also been seeking more information than usual from the government. MPs asked 19% more oral parliamentary questions (PQs) per sitting day than in the 2017–19 session – itself a tumultuous period for the Commons, encompassing the heights of the parliamentary Brexit drama – while written questions were up 13% (1 January to 31 December 2020). There were more written PQs tabled by MPs in June (6,999) and September (5,497) 2020 than in any single month of the 2017–19 parliament. Unsurprisingly, a large proportion of PQs focused on the pandemic, particularly during the early phase, while departments with a key role in the pandemic response – like the Treasury and DHSC – saw large increases in their overall numbers.

Apart from the scale of the policy challenge posed by the pandemic itself, the high number of PQs may also reflect the move to remote parliamentary proceedings, leading MPs to focus on PQs instead of more informal means of applying political pressure or obtaining information.

The government increased its direct communication with the public as the pandemic began

Figure 5.3 Appearances by ministers and senior officials at televised coronavirus press conferences



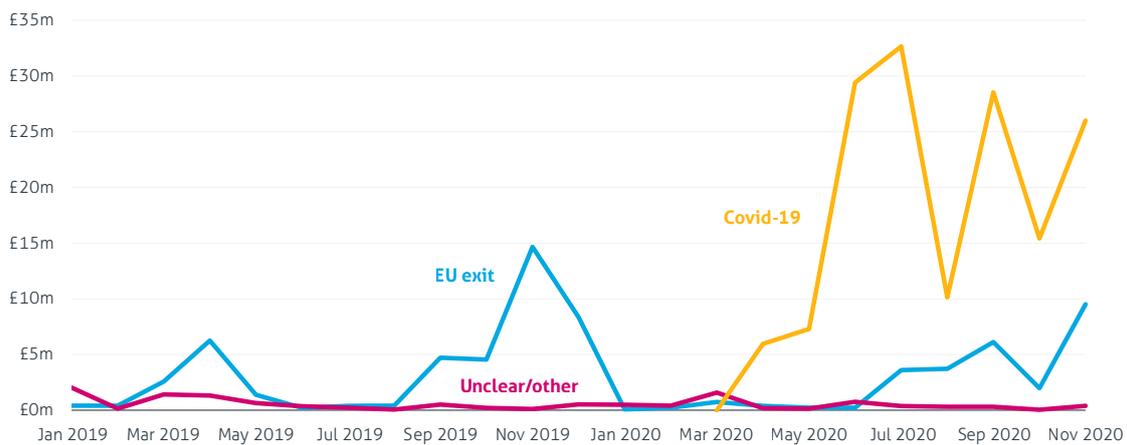
Source: Institute for Government analysis, collection of slides and datasets to accompany coronavirus press conferences and accompanying YouTube videos, 1 March 2020 to 22 January 2021.

As well as making information available via GOV.UK, the government has increased direct communication with the public. Ministers and their officials have given situation updates and announced and explained major decisions and changes to restrictions – like the first lockdown, the lockdown exit strategy and the ‘rule of six’ – directly to the public via televised press conferences during prime viewing hours. At their peak, press conferences were watched by 27.5 million people.⁵

While all modern governments have made policy announcements at press conferences, the convention is to make major announcements in parliament. Departure from this practice has been criticised by some MPs: the Speaker accused the government of “total disregard” for the House of Commons, while backbenchers have expressed anger at their inability to question ministers on decisions at the time of announcement.⁶ (In some cases, major announcements such as the imposition of Tier 4 restrictions and the third English lockdown in January 2021 were not made in the Commons because parliament was on recess at the time.)

More recently, the government has tried to balance the need to communicate important information in a way most likely to reach the public with accountability to parliament, by making statements to the Commons in the afternoon, followed by press conferences in the late afternoon or early evening.

Figure 5.4 **Cabinet Office monthly spending on media, marketing and advertising campaigns by campaign area, January 2019 to November 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office 'Expenditure over £25,000' releases, January 2019–November 2020. Expenses were not always incurred in the same month they are reported. For instance, advertising spending in June 2020 may be for a campaign run in prior months.

The government's emphasis on communicating directly with the public about the pandemic is also reflected in the sharp increase in some departments' spending on media, marketing and advertising in 2020 – particularly the Cabinet Office (which took control of the main Covid-19 messaging campaigns) and DHSC. For the former, the vast majority (83%) of that spending related to Covid-19, while for DHSC it was nearly half.* Covid-19 advertising campaigns have been successful in reaching the population,⁷ but that does not necessarily mean they will have achieved their aim of influencing people to change their behaviour, as the Cabinet Office's 'Get Ready for Brexit' campaign showed. In that case, the National Audit Office (NAO) criticised the Cabinet Office for failing to show that the campaign led to greater Brexit preparedness, despite the fact the campaign had reached nearly the entire population of the UK.⁸

The way information was presented to the public was at times unclear and misleading

The government's communication has reached a wide audience. On top of record visits to GOV.UK, the Cabinet Office claimed in March that its public information campaigns had reached 95% of adults in the UK an average of 17 times,⁹ while press conferences have frequently attracted audiences in the millions.¹⁰

But this communication has not always been effective in helping the public understand what they should or need to do to protect themselves and comply with restrictions, or why the government has taken certain decisions. Late night, last-minute announcements of new localised restrictions, pre-briefing of new restrictions to sections of the media, delayed publication of a postcode search function and contradictory information published by different departments have all caused confusion and uncertainty for the public.¹¹ For people in the devolved nations, this has been compounded by the failure of ministers and departments at times to be clear about whether they are referring to the whole of the UK or just England.¹² Ministers and officials have, at times, offered a confusing barrage of statistics about the state of the pandemic in press conferences, without always publishing the datasets from which they were drawn.¹³

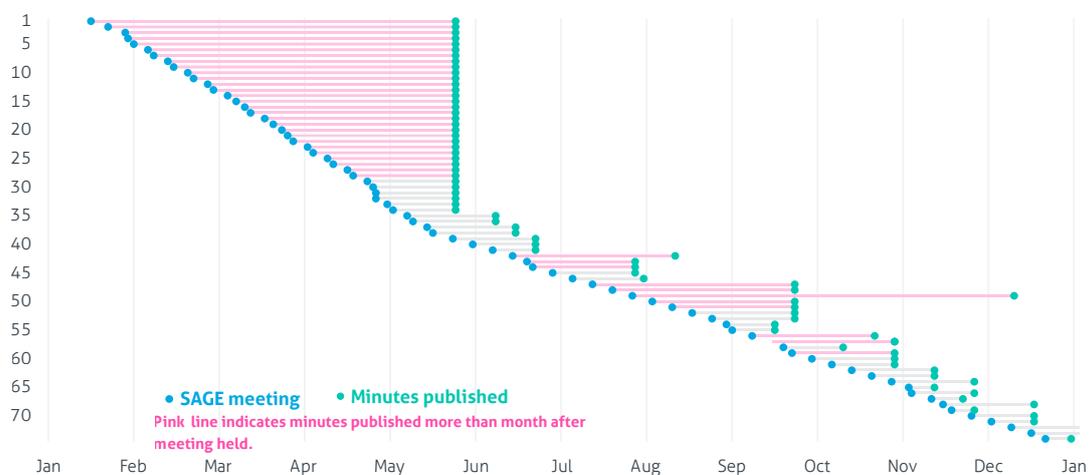
* Most departments use high-level descriptions of spending items, therefore it is not always possible to identify whether spending related to Covid-19.

Beyond this lack of clarity, the government has sometimes presented key metrics in misleading ways. Reporting on testing numbers has, in the words of the UK Statistics Authority chair, been “far from complete and comprehensible”.¹⁴ For instance, in the early phases of the pandemic, the government included home testing kits posted out in its reports of the number of tests conducted, regardless of whether those home testing kits were returned. This caused confusion and made it difficult for parliament and the public to judge how well the testing programme was working. The approach was seen by many as an attempt to allow the government to reach its target of 100,000 tests per day by the end of April, rather than to accurately convey information about testing. As the chair of the UK Statistics Authority put it: “The aim seems to be to show the largest possible number of tests, even at the expense of understanding.”¹⁵

These confusing messages contributed to surveys showing that significant numbers of people were unclear about the restrictions that applied to them. By late June, little over half of respondents to one Ipsos MORI survey felt clear on who they could socialise with (59%), how to work safely (56%) or where they could travel to (54%).¹⁶ While this is no doubt a reflection of the complexity of the policies themselves, it also speaks to the sometimes poor quality of communication.

In some ways the government increased transparency about how it made decisions

Figure 5.5 **Dates of SAGE meetings and publication of meeting minutes, January to December 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of GOV.UK publication of SAGE minutes, January to December 2020.

The UK government has taken the welcome step of breaking with past practice by publishing SAGE minutes and papers as the crisis unfolded, rather than waiting until after the crisis has been resolved. It has committed to publishing SAGE minutes within a month of each meeting and has met the target around three quarters of the time.¹⁷ The Scottish and Welsh governments have also published minutes and papers from their own scientific advisory groups, which supplement the advice those governments receive from SAGE.

In this way, the scientific advice to the UK government has been far more transparent than the rest of the advice ministers receive from departments (such as an economic analysis of lockdown proposals, for example). This has helped the public understand the scientific basis for government decisions but does not on its own give a complete picture. The publication of SAGE documents has also had a significant impact on public debate. For example, the publication of the minutes of a SAGE meeting in September that recommended a short, circuit-breaking lockdown focused media scrutiny on the government's decision to pursue the tiered system of restrictions in England instead.¹⁸

Departments are not publishing information about spending on time

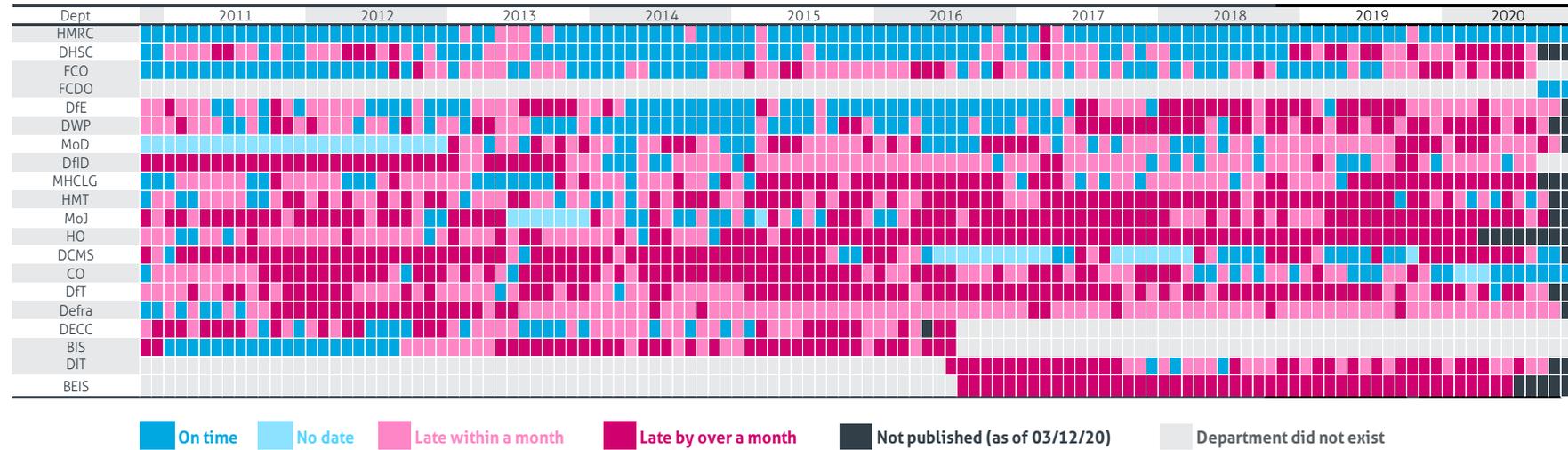
While increased transparency around SAGE deliberations was positive, many departments failed to publish key transparency data or respond to FoI requests on time. It is understandable that departments prioritise their direct work on the pandemic, but this delay makes it harder to understand and assess the effectiveness of the government response.

Every month, departments are required to publish all their spending over £25,000. This information should be released by the last working day of the month after the month to which it relates.¹⁹ Timeliness of publication has always been poor (see Figure 5.6) but has worsened in the past six years: in 2014, 38% of data releases were on time; only 16% of releases for spending in January–November 2020 have been. This was a decrease on last year, when 20% of releases were within a month. Publication delays in the early phase of a crisis might be understandable, but not when the response becomes business as usual.

Compared to last year, there have been fewer instances of departments failing to publish spending entirely. But some departments, agencies and public bodies still have backlogs of unpublished data, including those with a key role in the pandemic response: for instance, NHS England and PHE have not released data since March 2020.

Delays have also affected publication of information about contracts awarded for work on Covid-19. The Government Commercial Function recommends that departments publish basic details of contracts within 90 days of them being awarded. Departments had published the details of fewer than half of the contracts worth more than £25,000 and awarded in the first half of 2020 by 10 November, while only 25% were published within the 90-day target. Some departments have now advised the NAO they are devoting more resources to publishing contract details.²⁰

Figure 5.6 **Publication of departmental spending over £25,000, November 2010 to November 2020**



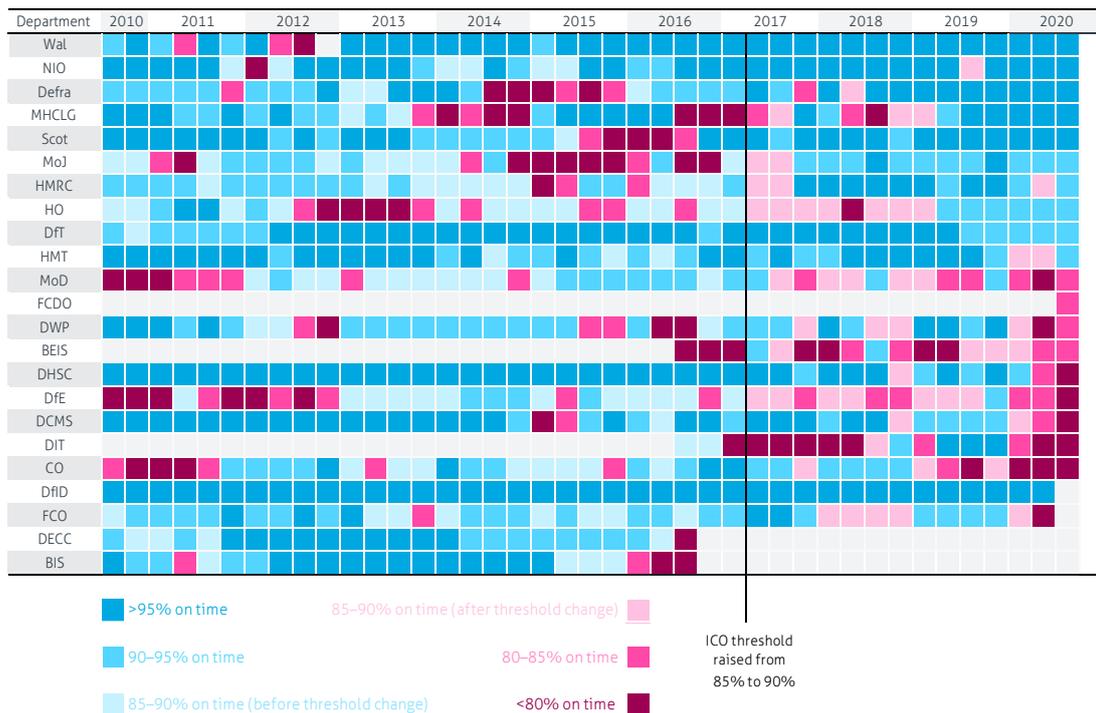
Source: Institute for Government analysis of data.gov.uk and GOV.UK publication of departmental spending records, November 2010 to November 2020. DfID is over £500 from April 2011 onwards; MHCLG is over £500 until April 2012, then over £250 until present. A list of departmental initialisms is found at the end of this report.

As well as delays, it can often be difficult to tell what departments have spent their money on. Departments do not always offer descriptions of spending, beyond assigning a high-level category (like 'marketing'), contrary to government guidance.²¹ Further, departments do not use these categories consistently, which can make it hard to compare different departments' spending.

Throughout the pandemic, the government has been criticised for the propriety of some significant spending decisions. There have been reports of large contracts being awarded without competition to PR firms connected to ministers and the NAO found that suppliers offering personal protective equipment were 10 times more likely to win contracts when they were referred to departments by the offices of parliamentarians and lords.²² But delays and lack of detail about what departments are buying, from whom and why, make it harder to bring cases like these to light, and thus hold the government to account for its use of public funds and ensure value for money. Publishing this information is even more important when departments have – often understandably – used emergency spending approvals and skipped the usual checks and procedures, like open competition for contracts.

The government has got worse at publishing other transparency information

Figure 5.7 **Timeliness of responses to FoI requests, Q3 2010 to Q3 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Freedom of Information statistics, 2010–Q3 2020.

Government departments have 20 days to respond to (or seek an extension for) FoI requests if they are to be counted as 'on time'. Unsurprisingly, many departments' performance in the timeliness of responses declined between Q4 2019 and Q3 2020.

Departments that routinely respond to fewer than 90% of FoI requests on time can be subject to special monitoring by the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). Eight departments achieved the 90% benchmark in the first three quarters of 2020, compared to 13 across all of 2019. The ICO has recognised the impact of the pandemic on departments’ capacity to meet these deadlines, and has said it is taking a “pragmatic and empathetic” approach, stating in March it would not be penalising public authorities for prioritising other areas. More recently, it has asked departments to make plans for clearing backlogs of FoI requests and has developed a ‘toolkit’ to support this work.²³

Figure 5.8 Percentage of FoI requests granted in full, by department, Q1 2005 to Q3 2020



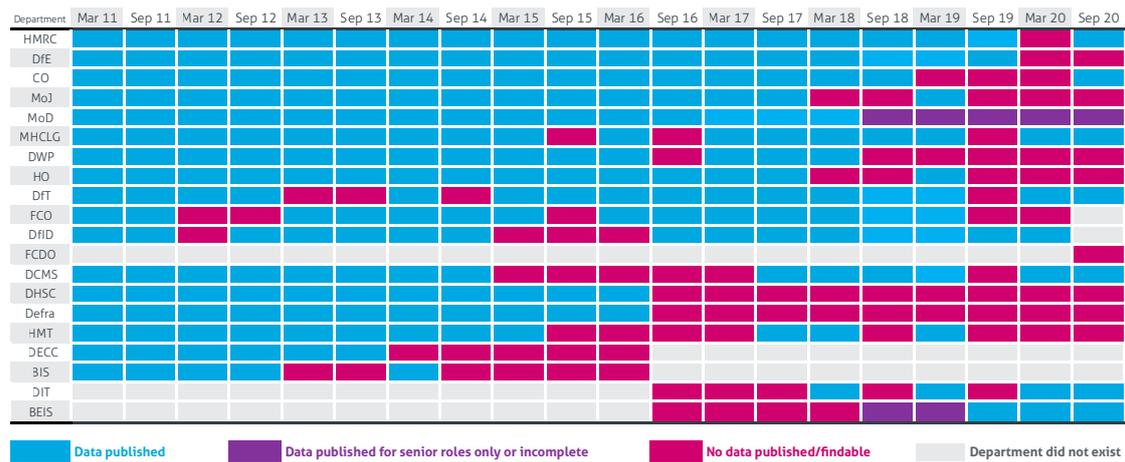
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office Freedom of Information statistics, 2005–Q3 2020.

Otherwise, most long-term trends in FoI continue. The percentage of requests that are granted in full remains low, after falling consistently between 2005 and 2016. Across the first three quarters of 2020, 43.6% of ‘resolvable’ requests* were granted in full, 14.5% were partially withheld and 41.9% were withheld in full. This compares to 64.2% being granted in full and only 21.3% withheld in full in 2005.

There are several possible explanations for these numbers. First, because government data is increasingly available to the public, FoI requests might increasingly focus on more sensitive information, which the government has defensible reasons to withhold. Second, the nature of requests may be changing. Departments may justifiably decline requests that are vague and are also likely to dismiss overly complex or expansive demands on cost grounds. Third, even if they are not actively hostile to the FoI regime, ministers and therefore their departments may see the timely and complete release of information as a low priority. There have also been reports that the Cabinet Office is taking a more interventionist approach to restricting the release of information, particularly where requested by journalists, through its long-standing FoI clearing house.²⁴ While this would represent a worrying trend, it is unlikely to have a large effect on these statistics.

* Examples of requests that are not ‘resolvable’ would include those where the department does not hold the information that is being requested.

Figure 5.9 Publication of departmental organograms, 2011–2020 (as at 13 January 2021)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of data.gov.uk and GOV.UK publications of departmental organograms, March 2011 to September 2020.

Organograms give a snapshot of each department’s staff and structure, containing information about their grades, salaries, job titles and professions. This helps the public understand what departments do, how resources are distributed between different priorities and who is advising ministers. They can also help academics and others hoping to share useful information to identify who to contact.

Publishing this information also makes it easier for the public, MPs and the people and institutions that work with the government to understand how departments have reorganised their staff to respond to the pandemic and which areas of work might have been deprioritised or put on hold. For instance, the Department for Transport has published a structure chart showing which senior leaders and parts of the department are co-ordinating its work on the pandemic.²⁵

Organograms are meant to be published twice a year: one snapshot as at 30 September by 6 December, and another as at 31 March by 6 June. Only seven of 17 departments have published their organograms for September 2020. Some have been poor at organogram publication for some time and others are publishing data years late. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and DHSC have not published complete data since March 2016.

Looking ahead

The pandemic has put enormous pressure on departments’ workloads and resources, and this has contributed to continued poor performance on several transparency metrics. But for as long as this situation is the ‘new normal’, the government will need to find a way of balancing these demands with the need for the public and parliament to understand – and trust – its response. This must be reinforced by maintaining the levels of direct communication seen in 2020, but with a stronger emphasis on clarity and ease of use, particularly as the government faces the challenge of the vaccine roll-out and continued social distancing restrictions.



2021: The year ahead

2021 is a year of changes for the UK, and potentially for the government. As the first year fully outside the EU and its regulatory arrangements, 2021 is when the real impact of the Brexit vote in 2016, and the political decisions taken since then, will be felt. It is also – the country will be hoping – the year when the UK, along with the rest of the world, turns the corner on the coronavirus pandemic that has caused so much hardship for the past 12 months.

The decisions that ministers take in the coming months present an opportunity for the government to shape the future of the UK domestically and on the international stage. At the same time, as ministers put most of their original plans for 2020 on hold to deal with the pandemic, 2021 is in some ways like the first year of a new administration, when the government will want to focus on setting out more detail on, and then delivering priorities from, its manifesto.

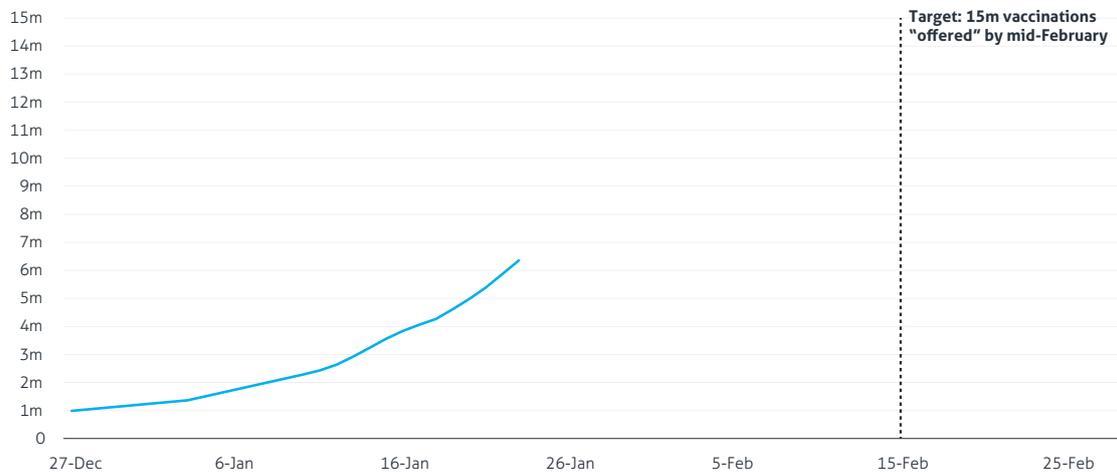
This paper has considered five key aspects of how the government gets things done, and assessed how they changed in 2020 and where they stand at the start of 2021. This concluding section looks at some of the most pressing issues facing the government in the coming year.

Coronavirus and vaccine roll-out

The UK's vaccination programme has begun in earnest, with individuals deemed to be a priority receiving the first injections from the end of last year. The government published its vaccine delivery plan on 11 January, setting out its ambition to offer the vaccine to around 15 million people in the four most vulnerable categories by 15 February, a target ministers are confident they will reach.¹ However, the government will need to continue to overcome supply, distribution and communication challenges as it extends the programme to larger cohorts and be ready for the potential emergence of resistant strains of Covid-19. The success of the vaccine roll-out will determine the government's credibility on almost anything else it wants to do. Ensuring that vaccines are delivered to a large enough proportion of the population to allow restrictions on economic activity to be lifted safely must be the government's priority for the next few months.

While people wait for the vaccine to have its full effect, restrictions on daily life continue. Constraints have tightened since the new tier system in England was established in December 2020: at the time of publication, the whole country is in some form of lockdown.² In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the devolved governments have taken their own approaches, differing from the UK government's system as both science and politics dictate. Explaining the reasoning behind the restrictions was a continual challenge for the government during 2020 – the need to do so with clarity and credibility has not yet passed.

Figure 6.1 **Number of people given first dose of coronavirus vaccination in the UK, 23 January 2021**



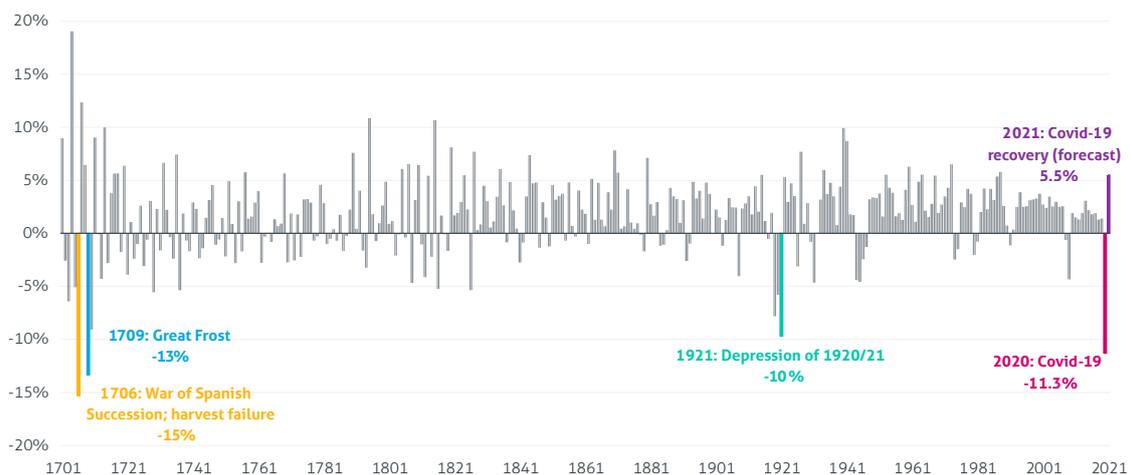
Source: Institute for Government analysis of UK Government, Coronavirus dashboard. On current trajectory the UK is on track to exceed its target and *vaccinate*, as opposed to just offer to vaccinate, 15m people by mid-February.

The economy and public finances

The response to the pandemic has meant unexpected government spending of hundreds of billions of pounds, at the same time as the biggest drop in GDP in more than three centuries. This event is likely to have a lasting impact on the economy, with the official forecasts suggesting that UK economic output will be lower than previously expected even in five years' time. This will depress tax revenues and increase public spending, including on support for those who have lost their jobs. As the chancellor warned MPs at the start of the new year, the economy will "get worse before it gets better".³

At the same time, while some businesses and sectors have begun adapting to the new trading arrangements with the EU, for others the longer-term impacts in competitiveness are yet to be felt. The 2021 budget, planned for 3 March, will not be the time to start fiscal consolidation. But two big questions for the government over the next year or two will be the timing of any consolidation and the extent to which the higher levels of spending on public services and welfare introduced during the pandemic are sustained.

Figure 6.2 Year-on-year changes in UK GDP, 1701–2021



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Bank of England, 'A millennium of macroeconomic data', and OBR, *Economic and fiscal outlook*, November 2020.

The UK's place in the world

The UK has spent much of the past four years looking inwards as it sought to decide how to put Brexit into practice. Now the transition period has ended with an agreement on the UK–EU future relationship in place, the formal Brexit process is over. The UK's relationship with the EU will, however, continue to be a force in government and politics, particularly as the government works out how to manage the new Trade and Cooperation Agreement.⁴ This is just one of many international issues that the country will need to deal with over the coming year. The government has two particular foreign policy opportunities in 2021: this year the UK holds the G7 presidency and is host of the COP26 UN climate conference.

At the same time, global trends including more assertive Asian countries and a 'Western alliance' seeking to heal the unpredictability of the Trump years, as well as differing global views on what the post-Covid international community should look like, are all forces the government cannot control; it may struggle to advance its priorities against that background. There is an opportunity for the UK to make the running on some of these issues but to do so it needs to know both what it wants and how it is going to use its international alliances to achieve it.

Boris Johnson's government has still yet to set out its overarching strategy for foreign affairs. In February 2020 the prime minister said that the government was undertaking an 'integrated review' into the UK's security, defence, development and foreign policy, described as the biggest review of these issues "since the end of the Cold War".⁵ The findings of the review, which was delayed by the pandemic, have yet to be published. But the prime minister has already made several moves that hint at his approach, including creating the FCDO, increasing the defence budget and cutting the development budget. The government now needs to show how these decisions tell a coherent story about what role the UK will play in the world in the third decade of the 21st century.

The union

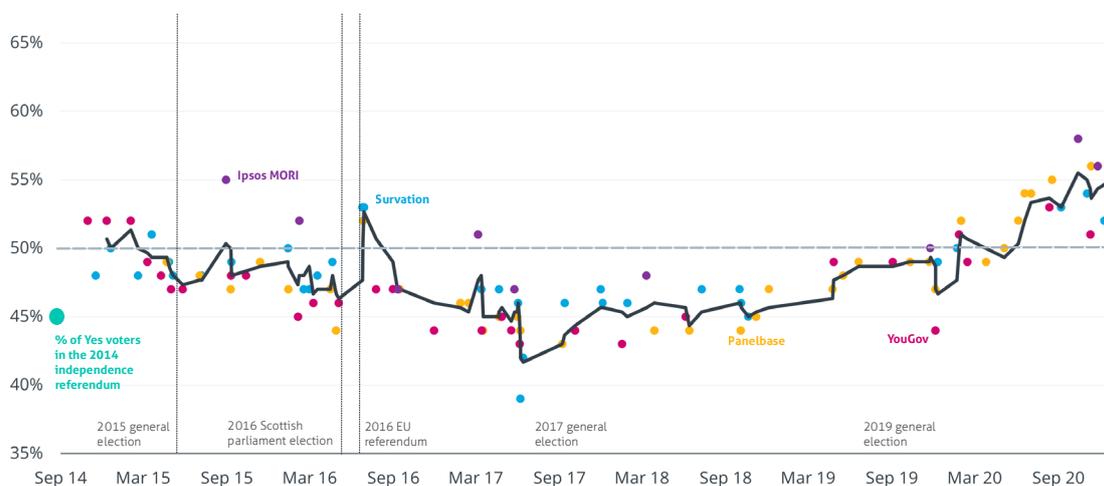
When he became prime minister, Johnson appointed himself 'minister for the union'.⁶ Since then, he has spoken many times about the importance of the union between the four nations of the UK. But while this theme has been a notable aspect of Johnson's approach to governing, the practical challenges of the pandemic and Brexit have put extra pressure on the current devolution settlements. The question of the union could become one of the biggest challenges the government faces in 2021.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown to many people for the first time the practical implications of the devolved settlements. Governments in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast all took different approaches at times, leading to differences in the lockdown restrictions in each part of the UK. The UK government's insistence on a 'sovereignty first' Brexit has further damaged already difficult relationships with its Scottish and Welsh counterparts, particularly the former given that a clear majority of Scots voted to stay in the EU. The UK government's introduction of new legislation to prevent the emergence of new trade barriers between the four parts of the UK – the UK Internal Market Act – also provoked a strong backlash from both Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Meanwhile, the Northern Ireland executive – sitting only since January 2020 after collapsing three years previously – has been working to implement the protocol that will see new checks and processes on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. The practical implications of the Northern Ireland protocol are already being felt, with reports of disruption to supermarket supply chains because of new paperwork required on GB–NI trade and uncertainty among businesses in Great Britain about how to comply with new requirements from 1 January.⁷ The way the UK government has approached Brexit since 2016 has also brought to the fore underlying questions about the longer-term status of Northern Ireland within the union.

With elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments due to take place in May (Covid-dependent), 2021 will be a testing year for the prime minister's unionist credentials – especially with support for Scottish independence at a record high. Having set up a unit in No.10 to prioritise the union, Johnson will need to show he is serious about protecting it.⁸

Figure 6.3 **Percentage of people who would vote 'Yes' in a second Scottish independence referendum (rolling average of previous three polls)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of What Scotland Thinks summary of polls, Suvation poll results, YouGov poll results, Panelbase poll results and Ipsos MORI poll results. Some of the polls shown on this chart included 16- and 17-year-olds in the sample. 'Don't Know'/'Wouldn't Answer' are excluded from results.

Levelling up

One of the prime minister's favourite themes is his aim of 'levelling up' the country – investing in the poorer parts of the UK to rebalance the economy away from the affluent south-east. While this was a key plank of the Conservatives' election campaign in 2019, the pandemic meant that the government was not able to make as much progress on this agenda in 2020 as it might have hoped.

The November spending review marked the beginning of the government's investment programme, with a £4 billion 'levelling up fund' available for local authorities.⁹ At the time of writing, there is little information about what this fund is being used for, but reports in early January that the government has cut funding for Transport for the North, a sub-national body, by 40% raised questions over its commitment to the agenda.¹⁰

Ministers have said they want to move civil service jobs out of London as part of the 'levelling-up' agenda, but the government needs to be realistic about what relocations can achieve. Shifting 22,000 jobs around the country could bring localised benefits to the selected areas, but it will not be a panacea for overcoming economic inequality between regions.¹¹ 2021 is the year for the government to show how it plans to 'level up' in practice.

Figure 6.4 **Capital spending per person, by region and nation, annual average between 2014/15 and 2018/19 (£ per person, 2020/21 prices)**



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Green Budget 2020*. Based on HM Treasury, 'Country and regional analysis', 2019; ONS, mid-year population estimates for each year; ONS June 2020 GDP deflators.

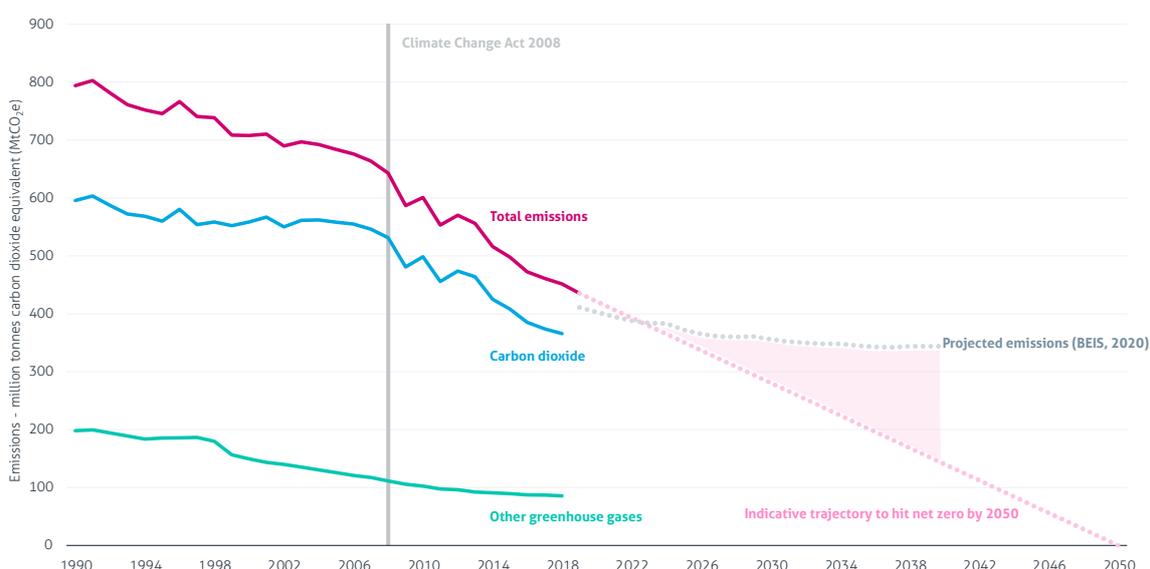
Climate change

One of Theresa May's final acts as prime minister was to commit the UK to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 – a relatively simple political decision that did not even need a new act of parliament but which, if taken seriously by government, has huge implications for the way we live.¹² Johnson has since taken up the mantle of the net zero challenge, making it a central theme of his government. While other countries are following suit in announcing similar targets, the UK is beginning to set out its plan for hitting the target.

In November 2020 the prime minister announced his '10-point plan' for setting the UK on the right track, with significant investment in renewable electricity, electric transport and, although less ambitious than expected, in household energy efficiency.¹³ The prime minister has recognised both the importance of this issue and the size of the opportunity – the UK can play a leading role in the global effort to tackle climate change, while also supporting the development of new jobs and industries at home. Hosting the COP26 climate conference is also an opportunity for the government to burnish its green credentials, although it is only a milestone on the way to 2050.

Aside from generating positive headlines, the government needs to put together a detailed, credible plan for reaching net zero – including dealing with long-standing areas of policy failure such as how we heat our homes.¹⁴ To do so, the government will need to ensure that the country at large has the skills it needs – like engineers to install the new technologies we will come to rely on – and set out a plan for getting this capability in place. 2050 is a long way off but the work this government does in the coming months and years will be instrumental in putting the UK on the right track.

Figure 6.5 UK greenhouse gas emissions (1990–2019) and emissions projections (2019–40)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, '2019 UK greenhouse gas emissions: provisional figures', 3 June 2020, 'Updated energy and emissions projections: 2019', 30 October 2020.

Civil service reform

While changing how the state functions will not get the attention of voters, or even journalists, in the same way as big new infrastructure investments, Johnson and his government have made reforming the civil service a priority. One of the main proponents of this reform was his former chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, who had many criticisms of how the civil service worked.¹⁵ Michael Gove, minister for the Cabinet Office (and the first minister Cummings worked for in government), is also a proponent of civil service reform and continued ministerial focus will be needed to make a success of these reform efforts.

But, like many of this government's priorities, the issue did not move much beyond rhetoric in 2020 – other than the changes in top civil service posts that the prime minister brought about. Cummings' departure from government in November 2020 may mean that this is no longer the priority it once was. Civil service leaders say they are still committed to it but that it is going to be conducted more quietly.

The status of the government's planned white paper on civil service reform is unclear – as is the level of detail that can be expected. If ministers are serious about making change, they need to honestly assess the civil service's capability, set out what they want it to do differently and how they want to get there, where they want the civil service to be located and why, as well as how they intend to better use the skills, networks and technology the civil service already has. The civil service has learnt much from dealing with Brexit and Covid, particularly in how to manage the workforce flexibly and respond to crises: it should embed these lessons for the future.

These are the main challenges and opportunities that the government faces in 2021 – some that it has chosen itself and some that it has not. No list can be exhaustive, but we already know the scale and importance of the coming year for the government. Johnson must now build the team to deliver on these priorities and ensure that 'building back better' is not just rhetoric.



Methodology

How we define departments (throughout)

Where possible, we group bodies into 'departmental groups' according to where ministerial responsibility lies, even when these are reported under a separate departmental heading in the original data. For instance, we group Ofsted with DfE and not as a separate department.

We then make the following distinction within each departmental group:

- **Department:** the core department, and other bodies within it, that are directly line managed by the department (for example, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service within MoJ), and the Education and Skills Funding Agency within DfE).
- **Other organisations:** other bodies employing civil servants – executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and Crown non-departmental public bodies – for which ministers in the department have responsibility (for example, Ofsted in DfE, the DVLA in DfT) but which are not part of the department's line management structure.

A table listing the departments and their associated organisations is found overleaf.

This isn't always possible, and there are some other instances where we are not able to make this distinction.

- We apply our definition of 'department' in our analysis of staff numbers, grade, age, gender, ethnicity, disability, professions and pay ranges.
- We use the wider 'departmental group' in our analysis of location.
- We use the department as defined by the data producer on engagement, pay, functions, turnover, Freedom of Information, spend over £25,000 and organograms.

Acronym	Department	Other organisations
AGO	Attorney General's Office	Crown Prosecution Service; Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate; Government Legal Department; Serious Fraud Office
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (created July 2016)	Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service; Companies House; Competition and Markets Authority; HM Land Registry; Insolvency Service; UK Intellectual Property Office; Met Office; Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem); Ordnance Survey; UK Space Agency
CO	Cabinet Office Office of the Parliamentary Counsel	Buying Solutions; Central Office of Information; Charity Commission; Crown Commercial Service; Government Procurement Service; National School of Government; UK Statistics Authority; Government in Parliament; Government Property Agency
DCMS	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	Royal Parks; National Archives
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Animal and Plant Health Agency; Animal Health; Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency; Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science; Food and Environment Research Agency; Government Decontamination Services; Marine Fisheries Agency; Ofwat; Rural Payments Agency; Veterinary Laboratories Agency; Veterinary Medicines Directorate
DfE	Department for Education Education and Skills Funding Agency; Education Funding Agency; National College; National College for Teaching and Leadership; Standards and Testing Agency; Teaching Regulation Agency; Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation; Ofsted; Skills Funding Agency
DfID	Department for International Development (merged with the FCO in September 2020 to create the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO).	N/A
DfT	Department for Transport	Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency; Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency; Driving Standards Agency; Government Car and Despatch Agency; Highways Agency; Maritime and Coastguard Agency; Office of Rail and Road; Office of Rail Regulation; Vehicle and Operator Services Agency; Vehicle Certification Agency
DHSC (formerly DH)	Department of Health and Social Care, formerly Department of Health (name change January 2018)	Food Standards Agency; Meat Hygiene Service; Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency; National Healthcare Purchasing and Supplies; NHS Business Services Authority; Public Health England

DIT	Department for International Trade (created July 2016)	Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services; Security and Intelligence Services; Wilton Park Executive Agency; Export Credits Guarantee Department/UK Export Finance
	Department for Work and Pensions	
DWP	Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission; DWP Corporate and Shared Services; Jobcentre Plus; Pensions and Disability Carers Service	The Health and Safety Executive; The Rent Service
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (merged with DfID in September 2020 to create the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO)	Security and Intelligence Services; Wilton Park Executive Agency; Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services (transferred to FCDO in September 2020)
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (created September 2020)	Security and Intelligence Services; Wilton Park Executive Agency; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Services
HMRC	HM Revenue and Customs	Valuation Office Agency
HMT	HM Treasury	Asset Protection Agency; Debt Management Office; Government Actuary's Department; Government Internal Audit Agency; National Savings and Investments; Office for Budget Responsibility; Office for Government Commerce; OGC Buying Solutions; Royal Mint; National Infrastructure Commission
HO	Home Office UK Border Agency	Criminal Records Bureau; Her Majesty's Passport Office; Identity Passport Service; National Fraud Authority; National Crime Agency
MHCLG (formerly DCLG)	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (formerly Department for Communities and Local Government; name change January 2018)	Fire Service College; Planning Inspectorate; Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre
MoD	Ministry of Defence Defence Equipment and Support	Defence Science and Technology Laboratory; Defence Support Group; UK Hydrographic Office; Royal Fleet Auxiliary; Defence Electronics and Components Agency; Submarine Delivery Agency
	Ministry of Justice	
MoJ	HM Courts and Tribunals Service; HM Courts Service; Legal Aid Agency; National Offender Management Service (Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service since 2017); Scotland Office (incl. Office of the Advocate General for Scotland); The Office of the Public Guardian; Tribunals Service; Wales Office	UK Supreme Court; Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority
NIO	Northern Ireland Office	N/A

Change in forecast tax revenues – Chapter 1, p11

For each tax, we take the difference in the forecast for revenues in the Office for Budget Responsibility's *Economic and Fiscal Outlooks* in March and November 2020.

We calculate the amount that is a result of policy changes by taking the sum of the direct effects of tax policies on tax revenue streams in the November 2020 *Economic and fiscal outlook* (supplementary Table 3.10). We do not include second-order effects on tax revenues (for example, the higher tax revenues that result from the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme).

The policies we include are:

- the deferral of self-assessment income tax and capital gains from the 2020/21 tax year
- cuts in VAT for the hospitality and leisure industries, PPE, the construction sector and e-publications
- the business rates holiday for leisure and hospitality businesses and nurseries
- the increase in the stamp duty land tax threshold.

Ministerial resignations – Chapter 2, p22

Our tally of resignations includes only those outside of reshuffles; those during reshuffles are often difficult to discern from sackings (although we do include Jonathan Aitken's resignation in 1995, where he resigned to fight a libel action). We do not count those who announced in advance they would step down at the next reshuffle, or those who were sacked (although these are listed in our open spreadsheets of resignations at <http://bit.ly/2OXZ81a> and <http://bit.ly/2DOVxr6>). This again means our numbers may differ very slightly from others'. We also do not include Alok Sharma's resignation from the post of secretary of state for BEIS in January 2021 as he did not leave the government but resigned to focus on his other post, president of the COP26 climate conference, and still attends cabinet.

U-turns – Chapter 2, p25

We define a U-turn as a policy decision, piece of legislation or announcement that follows a clear announcement or manifesto commitment that the government would do the contrary.

Meetings with devolved governments – Chapter 2, p28

The information releases from the Scottish and Welsh governments form the basis of the chart showing meetings between the UK and devolved governments, categorised into COBR, implementation groups and other meetings. For 'Other' we eliminated meetings with UK ministers who are not in the cabinet, for ease of display. We then supplemented these with information from Freedom of Information responses from HM Treasury, Northern Ireland Office, Wales Office, Northern Ireland Department of Health, as well as the information available on the UK government's inter-governmental relations page on GOV.UK.

Meetings with local authorities – Chapter 2, p30

We sent Freedom of Information requests to Liverpool City Council and Combined Authority, Manchester City Council, Leicester City Council and Kent County Council, requesting the dates and subjects of all meetings with central government concerning the Covid-19 pandemic and preparations for the end of the Brexit transition period between 1 January 2020 and 23 November 2020, the date of the request. Liverpool City Council provided the dates and subjects of all meetings with central government, so we have recorded only those meetings with the words 'T&T/test and trace; lockdown; Covid; DHSC' in the title. We did not receive a response from Kent County Council in time for publication.

Workforce analysis – Chapter 3, throughout

The Office for National Statistics (annual civil service employment survey, to 2018) and Cabinet Office (civil service statistics, from 2019) report staff numbers in any given category to the nearest 10, and therefore numbers may not be exact. We have rounded any numbers lower than five to three (for example, in our analysis of age).

DfID and FCO merged in September 2020 to create the FCDO but are still included in many of our workforce analysis charts. This is because the civil service statistics data used to analyse some aspects of the civil service workforce such as grade, pay or location was published in August 2020 before this machinery of government change. The government updated the civil service statistics in December 2020; this is reflected in our analysis.

Some data releases report certain roles such as health professionals, military personnel and senior diplomats as 'senior civil service', but the Cabinet Office does not consider these roles to be part of the actual Senior Civil Service (SCS). We therefore refer to 'senior civil service and equivalent' in our analysis of ONS data.

Staff numbers – Chapter 3, pp34–35

To analyse staff numbers, we use Table 9 from the ONS' quarterly public sector employment series, which contains staff numbers (full-time equivalent, FTE) in all public organisations that employ civil servants. FTE counts part-time staff according to the time they work (e.g., a person working two days a week as 0.4); this is more accurate than headcount, which does not distinguish between full-time and part-time employees.

Our calculated rates of change in each period for each department are adjusted for reclassifications of staff between bodies. Reclassifications are usually noted by the ONS in footnotes to the data tables. The figures shown for each department in our 'change from baseline' charts take a geometric average of per-period change rates over all periods from 2010 Q3 (our spending review baseline) to the latest period.

Professions and functions, Chapter 3, pp37–39

We have grouped the 29 civil service professions reported by the ONS into three overarching categories:

Profession	IfG category
Commercial	Cross-departmental specialisms
Communications	Cross-departmental specialisms
Corporate finance	Cross-departmental specialisms (included in the finance sub-category)
Digital, data and technology (DDaT)	Cross-departmental specialisms
Economics	Cross-departmental specialisms (included in the analytics sub-category)
Finance	Cross-departmental specialisms
Human Resources (HR)	Cross-departmental specialisms
Inspector of education and training	Departmental specialisms
Intelligence analysis	Departmental specialisms
Internal audit	Cross-departmental specialisms
International trade	Departmental specialisms
Knowledge and information management	Cross-departmental specialisms
Legal	Cross-departmental specialisms
Medicine	Departmental specialisms
Operational delivery	Operational delivery
Operational research	Cross-departmental specialisms
Planning	Departmental specialisms (included in the planning sub-category)
Planning inspectors	Departmental specialisms (included in the planning sub-category)
Policy	Cross-departmental specialisms
Project delivery	Cross-departmental specialisms
Property	Cross-departmental specialisms
Psychology	Departmental specialisms
Science and engineering	Departmental specialisms
Security	Departmental specialisms
Social research	Cross-departmental specialisms (included in the analytics sub-category)
Statistics	Cross-departmental specialisms (included in the analytics sub-category)
Tax	Departmental specialisms
Veterinarian	Departmental specialisms

Where civil servants' profession is not recorded we classify them as 'unknown'. The number of individuals in individual functions or professions is calculated based on the data reported by individuals on their departmental HR system, rather than an objective classification. Since it is based on individuals' decisions to self-identify with a specific function or profession, any changes in numbers over time are likely to be caused by an increase in the number of people self-identifying rather than an increase in the numbers, although this is difficult to untangle.

Turnover at director-general level, Chapter 3, p40

Our analysis of turnover among directors-general in the departments which saw permanent secretaries depart in 2020 is impressionistic. It draws on a snapshot of those DGs (and equivalent) who were in place in September 2020, and how many months they had been in their role. This data was largely taken from departments' websites. Where data was not available or up-to-date, we tried to use alternative sources – though there some directors-general for whom it was not possible to find reliable information on how long they had held their role.

Parliamentary questions – Chapter 5, p65

We searched for Commons written parliamentary questions using the online written question finder on the UK Parliament website, and Commons oral questions through the data.parliament.uk oral question finder. We counted returns by department, and compared results for questions tabled between 13 June 2017 and 8 October 2019 (the sitting dates of the 2017–19 parliament) with questions tabled between 1 January and 31 December 2020. For oral questions, we included only questions that were tabled, not those that were withdrawn. We then divided departmental results by the total number of days the House of Commons sat between those dates. For totals relating to the FCDO, we have compared the sum of questions to the FCO and DfID between 2017 and 2019 with the sum of the questions to the FCO, DfID and the FCDO for 2020.

Results may differ slightly to those published by the Procedure Committee, as parliamentary staff have access to additional data that is not publicly available.

Press conferences – Chapter 5, p66

We counted all press conferences that appeared on GOV.UK's collection of 'Slides, datasets and transcripts from press conferences at 10 Downing Street in response to coronavirus'. This includes data briefings given by government scientists, and the prime minister's addresses to the nation. We have included all appearances by government ministers, but included other speakers only where they have appeared more than three times (22 speakers appeared three times or fewer).

Advertising campaign spending – Chapter 5, p67

We analysed £25,000 spend data released by the Cabinet Office on GOV.UK. We calculated the total amount spent on advertising by filtering for expense types including the words 'marketing', 'media', 'advertising', 'campaign' and 'publicity'.

We categorised this spending as EU exit spending if 'EU exit' was referenced in the expense area. Spending was categorised as Covid-19 spending if 'Covid-19' or 'coronavirus' was referenced in the expense area. All other advertising spending was categorised as 'Other'.

Spending over £25,000 – Chapter 5, pp69–71

We searched for £25,000 spend data on GOV.UK and data.gov.uk for releases covering the period November 2010 to November 2020. If a release could not be located, we marked the file as 'Not published'.

Treasury guidance (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130102173628/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/government_spend_guide_2012.pdf#page=6) says the releases should be published by the end of the following month (e.g., the September 2020 file should have been published by 31 October 2020). Releases that came out up to 60 days after the first day of the month to which the data refers were classified as 'on time'. Releases that came out 61–90 days after the first day of the month were classified 'late within a month', and 91+ days after as 'late over a month'.

Organograms – Chapter 5, p73

We searched for organogram data on GOV.UK and data.gov.uk and recorded whether we could find the file for each six-month period. Guidance says departments should publish their 31 March organograms by 6 June, and the 30 September versions by 6 December. In some cases, departments published organograms capturing slightly different dates, which we have treated as having been published in accordance with government guidance.

Our final data was collected on 13 January 2021 as departments were due to have published their organograms for September 2020 by 6 December. Some organograms may therefore have been published in the meantime, though they would still be late.

In some cases, information about years before 2020 differs to that published in previous editions of Whitehall Monitor (for instance, where departments published old organograms in 2020).

List of abbreviations

Departments and organisations

Acronym	Organisation name
AGO	Attorney General's Office
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
BERR	Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CDDO	Central Digital and Data Office
CO	Cabinet Office
DCA	Department for Constitutional Affairs
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government (now MHCLG)
DCMS	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
DPCP	Department of Prices and Consumer Protection
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DECC	Department of Energy and Climate Change
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DETR	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
DExEU	Department for Exiting the European Union (abolished 31 Jan 2020)
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DfID	Department for International Development (now merged into FCDO)
DfSS	Department for Social Security
DfT	Department for Transport
DH	Department of Health (now DHSC)
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
DIT	Department for International Trade
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
DNH	Department of National Heritage
DTLR	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions
DVLA	Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (part of DfT)
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Foreign Office
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Foreign Office (now merged into FCDO)
GDS	Government Digital Service

HMCTS	Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury, the Treasury
HO	Home Office
HoC	House of Commons
HoL	House of Lords
IPA	Infrastructure and Projects Authority
Law	Law officers (AGO, Office of the Advocate General for Scotland)
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NAO	National Audit Office
NHS	National Health Service
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OBR	Office for Budget Responsibility
ODM	Ministry of Overseas Development
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
OPS	Office of Public Service
OPSS	Office of Public Service and Science
ONS	Office for National Statistics
Scot	Scotland Office
SG/Scot Gov	Scottish Government
Wal	Wales Office

Other abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
AO/AA	Administrative officer/administrative assistant (civil service grade)
CA	Combined authority
CJRS	Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
COBR	Civil Contingencies Committee (which meets in Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms)
CS	Civil service
DDaT	Digital data and technology profession
EO	Executive officer (civil service grade)
EU	European Union

FTE	Full-time equivalent
FoI	Freedom of Information
FSM	Free school meals
G6/G7	Grade 6 and Grade 7 (civil service grades)
GDP	Gross domestic product
GE	General election
IFG	Institute for Government
IT/ICT	Information technology/Information and communications technology
JSS	Job Support Scheme
LBTT	Land and buildings transactions tax
MIG	Ministerial implementation group
MoS	Minister of state
NDPB	Non-departmental public body
PM	Prime minister
PPE	Personal protective equipment
Q (Q1 etc.)	Quarter
SCS	Senior civil service
SDLT	Stamp duty land tax
SEO/HEO	Senior executive officer/Higher executive officer (civil service grades)
SEISS	Self-Employment Income Support Scheme
SI	Statutory instrument
SoS	Secretary of state
SR	Spending review/Spending round
SSPS	Statutory Sick Pay Scheme
VAT	Value added tax
WFH	Working from home

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