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**WHAT’S GONE WRONG WITH WHITEHALL?**

**Discussion paper**

This paper is the first output of our Assessment workstream, which is examining the standout successes and failures of recent public administrations. It assesses four key areas to determine whether UK government is operating at a world-class level. We welcome comment and feedback so as to inform our final report.

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**November 2020**

**The Commission for Smart Government**

The Commission for Smart Government is an independent initiative to consider how to make public administration more effective. The Commission is a project of [GovernUp](http://www.governup.org/), which is an independent, non-party research initiative that offers evidenced-based solutions for all political parties to adopt. This is the first of a series of discussion documents that will address the 12 areas of focus covered by the Commission. The 12 workstreams are:

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| Assessment | *What have been the standout successes and failures of recent public administrations, and what can we learn from them?* |
| Best Practice | *What are the examples of best practice in the UK and around the world from which we can learn?* |
| Talent &  Competence | *How do we equip civil servants with better skills, recruit and remunerate to attract the best and incentivise success, and share knowledge?* |
| Project Management | *How do we ensure officials have sufficient commercial and project management experience to commission and manage big projects successfully?* |
| Finance | *How do we ensure stronger financial management, strip out cost and drive efficiency?* |
| Structures | *How should we improve the current Whitehall structure, with its small yet overlapping centre and siloed departments, to make decision-making more effective and less bureaucratic?* |
| Devolution | *To what extent should we devolve more power and decision-making to local bodies, and how can this be achieved while maintaining a proper role for the UK Government?* |
| Accountability | *How can we make the system, including ministers and civil servants, as well as agencies, regulators and arms-length bodies, more accountable?* |
| Technology | *How can we deploy technology more effectively and rapidly to improve public services?* |
| Data | *How can we ensure that decisions are evidence-based and informed by data?* |
| Ministers | *How can we make ministers and advisers more effective in their jobs?* |
| Appointments | *How can we ensure that the appointments system attracts the best and aligns with the Government’s priorities?* |

**Commissioners**

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| --- | --- |
| **Michael Bichard** | Lord Bichard KCB is a crossbench peer in the House of Lords and chair of the National Audit Office. He was formerly Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and the first Director of the Institute for Government. |
| **Deborah Cadman** | Deborah Cadman OBE is Chief Executive of the West Midlands Combined Authority. |
| **Camilla Cavendish** | Baroness Cavendish of Little Venice is a former Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit. |
| **Suma Chakrabarti** | Sir Suma Chakrabarti KCB was until recently the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. He was formerly Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for International Development. |
| **Ian Cheshire** | Sir Ian Cheshire is the Chairman of Barclays UK plc. He was formerly the Government Lead Non-Executive Director. |
| **Phaedra Chrousos** | Phaedra Chrousos is the Chief Strategy Officer for Libra Group and a former commissioner for the US Technology and Transformation Service. |
| **Chris Deverell** | General Sir Chris Deverell KCB MBE is the former Commander of UK Joint Forces Command. |
| **Simone Finn** | Baroness Finn is a Non-Executive Director at the Cabinet Office and a former government adviser on civil service reform. |
| **Jayne-Anne Gadhia** | Dame Jayne-Anne Gadhia DBE FRSE is a businesswoman and the founder and Executive Chair of the start-up Snoop. |
| **Martin Gilbert** | Martin Gilbert is the Chairman of Revolut and the co-founder and former CEO of Aberdeen Asset Management. |
| **Verity Harding** | Verity Harding is a Visiting Fellow at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge University, where she is on secondment from her role as Global Head of Policy and Partnerships at DeepMind. |
| **Nick Herbert** | Lord Herbert of South Downs CBE PC (Chair) is a former Conservative minister. |
| **Margaret Hodge** | Rt Hon Dame Margaret Hodge DBE MP is a Labour Member of Parliament, a former minister, and the former Chair of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee. |
| **Husayn Kassai** | Husayn Kassai is the co-founder and CEO of Onfido. |
| **Daniel Korski** | Daniel Korski is the co-founder and CEO of PUBLIC and a former Deputy Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit. |
| **Paul Marshall** | Sir Paul Marshall is Chair and Chief Investment Officer of Marshall Wace LLP and a former Lead Non-Executive Director at the Department for Education. |
| **John Nash** | Lord Nash is a businessman and Government Lead Non-Executive Director. He is a former minister. |
| **Mark Rowley** | Sir Mark Rowley QPM is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. |
| **Gisela Stuart** | Baroness Stuart of Edgbaston PC is Lead Non-Executive Director at the Cabinet Office and a former Labour MP and minister. |
| **Jacky Wright** | Jacky Wright is the Chief Digital Officer for Microsoft US. |

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# Summary

This paper contains the Commission’s starting assessment of whether the UK’s system of government is world class on four tests. Does it:

1. Have a clear strategic direction?

2. Bring about change?

3. Use technology and data well?

4. Attract and effectively deploy great people?

These tests are connected. Government cannot plan and do well without making good use of technology and data, and without a skilled, well-managed workforce. But it needs to set and deliver a strategy for building those vital capacities.

*“The quality of the UK's legislative and executive institutions has diminished in recent years. Policymaking… has become less predictable and effective.”* Moody’s, October 2020

External observers – Moody’s and the World Bank – are increasingly critical. The current Government knows we need radical reform and has set out some elements.

Our view is blunt. **Britain’s reputation for strong government which delivers for citizens is under threat**. Running policy sores like social care have remained unfixed through successive administrations. There is no sign of a strategy for big strategic challenges – climate, social and economic inequality, our way in the world after Brexit. A death rate from coronavirus ten times that of Germany and twenty times that of East Asian countries shows the system is not resilient. It has been weak at bringing about improvement: reform plans come and go but are not ambitious enough or are allowed to fizzle out.

*“The need for reform is obvious.”* Michael Gove,

July 2020

Comparing the current system to our four tests:

*“In times of crisis, public trust in government is key to ensuring compliance with any measures citizens are asked to take. Perceptions of incompetence foster distrust”* Suzanne Hall, Ipsos MORI, October 2020

1. **Weaknesses in the system and structures of government seriously undermine strategic coherence**. The centre of government is underpowered and dysfunctional, with inadequate support for the office of Prime Minister and confused roles and accountability. There are big institutional barriers to departments working together. Systems for planning resources and activity are weak.
2. **Government struggles to bring about change**. There is systemic failure to design workable approaches, notably on complex social and economic challenges which cannot be tackled by top-down centralism. Accountability is weak and confused. There is no clear approach to working with local government, other public bodies and private and NGO public service providers.
3. There are good ambitions on **data and technology**, but they **require more impetus, ambition and investment**. Technology must provide better services to meet citizens' needs and transform the efficiency of internal processes. Government must not lose the confidence of citizens that their data is handled well and must practice openness.
4. **Outdated practices for managing people and skills require urgent reform**. The staffing and leadership of the Civil Service lacks the mix of skills and backgrounds needed for a modern government which is effective and responsive to the society for which it works. There are major structural barriers to reform and improvement. Political talent requires conscious development and support too.

We would welcome evidence and feedback on the analysis in this paper. Over the coming months, we will refine it. We will also develop proposals, including for a properly structured and resourced centre of government; for financial and performance planning, to fix broken accountability and for government to be able to bring about change other than by ineffective diktat and micro-management; to address the key inhibitors to world class use of technology and data; and to enable the people in government to thrive and be successful.

# What this paper is about

The Commission has been established to assess objectively whether Britain’s system of government is equal to the challenges facing the country: recovering from the social and economic impact of coronavirus, making a success of ‘global Britain’ outside the European Union, and exploiting the next wave of technological change. Government needs to be smarter: more efficient, more capable, and more accountable.

Over the next six months, the Commission will examine and draw up proposals on ten aspects of how government works. The purpose of this paper is to provide an initial assessment of the big picture: looked at as a whole, how effective is Britain’s system of government and what are the main ways it needs to improve?

We are publishing this paper near the beginning of our work, rather than at the end, to explain our choice of topics for detailed work, and because our central thesis is that incremental, modest, improvements to specific aspects of how government works have not, and will not, bring about the fundamental change needed.

This paper is not, however, the final word. We will develop the analysis further based on the evidence and proposals in our workstreams, reflecting feedback.

A companion introductory paper will look at examples of what has worked well in government improvement in this country and abroad.

# What would a world class, effective government look like?

The main part of this paper assesses how well British government is working against what we suggest are four essential tests of good government. Does government:

1. Have a clear strategic direction?
2. Bring about effective change?
3. Use technology and data well?
4. Attract and effectively deploy great people?

Figure (i) below expands on these tests.

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| **Figure (i): World Class, effective, government** | |
| 1. **Have a clear strategic direction?** | * Enables politicians to settle a clear, focused, set of strategic priorities: * Consistent with a clear political vision; * Which identifies and addresses the main challenges for social and economic wellbeing, security and prosperity; * Is based on a sound assessment of medium and long-term risk and opportunity. * Has a clear understanding about how priorities can turn into action, whether directly by government or by enabling others. * Can effectively allocate resources against its strategic priorities, linked to effective measures of success and targets. |
| 1. **Bring about effective change?** | * Applies the right models of change, including centrally planned and managed delivery, systems stewardship, and enabling action at local and community level and by citizens. * Empowers leaders to manage projects, services, and change, but holds them to account by allocating responsibility and control over resources, with clear and aligned accountability. * Is supported by well organised relationships between the core, sub-national governments, and wider public sector, and by effective partnerships with the third and private sector. Uses strong systems and technologies to manage spending, performance, and outcomes. |
| 1. **Use technology and data well?** | * Uses evidence from data capture and analysis as the basis for decision-making and policy development. * Is able to deploy technology creatively to transform public service delivery to be more efficient and responsive to citizen needs. * Uses data as the basis for strong performance management, accountability, and assessment of impact against strategy. |
| 1. **Attract and effectively deploy great people?** | * Is able to attract, retain, reward, and develop highly skilled, motivated, and effective people who can deliver services which citizens need. * Empowers people to perform effectively within organisational systems that optimise effective decision-making and innovation. * Deploys professional expertise in core functional areas - project management, commercial, finance, policy – to bring about improvement across government. * Uses systems of scrutiny, governance and accountability effectively to drive performance and good outcomes against strategic plan. * Embodies an outward looking, creative and self-learning system that encourages relentless improvement. |

These tests are interlinked. Most importantly, (1) (strategy) underpins the other three. The relationship between (1) and (2) (bringing about change) cannot be one-way: great strategy is based on understanding implementation and the players who are going to be involved in it. Effective shaping of change (2) can only happen with effective use of technology and data (3) and making sure government has the right people and deploys them well. Government can only meet these tests if the political component, Ministers and those around them, works well with public servants.

## The imperative for reform

**Britain’s reputation for strong, competent government is under threat.** Only last month, the credit rating agency Moody’s downgraded the UK, including alongside its economic analysis a strong statement about “*the weakening in the UK's institutions and governance that Moody's has observed in recent years.”* They went on to say that: “*while still high, the quality of the UK's legislative and executive institutions has diminished in recent years. Policymaking, particularly with respect to fiscal policy, has become less predictable and effective*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) On the World Bank’s Government Effectiveness measure, the UK ranks below all the G7 countries except Italy (lower even than the US), and below Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.[[2]](#endnote-2) Looking at the Civil Service specifically, the INCiSE international comparison rates the UK Civil Service strongest in its overall measure, with particularly strong rankings in regulation, policymaking, openness, and fiscal and financial management. On other measures, however – digital, inclusiveness and integrity – it appears well down the rankings.[[3]](#endnote-3) So even this more friendly assessment – about the Civil Service component of UK governance only – suggests a worrying patchiness in what works well or does not.

More importantly still, government which appears incompetent risks undermining citizen confidence and consent. As Suzanne Hall of Ipsos MORI puts it: “*in times of crisis, public trust in government is key to ensuring compliance with any measures citizens are asked to take. Perceptions of incompetence foster mistrust, meaning people may be less likely to follow the rules – which in turn makes the State less resilient in the face of adversity.*”[[4]](#endnote-4)

**The Commission agrees that reform is now imperative.** We acknowledge considerable strengths, which reform must preserve and develop. We need not and must not create a public service ground zero. However, major shortcomings have not been addressed for too long. Our system of government is insufficiently focused on making a difference for citizens across the whole country, and for that reason is neither well enough attuned to their experience, nor driven, as it should, by meeting their needs and expectations. Weaknesses which were already widely understood, but not addressed with sufficient determination, have left the UK State and society peculiarly unprepared for coronavirus. Weaknesses in how government works have been a contributory factor in the UK’s high death rate from the pandemic, and brought our weaknesses to international attention.

What is wrong and why does it matter?

First, **our system of government seems unable to sort out effectively longstanding societal and policy problems.** Important, strategic issues which affect the wellbeing of millions of citizens and the effectiveness of government have not been resolved satisfactorily, over decades in some cases. Profound problems about our economy, society and public services remain unfixed: stubbornly low productivity rates, low rates of investment, a weak balance of trade, housing supply and affordability and social care to name just some of the most obvious. For England especially, successive governments have failed to set and stick with a principled, effective, relationship with sub-national government in which it is empowered and resourced – recognising that not every element of all problems can be solved from the centre. The legislative and financial settlement with the devolved countries is more settled, but it is not clear that the track record of their governments on finding solutions to these challenges has been noticeably better.

Second, **it shows little sign of being able to tackle effectively known future challenges.** We need to set a clear path towards net zero, for which government has no clear strategic framework now, with the consequence that local government, business and other players have no basis for planning and bringing about the radical change which is needed in our energy, housing, transport and other systems .[[5]](#endnote-5) With Brexit, the UK’s economic and foreign affairs context shifts massively. This means we have to rethink profoundly our economic and industrial strategy and how we manage our place in the world. And not just rethink, reshape effectively. Even before coronavirus, the medium to long-term picture for the public finances was one of “significant pressure” from health, the ageing population and other factors, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility.[[6]](#endnote-6) Once the pandemic crisis itself ends, it will leave an enormous legacy, profound changes in our economy and society as well as a massive fiscal hangover, with which government will need to get to grips.

Third, **it lacks resilience.** This is shown above all in the response to coronavirus. It has revealed some strengths, notably an ability to improvise rapidly, which, on an initial view at least, has mitigated some of the worst potential impacts, on livelihoods, in prisons and on homelessness. However, on other important aspects, Britain’s lack of a better functioning government has left it at a disadvantage to competitors. In a new book, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge argue that the crisis has shown up a clear competitive edge for countries with effective systems of government. They point to the slowness of the UK reaction to coronavirus, its over-centralisation, dysfunctionality at the centre of government and tendency towards a monopolistic approach - in contrast to the regionally led approach deployed in most countries (Germany, South Korea) which are seen to have had a 'better' crisis. This has had the most devasting consequences in terms of death rates: better performing western countries like Germany have done ten times better, and eastern countries 20 times.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Fourth, **the system of government seems incapable of continuous improvement and reform of the breadth and radicalism required.** Plans and initiatives to address known problems with government and public services have come and gone. The Thatcher government drove strongly from the centre for efficiency, basic systems of financial management and, latterly, improving accountability and focus on delivery through the Next Steps programme.[[8]](#endnote-8) The basic capability of deciding what to do and getting it to happen was a concern for the Blair administration. It introduced, and progressively refined, improvements, notably Public Service Agreements, the Delivery Unit at the centre, into which Blair invested considerable personal capital. However, there was a loss of momentum after 2005, and the remnants of the approach were set aside by the Coalition.[[9]](#endnote-9) Understanding of place and the relationship with local government and others has been the subject of analysis after analysis.[[10]](#endnote-10) Likewise procurement and digital. The Coalition drew up an ambitious plan for Civil Service reform. Both at the end of the New Labour phase, and with a strong drive from George Osborne under the Coalition, there have been determined efforts to understand places and work effectively with local leaders to improve the management of investment and public services.[[11]](#endnote-11) But, as GovernUp put it, there is “*all change and not enough change…reform has not significantly addressed key issues, has often lacked clarity, and implementation has been patchy*.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Technology is key to tackling all these problems: “*ossified institutions and approaches designed for the offline world are a poor fit for dealing with an operating environment that is now defined by the Internet and new technologies*.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

The problem therefore transcends individual areas of concern and reform initiatives to address them. It is about the big picture, and whether government has the strategic and change management capabilities, including the data, systems, and technologies, to design and bring about change across the piece and make it stick. A lack of effective support for the Prime Minister and for the Cabinet to operate effectively means there is a lack of strategy and assurance about decisions being put into effect. That leads to a vicious spiral in which the centre’s inability to operate strategically causes it to micro-manage, leaving it yet further unable to play the strategic role which only it can.

**The Government takes the same view and has set out a diagnosis.** It has been reported of the Prime Minister that he: *“… listens to experts and then he makes a decision and pulls the lever. What has been immensely frustrating for everyone involved is levers have been pulled and nothing happened.”*[[14]](#endnote-14)

In the light of the crisis, as well as his broader experience in government, Michael Gove has strongly challenged the whole system, politicians, civil servants and, indeed, large companies dominating the government supplier landscape. “*Faith in conventional political parties, their leadership and their allies in business has been broken. Failures of policy and judgment have put previously existing elites in the dock. Their misjudgements, in the eyes of many, have been compounded by cultural condescension and insulation from accountability.*”[[15]](#endnote-15)

He has compared the challenges for the UK and world to the 1930s, drawing three lessons from Roosevelt’s approach to recovery in that era: “*no society [can] succeed unless every citizen within it had the chance to succeed*”; that our times require “*not simply a change of personnel and rhetoric that was required but a change in structure, ambition and organisation*”; and for government “*to be flexible, adaptive and empirical*.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Dominic Cummings has argued for similar radicalism about both structure and ways of working.[[17]](#endnote-17)

As to the flaws which currently stand in the way of reform, Gove has spoken of: a lack of emphasis on delivery, as opposed to policy formation; insufficient emphasis on evidence and using it well; and too much uniformity in policy-makers’ educational and professional background, where they live, and their cultural assumptions, leading to a lack of the cognitive diversity which leads to good analysis and decision-taking.

The Cabinet Office’s own prospectus on Civil Service reform brings out the themes in this analysis, emphasising the need for significant change, and the interlinked issues of agility and innovation, data and technology and diversity of background.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The Cabinet Office is now developing a transformation programme for the Civil Service “*to further enhance its efficiency, effectiveness and agility, creating the high performance, innovative and digitally powered service we need for the times we are in.*”[[19]](#endnote-19) In headline terms, it appears to be directed at the right issues. However, the programme is limited to the Civil Service, rather than the system of government as a whole, and there is a long history of fair diagnosis and good intentions failing to translate into embedded successful change on the scale which is required. This is not least because the Cabinet Office struggles to gain traction over what happens in largely autonomous departments.

The rest of this paper looks in more depth at how British government currently measures against the four tests set out above, and explains how the Commission’s work programme will develop proposals for improvement.

# 1. Does government have a clear strategic direction?

We suggested above that this test is the most important: everything else rests on it. We also set out what we see as the current failures of strategy – longstanding unresolved policy problems, lack of proper plans for known future challenges, resilience and lack of capacity for change management.

Success in tackling these issues means success everywhere in the country, “Mansfield to Middlesbrough to Merthyr Tydfil”, as Michael Gove put it, which requires overcoming yet another dimension of policy failure, entrenched disparities in economic growth between regions, and stalled improvement in social mobility.[[20]](#endnote-20) It requires a recognition that muscular action directed top down from central government is often doomed to failure - notably for tackling deep-seated complex social policy challenges – for all that it may work well on other fronts.

In the absence of strategy, it is all too likely that government will continue in a repeated cycle of crisis management. Under pressure politically or in the media, some make-do-and-mend patch is applied to a deep-seated problem, with the certainty that it will unravel at some not-too-distant point in the future. Strategy is vital to the success of major projects too: the centre of government needs to ensure that desired outcomes are clear and plans realistic. On the long-term challenges, for example net zero, there is a need for a strategy running well beyond a single Parliamentary term. But strategic capability also needs to be resilient enough to adapt both to external events and changes in political priorities.

There are issues of official capability and culture. But, even more than with our other three tests, the prime responsibility for the UK’s weakness on this test is with its national politicians, as Michael Gove has recognised in a speech defending public service: “*of course we politicians are principally to blame. We go for the sugar rush that comes from announcing radical initiatives, unveiling dramatic overhauls, launching new spending programmes, ramping up this and rolling out that*.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

There are three closely linked reasons.

## A dysfunctional centre of government with particularly weak support for the Prime Minister

Whitehall and its watchers often talk of “the centre” (of government), but it is far from a unified, clearly organised, set of functions. It is in three parts:

* The Prime Minister’s personal office (No 10), consisting of only around 200 staff.[[22]](#endnote-22)
* The Cabinet Office, whose main components are the central capacity for managing government and Cabinet business (the secretariats and National Security Council) and the government’s central HR and business effectiveness capacity. Formal accountability for the Cabinet Office rests with the Prime Minister, but a number of other Ministers have roles there, and it has a highly complex structure.
* The Treasury: economic policy and its execution are, of course, fundamental to the success of any government. But the planning and management of public spending, carried out by its Spending Directorate, plays a crucial part in the government’s strategic capability.

The Institute for Government (IfG) has suggested the centre has six key roles in support of the Prime Minister: policy advice and support; long-term policy development and direction; co-ordination and dispute resolution; progress assurance; incubating and catalysing change; and communications and external relations.[[23]](#endnote-23) (A critical dimension of the last, we would say, is the relationship with Parliament.) One might add to those the resource planning role of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office’s central HR and government effectiveness roles.

This is a challenging collection of roles, but the current structure means that success depends heavily on the skill of individuals and personal relationships, political and official: it is not “wired in”. As the IfG has argued: “*any prime minister should be able to take for granted the existence of capacities to coordinate and drive their agenda, to support the solving of longer-term problems, to assure progress and to help incubate or catalyse change, in addition to day-to-day support from their private office. They should then be able to tailor those capacities to their priorities, personal style and political circumstances.*” Yet that has not been there, leading Prime Ministers to improvise work-arounds.[[24]](#endnote-24) Direct policy support for the Prime Minister has tended to be small in scale – no more than 10-20 individuals, and focused on short term fire-fighting – “to fall on hand grenades” as an observer of No.10’s Canadian counterpart put it.[[25]](#endnote-25) This contrasts with Germany, for example, where the Chancellor can call on support within her office of a similar number of experts on the economy alone. [[26]](#endnote-26) To varying extents, Prime Ministers have recognised that they also need support in shaping and enforcing medium term strategy. But an established capacity for doing this has never become a permanent part of the landscape.[[27]](#endnote-27)

A recent Permanent Secretary has described the way the centre works as like a “court”, a term echoed by the IfG: “*the centre of the UK government, broadly speaking, operates like a court. It’s designed to manage messaging, not to deliver big policy goals; it’s just not structured like that. It doesn’t have folk at the centre who have that kind of experience*.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

The issue is not about resources. The Cabinet Office has a budget of over £600m and employs nearly 6,000 staff.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is about a centre with a clearer remit, operating model, and organisation, and employing the right people. The answer is likely to be a smaller, but much more effective, centre.

As the IfG has chronicled, government has looked at these issues a number of times, made tinkering and often not enduring changes, considered but shied away from more radical change.[[30]](#endnote-30) At least twice in the last 20 years, we understand that Prime Ministers have considered creating a more unified centre by reducing the role of the Treasury, Blair in 2005 and May in 2017, but in each case politics supervened.[[31]](#endnote-31)

## A structure which leads to fragmented thinking and action

The central departments aside, central government is organised into 18 main departments led by a Secretary of State or equivalent. While subject to Cabinet collective responsibility, formal accountability to Parliament for the department’s business is via the Secretary of State. Permanent Secretaries, as Accounting Officers, have specific personal responsibility for the management of spending. In addition, the dynamic between Secretaries of State is often heavily driven by political competition, and there are institutional “departmental views” and outlooks.

This structure means that working across departmental boundaries, whether to tackle issues such as rough sleeping (which involves health, welfare, employment and justice as well as housing issues), the infrastructure investment needs of particular places, or the concerted action across government needed to tackle the pandemic effectively, is against the grain. The system of Cabinet Committees is, at best, a patchy response to this default towards separateness. Particularly if a strong Prime Minister is driving colleagues towards working together on a common goal, it may work. But otherwise Committees simply become the arenas in which political and departmental rivalries and differences of mindset slog it out until they are forced to reach some weak compromise.

The problem is widely recognised, but not tackled with any determination or persistence. For example, the Blair government often spoke of “joined up government”, but its response was not change to the fundamentals of the departmental model, but to use special-purpose central units, for example on social exclusion or rough sleeping, to develop policy and broker stronger cross-departmental working. These achieved some success in the short term, but the system has reverted to type once these units have passed out of the limelight or been abolished.[[32]](#endnote-32)

## Inability to develop credible strategic financial and performance plans, aligned with each other

The two structural issues described above contribute to a dysfunctional approach to resource and performance planning which contrasts with other governments, for example Scotland and Canada.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The key problems are:

* The divided centre and under-powered Prime Minister’s office do not produce a clear, focused, set of priorities for the government as a whole, against which plans for resources and performance could be drawn up, against a zero base and with the right measures and targets.
* Planning processes have tended to operate separately, or even competitively, between the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, with the Treasury focusing on allocating public spending, and the Cabinet Office leading on such cross-government performance planning as has been done. Since 2017, the Treasury has started to take more of an interest in the value and impact of spending (its Public Value Framework), but this risks leading to yet further confusion because it operates alongside the Cabinet Office’s Single Departmental Plan process.[[34]](#endnote-34)
* The centre struggles to draw together the work of government as a whole, ensuring its priorities are delivered, and it deals effectively with the unexpected. Because its organisation is confused, and key capabilities are under-resourced, and departments’ separateness is buttressed by the accountability system, it cannot ensure departments focus on the government’s priorities and work effectively together across boundaries. [[35]](#endnote-35)
* Both financial and performance planning processes tend to be based on departmental structures. Instead of answering the questions like “what do we need to do to end rough sleeping?” and “how much resource is needed?”, they decide that department A should have £x billion to spend on everything it does, and department B £y billion, and produce plans which are a list of things department A is doing, and which department B is doing. The IfG’s 2018 study of spending reviews argued that they “*end up as a contest between ministers for scraps of spare cash – often fought out in the media through leaks – rather than a systematic look at how government might do things better. They do not set priorities effectively, at a time when pressure on public finances should make that essential*.”[[36]](#endnote-36)
* Government struggles to develop and apply convincing theories of change for issues, notably complex social policy challenges. Either it seeks to apply top-down direction of resources and action, often worsened by departmentalism, or does nothing more than express aspirations with no apparent conception of how it might encourage or enable players outside government to behave differently. Recognition is lacking that the complex, ambiguous challenges with which government wrestles typically demand adaptive, rather than technical leadership, and that services and change have to be designed properly.
* Despite some progress in recent years, the quality of both internal and published financial plans and accounts needs to be improved further, both to support decision-making in departments and to enable effective external scrutiny. Four years on from their invention, the linkage between spending and performance in Single Departmental Plans is limited, certainly in their summary published format. The centre seems reluctant or unable to mandate both a standard form of plans and accounts, and their publication in full, and its current approach has been sharply criticised by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.[[37]](#endnote-37)
* The availability and effective use of financial and performance data for planning and management, and skills and professionalism, are also vital elements of improvement.

## How the Commission’s work programme will address these issues

Our workstreams on Structures and Finance will develop detailed proposals to address these issues. We will look to produce proposals for a streamlined, less fragmented centre, with stronger support for the Prime Minister on the leadership of government and the relationship with Parliament, drawing on international exemplars; and for stronger approaches to planning resources and performance across government, embodied in a strengthened spending review process. Alongside the Devolution and Accountability streams, we will suggest ways government can better understand and apply theories of change for challenges outside its direct delivery competence. Alongside the Data and Talent and Competence workstreams, we will argue for improvements in the use of data and information, and in financial skills.

# 2. Does government bring about effective change?

In order to execute their agendas successfully, governments clearly have to know what they want and apply the right change management techniques. As we have explored in the previous section, the ability to do that is multiply flawed at the moment.

That a book of over 400 pages could be written on *The Blunders of our Governments* is an indicator that delivery all too often goes badly wrong.[[38]](#endnote-38) Across the dimensions of effective project delivery identified in Flyvberg’s book on megaprojects – initial deliberation, optimism bias and over-confidence, strong project management capability, effective oversight and risk management, and the ability to adapt when necessary – all too often programmes do not succeed.[[39]](#endnote-39) As Lord (Michael) Bichard, Chairman of the National Audit Office and one of our Commissioners, puts it: “*I see all too often the failures to deliver projects and policies on time and within budget. They cost the nation massively in scarce resources and they mean that good policies fail to deliver the intended benefits to communities across the country*.” The Government’s most recent analysis of major projects rates over 80 per cent of projects red, red/amber or red.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Government too often lacks the effective systems of management, delegation, partnership, and accountability which are needed for effective performance, change, innovation and improvement. It therefore defaults towards micro-management and short-term crisis responses which undermine accountability and patch up, rather than fix, problems. Too often policy rushes into implementation without carefully thinking through design around the needs of citizens with digital at its heart, the widely criticised missteps of the test and trace programme being a current example. Too often design fails to apply lessons derived from evidence and evaluation sufficiently to the design of interventions. Operational skills are not sufficiently valued or included in the decision-making process: “*There was a sort of snobbery towards [the operational delivery professional] on the part of some of the policy officials, as though he were involved in the business of trade and they were part of the policy priesthood.”[[41]](#endnote-41)*

Government has always procured goods and services externally, but, since the 1980s, there has been a trend towards larger scale and more ambitious outsourcing. Outsourcing is an important tool for government, which requires careful management if benefits are to be realised and risks managed. Recent high-profile events, notably the failure of outsourced probation and the collapse of Carillion, illustrate how important it is for government to manage commercial relationships effectively. As a recent report by Reform argues, “*more can be done to improve public procurement and ensure high quality, value-for-money services in the long-term”,* with both accountability and skills being important themes*.[[42]](#endnote-42)*

As with strategy, the entrenched weaknesses of our system of government in bringing about change are at least as much due to a frequent lack of focus by Ministers, as in the organisation, capability, and capacity of public servants. In its survey of 40 years of government attempts to improve the management of performance, the IfG identified political leadership as a vital component.[[43]](#endnote-43)

There are two main underlying cultural problems, accountability, and resistance to devolution, which this paper explores in the remainder of this section. The ability to make effective use of data and technology, and the right political, leadership and workforce skills are also critical for the success of delivery, and explored in sections (3) and (4) of this paper below.

## Accountability

In an effective, well-designed government system, it would be clear who controls resources and activity, and how, and organisational and personal accountability would be aligned with that. The information and systems needed to understand performance and hold leaders to account would be in place. The UK’s system of government is a long way from this model, for four sets of reasons:

* **Unclear definition of responsibilities:** across several planes: the relationship between Ministers and officials, between the centre and departments, between national and local, and across often highly complex organisational boundaries between departments, arm’s length bodies, local government and private and third sector public service providers. The IfG’s recent assessment of accountability found, for example, that in Whitehall, “*the accountability system is built on a series of conventions that result in glaring gaps, a lack of transparency and an inability to deal with cross-cutting problems.*”[[44]](#endnote-44) In its report on performance management, as an example of confused accountability in the wider public service, the IfG found that in education, councils “*are left with only limited tools to achieve the results for which they are to be held accountable. This misalignment is not criticised only by councils: an academy chain leader told us that councils suffer from “responsibility without power,” and that the arrangement of accountability and funding for schools is a “funny, hybrid” system.*”*[[45]](#endnote-45)* The pandemic crisis has produced further illustrations of this confusion in the controversy about the respective roles and authority of Minsters, Public Health England and Ofqual.
* **Unclear definition of success and lack of management and outcomes data to monitor it**: for example, the IfG found that around a third of objectives in Single Departmental Plans are measured by only one performance indicator, or none at all.[[46]](#endnote-46) IfG has also found that “*data may be held in pockets of government… But the figures are not aggregated and analysed nationally and, in many cases, locally collected data will not be directly comparable*.”[[47]](#endnote-47)
* **Issues of personnel and culture:** rapid turnover of Ministers and officials inhibits accountability. The Ministry of Justice is on its fourth Secretary of State since 2016, and DWP on its sixth.[[48]](#endnote-48) In its study of Civil Service turnover, the IfG found that “*in six departments, a new minister will find four in 10 of their senior officials have been in post less than a year*.”[[49]](#endnote-49)
* **Patchy, often ineffective, external scrutiny and accountability.** Over time, departmental or personal failings have become less likely to lead to Ministerial resignations, yet Parliament struggles to hold officials to account either.[[50]](#endnote-50)
* **The lack of effective horizontal models of accountability**, for example local leaders facing effective scrutiny and accountability in their local areas, or mechanisms for direct accountability to citizens.

Weak accountability matters not just because it gets in the way of government being effective, but because it undermines confidence in government and politics. As the IfG puts it: “*the debate about low levels of trust in government in the UK forms the backdrop to any discussion of accountability. There is a widely held belief among British people that government is failing to deliver and does not operate transparently.*”[[51]](#endnote-51)

## Relationships with sub-national government, communities, and citizens

A closely linked weakness in the current system of government, again with both political and Civil Service dimensions, is the effectiveness with which government defines and manages its relationships with sub-national government – the devolved countries and English local government. A key challenge is that they have their own democratic mandates and legitimacy: in a strong system, there would be clarity about how national and sub-national government respect each other’s prerogatives and vital interests.

English local government lacks a formal, stable, and entrenched definition of its role. For the devolved countries, by contrast, powers are defined in statute, and in a way which tends to emphasis the sub-national: the authority of the devolved governments and legislatures is defined as everything not included in a limited list of matters reserved to the UK government. They receive their funding from the Exchequer as a block grant determined by a stable formula, and with complete control about how they spend it. In many other countries, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the USA, similarly, the relationship is defined in constitutions.

There has been real, though patchy, progress in devolution in parts of England, particularly in the phase when George Osborne as Chancellor was spearheading it. But the approach has been one of individual negotiation about roles, structures, and money. Devolution deals are not enshrined in statute, there is no medium-term assurance about resources, and a concern that, as the government giveth, the government may well take away. The governance “map” of England has also become very complex, with a mix of metro areas with Mayoral combined authorities, other areas with some kind of “deal”, and the rest, with an ad hoc mix of unitary and two-tier governance.

England is among the most centralised comparable countries in the world. On a range of measures: the percentage of government revenue raised locally, and the proportion of spending, generally and on economic development, controlled locally, it is among the most centralised.[[52]](#endnote-52) This has profound consequences for the design and delivery of public services and capital investment. It also means sub-national government has little leverage over the profound and longstanding challenge of regional economic growth disparities.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Government lacks sources of data and insight on places, and local spending and services. While the Government Regional Offices, abolished in 2010, did not have many fans when they existed, their abolition deprived central government of insight about how policies and relationships were working in specific parts of the country. The Audit Commission was also abolished at that time. Aside from its audit and inspection functions, it used to collect and publish data about council spending and performance which was useful for the sector, and central government.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Whitehall’s departmentalism is a principal culprit. A 2019 study found that, since 2010, government had allocated £6.3bn to local government through 103 parcels of funding attached to specific projects, each with their own particular objectives, timetable, and requirements. In the first half of 2019 alone, just one department (MHCLG) had announced 21 such funding schemes. Despite strong recommendations against this in Michael Heseltine’s 2012 economic growth report, this dysfunctional approach continues.[[55]](#endnote-55) The approach to planning capital spending is no better: IfG found that “*one major city was currently either receiving or bidding for funding from five programmes administered by two departments to develop local transport infrastructure. There was “considerable overlap” locally between these schemes but authorities had to bid for each fund separately. The funds themselves had different reporting requirements and would last for slightly different periods*.”[[56]](#endnote-56)

Departmental accountability to Parliament is also seen to be an obstacle to devolution: Deborah Cadman, a metro region Chief Executive and one of our Commissioners, has said “*as long as permanent secretaries are put in front of select committees to account for funds provided to local and regional bodies, there will be a reluctance to devolve responsibility*.”[[57]](#endnote-57) As we noted above, there is a need for different, more effective and appropriate models.

The handling of the pandemic has put over-centralisation in the dock. As Philip Rycroft, a recent Permanent Secretary with deep experience in the handling of these relationships has said: “*the whole COVID episode has been marked by centralisation; distrust of the devolved administrations; not involving the metropolitan mayors. In all of the big systems – test and trace, PPE procurements and so on – the attempt has been made to manage that, as far as possible, from central entities rather than devolving those decisions*”.[[58]](#endnote-58) According to Deborah Cadman, “*too often processes were designed and delivered centrally where local knowledge was key*.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Elected metro Mayors with personal mandates far greater than any individual member of the House of Commons have found out about immensely significant central government decisions affecting their places only on live TV. Local government’s lack of financial resilience, a consequence of implementing deep spending reductions without putting in place a sustainable medium-term settlement for revenue and spending, has required central government to provide top-up emergency funding. Despite that, there are mounting concerns that many councils are on the edge of financial viability.

As Rycroft also says, this is a longstanding problem: *“There is no tradition at the UK government level of thinking in a systematic, coherent way about its relationship with the regional and the local. Instead, successive governments rearrange the deckchairs, but none of that persists for terribly long. The next government comes in, rips it up and starts again. As a result, the map of local responsibilities is almost completely incoherent*.*”*[[60]](#endnote-60)

Two examples of reforms not being sustained are Total Place and George Osborne’s devolution deals. The Total Place project, in 2009-10, examined in 13 pilot areas how spending allocation and programme design could be improved by looking across the whole of a place. Its final report in 2010 suggested ways to improve the design of programmes and to shift resources from tackling social problems to prevention.[[61]](#endnote-61) Osborne, as Chancellor, provided strong impetus to devolution deals providing for single investment programmes to support a stronger local economy. IfG found that “*local officials and business leaders see this as an improvement, enabling those based in the area and close to projects to make pragmatic decisions about the best use of funding – from timing to allocation between projects*.”[[62]](#endnote-62) Both approaches were, however, reliant on the happenstance of the enthusiasm and advocacy of powerful individuals, and have not become baked into government’s ways of working.

Government is arguably even further from understanding how to manage well its relationships with citizens and communities. The Coalition’s Big Society initiative is widely acknowledged to have failed. As one appraisal puts it, that was not because the insights on which it was based were wrong: about the potential for social business, giving local people more ability to develop ways of meeting their local needs, and the need for new, less resource-heavy models of public service. However, it was not carried through into a properly designed and sustained approach, both national politicians and the central Civil Service machine lacking insight into how government could be effective in enabling the kind of activity the initiative intended.[[63]](#endnote-63) The May government published a Civil Society Strategy in 2018. Strong on aspiration, it argued for “*a new approach…that gives greater freedom and responsibility to our communities*.”[[64]](#endnote-64) Little tangible emerged from it (three local authority pilots of citizens assemblies), and the government’s approach to local community response to the pandemic shows little sign that an understanding of effective relationships with civil society is well embedded in the Westminster political and official communities.

Some councils have shown greater capacity to reimagine the relationship between the state, communities, and citizens. For example, the “Wigan Deal” is based on the concept of an informal deal between the council and citizens “to work together to create a better borough.” It claims savings of £115m.[[65]](#endnote-65) The Greater Manchester Combined Authority has produced a White Paper on public services “*to change the way our public services work to support people to achieve their full potential and ensure nobody is left behind*.”[[66]](#endnote-66)

These issues have emerged strongly in the response to the pandemic, in which the respective merits of grass-roots mutual aid groups, working with councils, have been compared to the Government’s national volunteer and shielding support programmes.[[67]](#endnote-67) Proposals have emerged for community rights to be enshrined in law, in the face of government’s “*centralised response and lethal failures on Covid*.”[[68]](#endnote-68)

# 3. Does government use technology and data well?

Achieving the necessary step forward in government capabilities will require much better use of technology and data. Under the Coalition, the government was on the front foot: the creation of the Government Digital Service, gov.uk, GovNotify, the Service Standard – to name but a few innovations – were for many years global exemplars. The Government’s commitment to open working – sharing code and working with others – have been widely admired and copied, even prompting a letter of thanks from President Obama to the then head of the Government Digital Service.[[69]](#endnote-69)

But what was once cutting edge is now lagging behind.  Focus and investment have shifted, ambition has dipped, and clarity of purpose has dimmed.  This summer, the headlines have been dominated by two prominent digital failures which have had a very tangible impact on us all: the delay in establishing a viable Test and Trace system, and the widespread misery caused by Ofqual’s A-level grade awards.  Whilst the crisis also showcased some more successful digitally enabled government services, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme, government digital services have not kept pace with the increase in citizens’ expectations of quality and accessibility.  At the same time, the use of data and digital technologies to transform government’s internal processes is behind the curve; up to 60 per cent of the cost of public services is spent on service failure.  If we are to meet the very considerable challenges of the next five years, there must be a radical step change in government digital capability.  With our fiscal position deteriorating rapidly, digital transformation of public services becomes not only desirable but essential. It appears government recognises the challenge, with the publication of its data strategy.[[70]](#endnote-70) But it requires more impetus, ambition, and investment.

There are three main challenges which the government needs to tackle successfully to get into the world class in technology and data: the opportunity to transform citizen-facing government services through technology; the opportunity to transform internal government processes through use of data and technology; and strengthening the contract between government and citizen.

## Transforming citizen-facing services

The challenge for government is how technology can provide much more responsive, and efficient services, more closely attuned with citizens' needs, not just central government services like tax collection, but in the wider public service, notably the NHS.

We have pointed out some examples of where the government’s approach needs to meet citizens’ expectations in our recent paper on better digital government. They include: the continued requirement for separate identity and logins for different departments’ services; the continued requirement for physical documentation to be provided in addition to a digital process; the lack of key enablers for digital services such as a government-issued document for online identification and authentication; base registries to automatically validate or retrieve data related to individuals or businesses; and digital post services. [[71]](#endnote-71) Legacy systems, failure to build in inter-operability, and real or perceived legal and privacy issues are factors holding back modernisation.

To take just one example, pre-filling forms for citizens with data that is already known to the public administration. In Europe only three countries are seen as worse: Montenegro, Switzerland, and Romania. Greece used to be worse but has improved in the last few years to surpass the UK in the league table.[[72]](#endnote-72)

General characteristics of British government explored in other sections of this paper are the culprits here. Government evolved before the internet, “*creating a series of largely stand-alone organisational silos without any ‘shared plumbing’ – or digital infrastructure – to support functions and services common to all*.”[[73]](#endnote-73) The centre is not strong enough to insist that departments organise digital services around citizen needs and the government’s priorities, rather than their own organisational structures. Capability, at the centre and in departments, is not strong enough and leaders too often lack the understanding of technology and data to know how to deploy capability effectively.

## Transforming internal government processes

Progress needs to be accelerated on transformation which will provide better value for money and improve the use of data by government. Again, it is vital that departmental boundaries do not lead to duplication in data procession and record-keeping. Progress has been slow on cloud storage. The government still does not buy digital products and services sufficiently well, having allowed itself to be captured by a small number of legacy providers who in many cases dictate the terms of the market, squeezing out smaller and more innovative firms. Tanya Filer of Cambridge University argues that “Governments around the world recognise an urgent need to move away from expensive, bloated IT contracts, and to serve citizens with greater efficiency and accountability.”

These weaknesses have played out in the pandemic response, notably using large IT consultants to deliver Test and Trace, as well as in plans by HMRC and the NHS to continue with over-large and complex programmes.

Other issues in procurement include the lack of common standards and practice across government on such matters as: what digital products the government should buy, what it should build itself and who owns any commercial upside and intellectual property (IP) from government-run digital projects; and a tendency to conceive of digitisation as just laying over a pre-digital process or service rather than services being re-thought anew with digital possibilities in mind.

Government also remains a long way from using data and technology effectively in its strategic decision-making and policy work. Ensuring government has good data and uses it well is a vital part of the challenge explored in (1) above of managing resources better and ensuring a focus on results and outcomes. There is no sign of anything in the UK comparable to the digital performance budgeting system Estonia is building.[[74]](#endnote-74) The IfG has argued that “*Government still needs to ‘fix the plumbing’ when it comes to managing information, tackling problems with poor quality data, a lack of standardisation, and the use of legacy technology, all of which continue to impede progress*.”[[75]](#endnote-75) More radically, there is no sign that UK government is taking seriously the potential of cognitive technologies to improve the insight of decision-makers into complex systems – something of interest to Dominic Cummings.[[76]](#endnote-76)

There are important links here to other workstreams. A key aspect of the strategic and planning issues in the Structures and Finance workstreams is whether government can shape and plan for this key aspect of transformation. Finding, rewarding, keeping, and deploying effectively the people needed for government to achieve world class in data and technology is explored in the Talent and Competence and Project Management workstreams. That is at least as much about the technological literacy of people in non-technical roles, notably leaders, as about specialists.

## Strengthening the contract between government and citizen

There is a real risk that trust in government online services will decrease. A Government Chief Digital Officer (GCDO) was meant to have been appointed “by 2020” but has not been. High-profile controversies – like the use of an algorithm to grade A-levels or the NHS’ Test-and-Trace app – risk clouding government successes such as the HMRC Covid19 work. For the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, HMRC rapidly designed and delivered a scheme to accurately determine the eligibility status of the entire self-employed population. The process included rapid ingestion of multiple and frequent complex data sources, the modelling of eligibility and the generation of outputs to feed the contact strategy; the live digital service; and the internal user interface. It all worked brilliantly. But when digital services work, nobody pays attention; when they fail to live up to expectations, everyone notices. If the potential gains from data and technology are to be realised, government needs to step up on trust, transparency, and data governance.

## How the Commission’s work programme will address these issues

As our commissioner Daniel Korski has put it, “*this Government — because of its majority, Covid, Brexit and the character of key decision-makers like the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and of course Cummings — has a unique chance to digitally reboot the government machinery*.” Our workstreams on Technology and Data will develop detailed proposals to address the key inhibitors to change: leadership, governance, procurement, citizen engagement, digital skills, managing risk and innovation, and the legacy of technical debt. They will look at the scope for a radical shift towards a system built around cloud utilities and services.

# 4. Does government attract and effectively deploy great people?

An organisation's ability to recruit and deploy talent is a fundamental indicator of success.  As the current phase of briefing by and against different players shows, in a weak system, with unresolved questions of accountability, poor outcomes can lead to destructive blame games. If politicians and officials display distrust of each other, what hope they have together of winning the trust of citizens that they will deliver for them? What is important now, is that government focuses on how to instil a relentless focus on serving citizens; reform of the Civil Service must play a central role in that. As our Commissioner Baroness (Simone) Finn puts it: “*This Government’s success depends on the ability of the civil service to implement policies, projects and manifesto promises.*”

The challenges of people management in government are not new, and some progress has been made. But they need to be tackled with a stronger eye to the big picture, and with determination to avoid stalling and backsliding. The skills and experience of politicians, executive leaders and workforce are too narrow, and key organisational capabilities are, despite some progress since 2010, still not sufficiently developed and embedded. In part, this is another symptom of the weakness in strategic capability explored in (1) above. Despite the obvious point that people and effective capabilities, in all parts of the system, are vital to its success, there is no unified strategy or ownership of these questions. The Cabinet Office’s remit for HR and organisational effectiveness is limited to the Senior Civil Service and Fast Stream – and that is still subject to the obstacles the departmental model creates to effective thinking and action across government as a whole.

There are two main sets of questions. Does government have the skills and talent it needs? How does it need to improve its systems to get them in place?

## Does government have the skills and talent it needs?

In order to manage – and indeed optimise – the complex systems required to deliver better services for the citizen, government needs the right mix of skills and talent. The tops of departments and their headquarters functions, mostly London-based, operate according to a staffing model which remains dominated by people who have made a career there, and who are known as “policy” officials or “generalists.” This model dates back to the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of the mid 19th century. Over 50 years ago, the Wilson government’s Fulton Committee characterised it as out of step with modern approaches to staffing and organisation.[[77]](#endnote-77) Yet it has remained stubbornly resistant to modernisation. As the first quarter of the 21st century draws to an end, it is startingly different from the principles of talent management in highly performing organisations, in the wider public sector as well as business.

There is a worrying deficit of operational delivery skills, and of solid professional expertise across the core cross-cutting functions of government. These are essential to its effectiveness in terms of both efficiency and impact. These horizontal functions include financial management, procurement, IT and digital, major projects, HR, and internal audit. The Coalition government took steps towards formalising and strengthening these functions, and creating a model in which there was central authority for functions across the whole of government, providing technical expertise, common standards and approaches to professional working, and better flows of management information. There were notable successes: the creation of GDS, (as noted above); the Major Projects Authority had a striking early impact on government project success rate; and the establishment of the Government Property Unit and creation of a single legal function under the Treasury Solicitor also had marked impact on capability and efficiency.

However, momentum on the establishment of this ‘functional model’ across government has stalled, and in some areas of early success – most notably GDS – progress has gone into reverse. Today, each function has a head of profession, usually combining a line leadership role in a department with their cross-government professional leadership.[[78]](#endnote-78) And there has been some progress in ensuring that the functions are staffed by people with proper professional expertise – for example, finance director roles are no longer routinely filled by people without a finance background. But there remains an issue around what Francis Maude has referred to as ‘parity of esteem’ between policy and operational and technical skills, “*It feels like a class divide: there are the white-collar policy mandarins, and the blue-collar technicians who do operations, finance, procurement, IT and digital, project management, HR, and so on…Many government failures could have been prevented if operational and technical teams had the same access to Ministers as do policy officials.*” It is significant that the role of the Government’s Chief Digital Officer has remained unfilled for over a year; without strong leadership from someone with real technical credibility, it will be hard to attract the calibre of people required to develop a cadre of technical expertise to stimulate and carry through the necessary change across government that has been indicated in (3) above.

Reinstating earlier momentum towards putting in place an effective ‘functional model’ will also require political focus and commitment. The Coalition Government set up a Cabinet sub-committee, PEX(ER), with responsibility for efficiency and reform, which provided important impetus to the programme to establish cross-cutting functions and their strategies, and provided the mandate for individual functional leaders. This committee was disbanded some time ago, and there remains no comparable Cabinet sub-committee oversight.

There is also concern that the Civil Service’s policy skills are under-developed. Whilst there is a “policy profession”, it is a long way from being recognisable as a professional function with early-career and ongoing, rigorous, accredited, formal learning on such matters as data and evidence, effective techniques of policy development, project management, effective written and spoken communication, and how to learn from and manage relationships with the world outside government. The government’s over-reliance on external consultants, including on policy questions, is an expression of this failure to cultivate mission-critical skills.

## How does it need to improve its systems to get them in place?

There are a number of important structural and cultural blockers to successful change.

Firstly, there is an effective monopoly on senior leadership roles. Director General and Permanent Secretary roles continue to be dominated by people recruited into the Civil Service early in their careers and who have developed through policy and HQ roles. While external recruitment is not unusual, a 2014 review for the Cabinet Office found serious problems with attracting and keeping external talent: poor recruitment processes, poor induction, poor talent development, no clear career paths for specialists, impersonal systems, and inflexible pay arrangements.[[79]](#endnote-79) There is little sign of much progress on its recommendations.

This impediment to cognitive diversity is compounded by barriers to progression within the Civil Service for people representing the full diversity of the UK. A review by Hay in 2014, for example, found major problems with systems and culture as they affect women – but, as they pointed out, the same negative characteristics are a block to realising the potential of other groups of staff.[[80]](#endnote-80)  Opening up entry and progression beyond the historically dominant groups is a vital part of ensuring policy-making is better focused on the needs of citizens, and on ensuring that capability is improved overall. More external recruitment at all career stages, and locating more roles outside London, would help with this.

The lack of appropriate external involvement in key decisions about individuals, based on effective criteria, is a significant blockage to change. Ministers in successive governments have been concerned that they do not have appropriate influence over the appointment of senior officials into key roles whilst they are held accountable for the outcomes. In 2014, a report by IPPR concluded that Ministers need stronger support and a greater degree of control over the Civil Service, alongside strengthening and clarification of accountability of civil servants. The report said, “*We believe – as demonstrated by the experience of other countries – that so long as sufficient safeguards are put in place it is perfectly possible to strengthen the degree of political oversight exercised by Ministers without undermining the fundamental commitment to a merit-based, non-partisan Civil Service[[81]](#endnote-81).”* The report’s central recommendation that Ministers should be able to choose from a list of appointable candidates for the role of Permanent Secretary was supported by Michael Dugher, then Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office, who observed that Ministers are rightly held accountable to Parliament for the performance of their departments, so it is only right that they should have a stronger say in the most important recruitment decision of their departments[[82]](#endnote-82).

If government is to start to manage its people in a modern, best-in-class, way, it needs to modernise all the basic elements of HR: recruitment, training, reward, talent management, appointments and managing the exit of people whose skills are no longer a match for what government needs.

Much of this is recognised in the Civil Service’s own reform prospectus, which sets out an offer of more structured training for staff. Greater focus on equipping civil servants with the skills required to do their roles, including development of functional expertise – accredited where appropriate – alongside structured development of managerial skills required for leaders, is to be welcomed. It is notable that countries such as Singapore, which are considered to have a very high calibre civil service, have invested heavily in continuous training programmes for staff. This focus on continued self-improvement is also a feature of the high-performing management consultancies on which government has come to depend for assistance in solving the hardest problems. These consultancies recruit from a similar talent pool to the government’s own Fast Stream but put a much greater focus on training. In order to begin to match these capabilities, government must put more investment into training its own elite cadre.

As a counterpoint to better training, proper performance management, based on clear outcomes metrics, is needed to underpin more objective criteria for SCS appointments. Excessive turnover in SCS roles is rightly highlighted in the Civil Service’s reform prospectus as a cause of concern. This is closely linked with an unmanaged approach to internal talent, in which individuals pursue their own career interests and the interests of the organisation and its effectiveness are not sufficiently safeguarded.[[83]](#endnote-83) This is caused by poorly structured incentive systems, including lack of flexibility on performance pay and in-role promotions. Looking at tenure in role from the perspective of managing performance, Permanent Secretaries now receive fixed-term contracts, and it has been suggested that this may be extended more broadly to SCS roles. However, this is not a method deployed by successful organisations outside government, which tend to manage performance through carefully structured incentive systems.

## Political talent

There are two main concerns about Ministers. First, the increasing professionalisation of politics, with career paths starting in the policy, lobbying and Parliamentary community, maybe including a spell as a special adviser and progressing on through election to Parliament. The risk is that this both results in a lack of cognitive diversity among those in Ministerial roles, and a lack of preparation and experience to equip them for their complex and challenging leadership role in departments.

Second, there is next to no formal preparation to remedy this lack of experience. The authors of GovernUp’s 2015 exploration of Ministers’ roles, support and preparation asked about it and the answers ranged from “*no training except for an away day*” to “*two sessions at the Institute for Government*” and “*sod all*”.[[84]](#endnote-84) A senior Minister told the IfG: “*I had no idea of what was involved. I had to learn to be a minister, moving from decision to decision, seeing how they get made.*”[[85]](#endnote-85) This is in contrast to local government, Australia and New Zealand.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Personal support for Ministers is also very slender in the UK system. In contrast, for example, to the *cabinets* which support French Ministers, Ministers are typically only supported by a Civil Service private office, focused on process and logistics, and a handful of special advisers. Just as the centre lacks strategic capability, the centre of departments around Ministers lacks the intelligence, data, strategy-shaping and project management capability needed to direct large government organisations effectively – and hence are likely to default to “court” mode, never rising above fire-fighting. Even with better preparation and training, Ministers’ personal skills could never cover all the bases. But it is not possible for them to bring in personal support, for example a business executive to help them get to grips with the department’s financial and business planning. The Coalition Government’s reform introducing Extended Ministerial Offices was dismantled by Theresa May when she became Prime Minister.[[87]](#endnote-87)

## How the Commission’s work programme will address these issues

Our workstreams on Talent and Competence, Project Management, Ministers, and Appointments will develop detailed proposals to tackle these issues: defining the skills needed, and necessary changes to structures, systems, personal accountability, and culture. Among other things, they will develop proposals for getting the basics of Civil Service people management right, drawing on effective practice in other organisations; and overcoming the barriers to reform which have prevented previous attempts at reform fully succeeding. They will also look at improving political talent and supporting Ministers and special advisers in being effective in their roles.

# Conclusion

There are many strengths in the UK system of government. However, the Commission is driven by an increasing concern that, against the background of national and global change and challenges, it is not world class. If there were previously any doubt about this, the way the pandemic has put the system under pressure has surely underscored the imperative for reform. This is not about individuals: on the whole, the people in the system join it with good intentions and are talented. Nor should it be about levelling the system back to ground zero on the basis of sweeping generalisations or an excessively pessimistic view. Change can and should be radical, yet still build on existing strengths and successful reforms where they are under way. However, successful reform also requires both clarity and honesty about the big picture and strong plans to address the key components identified in this paper.

The next stage of government reform needs to be based on a big picture, tackling the main elements, which are strongly inter-related, alongside each other. The roles and performance of both politicians and the Civil Service, and the relationship between them, need to change. Above all, the government needs to find a way to ensure that initial energy and commitment are maintained, plans are carried through, it learns from mistakes and improves, and recognises that change has to be continuous. Business as usual will never come back.

Over the coming months, the Commission will work to develop proposals which we hope will help government with this challenge.

# Author

The author of this Discussion Paper is Martin Wheatley. Martin is a former senior civil servant and local government professional, with experience on social policy, environment and housing including the Treasury, the Social Exclusion Unit, Croydon Council and the Local Government Association. A founder member of SHOUT, he is also a Research Fellow of the Smith Institute and Research Director of GovernUp.

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