

# REFORM

## CIVIL UNREST

**A portrait of the Civil Service through Brexit, the pandemic and political turbulence**

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## ABOUT REFORM

*Reform* is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We believe that the State has a fundamental role to play in enabling individuals, families and communities to thrive. But our vision is one in which the State delivers only the services that it is best placed to deliver, within sound public finances, and where both decision-making and delivery is devolved to the most appropriate level. We are committed to driving systemic change that will deliver better outcomes for all.

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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

*Reform* is delighted to be publishing this paper by Amy Gandon as part of our 'Reimagining Whitehall' programme. In publishing externally authored papers, *Reform* is seeking to further the debate on how to improve the functioning of the State. We do not necessarily endorse all findings, arguments or proposals, but we believe in the value of cognitive and viewpoint diversity, and are committed to providing a platform for reform-minded thinkers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express particular thanks to the fifty anonymous current and recent ex-civil servants who volunteered the testimony that is the basis of this report.

The author would also like to thank contributors Callum Hunter, Emily Dixon, Frances Maclellan, Mélody Verot, Pauline Bokea, Tendai Chetse and William Knatchbull for their skilled and enthusiastic research, and other contributors who wish to remain anonymous, for their analysis and support in drafting the paper. All contributed on a voluntary basis.

Finally, the author is grateful to Charlotte Pickles and Simon Kaye for acting as editors.

## SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

It is important to state at the outset that this is not an academic study, nor are the participants a representative sample. The aim of the project is to bring civil servant perspectives to light by sharing, in their own words, the experience of a sub-section of current and former officials. Importantly, and unusually, the aim is to reflect the experiences of the ‘rank and file’ of the civil service, particularly the junior and middle-ranking grades. Some coverage of the senior civil service is included for contrast.

It is important to note that this project primarily covers the policy profession: those civil servants involved in equipping ministers with the evidence and options to inform decisions on policy and its implementation. This is a narrow sub-set of the wider civil service, the majority of which work in operational functions, for example in prisons or processing benefits and pensions.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Overarching approach***

Semi-structured, 45-minute interviews were conducted with each of the fifty current and recent ex-officials who volunteered to take part.

The interviewees were asked a series of open questions, focusing specifically on their experience during “the last few years”. This was with a view to testing the hypothesis that the demands of delivering Brexit and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a souring of relationships with ministers under the Johnson Government, had marked a particular turning point for the civil service.

Interviews were conducted between August and November 2022. It is important to note that this period saw three changes of Prime Minister, with Boris Johnson formally stepping down in September and Rishi Sunak taking over from Liz Truss in late October. As a result, the reference points when thinking about ‘political leadership’ will be different depending on where participants’ interviews fell in this time period.

Interviews were subsequently transcribed and a thematic analysis of key themes conducted. It is important to note that, where percentages are used to represent the results of analysis, this refers to the proportion of participants who *proactively raised* that theme in response to open questions. For example, Chapter 3 describes 61 per cent of participants referring to policymaking becoming more short-termist and reactive. This means 61 per cent brought this up independently. It is conceivable that a higher share of the sample would have agreed with a statement to this effect had it been presented to them.

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<sup>1</sup> 55.7 per cent of the civil service work in operational functions. For more information about the make-up of the civil service by profession, see Cabinet Office, ‘Statistical Bulletin - Civil Service Statistics: 2023’, Webpage, 2 August 2023.

## Sample

Given the restrictions – both normative and formal (i.e. through the Civil Service Code) – on civil servants speaking openly about aspects of their work, participants' testimony has been kept anonymous. While the net was cast wide for participants and the aim was to get as broad a spread across departments as possible, those who were willing to take part were disproportionately from the interviewer's network.

It is also worth noting that macro trends in the world of work may influence participants' views, for example the impacts of widespread struggle and introspection during the COVID-19 pandemic, manifesting in the so-called 'Great Resignation'.

While the civil service is an exceptionally large and diverse organisation of nearly 500,000 staff, the sample focuses on the relatively small subsection that works in policy, advising ministers on the evidence, policy design and delivery relating to their priorities. The research questions were therefore focused on policy- and decision-making.

## Sample make-up

- Status: 54% were current civil servants at the time of interview, 46% had left the civil service. One participant was a Special Adviser.
- Profession: 88% were in Policy, the remaining 12% were in adjacent roles which meant they were involved in the policy and decision-making process
- Department: 22% worked in the Cabinet Office, 18% in the Department of Health and Social Care, and 10% in the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; 12 other departments were represented by between one and three participants.<sup>2</sup>
- Length of service: this varied from seven months through to 41 years, but the average length of service was 6.6 years.
- Grade: 38% were grade 7 and 36% grade 6. The remainder of the sample were senior civil servants (14%) and below grade 7 (12%).
- Age: 70% were aged under 35, with a further 20% aged 35-44. 10% were over 45.
- Gender: 52% were male, 46% female and 2% non-binary/other.
- Ethnicity: 78% were white, 10% Asian/Asian British, 8% Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and 4% mixed/multiple ethnic groups.

As above, in comparison to the full civil service, this sample is heavily concentrated in policy roles. They are also disproportionately young and mid-grade, and slightly more ethnically diverse.

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<sup>2</sup> Current or final department before leaving the civil service. The categorisation of departments pre-dates the 2023 machinery of government changes that split up the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) or the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

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# Reform Foreword

*Machinery of government* reform rarely receives the level of interest or focus given to *public service* reform. Overhauling education or health or policing has immediate resonance – we all use those services, we personally experience their shortcomings. Overhauling the centre of government by contrast is often seen as a technocratic endeavour.

Yet the latter is an essential precursor to the former. Public service priorities and budgets are set in Whitehall. Policy is shaped and decisions taken about what happens in schools and hospitals and police forces by civil servants and ministers in central government. Reforming Whitehall is not technocratic, it is fundamental to building a high-functioning State that delivers for us all.

That is why, as part of our 'Reimagining the State' programme, *Reform* has a major workstream exploring how we can reimagine Whitehall, and why we are delighted to be publishing Amy Gandon's research on how civil servants themselves experience the government machine.

*Civil unrest* is a powerful and illuminating read. It is rare to hear directly from civil servants themselves, and even rarer to hear from those in more junior grades. In giving voice to their daily experience, Amy has shown that many of the criticisms most frequently levelled at Whitehall are in fact shared by those working within it.

An overly bureaucratic and incrementalist culture is stifling policy innovation. Too many senior leaders are seen as self-interested, and senior leadership roles as unattractive. Insularity and a lack of diversity result in groupthink. A tick box, competency-based HR system is actively undermining the meritocratic principle, leading to 'shadow' systems for promotion and failing to address poor performance. And short-termism is undermining robust and high-quality policy development and decision-making.

Simultaneously, these systemic issues are compounded by a reactive and appearances-driven political environment and deteriorating relations with ministers, as well as a sense of being undervalued.

The result is a palpable sense of frustration and disillusionment.

Yet alongside this, almost three quarters of those interviewed expressed pride in serving the country, and many cited the importance of their work. And examples were given of strong senior leadership and productive and effective minister-official relationships. Importantly for those of us committed to putting forward solutions to Whitehall's problems, participants articulated an appetite for more radical reform. Amy's paper is a timely reminder that building a fit for purpose machine can – and must – be done *with* the civil servants who staff it.

**Charlotte Pickles**

**Director, *Reform***

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# Author Foreword

This is the story of the UK Civil Service at one of the most turbulent times in its history, told in their own words.

Civil servants' testimony rarely features in the debate about government effectiveness and reform of the civil service itself. This is in many ways a function of the constraints placed on civil servants speaking openly about their work, but that is certainly not the whole story. Recent attempts at reform have sometimes appeared actively hostile to civil servant perspectives, driven by those on the political side of Whitehall and exhibiting insufficient trust in the civil service's competence or intentions.

Conversations about how government works and how it needs to change are dominated by politicians, top-ranking officials and think tanks. Notwithstanding the diversity of worldview that cohort is likely to offer, their experience of the civil service is partial, a 'bird's eye view' from the top or outside as opposed to those who live and breathe the system from inside. Designing reforms relies on an in-depth understanding of the current system, but it is as if the practices of 'user-centred design' – celebrated in policy manuals across Whitehall – do not apply to the reform of government itself.

This desire to rebalance the conversation is a big part of why I wanted to undertake this project. But it also has other, more personal origins. I myself joined the civil service via the Fast Stream training scheme in 2017. I was full of ideas for policy change, optimism about the impact I could have, and aspirations for a long career. Five years, five departments and a pandemic later, I found myself in a very different situation. After an intense period of working in the Cabinet Office at the onset of the pandemic and later on during the recovery effort, I was seriously burnt out. I had lost nearly all faith in my ability – or that of the State – to make change. As I described it to friends and family, working in the civil service felt like "trying to swim through rapid-setting concrete": frantic and strenuous effort, only to stay still.

I resigned in June 2022. Like many of our participants, there were multiple complex factors that led to my decision, not least the impact of the COVID pandemic and the introspection it prompted about my life and priorities. But the more I spoke to fellow civil servants about my decision, the more I wondered whether this was a more widespread phenomenon. Did other civil servants feel surprised – even disappointed, as I had felt – when they saw how the State operated in practice? Was my experience unusual, working in perhaps a particularly challenging part of government at a particularly intense time, or something more commonplace?

I was also beginning to realise I was not alone in my decision to leave the civil service. It is borne out in the recent People Survey data, with staff turnover approaching 14 per cent, the highest in a decade, and the proportion of civil servants intending to leave within the next 12 months on the rise. If this trend continues and is not met with decisive intervention, there are clear implications for the retention of talent and institutional knowledge, and therefore for the quality of policy- and



decision-making. Given the scale and fast evolving nature of the issues that beset governments the world over – economic fragility, climate change and rapid developments in technology – this could be extremely damaging.

But I am an optimist, and this report is motivated by a belief that the only way to make wholesale change is through a ‘warts-and-all’ diagnosis and an inclusive, broad-based commitment to the appropriate cure.

This is also not about apportioning blame. It is about hearing a seldom heard side of the story to get a deeper understanding of the system, and the incentives and behaviours created as a result. Government is a complex system made up of humans who are, by definition, fallible and flawed. This report hopes to embrace rather than exclude human stories, feelings and responses as a core part of why the civil service is the way it is. In turn, they will also be a core part of the path to reform.

**Amy Gandon**

**Report author**

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# Executive summary

The civil service and its effectiveness have long been the subject of debate, but never more so than over the past few years. What has too often been missing from those discussions is the voice of civil servants themselves.

This report seeks to redress that balance. Through the anonymous testimony of 50 civil servants, it provides an ‘insider’s look’ into government through Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of broader political instability. In so doing, it challenges the perception of civil servants as an undifferentiated or obstructive ‘blob’. The officials interviewed were not only aware of the Service’s flaws but deeply frustrated by them and eager for change.

The hope is that this work will pave the way for a more constructive, even co-productive, approach to reforming the civil service in future.

The following themes emerged most strongly and commonly across the fifty interviews:

- **An ambition to serve the public and deliver impact but frustration with how difficult this was in practice**, with much of their time taken up by briefings and ‘busy work’ over analysis and policymaking (see Chapter 2).
- **A feeling that government had become more reactive and short-termist in recent years**, and less anchored in a stable, long-term vision for the future. Many participants felt a more politically volatile environment meant more effort being spent on announcements and ‘good news stories’ than on long-term solutions and implementation (see Chapter 3).
- **A noticeable shift in the relationship between ministers and civil servants**, with mutual mistrust making it difficult to give honest advice and make decisions efficiently. Some felt ministers were right to suspect officials of political bias, while others felt their duty to challenge had been misinterpreted as resistance (see Chapter 4).
- **Lack of admiration for civil service leadership**, which was felt to be an increasingly difficult role in the face of greater public profile and strained relationships with politicians. Very few participants aspired to the senior ranks, unwilling to deal with the pressures and ‘small p’ politics involved (see Chapter 5).
- **Further decline in the civil service’s ability to manage and retain talent** over the past few years, with significant demands – especially from Brexit and the pandemic – leading to inexperienced staff being recruited and promoted. With higher workloads and a squeeze on pay, participants felt the civil service was now a less attractive place to work on top of long-standing issues around promoting expertise and reducing churn (see Chapter 6).

But while their testimony paints a difficult picture of life in the civil service, participants invariably found their work stimulating and important. Many shared examples of inspirational leadership from civil servants and ministers alike. Ultimately, they had plenty of ideas to inform a positive agenda for change, summarised in our eight key principles for reform (see Conclusion). Politicians and senior officials would be wise to consider these if future reforms are to carry the support of the half a million civil servants they affect.

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# 1. Introduction

The Civil Service is the institution which helps the government of the day develop and implement its policies. The permanent, non-partisan and merit-based nature of the UK Civil Service is designed to provide stability, including between changes of government, expertise and challenge so ministers are able to deliver the best possible outcomes.

The civil service today is the outcome of many reviews, reports and reforms, starting with the Northcote-Trevelyan settlement in 1854.<sup>3</sup> This prescribed that appointment to the civil service be through open competition, with individuals chosen solely on merit. This is widely acknowledged as the beginnings of a bureaucracy that would be able to support the workings of modern government.

The Haldane Report in 1918 further clarified the role and purpose of the civil service, highlighting the need for civil servants and ministers to work in close – even “indivisible” – partnership.<sup>4</sup> The size of the typical departmental portfolio makes it impossible for ministers to master every detail and decision, making appropriate delegation to civil servants an essential feature of an efficient system with large-scale impact. The so-called ‘Haldane convention’ of a close policymaking partnership is in turn enshrined in accountability arrangements, with civil servants accountable to ministers but ministers accountable to Parliament.

Then came the Fulton Committee in 1965, and with it the beginnings of some familiar criticisms of the civil service. Fulton argued that the civil service was dominated by “generalists”, lacking scientific and technical expertise and management skills, and was too detached from wider society.<sup>5</sup> The resulting recommendations included many features we see in the civil service today, for example the appointment of a ‘Head of the Civil Service’ – currently combined with the position of Cabinet Secretary – a unified grading structure, and Secretaries of State being able to appoint a small number of their own staff. Fulton’s push for greater professionalism amongst generalists and specialists and for greater mobility between the civil service and other sectors will also be familiar from reform efforts in the 20th and 21st century.

Criticism of the civil service is hardly new, then. In recent years, however, criticism has become more prominent, more frequent, and more personal. Reformers like Dominic Cummings or, more recently, former ministers like Dominic Raab have accused civil servants of blocking the Government’s agenda and, at times, described reform efforts in rather strong terms (for example, forecasting a “hard rain”).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stafford H. Northcote and C.E. Trevelyan, *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, 1854.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Reconstruction, *Report of the Machinery of Government Committee*, 1918.

<sup>5</sup> John Fulton, *Vol. 1, Report of the Committee 1966-68*. (The Civil Service, 1968), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Elliott, ‘Hard Rain Is Going to Fall on Civil Service, Says Dominic Cummings’, *The Times*, 25 June 2020.

Civil service impartiality has been called into question, with officials sometimes depicted as insufficiently diverse and allowing London-centric, liberal and especially ‘Remain-voting’ inclinations to affect their advice and implementation efforts. The Johnson Government also oversaw the sacking of a number of permanent secretaries. Age-old depictions of civil service inefficiency have also taken on new life in the wake of the COVID pandemic, with a number of ministers criticising civil servants for working too often from home.<sup>7</sup>

These dynamics have led many to diagnose a breakdown in relations between the civil service and the elected Government. But while some ministers are both willing and able to air their grievances in public, serving civil servants are much less free to do so. There are constraints around civil servants speaking openly about their work, for example restrictions in the Civil Service Code around sharing “official information” (however defined) without permission. There are indeed good reasons for detailed policy discussions to remain private: for example, to allow for free thinking or consideration of the evidence without the pressure of public or media scrutiny. Many civil servants’ discretion is also motivated by a sense of loyalty to ministers, whether individually or to their democratic mandate.

This report seeks to rebalance the debate about the civil service’s effectiveness by showcasing the anonymous testimony of 50 current and recent ex-officials. ‘Rebalancing’ in this case does not mean a blindly loyal and unwaveringly positive account of the civil service; on the contrary, our participants offered a stark assessment of their colleagues’, leaders’ and the wider system’s failings. What it does mean is building an agenda for reform in a way that respects and incorporates civil servants in the process, not least because they will be a core part of the solution.

What follows is thematic analysis of the 50 participants’ testimony about their recent experiences of working in government. Following a short explanation of the methodology, the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** looks at the sense of public service, camaraderie and subject matter interest that prevails amongst civil servants;
- **Chapter 3** explores how policy- and decision-making works and has shifted recently, especially in the wake of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic;
- **Chapter 4** is on the civil service’s relationship with ministers and the impact of a deterioration in trust on how officials perform their core duties;
- **Chapter 5** looks at the quality of leadership and management in the civil service, including the sorts of traits that are rewarded by elevation to its highest ranks;
- **Chapter 6** looks at how civil servants are paid, recruited and promoted, and the implications for civil servants’ behaviour and delivery for the public;

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<sup>7</sup> This came to a head, of course, with Jacob Rees-Mogg leaving notes on civil servants’ empty office desks and with Oliver Dowden calling for civil servants to “get of their Pelotons and get back to the office”. See, for example, Emily McGarvey and Jonathan Blake, ‘Jacob Rees-Mogg Empty Desk Note to Civil Servants Insulting, Says Union’, *BBC News*, 23 April 2022; BBC News, ‘Conservative Conference: Get off Your Pelotons and Back to Work, Says Oliver Dowden’, 5 October 2021.

- The **Conclusion** sets out key principles for reform, as well as some specific recommendations that could be implemented now.

## 2. Commitment to making a difference

It is worthwhile to understand what attracts people to working in the civil service. The civil servants we spoke to were unified by a sense of public service: a desire to do good and to work on intellectually challenging and socially important problems. While around half of our sample decided to leave the civil service, there was evidence across participants that they thoroughly enjoyed aspects, or all, of their work, especially their collaboration with like-minded colleagues. (Whether civil servants are *too* like-minded is covered in Chapter 3.)

This commitment to making a difference is contrasted against the difficulty of doing so in practice, whether due to bureaucracy or incentives to focus efforts on superficial tasks and ‘busy work’. This brings into focus criticisms of the civil service as inefficient or ineffective, highlighting how it is often the wider system that conspires to make delivering more difficult than it ought to be. And, if participants’ testimonies are anything to go by, this frustration is a reason why many civil servants opt to have a smaller but more direct impact in the third or private sector.

### Chapter in a nutshell

- 71% of participants expressed a desire to serve their country and pride that their work helped them make a difference.
- 29% mentioned finding their work important and intellectually stimulating, with proximity to decision-making appearing to offer strong opportunities for impact.
- 39% mentioned how much they appreciated their colleagues, both in terms of capability and shared values.
- 29% contrasted their ambitions for social impact with the reality of their work, which often felt remote from or misaligned with the activities that actually change things for citizens.

*Note: these percentages, and those in subsequent chapters, reflect the share of participants who proactively brought up these topics in response to open questions (e.g. “tell me what it’s been like working in the civil service over the past few years”). Participants were not given specific statements and asked if they agreed or disagreed.*

### 2.1 Personal commitment and pride

One of the strongest themes across the research was a shared sense of ‘personal commitment and pride’. 71 per cent of participants expressed a desire to serve the country and its communities, and pride in the potential of their role to make a positive difference. This is perhaps unsurprising given participants’ choice of career, but it is notable that it emerged so strongly in the context of open questions. As one senior civil servant at the Department of Health and Social Care put it:

“It’s a real privilege to work... at the heart of government and make decisions that affect millions of people, and especially in the Department of Health where it’s something that touches everybody in the country. [Being] part of the functioning of a democracy is a real privilege, coming to work with a sense of purpose every day. It’s great, it’s an exciting place to work.” (Participant 38)

One participant, who worked in the Home Office until they resigned last year, highlighted how their career as a civil servant had been a source of immense pride.

“I’ve always been so proud to work for the civil service and proud to work for the department... my granddad was a civil servant who worked for the [country’s board of trade] before moving here. For me, it’s always been something that was on the level of, you know, doctors, teachers, nurses, surgeons, that kind of thing being a civil servant.” (Participant 24)

Some linked this sense of pride to the function civil servants play in democracy and a general belief in the principle of enacting the people’s will, like Participant 38 above. For others, the appeal was about social contribution. Two former members of the Fast Stream spoke about “making a positive impact in the world” (Participant 2) and “making a contribution to society” (Participant 8). For others, it was an interest in a specific domain of policymaking that drew them to the civil service, such as health policy, or education. One participant, who joined as a direct appointee from the Fast Stream assessment process, was excited as a working class person from the North West to play a part in the Levelling Up agenda:

“It was the opportunity to be able to effect change, because I’ve always been on the outside. Being on the inside I thought could be useful. Having someone like me from a working class background to try and make change in the system itself is what attracted me to it initially.” (Participant 22)

## 2.2 Intellectually challenging and important work

Connected to this was a sense that the civil service is an exciting place to be, offering varied and intellectually stimulating work and the chance to influence decision-making in the UK. This was mentioned by nearly a third of our interviewees (29 per cent). As a current middle ranking civil servant in a strategy role put it:

“I really like how... you can get varied experiences... from the civil service. I think it’s rare to be in an organisation where you can do so many different roles over the course of your career and get so much experience... it’s just nice doing something where you’re problem solving on a regular basis, you get to work with such varied stakeholders, get such an inside view of how the country operates.” (Participant 41)



Participants remarked on how they enjoyed the “fiendish nature of how complicated problems needed to be solved quickly” (Participant 25), or how they “want to feel like I’m involved in tackling really knotty problems that help make the world better” (Participant 7). One participant, in the early stages of their career, felt they had more autonomy and responsibility than their friends in different sectors, with the civil service offering “more interesting work” and the opportunity to work on “crunchy policy issues that feel like you are having a direct impact.” (Participant 31)

The possibility of impact was often closely associated with the proximity to decision-makers:

“It’s an absolute privilege to do the kinds of jobs that you do, to have the access and the power and the ability to make decisions. And that will always be my most pressing memory of the civil service. If you ever lose that, then that is an issue.” (Participant 27)

## 2.3 Camaraderie, skills, and shared values of colleagues

Participants’ colleagues were a clear source of enjoyment and inspiration in their work, with 39 per cent of interviewees bringing this up. On the one hand, this was about talent and capability. One former fast streamer who worked in a variety of roles in the Cabinet Office, remarked:

“I always loved the people I was working with, I thought that was always the best thing. It was incredibly creative, stimulating, imaginative people, all with interesting things going on, at work and outside of work and always ... incredibly motivated.” (Participant 46)

Some comments revealed an awareness of stereotypes and recent media narratives around civil service capability and work ethic (see also Chapter 4). For example, a civil servant of over fifteen years remarked on the number of “incredibly bright, dedicated, ambitious, talented people coming through” and shared an anecdote about an exchange programme in the Department of Health and Social Care:

“I remember... we would have people from consultancies coming into our team and a young, really bright consultant came in and said: ‘I was told civil servants were really crap, but actually, you guys are really good and you really know what you’re doing. It’s just really hard.’ And us going, ‘Yeah’.” (Participant 3)

Participants enjoyed working with colleagues who were like-minded and shared their values. A former official in the Department for Education who left in 2021, for example, said they missed “the values of my old colleagues and the passion we had... people that work there are fundamentally passionate about delivering good public services, and you don’t get that in the same way outside” (Participant 1). Another ex-official from the Treasury similarly reflected: “the work is not as interesting... In a lot of ways I’ve missed the people I’ve worked with... by and large, civil servants are fun, friendly people to get on with.” (Participant 5).

Others described colleagues “going the extra mile” and working above and beyond their brief to achieve positive outcomes. Some commented on values of kindness and care:

“Being able to... work with the nicest, kindest people that I have ever met has been life-changing for me. I’m super grateful for having had this opportunity to experience all that.” (Participant 47)

Finally, there was also a strong sense of teamwork and peers’ willingness to ‘muck in’, especially during the challenges of the past few years. Speaking about their time working on the pandemic response, one participant described a feeling of “chaos”, but with “really good people who were getting stuck into it... and you were finding camaraderie with people who had gone through different things. You find people you can lean on, and that’s so lovely.” (Participant 23)

In fact, the COVID-19 crisis appeared to have galvanised more collaborative working for many interviewees: “it proved the can-do attitude of the civil service” (Participant 25), and another noted “a real positivity of everyone wanting to work together.” (Participant 45)

## 2.4 Tensions between expectations and reality

Nonetheless, there was a clear tension between motivations for impact and ability to realise it, a theme that was mentioned by 29 per cent of participants. A number of interviewees drew contrasts between the expectations they had going into the civil service and the realities they confronted once there:

“I started as a very passionate, public policy interested person... Increasingly, you just started to feel like an insignificant drop in the sea trying to do things, change things. And you just keep running into blocks.” (Participant 9)

“I felt a general sadness about how my job was in reality versus what it could be... really a lot of what we were doing was briefings and writing answers that we’d written hundreds of times rather than true policy development and thinking about how to improve things.” (Participant 17)

There was a sense that the stored up energy and motivation to create change is instead being directed at serving the bureaucratic system itself. The frustration participants experienced as a result was palpable:

“Some days I absolutely love it and other days you will be crying thinking like ‘what is the point?’... sometimes that can be down to the sheer bureaucracy and ‘computer says no’ attitude of the work that’s happening around you... there are things that I really adore, and other things where I think, ‘God, this is the most pedantic thing I’ve ever had to do. Why can’t we just get stuff done?’.” (Participant 15)

According to participants, deep and meaningful change only seemed to happen in unicorn-like circumstances where funding, political capital, and a nexus of cross-government stakeholders were in alignment: “It’s difficult when you’re trying to push through some areas that you’re really passionate about, and it doesn’t necessarily get traction or funding or it’s not the right time or right place” (Participant 17), with another noting:

“It was sometimes a little bit sad because it felt like it was difficult to actually get traction in the system. It felt like... towards the end of my time there, if you really wanted to get anything done, you had to know the right people in the civil service and... you had to really know how to work the system.” (Participant 46)

In a number of cases, the desire for a more direct impact was driving participants out of the civil service, or even out of the public sector altogether:

“I was really craving that direct impact going into the civil service. It was this vision of making a positive impact in the world. But it’s so tangential, the work that we do – you kind of see the impact, but you kind of can’t see it.” (Participant 2)

“I think I’d like to get somewhere where you can see the impact of your work a bit more... I want to feel like I’m making a difference.” (Participant 20)

It was for this reason that one participant was attracted to work in the private sector, where outcomes are more direct and easily measurable.

“A lot of civil servants want to feel like they’re making a positive change, being listened to, that they’re valued, both in terms of money, but also in terms of opportunity... in the private sector you’ve got a clearer motivation because everything gets measured in money. Are you bringing in money and how much of a slice of that do you get? It becomes a much more... basic calculation about how you value yourself and your contribution. I think as a civil servant, that public duty value only will go so far.” (Participant 39)

It may be argued that civil servants’ own *personal* desire for impact is irrelevant in the context of a role which is about implementing the agenda of others. This is short-sighted: the scale and efficiency of impact government is able to make depends on a partnership between ministers and civil servants, with the latter acting within clear parameters set by politicians. There is therefore a distinction between deriving satisfaction from being part of positive impact, on the one hand, and exceeding the bounds of ministers’ democratic mandate, on the other.

Working for the social good is a clear part of the civil service’s appeal from an employment perspective. It would be imprudent to minimise this part of the job if the civil service is to attract the best possible talent, especially when other benefits, including salaries, are more competitive in other sectors (and perhaps increasingly so, see Chapter 6).

The rest of this report explores the reasons behind this tension between intention and impact, and why – despite the efforts and skill of thousands of eager civil servants and ministers – change is so hard to make.

## 3. Policy and decision-making

88 per cent of participants worked in policy, with the remaining 12 per cent in adjacent roles – the process of advising on, making and implementing policy therefore emerged as a common theme. There are striking commonalities between participants' accounts of specific aspects of the policymaking process over the past few years, including a shared sense that there has been a shift away from a longer-term, more considered process towards something more reactive and preoccupied with appearances.

While participants are disproportionately drawn from the parts of government most affected by changes in the executive centre (the Cabinet Office) and by the pandemic (the Department of Health and Social Care), these themes transcended departmental boundaries. This may suggest something about the incumbent style of governing or perhaps something broader about the increasingly fast-paced world civil servants are operating in.

Whatever the cause, these shifts were off-putting to many of the civil servants interviewed, and linked to decisions to leave. This approach to decision-making was also perceived to have led, from our participants' perspectives, to a range of suboptimal policy outcomes for the public.

### Chapter in a nutshell

- 61% of participants described policymaking as fast-paced, reactive and insufficiently linked to a long-term vision.
- 53% felt decisions were driven more by an imperative to announce things or manage appearances over delivering change on the ground.
- 39% felt policy suffered from a lack of innovation or imagination, with frantic activity leading to surprisingly little change in reality.
- 35% felt concern around the level or diversity of consultation, either of expertise or lived experience.

### 3.1 Vision, reactivity and short-termism

61 per cent of participants cited feeling that policy- and decision-making had become more rushed, more reactive and less determined by an overarching long-term vision than in previous periods. On the one hand, this is a long-standing issue in government: it is common for impacts that can be realised within an election cycle to be prioritised over those with long-term implications but for which a government is unable to take immediate credit.

The pressures of politics also make it difficult to prioritise and accept the trade-offs of disappointing constituents or neglecting outcomes of societal significance. On the other hand,

there was a sense from the interviews that regular changes in ministerial leadership, and the twin shocks of COVID and Brexit may have exacerbated these pre-existing tendencies.

It is a truism to say that good government relies on a coherent, consistent vision for the change it wants to make. This is not only strategic but also efficient. If civil servants have a clear sense of ministers' priorities and how they want to pursue them, they can work diligently in the background to consider evidence and options, checking in with ministers at key decision points rather than being constantly in discussion. If there is not a clear vision – or if it changes regularly – ministers and civil servants may find themselves working micro-issue by micro-issue and making much slower progress as a result. Many participants felt this had been a problem of late, as the quotes below, drawn from participants working in seven different departments since 2016, show.

“[Speaking about the past few years] it's been characterised by constant and massive churn and ambiguity in strategic direction.” (Participant 14)

“There was just the sense that there was at no time a clear internal narrative on what we were trying to do and why.” (Participant 12)

“And not just the COVID pandemic, but Brexit before it, [there was] a big, big theme in terms of really not understanding what the direction was.” (Participant 3)

“A minister's job is to set the new vision and then let civil servants deliver on it, and I think that's what's really been missing... there hasn't been a lot of vision-setting.” (Participant 29)

A few participants articulated how vision and priorities should ideally be set and communicated to the civil service, pointing to particular ministers who had done this well, such as Michael Gove. In general, individual ministers will not be mentioned in the report. However, an exception is made here given that his positive example was cited more than once:

“[Ministers should] have a clear objective... I disagree with Michael Gove on many things... but for me, that is how a Secretary of State should engage with the department. 'Here's a clear objective. Here's what I want. I want to academise schools. I want them to be free of local authority control. I want them to have their own curricula... Here's how I want you to deliver it – pushing them to deliver quickly.' I don't agree with all his decisions, but everyone knew what they were doing.” (Participant 1)

Good implementation, in short, requires that ministers are clear about what they want to achieve and why, so that civil servants can follow through with as much alignment to their wishes as possible.

In turn, delivering on that vision requires not only a clear-sighted view on priorities, but a willingness to reduce or eliminate efforts on things that are not a priority and accept the resulting trade-offs. A number of participants felt civil servants and politicians struggled with this. In many ways this is an issue inherent to government: politicians have to anticipate the electoral

consequences of deprioritising certain issues, and nothing crossing politicians' or civil servants' desks is easily dismissed as unimportant. But there was a sense that the scaling of ambitions to resourcing had been particularly unrealistic of late. Participants shared a feeling of being asked to do "everything" – delivering the entirety of the 2019 manifesto, newly repatriated areas of competence post-Brexit, recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as responding to issues arising from the news cycle. As Participant 41 put it:

"There are a lot of civil servants who have come in in the last five years... But we still don't have enough people to be doing everything that's in, for example, the manifesto... We're just being asked to do everything..."

There need to be some very difficult conversations and decisions about cutting back... And I think ministers are going to have to make some really challenging decisions, with the support of civil servants, about what work we'll continue doing, and ministers don't like stopping stuff."  
(Participant 41)

However, it is not only ministers who "don't like stopping stuff". Participants voiced frustration at fellow civil servants failing to engage meaningfully with prioritisation. Citing the example of then Health Secretary Thérèse Coffey's 'ABCD' set of priorities – ambulances, backlogs, care, doctors and dentists – Participant 20 described colleagues "waiting for permission" to stop things that were not aligned to those priorities, when they felt this steer was already very clear.

Clarity and consistency of direction is not exclusively a product of individual ministerial skill or style. It is also a function of wider circumstances and events that 'change the goalposts'. Participant 18 described a confluence of political and other factors that made it difficult for civil servants to have stable work priorities:

"[Referring to the period before 2019] it was very difficult to do long-term business continuity work because there were constant disruptions. Before Brexit, there was the Scottish referendum and then you have Brexit and then comes the pandemic. And it just makes it very difficult to work on something that has long-term impact. And everyone is just kind of chasing whatever is the source of policy urgency at the moment."

Several participants pointed to Brexit being the start of a shift towards more immediate "troubleshooting" rather than long-term vision and direction. This is not to make any normative comment about the impact of Brexit itself but instead the uncertainty created by debate about the precise kind of Brexit that would be implemented. This consumed large amounts of political and civil service bandwidth, and generated a wide range of scenarios for future policymaking that made it difficult to progress issues with certainty. As Participant 12, a former Treasury official, put it:

"[There was] constant uncertainty about what was going to happen with Brexit negotiations, what that meant for government budgets from 2019 onwards, what position the Treasury would take on financing, and also who gets the party's leadership and whether they could actually pursue their agenda... And how that manifested was just a huge level of

indecisiveness amongst everyone about what we were really doing. And that made it harder to have an impact on high level ambitions the Government had... on issues which required deep, diligent, working.”

Others contrasted this with what they felt were previous periods of relative stability, for example under the Coalition government of 2010-2015. As Participant 5 and 49 described it:

“Under the Coalition, things felt more stable. It felt like ministers were making what they thought were sensible decisions in the long-term interest... I think post-Brexit there was a big shift towards short-term policymaking.”

“Pre-referendum, you might not agree with ministers, but they had a clear vision – it was austerity... we were trying to reduce the deficit. We knew what our job was, it was reducing the deficit. And then it got a bit muddled slightly.”

Again, these participants made no comment here on whether Brexit was a good or bad development in itself, but rather were describing the sheer scale and complexity of the demands it placed on government. It involved vast numbers of decisions – from veterinary hygiene practices through to passport design – and required so much official time that other, less immediate issues received less attention.

This said, several participants felt a degree of optimism after the 2019 election, with Boris Johnson’s substantial majority signalling an end to Brexit deadlock and promising a positive, long-term policy agenda to deliver. As Participant 37, who was working in the Department for Education at the time, put it:

“The Conservatives were returned with a massive majority which was helpful in that it provided certainty around policy ambitions and they had the potential to be achieved. I think obviously the issue with Theresa May and those dying months of her premiership was that there was just complete stasis within government and a complete inability to get anything through Parliament. The positives of having a government that had been clearly elected with a strong mandate was that there was a feeling things could get done. I think that energised the department.”

Others mentioned ‘levelling up’ as a galvanising organising principle, which all departments could rally around. It created a general feeling of hope that things would begin to feel “more settled, more predictable, more stable” (Participant 15). These accounts contrast with stereotypes of the civil service – including from some of Johnson’s ministers – as being opposed to this agenda. Instead, for these testimonies at least, it was the *conditions* for producing high-quality, considered and impactful policy work that featured more prominently than the substance per se.

These hopes for stability were, however, short-lived with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understandably, the demands of such a crisis called for quick, focussed work on the situation as



it unfolded. On the one hand, some participants felt this opened up new opportunities for working differently: more quickly, more decisively and more innovatively. As Participant 17 put it:

“We had a bit more freedom to think about policy [and] come up with solutions... I think [ministers] were willing to take more risks because they knew the stakes were so high.”

Others described a feeling of purpose driven by the singular focus across all of government, proving the “can-do attitude of the civil service” and that it can deliver “incredibly quickly” when it needs to (participants 25 and 27 respectively).

On the other hand, some felt that decision-making became stuck in this more reactive ‘crisis mode’ after the threat of the pandemic had largely subsided. For example:

“The dominant feeling has just been one of reacting to events, at very short notice and intense deadlines... and a feeling that everything has to be done yesterday... It reduces the bandwidth to take a step back, look at the big picture and set ourselves up over the longer-term.” (Participant 37)

“I’ve seen the civil service run at problems with a pace that is more suitable for acute crises, rather than long-term systemic issues.” (Participant 31)

“People are being asked to do things at such a quick turnaround and aren't able to focus on longer-term work.” (Participant 41)

Several participants reflected on whether the pandemic had distorted expectations of how quickly decisions can and should be made. Participant 19 was concerned that ministers had learnt there was a different way of making decisions without the usual controls and processes, something they termed “addiction to COBRA” (referring to Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, where emergency government meetings took place during the pandemic). An official who worked in the Cabinet Office during the pandemic said they would not be surprised if “there’s a lasting legacy of thinking we can just commission something, have a paper the next day, ministers skim it and that’s how they make a policy decision.” They contrasted this with their experience of writing a Cabinet paper two years previously, where civil servants worked over weeks – across Whitehall – to ensure the best possible evidence and options could be presented to Cabinet ministers.

A number of participants expressed concern about being involved in policymaking at this pace, with multiple uses of the expressions “making things up on the hoof”, “making things up on the fly” and “constant firefighting”. As Participant 27 put it: “You can make decisions incredibly quickly... but often that means you don’t end up making the best decisions.”

Many also expressed their disappointment in civil service leaders failing to counteract these tendencies, for example by challenging timescales or setting higher standards for quality. Chapters 4 and 5 explore why relationships with ministers and the incentives presented to senior officials make challenge difficult in general – a crisis situation clearly makes it harder. Participant

42 described how the imperative to move quickly, felt by all, made it difficult to question decisions or timelines:

“Were civil servants in a position to say ‘Actually, Minister, that’s not appropriate?’ I don’t think that they were... because everyone was in response mode.” (Participant 42)

### 3.2 Announcements and appearances over delivery

A majority of participants (53 per cent) described their experience of policymaking as becoming increasingly driven by an imperative to announce things or manage appearances. This was often contrasted with their ability to focus efforts on delivering tangible outcomes on the ground. This felt linked to the apparent reluctance to accept the costs of prioritisation if it meant delivering difficult messages, disappointing the public or media, or risking electoral support. Similarly, some felt that there needed to be more interest in the complex and often time-consuming requirements of delivery rather than the immediate optics of a policy decision.

On the other hand, at times announcements appeared to be being used to force action among officials, a symptom of ministers’ frustration with a system that could be slow and bureaucratic.

This theme transcended policy areas:

“There was often this: ‘Let’s organise something to have something nice and shiny to announce at a clean energy ministerial session at a pre-COP meeting.’ And this just solidifies this perception of the UK for not really taking strategic interest in delivering against global challenges, but rather the optics of it.” (Participant 18)

“I think policy at the moment... is often about ‘what can I say or announce?’ So you’ll have a day coming up like World Mental Health Day... and they’ll just say, ‘we want to announce something. What can we announce?’... rather than thinking about ‘what is going to make the biggest change?’” (Participant 17)

Participant 17 contrasted this with the lack of political priority sometimes afforded to perceived “slightly boring, longer-term work”, for example working with the NHS to deliver the Long Term Plan or shifting budgets towards preventative intervention.

Some spoke about politicians feeling under pressure to present facts more favourably. Participant 34 gave an example of colleagues being asked to pursue alternative economic analysis about a trade deal, for example by including an assumption that the UK was still in the EU, because the initial analysis had not been positive enough.

Others described situations where deliverability had been secondary to public perception when making decisions to announce new policies. Participant 49 spoke about this in relation to manifesto pledges on health, where the budget allocated to implementation was advised to be

insufficient for the scale and timelines for delivery. As they put it: “No one thought it was remotely feasible, but it just started to be announced.” Another participant mentioned this phenomenon in relation to resettlement of refugees, contrasting the commitment to large targets for resettlement and the availability of safe and legal routes at the time of announcement.

Some participants felt delivery was often assumed to follow announcement automatically without ministers and officials working through the details. Reflecting on a “merry-go-round” of people putting out reviews and making recommendations, Participant 15 described a major “gap between those recommendations and being able to implement them in any coherent and considered ways”. Participant 31 felt the media was part of this, and could do more to incentivise delivery through their choice of coverage.

“The media are very bad at scrutinising actual delivery. There's very little coverage... government gets some praise for doing actual delivery, right, but you get the most bang for your buck and your press releases in terms of new announcements, right? And, similarly, obviously, the general public notice actual delivery, but usually that's some years down the line. And so there's less of a direct feedback loop between the quality of the actual final result and the decision that is made in the first place.” (Participant 31)

Participants also identified a breakdown in the policy development to announcement process. Policy decisions are typically the result of evidence gathering and engagement on a problem, the development of a spectrum of solutions, and then a ministerial decision on the basis of written advice and discussion with officials, advisors and other experts. Only at this point would the outcome be made known to beneficiaries and the wider public. Some interviewees gave examples of announcements being made prior to that work being undertaken. Participant 50 gave an example of a minister publicly committing to collaborating internationally on a highly technical area of science and technology without having consulted their officials or experts in that field:

“They agreed to do something that is basically impossible... And you get to the scientists, and the scientists are like ‘What? What do you want us to do with this?’ And obviously that degrades the trust that policy people have with scientists.”

This is clearly problematic, but it is worth reflecting on why ministers may behave in this way. On the one hand, short-circuiting engagement with civil servants or ignoring their advice may reflect broader mistrust, as explored in the next chapter. It may also reflect their frustration with the “computer says no” (Participant 15) attitude civil servants themselves experienced working in a large and clunky bureaucracy. As a result, participants felt announcements were sometimes used to force action or stretch the ambition further than might otherwise have been possible.

As several participants said, there could not be a more important time to both be developing good, considered policy and to be ensuring it translates into delivery. Participant 1 summed their feelings on it as follows:

“I mean, the country doesn't work... there are huge parts of, you know, courts, prisons, there are huge parts of public service that are just deteriorating year on year. That is the impact.”

(Participant 1)

### 3.3 Inertia and innovation

Related to the previous two themes, nearly two fifths of participants (39 per cent) referred to a feeling of inertia: that, despite frantic activity, nothing was materially changing in the outside world. This was partly a function of what participants described as “busy work”: the sheer amount of time spent on briefings or process as opposed to what would really make a difference to the public. Others felt the civil service was neither inherently, nor incentivised to be, bold or innovative in its ideas for policy.

Some indicative quotes from participants talking about experiences at the Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, and the Treasury respectively:

“You know, I don't think we really did any major, meaningful policy reform, I mean, probably from 2013-14 onwards to be honest, most of it stopped. By 2019... we were just going in circles, having the same conversations with the same people.” (Participant 1)

“I was talking to a policy friend the other day: she hasn't done any policy work... and I've not done any analytical work. We don't do any work, we just sort of survive.” (Participant 14)

“[There was] a feeling that lots of work was taking place, but not a lot was happening, as in like actual tangible outcomes.” (Participant 49)

Participants offered several explanations as to why this might be the case. First, much of their time at work was spent servicing the basic requirements of the system, for example briefing ministers for meetings, events or appearances in Parliament, or responding to public correspondence. As Participant 17 put it:

“You can be in a very busy policy area where you're getting over 20 PQs [Parliamentary Questions] a day, letters, lots of parliamentary interest, all sorts of briefings, debates, charities talking to you all the time and academics, but then the ability to actually translate that into action is a separate thing. You can feel like you're doing a lot on a day-to-day basis. But when you actually look at what you've achieved, that's not there.”

Participant 26 – a relatively new civil servant – was struck by how much of their day-to-day work was subsumed by this. They queried why every ministerial meeting required a briefing, in turn reviewed and signed off by two to three layers of management. As they put it: “just have a chat!”. There was also a sense that, as relationships between civil servants and ministers were more difficult, potentially more energy was going into keeping ministers satisfied with this form of support – whether driven by ministers' demands or the broader bureaucratic machine feeling a greater need to justify its existence.

Linked to the more appearances-driven approach, there was a sense that it was more difficult to undertake the creative and long-term work that might drive things forward more impactfully. As Participant 37 – a civil servant of five years across a range of social policy areas – put it:

“[Over the past few years] I haven’t really been in a situation where we’ve sat down and thought ‘Right, OK, here’s our policy problem. How are we going to address this? What are the potential ways that we could do it? Let’s do some proper thinking around it... come up with some potential solutions, present these to ministers and engage in a proper process.’”  
(Participant 37)

They contrasted this ideal with a feeling of “constantly reacting to short-term political changes or external events”. Participant 5, a former Treasury official, described how, in a more reactive policy environment, “throwing resource at the stuff” substituted for more considered problem-solving:

“You’d have a meeting with people... turning up to say ‘more money, more money, more money’ without ever thinking ‘where are you going to get all these workers from? You’re already running out of capacity because of x, y, z.’ It just felt like we weren’t having serious conversations about things and were trying to oversimplify... everyone was hoping that the serious, hard thinking was going on elsewhere.”

Notwithstanding these external factors, others felt the culture of the civil service itself inherently lacked imagination or courage, or that its role presented tensions with bold or radical change. Participant 28 acknowledged that the civil service “sometimes does lack that ability to think outside the box, think creatively, not just in a linear way... but to really problem solve”. Participant 19 also put this compellingly:

“We have lost all sense of boldness in policymaking. Both as a function of an exhausted Conservative government... and our very weak and timid civil service that truly doesn’t want to do anything radical.

Everything is just sort of fiddling in the margins... we’ll tweak this bit of legislation, and we’ll add this here... there’s no kind of desire to drive radicalism in terms of the re-making of public services and our theories of change for the 21st century.”

Participant 28 argued:

“Now, I couldn’t stand Dominic Cummings, but I did think he was right that the civil service sometimes lacks that ability to think outside the box, think creatively, and really problem solve... And I think as much as I didn’t agree with the way he went about it, I do think he was right that I think it needs a shake up really, as a whole.”

Participant 21 also addressed the need for greater creativity and innovation:

“The UK has been served well by a civil service that maintains continuity between governments and retains experience and expertise in particular areas of policy. But I think we're running into a challenge as an organising system, whereby the public is demanding change at an increasingly rapid rate, and expects politicians to be able to deliver it...

Therefore, if the civil service continues to be a force for a kind of ‘small c’ conservative steadiness, there is a risk that, while that might, in some instances, smooth things over and retain a degree of stability, it might also prevent radical change where it's actually needed.” (Participant 21)

Some of these ‘small c’ conservative tendencies exist for good reason, for example to preserve the core infrastructure of government for whichever administration comes next. Participants were clear that greater agility and creativity would be welcome to civil servants. In Chapter 2, the ability to have positive social impact was identified as central to participants’ motivations at work, and multiple participants cited a lack of creativity or meaningful impact as a reason for leaving or planning to leave the civil service:

“One of the core reasons [for leaving] was I just needed that creativity again. I just felt like creativity, innovation had really been stifled when I was working in the civil service.” (Participant 2)

“An advocacy role seemed like a sensible next step... and actually being able to do more of the real research, real thinking, real blue sky thinking and thinking about how things could change rather than just feeling quite cynical when I was stuck in the civil service.” (Participant 17)

“My job now is just keeping the lights on, if that – are the lights even on? I don't think they are. It just feels so reactive. Whereas I want to do something that's more intellectually and evidence-driven, that then has some sort of satisfaction and fulfilment at the end. I'm not getting any of that in my current role.” (Participant 29)

Given the scale of the challenges facing the country, and the rate and complexity of the change the UK faces, creating the space for civil servants to think differently – to innovate – is key.

### 3.4 Lack of consultation, diversity and ‘groupthink’

Finally, over a third of participants (35 per cent) expressed concern about the depth and range of perspectives consulted to make policy. This was associated with a more fast-paced approach to policymaking, as well as the desire to manage political risk and maintain control of information and decisions, leading to a ‘stage managed’ approach to engagement.

Participant 6 exemplified this, describing their experience in the Department for Education:

“[Policy] needs to be a lot more outward-looking and in touch with real people’s lived experience... Those in positions of authority – whether they’re senior civil servants or politicians – don’t speak to many people outside of Whitehall. Even as a junior civil servant, we might hold a roundtable with a selection of headteachers that [the Minister] has approved us to speak to, but you’re not speaking to frontline teachers in Blackpool.” (Participant 6)

They went on to describe how the confluence of time pressures on policy development and the (perceived) risks associated with government engagement made it hard to undertake engagement efficiently. As they put it, “you have to go through the right channels”.

Several participants felt the amount of external and internal cross-government consultation had declined in recent years. Participant 10 contrasted their current work with how they had been used to developing policy in the early- to mid-2010s:

“How it used to work as a policy lead: you would own an area, you worked to understand what was in place at the moment. Then you talked to stakeholders... and would have regular meetings with the Minister to go through what was happening and to secure decisions along the way. I made sure I understood risk and undertook impact assessments... I made sure I held regular stakeholder engagement... I made sure I had a two-way conversation with all of them.

Now my experience is that a minister decides they want to do something, we get told to deliver it. And we will insularly just go off, plan it, organise it and deliver it... Where’s your stakeholder engagement? And where’s your collective responsibility? Have you spoken to these other teams in departments that are working on something similar, when what you’re trying to do is going to have a knock-on impact to them? Oh, no, we didn’t do that. We were just told to deliver it.” (Participant 10)

Participants also linked this trend to management of political risk. One of the participants spoke about this in relation to a high-profile announcement in the field of health and social care:

“We basically had two to three months to work up a package [of reforms]. There were about 25 officials who were working on it. We hadn’t worked with the NHS, we hadn’t worked with anyone in local government. We were just doing it in an internal silo. I guess I get that with something that is as politically contentious as that, but we’re seeing the problems of it now. There’s a ridiculous implementation timescale on top of everything else going on [in the NHS and local government].” (Participant 5)

This hesitancy in engaging externally is not simply reluctance on the part of ministers. Participant 4 – who joined the civil service for a brief period after a career working in the NHS, third sector and local government – was struck by how hesitant colleagues were to talk to frontline staff. Despite the insights they could offer for how policies worked or were being implemented in reality, they sensed there was a fear of losing control of information or the policy process:

“And it almost feels like it’s a system-wide ‘Oh no, you’ve got to talk to the people at the top first. Oh no, you mustn’t talk to the people who actually do the work. Don’t talk to them for God’s sake.’ And there can be this sense of ‘Oh, my God, we’ve got to keep the secret. And

the secret can only be shared with these people at this level here. Because once you get down there, you're in trouble... because they're people on the ground and they can really scupper stuff." (Participant 4)

Without access to more diverse, expert or 'real-life' voices, Participant 4 felt policymakers ended up speaking to people "just like them". Participant 7 agreed, finding policy surprisingly unresponsive to the people it purports to serve, viewing external commentary or involvement as a threat against which it needed to defend itself:

"I just remember realising just how much time is spent coming up with explanations for things. And basically all the examples to work through were coming up with defensive lines to things... I just thought the posturing of this is so wrong: it is almost adversarial to questions, adversarial to inquiry, adversarial to just basic openness." (Participant 7)

They contrasted this with more client-facing jobs outside the civil service, where "your lesson is that the customer is king".

Participants also suggested that internal perspectives could not be relied upon to create good policy. A couple of participants, who had worked centrally on the COVID response, were conscious of how the make-up of teams had compromised policy design:

"I found myself thinking: most of the work being done in this team has been done by people under 30, who don't have a mortgage and don't have children. And that's not the public." (Participant 45)

"[There's a] lack of real understanding of what it is like to be outside of an upper middle-class income and that even working as an SEO or grade 7 in the civil service is still in the top 10% of incomes in the country." (Participant 6)

Participant 27 spoke about the "white Oxbridge men" that dominated decision-making roles on COVID-19 and that an absence of women in key positions had contributed to biased decisions, for example poor consideration of the beauty industry in the design of unlocking processes. Even where people had diverse perspectives to offer, several participants felt the civil service did not create the conditions for them to be raised and given a proper hearing. Participant 9 described how someone with frontline operational experience joined their team on a secondment during the pandemic: "She had different ideas as to how certain things could be done. But these ideas were essentially just dismissed as not part of the mainstream... they weren't part of the 'in club'". They continued, describing certain views taking hold in relation to tackling COVID:

"There was just a point of view and... that was the right point of view... I suppose what I'm saying is that there was 'groupthink'. A sense of 'This is the right thing. This is what we should do.' And therefore anything else is out."

Finally, in the absence of deeper consultation with others, or with experts, a number of participants described a phenomenon where policy defaulted more to ideological positions or personal beliefs than options that had been developed through a more considered process. Ideology is inherent



to politics, and ministers have every right to pursue their ideological beliefs through policy as elected representatives of the public. But failing to combine this with considered analysis of 'what works' or evidence-based policy is unlikely to maximise the intended impacts. It may also close down other options that politicians may not have already thought about, and which might achieve their aims more effectively. As Participant 42 put it:

"I did think that policy [during the pandemic] wasn't being made in a very robust way... Decisions got made in quite narrow ways, as lots of people have experienced and I'm sure will come through the inquiry. And that happened on EU exit as well. It was just very, very politicised. And you were basically catering to... 'What do they already think?', rather than informing them properly so they can make a decision on the basis of advice and evidence. It was like you just have to support them with the opinion that they've already come to."  
(Participant 42)

The civil service has been criticised for 'groupthink', as well as the extent to which it reflects the diversity – including cognitive diversity – of the UK public. As these examples show, there is evidence to suggest that some civil servants agree. What it also shows, though, is system dynamics make it difficult to counteract these tendencies. Safety to challenge, and space, time and permission to consult widely, are critical if this is to change.

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## 4. Relationship with ministers

Rightly, the political executive has enormous influence on the life of the civil service. Civil servants are duty-bound to serve the ministers of the day, and to support them to enact the policy platform for which they have been elected. However, the relationship between ministers and the civil service has been more challenging in recent years. There have been complaints of ministerial bullying, as well as accusations of the civil service obstructing the Government's agenda as an expression of its own political biases. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that relationships with ministers emerged as a core theme in interviews.

The impacts of these choppy waters were clear to see, not only on the morale and motivation of civil servants but on how they were able to perform their core functions. Participants offered worrying examples of how, in some departments, more hostile relationships had distorted the policymaking process, with ideas or information withheld for fear of ministerial censure. Wider phenomena in political leadership – for example, increased turnover in ministerial positions – also made it more difficult to deliver impact against clear and stable priorities. And, whether as a function of churn and inexperience or a deliberate process of politicisation, there were signs of the traditional boundaries between political and official roles becoming blurred.

This is not to say that things had soured across the board, or that participants did not feel the civil service had a role to play in restoring more positive working relationships with ministers. Indeed, a number of participants sympathised with the frustrations ministers experienced with the civil service, for example, its inability to embrace radical change or tendency towards certain perspectives or views of 'the evidence'. It is clear, however, that a strategy based on antagonism is unlikely to make the civil service change in the right ways and in fact presents risks to public outcomes.

### Chapter in a nutshell

- 47% of participants referred to a marked decline in relationships with ministers over the past few years.
- 31% described changes to the process of advising ministers or developing policy as a result of the deterioration in trust and rapport.
- Most rejected the idea that the civil service was deliberately obstructive, but some conceded that some of its characteristics – such as small 'c' conservatism or a lack of diversity in political belief or background – could make it appear so.
- 39% cited a higher rate of ministerial turnover as linked to worsening outcomes.
- 19% felt the roles of civil servants and ministers had become more blurred than before, whether through churn and inexperience on both sides or a deliberate process of politicisation.

## 4.1 A marked decline

Almost half of participants (47 per cent) highlighted that relationships with ministers has become more difficult in recent years. Long-standing civil servants drew negative comparisons with previous eras, and many expressed concerns that hostility from certain ministers towards civil servants was gratuitous rather than motivated by any higher-minded mission to improve outcomes for the public. Some felt that ‘civil service bashing’ had become politically useful for the Government, feeding into anti-establishment sentiments among voters or offering opportunities to refer accountability elsewhere.

For many, the EU referendum was described as the starting point for relationships souring, whether that was because of the differing style and outlook of ministers appointed – especially from 2019 onwards – or because the civil service was suspected of being opposed to the Brexit project itself. At the same time, participants also gave examples where relationships with ministers remained positive, particularly where there was mutual respect, trust and openness to hearing one another’s perspectives.

Numerous participants compared the current dynamic with those of times gone by. One participant – a civil servant of over 40 years – described the environment in their department under recent Secretaries of State as “the greatest atmosphere of conflictual tension that [they] had ever come across.” Interestingly, a number felt that – especially amongst newer ministers from 2019 – negative perceptions of officials predated some ministers’ contact with the civil service, and that many entered government predisposed to dislike or distrust them. As Participant 9 put it:

“There has just been less and less respect from ministers. I think it’s fuelled from the outside. So, when new ministers land in government, they already come with ideas that have been put in their heads [about civil servants]... It felt like they come with this attitude that they’re there to overcome us, rather than for us to work with them. You get that feeling of – I mean, we’ve never been equals, in a sense – but you’re not really a partner at work. You’re more like something they just have to put up with, a necessary evil.” (Participant 9)

Participant 27 agreed, suggesting that for some ministers, “the starting position [was] that all these people are incompetent” with certain figures deliberately creating an “us against them” narrative. This relates to wider tropes where the civil service is ‘othered’ and stereotyped as an undifferentiated mass – ‘the blob’ – rather than being depicted with the nuance that is inevitably closer to reality. For example, it is not uncommon for ministers to be complimentary about the civil servants that they directly work with, while being disparaging about ‘the Civil Service’ as a whole. Either these are inconsistent positions to take, or perhaps there is something broader and more systemic that mean the aggregate efforts of talented, motivated civil servants do not add up.

As mentioned, several felt that negative attitudes to the civil service became more acute around Brexit. Many referenced the perception of officials as “Remoaners” actively trying to frustrate the

Government's efforts to leave the EU or as representing "liberal metropolitan elite" or "establishment" perspectives that had been rejected through the referendum vote.

The style of the 2019 administration appears to have been a shock to the civil service. A desire for radical, disruptive change based on instinct and certain normative values (sovereignty, patriotism) or less familiar forms of evidence (e.g. science and technology, unconventional thinkers) strikes a stark contrast with the tools and approach to change with which the civil service is more familiar: steadier, more evolutionary change based on cost-benefit ratios and stakeholder consultation. These are, of course, broad generalisations, but they point to the difficulty of both sides to identify a common language to articulate their goals and a shared framework through which to make that happen, creating frustration on both sides.

Some participants felt certain ministers expressed that frustration towards civil servants in aggressive, and often counterproductive, ways. Participant 25 described ministers encountering a resistant civil service and feeling "you've really got to push the blob, and kick the blob" in order to get them to play ball. They linked this to a feeling of increased pressure and workload on officials as a result.

Nearly a fifth of participants mentioned former Cabinet Office minister Jacob Rees-Mogg's decision to place notes on civil servants' desks to highlight levels of home working as an example of unconstructive behaviour, especially when contrasted with civil servants' workload and working hours over the pandemic. A fifth also mentioned the sackings of senior civil servants – such as the permanent secretaries Tom Scholar (Treasury), Philip Rutnam (Home Office), Jonathan Slater (Education) and Simon McDonald (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) – as another emblem of ministers' aggressive stance towards them.

While some could see this as part of an attempt to reset culture and deliver change as quickly as possible, the overwhelming feeling was this was self-defeating, serving only to demotivate staff or make them behave defensively. Participant 27 spoke about how a more "fear-induced environment" created irrationalities and inefficiencies in ways of working, with activity highly centralised around the most senior officials. As Participant 40 put it:

"Creating a space where people are afraid doesn't create change, it creates resistance to change." (Participant 40)

A number of participants agreed, with one participant adding that ministers who "actively go to war against their civil servants" tend not to last long in their departments "because they end up not delivering anything." Participant 38 summed up how, and why, high-trust and co-operative relationships actively help the Government's cause, including by preventing negative media coverage:

"There has been a political climate in recent years where it has been beneficial to undermine the role of the civil service and not to recognise that, actually, in a healthy functioning government, we have respect for and awareness of those two different roles [i.e. ministers

and civil servants].

My feeling is that that has already changed with this new administration [under Rishi Sunak], and that has positive feedback loops almost immediately, because civil servants don't feel threatened. They don't feel the need to brief against ministers and leak. It's not helpful, almost any of the time, but when they feel threatened there's sort of an understandable urge to want to have their voice heard. So they leak, and that makes ministers trust them less and you get into a really negative cycle.

As soon as you get a sense of 'actually we trust you, you're an important part of what we do', you cut out the leaks, the trust starts to be rebuilt, and you can all get on with your job better.”  
(Participant 38)

Participants argued that more difficult relationships with ministers and their criticism of civil servants – for example around being obstructive – led to civil servants feeling less able to be open and honest about their views and feelings. This was clearly affecting several participants' enjoyment of their time at work, and how well they were able to perform their roles. Participants also referred to 'anxiety chains' cascading down line management and affecting the treatment of more junior staff. Participant 6 described a “toxic culture... where senior officials were afraid of [minister's name]” and work being created for junior staff “so that the SCS [Senior Civil Service] don't get in trouble”.

Some participants felt that it had become politically rewarding to criticise civil servants, either as a way of stoking anti-establishment sentiment or deflecting blame away from themselves. Participant 12 contrasted the recent period with the kinds of criticisms with which civil servants are familiar when they “signed up”:

“I think basically the tone from quite a lot of government ministers... has been different to the classic tone which we all knew when we signed up, right, which is 'Oh civil servants are lazy, useless bureaucrats', and has actually just got a bit mean to score political points with a small group of people who read the Telegraph.” (Participant 12)

Participant 40 referred to a “shift in accountability”, reflected in the “very high-profile removals of senior people” when things went wrong, for example the sacking of Jonathan Slater by then Secretary of State Gavin Williamson over the handling of exams during the pandemic:

“It wasn't ministers who were resigning if things went wrong, it seemed to start to be civil servants.” (Participant 40)

Credible arguments can of course be made about whether the civil service is sufficiently accountable to the public or to Parliament, and whether the levels of ministerial accountability are

proportionate to the strength and directness of the levers available to them to drive change.<sup>8</sup> In practice, ministerial success often depends a lot on the ability of the civil service to deliver on their direction. This tension between the power politicians expect to have and the reality of exercising that power is a legitimate source of frustration for politicians. This said, delivering in an enormously complex bureaucracy is not a question of ‘input in, output out’: ministers have a role not only in issuing instructions but in overseeing how they are carried out, including managing and motivating key staff.

It is also essential to acknowledge that, just as civil servants are not an undifferentiated ‘blob’, nor are ministers. A number of participants drew out the difference made by individual ministers’ characters and their approach towards officials: “it very much depends on the person, the personality” (Participant 16); “it’s so dependent on the individual minister” (Participant 17); “some of it is a function of the ministerial set that you have available to you” (Participant 19).

Several participants described the conditions where relationships with ministers had been very positive. For example, Participant 20 spoke about their experience working with a recent health minister:

“She had loads of time for her civil servants. She wanted to know them by name, and she listened to what they said... You could say, ‘Well, I’m not sure about that’. She’d listen to that, even if she decided she still wanted to go ahead. And that’s how it should be and that’s how it used to be in the old days, but I feel like there’s this real nervousness now.” (Participant 20)

Open dialogue is not about encroaching on ministers’ decision-making authority – as was very clear in participants’ testimonies. Participant 30 went on to say “our job is to do what ministers asked for”, as well as to highlight any risks in that course of action. Participant 13 expressed their shock at Liz Truss’ suggestion that she had to “overrule her civil servants” advice on Israel, accusing them of antisemitism:

“Ministers don’t need to overrule officials as you well know. Officials offer advice and ministers decide. The inference then is that these officials were making decisions and actions which FCDO officials don’t, except under political instruction, so those words deliberately or not created the impression that we had some kind of organisation that was going against the basic values by which we work, namely that we serve ministers by offering advice.” (Participant 13)

There was a concern that this core part of civil servants’ role – to advise ministers on not only the positive but potentially risky parts of their plans – was being mistaken for resistance and dismissed.

“There needs to be a change in the way ministers engage with civil servants and view their advice and take it as a genuine debate. The whole idea of government is that ministers come

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed this case was recently made by former Permanent Secretary Jonathan Slater in his paper ‘Fixing Whitehall’s Broken Policy Machine’, arguing for civil servants to make more of their advice and analysis public. See Jonathan Slater, *Fixing Whitehall’s Broken Policy Machine* (King’s College London, 2022).

with a political idea, civil servants come with some policy knowledge and you have a genuine dialogue about what is workable and feasible to achieve that objective... 'These are the risks, these are the rewards... These are the other areas you could explore, and here are some other options.' Equals chatting to each other, with respect." (Participant 23)

## 4.2 Distortions to making policy and giving advice

Nearly a third of participants (31 per cent) described changes to the advice given to ministers as a result of a more distrustful or acrimonious atmosphere in some quarters. Participants gave examples of advice being adapted to avoid ministerial censure, particularly where it contained difficult messages. One spoke about being told by No.10 to remove risks from slide decks for the Prime Minister, detecting that this was to counteract the civil service being unduly negative about what they were intending to do:

"It's just nonsensical to pretend that there aren't risks associated with options. You can still come at those options with a can-do, open-minded approach whilst talking about risks, they're not mutually exclusive." (Participant 25)

Another described hesitance among senior civil servants about sharing a dashboard on Brexit with ministers when it suggested government was not yet prepared:

"But I'm like, 'that is the facts... we can't withhold things because they don't want to hear we're not ready'." (Participant 23)

Another participant described some "really artificial bits of advice" being presented to ministers, because they felt unable to advise that something was impossible to deliver and being asked to make things "much more positive" or consider "the unthinkable option". This may respond to the criticism noted in Chapter 3 that the civil service can be closed-minded or overly risk averse, but this does not appear to have prompted more courageous or innovative thinking.

Participants 35 and 40 – both officials who had worked in the Ministry of Justice over the past few years – contrasted "collaborative engagement" and "robust discussion" with ministers at other times during their service with an environment in recent years in which they did not feel listened to. As one put it:

"It's one thing [ministers] listening and saying, 'fundamentally I take all your advice, but it's my priority to do this because of x y z,' but it's another to say 'No, I don't want to read it unless it's got these words on the top of it. Send it away, rewrite it.'" (Participant 35)

This links to a related perception that policymaking had shifted away from a dynamic back-and-forth towards something more directive, with limited opportunity for discussion or challenge. As Participant 14 put it:

“It is much less about the civil service giving advice to ministers, whether it's welcome or difficult advice, and much more about politicians saying JFDI [‘Just fucking do it’] to the civil service...

Everything's become very directive. The minister wants you to do this immediately. There is no scope to qualify the ask. And there's almost no appetite for ministers to get unsolicited advice. They don't want their department thinking and coming up with fresh ideas.” (Participant 14)

Three separate participants referenced the expression “the minister says jump, and we say ‘how high?’”, with Participant 28 contrasting this with “a more considered conversation, advice, recommendation”. Interestingly, just as ministers were described as being more directive to their departments, several participants observed a related shift in how directive the centre had become to other parts of government. Five different participants referenced a tendency for decisions to be centralised in No.10, with departments disempowered as a result. Speaking about changes to policymaking over the past few years, for example, Participant 25 said:

“There was also a change from much more considered policy development and allowing departments to have a bit more autonomy to do that, to Number 10 running the show on most things, if not everything.”

Others referenced the creation of numerous ‘Taskforces’ – situated in either No.10 or the Cabinet Office and duplicating responsibilities held in departments – as a manifestation of that phenomenon.

### 4.3 Bias and obstruction

One of the contributors to mistrust and antagonism between civil servants and ministers is the perception that civil servants bring their own political biases to their work. As this account goes, this results in, at best, less energetic implementation of policies with which they do not agree and, at worst, active obstruction to those policies. As discussed above, this was especially prominent around Brexit, with the civil service often depicted as primarily ‘Remain-voting’ and therefore distrusted with delivery of a project in which it was perceived to have little conviction.

Indeed, a few participants described the shock and upset felt in departments when the referendum vote result was announced: Participant 36, working in international policy at the time, spoke about “people in my office in tears”, while another, Participant 13, described their colleagues in the Foreign Office at the time being “shocked” and “saddened”.

In addition, two participants shared that they had voted to leave the European Union and both described a palpable feeling of being in the minority. Participant 45 described feeling uncomfortable sharing this with any of his fellow colleagues:



“So I voted Leave, and I told one person in DExEU that I voted Leave the whole time I was there. And that was right at the end, and it was someone I trusted particularly well. And the way we talked about Leave voters and the way we talked about the referendum and the decision I was like, ‘I am not going to tell anyone ever’...

Maybe I'm doing my colleagues a discredit and if I had spoken more, it would have been interesting and relevant [for policy- and decision-making], but again, if there are meetings where I was the only Leave voter it would have been extremely uncomfortable to say.”

However, several participants felt the conflict between many civil servants' personal preferences and their efforts to deliver Brexit demonstrated the remarkable professionalism of the civil service and its commitment to impartiality.

“You could see how devastated these people were... but did that feed into their advice or their work? Absolutely not. And I think across the whole civil service, everyone just got on with it... So I think the civil service responded very well to Brexit. There were lots of intellectual challenges that were met, lots of difficult policy development, delivery, operational stuff.” (Participant 36)

“The day after the vote we got a message from our then Perm Sec, saying ‘This happened. We must help the government deliver on the will of the people as expressed through this referendum. However we approached the referendum personally, it's the ultimate exercise in serving the public will.’ And from that moment on, I never saw any evidence that anyone was doing anything to hinder, less still block anything to do with the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.” (Participant 13)

“I don't feel I saw any sabotage, and, if anything, there was a willingness to push the boat out pretty far. People were leaning into things where they were like, ‘I'm not comfortable with this, but this is what ministers want and we are going to follow their steers’. So in some ways, that's where I feel like the ministerial criticism is particularly unwarranted. You know, the civil service has done all this stuff that they didn't want to do, and it was quite obvious that they didn't want to do it and they did it.” (Participant 45)

Some also felt critics of the civil service interpreted some of the inertia around Brexit as the result of wilful resistance rather than the natural overheads of transitioning to a different relationship with the EU or political uncertainty preventing decisive implementation. As Participant 49 put it:

“Certainly what I saw was the civil service trying to implement whatever version of Brexit politicians wanted, but it was really hard to get them to come to a straight answer because there was no political consensus... But what I also observed was that so many areas of policy had been done at the EU level that no one had really thought about them from a UK perspective for a long time.”

Some felt that normal advice-giving – especially where it presented risks or challenges – was misconstrued as resistance, reflecting ministers’ lack of faith in the civil service’s desire to deliver Brexit:

“If you’ve got people in the Conservative Party saying ‘I wish you were more positive about this’, well, they shouldn’t know how I [personally] feel either way. If they can level that accusation at senior civil servants, then I’d really like to think it’s only because they were doing their jobs and pointing out the evidence-based risks of Brexit. You can’t get away from that.” (Participant 36)

This narrative had registered with interviewees, for example Participant 37 said that it had been challenging “feeling that you’re working for a government that... thinks you are trying to frustrate the Government’s policy ambitions.”

Nonetheless, there was a wide spectrum of responses. Some were keen to reject the idea that one could generalise across the civil service in terms of political belief or attitudes to particular agendas. As Participant 25 put it, government is “a huge sprawling organisation of about half a million civil servants in different guises” and “every department culture is different and every person there is different”.

Some participants argued that what ministers might perceive as resistance was in fact a core part of the civil service’s duty to give honest and practical advice:

“I have never, in any department or role I’ve been in, seen a civil servant just say no to a minister or be purposefully dragging their feet. I’ve seen civil servants say quite firmly if they disagree with something, but when a minister has said ‘I’ve heard you, but I disagree’, action is taken to then deliver the steer that we’ve been given.” (Participant 23)

“In terms of civil servants obstructing – ugh, no! I think that’s the point of civil servants, to challenge. Ministers come in with a political agenda and our jobs are to do things in a way that’s good value for money for the taxpayer, that’s actually feasible in terms of delivery and that takes into account what we’ve committed to on diversity and equality or the green agenda... Challenging an idea because we disagree with the politics, I have never experienced that happening.” (Participant 42)

Participant 20 reinforced these views, stating that “if the civil service has its own agenda, it is because it is supposed to”, that is, an agenda “to be impartial, honest, and have integrity” (paraphrasing the Civil Service Code).

However, other participants felt there was some truth to these accusations. Participant 32 identified with the trope that “a lot of the civil service is centre-left” and felt that, for some of their colleagues, speaking ‘truth to power’ amounted to “challenging all these right-wing Tory Ministers who are taking the country in this horrible direction”.

Others described what they saw as a tendency for civil servants to be intellectually or ethically supercilious towards ministers, particularly those appointed since 2019. Participant 21 referred to some civil servants feeling their role was to “protect the country from ministers” and that, while this was not commonplace, there were some who thought “silly ministers, let’s try and make their views sensible somehow”.

Participants 38 and 45 both described a phenomenon where it was taken for granted that the current government or its ministers were disliked by civil servants, referring to “relatively open disparagement” of ministers “feeling quite normal”. Meanwhile Participant 38 reflected on “the overtness with which it’s assumed that politically nobody likes this government... it’s just a baked-in assumption in lots of conversations”. This could be because of several reasons, including their treatment of civil servants, however Participant 38 implied this was about their politics.

Several participants either agreed with or embodied the stereotype of the civil service being broadly liberal or progressive in outlook and/or not sharing the politics of the current government. For example:

“I’m not aligned with a lot of what this government does personally. From a personal, ethical perspective, I have struggled with it. And it’s especially difficult when you see some of the rhetoric that comes out of the government – you feel slightly ashamed to be associated with that because a lot of it is, I think, objectively reprehensible.” (Participant 37)

“I struggle working for a government I’m ideologically opposed to.” (Participant 26)

“I’m not a Tory, but I made my pact when I came into the civil service... I said I’ll deliver in discrete policy areas that I think I can get on board with. But I think very quickly in 2019-20 when certain anti-LGBT rhetoric started to come out and all that stuff said around Black Lives Matter, I started to think I’d like to work somewhere else, the political direction skewing to a bit further Right than I’ll be comfortable with.” (Participant 34)

“I think civil servants often fail to understand where ministers are coming from. They often just hear an idea and go, ‘Oh, well, that’s ridiculous and it won’t work’ or whatever else, rather than really trying to openly drill down into the intent that’s coming from a minister and explore the ‘why’.” (Participant 25)

Some participants either referred to, or themselves manifested, a discomfort with political imperatives having weight over and above ‘the evidence’, showcasing an innate tension in any democracy: the will of the people or their elected representatives is a vital component of decision-making, which can be sufficient regardless of whether there is wider ‘evidence’ to support that decision.

“Speaking candidly about my current role [in health] – there is a sense that there is a [health] blob view of the world that doesn’t care about politics or political mandates or ministerial prerogatives... It’s a challenge that I have, as a policy person, to argue that it’s entirely right

for ministers to make a decision and our job is to give them the evidence, make recommendations and if they choose to ignore that, that is how a democracy works.” (Participant 38)

Again, this is not a representative sample, so this study should not be used to extrapolate about the general political views of the civil service. What it does show, however, is that it would be impossible to staff a civil service of nearly half a million people, or approximately 30,000 working in policy, with only those who are personally aligned to the government of the day. Nor would that be desirable given the issues around ‘groupthink’ identified in Chapter 3.

All of this highlights difficulties in terms of how ‘impartiality’ and ‘objectivity’ are interpreted and practised in the civil service, as well as who civil servants feel they are meant to serve. Looking at the definition of ‘impartiality’, ‘political impartiality’ and ‘objectivity’ in the Civil Service Code, it’s clear what a grey area this is:

- **Impartiality:** carrying out responsibilities in a way that is fair, just and equitable, and reflects the civil service commitment to equality and diversity, without unjustifiably favouring or discriminating against particular individuals or interests.
- **Political impartiality:** serving the Government to the best of one’s ability, whatever its political persuasion, and acting in a way which retains the confidence of ministers, while avoiding acting in a way which is determined by party political purposes or allowing personal political views to determine advice or actions.
- **Objectivity:** providing information and advice on the basis of evidence, taking decisions on the merits of the case and taking due account of expert and professional advice, while ensuring not to ignore inconvenient facts or frustrate implementation of actions following from decisions.

It is easy to see how aspects of these principles trade off with one another: for example, the duty to be objective and yet consistently retain the confidence of ministers. In practice, it is difficult to agree how and what evidence should be used to objectively make decisions. All of this points to the need for better codification of what these principles mean in practice, and for stronger, more explicit consensus between ministers and civil servants around the inputs to good decision-making.

It may well be that strong expectations around – or perhaps misinterpretations of – ‘impartiality’ mean philosophical disagreement gets channelled into other aspects of advice. For example, some described how this may be expressed through assessments of “deliverability” or “legal risk”. As Participant 16 – who had worked in No.10 – put it:

“In my view, having a philosophical disposition on a particular policy and stating it is not breaching impartiality... There were many instances where I thought – what’s really going on

here is this person has very strong views against the particular policy we want to do or in favour of the particular policy they're proposing.

They're not allowed to say it... so it all gets converted into 'there are legal concerns' or 'there are operational concerns' or 'we're going to have to do a very long consultation to be able to do this'... And I sort of wish we could just have a big half an hour argument about it out loud... and then get on with it." (Participant 16)

Again, this perhaps points to the need to reconsider or clarify what impartiality and objectivity means in the civil service. Participant 25 felt "the civil service could possibly take slightly more advantage in talking openly about things", and that occasionally the idea of being "good, impartial, neutral civil servants" gets taken to the extreme.

## 4.4 Frequent changes in ministers and direction

Nearly two-fifths (39 per cent) highlighted the impact of political leadership or direction changing more rapidly than normal over the past few years. Several traced this initially back to the uncertainty over the precise form and timeline of the UK's exit from the EU, citing the vast amounts of work needing to go into considering and planning for various different scenarios rather than a more defined set of parameters. A striking number of interviewees also spoke about the impact of reshuffles, resignations and U-turns on their day-to-day work. For example:

"It's hard to imagine anything getting done under these conditions. It's really distracting every time there is a change of minister or a change of government. I mean how many chancellors have we had in the last four years? It's something crazy... You never really feel like you can put your head down and get anything done. Because by the time you put sense around one thing, all the priorities have changed and the thing's gone." (Participant 29)

"Political instability – you know, changing of governments' political priorities, deciding we want to do one thing and then that we're going to do another – has meant that you don't have that clarity of direction and stability that you need to invest in getting to grips with really challenging policy problems." (Participant 31)

As a tangible example of how ministerial changes divert officials' attention from delivery, interviewees highlighted disruptions to their and their colleagues' work to onboard new ministers. Participant 41 described having four sets of ministers in the year and a half in her department, leading on preparing briefing packs about all the key policy areas each time. Participant 47 described how this traded off with more delivery-oriented parts of their role:

"The amount of change... definitely contributes to circumstances one could interpret as inefficiencies. Half of my work is just dealing with all the political stuff, that's half of me being quite inefficient compared to solving real life problems."

Others mentioned how compromising the changes in direction were for the UK's economy through an inability to provide stability for businesses and investors, as well as its reputation internationally. Participant 49 highlighted how much time, energy and taxpayer money had been wasted on local efforts to respond to shifts in regional economic policy:

“Councils have spent hours and hours and hours, working on investment zones because they were announced. And now apparently they're going to get abolished at the Autumn Statement.

Similarly, before, Northern Powerhouse Rail was the thing. It was announced by Boris in 2019, then it was cancelled in the Integrated Rail Plan, it was re-announced by Liz Truss and then now it's going to get cancelled again. And I think people just expect government to be rubbish now.” (Participant 49)

Several participants highlighted how difficult it is for the civil service to determine where and how far to invest their focus in these conditions, and to maintain energy and enthusiasm to deliver when their efforts could be unravelled shortly after.

“How is the civil service meant to act when the Government is unstable? Do you keep the train going at 200 miles an hour or not? If the government of the day says ‘implement this policy’, you can feel like, ‘Yeah, but if we actually do it, it's quite painful, it's quite difficult... and it might change tomorrow’.” (Participant 45)

Participant 29 spoke about their inability to galvanise action within or across departments when ministers' positions are insecure, struggling to convince others to “get on board” with their programme. Similarly, at points when it feels likely a certain minister or even the Prime Minister is going to lose their job, it can feel unclear as to whether civil servants should be “putting the pedal to the metal” or “pumping the brakes” on their policy ambitions.

Some participants mentioned the importance of ministers building up subject-matter expertise as well as relationships with the officials leading on key policy areas in order to make good decisions, which is impossible to do with such significant churn.

“We had one minister for a good amount of time and were able to build a relationship with them. Whatever you think of the Minister, you can work to what they need and chip away at things. Ultimately, we've had how many ministers in the last like six, seven months whilst dealing with big policy questions? It just creates a plug – you cannot progress things forward... Instability at the top has such a knock-on effect on policymaking that people don't realise.” (Participant 15)

All of this uncertainty and redirection made the experience for civil servants more stressful and less fulfilling. A number of participants linked inconsistency of leadership to their and their teams' wellbeing, as well as to their considerations about leaving the civil service. As Participant 28 put it:

“People’s cups are just filling up... there isn’t really a government to work for, in a sense, because it’s changed so much... there has just been such a lack of consistency over the last three years – some of which is outside of their control with the pandemic and needing to respond – but I think that lack of consistency and lack of trust from senior leaders, it’s all piled into one.”

Participant 43 was committed to staying in the civil service, but described how the current political climate was making it impossible to live out the reasons they joined:

“What I think everyone really wants to do is to find a team with motivated people working on a stable priority, where they can really throw themselves into it, work hard, and see some results... And that just hasn’t been possible. It’s been so chaotic.”

However one participant also reflected on broader geopolitical trends that may have made volatility the “new normal”.

“We’re probably likely to be in this slightly chaotic, quite polarised, politically unstable world for a while longer, and it does feel like the civil service, or government as an organisation hasn’t worked out how it deals with that.” (Participant 43)

## 5. Civil service leadership

The previous chapter explored how relationships with ministers have changed or deteriorated over the past few years, with impacts on advice and decision-making. Clearly, though, the civil service itself, and especially its senior leadership, has a significant part to play in those outcomes: both in terms of commanding the trust of ministers and in maintaining the values and standards of the civil service.

Roughly half of participants brought up the role and quality of the leadership they had experienced over the past few years, with some stories of excellence but many others of disappointment and frustration. This was often set against descriptions of life as a civil service leader becoming increasingly difficult, grappling with significant, and often shifting, policy and delivery challenges alongside greater public exposure and pressure from ministers.

### Chapter in a nutshell

- 45% of participants described their senior leaders feeling less able or confident to give ministers challenging advice over the past few years.
- 47% highlighted the role of ‘small p’ politics on senior civil servants’ behaviour, feeling that imperatives to be individually recognised or ‘empire-build’ were more powerful than those to manage their teams well.
- 33% expressed frustrations with the civil service hierarchy, with excess supervision and lack of empowerment making it a less fulfilling place to work.
- 39% raised the issue of a dampening of ambition to become senior leaders in the civil service.

### 5.1 Speaking truth to power

Nearly half of participants (45 per cent) spoke about their leaders’ ability to “speak truth to power”, i.e. to give difficult but necessary advice to those in positions of authority, usually ministers. This has clear links with the previous chapter, which highlighted how greater hostility from ministers could affect the policymaking process. Our participants gave a number of examples where fearfulness – especially around losing ministerial favour or even their jobs – meant this duty was not fulfilled.

“Senior people are scared, and not willing to defend their advice to ministers because they don’t want to be seen to be doing the wrong thing or not giving them what they want.” (Participant 35)

“If our Permanent Secretary is being shouted at and is unable to do anything, and the Prime Minister doesn’t believe a report [on ministerial bullying], then that creates the culture of ‘I don’t want to challenge. I might lose my job’.” (Participant 33)



[When asked why civil servants are not more vocal in response to criticism] “I think it’s a genuine fear of getting sacked.” (Participant 25)

These quotes suggest that the high-profile sackings of permanent secretaries live long in civil servants’ memories and may have “trickled down” to other parts of the civil service (Participant 28). Those installed after these firings may also feel more reliant on ministers for their job security, and consequently feel less able to give them difficult advice where it is warranted. As Participant 31 put it, contrasting the current Cabinet Secretary and permanent secretaries with those of previous eras:

“If you look at Jeremy Heywood, who survived multiple different Prime Ministers, by the point that David Cameron comes into No.10... he had been around long enough to have an authority distinct from that given by the Prime Minister... that set up naturally means you are better able to challenge ministers if you need to.”

Fundamentally, these firings signalled a major shift between ministers and the permanent senior civil service. For example, participants described the sorts of behaviours or types of leaders likely to thrive in this more fearful environment. There were a number of references to senior civil servants as “yes people” or to tropes from the TV show ‘Yes, Minister’, where civil servants promise ministers more than is practically possible or sensible. Participant 10 described one such situation where one of the most senior members of their department – “very much a ‘yes person’” – openly criticised them and other departmental employees in front of a minister for a programme failing to deliver as expected. This was despite the participant’s advice throughout being that the scheme was undeliverable and receiving direction from the top to plough on regardless.

“I’m sorry, but you do not get to say this in front of everybody. You have been told multiple times what the reasons are. And also, you signed off on this scheme!”

Similarly, Participant 49 expressed concerns that certain manifesto commitments had been presented to ministers as more deliverable than they were in reality:

“I don’t really want to criticise senior civil servants – actually going back through this, it’s part of the reason I left – I was just like ‘I can’t do that’. I don’t know if it was different [to previous periods in the civil service], or I just became more senior, so I saw more of it, but they seemed very willing to repeat what ministers have told us to say, even if it’s untrue.”

A couple of participants gave examples of senior leaders risking breaches of various legal obligations, out of real or perceived pressure from ministers. For example, Participant 48 described a pressure to minimise certain legal duties around equality given the political swing against this agenda. Speaking about Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), they said:

“As civil servants, we should be able to give frank advice. We should be able to advise ministers ‘these are the pros and cons of delivering that’ and then let them make their decision.

But I think of late it's gotten to the point where some of the mechanisms for advising on risks around things, like PSED, individuals whose role it is to champion that from a compliance perspective almost feel like they need to be quiet. It's verging on telling people not to do their job." (Participant 48)

Participant 3 offered another example around procurement rules, where their Deputy Director felt unable to stand up to ministerial pressure to dismiss legitimate bids. Describing the individual in question as "beleaguered" and "downtrodden", they felt it was easier just to "go along with it" and offered little support to others in their team to push back.

Interestingly, a number of participants found that the ability to offer challenge was greater among junior civil servants, whether this was because they were closer to the detail or felt protected in their jobs from ministerial intervention. As Participant 16 – a Special Adviser with access to a number of different departmental teams – put it:

"I often found that there was an inverse relationship between the grades and the ability to speak truth to power. A junior civil servant, close to the policy area, will often tell you 'actually, I'm not sure this is going to work', whereas the SCS were always keen to say 'Yes, Prime Minister, of course we'll do that'. Even though it turned out they couldn't.

The innocent explanation is they're less close to the detail, and therefore, if they're in a meeting and the Minister says 'I want to do this', then, unless it sounds completely crazy, they'll probably say 'we'll look into it'. But I also think a lot of the SCS, especially at permanent secretary level but also some director generals, want to cozy up and be part of the 'in crowd' with relevant ministers. You know, no one likes being the person saying 'No'."

Participant 35 (a Grade 7) agreed, describing themselves as being the most junior person in a room full of "four senior people above you", but being the only one willing or able to say "No, you can't do that – that's not how it works".

However, a number of participants mentioned how leaders under pressure were altering incentives further down the chain, with fear of ministerial reproach generating a more risk averse and 'stage managed' approach to policymaking. As two participants put it:

"I think it made the whole place feel more cutthroat, because there was more stress, more pressure... People tended to be slightly more ruthless, less trusting, very risk averse, any kind of innovation or challenge was too risky." (Participant 9)

"There's so many more people in the chain of command now. I think that has taken away some space and autonomy from team leadership roles. Things are delegated and passed down, but not in the same way, whether it's a trust issue or a risk issue." (Participant 28)

Some participants also felt more exposed, or like they had less support from senior staff, when it came to their own efforts to defend their work, and that some of the pressures were passed down

to them. There was a clear desire to see or at least *know* the necessary challenge was being provided – to be sure that risks had been raised or ethical questions posed, even if ministers had decided to go ahead regardless. Some contrasted the types of leaders who thrived or survived in a more cutthroat environment and those that best supported their teams. As Participant 3 put it:

“You cannot be an effective leader without empathy. Now, clearly, we need people with expertise and knowledge, bright people who can work the system, but we also desperately need people who are really good people managers. Who have the empathy and humility to listen to what is going on with their staff. I don’t see enough of that.

I think at the moment the people who are most advantaged are those... who are more hard nosed, who will just walk the walk, talk the talk and upsell everything.”

## 5.2 Self-interest and small ‘p’ politics

Nearly half (47 per cent) of interviewees referred to leadership in the civil service requiring leaders to manage ‘small p’ politics to get ahead, and that individual incentives – for ministerial approval, promotion or success – were often more powerful than those in the collective or public interest.

“If you really wanted to get anything done, you had to know the right people and you had to know how to work the system... And I was very surprised the more and more I discovered that senior people were quite happy sort of as long as the system was working for them and their position.” (Participant 46)

“It seems to me that [senior leadership recruitment] isn’t as much about ability as it is the ability to do the ‘small p’ politics of the civil service.” (Participant 16)

“[Talking about their time in a particular department] It often felt like people were really out for their own careers as opposed to actually progressing things. Not all the time, there are obviously exceptions, but that was the sense that I got working there.” (Participant 2)

On the one hand, this might show that the senior civil service selects for those who are savvy political operators and skilled in showcasing themselves and their work to ministers. On the other hand, it may be that the requirements of leadership within a bureaucracy force people to adapt and behave in certain ways. They may not be mutually exclusive. Either way, participants – around half of whom had left – were clear they found this off-putting.

One of the participants who raised this was in fact a member of the SCS, but had since left, feeling that they did not ‘fit the mould’ – a mould they described as “a hero leadership model”, where team performance mattered little “if it meant you could be the one to ride in on a white horse and save the day”. They contrasted what were professed to be the criteria for evaluating their performance as an SCS with what they felt happened in reality:

“I continue to be astonished that in all of my performance assessments, my staff survey results were never considered. What I felt was considered was... how much of a hero was I? And so, of course, what you create is an incentive mechanism. You know, this is the thing that I'm being rewarded for.” (Participant 19)

Elaborating on what “heroism” meant in this context, the participant described a model of leadership which jettisons proper delegation and collaboration in favour of seniors taking on a disproportionate share of the work (and the glory). The “private secretary type”, as they put it. Commenting on the preponderance of cabinet secretaries and other senior leaders taken from this tradition, they went on:

“There is sometimes this willingness to roll their eyes at what the rest of the system is doing, and fix it themselves rather than asking: ‘Why is the system not fixing this? Why does it require me to roll up my sleeves and get involved?’”

Participant 19 was clear that this is a long-standing problem, but if participants’ testimonies about the last few years are anything to go by, a heightened reliance on ministerial approval for success or security could amplify these tendencies.

Numerous participants highlighted how leaders prioritising ministers or seniors traded off with providing support for their teams, especially in highly political contexts. One described the leadership during their recent stint in the Cabinet Office during Brexit and the pandemic as “particularly unfocussed on the team... how the team works, how people are feeling” (Participant 23). In an environment with “shifting political conversations and shifting policy winds”, one could optimistically say that their leaders’ time was best spent with ministers, clarifying the political direction to transmit that to their teams. The “cynic’s view”, they went on, was that it was a sign of “people wanting to get ahead and not focus their time on anything different to that”.

Another Cabinet Office member of staff expressed a similar sentiment, describing how people “cared much more about upward management than downward management, because they wanted to be in the room where the most important decisions were happening.” (Participant 42)

Two participants drew a contrast between competing political and managerial demands, particularly during the pandemic response.

“It was mad that it was six weeks into the response that [a senior leader] said ‘We must get together and talk about working cultures and how people are feeling. People are burnt out – what are we doing about it?’ [They were] the only person to battle to [try and] get the rest to pay any attention to it. And others would be like ‘Yes, yes really important – but what about this pressing Prime Ministerial meeting?’” (Participant 43)

Others expressed their disappointment that leaders did not do more to look after their staff. Participant 27 described how a fearful environment, where seniors were worried about losing their jobs, created an atmosphere “where it’s everyone for themselves”, and a number of participants

mentioned how this could contribute to feeling “exposed and unsupported” (Participant 24) or “completely on [your] own” at more junior levels.

This courting of power, participants suggested, led to irrational outcomes, with clear costs to taxpayers and citizens. The first set of examples was around spending. Several participants mentioned how departmental budgets, especially where they apply to spending on the number of people working on different topics (or ‘admin costs’), were unduly influenced by incentives for senior leaders to hold onto or expand their team – a perceived marker of success – rather than to map resourcing to ministerial priorities or other more objective indicators of resourcing need. Participant 47 mentioned this becoming particularly acute when headcount reductions were being discussed in 2021-22, resulting in “backstabbing” and negative information being concealed to protect against further headcount loss.

Participant 19 also linked these dynamics to the civil service’s inability to present radical ideas for improvement, in particular around reformulating departments or transforming ways of working, “in case it’s not in their personal interests: you know, if it results in their budget declining, or in the number of people they manage declining, or just their overall importance in the system declining”. The tendency is therefore for teams and departments to expand, along with associated costs to the taxpayer.

This power-hoarding impulse also impacts collaboration between teams and departments. Participant 45 spoke about how this can lead to duplication of effort, citing the emergence of “a parliamentary team in the policy directorate” and “a policy team within the parliamentary directorate” as senior civil servants battled for pre-eminence in the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU):

“You’re like ‘wait a sec’: this is only happening because of different egos and who wants to be in control.”

### 5.3 Excess hierarchy and bureaucracy

A third (33 per cent) of participants spoke unfavourably about the civil service’s culture of hierarchy, which many felt contributed to inefficiency as well as to their work being less fulfilling. Some also felt that the nervousness described in this and other chapters was contributing to the hierarchy becoming steeper, with decisions held at more senior levels to manage risk. Participant 1 – who was one rung away from the senior civil service when they decided to leave – gave an example that proved to be the last straw for them:

“I was going to speak to [a junior minister] and one of my directors asked me to send her a script for what I was going to say. And I just thought, I’m a Grade 6. I’ve been here for years. I don’t need to clear a script with you for talking with [a junior minister]. That’s a waste of your time and a waste of my time.” (Participant 1)

'Clearance processes', whereby managers check the work of more junior civil servants before it goes to more senior officials, ministers or into the public domain, came under particular criticism. Participant 4 – a newcomer to the civil service from local government and the third sector – found the situation completely alien:

"This clearance nonsense is just ridiculous. This 'check with somebody who checks with their manager who checks with their manager' – you know, four or five lines of checking... if they are not happy with the people they're paying 45 grand to make decisions, [then] get shot because you are wasting public money."

They linked this to an unhealthy lack of trust, while others referenced fear of "embarrassment" or "being told off by the level above you" if something reached ministers without "absolutely everything" being thought of in advance. Participant 4 compared this to much flatter, freer structures and more direct working relationships between junior and very senior staff in other organisations they had worked in.

Participant 34 explained how they felt recruitment and management training contributed to excess hierarchy and bureaucracy:

"It's because of the internal approach to recruitment, where civil servants just move between departments. It's very rare for somebody to randomly come in in the middle of their career from the outside. And that unique disposition has allowed the civil service to develop a very particular way of doing things... There's these self-repeating behaviours that new members of staff are taught, and then go on to repeat.

That's the fundamental relationship that makes the civil service – that of manager, and the person who is managed... And it's a narcissistic pursuit, I think, to read someone's work – someone that is perfectly capable of writing a briefing – but you read it over and over and over again, and make comments and changes all the same." (Participant 34)

In the context of the intense demands facing government, managerial efforts could clearly be better directed. Participant 30 contrasted the responsibilities of their role, involving "hundreds of millions of pounds" of spending, with their manager refusing to let them put bold text in a submission: "we get caught up in the minutiae of detail and lose sight of the bigger picture, which then just slows you down and has a big knock-on impact".

Another aligned theme was how hierarchy prevented evidence being shared and decisions being made at the right level. Participants, especially those in the earlier stages of their career, shared examples of doing the lion's share of the work to inform a decision or meeting, but being prevented from attending or contributing because they were considered too junior.

"I think about the amount of senior meetings, where you've got so much effort from people at the lower levels going into just telling the seniors what to say. What if you cut that step, and empowered people at the lower levels to have that input into decision making? I just think it'd

be so much more effective.

What if you were to have, with every single senior, a policy adviser sat next to them who was actively encouraged to be a part of that conversation? How do we democratise our working environments to encourage more ideas?" (Participant 2)

Participant 4 agreed, saying that the "pyramid" of the civil service hierarchy was too steep – "you need to go up seven layers to then go back down five" – and urgently needed flattening.

Ultimately, it was clear from the interviews how bureaucracy was negatively impacting people's experiences, and, in particular, making the social impact for which many joined the civil service feel more remote. Participant 6 explained why this might make people inclined to leave for other sectors:

"Either you have to spend quite a lot of time in the civil service climbing the ranks until you can get your actual ideas in front of decision makers, without them being watered down by senior officials, or you just take a step out now and have more autonomy."

## 5.4 Admiration and aspiration towards the Senior Civil Service

The final theme within this chapter relates to whether participants respected, or wanted to become, senior leaders in the civil service. This came up in nearly two fifths (39 per cent) of interviews. To begin with, there was a feeling that the calibre of the senior civil service is not what it once was. Participant 1 referred to the quality of the average civil servant, especially at senior levels, "going completely south". A number linked this to other themes in this report, for example the uptick in people with experience and skill leaving the civil service and a perceived phenomenon of overpromotion linked to the resourcing demands of both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 6). Participant 19 – themselves a former member of the senior civil service – predicted that, as a result, the civil service was about to go through a "period of weak leaders, leading a weak middle".

However, more than a few participants spoke about the talent and leadership they observed at middling or junior ranks of the civil service.

"I think overall, junior civil servants are quite good. And a lot of the criticisms that are made of them... I think are unfair. But I think senior levels of the SCS are quite poor. I think a lot of the problems with the civil service is the senior civil service actually – both the system and the incentives it creates, as well as the people." (Participant 16)

"The leadership that I experienced has been incredibly mixed. I have been led by some incredibly good deputy directors and incredibly good directors, but I think the competence I've

experienced has been more in the mid-level to lower grades.” (Participant 47)

Indicating this may be more about incentives and culture than talent, Participant 47 stated:

“Sometimes I see people progress through the ranks and then suddenly you realise, actually, ‘why are you not as competent as you used to be?’. For me, the pressure on DDs [deputy directors] and directors is what often makes them look less competent – they are placed in a system that doesn’t support the kind of work they have previously done... and suddenly they have to do a lot of ‘small-p’ political decision-making, a lot of defending people rather than actually leading teams.”

Whatever the reason, the impact on the aspirations of those at more junior grades is worrying. Many participants at mid- or junior levels said they did not aspire to the senior civil service.

“The next natural step was going to SCS, but from my experiences working with the SCS... I just thought these are not the people that I want to be. I don’t want to be doing their jobs because it seems really stressful, but also not really achieving much... So that was the main thing. I couldn’t see a future.” (Participant 2, a Grade 7 who had left the civil service)

“If I wanted to progress in my career, you’re thinking maybe I want to make the step into the senior civil service and I couldn’t see the path for that. All the people I was encountering at senior civil service level were ‘yes people’.” (Participant 3, a Grade 7)

“I found that the higher up you get, the less integrity [you] kept. And that’s something I wouldn’t want my name attached to... I know that if I really wanted to, I could [become SCS], I would hope, but I just made the decision that I didn’t want to.” (Participant 8, an SEO when they left)

“I don’t have any major aspirations in terms of the SCS or anything like that, because the more you get into that machine, the less attractive that becomes.” (Participant 15, a Grade 7)

“The next step up for me career wise would be deputy director and that doesn’t seem appealing to me... you basically have to give up your life for a salary that I don’t think is reflective. And also what you get out of your job has really diminished [in] the last few years.” (Participant 28, a Grade 6)

“Honestly, the word I would use is that I feel stuck or trapped, in that I don’t look up the food chain and dream of being that DD or that Director. Some of the SCS I have worked with have been great, but a lot of them are unimpressive. I don’t want to be them.” (Participant 45)

It was also striking that members of the senior civil service felt similarly, not aspiring to higher levels of the organisation. Participant 20, a Deputy Director, referred to the expectation in organisations that you “ideally want to be the people above you – you know, ‘I want to be like you when I grow up’”, but that they “just don’t respect” the current set of permanent secretaries. Participant 19, a Director when they left, described their aspiration “grinding to a halt” in the few



years before their resignation, “in terms of feeling that being a DG would be fun, whereas actually, I started thinking that being a DG would be fucking miserable.”

Maintaining integrity was perceived to be key. Participant 26 shared Participant 8’s impression that this became harder to maintain at more senior ranks, both linking this to their proximity to politicians and their reliance on ministers for “the next career move”. Several participants referenced ‘Partygate’ as a particular failure of the most senior leaders’ integrity. Participant 5 described feeling “ashamed” and “let down” by senior officials’ complicity in breaking the COVID-19 rules, while Participant 20 referred to emails from the Cabinet Secretary to remind civil servants of their duty to “do their bit”, and that this felt hypocritical.

Several participants expressed a desire to see more leadership from the Cabinet Secretary to set the standard in defending the civil service and its values, for example:

“[Referring to low morale due to criticism in the papers] Literally no senior is standing up – like, where is Simon Case? He’s supposed to represent all of us, and yet there’s no hide nor hair of him.” (Participant 10)

“[Referring to Liz Truss’ accusation of antisemitism in the Foreign Office] Simon Case was nowhere to be seen – you know, that’s the gaffer right? I’m not saying he should have gone and denied there’s no antisemitism in the civil service, but I am looking to him to say ‘hang on, if you’ve got evidence of your concern, please let me know’ because these people work for you.” (Participant 24)

“We need to see stronger leadership from [the Cabinet Secretary] and the senior permanent secretaries when challenging ministers when they do things wrong, when they don’t behave right... at the moment, civil servants don’t trust their senior leadership to look after them.” (Participant 33)

At the same time, participants felt their leaders had an increasingly difficult job. This included not only the pressures from ministers, shifting and complex policy and delivery challenges, and bureaucracy, but also increasing public exposure. Participants mentioned coverage of senior civil servants named in the media, without the right to reply.

Participant 6 also mentioned the willingness of certain ministers to leak civil servants’ names to the press if they found them obstructive, and that the risk of their “personal life being scrutinised” was one of the reasons why they no longer aspired to the SCS. Participant 24 compared this to when they first joined the civil service:

“When I started 13 years ago, I would be very surprised if I even knew who the Permanent Secretary was. And you know, recently, people have been talking about who’s going to be the Perm Sec at the Treasury and that for me is the big difference – those people should not be household names.” (Participant 24)

However, there were a number of exceptions to these broader themes of perceived poor leadership. Several participants mentioned positive role models and their influence in insulating teams from the more difficult aspects of the past few years. Participant 5 mentioned how their “absolutely fantastic Deputy Director” had taken special care over the team’s wellbeing during the pandemic, while Participant 17 remarked on their “supportive” and “lovely” senior leadership, with genuine passion for their policy area.

Participant 35 spoke in complimentary terms of their Director General being “bold and confident” in standing up to seniors. Combined, this small sample suggests that honesty and empathy were especially important for participants to see in their leaders.

It is also worth noting that declining aspirations towards leadership did not extend to all participants. As Participants 25 and 41 said of their ambitions:

“Ultimately I see myself in the civil service long-term and hopefully reaching senior civil service level. I think the dream is to be a DG one day... for me, that’s the level at which you get really interesting work. You manage a big portfolio but it’s still focussed, and you don’t have to be in the stressful position of being a permanent secretary. It’s the best of both worlds. So that’s the 15-20-year goal.” (Participant 41, currently a Grade 7)

“I would love to become a DG some day. I feel like you have more influence over a larger portfolio... for me, it’s the proximity to influence. That’s always driven me – to decide ‘we should be doing this instead of that’ – being involved in more, and bigger, decisions. That would be the key driver for aspiring up the ladder.” (Participant 25, currently a Grade 6 on secondment)

In addition to these two confident expressions of ambition, there were a few more caveated ones, for example, those who said they might see what it was like under a new government or after taking a break in a different sector.

## 6. Managing talent and skill

An organisation is only as good as its people, and this is no less true in government. The public relies on the civil service to deliver a number of the government's core functions and to do so with diligence and skill. In policy, where the majority of our participants worked, ministers depend on officials having detailed knowledge of the issues within their departmental portfolio, as well as being capable of anticipating and solving knotty policy problems as they arise. This is of course the basis for having a permanent civil service, offering specialist expertise and continuity across policy areas, even as politicians and governments change.

Sadly, for a variety of reasons, this is not the civil service that ministers often encounter. The incentives presented to civil servants, for example to progress up the grades or earn higher wages, often lead them to move departments or change roles on a regular basis. This undermines the development of individual expertise, as well as government's institutional knowledge. Compounding this, hiring processes are slow and efforts to protect meritocracy, for example reliance on various 'competencies' as key selection criteria, make it more difficult to bring in desirable skills from outside. It is also famously difficult to manage poor performance, with a culture of moving staff on rather than addressing deficiencies or ending their employment.

### Chapter in a nutshell

- 39% referred to the civil service becoming a less attractive employer, especially in light of criticism in the media, pay restraint and increasing workloads.
- Nearly 70% commented on the opaque and unfair ways in which jobs and promotions are awarded in the civil service. This has the impact of crowding out valuable behaviours and perspectives.
- 33% highlighted how the demands of Brexit and COVID had meant typical HR practices had been relaxed, resulting in grade inflation and 'cliques' linked to certain senior leaders moving from different crisis areas.

### 6.1 The Civil Service's attractiveness as an employer

While the civil service may not be competitive with parts of the private sector on pay, it has long had the reputation for compensating for this via other benefits: for example, a generous pension, better working conditions (such as flexible working or better working hours) and the ability to work on societally important problems. However, many of our participants (39 per cent) felt employment in the civil service was becoming less attractive in these respects. As Participant 3, a civil servant of nearly 15 years put it:

“It’s got to be looking now, like a less attractive career option than it did when I joined, for all sorts of reasons.” (Participant 3)

Starting with pay, recent strikes and the latest People Survey results highlight the widespread levels of dissatisfaction with how civil servants are compensated. The 2022 People Survey results showed that just 27 per cent of civil servants felt their pay adequately reflected their performance, the lowest score since the survey began in 2009. Participants for this research provided further insight. Unsurprisingly, a number mentioned pay not keeping up with inflation, and the squeeze some were feeling during a cost of living crisis.

“[Pay] was an issue five years ago, but now I can’t imagine the impact and pressure on people trying to live in London and work in Whitehall when salaries haven’t kept pace.”  
(Participant 3)

Broadly, though, concerns were raised less over *absolute* levels of pay and more around levels of compensation relative to other benefits on offer, and relative to what other sectors might pay for the same skills and levels of responsibility. One participant noted they were working longer hours for far less pay than their partner, who was working in finance. Another noted:

“I was overworking so much that I started looking at salary insights on LinkedIn to see what my job would get at KPMG, Deloitte, even some charities and it was £80-100K. I didn’t necessarily want that money – I was happy on £52k... but I’ve always said to my friends, ‘Oh come and work for the civil service, you’ll be overworking in private companies’. And then I’m sat here, doing... private sector hours for public sector pay. I just thought, ‘what am I doing?’”  
(Participant 34)

Others mentioned not just compensation in salary, but also in terms of rewarding performance through bonuses, and the balance of non-financial benefits available in other sectors for a similar amount of pay:

“I’ve been in the highest rating for performance every reporting period... but you’re capped on how much you can get. I got a £1,200 performance award [which, after tax] went into my account at around £500. In the private sector... starting salary for some of the jobs I’ve been looking at is about £30-40k per annum more than what I’m on now. Plus, there’s the bonus, and... they’re much more open about working from home or working while you’re travelling, whereas you can’t take government IT abroad.” (Participant 39)

“I could go and work for a think tank, third sector, or academia, which would let me do the kind of work that I want to do. And nowadays I’d earn as much money for a much nicer experience.”  
(Participant 14)

However, it was a nuanced picture, with under-compensation – and in some cases overcompensation – felt to be distributed differently across the grades. Some felt remuneration was particularly low for senior civil servants relative to the level of responsibility and workload.

One participant noted that one of the reasons they left was because “that salary increase from grade 6 to SCS is tiny” (Participant 5), with another two noting:

“The grade 6 band is perfectly fine for the expectations but then, starting to think a couple of years ahead for SCS 1, it's just diabolical. Just over £70k per annum for the responsibility you have – it's just not commensurate. I know everybody says ‘Oh, you don't do it for the money’, but nonetheless, when you want to buy a flat or afford a second bedroom, it is important.” (Participant 25)

“The next step for my career would be deputy director (SCS 1) and that just doesn't seem appealing to me. You basically have to give up your life for a salary that doesn't really reflect that. What you get out of your job has really diminished over the last few years.” (Participant 28)

Others noted that while middle management positions such as grades 6 and 7 are relatively well paid, pay bands for junior positions (EO, HEO, SEO) were too low. Participants noted how this related to talent and outcomes:

“I agree with the criticism around accountability... a grade 7 job is a very well-paid job... so if you're not delivering, you should be out. There should be clear metrics and accountability for grade 7 and up.” (Participant 1)

“I definitely noticed lower quality fast streamers coming through, even in the Treasury which has its own graduate recruitment schemes... the fundamental reason is pay. It was very hard to fill HEO jobs in the Treasury with quality candidates. You would end up taking whoever you could get.” (Participant 5)

One civil servant had joined from local government and noted the lower quality and level of work expected from some middle managers (grade 6 and 7) in the civil service compared to other parts of the public sector:

“There were [grade 7s] operating at a level where in [local government] they would probably be lucky to be paid £28k... I think there needs to be a national review of... what a band six nurse does in comparison to the person who's paid the same in the civil service. I think you would be terrified at the amount of money that's being wasted in the civil service by paying people to be just about Team Leader Administrator level in a local government.” (Participant 4)

In terms of the civil service's appeal as an employer beyond pay, nearly half (49 per cent) of participants said they felt undervalued and unappreciated for their work, while over half (51 per cent) mentioned feeling overworked and under-resourced. Participants linked a prevailing feeling of low morale to hostility from ministers combined with more work than ever before.

“I think there's just a general consensus of everyone being fed up. They're fed up of working all hours. They're fed up of constantly being briefed against. They're fed up of things constantly changing.” (Participant 10)

Several participants felt insulted by the contrast between ministerial accusations of laziness or inefficiency with the hours they were working, especially during the pandemic and after the repatriation of various policy responsibilities after Brexit. Participants mentioned working 12-14-hour days for weeks at a time during the pandemic, witnessing staff collapsing due to exhaustion, and making significant sacrifices in their personal lives. A number explicitly noted that they were happy about, and committed to, working hard, but that this needed to be recognised for it to feel worthwhile (especially relative to better remunerated roles elsewhere).

“There is an expectation that you work long hours in these jobs and I am actually kind of comfortable with that. I think what we do is incredibly important, and it's not a nine to five. [But] there's a massive, massive trade off with pay and family life.” (Participant 5)

Participant 30 made similar comments, mentioning that a colleague had worked out her hours relative to her pay and figured out she was getting paid less than minimum wage.

A number drew comparisons with how the civil service had been treated in recent years with standard strategies for motivating and retaining staff in other sectors, for example:

“If I was looking at a business for my next job and they told me they were cutting headcount, moving all their staff out of the area I live, and they were publicly attacking their own staff, would I want to go and work there? No.” (Participant 1)

“[Referring to criticism of the civil service in the media] It's mad considering how hard everyone has worked over the past three years, and just deeply insulting. And I'm not sure you would get away with that in any private sector organisation. Rule one, motivate your staff.” (Participant 37)

Others noted how other common practices around staff mental health and wellbeing in other sectors were being presented as indulgences for civil servants. For example, Minister Oliver Dowden picked out Permanent Secretary Sarah Healey's use of her exercise bike in her lunch hour – something she described as of “huge benefit to [her] wellbeing” – as emblematic of the need to get civil servants back into the office. Money spent on mindfulness apps for civil servants was criticised in *The Telegraph*,<sup>9</sup> despite successful private sector organisations investing similarly in staff wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Susie Coen, ‘Civil Service Spending Almost £500k for Mindfulness Apps Where Celebrities Read Bedtime Stories’, *The Telegraph*, 5 November 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the wellbeing offers of major companies like KPMG, KPMG, ‘Health and Wellbeing’, 2023; Google, Google, ‘Benefits at Google’, Webpage, 2023; or Accenture, Accenture, ‘Prioritizing Health and Well-Being, Everyday’, Webpage, 2023, all of which include access to mindfulness and mental health apps.

As Participant 10 described it, “mental health and wellbeing seems to be getting trashed by ministers”.

Of course, one of the key non-financial benefits offered in the civil service is the promise of making a positive difference on issues you are passionate about. Previous chapters have covered the perception that this has become increasingly difficult in recent years, with roles becoming less attractive as a result. There was a feeling among participants that interest in, or commitment to, public service was being relied upon to do too much of the heavy lifting in terms of talent management. As Participant 39 put it, “that kind of public duty value only will go so far”.

Ensuring the civil service is as attractive an employer as possible is of course not only important for retaining existing talent, but for bringing in new talent and filling critical skills gaps from outside. A number of participants suggested competitiveness, including on pay, was a real problem for bringing in key skills, such as data science, commercial expertise or project management.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that pay, especially at a difficult time for public finances, should or could be increased dramatically across the board. However, there may well be a case to do so at particular levels and in particular roles where desirable skills cannot be attracted any other way.

At the same time, there may be some low-cost ways to make the civil service a more appealing place to work: for example, restoring positive relationships with ministers and reviving civil servants’ feelings of value and respect at work, or encouraging more decisive prioritisation of effort to return workloads to a manageable level. As Participant 18 put it:

“The economic cost [of high turnover] can only significantly outweigh the cost of investing more to make the civil service an enjoyable workplace. The public sector will never be competitive with the private sector, but it doesn’t have to be. But then there has to be all the other tangibles you know, flexibility... empowering people to challenge, people feeling their views are respected and that they matter.” (Participant 18)

## 6.2 Opaque and ineffective approaches to recruitment and promotion

The civil service has gone to great lengths to try and debias its recruitment and promotion practices, including ‘blind applications’, clearly articulated ‘Success Profiles’ and expectations per grade and aiming to compete more jobs rather than promote internally. Yet according to nearly 70 per cent of participants, these recruitment and promotion practices were not delivering on their promise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cabinet Office, *Success Profiles*, 2019.

Participants' own stories revealed issues with Civil Service HR practices, including struggling to progress unless they moved roles or department, feeling incentivised to develop generalist rather than specialist skills, and finding that ministers' or senior leaders' patronage was often more critical for progression than behaviours advertised as important. Some also mentioned how recruitment processes were too slow to secure the best talent for top ministerial priorities, leading to the development of a 'shadow system' where known staff were given jobs without an open competition. Taken together, participants felt this contributed to a narrow set of skills and characteristics being rewarded, to the detriment of outcomes.

### ***Moving to progress***

The need to move roles to secure promotion or increase salary contributes to well-recognised issues of 'churn' in the civil service.

"[When joining the civil service in 2017] there seemed to be a general consensus that you would initially remain in a department for a considerable period of time, try to see whether you could promote within. But I found that there was a need to move across departments to promote." (Participant 48)

Similarly, a number of participants reflected on how difficult it was to find a route to promotion in ways that one might expect in any other sector, for example through strong performance, possessing valuable skills or developing new ones. One participant, who worked in strategic finance, found there was limited organisational endorsement or reward for their development:

"It was difficult... to find an organic route of promotion. I couldn't really tally the fact that a) my performance reviews were doing well and b) I was improving my skills through accountancy exams, etc. You would expect that I'd be levelling up in my role almost automatically, or at least there'd be a clear route or encouragement." (Participant 11)

Another participant, who had recently started in a central government policy role after working in an arm's length body, reflected on how incentives for staff to progress quickly affected a teams' ability to develop in-depth knowledge:

"[In my team] no one has been there more than a year. If you have been there more than a year, people thought 'oh you're not very ambitious because you've been in that job for a year, when are you going to look for your next move?' People can't just be allowed to develop some in-depth knowledge and experience because they're always thinking 'I've got to get ready for the next thing'." (Participant 36)

This is in part a reflection of the civil service approach to internal promotion and in-role pay or responsibility increases. In part to encourage 'fair and open competition', and in part to reduce costs, typical HR practices do not allow for high performers to be promoted without proving themselves to be the best candidate in a full recruitment exercise. Similarly, each role is discrete, with limited flex for roles to be adapted or pay increased to suit an employee's growing capabilities



or reward good performance.

“Career structures are made so that you get rewarded for moving – it’s very hard to stay in an area or a team and then get a promotion... so how do you reward people for staying in an area and specialising?” (Participant 17)

“We have HEOs and SEOs who last no more than 18 months in a policy role. We need to... look again at how we support careers in the civil service. Having a little bit more money in the same role would go so far over time to improve culture because you build up more loyalty. When you lose half a team every 18 months it’s impossible to do anything long-term.” (Participant 35)

In practice, civil servants’ pay is fixed at the bottom of the pay band for that grade, in that department, unless they are able to negotiate a higher salary at the point of appointment (usually a privilege only afforded to external candidates). This dampens incentives to perform well in post and to build expertise in one area over a long period. By contrast, it sharpens incentives to secure the experience needed to get the next, more senior post, often in another area altogether, as quickly as possible. As Participant 29 put it:

“Because of the way recruitment and progression works, people don’t trade on expertise and they don’t get promoted by being really good at their job. They get promoted by having ticked the right boxes.”

### ***Undermining specialism, favouring the generalist***

It is a well-worn critique of the civil service that it struggles to attract or develop specialist knowledge in key policy areas, instead incentivising a workforce of ‘generalists’ with a more transferable set of skills. This is a direct result of the above approach to promotion and progression.

Participants were frustrated by the inefficiencies created by a rapid succession of generalist staff and concerned that recent periods of pressure had made government more tolerant of making decisions without expert input, whether internally or externally.

“I cannot fathom the amount of taxpayers’ waste in government as a result of it not being well equipped in the first place. Just the amount of time that it takes onboarding people, the value deterioration when you have turnovers on these levels.” (Participant 18)

“It really damages our ability to get stuff done at pace because if you end up with teams that are just refreshing themselves every two or three years the loss of institutional knowledge is so massive. And there aren’t people within the departments who are maintaining the continuity of knowledge.” (Participant 37)

“We just carry on doing things not being experts, and it’s kind of accepted that you don’t need to be an expert in everything you do. That’s why we all jump around jobs so much, and it leads to poor decision-making” (Participant 5)

Participant 5 went on to give the example of working in one policy area, where the team in the department had expanded massively to accommodate a new programme of reform but that none of the new senior leaders had any specialist experience in that field. By the time they finished working in that field, “there was barely anyone who had been working [in this policy area] for as long as I had, and that’s a pretty terrifying thought because I’d only been doing it for three years”.

As an example of how this impacts the civil service’s ability to advise ministers or political staff, the Special Adviser in our sample described wanting to learn lessons from how a reform was implemented a few years previously and asking to speak to the relevant staff:

“I asked, ‘could I have a chat with the policy team that did this four years ago?’ and they said ‘oh, they’ve all left’. So much for the permanent civil service. In that sense the civil service is neither permanent nor expert.” (Participant 16)

Staff turnover not only compromises the standing of civil servants with ministers, but also with external stakeholders. In such circumstances, external input from delivery partners or civil society can be a valuable source of expertise when it is missing in-house, but some participants felt churn was jeopardising these relationships, requiring them to repeat themselves to a different point of contact on a regular basis:

“When I told them I was leaving, [stakeholders’ reaction was] ‘Oh, not again’ because they felt like they’d have to go through the whole story again. The relationship that professional bodies and lobbyists are having with the Government has been strained. Every time they go to a meeting, it’s a different face... And that has an impact because they’re very useful in making positive improvements to policy. If they don’t trust that government officials can do the job, they’re not going to come to government anymore.” (Participant 33)

To counter this, in addition to enabling more in-role progression, a few participants suggested creating highly paid specialist roles, or even reformulating the structure and size of typical policy teams, to reward and create space for policy experts without management responsibilities. For example:

“It would be good if we recruited more people based on expertise, and it would also be good if we could promote them without expectations of line management responsibilities. And some bits of the civil service that work well do that. The Office of Parliamentary Counsel, for example, only has about 50 [in the team], but the head of it is Perm Sec level, and they have four DGs.” (Participant 16)

“How do you... bring in more external expertise, but make those roles not necessarily managerial but more about providing guidance and specialist knowledge. I think... people who

are doing the more generalist stuff around briefing don't have time to then also be a specialist.” (Participant 17)

It was pointed out that those best placed to develop and advise on policy, grade 6s or deputy directors, often spend most of their time on management, with the ‘meat’ of policy work delegated to junior grades. Many of these management activities involve ‘clearance’ of work produced by more junior grades – higher quality and quicker outcomes may be achieved with a smaller, more senior and more expert team producing these outputs themselves.

“... at the moment, teams for me feel very bottom-heavy. And then you end up with you know, a team of ten or 15, primarily made up of HEOs and SEOs and maybe some grade 7s and the management of that team... and the deputy director or grade 6, who are probably the most experienced, ends up spending their time marking and amending the homework of the junior members of staff, when actually they could probably bash out most of the kind of briefing notes that they need in one afternoon themselves. And that seems more efficient to me.” (Participant 21)

Of course, policy teams need to provide opportunities for junior staff to ‘learn their craft’ and develop the next generation of experts, but there is an argument that higher salaries to attract more specialist, senior staff could be funded through savings on more junior roles.

### ***A ‘shadow system’ for recruitment***

Civil service recruitment requirements also make it difficult to hire efficiently, especially for new or urgent priorities. Imagine having to conduct a three-month long external recruitment exercise, followed by lengthy security checks, for a team of 40 people needed to work on Ukrainian refugee resettlement, for example. This is where participants described a secondary or ‘shadow’ system of recruitment being set up to bypass processes designed to protect appointment on merit. This included laterally transferring people into roles from other departments on temporary loans or offering ‘temporary promotion’ (or ‘TP’) to attract or keep talented staff:

“I can see that the proper HR processes aren’t working for people, so there's a shadow system that’s being set up, which is one that I have benefited from. Temporary teams are stood up, and people are TP-ed into them or within them. From there people can move across and level transfer [at promoted grade] to this team and that team because they happen to know people... but it shouldn’t be like that.” (Participant 43)

“I didn’t apply for any of my jobs after my first offer. I got promoted to director and then applied for no further jobs... [someone] would just text me and say, ‘I need you to do this’. Okay, I’ll do what I’m told. There’s something about those processes and to what extent those become ‘small c’ corrupted... I’m not sure that’s a healthy way of managing resources. All you’re doing is allowing people of a particular type to get ahead.” (Participant 19)

These more informal recruitment processes were felt to be particularly acute for the senior civil

service. Clearly, the civil service needs to be an agile and mobile workforce, capable of flexing to ministerial priorities. However, care needs to be taken to balance these imperatives against the need to hire in the best – rather than simply the best known – people for key roles.

Some felt that the role of reputation or visibility in promotion sharpened incentives to produce “shiny”, ministerial-facing outcomes, such as strategy documents or announcements over delivery of difficult, long-term programmes of work. As two participants described it:

“What do you get rewarded for? Are you going to get rewarded for doing this really hard thing where you’re probably never going to get the shiny solution because it’s really hard. No, you’re going to get rewarded for doing this shiny thing over here, moving on quickly, and moving up.”  
(Participant 40)

“The people who [get promoted] are people... who don’t necessarily have a good track record in terms of delivery – material delivery – but are just very good at political manoeuvrings.”  
(Participant 9)

### ***Homogeneity***

Beyond incentivising the wrong kind of behaviour and skills, a number of participants pointed to the homogenising effect of these practices. High-flyers often ended up looking and sounding the same, with participants describing successful civil servants variously as “a homogenous block” (Participant 22) or as fitting “a cookie-cutter mould” (Participants 27 and 26).

Some felt this applied particularly in certain parts of government, namely the executive centre of No.10, Cabinet Office and the Treasury, and in talent schemes such as the Fast Stream. Broadly, this seemed to refer to certain kinds of class or educational background and to some sort of social or cultural capital, manifesting in confidence and the ability to “speak the right language” with ministers or seniors. Some participants spoke about the resulting lack of diversity in perspective or cognition, and that more confident voices might crowd out less well represented ones, leading to ‘groupthink’:

“The problem that we have as civil servants is that... there can be a tendency to work with people who are exactly like you, think in a certain way, and not to welcome outsider perspectives, not to be open to challenge.” (Participant 43)

The impact of this on some of our participants, particularly those from ethnic minorities or other less represented backgrounds, was clear. A number expressed feelings of not belonging or having a future in the civil service given the make-up of the senior ranks or behaviours they felt they needed to demonstrate to get ahead:

“It just felt like if you’re white and middle class, you can pretty much get to the top regardless, you speak the lingo, so to speak.” (Participant 11)

“I have noticed that when you go to senior meetings, it's not people like me who are represented... I feel like I just don't have the right background... you can sometimes feel like, ‘Oh, why didn't I get that opportunity? Why didn't I get that job?’ Sometimes it feels like someone who's slightly more similar, more ‘part of the group’ got it.” (Participant 9)

### **External hires**

The inaccessibility of the civil service to outsiders, in terms of its jargon and processes, was also felt to contribute to its homogeneity. Despite a recent push to open up the civil service to external candidates – for example, by making senior civil service roles externally advertised by default – a number of participants felt internal candidates still had an upper hand:

“Candidates who don't already understand the ‘Success Profile’ system really stand to fall afoul of the recruitment process... You only have a chance of succeeding if you're a civil servant. And I feel like people from the private sector, from charities, from other sectors with great expertise, don't really have a solid pipeline into the civil service. And so we end up with a more reduced and concentrated civil servant-y way of doing things and don't have many shocks to the system that come externally.” (Participant 34)

As a case in point, the same participant described running an external recruitment for junior roles and only getting existing civil servants applying. It may be the case that action taken to make civil service recruitment less biased is actually having the opposite effect, excluding a wider range of diverse candidates.

## **6.3 Impact of Brexit and the pandemic**

Section 6.2 describes long-standing issues with the way the civil service recruits and promotes its staff, but a third of participants (33 per cent) felt these had intensified as a direct result of the resourcing demands of Brexit and the pandemic. This referred not only to the number of roles created as a result of novel requirements – from testing and vaccines to new agricultural policies – but also to the speed with which those posts needed to be filled. As a result, participants gave examples of usual recruitment protocols being relaxed, with, often negative, implications: for example, inexperienced staff being promoted or senior staff relying on pre-existing contacts to fill critical posts rather than a merit-based process.

Participant 24 described it as “open season”, while Participant 45 spoke about “a few windows where it felt like promotion was really accelerated”, with “a lot of people bouncing up into grade 7, grade 6, DD roles”. This was occasionally accompanied by a feeling that, as these were often roles with a high degree of reactivity and uncertainty, or even because of opposition to Brexit in and of itself, they were not automatically desirable jobs.

Participants raised concerns that this led to appointments being made without the right skills or experience, and that grade inflation was particularly acute in areas or departments with a high

number of such roles. Both participants 9 and 45 spoke about expectations for the age at which you would become a deputy director, the first rung of the Senior Civil Service (SCS), reducing dramatically. Anecdotally, one would typically expect a deputy director to be in their late 30s to 40s, but in their experience it was not uncommon for major portfolios of high-risk work to be overseen by those in their late 20s, with a number of risks linked to this.

“The grade inflation has been quite significant... You get more and more inexperienced people doing really senior positions, because they played it right with someone at a certain point... I was managed by a 27-year-old Deputy Director... Where is the experience coming from? Track record, time served, just mattered more before [COVID and Brexit].” (Participant 9)

“[Brexit and COVID] generated an expectation that everyone who’s 27 should be a grade 6 by now. Or, ‘Oh, you’re not a DD by 30, what’s wrong with you?’... I think that it probably meant there was a small pocket of people who were over-promoted and I’m sure some of them were brilliant, but some of them weren’t.” (Participant 45)

This was not limited to the senior grades, either – participants spoke about how expectations for the level of experience or skill required at each grade affected the entire spectrum of roles. Participant 36 spoke about this more general “devaluing of the grade structures” with reference to junior roles:

“When I first started, I felt an HEO was more skilled as a civil servant in terms of what it means, the way we work, anything from briefing to submissions to knowing how to engage with Whitehall... There was, of course, a need to get a quick influx of civil servants in preparation for Brexit. That has contributed to it.”

A number of participants pointed to departments like DExEU and the Department of International Trade (DIT) as focal points for these phenomena. For example, one noted that “when DExEU was set up, it was a joke among civil servants that if you wanted a promotion, you could just jump over to DExEU and get one. You saw an inflation of grades without skill sets because they needed to staff things” (Participant 23).

There was a sense that an influx of new or less experienced staff was associated with a lesser ability to manage relationships and get things done in the complex system of government.

“I feel like there’s been a loss of skills... and that’s not me saying anyone who went to work at DExEU or anyone who came in externally wasn’t good... I’m sure they were very capable, very bright, but they didn’t have that experience in terms of working with the machine that is government.” (Participant 28)

Several remarked on the impact of this on the culture of these departments, with the former Department for International Trade (DIT) – now part of the Department for Business and Trade – particularly singled out for a “sharp-elbowed” environment of young, ambitious officials jostling for position. Participant 34 described DIT as a “Wolf of Wall Street style place” characterised by “glory

hunting”, while Participant 41 referred to a “toxic culture” at senior levels with “a lot of competitiveness”. Others referred to common features elsewhere in the civil service, like high levels of attrition or poor workload management, being particularly acute at DIT. At the same time, former DIT staff felt there were positives, with dynamic teams meaning flat hierarchies and more empowerment to act independently than in other departments.

In addition, Participant 40 felt newcomers brought a huge injection of energy at critical points where existing staff had become disillusioned with progress on difficult topics, but the flipside of this was that without government experience they also became “disillusioned by their inability to make anything happen”.

Others felt there were impacts not only on delivery but also on the upholding of key principles from a propriety and ethics standpoint, for example as seen in Chapter 3 with civil servants uncertain on key boundaries between official and political responsibilities.

Participants were also concerned that Brexit or pandemic-era experiences of working in government engendered and normalised a suboptimal approach to policymaking, characterised by “fire-fighting” rather than more strategic and considered work. Participant 10 highlighted how many of those on the Fast Stream scheme will have received their training almost exclusively in this way of working or in a narrow range of “high-priority” Brexit or COVID-19 posts, with costs to roundedness of their skillset. Participant 23 stated:

“With COVID and Brexit, if something was on fire, you needed to throw people at it. And so people became really good at firefighting. I now don’t know if people have the skillset for when something is simmering, and you need to step back and just watch it or slowly monitor or move out of firefighting. I don’t know if people now are as good at doing that.” (Participant 23)

Finally, some participants described certain senior officials during this crisis-driven period collecting staff and forming ‘cliques’ that followed those individuals from job to job.

“Because of the big projects like Brexit, COVID... there was less emphasis on merit in civil servants’ promotion and recruitment... The ‘in clubs’ always existed in government but they got much worse... You get the same people working on the same things in government, copying and pasting the same people into the same places.” (Participant 9)

In some ways, this is understandable: in high-profile, fast-paced roles, senior staff need to have teams that they trust and rely on. However, this clearly impacts the ability of other talented staff to access these, often very high-profile, roles, as well as reducing the likelihood of building diverse, specialised skills around the policy issue in question. As Participant 43 put it, despite having benefited from this kind of senior sponsorship themselves:

“It’s really damaging, because the whole reason that those processes were set up in the first place was to try and ensure there was free and fair competition and ensure that we got the right people into the roles.” (Participant 43)

Taking stock on the extent to which grade inflation may have taken root, as well as where skills and experience may be most lacking, the civil service should take action to explicitly re-establish standards, fill skills gaps, and manage careers more deliberately to ensure a rounded portfolio of experience, especially before promotion to senior levels.

## 6.4 Managing poor performance

Earlier sections of this chapter covered the traits that are positively rewarded through promotion or recruitment. By contrast, 16 per cent of participants expressed concerns that certain negative behaviours had little or no impact on people's careers.

This is another familiar critique, from both inside and outside the civil service. Questions on whether "poor performance is dealt with effectively" in the annual staff People Survey are regularly among the lowest scoring, and participants' testimonies for this research indicated that this was a source of great frustration for them.

"There needs to be ways to deal with poor performance quicker. I don't understand why when you're hiring people, you can't talk to past managers. If you have a poor performer, the easiest way to get rid of them is to encourage them to apply for promotion and help them with their behaviours, which are cookie cutter, and then brush it off on someone else. It needs to change so that we're not just passing people around the system... if there is poor performance, there should be repercussions." (Participant 23)

Even where there are clear policies around addressing poor performance, participants referred to norms to "pull punches" (perhaps out of a culture of excessive politeness) or that the time taken to follow due process made it much easier to move underperformers to a new role, even to encourage them to apply for a promotion. Participant 30 described this phenomenon and its effects as follows:

"We should rule out some of the inefficiencies, where people are underperforming and people can never get sacked. You can bully, you can harass, you can just consistently underperform and you'll just get moved around. You'll never get sacked which is quite demotivating when you are a hard worker and you see that happening... and maybe that way we'd increase our reputation with ministers and the public as well." (Participant 30)

Building on this quote, a number of participants felt that poor management, and even bullying and harassment behaviours, had little impact on people's career trajectories.

"I think everyone has seen people with persistent allegations of bullying, harassment and just being really terrible people. That it doesn't affect their trajectories upwards is beyond me." (Participant 9)



“People who are performing poorly, being bad managers and acting like bullies – in a previous job, I had a real bullying manager – there’s barely anything that can be done. They’ll just carry on getting promoted and moving on to the next job because of the system” (Participant 42)

“When I submitted my feedback about [my manager who was bullying me], saying how bad it was as part of [their] end of year review, there was no follow up. [Their] immediate boss did not come and talk to me about my experience. Just clearly not interested.” (Participant 50)

Several participants described their experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination, and the inaction of their line management chains. Given the sensitivity, direct quotes detailing cases have not been included, but the commonalities of experience were notable: for example, victims escalating their complaints to senior leaders through formal channels, and nothing happening, whether through leaders’ reluctance to address issues or technicalities within the complaints process (e.g. time limits) preventing action.

Taken together, the themes highlighted in this chapter indicate an appetite for a more expert, agile and accountable workforce. In these respects, they have quite a lot in common with the civil service’s critics.

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## 7. Conclusion

The goal of this report has been to provide a rare glimpse into the experiences of those working in and around the civil service policy profession over the past few years. The issues described over the previous six chapters are many and varied. This report has covered shortcomings in the behaviours, processes and structures relating to both the political and official side of government. Participants have been candid in sharing how these have impacted their ability to do their jobs to the best of their abilities, as well as the impacts on their wellbeing and job satisfaction. This, as discussed, means Whitehall is operating less effectively than it should, and that in turn means citizens are being less well served.

The report has also highlighted – perhaps contrary to some of the media depiction of civil servants – that participants were not only aware of the civil service’s flaws but eager for reform. Every participant was asked what they would advise the current Prime Minister and Cabinet Secretary if they were to make the civil service more effective, and they had plenty of suggestions. The most common responses form the basis of the ten principles for reform set out below.

Readers may also be surprised to see areas of overlap between our participants’ wish list and that of the civil service’s most high-profile detractors: greater efficiency, more specialist expertise, and more robust approaches to poor performance. There will be many reasons why previous reform attempts have not had the desired effect. However, a hostile or antagonistic approach from political figures does not appear to have helped things, generating a defensive ‘immune response’ from the civil servants ideally needed to carry the torch.

If there is one thing readers take from this report, then it should be that a more constructive, even co-productive, relationship with the civil service on its reform is more likely to be successful. This could even include, for example, a standing ‘Civil Servants Assembly’ to advise the responsible Minister(s) and senior officials on the design, implementation and communication of change.

This said, many of what participants wanted to see in a reformed civil service are beyond even the most senior officials’ gift. For example, there is little that civil servants can – or should – do to moderate the changing nature of politics or the short-termism that electoral cycles can create. Nonetheless, politicians may find it useful to hear about the conditions civil servants said enabled them to deliver ministerial direction most effectively.

### Principles for reform

**Principle 1:** A more highly skilled workforce, including through a more competitive employment offer, investment in learning and development, and stronger incentives around performance and specialisation. This was mentioned by 61% of participants.

**Principle 2:** Clear and consistent long-term direction, with a firm set of priorities that are appropriately resourced. 41% of participants included this within their asks to the PM and Cabinet Secretary.

**Principle 3:** A more trusting, respectful and collaborative relationship with ministers. Some mentioned the need for a “reset” moment to repair a relationship that had been “broken”. This was mentioned by 38% of participants.

**Principle 4:** A mindset and make-up that is more outward-looking and representative of the UK public, including through more open forms of public engagement and recruitment from underrepresented socio-economic and regional backgrounds. 29% mentioned this.

**Principle 5:** Flatter, more dynamic and more streamlined structures. 22% felt civil service work would be more fulfilling and efficient if it stripped back several layers of management. This included suggestions for smaller, more expert policy teams.

**Principle 6:** Greater tools and incentives for cross-government collaboration. A fifth (20%) felt they and their leaders were too often incentivised to compete rather than collaborate. Ministerial responsibilities are narrowly departmental rather than cross-government. Some suggested common IT systems or different models of interdepartmental working – including for politicians – to remedy this.

**Principle 7:** Clearer codification of the role of the civil service, and stronger accountability to perform that role. 18% proposed this, linked to concerns the political/official roles had become more blurred.

**Principle 8:** More confident and collectivist leadership. 18% wanted senior leaders to be braver in their defence of the civil service, and for team management and delivery to be reprioritised in criteria for their success.

However, some of the issues participants identified are more immediately remediable and within the civil service’s mandate, particularly in relation to HR practices. The box below sets out participants’ more specific ideas for reform, on which civil service leadership could take action today.

## Proposals for reform

**Proposal 1:** Scrap generic competency-based recruitment via ‘Success Profiles’. Replace it with models that test for more specific skills, knowledge and experience required for each role, familiar from hiring practices in other sectors.

**Proposal 2:** Offer more substantial in-role reward, in terms of both pay and responsibility increases. A cost-benefit analysis should be conducted of high turnover versus modelled retention effects of different levels of in-role pay increases.

**Proposal 3:** Bolster incentives to manage poor performance more robustly, for example by enabling references and dialogue between managers in intra-civil service transfers, and encouragement from senior leaders to reset cultural norms.

**Proposal 4:** Regularise more formal and ongoing training for policy professionals, with an emphasis on 'hard' skills like evidence-gathering and interpretation or delivery models. This should be informed by a 20- to 30-year horizon scanning exercise of the skills that the civil service will need in a 21st century model of government.

**Proposal 5:** Reassert baseline standards for the levels of experience and skill at each grade to counter grade inflation and identify skills gaps to be filled with deliberate learning and development programmes. To support this, Civil Service HR should consult on, and publish, standardised expectations in terms of the complexity of work or experience and skills required at each level.

**Proposal 6:** Launch a pilot of smaller, more senior and more specialist policy teams, identifying a suitable department and policy area, with similar teams of the more conventional type available for a comparative, independent assessment of success.

**Proposal 7:** Develop stronger organisational norms around delegation, empowerment and experimentation, for example through senior official and political endorsement of junior staff in high-profile meetings and ministerial briefings and emphasis on empowerment within performance assessments of leaders and managers.

# REFORM

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