

Re:State

THE ALTERNATIVE PEOPLE SURVEY 2025

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July 2025

ABOUT RE:STATE

Re:State 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.

We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach. This is reflected in our cross-party Advisory Board and our events programme which seeks to convene likeminded reformers from across the political spectrum.

Re:State is a registered charity, the *Re:State Trust*, charity no. 1103739.

ABOUT REMAKING THE STATE

After a decade of disruption, the country faces a moment of national reflection. For too long, Britain has been papering over the cracks in an outdated social and economic model, but while this may bring temporary respite, it doesn't fix the foundations. In 1942 Beveridge stated: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching." 80 years on, and in the wake of a devastating national crisis, that statement once again rings true. Now is the time to fix Britain's foundations.

Re:State's programme, 'Remaking the State', puts forward a bold new vision for the role and shape of the State. One that can create the conditions for strong, confident communities, dynamic, innovative markets, and transformative, sustainable public services.

'Re:Imagining Whitehall' is one of the major work streams within this programme.

ABOUT RE:IMAGINING WHITEHALL

This publication is part of the 'Re:Imagining Whitehall' work stream. To effectively remake the State, major change must occur in the behaviours, processes, and structures of central government.

In partnership with *Civil Service World*, we have surveyed civil servants to provide a fuller account of how they feel about their work, and the culture of the organisations they work in. A high-performing civil service is vital to a functioning government, but the views of civil servants themselves are often overlooked when analysing the current state of Whitehall. The *Alternative People Survey* provides new insights into what is happening on the ground in the civil service, to identify areas for improvement.

'Re:Imagining Whitehall' Steering group

Re:State is grateful to the expert members of the 'Re:Imagining Whitehall' Steering Group who provide invaluable insight and advise on the work stream. Their involvement does not equal endorsement of every argument or recommendation put forward.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank *Civil Service World* for partnering with us to deliver the *Alternative People Survey* and the 1,265 respondents.

METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted in partnership with *Civil Service World*. It contained 25 questions, of which the first 24 offer multiple options. Question 25 gave respondents a free-text box to answer an optional open-ended question.

It is important to note that while the survey provides a powerful indicator of civil servants' views, it is not representative of the whole workforce and should not be treated as such. Respondents are self-selecting, so the responses are not weighted.

Some of the survey questions repeat questions which were used in the survey which supported *Re:State's* (formerly *Reform* think tank) paper *Making the grade* from May 2024. Where the same questions have been used, comparative figures and the percentage change year-to-year are shown. Where questions are new, there are no comparative figures, as this is the first year of the full *Alternative People Survey*.

The survey was live between 31 January 2025 and 3 March 2025. It was promoted by both *Civil Service World* and *Re:State* via newsletters and social media channels. 1,265 respondents completed all questions in the survey.

The breakdown of answers given to Questions 11 to 17, Question 19 and Questions 21 to 24 are broken down in this paper. The answers given to Questions 1 to 10, and Question 18, which are about respondent demographics, are broken down in Appendix 1. Several free-text answers to Question 25 are included in this paper.

Answers to Question 20, which asked line managers about their perceptions of poor performance and HR processes, are not included because of a technical error in the data collection.

The survey is particularly aimed at civil servants working in areas which were traditionally considered as "Whitehall", rather than those in larger operational roles. Whitehall roles are hard to formally define, but the make-up of this survey is consistent with the demographics you would expect to see in Whitehall. The policy and operational delivery professions are the most represented, and London is the geography most represented. Respondents largely came from grades which are more senior than the average in the civil service, are more likely to have line management responsibilities, most had at least three years' experience in the civil service and were fairly evenly split on gender.

- 51 per cent of respondents are female and 45 per cent are male.
- 9 per cent of respondents are Senior Civil Servants, 45 per cent are Grades 6 and 7, 41 per cent are SEO, HEO and EO, and 7 per cent are administrative grades and other.
- 12 per cent are from the Department for Work and Pensions, 11 per cent are from HM Revenue and Customs, and less than 10 per cent from each of the other departments
- 21 per cent are from the policy profession, 19 per cent are from operational delivery, 11 per cent from project management and delivery, and less than 10 per cent from each of the other professions.
- 38 per cent are based in London, 11 per cent in the Northwest, and less than 10 per cent from each of the other regions.

- 57 per cent have been in the civil service for 10 years or more, 22 per cent have been in the civil service for between 5 and 9 years, 14 per cent have been in the civil service for between three and four years, and 8 per cent have been in the civil service for two years or less.
- 58 per cent are line managers.

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1. Introduction

The Civil Service is an unusually anonymous workforce. The 542,840 officials working for central government traditionally do not – indeed cannot – take public positions about government policy.¹ Political impartiality is a core value in *The Civil Service Code*.² However, it also extends to discussing their own experience of work. That means, other than through the filter of unions that represent civil servants, little is known about how this sizeable group of people feel about the conditions and environment within which they work.

The annual *Civil Service People Survey* offers a helpful, but incomplete, picture, focused on overall attitudes to civil servants' work. Mediated through the Cabinet Office's own view of what the important and appropriate questions to ask are, it does not capture much of the important detail on officials' day-to-day experiences. While it is challenging to build a complete picture of the civil service with an external, self-selecting survey, this survey is an important contribution to the picture of experience within the civil service.

Understanding the Civil Service is important at any time, but especially so during a time of significant upheaval. The Civil Service has been through a decade of disruption, responding to Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic – and in the years running up to the 2024 election endured an abnormal level of political instability and ministerial churn. It is now grappling with war in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis and geopolitical destabilisation. In large part due to the response to these era-defining crises, the public finances are in a dire state, meaning departmental budgets are under huge pressure. The government machine is therefore undergoing serious challenge and transformation.

The new Government has recognised the need for reorganisation, especially in the context of delivering the five missions.³ “Rewiring the state” to be more efficient and effective.⁴ Changing to adopt a “test and learn” culture which is less bureaucratic and more innovative.⁵ And a zero-based Spending Review to deliver all these priorities whilst staying within increasingly challenging fiscal rules.⁶

Last year, as part of the report *Making the grade, Re:State* (formerly *Reform* think tank) partnered with *Civil Service World* (CSW) to survey civil servants to better understand their experience of performance management – in particular their experience and perception of how the two ends of the performance scale are managed.

Building on the success of that survey, this year *Re:State* and CSW have launched the *Alternative People Survey*, to build on this analysis and introduce additional questions.

¹ Cabinet Office, ‘Statistical Bulletin - Civil Service Statistics: 2024’, Webpage, 20 August 2024.

² Civil Service, ‘The Civil Service Code’, Webpage, 16 March 2015; Jack Worlidge et al., *Whitehall Monitor 2025*, n.d.

³ Labour Party, *Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024*, 2024.

⁴ Keir Starmer, *PM Speech on Plan for Change: 5 December 2024*, 2024.

⁵ Pat McFadden, *Pat McFadden Vows to Make the State ‘More like a Start up’ as He Deploys Reform Teams across Country*, 2024.

⁶ Rachel Reeves, ‘Speech: Chancellor Rachel Reeves Is Taking Immediate Action to Fix the Foundations of Our Economy’, 8 July 2024.

Again, this is not a representative survey, it is designed to give a sense of how people are feeling to help inform the debate about how the working environment needs to change.

The results of this fuller survey show a mixed picture: optimism about the clarity of the Government's missions, and the potential for new technology, combined with deep pessimism about the quality of the workforce and the efficiency of bureaucratic processes.

Of respondents:

- 74 per cent agreed with the statement "I am clear about what my department's priorities are".
- 30 per cent were using artificial intelligence (AI) tools in their work, and 78 per cent of that group believed it helped them do their jobs better.
- Only 8 per cent agreed with the statement "the civil service in general manages poor performance well", with 79 per cent disagreeing.
- 70 per cent agreed with the statement "I often feel that processes get in the way of me performing my job".

The quality of government is dependent on a high-performing civil service workforce. High-performing organisations attract, reward and retain talent, and quickly tackle under performance.⁷ They create environments and cultures that incentivise creativity and innovation, they are laser focused on outcomes and they build the capacity and capability to achieve them.

The current Government has committed to rewiring the State, underpinned by radical changes to how the machinery of government works. The findings from the *Alternative People Survey* reveal variable confidence from civil servants that their own organisations are up to the challenge. Civil service reform is a vital part of state reform and economic renewal.⁸ It is essential that the Government recognises that in many areas, the starting point is from a culture of significant disillusionment, rooted in a system whose approach to talent and performance management, pay and conditions, process and technology, is no longer fit for purpose.

As one official wrote in the free text portion of the survey:

"The key thing holding back the civil service are systems and processes broken by overengineering or excessive bureaucracy. Those broken systems across HR, procurement, finance, risk taking etc. all then manifest in poor performance, low productivity [and] poor decisions."

If the State is to be remade, Whitehall must be overhauled.

⁷ Joe Hill, Charlotte Pickles, and Sean Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall* (Reform, 2024).

⁸ Reform Think Tank and Labour Growth Group, *Building State Capacity for Economic Growth*, 2025.

2. Results

2.1 Talent and performance management

Last year, *Re:State* (formerly *Reform* think tank) research into civil service views on talent and performance confirmed widespread support among civil servants for a much more direct approach to promoting top talent and managing out poor performers.⁹ Too often talented civil servants don't get access to the right opportunities and support and leave the civil service. Simultaneously, poor performing civil servants are often shuffled around the system rather than having performance concerns addressed, reducing the productivity of their teams and demotivating their colleagues. Taken together, these challenges seriously constrain the capacity of the Whitehall machine.

Two separate responses to the free text question sum up the issue:

"Talent and poor performance management are the single biggest things holding the civil service back."

"Our inability to reward the right skills and strong performance fails to keep the good ones in post. And our virtually non-existent management of poor performers keeps the bad ones in until retirement."

2.1.1 Poor performance

Civil servants continue to show the frustration revealed in last year's survey for *Making the grade*, as well as a clear desire for urgent reform. 79 per cent of people disagreed with the statement "the civil service in general manages poor performance well".

In addition, almost two thirds agreed with the statement that "managers are incentivised to move poor performers to another role or department, rather than manage them". And, worryingly, over half agreed with the statement "I am aware of disciplinary issues where action should have been taken but has not".

In fact, one of the most frequent topics raised in free text when asked "would you like to confidentially share any other views or experiences of the civil service or your department?" was poor performance.

"Line management is the single biggest issue, managers are too scared or unwilling to have difficult conversations, meaning poor performance is always overlooked."

"Poor performance is not dealt with promptly and often nothing is dealt with. Many people in my department have been promoted way beyond their capability."

⁹ Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.

“I firmly believe if we were able to quickly remove ten per cent of staff who amount to the lowest performers, the saving in management time alone would mean we'd be more efficient and get more work done even without those 10 per cent.”

“In the [department], there is effectively no performance management system to speak of, beyond triggering escalatory action for egregious behaviour. Even then, this takes management a long time to address, usually by moving problematic individuals around teams or the department.”

“It's my experience that the lawyers get in the way of dismissing poor performers. I personally had a staff member who was drunk on duty (more than once). My hands were tied in sacking them. We ended up spending £000 [sic] in time dealing with the situation when other organisations would have dismissed instantly.”

“Managers/departments are too afraid to take action against people in case they are accused of discrimination against a particular protected characteristic, this results in poor performance/ behaviours not being addressed. It is time that departments and the Civil Service to start seeing the bigger picture and started to realise the impact on the wider team/ business/ department reputation/ service offered and took the required [action] to address poor performance/ behaviours at the core.”

“People seem unsackable, with people on year-long performance plans still not considered “signed off” or just left to it and given a slap on the wrist when they are randomly spot checked [on their decisions].”

Although not the subject of any specific questions from the Survey, in the optional open-ended question many respondents also flagged that corporate Human Resources (HR) functions were often a hinderance rather than a help when it came to managing poor performers. Examples included:

“The lack of consistent HR support is hampering effectively managing people out of the door. The process is so long winded and the taxpayer is left paying the bill for people who should be dismissed promptly yet know how to play the game.”

“We could make massive efficiency savings if we had a fundamentally different approach to HR. Our pay systems and structures are not designed in a way that motivates or rewards high performance and it is incredibly difficult to address poor performance. The result is that managers just move poor performers to other roles and the problem is just shifted to another team. Tax payers shouldn't be paying the salaries of people who are basically incompetent but weak HR plus the power of trade unions mean that's what's happening.”

2.1.2 Talent progression

More broadly, responses suggested a distinct mood of dissatisfaction with the opportunities available within the civil service for talented people. 60 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “talented people rise to the top of the civil service” and only 37 per

cent agreed with the statement that “there are opportunities to progress which makes a future career in the civil service an exciting prospect”.

On pay, just 20 per cent of respondents agreed that “the pay bands in my department appropriately reflect differences in responsibilities and workload”, while a full two thirds disagreed. This is both reflective of frustrations with reward for hard work and excellence, but is also undermining performance by creating perverse incentives. In free text answers, numerous respondents commented on the lack of in-role pay progression as a driver of both churn and over promotion: “the Civil Service creates some of its own problems by not grasping the fact that the only way to get a pay rise these days is to bounce around jobs.”

Respondents commented that:

“There is no support for managing poor performance. But strong performers are stuck with little promotion opportunities and no rewards pay or otherwise for excelling... Other than more work at same pay. Unrecognised good performance [is] becoming increasingly problematic for keeping up motivation and keeping talent.”

“I genuinely believe the civil service can still be a great place to work, however the lack of pay progression and opportunities for advancement mean that people end up department hopping to get on.”

“There are limited rewards for exceptional delivery and minimal consequences for poor performance at all levels of seniority.”

“Promotion prospects are currently dire, and pay is not great.”

“I have never seen talented colleagues so demoralised.”

“We need to reduce headcount in the civil service (doesn’t need to be as big as it is) but pay high performers better.”

“Lack of competitive pay is not retaining talented individuals or attracting skilled applicants to the civil service.”

Taken as a whole, these results are deeply worrying.

Since the election, the Government has committed to improving talent and performance management. The Prime Minister announced plans for performance-related pay.¹⁰ The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Pat McFadden, announced “Tours of Duty” in government for talented tech workers,¹¹ and has pledged to use “mutually agreed exits” for poor performers.¹² It is vital that this action is bold and taken swiftly to address, as one person put it, the fact that there are “not enough sticks for poor performers and not enough carrots for high performers”.

¹⁰ Henry Zeffman, ‘Starmer Pitches Reform to “shackled” Civil Servants’, *BBC News*, 10 March 2025.

¹¹ Michael McFadden, ‘Reform of the State Has to Deliver for People’, Web Page, 2024.

¹² Kate Whannel and Iain Watson, ‘Civil Service Reforms Will Be Radical, Minister Vows’, *BBC News*, 8 March 2025.

Q11 – To what extent do you agree with the following statements, relating to talent and performance management in the civil service?

“The civil service takes talent and performance management seriously”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	3% (-)
Somewhat agree	26% (-)
Neither agree nor disagree	14% (+1)
Somewhat disagree	28% (-2)
Strongly disagree	29% (+2)
Don't know	<1% (-)

“Talented people rise to the top of the civil service”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	2% (-)
Somewhat agree	23% (-4)
Neither agree nor disagree	15% (-)
Somewhat disagree	33% (+2)
Strongly disagree	27% (+2)
Don't know	<1% (-)

“The civil service in general manages poor performance well”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	1% (-)
Somewhat agree	7% (+2)
Neither agree nor disagree	11% (+5)
Somewhat disagree	27% (-5)
Strongly disagree	52% (-3)
Don't know	2% (+1)

“Managers are incentivised to move poor performers to another role or department, rather than manage them”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	26%
Somewhat agree	36%
Neither agree nor disagree	14%
Somewhat disagree	9%
Strongly disagree	9%
Don't know	6%

“I have a good line manager and feel supported by them to make progress”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	32% (+3)
Somewhat agree	31% (-1)
Neither agree nor disagree	12% (-2)
Somewhat disagree	11% (-1)
Strongly disagree	13% (-)
Don't know	<1% (-)

“There are opportunities to progress which makes a future career in the civil service an exciting prospect”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	9% (-2)
Somewhat agree	29% (-4)
Neither agree nor disagree	16% (+2)
Somewhat disagree	21% (-)
Strongly disagree	24% (+3)
Don't know	<1% (-)

“The pay bands in my department appropriately reflect differences in responsibilities and workload”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	3%
Somewhat agree	17%
Neither agree nor disagree	12%
Somewhat disagree	27%
Strongly disagree	39%
Don't know	3%

“There are an appropriate range of civil service grades in my department”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	11%
Somewhat agree	30%
Neither agree nor disagree	18%
Somewhat disagree	19%
Strongly disagree	20%
Don't know	3%

“I am aware of disciplinary issues where action should have been taken but has not”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	29% (-5)
Somewhat agree	26% (-2)
Neither agree nor disagree	13% (-)
Somewhat disagree	10% (-)
Strongly disagree	10% (+3)
Don't know	12% (+4)

“I understand the role the HR function in my department plays”.

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Strongly agree	16% (-)
Somewhat agree	31% (-)
Neither agree nor disagree	16% (+2)
Somewhat disagree	18% (-2)
Strongly disagree	17% (-1)
Don't know	2% (+1)

Q12 – What proportion of people in your directorate do you feel are poor performers?

Answer	Percentage
Under 10%	40% (-4)
10-30%	34% (-5)
30-50%	8% (+1)
More than 50%	3% (+1)
Don't know	14% (+7)

Q19 – Have you ever had to manage someone out of the civil service for poor performance or disciplinary reasons?

Answer	Percentage and change versus 2024
Yes	38% (+1)
No	62% (-1)

2.2 Department performance

Clarity of purpose and structure, along with the right blend of skills and capabilities, are key to getting the most out of the workforce. Organisations without these struggle to perform. Whilst respondents have some, though insufficient, clarity on their department's priorities, they are very much not confident in their ability to deliver against them.

While 74 per cent of respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement “I am clear about what my department's priorities are”, only a third strongly agreed, and almost

one in five disagreed. This should be of concern to ministers and senior department leaders alike.

More worryingly, 53 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “my department possesses the capability and capacity needed to deliver its priorities”. These figures were highest in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (66 per cent) and the Department of Health and Social Care (65 per cent). In fact, overall just 35 per cent of respondents felt their departments are appropriately equipped. While the number of respondents at each grade is relatively small, it is striking how little faith leadership had. Senior Civil Servants (SCS) were most likely to feel their departments lacked the right capability and capacity to deliver their priorities (65 per cent disagreed, compared to below 50 per cent for Administrative, Executive and Higher officers).

This ties into broader concerns with departmental cultures and processes.

Indicative of a machine ill-adapted to modern challenges, 70 per cent agreed with the statement that “I often feel that processes get in the way of me performing my job”. Ironically, the people with the greatest ability to change process, the SCS, were most likely to agree process got in the way (83 per cent).

“There are incredible levels of waste. In my department there have been two major developments involving consultants at considerable expense. While they produced great slide packs nothing was delivered that did not already exist.”

“The department... is too heavy with too many SCS and G6 trying to manage too few people and introducing multiple layers of oversight, stifling innovation, enterprise and stopping any risk-taking.”

“Clear informed analytical creative thinking is strongly discouraged – especially where it contradicts the prevailing groupthink ideology. Waste is rife.”

When it comes to feeling encouraged or empowered to identify better ways to do things and learn from what does and doesn’t work, respondents were similarly largely negative.

Only 24 per cent agreed with the statement that “my department actively encourages and rewards civil servants who try to innovate”, while 52 per cent actively disagreed. At the Ministry of Defence, just 17 per cent agree, compared to 34 per cent at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) — thought just a third of staffing in the department responsible for the innovation feeling encouraged to innovate is a concern.

“While processes are necessary to ensure careful guardianship of public money, they do definitely tie one hand behind people’s back on occasion in delivering innovative results.”

“Coming from the private sector I find the slowness of the Civil Service processes and procedures very frustrating. It stopped me in being able to complete my job far too many times. People are great and super motivated despite the constant barriers put before them.”

“The expressed desire for innovation is completely at odds with the capacity and autonomy of staff to put any innovation in place to improve efficiency or outputs.”

Linked to this, and despite the very well-rehearsed failures across public service areas, just 39 per cent agreed that “when taking decisions my department considers the risks of ‘doing nothing’ to the same degree as the risks of taking action.” This status quo bias, which fails to properly understand risk, is likely to be impeding the testing of more innovative practices and deploying productivity-boosting technologies.

Worryingly, just 18 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement “my department consistently evaluates policies and projects and then consistently applies these lessons to future policymaking and implementation”. Almost 60 per cent disagreed this is the case, despite Whitehall supposedly having adopted a more evaluation-based approach in the past few years, including establishing the Evaluation Task Force and an Evaluation Registry.¹³

“Civil Service as whole needs to share best practices on projects and not constantly re-invent the wheel. A lot more work should focus on lessons learned and when the feasibility of projects is reviewed it should be mandatory that we check similar works have not been carried out by another department.”

These results support the need for radical clarity of purpose and priorities, clearly communicated, a focus on matching capable resource to those priorities and developing a culture and model that embeds a proportionate attitude towards risk and incentivises innovation and iteration. As Pat McFadden has said, “if we are terrified of failure we will never innovate and we’ll carry on doing what we’ve always done”.¹⁴

Q13 – To what extent do you agree with the following statements relating to your department?

“I am clear about what my department’s priorities are”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	33%
Somewhat agree	41%
Neither agree nor disagree	7%
Somewhat disagree	10%
Strongly disagree	8%
Don’t know	<1%

¹³ Cabinet Office, ‘Evaluation Registry’, n.d.

¹⁴ McFadden, *Pat McFadden Vows to Make the State ‘More like a Start up’ as He Deploys Reform Teams across Country*.

“My department possesses the capability and capacity needed to deliver its priorities”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	7%
Somewhat agree	28%
Neither agree nor disagree	11%
Somewhat disagree	29%
Strongly disagree	24%
Don't know	2%

“I often feel that processes get in the way of me performing my job”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	32%
Somewhat agree	38%
Neither agree nor disagree	14%
Somewhat disagree	12%
Strongly disagree	4%
Don't know	<1%

“My department provides me with sufficient access to data and technology, including AI, to do my job”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	9%
Somewhat agree	39%
Neither agree nor disagree	13%
Somewhat disagree	20%
Strongly disagree	18%
Don't know	1%
Total	100%

“When taking decisions my department considers the risks of doing nothing to the same degree as the risks of taking action”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	9%
Somewhat agree	30%
Neither agree nor disagree	17%
Somewhat disagree	21%
Strongly disagree	16%
Don't know	6%

“My department actively encourages and rewards civil servants who try to innovate”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	4%
Somewhat agree	20%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%
Somewhat disagree	25%
Strongly disagree	27%
Don't know	2%

“I am encouraged to identify ways to cut waste and improve efficiency in my everyday work”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	8%
Somewhat agree	29%
Neither agree nor disagree	18%
Somewhat disagree	23%
Strongly disagree	22%
Don't know	<1%

“My department consistently evaluates policies and projects and then consistently applies these lessons to future policymaking and implementation”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	4%
Somewhat agree	14%
Neither agree nor disagree	18%
Somewhat disagree	28%
Strongly disagree	31%
Don't know	5%

2.3 Procurement

Successive governments have viewed better public procurement as a key lever to drive value for money. The current administration is no different and are also looking to use procurement to enable mission delivery.¹⁵ Government spends billions of pounds procuring goods and services, huge sums that directly impact the public finances, public service delivery and the economy itself.

In 2024 the head of the National Audit Office identified public procurement as one of the five main areas of financial opportunity,¹⁶ and there have been numerous, high-profile procurement failures and overruns.

¹⁵ Government Commercial Function, ‘National Procurement Policy Statement’, Web Page, GOV.UK, 12 February 2025.

¹⁶ Gareth Davies, *Improving Productivity Could Release Tens of Billions for Government Priorities*, 2024.

The views of respondents with direct involvement in procurement do not make for happy reading. Of the 22 per cent who said they are directly involved in the procurement of goods and services only 12 per cent agreed with the statement “the civil service procures goods and services effectively from the private sector” (with only 1 per cent answering that they strongly agreed). In contrast, 58 per cent disagreed.

Further, just 34 per cent agreed with the statement “the civil service values the partnerships it has with the private sector”, while more than 20 per cent disagreed. Perhaps most striking given the respondents are involved in working with the private sector, 46 per cent either answered that they neither agreed nor disagreed or that they didn’t know.

A mixture of frustration and apathy in the civil service workforce will not drive the kind of radical transformations of procurement spending needed to deliver value for money. One respondent wrote:

“Contracts are not generally robust, which hampers effective contract management and also often cover long periods, which limits the ability to test the market frequently and obtain better terms to improve value for money.”

“Procurement of supplies is really expensive. I needed a USB C to C cable for my Surface Pro and it cost £10.76 through DWP Place, I could have got the same cable via Amazon for £1.50, ridiculous process.”

Previous *Re:State* (formerly *Reform* think tank) research has highlighted that corporate capabilities like procurement are not part of the professional background of most permanent secretaries and are of little interest to them and other senior officials as leaders of government departments.¹⁷ This will need to be dramatically reversed if Whitehall is to grip procurement and drive better outcomes with commercial partners.

Q14 – Are you directly involved in the procurement of goods and/or services?

Answer	Percentage
Yes	22%
No	78%

Q15 – To what degree do you agree with the following statements relating to procurement?

“The civil service procures goods and services effectively from the private sector”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	1%
Somewhat agree	11%
Neither agree nor disagree	13%
Somewhat disagree	27%
Strongly disagree	31%
Don’t know	16%

¹⁷ Charlotte Pickles and James Sweetland, *Breaking down the Barriers: Why Whitehall Is so Hard to Reform* (Reform, 2023).

“The civil service values the partnerships it has with the private sector”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	7%
Somewhat agree	27%
Neither agree nor disagree	26%
Somewhat disagree	12%
Strongly disagree	8%
Don't know	20%

2.4 Ministers and special advisers

Ministers often report feeling frustrated in their inability to drive change in line with their priorities.¹⁸ This is not helped by inadequate support from advisers who are directly accountable to the ministers who appoint them. *Re:State* research highlighted that ministers in peer nations are able to appoint multiples more advisers than ministers in the British government. The research also revealed the inadequate training and management of special advisers (SpAds), as well as the erosion in their pay which makes hiring for deep expertise or experience hard.¹⁹ These issues may well be contributing factors to the sometimes reported tensions between the political team and officials.

However, many former and current officials, as well as SpAds, are quick to highlight the important role SpAds can play in facilitating the delivery of government objectives. One respondent in free text captured the issue well:

“We do also need to have a conversation about the capability of SpAds. A strong SpAd makes a department stronger. But we've all worked with very weak SpAds... they just are not up to it intellectually.”

This tension is clear from respondents' answers to the survey data. Of all respondents:

- 34 per cent agreed with the statement that “in my department there is an effective working relationship between ministers, special advisers and civil servants”, and 36 per cent disagreed.
- 18 per cent said it was true that “in my department special advisers add value and help to deliver departmental priorities”, while 14 per cent disagreed. The majority either did not agree or disagree (22 per cent) or didn't know (36 per cent).

However, the 37 per cent of respondents who also said that they had worked closely with ministers and/or special advisers were more positive about the quality of the relationship, although more also raised concerns about how well they worked with officials.

¹⁸ Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, *The Minister and the Official: The Fulcrum of Whitehall Effectiveness: Fifth Report of Session 2017-19*, HC 497 (London: The Stationery Office, 2018).

¹⁹ Patrick King and Charlotte Pickles, *Grown up Government: Towards a Comprehensive Model of Political Support* (Reform, 2024).

- 57 per cent agreed with the statement that “in my department there is an effective working relationship between ministers, special advisers and civil servants”, and only 26 per cent disagreed.
- 36 per cent said it was true that “in my department special advisers add value and help to deliver departmental priorities”, although 33 per cent disagreed — fewer respondents said they did not know (8 per cent).

The current Government has removed the cap on the number of departmental SpAds, as well as making more appointments to non-political roles. These are both positive moves, though ministers remain under-supported. Crucially, ministers must ensure that strong working relationships exist between special advisers and officials in their department.

Q16 – Have you worked closely with ministers and/or special advisers?

Answer	Percentage
Yes	37%
No	63%

Q17 – To what degree do you agree with the following statements relating to ministers and special advisers?

“In my department there is an effective working relationship between ministers, special advisers and civil servants”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	7%
Somewhat agree	27%
Neither agree nor disagree	19%
Somewhat disagree	11%
Strongly disagree	8%
Don't know	28%

“In my department special advisers add value and help to deliver departmental priorities”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	4%
Somewhat agree	14%
Neither agree nor disagree	22%
Somewhat disagree	12%
Strongly disagree	12%
Don't know	36%

2.5 Technology and artificial intelligence

One of the Government's first moves after the election was to announce that responsibility for digital government would move from the Cabinet Office to the DSIT, which Secretary of

State Peter Kyle said would allow DSIT to become “the centre of digital expertise and delivery in government, improving how the government and public services interact with citizens”.²⁰

This machinery of government change brought together the Government Digital Service, the Central Digital and Data Office, and the Incubator for AI into a new digital centre of government, which the Government hopes will drive radical transformation of the State and believes could unlock £45 billion of productivity improvements and savings (though it is not yet clear exactly how).²¹

As *Re:State* has argued, automation and adoption of AI is essential to driving an efficient and effective modern State.²² Particularly crucial is a strategic approach, which drives automation in the big areas of cost, rather than small use cases which might be easier to pilot but don’t unlock dramatic productivity improvements.

30 per cent of respondents said they are personally using AI in their work, but almost double (57 per cent) said they are aware of their colleagues doing so.

Of those who are using AI in their work, the majority (59 per cent) reported they were using either only public tools (like ChatGPT), or a mixture of public and internal tools. 41 per cent reported they were using internal tools — though it should be noted that these categories may not be fully understood by respondents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given that those using AI tools are choosing to do so, users were almost unequivocal in their belief that AI tools helped them do a better job. 78 per cent of respondents who used AI agreed with the statement “the AI tools I use help me do my job better”, compared to just 4 per cent who disagreed. The key question for Whitehall’s leaders, is whether this use is in appropriate cases, reflects best practice, and whether they should be concerned about the high levels of use of publicly-available AI tools.

Q21 – Do you use AI in your work?

Answer	Percentage
Yes	30%
No	70%

Q22 – Are you using internal government AI tools, publicly available AI products, or both?

Answer	Percentage
Internal	41%
Publicly available	35%
Both	24%

²⁰ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, ‘DSIT Bolstered to Better Serve the British Public Through Science and Technology’, Web Page, 8 July 2024.

²¹ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, ‘Blueprint for a Modern Digital Government’, January 2025.

²² Joe Hill and Sean Eke, *Getting the Machine Learning: Scaling AI in Public Services*, 2024.

Q23 – To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “The AI tools I use help me to do my job better”.

Answer	Percentage
Strongly agree	53%
Somewhat agree	25%
Neither agree nor disagree	17%
Somewhat disagree	3%
Strongly disagree	1%
Don't know	<1%

Q24 – Are you aware of other civil servants using publicly-available AI tools in their work?

Answer	Percentage
Yes	57%
No	43%

2.6 Recruitment

Recruitment into the civil service has long been criticised for its abstract and formulaic approach, and also for being a closed shop where most roles are not advertised to outsiders. *Re:State* explored this in *Making the grade*. A key commitment in the 2021 *Declaration on Government Reform* was that “we will improve the way we recruit and the way we manage moves into and out of government”. Last year’s *Civil Service People Plan* committed to “revamp our processes to speed up recruitment and open up as many entry routes as possible”.²³

Although the Survey contained no specific questions about recruitment, issues with the approach were raised so frequently in the free text question that it is worth highlighting the deep frustrations voiced by respondents.

“Recruitment needs reforming. Barriers to entry too high, barriers to exit also too high. There isn't competitive recruitment with private sector, as there is strong bias towards internal candidates.”

“The Civil Service recruitment processes do not favour genuine talent or recognise potential in the right way. Many successful candidates are simply good at performing at interview and unable to be effective in their roles. We do not recognise and reward knowledge and experience.”

“Recruitment needs to be reviewed as processes focus on people saying the right thing in interview rather than making a true assessment of their capabilities and ability to do the job. It's a tick box exercise where you get a mark for using the right management speak.”

²³ ‘Civil Service People Plan 2024-2027’, 10 January 2024.

“Our woeful recruitment framework and tendency to advertise jobs internally within the Civil Service means it is hard to get the right people in.”

“The application system for new roles is performative, formulaic, and inaccessible to those outside the civil service (as well as incredibly time consuming). The entire system related to behaviours and competencies should be scrapped and replaced with a more effective system which takes performance more closely into account.”

“The current Success Profiles framework is outdated and ineffective. It relies solely on a personal statement and an interview — both of which can be easily fabricated — rather than a comprehensive evaluation of performance, deliverables, skills, and behaviours. This outdated approach often results in individuals securing roles they are not capable of performing, either through cherry-picking or strategic job-hopping for promotions and salary increases. I see this all the time.”

“The recruitment process needs an overhaul. The behaviours and ‘STAR’ delivery requirement are artificial.”

“The recruitment system is unwieldy. The application system encourages success for those who can tell a good story, rather than those who can actually deliver and who can fit into a team effectively.”

“The whole job application process needs a complete revamp and should be skilled and merit based instead of behaviours which are either not relevant or cannot be validated. No input from line managers or appraisals or qualifications are taken into consideration when applying for roles/promotions.”

“HR are risk averse and unhelpful, inconsistent advice, too removed from the reality of leading and managing people at scale. Recruitment needs complete overhaul, ditch success profiles and looking back - enable us to recruit on talent and potential using a strengths based approach. Provide HR processes which enable us to have consistency and fairness but which are simple and straightforward to use to support people including applying penalties/dismissal for poor performance.”

Overhauling recruitment processes is fundamental to ensuring the right people are in the right roles, and that the Civil Service is bringing in the best possible talent. Succeeding in ‘rewiring the State’ means recruiting in ways which encourages a diversity of thinking and people from unusual backgrounds to apply to work in Whitehall, rather than just the usual suspects. Based on these answers, there is plenty of support within the Civil Service itself for a different model.

3. Conclusion

The first *Alternative People Survey* paints a nuanced picture of a civil service which is both hopeful about its mission and yet deeply frustrated by its own culture.

Almost three quarters of respondents are at least somewhat clear about what their department's priorities are. This is both positive for a civil service which often seems directionless, and still low compared to the standards government should aspire to. As argued in previous *Re:State* (formerly *Reform* think tank) papers, prioritisation is historically a failure of government.²⁴ If everything is a target, nothing is a target.

Multiple respondents praised the talent and dynamism which exists within the civil service. Respondents have begun to experiment with AI and many praised their fellow civil servants, commenting that “overall the civil service is a hotbed of talented people who do, and deliver, amazing work” and “there are extremely talented individuals across the civil service”.

However, talent is often overlooked or mismanaged, poor performance remains unaddressed, innovation is stifled, inefficiencies are allowed to fester, and evaluation is not consistently conducted or learned from. These problems have resulted in a disillusioned civil service workforce. 45 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “there are opportunities to progress which makes a future career in the civil service an exciting prospect” and, as one respondent remarked, “I have never seen talented colleagues so demoralised”.

Perhaps the biggest challenge remains the deeply rooted cultural and procedural barriers inhibiting the civil service's ability to deliver for the country. The Government has acknowledged the importance of reforming the civil service, through changing recruitment processes, introducing new bodies such as the digital centre of government or the Office for Value for Money, and reforming critical areas like technology adoption and procurement.

These survey results highlight the importance of this change, and the need for it to proceed at an even faster pace. This is an opportunity to not only reignite the ability of the State to deliver, but to also remotivate civil servants through providing them with the tools and processes they need. Only by doing so can the State truly deliver the radical change the public demand.

²⁴ Joe Hill, *Everythingism: An Essay* (Reform think tank, 2025).

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Re:State

ISBN: 978-1-910850-85-5



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