

NAO chief: civil servants who speak truth to ministers ‘should be promoted’

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Amyas Morse tells MPs that ministerial directions are too rare and departments must re-prioritise ahead of Brexit

The head of the National Audit Office has said the best way to encourage civil servants to speak truth to power is to promote the ones that do.

Sir Amyas Morse, comptroller and auditor general of the NAO, told MPs yesterday he'd spoken to many officials who fear that offering ministers constructive criticism can damage their careers. But he said there weren't any "little procedures" that could be put in place to combat this.

In the opening session of a new inquiry into civil service capability, Morse also called for a strengthening of the system of ministerial directions and for officials to recognise their "optimism bias" when it comes to delivering government projects.

Morse was speaking on 7 November to MPs on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which recently announced an inquiry into civil service capability in light of Brexit, covering sensitive areas such as the relationship between ministers and civil servants.

Morse told them: "The issue is that accounting officers have a clear responsibility for value for money but they also have conflicting responsibilities for supporting their ministers and carrying through their policies.

"There isn't a very clear statement about how these two are supposed to be reconciled."

He said he felt that accounting officers were "increasingly" thinking about their responsibilities with regard to value for money, but that there was a lot of evidence to suggest that officials still believe offering ministers uncomfortable truths can be career-limiting.

There isn't really evidence of this happening in practice, given that "ministers have legitimate choice as to who is appointed and they don't have to account for that choice", he added.

Asked how civil servants could be encouraged to constructively criticise ministers, Morse responded: "I think the best way you can possibly do it is by people who have put forward constructive criticism actually getting promoted.

"Because no matter what I say to you, if the actual reality and the wisdom on the ground is: 'if you make a nuisance of yourself, strangely your career will not thrive', there's nothing we can do in terms of little procedures that will really help with that."

But he did say it would be helpful to find ways to make ministerial directions more common and acceptable. Circumstances where officials seek written direction from a secretary of state to pass up the responsibility for a particular use of public money are currently quite "rare" and "often on a technicality", he added.

The PACAC inquiry follows a NAO report published in March that warned of [the pressures on Whitehall capacity and capability](#) given the backdrop of spending restraint, reductions in staff numbers and now Britain's decision to leave the European Union.

Morse told the committee that, pre-Brexit, the civil service had recognised its skills gaps and was moving in the right direction, but that the tasks it now faces have increased considerably.

He argued that departments now need to review their pre-existing commitments and assess how many of them can still be managed. But he conceded that departments have started to plan their

future workforce and skills needs much more comprehensively, particularly HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

HMRC chief executive Jon Thompson said on Monday that he might need to put up to 40% of his resources into implementing Brexit. He has also already committed to [a reprioritisation exercise for all the department's existing programmes.](#)

Morse also highlighted that many of the most fraught civil service projects, including Universal Credit implementation and the Home Office e-borders programme, were beset by problems of “optimism bias” and “over-aggressive ambitions” as to what can be achieved and in what timescale.

He said: “Because you have a lot of highly intelligent and intellectual people in civil service, they can easily envisage how you could do something differently and think of an exciting breakthrough project.

“If you were in the commercial world, what you’re trying to do is get something that will move your activity forward in the requisite way as cheaply and as low risk as possible.... You’re just trying to get the job done.

“There is an attitudinal adjustment that could be very usefully made.”