



---

# Leading the civil service's largest profession

Keynote speech by Jon Thompson

---

Translating policy into delivery is one of the most complex challenges in government, and one thrown into sharp relief by austerity and Brexit. The operational delivery profession plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the two.

In a recent speech at the Institute for Government, Jon Thompson, head of the operational delivery profession and Chief Executive of HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), offered insights into how he is developing the largest specialism in the civil service to meet these challenges.

## Developing the profession

Thompson started with key facts. About 70% of civil servants work in operational delivery. They are the face of government, delivering large-scale public services directly to citizens and business across very different areas. Operational delivery staff process benefits payments; they work in prisons, or at the border in the UK's 40 commercial airports or 120 commercial ports. In 2017, they administered child benefits for seven million claimants and issued nearly seven million passports. He noted that the profession deals with ten times as many business customers as some of the UK's leading energy suppliers.

Jon Thompson is leading a profession comprising 250,000 civil servants working across 20 departments. Since its creation in 2012, the profession has worked to create career pathways and learning opportunities for its staff. It now offers six levels of operational delivery qualifications, from GCSE to Master's Degree level. Of the 22,000 civil servants who have registered for these qualifications – around 10% of the profession – 10,000

have now qualified. More than 6,000 apprentices are working in operational delivery; Thompson himself started as an apprentice in the 1980s.

Providing learning opportunities for leaders is also a priority for the profession. Good leadership is particularly important when some directors lead operational delivery functions made of up very large teams – one of HMRC's 'commands' includes 11,000 people.

## **Crossing the 'valley of death' between policy and delivery**

Joining up policy and delivery is one of the key tasks for operational delivery professionals. The speech highlighted how vital it is that civil servants working in policy and implementation appreciate each other's insights and skills, and that they learn from each other in areas including digital, project delivery, or communications.

HMRC's transformation of the tax system following its 2015 Spending Review settlement provides a good example of this. Certain aspects of this programme, like the Personal Tax Account, affect up to 17 million citizens. Despite many successes, Thompson recognised that there were times when policy and delivery had not been sufficiently joined up, leading to incorrect assumptions or delivery taking place on the wrong timescale. A key lesson he highlighted was the need for different government professions to better understand each other.

There are many opportunities to create these links between professions. To start with, entrants to the civil service fast stream will need to complete at least one placement in operational delivery, to better understand the practicalities of delivering policies. Developing future leaders to understand the connections between operational delivery and other disciplines offers some of the greatest potential to improve delivery.

A solid understanding of delivery also empowers civil service leaders to 'speak truth unto power', and to advise ministers on the timescales, costs and technical aspects of delivering their policies. HMRC and HM Treasury have already partnered to ensure this kind of support is available to Treasury ministers. At times, this duty can have costly personal consequences for civil servants, with Thompson highlighting the death threats he received over his estimates of the costs of Brexit.

Brexit is driving large amounts of additional work for the operational delivery profession. HMRC is currently on course to recruit 5,000 extra staff to assist its delivery, and is in the process of modernising the customs system. With the Chief Executive of the civil service arguing two years ago that the civil service was doing 30% too much, there is no shortage of work for the profession going forward.

*This event was part of a series sponsored by Oracle: to find out more about future events in the series, please visit the [Institute for Government's website](#).*

**The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.**

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.

Copies of this IfG Insight are available alongside our other research work at:  
[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

Email: [enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)  
Twitter: [@instituteforgov](https://twitter.com/instituteforgov)

**Institute for Government**  
2 Carlton Gardens, London, SW1Y 5AA  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

October 2018

© Institute for Government 2018

The Institute for Government is a registered charity in England and Wales (No. 1123926) with cross-party governance. Our main funder is the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts.