

The Civil Service

Research Briefing

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A briefing on the constitutional status and regulation of the Home Civil Service (Great Britain), the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service.

Summary

The Civil Service is a permanent body of officials that supports the UK Government in developing and implementing policy. Known informally as “Whitehall”, the Home Civil Service (HCS) includes staff working for UK government departments and the devolved Scottish and Welsh Governments.

The HCS is accountable to Ministers of the Crown, who are themselves accountable to Parliament. Civil servants serve the government of the day and are expected to act with integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. These core values are set out in the Civil Service Code, which is published under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. This act also placed the Civil Service Commission on a statutory basis. The Commission regulates recruitment, requiring appointments to be made on merit following fair and open competition, and hears complaints under the Civil Service Code.

The modern Civil Service developed during the 19th century. The 1854 Northcote–Trevelyan Report recommended recruitment based on merit rather than patronage, a unified structure and political neutrality. These principles were gradually implemented from 1870 and have been reinforced by later reviews and institutional changes.

The Prime Minister is, by convention, Minister for the Civil Service and has statutory responsibility for managing it. The most senior (non-elected) officials in departments are permanent secretaries, who manage day-to-day operations. They also act as accounting officers, responsible for ensuring public money is spent properly.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service and HM Diplomatic Service are separate, although they share similar principles such as appointment on merit and political impartiality.

What is the Civil Service?

The Civil Service or the Home Civil Service (referred to in legislation as [“the Civil Service of the State”](#) or [“civil service of the Crown”](#)) supports the UK Government of the day [“to develop and implement its policies as effectively as possible”](#). It is often known as

“Whitehall”, a reference to a group of buildings in central London which house several government departments.

The Home Civil Service includes those working for the devolved Scottish and Welsh Governments but does not include HM Diplomatic Service (which staffs the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and British diplomatic missions abroad) or the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which are separate.

Nor does the Home Civil Service include Ministers of the Crown, members of the armed forces, the police, officers of local government, non-departmental public bodies, staff from both Houses of Parliament, employees of the National Health Service or staff of the Royal Household.

In his [1985 Armstrong Memorandum](#), Sir Robert Armstrong stated the constitutional basis of the Civil Service:

Civil servants are servants of the Crown. For all practical purposes the Crown in this context means and is represented by the Government of the day. There are special cases in which certain functions are conferred by law upon particular members or groups of members of the public service; but in general the executive powers of the Crown are exercised by and on the advice of Her Majesty’s Ministers, who are in turn answerable to Parliament. The civil service as such has no constitutional personality or responsibility separate from the duly elected Government of the day. It is there to provide the Government of the day with advice on the formulation of the policies of the Government, to assist in carrying out the decisions of the Government, and to manage and deliver the services for which the Government is responsible.

History of the Civil Service

Government administration emerged organically as the British state and Empire expanded during the 18th century. In 1806 the [East India Company College](#) was established at Haileybury to train administrators for the private East India Company. This provided a model for the 1854 [Northcote–Trevelyan Report](#), which recommended a permanent, unified and politically neutral Civil Service for Great Britain with appointments made on merit.

Although a [Civil Service Commission](#) was established in 1855 to oversee open recruitment (rather than patronage), the Northcote–Trevelyan proposals were not implemented until 1870 when Queen Victoria approved [a prerogative Order in Council](#).

1 Northcote–Trevelyan Report

On 12 April 1853 William Gladstone, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, commissioned a review of the Civil Service to be carried out by the then permanent secretary at the Treasury, Charles Trevelyan, and Sir Stafford Northcote, a former civil servant at the Board of Trade. Northcote and Trevelyan’s Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service was published in February 1854 and recommended:

- dividing posts into “mechanical” and “intellectual”
- recruitment by competitive exam
- service-wide classification of staff
- internal promotion on merit

This was, as historian [Lord Hennessy has stated](#):

the greatest single governing gift of the nineteenth to the twentieth century: a politically disinterested and permanent Civil Service with core values of integrity, propriety, objectivity and appointment on merit, able to transfer its loyalty and expertise from one elected government to the next.

The Northcote–Trevelyan model was subsequently endorsed by several reviews, including the [Royal Commission on the Civil Service](#) (1914) chaired by Lord MacDonnell, which proposed central management of the Civil Service, and Lord Haldane’s [Report of the Machinery of Government Committee](#), which called for rationalisation of departmental responsibilities.

[The position of Cabinet Secretary was created in 1916](#) when the modern Cabinet system was introduced by Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George. The first Head of the Civil Service, Sir Warren Fisher, was appointed in 1919.

Another committee chaired by Lord Fulton [reported in 1968](#). He made 158 recommendations including the creation of a Civil Service College (established in 1970, later the [National School of Government](#)), a central policy planning unit and removing Treasury oversight of the Civil Service. Prime Minister Harold Wilson created the [Civil Service Department](#) (CSD) in 1968 and became the first [Minister for the Civil Service](#).

The CSD was dissolved in December 1981 and its functions distributed between the Treasury and a new Management and Personnel Office (MPO) under the control of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The MPO was assimilated into the Cabinet Office in 1982. The Civil Service continued to be [regulated under the royal prerogative](#) rather than by an act of Parliament until 2010 when [sections 2 and 3](#) of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 placed the [Civil Service Commission](#) on a statutory basis and provided the Minister for the Civil Service (by convention the Prime Minister) with a statutory power “to manage the civil service”.

The Civil Service and the Union

Ireland’s [Dublin Castle administration](#) was separate from the Home Civil Service until 1922, while the Northern Ireland Civil Service was established to serve the devolved Government of Northern Ireland (1921–73). Following the partition of Ireland, the [Government of Ireland Act 1920](#) provided for “existing Irish officers” to be allocated to Belfast by a Civil Service Committee.

In the case of Scotland and Wales, there was considerable [“administrative devolution”](#) from London to Edinburgh and Cardiff during the 20th century, although the Home Civil Service remained Great Britain-wide.

The [creation of a Scottish Office in 1885](#) introduced a further territorial dimension to British public administration. Following publication of the Gilmour Committee on Scottish Administration, the [Reorganisation of Offices \(Scotland\) Act 1939](#) provided for the [transfer of further functions](#) to the Secretary of State for Scotland. The purpose-built [St Andrew’s House](#) in Edinburgh opened in 1939 as the home of Scotland’s consolidated administration. Wales did not get its own government department until the [Welsh Office was created in April 1965](#). Previously, a [Welsh Department of the \(British\) Board of Education](#) had been

established in 1907 with its own permanent secretary, followed by the Welsh Board of Health in 1919 and the Welsh Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in 1922.

The Home Civil Service

The Home Civil Service covers Great Britain and includes staff of the devolved Scottish and Welsh Governments. All HCS civil servants work for and report ultimately to the Head of the Civil Service, who is the Cabinet Secretary. The most recent [Civil Service statistics](#) show that 549,660 people are employed in the HCS. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are [approximately 41,155 civil servants based in Wales](#).

[Heads of Department](#) is responsible for the strategic leadership of the Home Civil Service. It is chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and comprises a selection of permanent secretaries. It is supported by two sub-boards: a Transformation Board and a People Board. A [Senior Leadership Committee](#) also provides advice to the Cabinet Secretary.

Ministers and the Civil Service

The Home Civil Service is [accountable to UK Ministers of the Crown](#), who in turn are accountable to the UK Parliament. The [Civil Service management code](#) states that: Civil servants are servants of the Crown and owe a duty of loyal service to the Crown as their employer. Since constitutionally the Crown acts on the advice of Ministers who are answerable for their departments and agencies in Parliament, that duty is, subject to the provisions of the Civil Service Code, owed to the duly constituted Government.

Under the non-statutory [Ministerial Code](#), Ministers of the Crown must uphold the political impartiality of the HCS and not ask civil servants to act in any way which would conflict with the Civil Service Code and the statutory requirements of the 2010 act. The [Scottish](#) and [Welsh Ministerial Codes](#) include similar provisions for the Scottish and Welsh Ministers, respectively.

Senior civil servants can also be held accountable by Parliament. The [Osmotherly Rules](#) provided non-statutory guidance for civil servants on working with – and providing evidence to – parliamentary select committees. The Commons' [Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee](#) examines the “quality and standards of administration provided by Civil Service departments”.

Under the [Carltona principle](#), the HCS has “no legal or constitutional personality separate from the Government or ministers”. This means that a Minister of the Crown is answerable to Parliament for the actions of their officials. As Lord Greene put it in the case of *Carltona Ltd v Commissioners of Works*:

It is he [the minister] who must answer before Parliament for anything that his officials have done under his authority, and, if for an important matter he selected an official of such junior standing that he could not be expected competently to perform the work, the minister would have to answer for that in Parliament. The whole system of departmental organisation and administration is based on the view that ministers, being responsible to Parliament, will see that important duties are committed to experienced officials.

Civil Service Commission

[Section 2](#) of and [schedule 1](#) to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 established a body corporate called the [Civil Service Commission](#). This ensures that appointments to the Home Civil Service are made openly and on merit.

Twelve Civil Service Commissioners for Great Britain (including the [First Civil Service Commissioner](#)) are appointed by the King on the recommendation of the Minister for the Civil Service. Before selecting a person as First Commissioner, the minister must consult the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and “relevant opposition leaders” in the UK Parliament. There exist “specified link commissioners”, one for Scotland and one for Wales.

A consolidated [Framework Agreement](#) was agreed between the Cabinet Office, Civil Service Commission, the [Advisory Committee on Business Appointments](#) and the [Commissioner for Public Appointments](#) in February 2025. The Cabinet Office answers parliamentary questions on the work of the Civil Service Commission “[while respecting its operational independence](#)”.

[Section 10](#) of the 2010 act provides that a person’s selection for appointment to the Civil Service must be “on merit on the basis of fair and open competition”, although there are exceptions for special advisers and “a selection excepted by the recruitment principles” under [section 12\(1\)\(b\)](#). A civil servant can only hold an appointment at any grade for up to two years if appointed by exception. This [can be extended with prior approval](#) from the Civil Service Commission.

Under [section 11](#), the Civil Service Commission is required to publish [Recruitment Principles](#) which govern how external appointments are made, including Ministerial involvement. The Recruitment Principles can be revised by the Commission but only [with the Prime Minister’s agreement](#).

Code of Conduct for the Civil Service

[Section 5](#) of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 provides that the Minister for the Civil Service must publish a Code of Conduct for the Civil Service. This [Civil Service Code](#) includes the “core values” of:

- “integrity” (putting the obligations of public service above your own personal interests, including an obligation to “comply with the law and uphold the administration of justice”)
- “honesty” (being truthful and open)
- “objectivity” (basing your advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence)
- “impartiality” (acting solely according to the merits of the case and serving equally well governments of different political persuasions)

[Section 7](#) of the 2010 act stipulates “minimum requirements” for the Civil Service Code, chiefly that civil servants must “carry out their duties for the assistance of the administration as it is duly constituted for the time being, whatever its political complexion”.

The current Cabinet Secretary (Dame Antonia Romeo) intends to “refresh” the Civil Service Code to ensure it is [“up to date, well understood, and adhered to across the Civil Service”](#).

Civil servants working for the [Scottish](#) and [Welsh Governments](#) and their agencies have their own versions of the Civil Service Code. Under [section 5](#) of the 2010 act, these are published by the Minister for the Civil Service following consultation with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and must be laid before the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments.

The [Civil Service management code](#) outlines civil servants' terms and conditions of service for government departments and agencies. This code divides civil servants into three groups:

- the politically free (some junior civil servants) who may take part in all political activities
- a politically restricted group (primarily senior civil servants) who may be given permission to take part in local politics
- an intermediate group comprising all other staff

The Cabinet Office issues non-statutory [Election guidance for civil servants](#) which governs their activities during the [pre-election period of sensitivity](#) previously known as “purdah”.

Minister for the Civil Service

By long-standing convention, the Prime Minister is also Minister for the Civil Service. A new Prime Minister often [shares a message to the Civil Service](#).

The Prime Minister may delegate their powers in this respect to other Ministers of the Crown and to the devolved governments under the [Civil Service \(Management Functions\) Act 1992](#). [Section 3\(6\)](#) of the 2010 act provides that:

In exercising his power to manage the civil service, the Minister for the Civil Service shall have regard to the need to ensure that civil servants who advise Ministers are aware of the constitutional significance of Parliament and of the conventions governing the relationship between Parliament and [His] Majesty's Government.

The government department with responsibility for the Home Civil Service is the Cabinet Office, which is [“the corporate headquarters for government, in partnership with HM Treasury”](#). One of its responsibilities is “creating an exceptional Civil Service, improving its capability and effectiveness”. The permanent secretary for the Cabinet Office is also [Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service](#).

Cabinet Secretary

The Cabinet Secretary (or Secretary to the Cabinet) is Head of the Home Civil Service. The Cabinet Secretary is appointed by the Prime Minister on the advice of the retiring Cabinet Secretary and the First Civil Service Commissioner. Someone appointed to that role needs [“the ability to secure the confidence of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet”](#).

The Cabinet Secretary attends all meetings of the UK Cabinet (unless “unavoidably absent”) and is responsible for the “smooth running” of Cabinet meetings and for preparing records of its discussions and decisions. According to the [Cabinet Manual](#) (PDF), the Cabinet Secretary is also responsible for advising the Prime Minister on:

- the agenda for Cabinet meetings
- the overall structure of the Cabinet committee system, including the chair, deputy chair (if any), membership and the terms of reference
- machinery of government issues (transfers of responsibility from one department to another)

More broadly, Lord Young of Old Windsor (a former Private Secretary to Queen Elizabeth II) has described the Cabinet Secretary as part of the “[so-called ‘Golden Triangle’](#)” which navigates potentially difficult constitutional situations. The other two parts are the Monarch’s Private Secretary and the Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister.

A Cabinet Secretary can publish a [statement of “objectives”](#) for the Civil Service, in agreement with the Prime Minister.

The House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has [questioned several Cabinet Secretaries](#), who can also [give evidence to public inquiries](#).

Permanent secretaries

Around 40 permanent secretaries are responsible to the Cabinet Secretary/Head of the Civil Service for the effective day-to-day management of the relevant department. This includes the permanent secretaries to the devolved Scottish and Welsh Governments but not the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

The Scotland and Wales Offices (which support the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales) are headed by directors. The [Northern Ireland Office](#) (a UK Government department) has a permanent secretary.

Appointment and dismissal

The final [appointment of permanent secretaries and directors-general is made by the Prime Minister](#), who is asked to approve the candidate who has come top in the merit order. The First Civil Service Commissioner is involved in giving the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales [a list of appointable candidates](#) to be the permanent secretaries of the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

Since 2014, permanent secretaries have been appointed on a five-year fixed-tenure contract. There is [no automatic presumption in favour of renewal](#), but renewals may be possible at the discretion of the Prime Minister in cases where performance has been strong and an extension is supported by the relevant Minister of the Crown.

Ministers do not usually dismiss permanent secretaries directly, but some have faced pressure to resign. [According to the Institute for Government](#):

In March 2020 the permanent secretary at the Home Office, Sir Philip Rutnam, resigned and launched a claim for constructive dismissal against the Home Office. The cabinet secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill, announced his own departure in June 2020 amidst heavy negative briefing in the papers against him and after reports that he was being forced out. In August 2020 the permanent secretary of the Department for Education, Jonathan Slater, left the civil

service after the prime minister 'concluded that there is a need for fresh official leadership at the Department for Education'. Like Sedwill, Slater stepped down, so was not formally fired, but the decision appeared to have been taken by the prime minister.

By "[mutual agreement](#)" of the Prime Minister and Sir Chris Wormald, it was announced on 12 February 2026 that the latter would stand down as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service. Sir Chris had been appointed in December 2024.

Pay

Permanent secretaries' pay is set by the [Permanent Secretary Remuneration Committee](#).

Relationship with ministers and Parliament

The UK [Ministerial Code states that](#):

Ministers and permanent secretaries should have a trusting, positive relationship, with regular opportunities for the exchange of feedback. Any concerns about this relationship should be resolved as swiftly as possible with the Cabinet Secretary and Prime Minister.

The Accounting Officer for a government department (usually a permanent secretary) is appointed by the Treasury under [section 5\(6\)](#) of the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000. Where an Accounting Officer [objects to a proposed course of action by a Minister of the Crown on grounds of propriety, regularity or value for money](#), they are required to seek a written ministerial direction. This is copied to the Comptroller and Auditor General who will normally draw the matter to the attention of the Commons' [Public Accounts Committee](#). [Ministerial Directions](#) are published online by HM Treasury.

Permanent secretaries appear in front of the Commons' Public Accounts Commission and Select Committees to answer questions regarding their responsibilities.

Employment of civil servants

Under [section 12](#) of the Official Secrets Act 1989 any person employed in the Civil Service of the Crown is defined as a "Crown servant".

[Section 191](#) of the Employment Act 1996 extended most employment legislation to "persons in Crown employment", including protections from unfair dismissal. Civil servants also have employment rights by virtue of [section 273](#) of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992.

Civil service grades

There are [seven broad grades](#) in the Civil Service:

- [Administrative officer/Administrative assistant \(AO/AA\)](#)
- [Executive officer \(EO\)](#)
- [Higher executive officer \(HEO\)](#)
- [Senior executive officer \(SEO\)](#)
- [Grade 7](#)
- [Grade 6](#)
- [Senior Civil Services \(SCS\)](#)

Pay

The [Review Body on Senior Salaries](#) provides independent advice to the Prime Minister, senior Ministers of the Crown and the Minister of Justice for Northern Ireland on the remuneration of senior civil servants.

Employment of foreign citizens

There is a general [statutory prohibition on the employment of “aliens”](#) (non-UK citizens) in the Civil Service [except in certain circumstances](#). However, under [section 1](#) of the Aliens’ Employment Act 1955, “an alien may be employed in any civil capacity under the Crown” under a certificate issued by a Minister of the Crown on the basis that no suitably qualified British citizen was available to do the job, or the alien possesses exceptional qualifications or experience.

Security vetting

The Cabinet Office adheres to relevant [national security vetting policies](#). [United Kingdom Security Vetting](#) (UKSV) provides a range of independent vetting services designed to identify potential personnel security risks, although the employing government department [“ultimately owns the risk of any appointment decision”](#).

The Cabinet Office has a [“longstanding policy”](#) of not commenting publicly on internal HR matters, [details of individual clearances or national security](#). Under [section 1](#) of the Official Secrets Act 1989:

A person who is or has been a Crown servant or government contractor is guilty of an offence if without lawful authority he makes a damaging disclosure of any information, document or other article relating to security or intelligence which is or has been in his possession by virtue of his position.

Regulation of misconduct

If passed by Parliament, the [Public Office \(Accountability\) Bill](#) would replace the existing common law offence of misconduct in public office with a new offence that can be committed by civil servants who behave corruptly.

Disqualification from political office

Under [section 1](#) of the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975, anyone employed full or part-time in the Civil Service of the Crown, which includes the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service, is disqualified from membership of the House of Commons. Civil servants are also disqualified from [membership of the Scottish Parliament](#), the [Senedd/Welsh Parliament](#) and the [Northern Ireland Assembly](#).

Mutually agreed exit

A mutually agreed exit is defined as a form of negotiated exit under the terms of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme. Details of any payments made to permanent secretaries on this basis are published in the relevant departmental annual report and accounts.

Performance management

Government departments must ensure that the [Performance management framework for the Senior Civil Service](#) forms the basis of their performance management policy (separate performance management guidance applies to permanent secretaries).

Since January 2026, senior civil servants have had their performance assessed against key performance indicators directly set by ministers, with those [“under-delivering \[...\] held to account”](#). In [a December 2024 speech](#), Sir Keir Starmer said he believed “too many people in Whitehall” were “comfortable in the tepid bath of managed decline”.

Civil service reform

The UK Government intends to establish a new [National School of Government and Public Services](#), while the 2026 King’s Speech promised proposals to [“strengthen the delivery, accountability, innovation and productivity of the Civil Service”](#). Sir Keir Starmer, the then Prime Minister, announced a [Review into the Organisation, Performance, and Transformation of the Permanent Civil Service](#) on 1 July 2026 and its [terms of reference](#) were published the same day. The review is due to report before summer 2027.

The Institute for Government has proposed [a new Civil Service Bill](#) to strengthen the statutory basis of the Home Civil Service.

The independent website [Understanding the UK Civil Service](#) provides what it calls “a thorough introduction to the duties, responsibilities and working practices of Whitehall officials”. It also contains information on Civil Service numbers, pay, pensions as well as a detailed [history of Civil Service reform](#).

Scottish Government

[Section 126](#) of the Scotland Act 1998 defines the “Scottish Administration” as members of the Scottish Government, junior Scottish Ministers, non-ministerial office holders and their respective members of staff. Staff of the Scottish Administration are [members of the civil service of the state](#) (that is, the Home Civil Service). The [Scottish Civil Service Code states](#) that they are “accountable to Scottish Ministers, who in turn are accountable to the Scottish Parliament”.

The Scottish Government’s [permanent secretary](#), who is accountable to Scottish Ministers, is responsible for the management of [more than 40 Directorates](#) allocated to eight directors-general. Under the [Public Finance and Accountability \(Scotland\) Act 2000](#), the permanent secretary is Principal Accountable Officer for the Scottish Administration.

Welsh Government

Welsh Government staff also form [part of the civil service of the state](#). The Welsh Government’s [permanent secretary](#), who is responsible to Welsh Ministers, is also its Principal Accounting Officer.

Northern Ireland Civil Service

The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) was first established in 1921 to support the devolved Government of Northern Ireland, as established under [section 8](#) of the Government of Ireland Act 1920.

This followed the historic structure of the Irish Civil Service, which was separate from that in Great Britain and administered from Dublin Castle. Some British departments' responsibilities also extended to that part of the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. During the period of what was known as “direct rule” (1972–99) the NICS continued in existence.

There are currently [nine Northern Ireland departments](#), each of which is led by a permanent secretary. Figures published in July 2024 suggested [around 24,000 people work in the NICS](#).

Constitutional status and responsibilities

Unlike the Home Civil Service, the NICS was – and continues to be – regulated under the royal prerogative rather than an act of Parliament. It is [not covered by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010](#).

Under section 4 of the prerogative [Civil Service \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1999](#), the Northern Ireland Department of Finance is responsible for the “general management and control” of the NICS. Under the [Civil Service \(Management Functions\) \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1994](#), in certain areas this has been delegated to other departments. A [Northern Ireland Civil Service Handbook](#) is published under the 1999 order, as is a [Code of Ethics](#). The Code’s “core values” are integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.

Under the Northern Ireland Ministerial Code of Conduct (as contained in [schedule 4](#) to the Northern Ireland Act 1998), Northern Ireland Executive Ministers must: uphold the political impartiality of the civil service, not asking civil servants to act in any way which would conflict with the Northern Ireland Civil Service Code of Ethics.

Governance

A [Northern Ireland Civil Service Board](#) provides “concerted strategic leadership of the work of the NICS in support of the Northern Ireland Executive”. The [Permanent Secretaries Stocktake](#) (formerly the Permanent Secretaries Group) comprises eight departmental permanent secretaries and is chaired by the [Head of the \(Northern Ireland\) Civil Service](#) (HOCS).

Under the prerogative [Civil Service Commissioners \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1999](#), [Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland](#) are appointed by the King on UK ministerial advice. As with their British counterparts, the commissioners exist to “maintain the principle of selection on merit” and are required to publish a Recruitment Code. Paragraph 2(b) allows for a certain number of appointments outside this merit principle. These are special advisers appointed by the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Speaker, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and other Northern Ireland Executive Ministers. The commissioners investigate complaints made under the Code of Ethics.

Employment of Northern Ireland civil servants

There are [three staff groups within the NICS](#): Senior Civil Service (SCS), Non-Industrial and Industrial. The SCS has four grades:

- grade 5 – normally the head of a division
- grade 3 – head of a directorate or executive agency
- permanent secretary – head of the department
- Head of Service – Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

The Non-Industrial staff group is split into eight grades:

- administrative assistant
- administrative officer
- executive officer II
- executive officer I
- staff officer
- deputy principal
- grade 7
- grade 6

Under [section 23](#) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, “prerogative and other executive powers” of the King in respect of the NICS are exercisable by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister acting jointly, but subject to Assembly approval by virtue of the [Functioning of Government \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2021](#).

[Special advisers](#) are appointed on this basis, as is the HOCS, who is also secretary to the Northern Ireland Executive. The HOCS role is [structurally unique](#) and does not sit within the [Performance management framework for the Senior Civil Service](#).

Under the [Civil Service \(Special Advisers\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2013](#) (as amended), those with serious criminal convictions are disqualified from appointment. A [Code of Conduct for Special Advisers](#) has been issued under [section 7](#) of that act.

HM Diplomatic Service

Brief history of the foreign and diplomatic services

The Foreign Office was [formed in 1782 as a small administrative department based in London](#).

In 1919, the separate Diplomatic Service amalgamated with the Foreign Office and staff serving at home and overseas became interchangeable. In 1943 these bodies merged with the Consular Service to create the Foreign Service. Then, in 1965, the Foreign Service merged with the Commonwealth Service to create Her Majesty’s Diplomatic Service. Finally, the Foreign Service merged with the Commonwealth Office to [form the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1968](#).

In 1954 the Colonial Service was replaced with HM Overseas Civil Service, which existed until 1997 when sovereignty over Hong Kong was transferred to China. Some parts of the British Empire had their own administrations, such as the Indian Civil Service (1858–1947) and the Sudan Political Service (1899–1956). The present Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) was [constituted in 2020](#).

Constitution and responsibilities

Under [section 3](#) of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, the Secretary of State (in practice the Foreign Secretary) has the power to manage HM Diplomatic Service. Under [section 6](#) they must publish a [Diplomatic Service Code](#) and lay it before Parliament. [Section 7](#) stipulates a “minimum requirement” for the code that those in the Diplomatic Service:

carry out their duties for the assistance of the administration as it is duly constituted for the time being, whatever its political complexion.

They must do so “with integrity and honesty, and with objectivity and impartiality”. Special advisers in the FCDO are not required to do so with objectivity or impartiality.

[Diplomatic Service Regulations \(DSRs\) and Home Service Regulations \(HSRs\)](#) set out the principal terms and conditions governing employment by the Diplomatic Service and of Home civil servants whose parent department is the FCDO.

The Head of the Diplomatic Service is the permanent secretary at the FCDO. They are [appointed by the Foreign Secretary with the approval of the Prime Minister](#).

Appointment to the Diplomatic Service

As with members of the Home Civil Service, under [section 10](#) of the 2010 act, a person’s selection for the Diplomatic Service “must be on merit on the basis of fair and open competition”. Excepted from this requirement are special advisers, a selection [excepted under recruitment principles](#) and those selected for appointment either as head of mission (an ambassador or high commissioner) or as Governor of a British Overseas Territory. For more on the appointment of ambassadors and high commissioners see Commons Library briefing, [How are diplomats appointed?](#)

The provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 do not extend to [MI5 – The Security Service](#), [MI6 \(Secret Intelligence Service\)](#) or [GCHQ](#).

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