



House of Commons
Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee

Civil Service People Survey: Government response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2022–23

First Special Report of Session
2023–24

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Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

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First Special Report

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee published its Ninth Report of Session 2022–23, [Civil Service People Survey](#) (HC 575) on 24th October 2023. The Government's response was received on 22 December 2023 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government is grateful to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for their inquiry into the annual Civil Service People Survey.

The [report](#) highlights the rich and reliable insights that the People Survey has provided since 2009 as well as the efforts made to improve the Survey over time. The Committee made a number of recommendations for consideration.

The response to the Committee's recommendations are below:

Survey Design and Delivery

Conclusion: When first launched, the People Survey was intended as a tool to support government departments and agencies in embedding and improving employee engagement. However, the data that have emerged from the survey have revealed themselves to be crucial to a much broader audience: to Parliamentarians, researchers and academics, and trade union representatives. While the Cabinet Office appears to have a strong understanding of the needs of internal users of the data, the same cannot yet be said for external users of People Survey data. (Paragraph 14).

Recommendation: *The Cabinet Office should expand its annual engagement with users of the People Survey, to ensure that the needs of external stakeholders are well understood and used to support the development of future survey questionnaires. A summary of this engagement should be included within the technical guide that is published alongside final results each year.* (Paragraph 15).

On an annual basis, the Cabinet Office team that manages the People Survey on behalf of the 100+ participating organisations engages with a range of internal and external stakeholders. Internally this includes HR Directors from across participating departments, as well as policy leads, organisations survey managers, cross-government networks, and actual respondents to the survey to ensure that its content meets current policy priorities and users' needs.

Externally we engage with international peers via the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) surveys group, academics, and other public sector organisations such as NHS England, to share best practices and modern methods of gathering employee insights and improving engagement. We also engage with trade union representatives.

The Cabinet Office accepts this recommendation and will consider wider engagement of external stakeholders, including with leading private sector organisations, as part of our work to review the Civil Service People Survey questionnaire going forward. A list of consultees will be included in future technical guides published on GOV.UK. The Cabinet

Office will also work with colleagues to implement a user engagement strategy that builds on best practice drawing on examples from across the Government Statistical Service and elsewhere.

Conclusion: We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge facing the Cabinet Office in translating the many demands for data voiced into a single survey questionnaire. Ultimately, no single source of data will be able to answer all the questions stakeholders have about the experiences and performance of civil servants in the UK. The People Survey is but one piece of a much bigger puzzle. (Paragraph 19).

Recommendation: *To maximise the quality of information available on the experiences and performance of the UK Civil Service, the Cabinet Office - in partnership with participating organisations - should continue to develop the broader evidence base. The broad annual snapshots provided by the People Survey should be supplemented with more frequent, timely, and targeted 'pulse' surveys, as well as the administrative data already being collected by participating organisations on absence, recruitment, and performance. The Cabinet Office should report publicly on its plans to improve the data available to decision-makers on the experiences and performance of civil servants by the end of 2023.* (Paragraph 20).

The Government recognises the benefits of utilising a broad evidence base to maximise the value of data already collected, and welcomes the challenge to align these resources to provide a broader, more resilient and holistic evidence base.

The Head of Civil Service Employee Experience and People Performance has been commissioned to review what wider data are collected and how best to utilise these data to optimise employee insights across the Civil Service to maximise the quality of information available. With many data sources available, a report may not be available until early 2024.

Government People Group (GPG) is currently in the process of developing a data dashboard that would allow departments to review and benchmark administrative data, including recruitment and pay data. Data from resources such as this will be considered. The Cabinet Office accepts the recommendation to continue to develop the broader evidence base.

Pulse surveys are used widely within departments to help them target and respond quickly to local issues. We will consider how to include these as a cross-government resource, and will ensure a wide range of data is available to help support decision making in departments and more widely.

Conclusion: It is not clear what value the Employee Engagement Index offers, beyond consistency with previous years' results. In drawing together responses on abstract questions on issues such as pride, advocacy, and attachment, it overlooks more tangible issues such as leadership, learning and development, and pay and benefits, where action could usefully be taken. (Paragraph 23).

Recommendation: *Fourteen years on from the launch of the People Survey, the Cabinet Office should review the value of its headline Employee Engagement Index, in consultation with users of the survey. This review should consider the degree to which*

the measure is used to inform decision-making, and whether there may be other, more helpful measures available. The Cabinet Office should provide an update on its plans for this work in its response to this report. (Paragraph 24).

The Cabinet Office conducted a strategic review of the Civil Service People Survey over Summer 2022 in collaboration with a wide-range of users and stakeholders including: diversity & inclusion leads; digital experts; analysts; survey managers; Civil Service Internal Communications; Office for National Statistics experts; and academics. These discussions included the usefulness of the engagement measure. The group agreed that the Survey should continue to have the Employee Engagement Index as one of its key measures.

The Civil Service People Survey uses five questions measuring pride, advocacy, attachment, inspiration and motivation to produce an engagement score. Our theoretical approach to engagement is designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being, in line with existing literature.

An identical or very similar engagement index is used widely in e.g. the Australian¹ and US governments surveys² and in the NHS England³ and UK Armed Forces⁴ staff surveys to distil the employee experience into one measure.

The analytical framework used in the Civil Service People Survey does not consider engagement as an isolated concept, but is one which is linked to and driven by nine key themes of employees' experience at work (the themes are: my work, my team, resources and workload, organisational objectives and purposes, learning and development, pay and benefits, my manager, inclusion and fair treatment, and leadership and managing change).

The results of the Civil Service People Survey have shown consistently that 'leadership and managing change' is the strongest driver of employee engagement in the Civil Service, followed by the 'my work' and 'my manager' themes. The 'organisational objectives and purpose' and 'resources and workload' themes are also strongly associated with changes in levels of employee engagement. Taking action on people's experience of work in these nine themes, increases the level of employee engagement which then should raise performance and increase wellbeing.

The Cabinet Office accepts this recommendation. We will build on the work done in previous years and will explore the content and usefulness of the Employee Engagement Index in wider work planned on the Survey beyond 2023. As part of this work the Cabinet Office is currently examining different options on how to improve the Survey in the future, embedding the recommendations from the Committee's report, and plans to implement those changes over the next two years working towards a new version of the Civil Service People Survey in 2025.

Recommendation: As part of its plan to improve available data on the experiences and performance of civil servants (see paragraph 20), the Cabinet Office should summarise

1 <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/2022-aps-employee-census/2022-overall-results>

2 <https://www.opm.gov/fevs/>

3 <https://www.nhsstaffsurveys.com/results/national-results/>

4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2023>

the opportunities that are available for enhancing existing quality assurance processes via the cross referencing of sources, and which of these it intends to pursue. (Paragraph 30).

The Cabinet Office has a robust quality assurance process in place to ensure the validity of the findings. There is a broad range of validity checks including automated ones built into the online platform; offline ones run through automated, reproducible, version-controlled scripts where outputs are tested with code using different softwares (e.g. R or STATA [programming languages for statistical computing]); and manual checks to maximise the chances of spotting errors by using different methods.

The Cabinet Office accepts this recommendation and recognises the usefulness of including additional cross-referencing of sources in the quality assurance processes. At this stage we think options to pursue include:

- the current year's scores will continue to be 'sense checked' by comparing them to previous year's scores before release;
- each organisation will continue to cross-reference their findings with those organisations of a similar size or doing similar type of work e.g. policy or delivery;
- participating organisations will cross-reference the results from the survey with the findings from their pulse surveys programmes (if they have one) that include the same measures. For example, DWP has a Listening Programme with quarterly (and/or as required around business priorities) Pulse Surveys to engage with colleagues and gain feedback across the employee journey. The pulse surveys are specifically designed to respond to DWP needs and gain a better understanding of the employee experience. DWP's Pulse Survey questions are aligned with some of those from the Civil Service People Survey on topics such as: Health & Wellbeing; Communications; Belonging; Pride; Great Place to Work; Fair Treatment; Productivity; Role / Grade; Time with DWP / Predecessor; Ways of Working; and Demographics. The findings from the Civil Service People Survey are then used to benchmark, as necessary, to the results from the Pulse Surveys.

HMRC has an Employee Listening Strategy to ensure mechanisms are in place to give every colleague a voice – in a scalable way, improve the employee experience and drive-up employee engagement, ensure that they gather feedback at a time of upheaval, change and 'moments that matter' during the employee lifecycle. These listening mechanisms include core surveys – the HMRC Pulse Survey (Pulse) and the People Survey and are part of a broader transition to an employee lifecycle driven listening. Planned actions following the "Listen, Learn, Act and Communicate" cycle include: i. use Pulse, the People Survey, other HMRC surveys and approaches, as a major part of how HMRC "listen" to their people. As well as measuring employee engagement, Pulse monitors topical themes as a way to track how various initiatives or key issues are perceived; ii. "learn" by creating ground level action plans in collaboration with colleagues to foster ownership, grounded in data, to drive the other two elements of the cycle. Additionally, the HMRC People, Analytics and Insight Directorate focuses on Data Storytelling, both as a tool to influence action being taken, but also as part of data and insight upskilling targeted at the whole of HMRC Chief People Officer Group; iii. the

latter two elements – “act” and “communicate” - take forward and implement learning from the core surveys – Pulse and People Surveys. This approach acts as a barometer and becomes a part of HMRC’s evidence base ensuring that action is driven in line with the HMRC Strategic Objective to make HMRC a great place to work;

- some questions included in the Survey, e.g. personal wellbeing, etc. could be compared with other surveys where they are used, such as the annual population survey, albeit recognising the differences in survey respondents;
- additional analysis could be conducted on the representativeness of the sample of the survey respondents against the Civil Service workforce administrative data, such as the Civil Service Statistics; and
- international comparison will be applied whenever possible, such as for the OECD module on engagement included as test questions, and forthcoming OECD administered engagement survey for EU nations.

The dissemination of results

It is not clear to us that withholding People Survey data, so as to time its release with countless publications about Ministerial gifts, hospitality and expenses, is truly a transparent, or helpful, approach to the publication of the important data collected by the People Survey. We similarly find it difficult to believe that, in 2023, it takes a small team of statisticians several months to migrate results from internal dashboards and analyses into a single Excel spreadsheet for publication. Given that data and extensive analyses are readily available across government months ahead of their public release, current delays in the publication of data are indefensible. (Paragraph 36)

Recommendation: *We recommend that in future, initial results from the People Survey (including median scores for each question for both the civil service, and individual participating organisations) be published at the point they are distributed to participants, and before the end of the calendar year to which results refer.* (Paragraph 37)

The Cabinet Office does not accept this recommendation. The Cabinet Office will, however, commit to reducing the timing between internal and external distribution of the findings.

To further improve communications with external users of the Survey, we will also explore the option of including release dates in advance in the Research and Statistics calendar on gov.uk.

It should be noted that it is not uncommon for external publication of results to take some time due to the quality assurance and preparation involved e.g. fifteen weeks after the close of the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2023⁵ and sixteen weeks after the close of the Canadian Public Service Employee Survey 2022/2023⁶.

The Cabinet Office will maintain its robust approach to the quality assurance of results from the People Survey.

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2023>

6 <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/public-service-employee-survey/2022-23.html>

The Cabinet Office will provide accompanying commentary, helping to explain the main findings alongside the release of results.

When first established, the People Survey was envisioned as a management tool to support public bodies in gauging and promoting employee engagement. But the high-quality data it has generated - a result of excellent work by government statisticians, particularly in the early years of the survey - has proven itself to be invaluable in many more contexts. The People Survey is a unique barometer of how those involved in the day-to-day running of government and the delivery of public services feel about their work, and is an important tool for many in Parliament and academia, who seek to scrutinise the work of the Civil Service, not to mention trade unions, who represent those taking part in the exercise. (Paragraph 45)

Recommendation: *The People Survey is a dataset of significant public interest. In future, the People Survey results should be treated and classified as official statistics and be published in full compliance with the Code of Practice for Statistics. The Cabinet Office should formally request the assessment of the People Survey against the Code of Practice as soon as possible and - as part of this work - liaise with the Office for Statistics Regulation for further information on how to apply the Code while protecting the ability of participating organisations to access and use results in a timely fashion. In its response to this report, the Cabinet Office should update the Committee on its progress with this process.* (Paragraph 46)

The Cabinet Office does not accept this recommendation. The Civil Service People Survey is primarily a management tool aiming to support UK government departments and agencies to embed and improve employee engagement with their organisations. The Survey is also an effective mechanism for internal and external accountability that provides invaluable insight to help measure progress against the aims and outcomes of major cross Civil Service policy initiatives.

Currently, the People Survey looks to match a number of the approaches set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics given the wide interest in the annual results, including those relating to quality assurance and to providing technical guidance to users. This helps to show our commitment to producing outputs that are respected for their high quality and which inform decision making. We commit to publishing a commentary of the main high-level findings and reducing the timing between internal and external distribution of the findings.

Responding to Results

For over a decade, a majority of civil servants have been telling their leaders that they do not believe effective action is taken on the back of People Surveys. External users of the data share these concerns. Given that the Cabinet Office describes the People Survey as a management tool, we were surprised by the lack of robust evidence we received about its impact in driving change across the Civil Service. (Paragraph 54)

Empowering departments, organisations and individual teams to respond to issues raised in the People Survey is in many cases a sensible approach. They will be best placed to respond to local issues and specific challenges. But other issues require a coordinating hand. Some of the questions asked in the People Survey concern matters - such as pay and benefits - over which individual departments and organisations have a

limited capacity to respond, and these must be addressed at the system-level across the whole of the Civil Service. The Cabinet Office, as the body responsible for the conduct of the People Survey, also bears responsibility for evaluating its impact - not least to inform discussions about the future of the survey. (Paragraph 55)

Recommendation: *Departments themselves should develop action plans in response to future People Survey results, which define measurable and timely interventions. These action plans should be included in departmental Annual Reports and Accounts each year. Departments should also evaluate their success in delivering action plans in future, summarising these evaluations in their Annual Reports and Accounts each year. (Paragraph 56)*

Whilst the Government disagrees with the overall statement that effective action is not taken from the People Survey, it is recognised that Departmental communication and action will vary, in addition to which, many actions are a longer term mechanism that may be less visible to colleagues.

The Cabinet Office is keen to support colleagues across Departments to analyse and utilise their results, and to evaluate and review outcomes of actions taken. We recognise the benefits that action plans hold in terms of accountability and transparency, and many departments already utilise action plans for the People Survey. The Cabinet Office currently provides departments with an online tool to create and track their own action plans; they also provide some team-level resources to help teams act on survey results.

Recommendation *The Cabinet Office should enhance the support it provides around future People Surveys. Its central HR team should take a more active role both in leading Civil Service wide responses as required, and in tracking organisational and departmental measures taken in response to the People Survey results. Its analytical team, expert as it is on the People Survey, should offer further support to participating organisations and departments who seek to understand results. The Cabinet Office should report on plans to strengthen its coordinating role in its response to this report. (Paragraph 57)*

The Cabinet Office recognises that the current resources available to analyse results do vary by Department, and that additional guidance from the centre may help to provide improved consistency and support the promulgation of best practice. Any central guidance / support should be balanced with retaining Departmental autonomy and agility to address locally identified issues, and so we will work to balance this.

Many Departments may have their own resources and toolkits, in addition to those available centrally. The team will consider the most effective means to pull together current resources, identify duplication and any gaps, and how best to cascade model policies, products and processes so that all Departments have the awareness of a wealth of resources on which to draw upon and support their analysis of People Survey results. The Cabinet Office accepts the recommendation to enhance the support provided around future People Surveys to promote Civil Service performance in responding to survey findings.

Results from the 2022 Survey

Levels of bullying, harassment and discrimination at the Cabinet Office remain a point of concern. We welcome the desire expressed by senior leaders to reduce those levels and are encouraged to learn that a formal programme is in place to address these issues. (Paragraph 66)

The Cabinet Office should report to the Committee on its progress in delivering the 'A Better Cabinet Office' programme, in its response to this report. As part of that work, the Cabinet Office should include a thorough evaluation of its success or otherwise in delivering on the recommendations of its earlier Respect and Inclusion Review. (Paragraph 67)

Progress with A Better Cabinet Office

A Better Cabinet Office (ABCO) is the Department's people transformation programme, with an overarching focus on improving employee experience and engagement. There are six workstreams, focussed on the areas surfaced by the 2022 People Survey including: Pay; Career Progression; Purpose, Culture and Employee Deal; Leadership, Respect and Inclusion; Learning and Development and Workplace, Estates and Technology. Each workstream has an Executive Committee Sponsor and Task and Finish Group.

The first phase of ABCO focussed on establishing a robust programme, resetting communications and engagement channels and delivering as much change on the ground for staff as possible. The programme has a clear set of outcome statements, performance metrics and reports to the Executive Committee monthly on progress. Key achievements to date include:

- We developed, engaged and agreed a clear and common Purpose Statement for the Cabinet Office;
- We continue to train a network of 70+ fair treatment confidants to listen and offer support on workplace issues; these people are members of staff who voluntarily do this to help colleagues as part of their corporate contribution to the Cabinet Office.
- We invested an additional £2.6 million in L&D with 4,400 colleagues attending funded training over the last year; and
- We delivered significant improvements to our workplace and tech – including wifi upgrades, AV technology in 93 meeting rooms, 1250 laptops and 900 new desktop monitors;
- We delivered the first year of our Pay Strategy that was aimed at targeting lower paid staff (pay of lower grades and pay at the bottom of bands), improving pay competitiveness with OGDs, and making progress on reducing the gender and ethnicity pay gap;
- We established a better balance between delivering our Places for Growth targets and maximising internal career progression opportunities for people.

The second phase of ABCO will be informed by the results of the 2023 People Survey. The scale and reach will be more ambitious to transform the culture in our organisation - including the delivery of a leadership programme for the c.400 SCS in our organisation.

Respect and Inclusion Review: evaluation in delivering on the recommendations

Delivery of the Respect and Inclusion Review recommendations are a key part of our wider Better Cabinet Office Programme. Evaluation is currently in progress, with independent assurance being provided by an independent HR Director.

To date, 45 recommendations are fully complete, with a further 11 in progress, all with clear delivery dates for this financial year. Of the remaining three recommendations, one is on pause pending recruitment and two are not yet started. Outstanding actions will be embedded into our ongoing programme of work.

Some of our successes include:

- Speeding up the process and independence and building trust for employee disputes by changing our approach for Decision and Appeal Managers. For example, in July 2022 5% of DM were appointed within 5 days as per the policy. As of February 2023 37% of DM were appointed within 5 days - a 32% increase;
- Making it easier and quicker for people to get workplace adjustments;
- Changing our intranet platform to one that meets accessibility requirements and changing the navigation to one that is user-led;
- Making our most used employment policies easier to navigate and understand for both individuals and their Line Managers. For example, pages have simplified and made more user friendly for the top 85% of user searched topics; and
- Piloting an Anonymous Speak Up Portal with 11 Business Units across the department.