

Written evidence from Reform Think Tank (CLR19)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Civil Service Leadership and Reform inquiry

Reform's Reimagining Whitehall programme is directly considering many of the key questions raised by the Committee in this inquiry.

This evidence submission sets out some of our early findings and insights which we believe should inform the Committee's approach to this timely and important issue. In particular, we focus on the first two areas highlighted in the inquiry's call for evidence.

(Q1) The status and constitutional position of the Civil Service:

1. Fundamentally, the leadership of the Civil Service must work with politicians to build effective working relationships and ensure that candid advice can be given and received constructively. This requires a respectful approach from both sides, even when – in fact especially when – there are differences in perspective between these two groups.
2. However, the emphasis on the relationship between top civil servants and ministers in this debate is simply too narrow. There are deeper challenges within Whitehall which can prevent civil servants at all levels, but particularly those who are more junior, from providing candid advice which defies the existing status-quo.
3. This was described in *Reform's* launch essay for our Reimagining Whitehall programme, written by Dr Simon Kaye.¹ He termed this Whitehall's 'single mindset bias', which produces "a workforce that is too cognitively homogeneous, prone to groupthink, and lacking in varied expertise, experience, specialism, and competence in the practical skills of innovation and delivery. This also results in an insularity, or defensiveness, when it comes to external scrutiny and input."
4. This has significant implications for Whitehall's structures, processes and behaviours:
 - a. **Structures** – this bias is reflected in a cognitively homogenous workforce, especially at the most senior levels. This point was highlighted directly by several former permanent secretaries interviewed for a recent *Reform paper* on the barriers to reforming Whitehall.² It also creates management and recruitment practices which reinforce this single mindset over the long term.

¹ <https://reform.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Whitehall-Launch-Essay-formatted.pdf>

² https://reform.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Barriers_Final.pdf

- b. **Processes** – this bias creates institutionalised incentives which reward those who think – and act – in the traditional civil service way. By contrast, there is poor retention of those who think differently or are interested in innovating, while those who conform are generally rewarded by a relatively narrow system.
 - c. **Behaviours** – this bias is reflected in an exclusionary culture, one which prizes a particular dispassionate temperament, lacks specialists and experts, and often fails to look outwards to pull in external perspectives. This creates policymaking processes which tend towards groupthink, avoiding challenge of longstanding or ‘common sense’ approaches.
5. In summary, Whitehall is dominated by an undesirably narrow set of perspectives and experiences. It is an environment in which challenging the status-quo and providing candid advice which defies the ‘house view’ is frequently disincentivised.
 6. This is evident from the most recent Civil Service People Survey, which found that three in 10 civil servants did not feel they would be supported to try a new idea even if it may not work, with a similar proportion not agreeing with the idea that people are encouraged to speak up about serious policy or delivery risks in their organisation.³ It is our contention that this sizeable proportion contains many of those who think differently and might provide alternative views and perspectives.
 7. In other words, while enabling civil servants to give candid advice requires ministers to engage with them appropriately and fairly, the deeper challenge is about the culture of Whitehall. How do you build an environment which encourages truth-telling and challenge of existing views, whether that means giving candid advice to politicians or to more senior officials?
 8. To achieve this gold standard of effective advice from officials, reform of Whitehall’s culture itself is needed.
 9. Dismantling the hierarchical and narrow structures and cultures which define Whitehall can improve the range of advice and input that can emerge from the Civil Service. It would embed the discipline of providing candid advice and enable Whitehall to take in a broader range of perspectives, in turn supporting ministers to challenge deep-rooted policy problems with a greater diversity of thinking and fresh ideas. A core component of this should be learning from best practice around how to incorporate expertise and scientific knowledge both inside and outside Whitehall – a forthcoming *Reform* paper will explore these essential questions.

(Q2) Civil Service Leadership:

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-people-survey-2022-results>

1. The question of stewardship and the role senior civil servants should play in enhancing Whitehall's capability is an important one.
2. We explored this issue in detail in our recent paper 'Breaking down the barriers' – which drew on interviews with 10 former Permanent Secretaries, 2 former Cabinet Secretaries and 6 former Cabinet ministers (as well as numerous advisers and other civil servants) to set out the key blockers to successful reform of Whitehall.
3. This paper noted that reforms designed to improve Whitehall's capability have encountered many complex barriers, which undermine change programmes from the earliest point of their design, through to the long-term work of building a wider reforming culture.
4. Our interviewees felt that, though instigating reform does require some political permission and endorsement (especially from the Treasury and No.10), building Whitehall's capabilities should be the responsibility of the Civil Service itself.
5. As the avowedly permanent Civil Service, it is the duty of officials to maintain the long-term health of the government machine, especially given that politicians may lack the expertise or indeed the interest to focus on machinery of government reforms in the face of other pressing political priorities.
6. This stewardship duty is particularly important in relation to Permanent Secretaries. While those working within the Cabinet Office – whether the COO of the Civil Service or the Cabinet Secretary himself – usually view enhancing capabilities as at least some part of their role, the executive core cannot achieve change alone. Whitehall is defined by its departmental fiefdoms, so requiring the permanent secretaries who lead them to play their part in reform efforts is essential to delivering meaningful change.
7. However, leading reform of the Civil Service should not be considered an activity for the most senior civil servants alone. As our 'Breaking down the barriers' report notes, delivering successful waves of reform and embedding a deep-rooted commitment to change requires efforts to involve those working at all levels of the system. The key requirement of leaders within this system, then, is to catalyse wider engagement with the priority of system reform and mobilise staff at all levels toward that end. This seems the only plausible route to promoting and embedding reform programmes in the long term, while training up future leaders committed to transforming Whitehall and who understand how to deliver it.
8. To briefly return to our evidence in relation to the first question, it is worth noting that the cognitive diversity of Whitehall is itself a barrier to enhancing capability.

9. Bringing in new perspectives from those who have worked in different organisational cultures will help encourage reform and efforts to adopt new ways of working. But there is also a case for more porosity. If senior Whitehall leaders have spent some time working elsewhere during their career, whether the private sector or similar, they can bring in fresh ideas themselves. Enhancing capability means greater diversity of thought and greater diversity of experience.
10. The question of whether the Cabinet Secretary is sufficiently empowered to lead the Civil Service was another area addressed in our barriers to reform report.
11. Interviewees for this project acknowledged the trade-offs involved in how the Cabinet Secretary role is configured. There was general scepticism around one past model – which separated the role of Cabinet Secretary from the position of Head of the Home Civil Service – on the basis that this led to corporate reform efforts (driven by the latter) losing the influence that the Cabinet Secretary can offer, given their proximity to the Prime Minister.
12. Nonetheless, keeping these two roles combined also carries obvious risks. A Cabinet Secretary will generally struggle to focus a great deal of their time on transforming Whitehall’s capabilities, given that their duties to support the PM and Cabinet will be prioritised. Without a separate Head of the Civil Service, leadership of reform efforts can fall by the wayside.
13. Attempting to solve this problem has proven challenging. There have been different configurations of the relevant senior roles in the Cabinet Office – the Cabinet Secretary, Head of the Home Civil Service, CEO or COO of the Civil Service, and Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office – in recent years. To quote our paper, this “shows a significant level of change at the very top of the civil service, and is illustrative of the fact that finding the right solution – one which gives adequate weight to both advising the PM and servicing the Cabinet, and stewarding the corporate health of the civil service – has proven elusive.”
14. Though we do not yet present a settled position on how these senior roles should be structured, there is clearly merit in the idea that adapting how they are configured and rethinking the structures around them could create improved opportunities for reform-minded leadership. A considered review of the operating model in the executive core is needed – indeed, it is the subject of a major *Reform* policy paper to be published by the end of 2023.
15. This challenge strengthens the case for ensuring permanent secretaries feel a stewardship duty. While the executive core must play an essential role in driving change across the Whitehall machine, its limitations – and the related strengths of departmental fiefdoms – ensure that those officials leading departments must be

active drivers of reform too. The centre alone cannot transform the government machine, it must be the responsibility of the wider Civil Service itself.

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