

REIMAGINING WHITEHALL

—A MANIFESTO FOR DELIVERY—

**A modern machine,
designed to deliver**

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A modern machine, designed to deliver

As the country heads towards a general election, Reform is partnering with Newton Europe on a project to explore the practical steps that must be taken to ensure Whitehall is equipped to deliver on the priorities of government. Through a five-part series of high-level events with Whitehall leaders and experts, we will identify existing best practice as well as opportunities for systemic reform. The project will culminate in a 'Manifesto for delivery' to inform an incoming government.

This write-up summarises the findings from the first two policy roundtables held as part of this series. 'Designed to deliver – from ideas to outcomes', was introduced by Dame Dr Emily Lawson DBE, then Head of the No. 10 Delivery Unit, while the second, 'A modern machine: embedding corporate capabilities throughout Whitehall', was introduced by Sapana Agrawal, Director of Modernisation and Reform in the Cabinet Office. Both of these sessions were also introduced by Rich Lum, Partner at Newton Europe.

For decades, consensus has grown that the Whitehall system, despite its many strengths, needs transformative reform. To tackle current crises and prepare for future challenges, a more diverse, dynamic, and delivery-focused government machine is needed.

Achieving this will require commitment on the part of both senior politicians and senior officials, underpinned by a detailed understanding of the often technical and mechanical obstacles that stand in the way of delivery.

While there has been progress in improving the capabilities of the British State in recent years, from the work of the No.10 Delivery Unit to the ongoing development of the corporate functions, it is crucial that continued action is taken to build on these efforts and further reform the government machine.

Many longstanding shortcomings in how Whitehall operates – such as inadequate data sharing, siloed working and the failure to properly integrate policy skills with operational

capabilities – remain entrenched in the system. Solving these problems requires a renewed strategic focus, coupled with an effort to embed the mechanics of effective delivery across the State.

Renewed strategic focus

Establishing a common sense of purpose

Many participants viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as having created a window for innovation that enabled more effective delivery. The shared whole-of-government mission, in response to a national crisis, enabled people to cut through the friction and siloed working which too often frustrates new initiatives. In its place, a willingness to engage in more calculated and innovative risk-taking to solve problems and avoid bureaucratic process quickly developed.

To some extent, participants felt that elements of the Government reform agenda now provide a sense of common purpose across Whitehall. A specific commitment to, for example, make the

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most of digital skills, or a more general aspiration to modernise how government functions, are both goals that those working across the system can unite around. Indeed, in each of the policy roundtables, there was a clear sense of challenge: Whitehall leaders should be willing to step forward and collaborate on agendas which are essential to the long-term health of the machine, but may not deliver immediate short-term benefits.

However, it is also obvious that this sense of overriding common purpose is hard to replicate outside of a crisis. As one participant put it, the experience of rapid action and reduced bureaucracy during the pandemic is both “a blessing and a curse” for this reform agenda.

Building sustained motivation around a stronger sense of shared mission – even if it lacks the force of a national crisis and is confined to a few key agenda areas – can clearly act as a force multiplier for more effective delivery.

Prioritisation

The development of a common purpose across government must be combined with clear prioritisation. The executive centre should identify the areas of cross-government delivery it intends to focus on and transparently communicate them to departments, and in turn departments themselves must be more strategically focused. As recently as a few years ago, one attendee noted, the centre had no core list of its priority areas. This left a vacuum of purpose which was quickly filled by a confusing diversity of goals, driven by different players within the system.

Effective prioritisation is essential for several, interconnected reasons. First, it provides clarity for those working in the centre, giving them a clear sense of where they should focus their time to ensure the successful delivery of the PM’s programme for government.

Secondly, a publicised and transparent set of

priorities can establish straightforward ground rules which improve the relationship between the centre and departments. A settled list of areas of focus – ideally covering policy priorities and specific programmes – can clarify for departments where they can expect additional engagement and scrutiny from the centre, giving time to prepare data and resources to manage this relationship.

This prioritisation, which can facilitate a more productive central-departmental relationship, is also fundamental to building a sense of common purpose across government. A well-understood set of cross-Whitehall priorities offers, in effect, an agenda for collaborative action across the system. Participants pointed out, however, that ensuring departments are committed to this work requires skilful influencing and engagement.

Collaboration, not command and control

There was consensus among attendees – both those representing the executive centre and those from delivery departments – that the executive core must handle interactions with the rest of Whitehall with care. While much of this can indeed be achieved by prioritisation and clear communication, it also requires an approach which is explicitly framed as the centre ‘working with’ rather than ‘doing to’ departments.

The logic of this approach is partly pragmatic. Within Whitehall, the executive core is often underpowered when compared to the larger and better-resourced government departments with which it interacts. Furthermore, as civil servants are ultimately accountable to their departmental Secretary of State, orders from the centre can prove ineffectual. One participant articulated exactly this experience: while central demands may prove effective in the short run or as a one-off, in the long term, departments are the immediate source of direction. They are quite skilled at finding ways to avoid sharing information or otherwise being obstructive in response to unwanted orders – something which

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is inimical to any collective effort to improve delivery.

The centre can foster a much more cooperative approach by showing the benefits that are on offer to departments alongside the new kinds of scrutiny and accountability. For example, one area where this could work – as highlighted in one of the roundtables – is in relation to data. Signalling to departments that an ethic of reciprocity will guide centre-department interactions – with information being provided to the centre and the centre sharing processed data back out again – is one means to show the value of collaboration and build openness to cooperative working.

Continuous improvement

With this renewed strategic approach – in which a common mission, set of clearly-defined priorities, and effective working relationships are all established – the prospects of effective delivery are much higher. Locking these fundamentals into place can create the conditions needed to move forward key government programmes more effectively.

However, one additional principle – raised in both roundtables – is the need for government to see the improvement of overall delivery capabilities as an ongoing, cyclical process, rather than an occasional priority. This mirrors a point made in *Reform's* recent 'Breaking down the barriers' paper, which makes the case for continuous evolution and reform to unlock high performance in government.

Building a machine capable of delivery requires exactly this culture of continuous improvement, where reform and upskilling are seen as business-as-usual, to ensure government is constantly raising its game to meet future challenges.

The mechanics of delivery

Data and data sharing

When it comes to the practical work of delivery, attendees stressed the importance of leveraging data held across government. Some noted recent positive developments in this space that could aid delivery: the establishment of the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) in the Cabinet Office, as well as the creation of new data dashboards for the government missions. The latter in particular was emphasised as important in creating a 'single truth' which could enable the centre and departments to have a shared view of progress on key areas of focus.

However, these positive examples aside, attendees raised plenty of concerns about the wider approach to data within government, including underinvestment and low levels of understanding among civil servants. One participant suggested that the terms "data" and "analysis" are still often used interchangeably, with little distinction between raw information and processed insights – as well as what's needed to get from the former to the latter.

On top of this, inadequate data sharing, a longstanding barrier to delivery of cross-government programmes, remains a significant problem. Though a focus on data reciprocity at the centre is somewhat evident, participants cited striking evidence of failures to share data. This included one project which sought to provide ministers with oversight of a policy problem by connecting datasets from different departments. In this case, a single department refused to provide the requested information, citing a series of blockers one after the other, before finally handing the data over three years later. Addressing logjams like this would do much to enhance delivery.

Integrating policy and operations

Much like data sharing, another enduring

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challenge within Whitehall is the divide between policy expertise (often venerated as the most valuable skill in government) and operational delivery. While, encouragingly, one attendee claimed that, in their department, policy and operational skillsets are now viewed as equally important, it remains true that operational knowledge – including from those working at the frontline – is often pulled into the policy process too late, or not at all.

Being an effective policymaker or regulator is impossible without an understanding of how policy changes will affect delivery on the ground. The attempt to design credible ideas which can be implemented within customer-facing public services is made far easier if those at the frontline form part of the upstream policy development process. Connecting policy and operational functions can improve delivery of existing ideas, while also enabling better calibration of policymakers' focus by ensuring that they are thinking about the real issues that are hampering successful delivery.

Making best use of the functions

Similarly, effective delivery within Whitehall also means making the most of the specialist capabilities held within the government's functions. The establishment of the functions themselves has generally been viewed as an effective way of enhancing, for example, digital skillsets.

However, attendees stressed that there is scope for further progress. There remains a lack of trust between different functions, risking silo effects that replicate some other longstanding Whitehall divides, such as those between departments. There is also a danger that functions are seen as a solve-all substitute for more fundamental reform efforts, sometimes leaving these corporate capabilities to deal with the most intractable issues facing government.

Some participants also reflected on the framing and scope of the contributions made by the

functions. For example, the digital functions sometimes fail to articulate the value they can offer to more discrete projects, focusing instead on pitching long-term, visionary transformation programmes that may not be seen as self-evidently practicable by other parts of government.

Beyond this, a key insight is that connecting up different functions is the most effective means to drive high performance. This is because interdisciplinary teams are likely to have a better chance of seeing all sides of a problem or creating more innovative solutions to them.

Genuine collaboration will require the setting-aside of any 'policy-first' mentality – indeed, one attendee pointedly asked why skillsets such as digital or commercial are 'functions', whereas policy is termed a 'profession'. The same participant suggested that analysts should be seen as partners in the policy development process, rather than mere "servers" of policy officials. This requires a broader concept of what policy expertise actually entails, one which recognises that many of those outside the policy profession itself, such as analysts or tech experts, hold valuable policy expertise of their own.

'Functional connectors' and 'matrix navigators'

Participants offered diverse perspectives on the ways that different kinds of talent could be brought to bear within multidisciplinary teams and across complex problems. There was some division around whether finding people who can individually work across multiple functions is a wise thing to pursue – one attendee described such individuals as "gold dust" – or whether collecting diverse groups of experts with deep and complementary functional specialisms should be the priority. In either case, there was consensus that identifying those who can successfully manage interdisciplinary teams is essential, given how effective such units can be to drive delivery.

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Two particular kinds of talent were highlighted by attendees. One was the idea of the “functional connector”: individuals who can manage interdisciplinary teams by identifying the right skillsets needed for any given task, connect them together to solve problems, and manage their work to ensure effective collaboration and, ultimately, better delivery. This might, for example, refer to someone leading a unit in the Home Office which pulls together digital, operational and policy expertise to improve border security. This connecting role should, some participants argued, be seen as its own distinct skillset.

The other was the idea of the “matrix navigator”: individuals who can operate at points of complexity within Whitehall to drive change effectively, influencing those who don’t report to them, developing complex systems to manage information, and coping well with uncertainty. This might refer to those individuals in No.10 or the Cabinet Office working to improve cross-government delivery. Rather than simply managing a team with a straightforward hierarchy, their work relies on successfully mapping what parts of government are central to a given delivery problem, identifying the key individuals involved, and building relationships – through persuasion (as command is usually impossible) – to encourage action to address a given issue.

In both cases, these talents are marked by their ability to manage complexity in pursuit of better delivery, whether in leading cross-functional teams or driving change across distributed systems with complicated lines of accountability.

Customer-first

A final, consistent message across both roundtables was the need to refocus delivery on the citizen. Whitehall can often become fixated on itself – its internal work, the needs of policy staff, relationships with other departments – rather than looking outwards. The very purpose of better government delivery is, fundamentally,

to improve the performance of public services at the frontline level for citizens, whether enabling them to access information more easily, navigate complex government systems, or receive services more rapidly when they are in need.

Refocusing on customer need was described as one candidate for a significant shift that would demonstrate the importance of modernisation efforts that otherwise proceed in an incremental way. The range of changes noted above – from the renewed strategic focus to the mechanics of making government work – are all important, but their utility will be constrained if the system does not proceed with a user-first perspective.

Achieving this might mean more regular engagement with citizens, perhaps to help them identify the problems they face in using services. Or perhaps something more radical, such as bringing citizens themselves into the policymaking process earlier on, might be needed to help develop a truly user-centred approach to policy ideation and practical delivery.

Building towards a ‘Manifesto for delivery’

A renewed strategic focus, coupled with an effort to embed the mechanics of delivery, offers the prospect of a Whitehall machine that is far more capable of delivering on government priorities.

In the remaining three roundtables in this series – ‘Thinking differently: achieving a cognitively diverse civil service’, ‘An innovation mindset’, and ‘Delivering what works: building a Whitehall that learns’ – we will build on these emerging themes.

At the end of this landmark series, *Reform* will publish a ‘Manifesto for delivery’, setting out what an incoming government should do to transform delivery capabilities across government. The prize, reformed and more effective public services that meet the needs of citizens, is too significant to be ignored.



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