

# REIMAGINING WHITEHALL

—A MANIFESTO FOR DELIVERY—

Thinking differently to  
learn what works

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## Thinking differently to learn what works

*As the country heads towards a general election, Reform is partnering with Newton Europe on a project to explore the practical steps government must take to ensure Whitehall is equipped to deliver for the country. 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 second two policy roundtables held as part of this series. 'Thinking differently: achieving a cognitively diverse civil service' was introduced by Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and Emily Roche, Partner at Newton Europe. 'Delivering what works: building a Whitehall that learns' was introduced by Catherine Hutchinson, Head of the Evaluation Task Force at the Cabinet Office and Adam Walker, Partner at Newton Europe.*

*The write-up summarising the findings from the first two policy roundtables can be found on Reform's website.*

A consensus has existed for decades that, alongside other necessary reforms, Whitehall needs a more cognitively diverse workforce and better evaluation of the policies that it produces. More cognitive diversity guards against groupthink and increases the perspectives feeding into policy. Better evaluation ensures that governments learn from past successes and failures. Progress has been made in both areas. The proportion of ethnic minority civil servants is in line with the wider UK population, the Government is committed to moving 50 per cent of UK-based senior civil servants out of London by 2030 and the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy expands focus beyond just protected characteristics .

Meanwhile, the Evaluation Task Force has advised on more than £100 billion worth of programmes.

Sustaining momentum in these areas will be crucial.

While the Civil Service as a whole is more cognitively diverse, senior civil servants – and thus swathes of agenda-setting and decision-making – are often still representative of a much smaller range of backgrounds and experiences.

## Policy roundtable summary

As one former permanent secretary interviewed as part of *Reform's* 'Breaking down the barriers' paper recounted, "they either went to selective grammar school or private school. They went to Oxbridge largely. They largely joined the Fast Stream. They've known each other since they were 24, now they happen to be 48 and permanent secretaries".

Evaluation is also still too limited, with a recent NAO report finding that only 8 per cent of government spend on major projects had robust evaluation plans in place. As one roundtable participant said regarding evaluation, "everyone is talking about it but no one is doing it".

Across both roundtables participants identified six shared areas in which Whitehall's approach towards diversity and evaluation needs to improve.

### Focusing on outcomes

Participants at both roundtables were in agreement that focus must finally shift to outcomes rather than outputs. Diversity and evaluation should not be seen as ends in themselves but as paths to better policymaking and thus better policy outcomes.

This reflects another point made in 'Breaking down the barriers' that the Civil Service suffers from a bureaucracy bias whereby "processes become not only the means to achieving certain outcomes but the ends themselves".

One example provided during the roundtables was in Civil Service recruitment, where it was argued that an overfocus on ensuring fairness and transparency was taking focus away from bringing the right people in who could potentially "bring something different".

Another example was that of "orphaned evaluation" where the output of evaluation is occurring but the actual outcome of lessons being learnt which can be applied to policymaking is not, hence the evaluation is "orphaned".

### Establishing clarity

In order for there to be a focus on outcomes there needs to be clarity on what cognitive diversity means and what good evaluation looks like. Clarity in these areas would allow civil servants to reliably capture the relevant data, to be clear on whether or not they are working towards the correct outcome, and to ensure that progress is monitored over the long term.

At both roundtables, participants noted that the opacity surrounding these areas is beginning to improve. The work of the Evaluation Task Force in standardising evaluation across government, and the beforementioned Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy's expansion of focus beyond protected characteristics were both pointed to as examples of this.

### Utilising incentives

Policymaking can be outcome-focused and guided by clarity of definition. However, cognitive diversity and evaluation will only be fully progressed if policymakers have incentives to incorporate them into their work.

This problem came through most clearly in relation to evaluation. Participants stated that, within Whitehall's siloed and internally defensive system, civil servants have limited incentives to properly push for effective evaluation because any budgetary savings revert back to the Treasury, rather than to their 'home department'. This issue of how to incentivise actions which benefit government, but not necessarily one's 'home department', has been identified by *Reform's* recent research.

## Policy roundtable summary

Indeed, it was suggested that civil servants were often incentivised to actively avoid evaluation because it was perceived as being designed to "catch you out" rather than designed to support you and promote better outcomes.

One suggestion for how to further encourage evaluation was a system of 'shared gains' whereby departments retained a certain proportion of any gains arising from evaluation.

### Recruiting flexibly

One way of facilitating a focus on outcomes rather than processes is allowing for greater flexibility in recruitment. Participants at both roundtables made this point, expressing frustration that the current system is well-tuned for hiring people who fit the culture, but at the expense of the cognitive diversity that would enable more effective delivery and continuous learning.

Rigid hiring practices, whereby the emphasis is placed upon behaviours rather than particular skills or capabilities, was identified as an underlying reason for this challenge. At times, current hiring practices resemble a coded test which an applicant either understands how to pass or does not. One participant recounted meeting a group of exceptionally well qualified newly-recruited civil servants. All said that they had been rejected from the Civil Service the first time they applied, only receiving an offer the second time round when they received advice from current civil servants on how to approach the interview.

There was general agreement that flexibility during the hiring process has improved in recent years, with changes to the Fast Stream process and recruitment undertaken by the AI Safety Institute given as examples.

However, there was also consensus that a great deal of further improvement is required, and that these instances of better practice should be deliberately learned from to inform wider practice.

Changes suggested included providing hiring managers with more freedom to pursue unstructured interviews rather than sticking rigidly to a script, establishing a framework to account for "unconventional" life skills and ensuring a more consistent effort is made to value functional skills as well as behaviours.

### Sharing best practice

Linked to the above point is the need for improved sharing of best practice within Whitehall. Participants commented that this was currently limited, meaning that successful examples of diversity and inclusion, and learning from evaluation, were not extrapolated out across government.

Furthermore, it was suggested that there was insufficient interest in developing best practice from external viewpoints, whether that is from local government or external hires. Engagement with local government was described as "two different worlds" speaking to one another and one participant who joined the Civil Service as an external hire expressed frustration that "you have all this experience and no one asks you about it".

One block to sharing best practice is the siloed nature of government departments and the cultural differences this creates. One participant pointed out that even after being a civil servant for ten years they still felt a big cultural shift when they moved to a new department. It was recognised that culture is easy to criticise but difficult to address. "There is no lever for culture", as one participant noted.



## Policy roundtable summary

Another block is the lack of an effective institutional memory and, by extension, information hygiene. Best practice cannot be shared if civil service churn and poor information hygiene mean that examples of best practice are forgotten or overlooked.

### Getting leadership right

Underpinning all of the above is the need for greater commitment to and belief in the benefits of cognitive diversity and evaluation from senior civil servants

Senior civil servants need to support 'bottom up' diversity and evaluation initiatives. On evaluation this may involve senior civil servants actively encouraging a culture of positive failure and risk taking, something which the Civil Service has traditionally struggled with. One participant detected a culture in the Civil Service of "throwing the baby out with the bath water" on policies which did not work immediately .

Simultaneously, there remains a role for senior civil servants to proactively drive 'top down' diversity and evaluation requirements. Complementing the 'carrot' of greater incentives should be the 'stick' of senior civil servants demanding to see evidence of cognitively diverse input and thorough evaluation plans for policy formulation and delivery.

### Scrutinising policy

A Civil Service which fully incorporated cognitive diversity and evaluation by improving in all six of the above areas would be more effective, with better policymaking and better outcomes. One specific way in which this would occur is via greater scrutiny of policymaking.

One reason for this is an 'addition' point that a more cognitively diverse Civil Service would provide more perspectives and knowledge to draw upon, thus helping to prevent groupthink.

Participants pointed to the findings from the ongoing UK Covid-19 Inquiry as an example of where groupthink had been particularly detrimental to policymaking.

Another reason for this is a 'subtraction' point that there would be less space for what one participant termed "groundless assertions". Examples were provided of where there had been reluctance to utilise evaluation during the policymaking process in case the "wrong result" was found – that is, a result that provided evidence that contradicted the underlying assumptions of the policy.

While both roundtables recognised that examples do exist of cognitively diverse and external perspectives, and evaluation feeding into the policymaking process, they also agreed that this had not yet become standard practice.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the Civil Service had actually regressed in its ability to engage stakeholders. One participant recounted that when they first joined the Civil Service stakeholder engagement was more standardised, with some teams (for example) consistently inviting young people to detail what they think government policy should be. That this previously ordinary part of the process has been set aside or forgotten contributes to the sense that Whitehall lacks an effective institutional memory.

The difficulty of inviting more perspectives and evaluation into the policymaking process was also recognised.

One driver of this difficulty mooted by participants is fear of criticism, whether from rigorous evaluation or from external scrutiny. As touched on previously, participants noted that evaluation is frequently seen as something which is designed to "catch you out" rather than strengthen a team's work.

## Policy roundtable summary

Some civil servants are also sceptical about the value of other views. As one participant noted, it requires "humility" to "let other people into the room".

Another cause of the challenge in this area is fear of leaks. Participants expressed concerns with holding sensitive discussions with stakeholders who may then leak information and inadvertently undermine the policymaking process.

A final element was the sheer number of stakeholders which government decisions affect. Designing a policymaking system whereby all relevant perspectives are heard and all evaluation metrics are considered presents a significant logistical challenge.

### Next steps

Across the two roundtables three key lessons emerged.

Firstly, there needs to be a rigorous focus upon outcomes. Cognitive diversity and evaluation as ends in themselves risk becoming seen as 'box ticking exercises' rather than as crucial components in the policy making process.

Secondly, greater efforts need to be made to share examples of best practice. Attendees at both roundtables agreed that examples existed of cognitive diversity and evaluation being utilised to improve policy outcomes. However, there is not yet an efficient process to allow for these examples to be scaled up across Whitehall.

Thirdly, and necessary to achieving the above, there is appetite for stronger senior civil service leadership of reform programmes. An outcomes-focused Civil Service which frequently shares examples of best practice will struggle to come into being without the support of the most senior individuals within the Civil Service.

These recommendations and more will feed into a 'Manifesto for delivery', which *Reform* will publish later this year. This manifesto will draw upon the themes and ideas identified throughout this series of roundtables to inform an incoming government on the areas of best practice and the opportunities for systemic reform.



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