REFORM

Grown up government

Towards a comprehensive model of political support

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ABOUT REIMAGINING WHITEHALL

This paper is part of the *Reimagining Whitehall* work stream. To effectively reimagine the State, major change must occur in the behaviours, processes, and structures of central government. This paper set outs a revamped model of political support, focusing on the future role of political appointments and private office, to ensure that ministers are adequately empowered and supported to carry out the objectives of government.

Reimagining Whitehall Steering group

Reform is grateful to the expert members of the *Reimagining Whitehall Steering Group* who provide invaluable insight and advise on the programme. Their involvement does not equal endorsement of every argument or recommendation put forward.

Dr Henry Kippin, Chief Executive, North of Tyne Combined Authority

Sir Geoff Mulgan CBE, Former Head of Policy, Prime Minister's Office; former Director of the No.10 Strategy Unit

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The arguments and any errors that remain are the author's and the author's alone.

Interviewees

We would like to thank all 11 interviewees for giving their time and candid insights to support this research paper.

The list of interviewees is as follows:

- Will Cavendish, former Head of the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit and Director-General in the Department of Health, and Department of Energy and Climate Change
- Pamela Dow, Chief Operating Officer, Civic Future, and former Executive Director in the Cabinet Office and Principal Private Secretary in the Department for Education
- James Marshall, former Director of the No.10 Policy Unit
- Rt Hon Ben Gummer, former Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General
- Alex Hitchcock, former special adviser in the Department for Work and Pensions and to the COP26 President, in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Polly MacKenzie, former Director of Policy to the Deputy Prime Minister
- Lord Francis Maude, former Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General
- Professor Nick Pearce, Director of the Institute for Policy Research, and former Head of the No.10 Policy Unit
- Giles Wilkes, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government and former special adviser to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills
- Ben Yong, Associate Professor in Public Law and author of 'Special Advisers: Who They Are, What They Do and Why They Matter'

And one interviewee who wished to remain anonymous.

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Special advisers should explicitly be appointed either as policy, parliamentary, comms or legislative specialists, with role descriptions provided by Cabinet Office for each, to guide hiring decisions. Appointees should be able to demonstrate the experience, skills and expertise required for the role, at the level at which they are appointed.

Recommendation 2: A Chief of Staff should be created in departments with larger political teams. Those appointed to the role should have appropriately senior experience, including management of teams. They should be on a salary that reflects their experience and seniority, at a minimum Pay Band 3.

Recommendation 3: There should be an immediate uplift to each of the special adviser pay bands of 10 per cent. The ceiling for special adviser pay, the top of Pay Band 4, should be raised to match that of the SCS pay band 3, of £208,100.

Recommendation 4: No.10 should maintain a pool of special advisers with legislative and other kinds of specialist expertise (including specialists in data, science and technology) who can be flexibly deployed to departments, at short-notice, depending on business need.

Recommendation 5: Mission SpAds, approved by No.10, should be based in the department of the lead Secretary of State for each mission and deployed, with input from No.10, to provide additional political support to other departments delivering that mission as required. At least two special advisers should be available per mission.

Recommendation 6: Integrated ministerial offices, akin to the short-lived EMO, should be the standard model for ministerial teams. This should be reintroduced into the next version of the Ministerial Code, to make clear the expectation of a more substantive, expert and unified team supporting ministers. This should be jointly run by a secretary of state's chief of staff, where there is one, and their principle private secretary, and staffed by a mixture of SpAds, policy fellows and private secretaries.

Recommendation 7: A list of appointable roles should be presented by the permanent secretary to new secretaries of state and ministers as part of the induction provided by a department. This should include roles that ministers can be involved in appointing in private office (such as private secretary roles) and the wider civil service, including NEDs, independent tsars, commissioners, policy fellows and other fixed-term appointments.

Recommendation 8: In line with the new integrated ministerial office model, a budget for political appointments should be set for each department based on need. This should take into account the workload of the department, the degree and complexity of reform expected, the political risk and sensitivity of the department's work and any reform programmes, and the legislative agenda.

Recommendation 9: Junior ministers with the most challenging, broad and/or priority briefs should be allocated special advisers to support their work. They should be jointly appointed by the secretary of state and junior minister, and be managed as part of the wider special adviser team.

Recommendation 10: Every new special adviser should receive a minimum level of formal induction, and when there is a new administration, this should occur en masse as early as possible.

New special advisers should be provided with an induction pack covering key information, and paired with a more senior special adviser for three to six months as a mentor, to help them navigate Whitehall. A core curriculum should be introduced for SpAds, including a baseline of technical information they are required to know, and two to three days spent shadowing people involved in frontline service delivery.

Recommendation 11: Special advisers should be appraised according to a consistent but light touch performance framework based around their contribution to the outcomes a department is trying to achieve and relevant competencies agreed with the department's chief of staff, or No 10 chief of staff for SpAds in smaller departments. This framework should be used as the basis of formal line performance management processes and be fed back to No.10.

Recommendation 12: Principal Private Secretaries and the heads of junior ministers' offices should be appointed on the basis that when their minister is replaced, they may be moved to a different role in the department. In effect, this provides a 'sunset clause' for a new minister to appoint someone else. One option would be for the departmental permanent secretary to identify four or five other candidates for the minister to interview, alongside re-interviewing the current post holder.

Recommendation 13: Departments should actively manage moves into ministerial private offices to ensure they are staffed by the most capable officials, including by 'talent spotting' private secretaries in the private offices of senior officials and arm's length bodies.

Recommendation 14: Diary managers in ministers' private offices should be appointed, at a minimum, as Higher Executive Officers (HEOs) or Senior Executive Officers (SEOs). Departments should seek to actively manage the careers of their best operational staff into private office to perform this role.

Introduction

Ministers consistently report feeling frustrated with their ability to drive change in line with their priorities.[1] In part this is a symptom of a Whitehall machine which has a tendency towards the status quo and whose sluggish bureaucracy can prove exasperating to politicians and officials alike. However it is also the result of woefully inadequate political support.

Ministers' private offices, working at the heart of departments, and their politically appointed staff, are essential to their ability to 'grip' problems, undertake reform, and 'get things done'. Despite this, the UK is an outlier in the lack of flexibility it affords ministers to hire their own staff and shape their own teams. The UK's approach relies on a patchwork of poorly defined conventions and grey areas that at best perpetuate tension between civil servants and political appointments, and at worst leave ministers unable to build effective teams and appoint talented outsiders to specialist posts.

It has become the norm to see political appointees as a form of necessary evil, to be limited wherever possible, rather than as valuable assets that support the delivery of promises made to the electorate. This has all led to an unhelpful environment where new administrations promise to curb adviser numbers, only to find this is counterproductive, and they need to break those early pledges and hire more people.

There has also been an unhelpful conflation of political adviser and politically appointed adviser – while they can be one and the same, they are not automatically so. It is perfectly possible for ministers to appoint people with specialist skills and knowledge to non-political roles in government.

Early signs indicate the new Labour Government has recognised the need for more support, removing the cap on departmental special advisers from the Ministerial Code and pressing ahead with external appointments. However, while this is encouraging, such actions need to be part of a genuine reset which not only takes capacity seriously, but also the framework in which those advisers are appointed.

This report sets out a comprehensive model of political support that would provide much-needed clarity to the system. It focuses on the political and subject matter expertise and skills that ministers should have at their disposal, as well as how existing avenues of support, including the role of special advisers and policy advisers, should be strengthened. Given the crucial role that private offices play in supporting ministers and acting as a bridge between the political and official, the report also explores ways in which these units can be strengthened.

How well the government functions is directly linked to the health and prosperity of the country. It is ministers who are setting the priorities for government and taking daily decisions with short- and long-term consequences. It is patently absurd that they would not be given every possible support to execute their roles. Strengthening political support should not be seen as in tension with maintaining an impartial civil service, it is about making government as effective as possible.

[1] Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, *The Minister and the Official: The Fulcrum of Whitehall Effectiveness: Fifth Report of Session 2017-19*, HC 497 (London: The Stationery Office, 2018).

1. Underserviced: an international outlier

The workload of government and the complexity of governing have dramatically increased over time. Secretaries of state and ministers are accountable for budgets worth hundreds of billions, the civil service is larger than at any previous time, and cross-cutting issues – from building a resilient state, to navigating transformative technological developments, and managing geopolitical upheaval – are posing era-defining challenges.

Yet the lynchpin of our model of political support and advice – access to a small number of special advisers – remains virtually unchanged since they were introduced in a recognisable form in the 1960s.[2]

As successive reviews have found, the UK is an outlier in this regard: placing much greater restrictions on the ability of ministers to make political appointments.[3] A report commissioned by the Cabinet Office in 2013 finds that ministers are provided with "insufficient" support "to perform their roles effectively" and that Britain is an "international outlier in terms of the … control ministers have over those people who play critical roles closest to them".[4] Little has changed since then.

1.1 A comparison with other countries

The UK is an outlier in terms of the politically appointed support available to ministers – particularly when compared to other Westminster-style systems. As one interviewee put it, the UK is "absolutely out of kilter with every comparable system" (Figure 1).

Since the late 1960s, the UK has operated a nominal cap of two SpAds per secretary of state (per the Ministerial Code),[5] with exceptions made for the Prime Minister and Chancellor who can appoint more. In practice, others secretaries of state have also hired more than two SpAds, including, in 2023, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.[6] Only in exceptional cases are special advisers appointed by junior ministers.

By contrast, in Australia, there are often more than 400 politically appointed staff supporting around 40 ministers; and in Canada, more than 600 "exempt" (i.e. politically appointed) staff for a similar number of ministers.[7] It is also common in these countries for the majority or entirety of a minister's office to be staffed by political appointments. For example, in Australia,

[2] Sebastian Whale, 'Living in the Dark: The Truth about Special Advisers', *Civil Service World*, 3 June 2020.
[3] See, for example, Institute for Public Policy Research, 'Accountability and Responsiveness in the Senior Civil Service: Lessons from Overseas', June 2013.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code* (Cabinet Office, 2022).
[6] Cabinet Office, *Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023*, 2023.
[7] Robert Hazell et al., *Submission to the Public Administration Committee Inquiry on Special Advisers* (Constitution Unit, 2012).

the only position within a minister's team that is not politically appointed is the 'Departmental Liaison Officer' (DLO) role, which provides admin and liaison support to a minister on behalf of their department. In practice, political advisers "dominate private office".[8]

Figure 1: International comparison of ministerial support

	UK	Australia	France	Canada
Number of ministerial staff	~ 100	400 +	500 +	~ 600
Limits on their numbers?	Yes	No	Yes – determined by the Prime Minister	No
Able to direct civil servants?	No	No	Yes	No

Source: Adapted from IPPR, 'Accountability and Responsiveness in the Senior Civil Service: Lessons from overseas', 2013. In 2023, there were 130 special advisers in the UK government (Cabinet Office, 'Annual Report on Special Advisers', 2023).

In Canada, ministers simply receive a budget from government to hire exempt staff and have complete freedom to set up a team tailored to their own needs and preferences – comprised of a large number of more junior political staff, a small number of senior and well-paid advisers or some combination of the two. This budget varies based on political considerations; the seniority of ministers (for example, junior ministers have fewer exempt staff than cabinet); and the responsibilities of a department.[9]

1.2 An overburdened centre

Despite having far less political support than comparable countries, ministers in the UK, and particularly secretaries of state, have immensely complex briefs. Power is concentrated in the executive (famously described as an "elective dictatorship"),[10] which oversees "one of the most centralised countries in the world".[11]

Simultaneously, ministers frequently report feeling disconnected from the levers of power, and lacking in the political support needed to drive change. Even the Prime Minister described the experience of trying to motivate action during the COVID-19 pandemic as being like a "bad

[8] Hazell et al.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ros Taylor, 'We Are Still Perilously Close to Hailsham's "Elective Dictatorship"', Blog, LSE Blogs, 30 September 2019.
[11] Sam Freedman, *Failed State: Why Nothing Works and How We Fix It* (London: Macmillan, 2024).

dream" where your feet refuse to move.[12] Yet the support available in the Prime Minister's political team – let alone government departments – is less than that of a "German city mayor".[13] Getting a grip on the challenges Whitehall and the country faces means getting serious about how ministers are staffed.

Increasingly, ministers are expected to grip extensive and wide-ranging briefs, operating in a volatile, 24-hour news environment which incentivises 'quick wins' and new initiatives. They are dealing with policy issues that span multiple departments; managing complex and often competing provider and stakeholder interests; operating in a divisive and combative parliamentary setting; and scrutinised in time frames that rarely allow for careful delivery by opposition MPs and media that are looking to point score. The stakes, in other words, are high and achieving impact extraordinarily difficult.

Indeed, a report by the Public Administration Committee finds that secretaries of state are frequently "overloaded" by their political responsibilities.[14]

Special advisers, meanwhile, act as a kind of 'force multiplier' for what the secretary of state wants to do. Working closely with junior ministers they provide essential extra capacity – to drive activity within their department and across government. However the imperative to minimise the number of SpAds limits their ability to do that. As one former senior special adviser pointed out, how can the Home Secretary, for example, never mind the whole Home Office ministerial team, be properly supported by "if you've just got two people bumbling around in the Home Office".

That same former SpAd succinctly expressed the model that is needed:

> "more people, more diverse, more senior, and more focused on the agendas that government wants to do so that you can actually mobilise the civil service to change, which it mostly wants to and struggles."

Achieving this vision of professional, experienced and skilled teams supporting minsters means significantly increasing the number of SpAds and policy advisers, getting serious about paying for expertise and experience, and implementing a more structured and accountable model.

It also means transparently making the case for these positions. It has become standard for the media to make hay out of political appointments – just look at the recent furore around the new Labour Government's appointments. While public scrutiny of government actions and taxpayer spending is sacrosanct, the implication that these hires should be seen in the negative is highly damaging. It also puts people off taking these crucial roles. Britain would still be an international outlier with double the number of political appointees, now is the time to get serious about equipping ministers with the support they need to succeed.

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[12] Prime Minister's Office, 'PM Economy Speech: 30 June 2020', 30 June 2020.
[13] Freedman, *Failed State: Why Nothing Works and How We Fix It*.
[14] Public Administration Select Committee, *Written Evidence, Smaller Government: What Do Ministers Do?*, 2011.

2. A new framework of political support

Special advisers (commonly referred to as SpAds) play an essential role in supporting their secretary of state and the government of the day to deliver their priorities, providing politically-sensitive assistance and advice.

SpAds are appointed on a temporary basis, officially as civil servants, but perform a wider array of tasks, including interpreting the party-political implications of civil service advice; performing a 'devil's advocate' role for their minister; liaising with their political party and other parts of government; attending party-political events, including party conferences; and acting as the 'eyes and ears' of their minister within a department.

They are also restricted in two important ways that the permanent civil service is not. Firstly, SpAds cannot manage other civil servants (though they can and do ask them to prepare briefings and other materials for ministers); and secondly, they are not able to control budgets or sign-off spending decisions.[15] The Code of Conduct for Special Advisers sets out some of these rules.[16]

Interviewees for this paper argued that the versatility and fluid responsibilities of special advisers are one of their defining features. Special advisers do not have direct management responsibilities, and so their time can be exclusively devoted to supporting their minister's priorities.

As a former minister told the Institute for Government, in big policy briefs, you just "don't have time to check [some of the policy detail] yourself, your private office doesn't have time. You need to bring somebody in who is a hard nut, who will make sure it gets delivered".[17] Several interviewees also reflected that there is value in secretaries of state having someone who feels confident to push back on their ideas and "disagree 20 per cent of the time" – something that can be challenging for permanent civil servants.

In the current system, special advisers are typically brought in either to contribute to policy development, or to handle media relations and political comms, or to liaise with parliament. However there is no formal distinction in the way SpAds are recruited or their terms of appointment. Political alignment, trust and loyalty are important considerations in making SpAd appointments. As one former SpAd put it, "secretaries of state want to have people with them they can completely trust, who are politically aligned to them, and whom they feel they will get trustworthy support and advice from".

There is also an opportunity for secretaries of state to select individuals with unique skillsets and a different way of thinking to other civil servants. Advisers (political or otherwise) can help increase cognitive diversity and act, as one interviewee put it, as the "grit in the oyster", puncturing through groupthink and providing expert input on specific subject areas.

[15] Iain Mansfield, 'A Tale of Spaddery', Blog, 31 August 2024.
[16] Cabinet Office, *Special Advisers: Code of Conduct*, 2023.
[17] Akash Paun and Tess Bishop, 'Ministers Reflect: Alex Neil', Webpage, Institute for Government, 26 September 2018.

Sir Michael Barber, for example, was first appointed as a special adviser in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) having worked for many years as a teacher in Britain and Zimbabwe and at the National Union for Teachers.[18] Likewise, Professor John Bew, who was appointed as a foreign policy adviser in No.10, was a well-regarded historian and international relations expert.[19] Both are examples of deeply qualified appointments, made for their clear expertise rather than their politics.

Perhaps less appreciated, SpAds also provide valuable assistance to officials – including by chasing the work of colleagues in other departments, advocating for a department in budget negotiations and in meetings with external stakeholders, and unblocking issues as they arise. Nick Hillman, a former special adviser to David Willetts, has written that attempts to shift the centre of gravity way from political appointees in the Coalition Government led to "officials complaining that [SpAds] were not throwing [their] weight around Whitehall sufficiently on behalf of the department".[20]

Likewise, interviewees told us that SpAds' overtly political function helps protect the impartiality of permanent civils servants, allowing them to be "permanently expert" and meaning they do not need to be "attuned to the shifting political sand of the support base for a minister". A failure to acknowledge the importance of political support, or strive for closer working between officials and special advisers, will lead to a vicious cycle of declining trust and respect, and a deterioration in the quality of advice available to ministers.

For SpAds to be trusted within Whitehall, there must be a clear understanding of what they are responsible for and the performance standards expected of them. Equally, officials must appreciate the unique value special advisers bring, and that they do not have a monopoly on the policy advice ministers ought to receive.

Olly Robbins, a former permanent secretary, puts this best, in his 2019 lecture on the constitutional role of the Civil Service: "[Special advisers] are a feature of a system that in fact protects the professional civil service model from partisan politicisation, and allows ministers to feel they are getting a second opinion on critical issues. The Service should welcome and support special advisers better, and contribute to a changed atmosphere in how they work side by side".[21]

2.1 Clarity of role

Special advisers are at their most effective when there is clear understanding of the value they add compared to the permanent civil service, and how they should interface with private office and other officials. This applies specifically to the responsibilities SpAds have – for example, whether they been brought in to bring a political lens to media work, to support the passage of complex legislation, policy development or liaise with the political party. But also in terms of the boundaries of their role and whether the alternative, of recruiting some of these staff into non-political civil service positions, would be more appropriate.

[18] Peter Wilby, 'Mad Professor Goes Global', *The Guardian*, 14 January 2011.
[19] King's College London, 'Professor John Bew', Webpage, 2024.
[20] Nick Hillman, *In Defence of Special Advisers: Lessons from Personal Experience* (Institute for Government, 2014).
[21] Hertford College, University of Oxford, 'Britain's Constitutional Crisis: The Civil Service', Webpage, 22 November 2019.

Conversely, a lack of clarity on what role, specifically, a SpAd is fulfilling not only undermines their efficacy, but also leads to less effective relationships between SpAds and civil servants. One interviewee pointed out that "the worst thing you can do in a machine-like bureaucracy is have an unclear role".

It can also mean that less experienced SpAds end up "doing odd jobs" which "don't fulfil the needs of taxpayers" – rather than focusing on the key, political aspects of their role. As one former senior SpAd put it: "A lot of special advisers get in on day one, they get issued with a pass, they get given a laptop, and that's it, and they sort of sit there and nothing happens."

In practice, most SpAds already specialise in a small number of areas, but interviewees agreed that it would be "better for all sides" if there was a clearer structure in this regard, with more defined roles and clear work plans.

2.1.1 Defining the roles

There are three 'types' of special adviser commonly referenced:

1) **The policy expert.** SpAds brought in for their expertise in a specific policy domain or for their general policy skills. Typically recruited from backgrounds such as academia, think tanks, party research units and parliamentary staffers.
2) **The comms specialist.** SpAds with media, comms and public affairs backgrounds, who can help 'spin' stories on behalf of their minister, land positive coverage and build and manage relationships with journalists.
3) **The parliamentary aide.** SpAds with connections to a political party and para-party organisations, strong political judgement and an acute understanding of the how the parliamentary party will respond to decisions.

Occasionally, special advisers have also been recruited to help with drafting complex pieces of legislation. For example, Meg Russell, an academic and current Director of the Constitution Unit, was brought in as a legislative SpAd under new Labour, working on areas including modernisation of the House of Lords and changes to how Select Committees function.[22]

While these roles are well understood, and largely implemented in practice, there are no separate role definitions to guide ministers' decisions about who to appoint, or at what level. Former SpAds suggested there is something important about "what kind of credentials you have to do different jobs". One suggested "If you're going to formalise someone as a media SpAd, you'd expect them to have experience and credentials in that area", and likewise for policy SpAds and parliamentary/political SpAds.

Policy experts

Policy SpAds play two key roles: supporting the development of departmental policy and providing political input to that process. They typically have some expertise – varying in depth – of that policy area, but can also be generalists with policy skills that can be applied to the topic (for example, people from think tanks). There is, however, no defined set of skills or experience that a policy SpAd must demonstrate, or corresponding pay bands for differing levels of expertise and/or experience.

[22] UCL, 'Professor Meg Russell', Webpage, 2024.

In most departments, the ministerial team would benefit from having several policy SpAds to cover the policy spectrum. In the DWP, for example, the Secretary of State may need an expert in pension policy, an expert in the benefits system, and an expert in labour market policy. In DHSC, the ministerial team may benefit from having experts in primary care, public health or social care, as well as experts in areas such as med tech or NHS management. Some of this may be provided though non-political experts, discussed below. At the same time, each department may benefit from having a senior policy expert who can look across briefs, identifying risks, issues and opportunities, rather than specialising in one area of the department's work.

The comms specialist

The skills and experience required of the comms specialist is more straightforwardly defined, as is their remit. Comms and media SpAds will provide a political lens to shape massaging and communications, help manage the comms 'grid', liaise with journalists and support press inquiries. In a department with a particularly tricky agenda, or multiple high-profile reform programmes, there may be a case for having more than one comms SpAd.

Parliamentary aides

For most secretaries of state with two special advisers, one focuses on policy and the other on political comms. This can mean that liaising with parliament becomes a second-order priority (which is generally not picked up by private office, which tends to have a limited understanding of ministers' parliamentary obligations[23]).

This liaison role is at least partially covered by the Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS), an unpaid 'payroll' position. This is held by an MP and each department usually has two PPSs. A large part of this role is supporting the ministerial team with parliamentary business, for example 'staffing' debates and sourcing speakers for departmental oral questions, and arranging MP 'surgeries' and broader MP engagement.

However, in a department with a heavy, and particularly a more controversial, reform and/or legislative agenda, this is unlikely to be sufficient, and the ministerial team would benefit from a SpAd dedicated to parliamentary engagement. Where this is the case, that individual would need strong party credentials and experience of working with MPs.

Recommendation 1: Special advisers should explicitly be appointed either as policy, parliamentary, comms or legislative specialists, with role descriptions provided by Cabinet Office for each, to guide hiring decisions. Appointees should be able to demonstrate the experience, skills and expertise required for the role, at the level at which they are appointed.

2.1.2 Professionalising the model: standardising the 'Chief of Staff'

Interviewees agreed that the level of experience and unity within a SpAd team is important in ensuring ministers feel adequately supported. A recent development in Whitehall, welcomed

[23] Maddy Bishop and Beatrice Barr, *Strengthening Private Office* (Institute for Government, 2023).

by interviewees, is to appoint a more senior special adviser known as a 'Chief of Staff' who can serve as a role model to, and help coordinate the activity of, other SpAds.

One former SpAd who worked under multiple principals in more than one department, said that, based on their experience:

> "it generally works best when you have…a chief of staff who is an experienced person who will handle all the cross-Whitehall stuff on behalf of the secretary of state and ultimately be an escalation point before the secretary of state for the department. So it's your more experienced, respected, slightly greyer-haired chief of staff who people know will carry some sort of weight when they're engaging."

They also argued that "a more empowered chief of staff would – or could – provide that function of "OK, let's sit down every quarter, or Summer recess, and let's work out whether we as a team and you personally have, as an employee, have delivered against those KPIs." This, they argued, could help professionalise the model and ensure that talent was developed and retained, while poor performers were moved on (performance management of SpAds is covered in more detail in Chapter 4).

Already, the 'Chief of Staff' moniker has begun to be used in several departments. This should be formalised and a chief of staff role appointed in departments with at least three SpAds. The chief of staff should be responsible for the day-to-day management of more junior political appointments. Importantly, they should have suitable senior experience, including in managing a team.

This could also provide a progression route for the most able SpAds, who could aspire to a chief of staff role. The chief of staff should be appointed by the Secretary of State (and approved by No.10) on an appropriate salary. In order to attract a suitably qualified person, at a minimum, in departments with a bigger special adviser team, this should correspond with Pay Band 3 (currently £73,000 to £102,000) or Pay Band 4 (currently £102,000 to £145,000).[24]

SpAd teams should be have a strong, shared understanding of a secretary of state's priorities and the expectations that correspond with them – clearly communicated by the chief of staff. In small departments with just a couple of SpAds, a chief of staff is unlikely to be necessary. Instead, the No.10 Chief of Staff should work with the departmental SpAds to set objectives and monitor performance (covered in section 4.3).

Recommendation 2: A Chief of Staff should be created in departments with larger political teams. Those appointed to the role should have appropriately senior experience, including management of teams. They should be on a salary that reflects their experience and seniority, at a minimum Pay Band 3.

2.2 Paying for talent

In addition to a chief of staff, ministers need to be able to draw on more experienced and expert advice. Having an adviser who is able to combine political nous with a domain-specific

[24] Cabinet Office, *Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023*.

lens is key: for example, on specific, complex pieces of work or legislation (like the AI Action Plan) where there are many competing versions of the right way forward, and where having a specialist background allows political and policy trade-offs to be better understood.[25]

Yet specific features of the special adviser role have meant that appointments tend to fit a similar mould and it is difficult (outside of No.10 and the Treasury) to attract older, more experienced subject matter experts. In general, SpAds skew younger (with a median age of 33), a majority are men, and over time more special advisers have been drawn from political backgrounds like party headquarters, and think tanks, with far fewer from business and academia (as was common in the 1980s and 1990s).[26]

In part, these characteristics are a consequence of much bigger, well-rehearsed challenges with identifying and attracting a genuinely diverse pool of political talent.[27] But they also reflect the unique demands placed on SpAds, including: the 24/7 nature of the work; the fact that pay compares poorly with alternatives (including equivalent roles in the civil service),[28] and a lack of job security. Most SpAds are expected to be constantly responsive to their minister, including in the evening and on weekends, with SpAds saying they lived "on a diet of caffeine and cortisol",[29] and describing 60-65 hours of work as a "typical week".[30]

One former adviser captured it well in an interview for this paper, acknowledging that "it's a huge privilege", but "at the same time it's a job where pretty much at the stroke of a pen you could be sacked…So you may have taken a salary cut to have come in to do it, you tend to work bloody hard in these jobs…and then at the end of it you wake up one morning and read on Guido that a reshuffle is happening and you find yourself on the street three hours later."

Most interviewees emphasised several of these factors, for example, that people with more experience would "have to take a monumental salary cut" and that "almost none of the modernisation of workplace entitlements" (including the ability to work in more flexible ways) "have taken place with respect to SpAds", in part for unavoidable reasons, but particularly disadvantaging women and mothers – as one interviewee said, the role is "really hard to make compatible with real life".

However it was pay that was raised most often, and was seen as the main barrier to bringing in more serious expertise and experience. One former SpAd summarised the issue:

> "you can go down one route that says basically, 'you're a 27, 28 year old, very loyal to the party, a party machine individual and you've been working in [HQ] and then you make the move over to be a SpAd and actually your salary of X is actually a pretty phenomenal salary compared to what you had before. However there's also the option of 'we want somebody that is older with more experience, dare I say some direct experience in the actual field', and they're often presented with having to take a

[25] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 'AI Expert to Lead Action Plan to Ensure UK Reaps the Benefits of Artificial Intelligence', Web Page, 26 July 2024.
[26] Gavin Freeguard, 'How Many Special Advisers Does It Take to Change a Lightbulb?', Blog, 20 February 2020.
[27] Munira Mirza, 'How the British Elite Lost Its Way', Blog, Engelsberg Ideas, 27 June 2024.
[28] Mansfield, 'A Tale of Spaddery'.
[29] Institute for Government, 'SpAdCast: What Is It Really like to Be a Special Adviser? Episode 1: Into Government', Webpage, 16 July 2024.
[30] Mansfield, 'A Tale of Spaddery'.

monumental salary cut in order to come into government. One example in my time was a very, very talented individual who took a cut in salary from about £220,000 down to £55,000."

This problem has been exacerbated by a freeze on SpAd pay bands since 2010. Interviewees argued this has contributed to a number of less-appropriate, "ex-parliamentary staffer" appointments (referring to parliamentary assistants and researchers who often have limited specialist knowledge and policy experience). Another interviewee said this has resulted in "the worst of all worlds", with a proliferation of a "back door set of mongrels and wasters" who are "not very good; all they are is loyal". And one former minister observed that pay constraints had led to a "surfeit of youth over experience" and "lots of instances of bright young things going around like bulls in a china shop". This is clearly a false economy.

Figure 2: SpAd pay (2010 – 2023)

	2010	2023 (had pay bands kept pace with inflation)
Scheme ceiling	£142,667	£213,573
Pay Band 4	£88,966 - £106,864	£133,182 - £159,976
Pay Band 3 and Premium	£66,512 - £103,263	£99,569 - £154,585
Pay Band 2	£52,215 - £69,266	£78,166 - £103,691
Pay Band 1	£40,252 - £54,121	£60,257 - £81,019
Pay Band 0	Up to £40,352	Up to £60,407

	2023 (most recent Cabinet Office data release)
Pay Band 4 ("Special Adviser Leadership")	£102,000 - £145,000
Pay Band 3 ("Senior Special Adviser")	£73,000 - £102,000
Pay Band 2 ("Special Adviser")	£57,000 - £84,000
Pay Band 1 ("Junior Special Adviser")	£40,500 - £53,000

Source: Prime Minister's Office, 'Special Adviser numbers and costs – October 2010', 2013; Cabinet Office, 'Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023', 2023.

For example, in 2010, Pay Band 1, the entry-level pay band for most special advisers, started at £40,252.[31] By 2023, the floor of this pay band had increased to only £40,500, representing

[31] Prime Minister's Office, *Special Adviser Numbers and Costs - October 2010*, 2013.

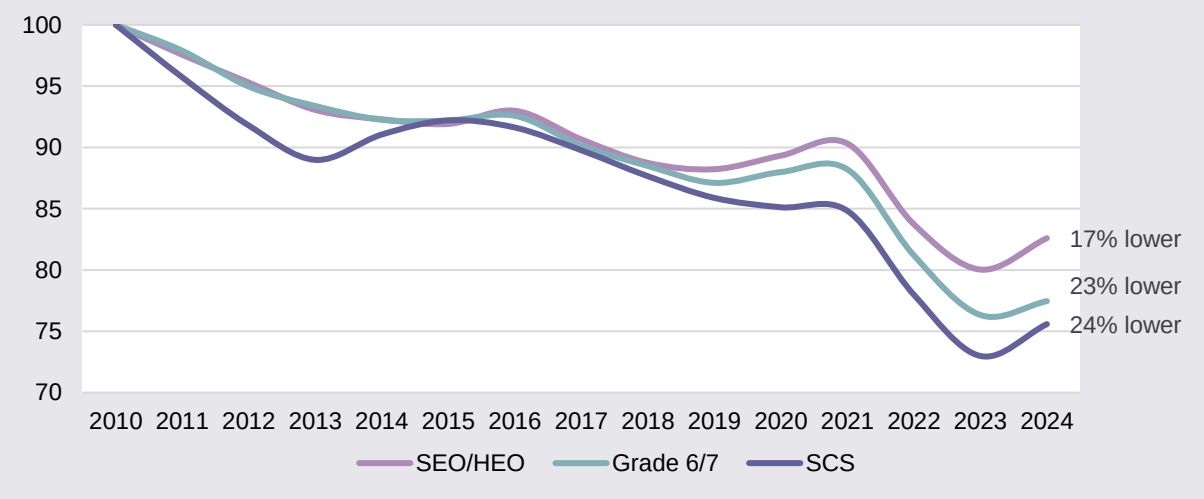
a significant real-terms pay reduction of 31 per cent.[32] At the top end, the highest salary in 2010, the scheme ceiling, was £142,667, while in 2023 it had barely increased with the top of Pay Band 4 offering £145,000, also a 31 per cent real-terms reduction. Had the value of SpAd salaries kept pace with inflation, an experienced SpAd appointed at the top of the band in 2023 would be earning over £200,000.

The reduction from six to four bands has created much wider salary ranges, potentially enabling appointments at a higher salary but at the same level. However this doesn't change the fact that the ranges overall are worth significantly less.

The erosion of the value of SpAds' salaries must of course be seen in the context of the wider erosion of pay, and in particular civil service pay. *Reform* has written separately about the need to address this, particularly in the context of attracting exceptional and specialist talent into Whitehall, and at Senior Civil Servant level.[33]

However, taking a rough comparison of civil service grades with SpAd bands reveals that SpAd pay has seen a greater real-terms reduction in value (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Change in median real-terms pay of civil service pay bands since 2010



Source: ONS, 'Civil Service Statistics', 2010-2018; Cabinet Office 'Civil Service Statistics', 2019-2024; ONS, 'Consumer price inflation time series', 2010-2024.

Just as pay has become a significant issue in the civil service, requiring urgent redress, so to is it a problem in politics. Ministerial salaries have been eroded by the same freeze that has been applied to SpAds, which came on top of a 5 per cent cut in 2010. This came after a de facto freeze by New Labour, who refused ministerial pay increases. In 2007, before the pay freezes and 5 per cent cut were implemented, a secretary of state was paid £77,546 in addition

[32] Cabinet Office, *Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023*.
[33] Joe Hill, Charlotte Pickles, and Sean Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall* (Reform, 2024); Joe Hill and Sean Eke, *Getting the Machine Learning: Scaling AI in Public Services* (Reform, 2024); Patrick King, *An Efficiency Mindset: Prioritising Efficiency in Whitehall's Everyday Work*, 2023.

to their MP salary, and a Minister of State £40,225.[34] The equivalent today would be around £127,000 and £66,000 respectively – instead the actual salaries are £67,505 for a secretary of state and £31,680 for a Minister of State (around 50 per cent lower in both cases).[35] Both civil servant and ministerial pay are outside of the scope of this paper, but *Reform* firmly believes that these must be addressed if Britain is to secure the best talent for government.

The Cabinet Office have not yet released the SpAd rates for 2024, but they should be increased by at least 10 per cent across the board, which would mean a 24-25 per cent real-terms decrease on 2010 salary bands. Even in this new model in which there are far more SpAds, this would still only represent a small increase in the overall pay bill

In addition to a blanket 10 per cent increase, the ceiling, or top of Band 4 should be raised to match that of SCS band 3 of £208,100 – slightly less, in real-terms, than the SpAd pay ceiling used in 2010, and significantly less in real-terms than the ceiling applied during most of New Labour's time in office.[36] This would allow much greater flexibility to appoint senior, specialist and experienced staffers, likely later in their careers, to key roles within government.

While there would be an expectation that few appointments are made at the upper end of this band, it would ensure government does not lose out on talent that could help it successfully execute its most important, high impact priorities. For context, there are almost 300 civil servants paid above £150,000 (and, to reiterate, *Reform* would argue there needs to an uplift in pay for key senior civil service roles).[37]

Recommendation 3: There should be an immediate uplift to each of the special adviser pay bands of 10 per cent. The ceiling for special adviser pay, the top of Pay Band 4, should be raised to match that of the SCS pay band 3, of £208,100.

2.3 A pool of standby talent

Interviewees reflected that government can more easily attract exceptional talent in No.10, where a combination of high political stakes and reward, and personal sponsorship from the Prime Minister, enable different kinds of appointment to be made, typically with more direct experience and specialist knowledge. No.10 special advisers are also concentrated at higher pay bands, making these roles more attractive. In 2023, the Prime Minister had 10 SpAds with salaries of £100,000 or more.[38]

Other interviewees noted that bringing outside experts in as SpAds is sometimes preferable to "having expert people in a 'machinery' job, which often comes with massive managerial responsibilities". In the current system, for example, direct appointments can be made to the Senior Civil Service (with the consent of the Civil Service Commission), however these staff

[34] House of Commons Library, *Members' Pay and Expenses and Ministerial Salaries 2022/23*, 2023.
[35] Ibid.
[36] See, for example, Baroness Amos, 'Lords Statement on Special Advisers', 21 July 2005, Column WS160.
[37] Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Statistics: 2024*, 2024.
[38] Cabinet Office, 'Practitioner Guidance on the 2024 - 25 Senior Civil Service Pay Framework', Webpage, 30 July 2024.

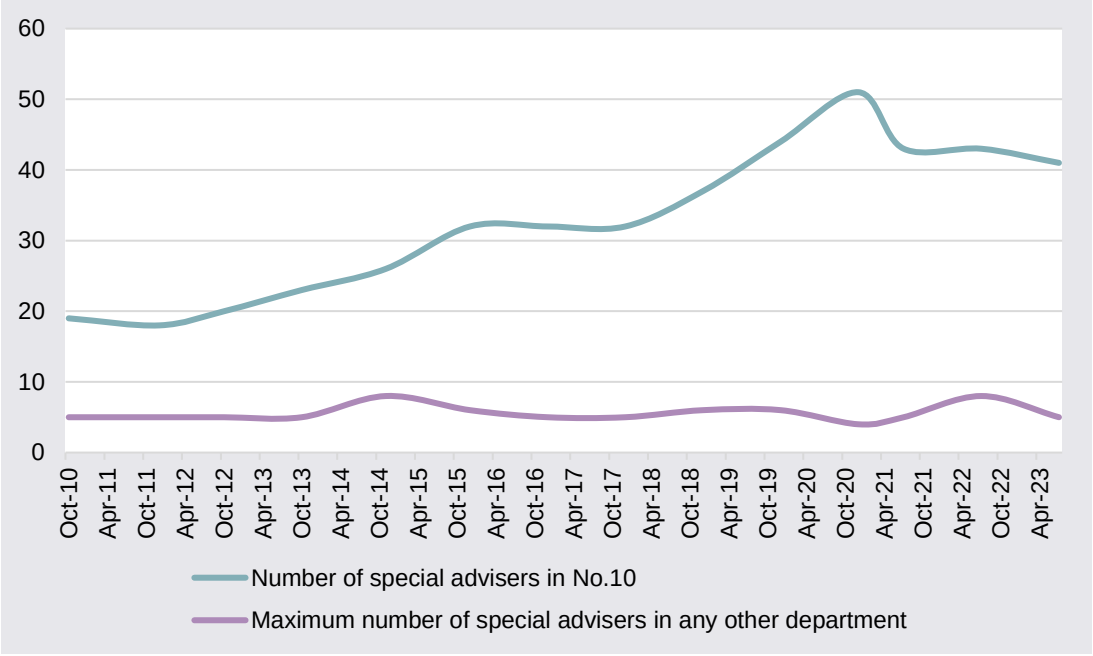
are constrained in the kinds of political advice they can offer, and their time would be split between playing an advisory role and managing a large team of civil servants.

There is therefore a strong case for having a flexible 'pool' of special advisers in No.10 who can be deployed to departments depending on short- to medium-term business need. This would enable secretaries of state to retain a core, permanent team of special advisers who they have a high degree of trust in, while also enabling experts to be used as 'surge' capacity in departments under significant political pressure.

Over time, there has been a significant growth in the number of SpAds based in No.10 (see Figure 2). Creating pools of specialists, who can be flexibly deployed, would increase the value gained from these advisers by involving them directly in questions of implementation, which are harder to consider from No.10, while potentially creating stronger links between a secretary of state's priorities and cross-government priorities. To make this work, flexible SpAds would need to move into their allocated department and operate as part of that departmental team, for the duration of the deployment, rather than operate from No.10.

Recommendation 4: No.10 should maintain a pool of special advisers with legislative and other kinds of specialist expertise (including specialists in data, science and technology) who can be flexibly deployed to departments, at short-notice, depending on business need.

Figure 4: Growth in SpAds in No.10



Source: Prime Minister's Office, 'Special Adviser numbers and costs – October 2010', 2013; Cabinet Office, 'Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023', 2023.

Mission SpAds

The Government's five 'missions' are an example of where this joined-up working will be critical. As *Reform* has previously argued, missions will need to foster genuine risk-taking and have structures in place for continuous cross-government coordination.

The political support available for delivering missions should reflect this aim – rather than being siloed by department. Apart from on specific, shared initiatives, special advisers rarely work across departmental boundaries and previous attempts to create a formal space for this (such as through weekly meetings) have generally been short-lived or involved too many people to be effective.[39]

A number of interviewees argued that creating SpAd roles for specific missions could help bring a more unified view of the political challenges involved in delivering missions. Rather than being tied to a single department with a contract that depends on the tenure of an individual secretary of state, these 'Mission SpAds' would be based in the department leading a mission, but deployed – with input from No.10 – to provide additional capacity to other departments contributing to that mission during key stages of delivery.

As a former minister argued:

> "If you take the new Government's five missions, that would seem an obvious place to say, 'ok, we need extra support within departments to make sure that happens' and therefore [should have] a cadre of special/policy advisers who are recruited on decent salaries to come in and support ministers".

For the period of time they are deployed, Mission SpAds would be based in the department of the lead secretary of state for each mission (such as the Treasury for the growth mission, or the Department of Health and Social Care for the health mission). This would ensure a direct line of political accountability (to the Prime Minister), and allow Mission SpAds to prioritise the long-term goals of a mission, rather than the day-to-day issues which ordinarily consume SpAd time.

Mission SpAds would then move between relevant departments depending on business need. For example, given the strong links between public health, local government-provided services and population health outcomes, the Mission SpAd for health may spend time working in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Likewise, the Mission SpAd for growth, ordinarily based in the Treasury, could be required to work for ministers in the Department for Business and Trade during key stages of mission delivery.

Mission SpAds should be recruited according to the specialist capabilities they can bring to a specific mission. Role descriptions should be provided by No.10 for these posts. As *Reform* has previously argued, missions should be led and supported by people with significant domain-specific experience and expertise, and this applies to Mission SpAds.[40] If the goal is to achieve net zero, for example, a Mission SpAd should have specialist knowledge of the energy sector; whilst the Mission SpAd for a growth mission should be highly knowledgeable

[39] Institute for Government, 'SpAdCast: What Is It Really like to Be a Special Adviser? Episode 3: Beyond the Department', Webpage, 29 July 2024.
[40] Patrick King and Sean Eke, *Mission Control: A How-To Guide to Delivering Mission-Led Government* (Reform, 2024).

in economic analysis, business and industrial strategy; and so on. These are emphatically not roles for the loyal but inexperienced twenty-somethings, but heavy weights that can work across complex briefs and have experience of driving change.

Recommendation 5: Mission SpAds, approved by No.10, should be based in the department of the lead Secretary of State for each mission and deployed, with input from No.10, to provide additional political support to other departments delivering that mission as required. At least two special advisers should be available per mission.

2.4 A unified model of political support

One of the biggest determinants of success for a minister is how well the 'political side' of their team and the permanent civil service side work together in private office. In the best cases, there is a carefully planned out structure, which makes clear how different roles add value and support the secretary of state or minister's work, as well as areas of 'crossover' between civil servants and politically appointed positions.

As a former minister puts it, civil servants and political appointments have to be properly "enmeshed with each other", and understand how they complement each other's work, otherwise the "political wheels spin and never engage" with anything.[41]

EMOs

There have been notable attempts to reform private office (comprising the civil servants who work most closely with a minister) to expand the support available to ministers and introduce this kind of structure by giving ministers more flexibility to appoint temporary, non-political policy advisers. For example, in 2013 the Ministerial Code was updated to allow the creation of an "Extended Ministerial Office" (or EMO).[42] EMOs enabled secretaries of state to work with permanent secretaries to "agree the composition of [their] office, the mix of staff and skills and the budget".[43]

Crucially, EMOs laid the groundwork for external appointments (in accordance with civil service recruitment principles) to provide specialist input on "policy formation and implementation", working in concert with a traditional private office team.[44]

Uptake of EMOs was relatively low. None were formally established in the coalition era (2010-2015), and only five departments adopted one afterwards.[45] In particular, there were criticisms of the requirement to have an "implementation lead" in the EMO approved by, and directly reporting into, No.10, and the burdensome amount of guidance that needed to be followed to set one up.[46] In 2017, EMOs began to be formally wound down and they are no longer in the

[41] Tess Bishop and Catherine Haddon, 'Ministers Reflect: Jo Johnson', Blog, Institute for Government, 28 May 2019.
[42] Cabinet Office, 'Extended Ministerial Offices - Guidance for Departments', November 2013.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Hughes Nicola, 'Is Scrapping Extended Ministerial Offices a Mistake?', Blog, Institute for Government, 6 January 2017.
[46] Ibid.

Ministerial Code.[47] Nevertheless, the emphasis on ministers working closely with permanent secretaries to shape the composition of their offices (including the skills they would benefit from), and the Cabinet Office guidance that staff in private office should be "fully integrated and working as one to deliver the minister's priorities" – were both well-justified steps in the direction of creating a more unified system of political support.[48]

One former SpAd interviewed for this paper explained, EMOs eventually "got caught up in the politicisation of relations between politicians and the Civil Service", but were "a rational way of putting in place both civil service and special adviser support in a proper, modernised support function for a secretary of state".

External appointments were also broadly effective in introducing greater diversity of thought, and helping ministers attract specific, expert skills to supplement private office and support their priorities. In DEFRA, for example, which adopted an EMO, a data specialist was brought in from the Open Data Institute to work on the department's open data programme and a campaigner to work on promoting British produce.[49]

Dame Clare Moriarty, then permanent secretary at the department, describes the EMO functioning "like an enriched strategy unit", bringing a "diversity of thinking skills" and helping bridge the gap "between what ministers think and how civil servants traditionally operate".[50]

2.4.1 Integrated ministerial offices

In a future model, creating an integrated civil service-political team would depend on a minister's most senior SpAd, in most cases the chief of staff, working hand-in-glove with the most senior civil servant in private office (the Principal Private Secretary, or PPS, discussed below) to establish a strong culture and encourage shared ways of working.

Interviewees for this paper suggested that No.10 is an example of where this 'interface' between appointed positions and civil servants works well, with both sides "holding each other accountable" and directly supporting the work of the Prime Minister. The Policy Unit in No.10, for example, has historically been staffed by a mix of special advisers and civil servants, and jointly headed by the Prime Minister's PPS and an externally appointed, senior special adviser, who work as one team.[51]

The office should be relatively senior, have a breadth of experience in 'getting things done' and promote strong links with the department (through officials) and outside world (through special advisers). This combination, of officials and special advisers, is also one that can help close the gap between new ideas being generated and the work needed to implement them.[52]

As with No.10, having departments' private offices be jointly managed by the most senior political appointment and a PPS would promote a greater appreciation of where civil service

[47] Matt Foster, 'Existing Extended Ministerial Offices to Be "Dismantled", Cabinet Office Confirms', *Civil Service World*, 17 January 2017.
[48] Cabinet Office, 'Extended Ministerial Offices - Guidance for Departments'.
[49] Nicola, 'Is Scrapping Extended Ministerial Offices a Mistake?'
[50] Foster, 'Existing Extended Ministerial Offices to Be "Dismantled", Cabinet Office Confirms'.
[51] Michelle Clement, 'Filling "the Hole in the Centre": The No.10 Policy Unit - 50 Years On', Blog, The National Archives, 2 May 2024.
[52] Mansfield, 'A Tale of Spaddery'.

and political elements of support coincide, how these can mutually reinforce one another, and strengthen the service a minister receives.

By contrast, interviewees argued that relationships in private office are fraught when "there's no structure". Achieving this coordination through a single leadership team, would ensure the relationships most critical to the success of a secretary of state are as strong as they can be.

Recommendation 6: Integrated ministerial offices, akin to the short-lived EMO, should be the standard model for ministerial teams. This should be reintroduced into the next version of the Ministerial Code, to make clear the expectation of a more substantive, expert and unified team supporting ministers. This should be jointly run by a secretary of state's chief of staff, where there is one, and their principle private secretary, and staffed by a mixture of SpAds, policy fellows and private secretaries.

2.4.2 Getting serious about capacity

Interviewees highlighted there are a number of other roles ministers are entitled to fill in private office and the wider department – including fixed-term appointments and permanent civil service positions – which are inconsistently and rarely taken up. These should become a more regular fixture of integrated ministerial offices.

Interviewees argued that the best appointments take into account the "different deficiencies" appointing ministers have, and therefore it makes little sense to create a "common template" across departments. In some cases, it will be obvious to the minister which appointments would be most beneficial. For example, they may choose to appoint an expert to conduct an independent stocktake to gather evidence in a contested or complex policy field (such as the MacAlister Review of children's social care or the Dame Carol Black review of drugs).[53]

However, in other cases, there is an important, more proactive role for the department to play in making ministers aware of their ability to appoint different positions. These include policy fellows, non-executive directors (NEDs), independent tsars and other fixed-term, specialist appointments. Interviewees commented that the Civil Service regularly "obscures from ministers what their powers are" in order to maximise the control it has over recruitment and senior civil service composition. Some also referred specifically to the Civil Service using recruitment into private office roles as a way of "controlling ministers".

Each of these options has its own benefits. NEDs can provide valuable, non-political advice and challenge to the executive team of a department, including permanent secretaries, and bring a wealth of experience from successful careers in other sectors that would not otherwise be available (for example, to input on complex, commercial transactions or transformation programmes). Tsars, meanwhile, can help turbo-charge specific initiatives and bring a more radical or delivery-oriented approach than if they were managed by current civil servants.

[53] Josh MacAlister, *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report*, 2022; Home Office and Department of Health and Social Care, *Independent Review of Drugs by Professor Dame Carol Black*, 2021.

Policy fellows

In addition to these fixed-term appointments, interviewees argued there are advantages to having domain-specific experts, who are politically-attuned, but would be unlikely to join government in an overtly political capacity (as a SpAd), embedded in a minister's team. To this end, policy fellows can provide deep expertise, unencumbered by operational or management responsibilities (which more senior civil servants will have).

One former minister explained that they were (somewhat unusually) given permission to make several "policy fellow" appointments and "found them very useful", since they were able to "appoint a very, very well respected academic to one particular area… and someone who had expertise in a management consultancy on complex delivery systems". Without this option, interviewees warned that ministers are reliant on less appropriate, more informal kinds of expertise, such as making phone calls to friends in other sectors, and relaying sensitive information, to make these judgements. This form of political appointment to a non-political role should be a standard option to supplement ministerial teams with specialist expertise.

A list of appointable roles

Normalising a route, separate from special adviser appointments, to bring in specific forms of advice and critical challenge would pay significant dividends in the expertise government has access to. Yet achieving these benefits relies on the civil service being transparent from the outset about the powers a minister has to appoint people, and in what contexts they can use them.

It should be commonplace for the permanent secretary to automatically present new ministers with a list of the roles they are entitled to fill, for example – or as one interviewee put it, to provide a "guide to EMOs for new ministers". This would include specifying roles (such as private secretary roles) that are non-political, but where the minister is entitled to suggest a name or be directly involved in recruitment. As one interviewee put it, "the best thing a department can do" to establish a positive working relationship, is "go to a minister unprompted and make this clear".

Recommendation 7: A list of appointable roles should be presented by the permanent secretary to new secretaries of state and ministers as part of the induction provided by a department. This should include roles that ministers can be involved in appointing in private office (such as private secretary roles) and the wider civil service, including NEDs, independent tsars, commissioners, policy fellows and other fixed-term appointments.

3. Right-sizing political support

In this new model, ministers would benefit from significantly more support than most currently receive – a necessary step towards ensuring that the government is actually staffed for success.

The integrated ministerial office would still be small in the context of wider departmental teams, but unlike now, sized for the task. As discussed above, internationally ministerial offices tend to be significantly larger, including in France, Canada and Australia.[54]

Right-sizing ministerial offices means allocating a budget for staffing based on workload, complexity, risk and political priorities. Interviewees consistently noted that, in the current system, it is "incredibly frustrating" for departments to be allocated the same number of special advisers regardless of their political workload.

3.1 Different departmental workloads

Interviewees argued that it makes little sense to have the same number of special advisers in large delivery departments, such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), as smaller departments like the Attorney General's Office, or departments where much of the policy remit is devolved, such as the Wales Office. In 2023, both the Welsh Secretary and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions had three special advisers.[55] Yet the DWP pays out £265.5 billion in pensions and benefits every year, with an operating budget of £9.6 billion.[56] Those benefits support some of the most vulnerable people in the country, and failures in delivery have real-world implications. In contrast, the Welsh Office has a budget of £5 million with a vastly smaller set of responsibilities: primarily focused on ensuring Welsh interests are represented in Westminster and Westminster's in Wales.[57]

One former senior SpAd summed up the problem: "departments are given arbitrary numbers of SpAds, plucked out of the air and just allocated totally irrespective of whether that department's got a load of legislation or no legislation, a load of complex stuff or not". The answer being to "match the political resource to what's needed".

The removal of the arbitrary two SpAd cap from the Ministerial Code by the new Labour Government is a positive step, but this must be accompanied by a systematic approach to building teams which is based on the demand and complexity of a secretary of state's brief. This would help to ensure ministers are adequately supported while providing a more rational justification for the number of appointments each secretary of state can make. In practice, in recent years the cap was consistently breached, with most departments having three or four

[54] Institute for Public Policy Research, 'Accountability and Responsiveness in the Senior Civil Service: Lessons from Overseas'.
[55] Cabinet Office, *Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023*.
[56] Esme Kirk-Wade et al., *Estimates Day Debate: The Spending of the Department for Work and Pensions* (House of Commons Library, 2023).
[57] Office of the Secretary of State for Wales, *Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24*, 2024.

SpAds, but this has still not been explicitly linked to need as the DWP and Wales Office examples shows.

The allocation should be determined centrally, by No.10, depending on what a department is expected to deliver and the political risks it is likely to face over a given period. For example, if government is committed to reforming primary and social care and modernising hospitals, while also tackling unprecedented backlogs and regulatory failures, there is a strong case for the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care being granted additional political support, including a greater number of SpAds, for the length of a parliament. Likewise, if issues related to immigration and border control have particular national salience, as well as carrying high risks, while at the same time reducing crime is a priority, the Home Secretary must be adequately supported. In either scenario, two – or even three or four – SpAds is a ludicrously low allocation.

As one former special adviser put it: it is about having an "in-flight awareness of the political load in different parts of the machine", and deploying the "political resources to match". Another noted that when a secretary of state is appointed, or a reshuffle happens, "there is a formal moment when an assessment is made of what the department is doing for the next year or two and I would match political resource to it".

In moving away from the cap on special adviser numbers per department, No.10 should also determine the level of support for each department on a case by case basis. This should take into account the workload of the department, the degree and complexity of reform expected, the political risk and sensitivity of the department's work and any reform programmes, and the legislative agenda.

At a minimum, all delivery departments should have a chief of staff and least one policy SpAd and one comms SpAd,[58] with budget allocated for additional SpAds and policy fellows based on need. In some departments, particularly where junior ministers also require support (see below), this might mean double digit teams. This should also take into account any temporary allocation from the No.10 pool of 'standby' advisers.

A letter should be published annually by No.10, detailing the medium- and long-term priorities of departments, and acting as a reference document for (private negotiations around) the political support each should be able to access. As a result, departments should be granted a budget to make political appointments, connected to their needs. Departments with the most politically challenging priorities and greatest anticipated workloads should have the greatest political resource. Once this agreed, the appointments should be transparently presented, alongside the priorities letter.

Recommendation 8: In line with the new integrated ministerial office model, a budget for political appointments should be set for each department based on need. This should take into account the workload of the department, the degree and complexity of reform expected, the political risk and sensitivity of the department's work and any reform programmes, and the legislative agenda.

[58] Departments involved in the delivery of frontline services, namely the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Justice, Home Office, and the Ministry of Defence.

3.1.1 Supporting junior ministers

For the same reasons that an overloaded secretary of state benefits from having SpAds who can provide them with additional capacity, there are clear advantages to a junior minister with a challenging and broad policy remit having direct access to political support. Interviewees for this paper argued that junior ministers "with a meaty policy brief" should "certainly be allocated a SpAd" and that the "ecosystem around junior ministers" is a "forgotten" part of the picture.

One interviewee gave a specific example of this: "In my time the minister of state for energy job was bigger than a secretary of state role to be honest, and that person was allocated one SpAd – and a junior SpAd." The implication was clearly that that minister was underserved and by extension a key government priority was underserved.

Currently in the Department of Health and Social Care, there is one junior minister responsible for adult social care, primary care, community health, end of life care, disabilities, hospital and community discharge, and dementia.[59] In the Department for Education, a single junior minister is responsible for technical qualifications, the funding of further education, adult education, the quality of higher education, apprenticeships, the creation of Skills England, and local skills improvement plans.[60] Both areas are stated government priorities, underpinning key 'missions'. These are clear examples where political support should be consummate to the brief.

Yet because special advisers work for the secretary of state, junior ministers have limited, sporadic access to political support. In addition, there is no guarantee that, even where SpAd time is allocated, the relationship between them and the junior minister will be effective (the SpAd has been chosen for their ability to work with the secretary of state).[61] Some interviewees even argued that special advisers are used by some Secretaries of State to stop junior ministers "going off the rails in their brief".

There are also junior ministers whose portfolio may be narrower, but the areas they are responsible for are at the heart of the government's priorities – or missions in the case of the current Government – and/or carry particular risk. For example, the Minister for Border Security and Asylum.

Interviewees commented that, in some departments, the (understandably) disproportionate focus on a secretary of state's priorities can mean that the work of junior ministers receives almost no scrutiny. One consequence is that politically risky parts of their brief are handled with very little support, and there is less oversight of areas that could become more risky over time. As one interviewee put it, junior ministers are effectively left "flying blind" and any number of small things that carry political risk could eventually "become a massive thing and blow up".

It would therefore help mitigate political risk and benefit the department overall to increase junior ministers' access to political support, particularly in more complex briefs. Interviewees were c there is a strong case for junior ministers having continuous access to their own special adviser. Without this dedicated capacity, SpAds will often do what they can for junior ministers

[59] Department of Health and Social Care, 'Minister of State for Care', Webpage, 2024.
[60] Department for Education, 'Minister of State (Minister for Skills)', Webpage, 2024.
[61] Tom Gash and Nicola Hughes, 'Ministers Reflect: Hugh Robertson', Webpage, Institute for Government, 6 July 2015.

but, as one former minister put it, “they’re really there to look after their boss” and “you [are] entirely reliant on the Civil Service”.[62]

Delegated SpAds

Providing particular junior ministers with dedicated political support would, however, have to be done in such a way as to not create tensions or mini fiefdoms within a department. Delegated SpAds could be used to achieve this. As one interviewee put it, “if you start creating organisational siloes” between junior ministers, “that’s a recipe for disaster”.

Sitting under the secretary of state, but appointed jointly with the junior minister, these SpAds would provide much need extra capacity while minimising the risk of ministerial ‘fiefdoms’ emerging.

The SpAds should be managed by the chief of staff[63] in the same way as those working to the secretary of state, ensuring that, while supporting the junior minister to deliver against their brief, they are directly tied to the delivery of the secretary of state’s – and Government’s – priorities.

Recommendation 9: Junior ministers with the most challenging, broad and/or priority briefs should be allocated special advisers to support their work. They should be jointly appointed by the secretary of state and junior minister, and be managed as part of the wider special adviser team.

[62] Gash and Hughes.
[63] Junior ministers with complex and/or politically risky briefs are likely to be in the bigger delivery departments, and hence the political team would indeed be headed up by a chief of staff.

4. Managing SpAds

4.1 SpAd induction

A further, important way of strengthening the support special advisers offer is to provide a more formal training and induction offer for new SpAds. At various points, this has been attempted by Chiefs of Staff in No.10 who nominally oversee all SpAds – but here too interviewees told us the model is "very imperfect" and that there is no "laid down structure". As one former SpAd said "you just get thrown in the deep end".

Worryingly, they noted that it is common for special advisers to "get in on day one, they get issued with a pass, they get given a laptop, and that's it, and they sort of sit there and nothing happens". Even something as basic as agreeing a salary and signing a contract can go on for months after starting the job. At most, new starters may receive mentorship from other SpAds, but aside from this, are left mostly in the dark. Lord Maude's Review of the Civil Service explains that while special advisers sometimes "learn their trade together in opposition, this does not prepare them for government work and civil service routine or ways of working".[64]

Providing induction as early as possible is key. Interviewees noted that once the pressures of government mount up, it is very difficult to provide any training "on the fly". And yet, being effective within the Whitehall machine relies on knowing which levers to pull to affect change, which political constraints matter most, and the unwritten, often counterintuitive way decisions are made. One interviewee described decision-making in the Civil Service as being like an "invisible tap" that you must be "told the location of" to get anything done.

A 2012 report by the Public Administration Committee contains suggestions of other information special advisers should be aware of, including "the implications of their status as temporary civil servants"; "the nature of their accountability to ministers" and "the role of permanent secretaries in managing the work and reputation of the department as a whole".[65] More than a decade on, none of this information is readily available to new SpAds.

Several interviewees referred to "SpAd school", a form of training that has previously been organised, haphazardly, part-way through a government. In future, as others have argued, induction should occur in a more routine way, whenever there is a change of administration, or new special advisers are appointed, with appropriate resources committed by the Cabinet Office (for example, induction could occur in partnership with the Leadership College for Government).[66]

[64] Cabinet Office, *Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service: The Rt Hon Lord Maude of Horsham*, 2023.
[65] Public Administration Committee, *Special Advisers in the Thick of It*, HC 134 (London: The Stationery Office, 2024).
[66] Hillman, *In Defence of Special Advisers: Lessons from Personal Experience*.

Lord Maude's Review recommends that training is provided to special advisers "prior to starting [their] roles",[67] however given the speed at which SpAds are appointed, this is unlikely to be possible in many cases.

Special advisers need both factual information, cultural context, and an understanding of how to apply the soft, political skills needed to navigate the Whitehall machine. To relay the latter in a more structured way, all SpAds should be paired with a more experienced SpAd for their first three to six months, who should help them understand what success looks like in their role. They should also be provided with an induction pack including procedural information on how the Civil Service works, its structures, hierarchies, and the terminology and day-to-day processes it uses, as well as basic information about the department they will be working in.

A "core curriculum" should be urgently developed and introduced for all SpAds: comprising technical information they are required to know and time spent understanding the operational work of their department. As part of this, SpAds should be required to spend two to three days (spread out over their first couple of months) shadowing people involved in frontline service delivery and receiving formal training in thematic areas such as public finances, project management, science and economics in policymaking and data use. These areas could be covered through modules already delivered by universities and third sector organisations.[68]

In addition, as several interviewees argued, SpAds should be given clear priorities for the first few months in post in the form of, as one former SpAd put it, "a workplan, as you would in any job." This would also, they pointed out, "give you a pretty accurate heads up as to whether the person was up to it or not".

Recommendation 10: Every new special adviser should receive a minimum level of formal induction, and when there is a new administration, this should occur en masse as early as possible.

New special advisers should be provided with an induction pack covering key information, and paired with a more senior special adviser for three to six months as a mentor, to help them navigate Whitehall. A core curriculum should be introduced for SpAds, including a baseline of technical information they are required to know, and two to three days spent shadowing people involved in frontline service delivery.

4.2 SpAd management

As the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers sets out, all SpAd appointments require written approval from the Prime Minister, while responsibility for the management and conduct of special advisers, including managing their performance and any disciplinary issues that arise, sits with the appointing minister.[69] It is also the responsibility of the appointing minister to

[67] Cabinet Office, *Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service: The Rt Hon Lord Maude of Horsham*.
[68] For example, Civic Future, a charity, provides short courses in 'Economics for Government' and 'Economics in Policymaking' aimed at professionals in policy and public life, that could be relevant to incoming special advisers.
[69] Cabinet Office, *Special Advisers: Code of Conduct*.

ensure special advisers adhere to this Code of Conduct (though the Prime Minister can terminate employment of a SpAd at any time, by withdrawing consent for their appointment).

Outside of these basic terms, there is no formal structure or HR system that applies to the management of special advisers. Given constraints on a secretary of the state's time, former SpAds emphasised that in practice, "there is no HR, role definition or KPIs"; and "no appraisal mechanisms" or "framework of performance management". Another commented that the role is "amateurish in nature from the start", and that it is "amazing how untransparent" special adviser performance is. One wryly noted: "It's extraordinary, I never had an HR conversation in four years."

One interviewee reflected that there would be "no way" for the No.10 chief of staff to get hold of performance information for the "100-150 people paid for by the taxpayer that contractually work into the prime minister", which is a "pretty desperate state of affairs". Interviewees explained that this arrangement "reinforces the tendency for SpAds to see their legitimacy as political" and "unrelated to their performance". There is also no clear way of identifying, and so no process in place for managing, special advisers who underperform.

This potentially undermines trust in political appointments but it also does a disservice to SpAds themselves, who should expect basic professional development opportunities. As one former SpAd argued: "the stuff people want in their careers is things like progression, coaching, training and development", and being a political appointee doesn't change that.

Squaring this circle requires balancing a more structured approach to performance management and development, with retaining the flexibility that is key the model's effectiveness.

4.3 A framework for performance

To elevate the importance of performance management, there should be a light touch, but standardised, framework used to assess SpAds. While departments already have some intuitive sense of how SpAds are performing, a framework would bring rigour and fairness to the appraisal process; create opportunities to support SpAds in their careers; and enable a more accurate comparison of special adviser performance at the centre of government.

As one former special adviser put it, "the centre should know how you're performing. It shouldn't be a secret", while another noted that if there is no performance assessment, then "you're off the hook". Although the output of special advisers' work is perhaps harder to determine than for some other civil servants – usually, there is no single 'product' or policy outcome a special adviser is directly responsible for – interviewees argued that this should not prohibit the use of high-level KPIs and other objectives.

Previous *Reform* research has highlighted the lack of a consistent approach to performance management in other parts of the civil service.[70] It has also found that if managers are not clear on expectations, "outcomes are likely to vary and poor performers could slip under the radar".[71] Likewise, interviewees confirmed that when it comes to SpAds, "you do get situations

[70] Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.
[71] Ibid.

where it is very clear when someone is out of their depth", but the system lacks the processes to deal with it.

At the same time, the lack of clarity around what is expected (which often comes from having clear objectives in a role) can mean that, as one former SpAd said, "Some of those less experienced special advisers just mimic junior civil servants, they go through the brief, they highlight it and underline it…you need a clearer sense of the value added that you are bringing to this equation".

As well as an improved induction process, these issues should be addressed through the introduction of a consistent performance framework which relates to the outcomes a department is trying to achieve, overseen by the secretary of state's chief of staff. In the Department for Work and Pensions, for example, KPIs could be linked to 'big ticket' items that the secretary of state has been tasked by the prime minister with delivering, such as reducing economic inactivity, with SpAds expected to demonstrate their contribution towards achieving these priorities.

To ensure fairness, this framework should also include factors related to certain competencies and inputs agreed by a special adviser and the department's chief of staff (as there are also many reasons, beyond the SpAd's control, for the success of a priority). For example, there could be an objective based on the SpAd's role in the development of a key piece of legislation, the early identification of political risks relating to departmental business, or in the case of media advisers, the quality of press coverage. There should also be an opportunity for '360' feedback from ministers, civil servants and other SpAds, as is now common in other sectors.[72]

Importantly, this framework should be light touch and focused on ensuring SpAds are working to their secretary of state's and the government's priorities. A track record of achieving consistent outcomes and delivering against objectives would present a strong case for increasing a SpAd's pay, promoting them into a more senior role or for another minister retaining them if there is a reshuffle. It would also enable incoming SpAds to be given a better sense of what they should expect to be working on and a benchmark, early on, of whether they are performing well in the role.

Finally, where a special adviser has consistently underperformed, it would allow a more constructive conversation to occur between No.10 and ministers and could be used to trigger a formal performance improvement plan.

Recommendation 11: Special advisers should be appraised according to a consistent but light touch performance framework based around their contribution to the outcomes a department is trying to achieve and relevant competencies agreed with the department's chief of staff, or No 10 chief of staff for SpAds in smaller departments. This framework should be used as the basis of formal line performance management processes and be fed back to No.10.

[72] Maury Peiperl, 'Getting 360-Degree Feedback Right', Webpage, Harvard Business Review, January 2001.

5. Setting up private office

One of the biggest changes in the support available to MPs once they become ministers is inheriting a 'private office': a team of civil servants including private secretaries (who act as the main link between a minister and the work undertaken by a department), speechwriters and admin staff (such as diary secretaries, correspondence officers and others).[73] These officials stay in place regardless of the government or the day or ministerial reshuffles.[74]

The role of private office is administrative, but it is also inherently political: working on behalf of a minister to ensure a department is effectively pursuing their priorities, offering timely advice and expertise, and representing the minister across government and to the outside world.

Junior ministers and secretaries of state both have their own private offices, though the team working for a secretary of state is generally larger (between five and 18 staff) and comprised of more senior staff.[75] The head of a secretary of state's private office, known as a Principal Private Secretary (or PPS), is described as one of the most influential and well-connected roles in Whitehall (and many PPS roles are senior civil service roles).[76]

The longer hours worked in private office, and elevated demands of these roles, mean they attract an additional "allowance" of up to a fifth of base salary. Pay for these roles is otherwise determined by the pay bands used in a department. Special advisers and a number of senior civil servants also have their own private secretaries, who perform a similar, coordinating role but are out of scope for this paper.

5.1 Valuing private office

Private offices are the essential node connecting ministers with the rest of their department, ensuring things get delivered by identifying and unblocking barriers to progress, and helping ministers prioritise their time by carefully filtering the huge number of policy submissions and other work produced by a department. Private office is, in effect, what enables a minister to manage the rest of the government machine.

Former ministers describe their private office as the "difference between … being a success or failure in the role" and the "reason you'll succeed or fail".[77] Sir Stephen Timms, a current minister and former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, has argued that private office is "the most important single determinant of whether or not you do a good job".[78]

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[73] Jo-Anna Schuller and Finn Baker, 'Ministers' Private Offices', Webpage, Institute for Government, 21 October 2020.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Schuller and Baker, 'Ministers' Private Offices'.
[76] Martin Stanley, 'The Power of Private Secretaries', Blog, 13 June 2023.
[77] Tim Durrant and Paeony Tingay, 'Ministers Reflect: Maria Miller', Webpage, Institute for Government, 29 June 2022; Catherine Haddon and Jo-Anna Hagen, 'Ministers Reflect: Nick Hurd', Webpage, Institute for Government, 11 January 2021.
[78] Nicola Hughes and Ines Stelk, 'Ministers Reflect: Stephen Timms', Webpage, Institute for Government, July 2016.

Similarly, interviewees for this paper stressed that it is vital to have a private office around a minister that instils complete confidence: that they can rely on and "absolutely feel they can work very closely with". This is in part about the experience and capability of people working in private office and the skillsets they bring, but it is also about a minister's ability to "gel" with their private office, compatibility and whether there is a strong relationship of trust.

Though the majority of roles in private office are not politically appointed, their function is the most small 'p' political in the civil service. A good private office is one that understands, weighs up, and can sensitively communicate political priorities to a department, but also engages with stakeholders outside of government in a politically-savvy way. Private secretaries must be able to make sound judgement calls that will align their principal's priorities and how they wish to operate.

There are some roles in private office where this political responsibility is more overtly tested. Interviewees gave the example of speechwriters who had an ineffective working relationship with their minister and were unable to draft in their 'voice'. Only after many months in the role and speeches being re-written by SpAds (and in some cases trusted aides outside government) were these speechwriters moved on. Bringing the right people into private office is not just a 'nice to have', it is central to the efficacy of a minister, and something that has significant knock-on impacts across government. As one interviewee put it, private office is "the most important force multiplier" for what a Secretary of State is trying to achieve.

For this reason, rigorous standards for private office should be set by the Policy Profession: underpinned by clear expectations and a formal baseline of skills and knowledge expected of those working in a minister's team. These should be reinforced through basecamps, training days and knowledge-sharing sessions – for example, on how to take effective minutes, manage a diary, chair meetings, and use technology to maximise administrative efficiency – to maintain the very highest standards of administrative performance.

5.2 Shaping private office

Of the relationships in private office, the one that is most important is between the PPS as head of office and secretary of state (and a junior minister and their head of office). As Sam Freedman, a former political adviser, argues, the PPS is the "most important civil servant in any department, because they control access to the [red] box" (submissions and briefings provided to the minister) "and manage all other private secretaries".[79] PPSs are therefore, in a sense, the ones who "actually control the machine" on a secretary of state's behalf – and in turn, amplify or limit a secretary of state's impact.[80]

The Prime Minister's PPS, for example, has been described as the "most senior official" in No.10, with "*far* more influence and actual power over many issues than Cabinet Ministers".[81] In other departments, the most effective PPSs can operate the government machine in ways that even ministers are unable to or unaware of, such as through nudging policy, influencing who secures key civil service roles (including in arm's length bodies) and having sensitive

[79] Sam Freedman, 'How to Be a Government Adviser', Blog, 17 August 2024.
[80] Dominic Cummings, 'SNIPPETS 2 + Ask Me Anything', Blog, 27 March 2022.
[81] Stanley, 'The Power of Private Secretaries'.

conversations with ministers and senior officials that other political staff are excluded from.[82] As one interviewee who had led a private office put it:

> "As a PPS my job was to make it possible for the principal to be as effective as the department could make them".

Yet this role can also prove a challenge. The individual that occupies the role has to tread a fine line between doing everything in their power to serve their minister, and, as interviewees said, "remaining loyal to the department" as a means of securing future career progression. Others argued that, for this reason, a PPS' "primary loyalty is always to the system" and that some PPSs are even recommended by the department to keep more radical or eccentric secretaries of state in check.

In some cases, ministers have reflected that PPSs operate as if their "job was to defend the department against [the minister] rather than to help [the minister] deliver the government's agenda",[83] and that the tendency is for permanent secretaries to put forward a PPS who "the machine wanted, not a genuine choice".[84] This is clearly damaging, both to the ability of the minister to get things done, and to the trust between the political and official that is so essential to success.

Despite mixed incentives, most PPSs are exceptionally capable and go on to be the among the most senior and accomplished civil servants. Former ministers often point to PPSs who are "worth their weight in gold".[85] Many also bring deep experience, and a practical understanding of how to get results from Whitehall, what levers to pull, and where bureaucratic power resides – traits it would be extremely difficult to replicate with an outside appointment.

Interviewees were also clear that, due to the importance of this relationship – to a minister's personal effectiveness and the work of government generally – there is a kind of informal understanding that they should have a say over who occupies the position of PPS. Equally, when the relationship is clearly not working or has broken down, interviewees explained that the secretary of state can be supported to find another PPS "in a perfectly decent way" (usually, through a delicate conversation with a department's permanent secretary). One former minister noted that "it's not in a permanent secretary's interest to have an unhappy minister" due to a PPS relationship that "isn't working".

Yet the lack of clarity and absence of any kind of formal process for how these moves should be managed means secretaries of state are often unaware this option is available. Or worse, feel unable to exercise their power without gaining a reputation as a minister who is 'difficult' or antagonistic towards the Civil Service.

Just as a CEO would expect to be able to shape their team, secretaries of state should feel able to input on the most senior official they have working in their team. Indeed, the ability to manage civil servants in the UK is delegated to ministers, not civil servants. As the Maude

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[82] Ibid.
[83] Nicola Hughes and Ines Stelk, 'Ministers Reflect: Ben Bradshaw', Webpage, Institute for Government, 13 September 2016.
[84] Nicola Hughes, 'Ministers Reflect: Ed Vaizey', Webpage, Institute for Government, 8 December 2016.
[85] Nicola Hughes and Jen Gold, 'Ministers Reflect: Jo Swinson', Webpage, Institute for Government, 17 June 2015.

Review of the Civil Service notes, “Ministers will have a legitimate interest in a small number of posts … for example because the postholder will work directly with them” and “There is nothing in law that prevents ministers from being involved in judging merit in the context of PPS and other civil service appointments”.[86]

One way to provide greater clarity, and sharpen the incentives PPSs have to focus on their minister’s priorities, would therefore be to trigger a ‘sunset’ clause whenever a new secretary of state or minister takes office, after which the minister would be asked by the permanent secretary by default whether they wish to retain their current PPS or head of office, or interview a new set of candidates (any change would most likely occur after several weeks, giving time for the new minister to assess).

Several interviewees similarly argued for a model which gives the Civil Service responsibility for “putting forward different people for PPS or private secretary” and gives the minister the ability to re-interview their existing private secretary alongside around five other candidates. They suggested that this would create a more constructive understanding that choosing the official who runs an office is “part of deal” on becoming a new minister and that this would be a “gamechanger” in terms of the support available to them.

Appointed PPSs would still be obliged to operate non-politically, but this would create a clear line of loyalty to the minster, and ensure minister’s are not left feeling poorly served but unable to act to change that.

Approaches that attempt to compensate for this by enabling other appointments, arguably misunderstand the role of PPS and its importance to things getting delivered in a department. Without an effective and trustworthy PPS, regardless of other support available, a minister is left disconnected from their department. Referring to PPS appointments, one interviewee stressed that “it is about whose primary loyalty is to you as minister” and that you should not try to “find workarounds for a system that’s f*****”.

Recommendation 12: Principal Private Secretaries and the heads of junior ministers’ offices should be appointed on the basis that when their minister is replaced, they may be moved to a different role in the department. In effect, this provides a ‘sunset clause’ for a new minister to appoint someone else. One option would be for the departmental permanent secretary to identify four or five other candidates for the minister to interview, alongside re-interviewing the current post holder.

5.2.1 Managing moves into private office

Despite how important private office is to ministers being supported and following through on their priorities, it is generally not considered a valued specialism or long-term career path by civil servants. The most ambitious civil servants typically spend a year or two in private office

[86] Cabinet Office, *Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service: The Rt Hon Lord Maude of Horsham*.

to build their credentials for other roles, seeing it as a training ground for future leadership.[87] Most permanent secretaries, for example, once worked in private office.[88]

For ministers to be properly supported, departments must focus on shifting this culture, so that roles in private office are valued for their own sake. Several interviewees commented that the PPS and DPS (Deputy Private Secretary) were once "looked up to" and seen as two of the most "impressive" civil servants in a department, but that the "status and quality" of private offices has deteriorated over time.

This is a problem: as one interviewee with private office experience argued, while "it's not rocket science, it takes real skill to do well", and the system can't perform if this part of it is not doing "well". The same interviewee reflected, worryingly, that "sometimes hiring into [private office] was like pulling teeth".

There are a number of ways to turn this around. First, interviewees argued that departments should be "talent spotting" across private offices (including offices in arm's length bodies and those of senior officials) to promote the most gifted private secretaries to ministers' teams. Second, departments should actively "manage the moves" of the most capable officials from other parts of government into private offices when positions become available. This kind of succession planning is second nature to how high-performing organisations in other sectors operate – staffing the CEO and other c-suite offices with the best and brightest – and government departments should use the same methods.[89]

Recommendation 13: Departments should actively manage moves into ministerial private offices to ensure they are staffed by the most capable officials, including by 'talent spotting' private secretaries in the private offices of senior officials and arm's length bodies.

5.2.2 The role of diary manager

One role which has been consistently under-valued in private office is that of diary secretary: the official responsible for efficiently managing a minister's diary and ensuring, for example, that their government commitments are balanced against parliamentary and constituency obligations and a minister's personal life.

While specific decisions about which engagements to prioritise are usually made collectively, between ministers, their SpAds and other officials in private office, the role nevertheless requires exceptional attention-to-detail, the ability to multi-task and manage time effectively, and involves near-constant, high-stakes communication with senior internal and external stakeholders.

Despite this, diary secretaries in private office are typically appointed as Executive Officers (the second-most junior grade in the civil service), attracting a salary of around £30,000 to

[87] Bishop and Barr, *Strengthening Private Office*.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Institute of Directors, 'Succession Planning', Webpage, 4 December 2019.

£35,000.[90] Diary managers and personal assistants to C-suite executives in the private sector, by contrast, are regularly paid upwards of £70,000, reflecting the contribution they make to the efficiency of an organisation's leadership and a recognition of the importance of effective time management.[91]

Indeed, Nick Hurd, a former minister, argues that "in a new team" the diary manager is "the most important person in the room" since time management is "absolutely critical"; yet the "[Whitehall] system wastes so much of your time in meetings and [its] instinct is to fill your time".[92] Lord O'Neill, another former minister, reflects that the "whole system [of Whitehall] is riddled with a lot of meetings for the sake of meetings".[93]

Interviewees said the fact that diary management is treated as a "low-level job" in Whitehall and "poorly paid" makes it difficult to attract people with the right experience, or indeed any relevant experience, to perform to the same standards as high-performing organisations in other sectors. Several argued that the "idea you'd have anything less than the best possible person as diary manager is absurd".

Increasing the base grade of diary secretaries in ministers' private offices would therefore be a low-cost way of seeing an outsized improvement in the efficiency and potential impact of new ministers. As one interviewee put it, there are many situations in Whitehall where you "end up with four people on 30 grand" when "one person on 90 grand would be better". And, in the case of private office, "it's about paying for quality".

In future, diary secretaries in these teams should be appointed as Higher Executive Officers or Senior Executive Officers at a minimum – grades which attract a median salary of around £40,000[94] – and departments should encourage administrative staff with substantial relevant experience into these posts, treating them as a core function of private office.

Recommendation 14: Diary managers in ministers' private offices should be appointed, at a minimum, as Higher Executive Officers (HEOs) or Senior Executive Officers (SEOs). Departments should seek to actively manage the careers of their best operational staff into private office to perform this role.

[90] Jim Dunton, '"Never Underestimate the Importance of Your Diary Manager", Ex-Minister Warns', *Civil Service World*, 25 August 2021.
[91] Oriel Partners, 'PA Salary Goals', Webpage, 2024.
[92] Dunton, '"Never Underestimate the Importance of Your Diary Manager", Ex-Minister Warns'.
[93] Nicola Hughes and Jill Rutter, 'Ministers Reflect: Lord O'Neill', Webpage, Institute for Government, 17 January 2017.
[94] Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Statistics: 2024*.

6. Conclusion

There is a growing sense that our political system is 'overloaded', with ministers lacking the capacity to take on the broad sweep of complex and sensitive issues in their brief. This is not only detrimental to achieving desired policy outcomes, but also to the public's sense that their priorities are being listened to and acted on – that the government of the day is delivering for them. Worryingly, a majority of voters now believe "nothing in the country works anymore",[95] with around four fifths (79 per cent) saying that Britain's way of governing could be improved "quite a lot" or "a great deal".[96]

There are many factors impacting on a government's ability to execute – including the quality of minsters themselves, the performance of Whitehall and local government, the state of the economy, and judicial and regulatory frameworks – but one which is easily addressed is the provision of adequate political support.

Unlike in high-performing organisations in other sectors, and indeed governments of comparable countries, Britain's politicians are significantly limited in their ability to shape the team they have around them and in the appointment of outside experts and aides who can help deliver their priorities. It is the equivalent of tying one hand behind a minister's back.

This paper sets out a comprehensive new model of political support: one that would introduce much greater capacity, clarity and flexibility to the system. This means significantly increasing the number of politically appointed staff – whether to political or non-political roles – and thereby the money spent on these advisers. It also means focusing on bringing in more specialist expertise and deeper experience, and prioritising getting talent into private office.

With Britain facing multiple era-defining challenges, now is the time to shed the hair shirt and build a political support system around ministers that will actually enable them to deliver for citizens. This is a small price to pay for a higher performing government.

[95] Rachel Wearmouth, 'Voters Don't Just Feel Britain Is Broken – They Feel They're Broken Too', *New Statesman*, 25 May 2023.
[96] National Centre for Social Research, 'Trust and Confidence in Britain's System of Government at Record Low', Press Release, 12 June 2024.

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