

REFORM

FULL STREAM AHEAD

The future of the Fast Stream

Patrick King

Joe Hill

December 2024

ABOUT REFORM

Reform is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We believe that the State has a fundamental role to play in enabling individuals, families and communities to thrive. But our vision is one in which the State delivers only the services that it is best placed to deliver, within sound public finances, and where both decision-making and delivery is devolved to the most appropriate level. We are committed to driving systemic change that will deliver better outcomes for all.

We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach. This is reflected in our cross-party Advisory Board and our events programme which seeks to convene likeminded reformers from across the political spectrum.

Reform is a registered charity, the *Reform* Research Trust, charity no. 1103739.

ABOUT REIMAGINING THE STATE

After a decade of disruption, the country faces a moment of national reflection. For too long, Britain has been papering over the cracks in an outdated social and economic model, but while this may bring temporary respite, it doesn't fix the foundations. In 1942 Beveridge stated: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching." 80 years on, and in the wake of a devastating national crisis, that statement once again rings true. Now is the time to fix Britain's foundations.

Reform's new programme, *Reimagining the State*, will put forward a bold new vision for the role and shape of the State. One that can create the conditions for strong, confident communities, dynamic, innovative markets, and transformative, sustainable public services.

Reimagining Whitehall is one of the major work streams within this programme.

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 Fast Stream model, focused on how people are recruited to the scheme, and how talent can best be managed and nurtured on it.

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

Philip Rycroft CB, Former Permanent
Secretary, Department for Exiting the
European Union

Professor Jonathan Slater, Former
Permanent Secretary, Department for
Education

Rachel Wolf, Founding Partner, Public
First; Co-Author, 2019 Conservative
Manifesto

Acknowledgements

External reviewers

We would like to express our gratitude to Amy Gandon, a former civil servant and freelance researcher, and Sonia Pawson, former Director of Government Skills, Cabinet Office, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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

Interviews

This report is based on interviews and material from *Reform's* May 2024 publication, *Making the Grade*.

We would like to thank the interviewees who gave their time and to support that earlier publication and whose candid insights helped inform this work.

FOI request

It is supplemented by an FOI request to the Cabinet Office which can be found in Appendix 1, published separately on *Reform's* website (reform.uk).

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	8
2. RECRUITMENT.....	10
2.1 Competing for the best and brightest.....	10
2.2 A higher bar for assessment.....	17
3. PROGRAMME.....	19
3.1 Calibrated for success.....	19
3.2 Ongoing assessment.....	23
4. DEVELOPING LEADERS.....	26
4.1 A curriculum centred on hard skills.....	27
4.2 Secondments.....	29
5. CONCLUSION.....	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	32

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: A new Executive Leadership Scheme should be introduced, focused on building cross-functional management capability.

The scheme should have a small cohort size, benchmarked to the number of permanent secretaries, be branded as an opportunity for ‘exceptional future leaders’ to join the civil service, and have a separate pay spine benchmarked to elite schemes in other sectors.

Recommendation 2: The case study assessment stage of Fast Stream applications should be replaced with core knowledge tests relevant to that scheme.

A more advanced, competitive exam should be used for the Executive Leadership Scheme, per the civil service entrance examinations of countries like France, Italy and Spain.

Recommendation 3: Final Selection Boards for the Executive Leadership Scheme should be composed of senior civil servants and one external assessor, such as a government Non-Executive Director, to provide challenge and promote cognitive diversity in selection decisions.

For the Professional Schemes, at least one senior civil servant should be on the assessment board, with the remainder of the board made up of either senior civil servants or Grade 6s from that function.

Recommendation 4: The Cabinet Office should develop an ‘ideal model’ of the hard skills and management experiences fast streamers will receive across placements for each scheme. Across schemes, much greater priority should be given to placements that involve a high level of responsibility and/or use of specialist skills, opportunities to manage discrete projects and staff, and that give fast streamers exposure to national priority areas.

Placements should be quality assured through ‘dip sample’ exit interviews with fast streamers and the teams they have worked in.

Recommendation 5: Responsibility for the personal development and career management of fast streamers on the Executive Leadership Scheme should sit with a government Chief Talent Officer, based in Cabinet Office, and their team. Responsibility for other Professional Schemes should sit with a very small ‘Fast Stream team’ within the relevant professional function.

The Chief Talent Officer should also maintain a database of the most talented fast streamers (informed by input from the professional function teams) to support their work on succession planning for senior civil service roles across government, and continue to help manage the careers of Executive Leadership Scheme alumni even once they have finished the programme.

Recommendation 6: All fast streamers should be assigned a senior mentor (deputy director level or above) to support them throughout their career, and beyond the end of the programme.

Recommendation 7: The mid-scheme assessment should be reformed, and take place 18 months into the Fast Stream, based around an assessment centre-style activity and written examination, with formal performance feedback from the fast streamer's line manager. It should be used to facilitate the removal of those who are not meeting a level of performance appropriate to a highly competitive graduate programme.

The end-of-scheme assessment should be reworked to focus on clear, operational and knowledge standards expected of fast streamers for promotion into a Grade 7 role, assessed by written and oral examinations. The tacit assumption that all fast streamers will be ready for promotion to a Grade 7 role after this point should be removed.

Recommendation 8: The most talented fast streamers from the Professional Schemes and the Executive Leadership Scheme – constituting the top 5 per cent of a given cohort – should also be identified by the end-of-scheme assessment.

This group should have their careers proactively managed and fast-tracked by the Chief Talent Officer's team, including where relevant into a Specialist Development Scheme led by the relevant civil service profession.

Recommendation 9: A baseline of hard skills and knowledge should be codified for each of the Fast Stream schemes – setting a world-leading standard of civil service policy expertise, equivalent to the operational and knowledge standards used in the British military.

Recommendation 10: A British equivalent of the Ecole d'Administration National (ENA) should be established across three to four leading universities to deliver modules that build expertise in the areas codified by the new Fast Stream curriculum.

Specific requirements for individual Fast Stream schemes should continue to be informed by government professions, with an overall standard that applies across schemes. This standard could include training in areas such as:

- Quantitative and statistical methods;
- Public management;
- Economics for policymaking; and
- Law and regulation

Recommendation 11: The Fast Stream and Emerging Talent (FSET) team in Cabinet Office should maintain a live database of the highest-stakes management opportunities that are available in partner organisations in the public sector – especially those with the biggest remits, such as trailblazer Combined Authorities, Integrated Care Systems and Multi-Academy Trusts – and private sector, to develop a high-quality secondment offer for fast streamers.

Participants on the Executive Leadership Scheme, who are required to develop cross-functional management expertise, should undertake a mandatory six-month secondment as part of the programme.

1. Introduction

The Fast Stream was set up to recruit the brightest and best to government. It is a key brand for the civil service and its largest recruitment pipeline for hiring early career talent, offering participants “unlimited potential to reach the highest levels”.¹ The status of the Fast Stream, and its relationship with Whitehall’s future talent pipeline, should warrant the upmost attention from senior leaders.

Despite this, aspects of the Fast Stream offer – from placements that vary wildly in the opportunities they provide fast streamers, to training which is insufficiently focused on hard skills– threaten this hard-won status and make the Fast Stream less competitive than many other graduate opportunities.

Notable reforms were made to the Fast Stream last year: including the introduction of a new curriculum for fast streamers (with universal and technical training modules); aligning schemes with government ‘professions’ (such as the Government Economic Service); and increasing the number of placements delivered outside of London.² The commitment, as the Civil Service said, to attracting talent “from the widest range of disciplines and locations” is the right one. As was an enhanced pay offer, to make the Fast Stream more competitive with other graduate opportunities.³

However, while very welcome, these reforms did not go far enough. Government must now double down on this progress to ensure the Fast Stream is best placed to develop Britain’s future public leaders, and has the strongest possible focus on building the hard skills fast streamers across schemes need to succeed.

With an annual intake of around 1,000 since 2015, the Fast Stream’s focus appears now to be much wider than just the recruitment of exceptional talent. But underneath the headline numbers, the composition of the Fast Stream has changed significantly. It remains an overall umbrella and brand, but rather than having one large Generalist Fast Stream (and a handful of other, more specialised ones), the Fast Stream is now split into 17 different ‘schemes’, each aligned with a particular civil service profession (for example, Policy).

This has blurred its purpose: losing its focus as a programme to develop the next generation of cross-government leaders, and becoming a graduate recruitment programme for specialists in professional areas. Both aims are important and necessary to the effectiveness of government, but in its current form, the Fast Stream is not effectively doing either.

As government grapples with once-in-a-generation challenges, including how to build a resilient state, restore economic growth and deliver Net Zero, it will need a new generation of leaders. Now is the time to ensure the Fast Stream is a core component in delivering that.

¹ Civil Service Careers, ‘Civil Service Fast Stream’, Webpage, 2024.

² Cabinet Office, ‘A Skilled Civil Service: Reforming the Fast Stream’, Blog, 5 November 2023.

³ Ibid.

This paper proposes a new model: founded on more rigorous entrance exams and a new “Executive Leadership Scheme”, specifically focused on multidisciplinary expertise. It also sets out a new approach to Fast Stream training and development, codified through a knowledge and skills-based curriculum that would set a new benchmark for civil service expertise – taking seriously the subject matter expertise fast streamers across all schemes should acquire.

2. Recruitment

The civil service Fast Stream is critical to recruiting a pipeline of future talent government can draw on, and in turn developing them into exceptional future leaders. Not all future leaders will join via the Fast Stream, nor should they – a diversity of experience is vital in the Senior Civil Service. However for an organisation the size of the Civil Service, a dedicated route to cultivate leadership talent is a valuable function.

To ensure the best possible people are recruited, competition should be fierce and the Fast Stream's 'brand' should be closely curated. Government should also work to ensure that the widest possible breadth of top talent is aware of the Fast Stream and motivated to apply. This should be based on a compelling, well-remunerated offer that successfully attracts top candidates who are weighing up a range of alternative career paths.

2.1 Competing for the best and brightest

Acceptance rates for the Fast Stream (based on the number of places available and the number of applicants who select a scheme as their first preference) vary significantly depending on scheme, though generally the more specialist schemes are less competitive. The Government Statistical Scheme and Economics Service, for example, have acceptance rates of 8.1 per cent and 8.9 per cent respectively.⁴ By contrast, the Government Policy Scheme, one of the two schemes which have replaced the 'Generalist' pathway (then-described as the government's "flagship" programme)⁵ has an acceptance rate of 3.7 per cent.⁶

The Government Policy Scheme also has more applicants per year than any other scheme. In 2023 26,011 people applied, compared to 19,477 for the second most popular scheme (the Diplomatic and Development scheme) and fewer than 10,000 for many others.⁷

The headline acceptance rates for this scheme compare well with top graduate programmes in other sectors, though there are some notable differences. For example, in 2022, among *The Times Top 100* graduate employers, there were around 39 applications per vacancy, equivalent to an acceptance rate of 2.6 per cent.⁸ Particularly considering most other employers are hiring for smaller intakes, it is notable how many more applications the Policy Scheme receives every year to achieve a comparable acceptance rate. However, it isn't clear whether the pool of applicants self-selecting to apply for the Fast Stream is different to the pool applying for other

⁴ Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Fast Stream: Recruitment Data 2024*, 2024.

⁵ Tevye Markson, 'Government Removes Generalist Track from Graduate Leaders Programme', *Public Technology*, 10 October 2023; Tevye Markson, 'Generalist Scheme Axed in Fast Stream Revamp', *Civil Service World*, 6 October 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Fast Stream: Recruitment Data 2024*.

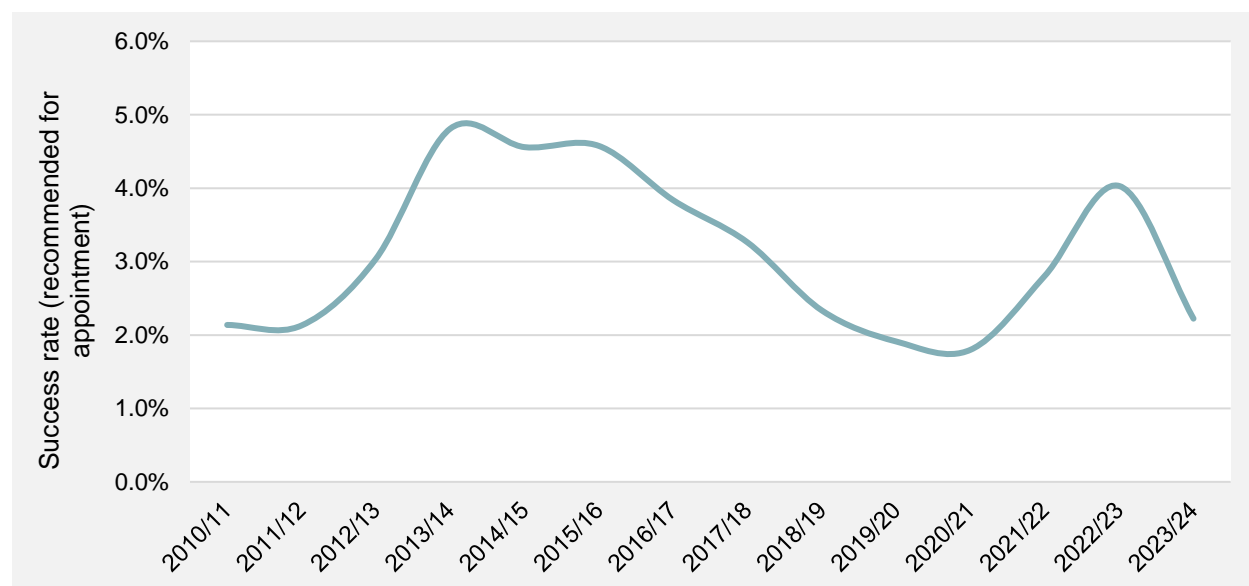
⁸ High Fliers, *The Graduate Market in 2023*, 2023.

graduate schemes – a wider appeal might make the headline number seem more competitive, but mean the average standard of applicant could be lower than comparator graduate schemes.

The competitiveness of the Fast Stream has fluctuated over time, though always with a success rate of around 5 per cent or lower across schemes. Between 2010-11 and 2023-24, for example, the mean success rate was 3.1 per cent overall, and 3.3 per cent overall since the Fast Stream was centralised (in 2013) and more government professions introduced their own schemes.⁹ Over the same period, the number of applications has been much more volatile: with the fewest people applying in 2013-14 (17,966),¹⁰ and more applying each year until applications peaked in 2019-20 (at 64,697).¹¹

More recent trends, however, including a collapse in the number of Fast Stream applications between 2020 and 2023 – from 64,697 to 26,899 overall, and on some schemes a reduction of up to 96 per cent¹² – should not be ignored. This could have any number of causes, including significant instability in government during that period, and a decision to pause the Fast Stream in 2023, which was then reversed, but likely still depressed applications, including through uncertainty and a reduced recruitment window.

Figure 1: Competitiveness of the Fast Stream, overall (2010-2024)



Source: Cabinet Office, 'Fast Stream Annual Report', 2010-2024.

⁹ Jordan Urban and Teodor Grama, 'Civil Service Fast Stream', Webpage, Institute for Government, 2 June 2022.

¹⁰ Civil Service HR, *Fast Stream and Early Talent Annual Report*, 2016.

¹¹ Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Fast Stream: Recruitment Data 2019, 2020 and 2021*, 2020.

¹² Ibid.

The Civil Service has strong selling points to attract the best and the brightest. The chance to work on some of the most complex and era-defining issues, and to achieve national impact and contribute positively to society, should continue to be emphasised. However, with organisations in other sectors increasingly attracting candidates on the basis of the impact they can have – going to great lengths, for example, to describe their ‘social purpose’ and paying significantly more for early career talent¹³ – the Fast Stream must focus on how it can remain one of the most attractive schemes for exceptional talent.

Pay

Fast Stream pay at £30,455 (with a London weighting for those based in the capital) is competitive with other graduate opportunities in the public sector, for example the NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme offers an initial salary of £29,255,¹⁴ and the Bank of England’s ‘Graduate Development Programme’ pays a starting salary of £32,750 outside of London.¹⁵

Yet it is markedly less competitive than many private sector schemes, including the graduate programmes of Lidl (£40,000), P&G (£40,000), and Aldi (£50,000).¹⁶ It is also much less competitive than the pay of management consultancy, finance and law firm programmes, which compete for a relatively similar pool of talent and frequently offer upwards of £50,000.¹⁷

Pay on the Fast Stream is also considerably less generous in real-terms than in 2010, when the starting salary was £27,000.¹⁸ Had pay kept pace with inflation, fast streamers would today earn more than £40,000 in Year 1. This represents a 24 per cent reduction in real terms.¹⁹

The previous government committed to boosting Fast Stream pay by at least 5.6 per cent this year, and 8.1 per cent in 2024-25 (people working in London will also receive a London Location Allowance, worth an additional four to eight per cent).²⁰ These are significant increases and will go some way to restoring competitive pay, but this should still be viewed against programmes the Fast Stream is competing with in other sectors, described above.

In part, the higher pay in these organisations is made possible by recruiting a smaller cohort of entrants, based on a projection of future leadership needs in the organisation (in line with theories of best practice for high-potential corporate management schemes).²¹ For example, P&G expect

¹⁴ NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme, ‘Pay & Benefits’, Webpage, 2024.

¹⁵ Bank of England, ‘Future Talent’, Webpage, 2024.

¹⁶ The Times, ‘Top 100 Graduate Employers’, Webpage, 2024, 100.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ FDA, ‘“A Victory for All Our Members Who Voted for Industrial Action”: The FDA’s Breakthrough on Fast Stream Pay’, Webpage, 20 November 2023.

¹⁹ Jim Dunton, ‘Cabinet Office Tables 6.75% Pay Offer for Fast Streamers’, *Civil Service World*, 15 August 2023.

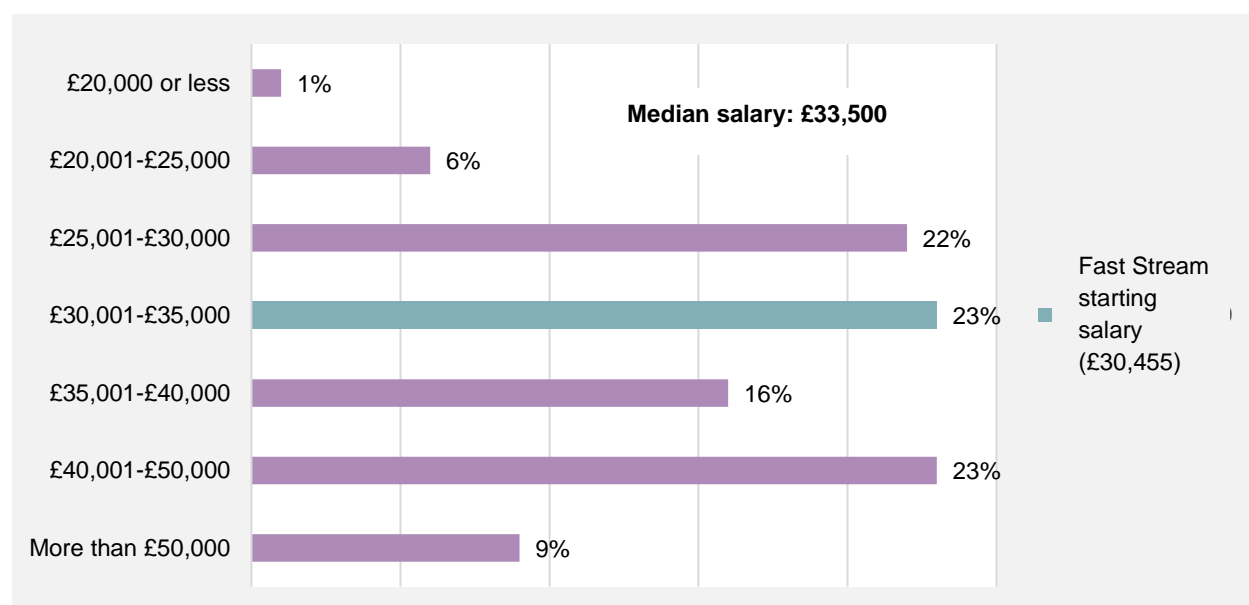
²⁰ Jim Dunton, ‘Fast Streamers Vote to Accept “Breakthrough” Pay Offer’, *Civil Service World*, 30 August 2023.

²¹ H Connor, W Hirsh, and L Barber, *Your Graduates and You: Effective Strategies for Graduate Recruitment and Development* (Institute of Employment Studies, 2003).

new joiners to “become their next generation of accomplished leaders”,²² and Aldi explain that successful candidates will eventually manage large areas of the business.²³

Clearly, there are limits to how far the Fast Stream can compete with the most profitable companies in the private sector on salary, particularly at the scale it operates (with much larger intakes than, say, trainees at a law firm). Nevertheless, as the gap grows, the Civil Service should continue to ask whether the pay offer is as competitive as it needs to be.

Figure 2: Graduate salaries at leading UK employers, 2023



Source: High Fliers, ‘The Graduate Market in 2023’, 2023.

Purpose

The Fast Stream covers 17 schemes in total, compared to five main schemes in 2010 – the schemes have multiplied because they have become more specialised, with new dedicated recruitment routes for statistics and finance, human resources, property and project delivery. As the number of schemes increases, it is important government provides clarity about the value each provides (compared to the alternative of recruiting early career talent through other routes, including non-graduate routes).²⁴ In general, evidence from behavioural science suggests that an excessive number of choices can be off putting, meaning that people do not commit to a final

²² The Times, ‘Top 100 Graduate Employers’.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pamela Dow, ‘HR Britain: How Human Resources Captured the Nation’, *New Statesman*, 28 November 2024.

decision.²⁵ The Government should therefore consider which of the 17 Fast Stream schemes could be rationalised, while still enabling the civil service to attract graduates with relevant skills into key professions.

Currently, every scheme promises leadership opportunities within the civil service, though many now specify that this will be *within* a profession: for example, as a “leader at the heart of the Government People Function” (for human resources) or as a “finance leader” (for the finance fast stream).²⁶

None focus primarily on the importance of overall leadership and management of the civil service across these functions – and of course the Generalist scheme, which used to serve this purpose, has been discontinued.²⁷ Interviewees for this paper argued that for the most ambitious applicants, it has therefore become less clear which route offers the greatest development opportunities and leadership prospects.

Worse still, there is a growing perception that people can progress just as quickly, or even faster, by not being on the Fast Stream. Many interviewees told us that in the 2016-2022 period in particular, during which the civil service significantly expanded, comparable graduates hired directly into civil service roles at EO/HEO level reached Grade 7 (the grade successful fast streamers are promoted to on completion of the scheme) just as quickly as fast streamers did. Though this is partly about grade inflation elsewhere in the civil service,²⁸ there is also a case for the Fast Stream setting higher expectations around how quickly participants can progress.

Many fast streamers also seem to be leaving the scheme before completing it, either to take up promotions offered elsewhere in the civil service, or to move into mainstream roles which are more prestigious than those they were posted to by the Fast Stream, or better paid.²⁹

One former fast streamer interviewed for this paper said that “of the three best fast streamers” in their peer group, “two left for mainstream HEO and SEO jobs” and another “applied for a Grade 7 job very early”. Another explained that there was a period when they were “essentially on gardening leave for two months” because there were no Grade 7 posts available once they had passed the end-of-scheme assessment. Some even suggested that the Fast Stream is “designed to push everyone into the middle”, and wasn’t concerned about the careers of the most exceptional performers who inevitably left.

The problem with this is twofold. Firstly, it means, counter-intuitively, that remaining part of the Fast Stream is not necessarily the fastest or best option for the most talented early career civil servants to progress. Secondly, as a result, those who leave the Fast Stream to join the

²⁵ Barry Schwartz, ‘More Isn’t Always Better’, Webpage, Harvard Business Review, June 2006.

²⁶ Civil Service Careers, ‘Civil Service Fast Stream’.

²⁷ Markson, ‘Generalist Scheme Axed in Fast Stream Revamp’.

²⁸ Amy Gandon, *Civil Unrest - A Portrait of the Civil Service through Brexit, the Pandemic, and Political Turbulence* (Reform, 2023).

²⁹ The pay deal agreed last year may help to reduce the attrition of fast streamers into better paid roles in the mainstream civil service.

mainstream civil service forgo any structured training, mentorship and development which a central scheme could usefully provide.³⁰

This is a wasted opportunity that puts an avoidable ceiling on the ambitions of some of the most talented people in government.

Size of cohort

Several interviewees argued that there is a link between the Fast Stream's ability to operate as a dedicated leadership route – with carefully curated placements and high pay – and the size of its cohorts. One said that to enable the Fast Stream to be oriented around creating future leaders, it should be refocused on the “crème de la crème” with a “much tighter” cohort size.

Currently, around 1,000 applicants to the Fast Stream have been successfully appointed each year for the last nine years.³¹ One interviewee believed these numbers were too high, saying that “bringing in 1,000 people per year when the senior civil service is so small makes no sense”. Another remarked that “if the Fast Stream is for the top jobs, why is it accepting 1,000 people?”.

Some graduate programmes in the private sector explicitly recognise this trade-off – pursuing a tight cohort size in comparison to a much larger overall headcount, to plan for the majority of that cohort to progress into the most senior positions in the company. As a study by the Institute for Employment Studies found, “Some high-potential schemes assume that by the end of the scheme, the graduate will already feature in the corporate succession plans”.³² This is often the case for high-potential graduates programmes in the retail sector.³³ In 2015, 90 per cent of Aldi's UK business directors joined the company as graduates, for example, including the then-chief executive of their UK business, Matthew Barnes.³⁴

At the hyper-competitive end, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) (their civil service) restricts the number of people who can be recruited to a proportion of the number of senior posts that exist in the public sector. In practice, this means that across India, of the more than 450,000 people who apply to the IAS annually, only around 180 are successful: an acceptance rate of less than 0.05 per cent.³⁵ Candidates often spend the majority of their twenties preparing for the entrance exam, which covers topics including world history and geography, economics, policy, the Indian constitution, and ethics.³⁶

Organisations in some elite sectors recruit a higher proportion of their overall workforce through their graduate schemes, and therefore have larger intakes. This applies, for example, to the graduate programmes of law firms and consultancies, where acceptance does not automatically

³⁰ Iain Mansfield, ‘Why Have Applications to the Civil Service Fast Stream Plummeted?’, Blog, 18 March 2024.

³¹ Cabinet Office, *Fast Stream Annual Report*, 2024.

³² Connor, Hirsh, and Barber, *Your Graduates and You: Effective Strategies for Graduate Recruitment and Development*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Aldi, ‘Aldi and Lidl: Graduate Recruitment Schemes Key Part of Success’, *The Guardian*, 29 December 2015.

³⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Indian Administrative Service Meets Big Data*, 2016.

³⁶ Ibid.

presume that a candidate will become a partner in that firm and where it is more common for senior hires to move laterally from competitors.

With a relatively large intake, the Fast Stream is trying to perform a dual function. On the one hand, it aims to be an elite future leadership scheme, with a training offer focused on management skills, to create a pipeline of talent for the most senior civil service roles. And on the other, it is a way of recruiting and upskilling graduates to become specialists in professional areas that would be expensive to recruit for from the private sector: such as project management, finance, and digital.

Given the breadth (and depth) of the civil service's work, both types of scheme are useful. But to properly benefit from each, the civil service must be explicit about these two, separate, purposes: to attract the very best future leaders who will work across the different functions of government, and to recruit graduates who are ambitious and want to rise to the senior civil service but in a specific functional capacity.

Although the Fast Stream is still a competitive route for attracting early career talent – and the newer 'functional' schemes have attracted candidates with a broader range of skills (half of Fast Stream entrants now have a STEM background, for example) – there is a strong case for revisiting whether, across these schemes, we have the right model for developing true, 'cross-functional' leaders as well as extremely capable, single-function professionals.³⁷

In the context of increasing competition from a range of other graduate programmes, and given the immense value that better cross-functional leadership would bring, this trade-off between cohort size, pay and purpose should be urgently addressed.

The Fast Stream should continue to be the overall umbrella for large-scale graduate recruitment into the civil service, and the current set of schemes focused on specific government professions should continue to be the pipeline for talent into government (described throughout this paper as the Professional Schemes). But alongside this routes, the Government should introduce a new Executive Leadership Scheme, focused on building skills to support better general corporate management of the civil service. This Scheme should have a separate pay scale to other Fast Stream schemes, a more rigorous selection process (see section 1.2) and a smaller cohort size. The intake could be benchmarked against the number of permanent secretaries (currently around 40 people,³⁸ compared to 314 recruited into the Policy scheme every year).³⁹

³⁷ Tevye Markson, 'Fast Stream Hits 50% STEM Grads Recruitment Target', *Civil Service World*, 26 October 2023.

³⁸ Catherine Haddon, 'Permanent Secretaries', Webpage, Institute for Government, 12 March 2020.

³⁹ Cabinet Office, *Fast Stream Annual Report*.

Recommendation 1: A new Executive Leadership Scheme should be introduced, focused on building cross-functional management capability.

The scheme should have a small cohort size, benchmarked to the number of permanent secretaries, be branded as an opportunity for ‘exceptional future leaders’ to join the civil service, and have a separate pay spine benchmarked to elite schemes in other sectors.

2.2 A higher bar for assessment

Applications to the Fast Stream consist of three main stages, beginning with a series of online tests, followed by an assessment centre, and (for most schemes) a final selection board.

The online tests have three core components:⁴⁰

- 1) Using data: which tests candidates on their ability to problem-solve, interpret information, and on their numerical competency
- 2) Work-based scenarios: which test candidates’ interpersonal skills
- 3) Case study assessment: which tests candidates adaptability and decision-making, based on fictitious situations

Candidates who successfully reach the assessment centre are required to complete various written, group and leadership exercises. The final selection board is then conducted by civil servants who are generally Grade 7 and 6, and who score candidates on questions specific to each scheme.

As *Reform* has previously argued, the assessment process for civil service roles should be “heavily skewed towards tests directly relevant to an individual’s ability to do the job” and should distinguish those who perform at the “very highest level” from those who receive a passing grade.⁴¹

Equivalent graduate programmes for the civil services of other countries embody this principle, with competitive entrance exams that set a high bar for core knowledge, including in France, Spain and Italy (historically, the UK also set civil service entrance exams).⁴²

Though it is right that different Fast Stream schemes set their own requirements (particularly at the final selection stage) for the skills candidates need, several interviewees criticised Fast Stream recruitment for focusing on generic workplace competencies over “hard-edged” skills. Likewise, others have described the current recruitment process as being too convoluted and opaque, and criticised the fact that candidates are unable to submit covering letters to promote

⁴⁰ Civil Service Fast Stream, ‘Understanding the Application Process’, Webpage, 2024.

⁴¹ Joe Hill, Charlotte Pickles, and Sean Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall* (Reform, 2024).

⁴² Ministry of Transformation and Public Service, ‘Civil Service Recruitment Practices in Other Countries’, Webpage, September 2018.

relevant skills or experience (many applicants to the Fast Stream have several years of work experience).⁴³

The online tests should therefore be overhauled by replacing the case study assessment with an online exam which for the professional scheme tests for specific subject knowledge (scientific knowledge for the science and engineering scheme, knowledge of statistics for the statistics service scheme, and so on), and for the Executive Leadership Scheme tests a core curriculum (decided by the Government Chief Talent Officer (see *Making the Grade*)). This should sit alongside the existing tests on data and interpersonal skills.

There is a risk that Generative artificial intelligence can be exploited by candidates to game results, both with the current tests used by the Fast Stream, and specific subject knowledge exams. Guidance published by the Joint Council for Qualifications in 2023 provides recommendations for securely delivering remote assessments, and detecting when AI may have been used.⁴⁴ Across the online tests – but especially in these knowledge-based exams – the Fast Stream should have systems for identifying and mitigating the risk of AI malpractice.

Given how important Fast Stream intakes are to future civil service capability and leadership, selection board assessments should not be left to delegated grades, particularly for the Executive Leadership Scheme; Fast Stream recruitment deserves time invested by the Senior Civil Service. For the Executive Leadership Scheme, recruitment boards should be made up of senior civil servants (SCS), who are better placed to assess leadership potential than Grade 6s and 7s. For the Professional Scheme, there should be at least one SCS assessor, but the remainder of the board could be made up of Grade 6s with specific skills within that function.

For the Executive Leadership Scheme, an external assessor, such as a government Non-Executive Director (NED), should also sit on selection boards to provide independent challenge and help promote cognitive diversity in selection decisions.

Recommendation 2: The case study assessment stage of Fast Stream applications should be replaced with core knowledge tests relevant to that scheme.

A more advanced, competitive exam should be used for the Executive Leadership Scheme, per the civil service entrance examinations of countries like France, Italy and Spain.

Recommendation 3: Final Selection Boards for the Executive Leadership Scheme should be composed of senior civil servants and one external assessor, such as a government Non-Executive Director, to provide challenge and promote cognitive diversity in selection decisions.

For the Professional Schemes, at least one senior civil servant should be on the assessment board, with the remainder of the board made up of either senior civil servants or Grade 6s from that function.

⁴³ Rosa Silverman and Flora Bowen, “‘There’s a Sense of the Government Hating Us’: Inside the Civil Service Fast Stream Collapse”, *The Telegraph*, 15 March 2024.

⁴⁴ Ofqual, *Ofqual’s Approach to Regulating the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Qualifications Sector*, 2024.

3. Programme

The opportunities and training available to people on the Fast Stream should ensure they receive the best possible grounding to move into leadership positions in the civil service.

From placements offered, to training, mentorship and line management, each component of the Fast Stream should be designed to maximise hard and soft skills learned, and expose fast streamers to the breadth of experience they need to succeed. Instead, fast streamers' experiences vary wildly, almost by chance, and the system disincentivises the best officials from remaining on the scheme.

3.1 Calibrated for success

Placements

Fast streamers' experience is shaped to a large extent by the quality of placements they undertake throughout their programme. However, some of the core features of these placements militates against quality and providing fast streamers with the high-responsibility roles they need to develop.

First, departments are incentivised to 'bid' for fast streamers to fill many different kinds of role, since this process allows them to circumvent regular civil service HR procedures to hire people – procedures which are often long and complicated.⁴⁵ Interviewees explained, as a result of this model, specific placements often "aren't given much thought" when they are scoped, with regards to their suitability. Many reflected on unfulfilling, personal experiences of arriving in a department and realising that they had very little real work to do, or that their area of work had been deprioritised by ministers months ago. Interviewees felt this problem was compounded by placements being assessed by generalist HR professionals with minimal experience of the wider civil service to use when making judgements about where fast streamers should be placed.

Second, since fast streamers can express a preference for, but have limited ability to directly decide the department, specific role (beyond the profession their stream is aligned with, e.g. Policy) or location of their placements, there is limited competitive pressure for departments to provide a high-quality, fulfilling experience. Hence, the amount of responsibility fast streamers are given, how integrated they are in teams, and their learning opportunities – including their ability to demonstrate leadership – vary drastically from placement to placement.

Interviewees argued that, in general, the quality of Fast Stream placements was random, and roles are not well scoped to provide the high-quality experiences needed to build leadership and management skills. One recalled a particular posting where they arrived to discover their policy area no longer existed, and their main remaining work for the next six months was to "design a poster for the team". Another said that a colleague in their team was referred to as a "spare fast

⁴⁵ Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.

streamer” because “there wasn’t really a role for them”, in a team which was supposed to be winding down that year.

Additionally, interviewees lamented that there is little to no tracking of the skills fast streamers are acquiring, or supposed to be acquiring, on each placement: further undermining the possibility of a strategic approach. One said, bluntly, that Fast Stream placements are “designed to obscure what skills are required”.

Given the vital importance of these placements to building fast streamers’ leadership capability, and that 70 per cent of Fast Stream learning is intended to be “on-the-job” (Appendix 1), this is an inadequate system.

More rigorous standards should be set by the Cabinet Office for the quality and consistency required of Fast Stream placements, and actively quality-assured, including through ‘dip-sample’ exit interviews with fast streamers and the teams they have worked in. Teams and Departments which provide poor quality postings should have their total allocation reduced in future rounds.

An ‘ideal model’ of the hard skills and management experiences fast streamers should receive across postings should be developed for each scheme, by specialists in relevant profession or, for the Executive Leadership Scheme, by the Government Chief Talent Officer (see *Making the Grade*). In general, much greater priority should be given to placements that involve a high level of responsibility, opportunities to manage discrete projects to conclusion or contribute key specialist skills, and that give fast streamers exposure to national priority areas.

Recommendation 4: The Cabinet Office should develop an ‘ideal model’ of the hard skills and management experiences fast streamers will receive across placements for each scheme. Across schemes, much greater priority should be given to placements that involve a high level of responsibility and/or use of specialist skills, opportunities to manage discrete projects and staff, and that give fast streamers exposure to national priority areas.

Placements should be quality assured through ‘dip sample’ exit interviews with fast streamers and the teams they have worked in.

Hands-on career management

A key value proposition of the Fast Stream is that people receive proactive career guidance, with a personal development plan and one-to-one support to progress at an accelerated rate, with a line manager who is invested in their career and the development opportunities they have.

Until this year, this support was delivered by a departmental line manager or ‘activity manager’ – in the same department as the fast streamer, and a dedicated ‘skills and capability manager’ in Cabinet Office, focused on their learning and development, and leading their performance

appraisals.⁴⁶ Following the 2023 Fast Stream review, however, the latter role was described as duplicative and has now been scrapped.⁴⁷

In interviews, *Reform* heard that skills and capability managers were too junior to have a big impact – from 2019, they were appointed as SEOs, below the Grade 7 roles they were coaching people to reach – and could seem “very distant” from fast streamers based elsewhere in government. Interviewees felt that this was an inappropriate person and grade to oversee the performance and promotion decisions of fast streamers, who they had little regular interaction with or professional background to assess.

While skills and capability managers were the wrong way to practice it, the principle that the most talented civil servants should have their careers more actively managed and supported remains the right one, as *Reform* argued in *Making the grade*.⁴⁸

Earlier this year, *Reform* recommended introducing a Civil Service Chief Talent Officer for precisely this purpose, working in the Cabinet Office and reporting directly to the Cabinet Secretary.⁴⁹ The Chief Talent Officer – whose remit it would be to develop ‘exceptional talent’ would be well placed to take responsibility for assuring the quality of the Executive Leadership Scheme (and its placements) in particular. Responsibility for assessing placement quality and consistency, and issuing guidance and standards for the Professional Schemes should then sit with a very small ‘Fast Stream team’ within the relevant professional function.

Crucially, as the Chief Talent Officer’s team and professional functions would focus on optimising the quality of placements and training, there would be minimal duplication with the day-to-day work of line managers.

This model would also create a link between Executive Leadership participants and the Chief Talent Officer’s work on succession planning for senior civil service and strategic roles across government (described in more detail in *Making the grade*).⁵⁰ Fast Stream teams in each professional function could help identify the most talented participants on those schemes, to inform the Chief Talent’s Officers succession planning for these specialisms.

At the same time, Executive Leadership Scheme participants should receive proactive support from the Chief Talent Officer beyond completion of the programme, to help reach their full potential as cross-functional leaders.

⁴⁶ Tevye Markson, ‘Cabinet Office to Scrap Fast Stream Line-Management Roles’, *Civil Service World*, 18 March 2024.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Recommendation 5: Responsibility for the personal development and career management of fast streamers on the Executive Leadership Scheme should sit with a government Chief Talent Officer, based in Cabinet Office, and their team. Responsibility for other Professional Schemes should sit with a very small ‘Fast Stream team’ within the relevant professional function.

The Chief Talent Officer should also maintain a database of the most talented fast streamers (informed by input from the professional function teams) to support their work on succession planning for senior civil service roles across government, and continue to help manage the careers of Executive Leadership Scheme alumni even once they have finished the programme.

Senior mentorship

There are many factors that affect who rises to the top in Whitehall and into the most prestigious, senior civil service roles. Some that are to do with merit, and others, as *Reform* has argued, that are about “hard-to-pin down attributes, such as temperament and mindset” that lead to an overly homogenous group of senior leaders.⁵¹

Yet, the fact that the Fast Stream intake is significantly more diverse – across almost any type of socio-economic and demographic background – than the senior civil service, suggests there is work to do once people are ‘through the door’ to ensure that the ‘ladder up’ is much easier for these people to climb. Strikingly, for example, there were fewer senior civil servants from low socio-economic backgrounds in 2019 than in 1967.⁵²

A significant and well-recognised barrier to progressing into the senior ranks of the civil service is the presence of unwritten rules and ways of working that can fast track someone’s career, but can inadvertently shut out candidates from atypical backgrounds who are unaware of them. As a report by the Social Mobility Commission found, access to senior roles is contingent on having an “organisational guide”, or mentor, who can help flag these rules – such as the need to apply to the right “accelerator roles” – and turbocharge a colleague’s career.⁵³

This particularly applies to securing jobs in the senior civil service, beyond the stage in someone’s career where they would receive formal support through the Fast Stream. As the report found, these rules contribute significantly to the fact that senior grades in the civil service are much less socio-economically diverse than junior grades.

If government is serious about using the Fast Stream as a route into senior leadership positions, the support and mentorship people receive beyond the scheme to progress into the senior civil service must be a consideration. Over time, a strong mentorship offer could also help diversify the senior civil service.

⁵¹ Simon Kaye, *Reimagining Whitehall: An Essay* (Reform, 2022).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sam Friedman, *Navigating the Labyrinth: Socio-Economic Background and Career Progression in the Civil Service* (Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

Fast streamers should therefore be assigned a senior mentor to support them throughout their career, and beyond the end of their scheme. For the Professional Schemes, a Deputy Director-level mentor working in that professional area would be most appropriate, whereas for the smaller cohort of the Executive Leadership Scheme a mentor should be Director-level at a minimum.

Recommendation 6: All fast streamers should be assigned a senior mentor (deputy director level or above) to support them throughout their career, and beyond the end of the programme.

3.2 Ongoing assessment

While initial recruitment to the Fast Stream is very selective, many interviewees believed the civil service does little to assess performance beyond the point of recruitment.

Currently, an ‘end-of-scheme assessment’ is used as a gateway to graduation from the Fast Stream and promotion to Grade 7 roles, requiring fast streamers to present evidence from across their scheme and demonstrate leadership ‘Behaviours’. However, interviewees explained that the vast majority of people pass the assessment the first time around; and that it can be retaken if failed, with “almost everyone” passing the second time. Others said they were given extensive coaching on how to pass the assessment by colleagues, and simply had to regurgitate the right examples from their experience. In many ways, this mirrors the challenges of assessing candidates for promotion in the wider civil service, the process for which *Reform* has been critical of in previous research.⁵⁴

Failure to set a serious end-of-scheme assessment is equivalent to setting low expectations of the standard fast streamers should reach upon graduation. As *Reform* has previously argued, the use of ‘Behaviours’ – which are easily gamed and too abstract to be a meaningful test of experience – also means government does not have precise criteria of the skills and knowledge expected of Fast Stream graduates.⁵⁵ One interviewee recounted knowing people who had “done very little, if anything” before the assessment and “passed first time”. For a programme designed to produce future government leaders, this is clearly inadequate.

Interviewees stressed that not every fast streamer is ready for a Grade 7 role after the scheme, and yet the sense of entitlement to one conveyed by the whole Fast Stream process creates perverse incentives: especially to apply for roles which are advertised more frequently rather than those which they are best qualified for. One interviewee recounted passing the end-of-scheme assessment, beginning a Grade 7 role, and immediately being put in charge of COVID emergency planning and submitting bids worth billions to the Treasury, despite knowing they were “not being the best person for the job”.

⁵⁴ Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Other interviewees told us that the Fast Stream sees its role as “moving people through a process” to a Grade 7 appointment, and not elevating them to the standard they need to reach. If schemes do not have a standard view of what it expects fast streamers to learn, it is hard for them to formally assess whether they have learned those skills. A new, more rigorous approach to assessment is required.

The Fast Stream model should include two formal and standardised assessments – the current end-of-scheme assessment and a reformed mid-scheme assessment. For the Professional Schemes, these should be designed by the relevant civil service profession, and for the Executive Leadership Scheme they should be designed by the Civil Service Chief Talent Officer. They should be targeted at (a) removing low performers from what is, by definition, a high-performers programme, and (b) identifying a small group of exceptionally talented individuals for faster development into future leadership roles. This would provide greater clarity on the purpose of the Fast Stream, raise its status, and improve the overall talent management process and pipeline in Whitehall.

Only high performers

The first assessment, the mid-scheme assessment, should identify and manage out those fast streamers who are not reaching a level of performance appropriate to a highly competitive graduate programme. This should occur after an individual has been on the programme for 18 months: typically during their second placement (the first being 12 months). This same approach to the staging of assessments would apply across both the existing Professional Schemes and the new Executive Leadership Scheme, even though the assessment process for each (and the individual professional schemes) would differ.

The Government People Group should manage the assessment process, based on the assessment designed by the professions or Chief Talent Officer (depending on the scheme). This should involve an assessment centre-style activity and written examination – neither of which have previously been used in mid-scheme assessments, which are largely based on existing performance appraisals. The results of these should be supplemented by a formal performance feedback report from the fast streamer’s line manager.

The end-of-scheme assessment should then be reworked to focus on clear, operational and knowledge standards expected of fast streamers for promotion to a Grade 7 role (see section 3.3) within the area aligned to their Professional Schemes, or as set out by the Chief Talent Officer for the Executive Leadership Scheme, assessed by written and oral examinations. Like the mid-scheme assessment, it should also involve formal feedback from a fast streamer’s line manager, and a colleague from at least one of their Fast Stream placements.

Following implementation of this new assessment model, the tacit assumption of promotion into a Grade 7 role on completion of the Fast Stream should be overturned. Instead, fast streamers who do not meet the required standards should be mainstreamed into the civil service at SEO level. Those who fall well below standards in the mid-scheme and/or end-of-scheme assessment

should begin a formal performance improvement plan process (described in detail in *Making the Grade*).⁵⁶

Recommendation 7: The mid-scheme assessment should be reformed, and take place 18 months into the Fast Stream, based around an assessment centre-style activity and written examination, with formal performance feedback from the fast streamer's line manager. It should be used to facilitate the removal of those who are not meeting a level of performance appropriate to a highly competitive graduate programme.

The end-of-scheme assessment should be reworked to focus on clear, operational and knowledge standards expected of fast streamers for promotion into a Grade 7 role, assessed by written and oral examinations. The tacit assumption that all fast streamers will be ready for promotion to a Grade 7 role after this point should be removed.

Exceptional talent

The end-of-scheme assessment should also be used to identify the most talented individuals across all Fast Stream schemes (both the Professional and Executive Leadership schemes), constituting no more than 5 per cent of a given cohort. These should be people for whom there is a realistic expectation of reaching director general or permanent secretary level, or becoming deep subject matter specialists in their areas.

This cohort will be key to the future capability of Whitehall, and should warrant a further investment of time beyond the Fast Stream by senior civil service leaders. The highest performers from both the Professional Schemes, and the Executive Leadership Scheme, should have their careers intentionally managed by the Chief Talent Officer's team thereafter (though some of the highest performers on the Professional Schemes may ultimately be better suited to a more specialist career, and transfer onto the Specialist Development Scheme, described in *Making the Grade*, instead).⁵⁷

Recommendation 8: The most talented fast streamers from the Professional Schemes and the Executive Leadership Scheme – constituting the top 5 per cent of a given cohort – should also be identified by the end-of-scheme assessment.

This group should have their careers proactively managed and fast-tracked by the Chief Talent Officer's team, including where relevant into a Specialist Development Scheme led by the relevant civil service profession.

⁵⁶ Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

4. Developing leaders

Even elite graduate programmes recognise the need for ongoing development, to cultivate skills needed for leadership.

The civil service plans for the vast majority (70 per cent) of Fast Stream learning to take place ‘on the job’. This ‘70/30 split’ – between on the job learning and formal training and feedback – is a conventional view of how leadership development should occur.⁵⁸ For example, the Singaporean civil service graduate programme is structured around experiential (70 per cent), relational (20 per cent) and formal (10 per cent) learning.⁵⁹ For this model to be most effective, the design of each component must be taken equally seriously.⁶⁰

Interviewees reflected that most Fast Stream training stems from the idea that people mainly require leadership skills (“an inherently nebulous concept”), and that this expectation aligns with a wider government culture plagued by a “tyranny of the gifted amateur”. This leads to a prioritisation of what they said were “abstract sessions” on, for example, “leading in ambiguity” and “commercial awareness”, over training and support to develop hard-edged skills. As one former fast streamer put it: “Most fast streamers were student society presidents or something, they’re presenting to people in their jobs, they don’t need training on presentations. They need hard skills”. Another said that training is “nowhere near as good as comparable private sector programmes”.

Likewise, in his Ditchley lecture on public service, Michael Gove (then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster) reflected that:

“Too much current Civil Service training is about vapid abstractions such as ‘Collaborating Better’ rather than about what works in classroom instruction or how to interrogate climate modelling or to find out what really goes on in the preparation of Crown Prosecution cases which leads to so many cracked trials”.⁶¹

The civil service should aim for fast streamers to excel in both domains: becoming deep experts in areas of national importance, but also, for example, being able to build effective teams, lead and present with confidence, and craft long-term strategy. There should be core knowledge and operational standards expected of all Fast Stream graduates, built up on the job, but also through practical, skills-focused training modules and high-value secondments into other sectors.

Last year’s reforms aimed to introduce a more clearly defined curriculum for the Fast Stream – with a foundation of core modules taught to all fast streamers, and others focused on building

⁵⁸ Julian Birkinshaw, Maya Gudka, and Steve Marshall, ‘What Leadership Development Should Look Like in the Hybrid Era’, Blog, Harvard Business Review, n.d.

⁵⁹ Public Service Division, ‘Public Service Leadership Careers’, Web Page, 17 April 2024.

⁶⁰ Birkinshaw, Gudka, and Marshall, ‘What Leadership Development Should Look Like in the Hybrid Era’.

⁶¹ Cabinet Office, “The Privilege of Public Service” given as the Ditchley Annual Lecture’, Webpage, 1 July 2020.

technical skills within professions.⁶² However, most of the options available through the universal “blocks” – such as 0.5 hours of training on “data visualisation” or one hour on “climate change and net zero” are not long enough to build genuine subject expertise. And while new technical and profession-based modules are welcome, there is not a route for building expertise across disciplines, connecting policy and delivery – as the Executive Leadership Scheme would seek to do – to develop cross-functional leadership.

4.1 A curriculum centred on hard skills

Work has been undertaken to strengthen the Fast Stream’s core curriculum with foundational units in digital, data and analytical skills, policy, and communication, and optional units in areas like procurement, project delivery and finance (see Appendix 1). Indeed, where this practical training does exist – such as on how to effectively draft policy submissions and brief ministers – it was widely complimented by interviewees. The problem is that there is not enough of it.

Modules that do exist are generally very short (four to seven hours), and lack the depth needed for fast streamers to become genuine experts in their field. The bar should be set much higher: several interviewees argued that government should aim for fast streamers to become experts in the areas they advise on, with policy advisors regarded in a similar light as other kinds of expert professional (such as accountants, medical consultants and engineers).

In some ways, this would simply be a reversion to higher standards that previously existed. As Munira Mirza, former Director of the No.10 Policy Unit writes:

“Civil Service mandarins were [previously] examined at entry – and frequently assessed – on their objective knowledge, not just their subjective qualities. All senior officials underwent rigorous training in thorough, structured courses at a national college. The political journey for many people running the country today is shorter, less demanding and more ad hoc”.⁶³

Government should tightly define the level of expertise people on each scheme are expected to reach and the operational standards they should perform at for qualification from the Fast Stream. Though recent reforms have set a framework of expected standards for each profession, it is not clear that this is used as a rigorous benchmark for determining whether graduates from the Fast Stream qualify for relevant jobs in government. This approach is successfully deployed in the RAF and Navy, for example, to ensure staff in each military function are trained to a required level of proficiency (Figure 3).

⁶² Government People Group, *Civil Service People Plan 2024-2027*, 2024.

⁶³ Munira Mirza, ‘How the British Elite Lost Its Way’, Blog, Engelsberg Ideas, 27 June 2024.

Figure 3: Operational and training standards used in the Royal Navy

The Royal Navy operates a well-established system of focused operational training – which includes realistic military simulations, wargaming, and other practice scenarios – to ensure all officers can reach a nationally required standard and have interoperability with other navies and air forces. The training is continually under review and adapted to meet modern requirements.

Alongside operational training, rigorous standards are set and tested for the knowledge and comprehension staff in the Navy should have in key areas such as electrical and mechanical systems. These are seen as strong indicators for in-job performance across all ranks, and certain results qualify candidates for different roles.

Source: Royal Navy, 'Operational Sea Training', 2024;

Once a baseline of knowledge and hard skills has been codified – a civil service equivalent of the standard applied in the military – in-depth modules should be commissioned from world-leading providers, including UK universities and business schools, to deliver this content and build subject matter expertise. Completion of the modules should be seen as a highly prestigious accolade, with the Fast Stream curriculum setting a world-leading standard for civil service expertise. As outlined in section 3.2, fast streamers should face challenging examinations to test this standard and graduate from their scheme.

Already, the Fast Stream partners with external providers to teach technical skills like economics, policy and lawmaking, such as King's College London's International School for Government.⁶⁴ Progress in this area should be expanded on, establishing, in effect, a British equivalent of the French Ecole d'Administration National (ENA), but delivered across three or four leading UK universities.

Prior to the creation of ENA, France, like the UK, did not have codified standards of knowledge in the civil service. The university was formed to train future public service leaders, to break the 'closed shop' of French policymaking and to "renovate the State".⁶⁵ Admission required passing a notoriously difficult three-part entrance exam, with a success rate of around 10 per cent, testing knowledge in areas like law, economics and international relations.⁶⁶ The UK-equivalent should have a similarly elite approach to training and public administration, with a focus on providing relevant specialist training to the Professional Schemes, and an elite foundational course reserved for the Elite Leadership Scheme (the ENA was closed, in part, due to criticism that it had become less meritocratic over time).⁶⁷

⁶⁴ KCL International School for Government, 'Education', Webpage, 2024.

⁶⁵ Alice Cuddy, 'ENA: The Elite French School That Trains Presidents', *BBC*, 21 April 2019.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Ngaire Woods, 'Building a New Elite', Blog, Blavatnik School of Government, 28 April 2021.

Recommendation 9: A baseline of hard skills and knowledge should be codified for each of the Fast Stream schemes – setting a world-leading standard of civil service policy expertise, equivalent to the operational and knowledge standards used in the British military.

Recommendation 10: A British equivalent of the Ecole d'Administration National (ENA) should be established across three to four leading universities to deliver modules that build expertise in the areas codified by the new Fast Stream curriculum.

Specific requirements for individual Fast Stream schemes should continue to be informed by government professions, with an overall standard that applies across schemes. This standard could include training in areas such as:

- Quantitative and statistical methods;
- Public management;
- Economics for policymaking; and
- Law and regulation

4.2 Secondments

Training on the Fast Stream should be complemented by opportunities to undertake high-calibre secondments into organisations in the public, private and charity sectors. As *Reform* has long argued, there is too often a separation in Whitehall between policy and its implementation, with officials classified as having expertise in one or the other.⁶⁸ A new calibre of fast streamer must therefore be expert in their professional area, but also have a strong understanding of how policies are actually implemented, supported by experience shadowing professionals delivering frontline services and working in high-performing organisations in the private and charity sectors – where there is generally a tighter feedback loop between strategy, delivery and outcomes.

Secondments are available through the Fast Stream in a variety of sectors for six months – but interviewees told *Reform* that these vary in quality.⁶⁹ Some secondments are into organisations which are too small to be able to provide high-quality management experiences in a short period of time, or that bear little relevance to what fast streamers will be doing in government.

Normalising six-month secondments into other parts of the public sector, in particular, could help create a more joined-up view of public service reform in the Fast Stream.⁷⁰ Government should make the most of high-stakes management opportunities that exist in trailblazer Combined Authority regions, such as Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, and in umbrella bodies like Integrated Care Systems and Multi-Academy Trusts. Private sector secondments with partners that can provide different kinds of management experience to those in the public sector–

⁶⁸ Kaye, *Reimagining Whitehall: An Essay*.

⁶⁹ Helen Tomlinson, 'Leading Development', Blog, Civil Service Fast Stream, 3 March 2020.

⁷⁰ The Commission for Smart Government, *Instilling a High Performance Culture in the Civil Service*, 2021.

for example, developing a product to sell to market, managing teams based in other jurisdictions, or overseeing complex supply chains – should also be prioritised.

This approach to secondments is widely used in the Singaporean civil service, for example, which routinely rotates graduates into high-responsibility roles elsewhere in the public sector, including in some cases to serve on the board of a government-linked companies as a director, and in the private sector.⁷¹

There is a role for the Cabinet Office to play in more actively curating these opportunities for fast streamers, including by institutionalising stronger long-term partnerships with target secondment organisations in the public and private sector to have a ‘real-time’ view of opportunities that are available. For example, if an Integrated Care System is experiencing particular performance issues, or a local authority is developing a new financial strategy, these secondments could complement formal training courses offered through the Fast Stream on financial management. Or if a private sector company is going through an acquisition process, or requires surge capacity for a high-risk, high-reward project, fast streamers could be seconded for a relevant time-bound project.

Given the aim of the Executive Leadership Scheme to build cross-functional management expertise, a high-quality, six-month secondment into a public body or private sector company, should be made a compulsory part of the programme.

Recommendation 11: The Fast Stream and Emerging Talent (FSET) team in Cabinet Office should maintain a live database of the highest-stakes management opportunities that are available in partner organisations in the public sector – especially those with the biggest remits, such as trailblazer Combined Authorities, Integrated Care Systems and Multi-Academy Trusts – and private sector, to develop a high-quality secondment offer for fast streamers.

Participants on the Executive Leadership Scheme, who are required to develop cross-functional management expertise, should undertake a mandatory six-month secondment as part of the programme.

⁷¹ Public Service Division, ‘Public Service Leadership Careers’.

5. Conclusions

Government should be highly ambitious for the Fast Stream. The opportunity to work on the biggest challenges the UK faces, take on a high level of responsibility and achieve enormous impact, is an offer that should, in principle, be unparalleled. Yet, through a convoluted recruitment process, insufficiently focused on the knowledge and competencies of candidates, and a relatively thin training and post-scheme development offer, government risks the most ambitious candidates looking elsewhere.

In becoming the ‘front door’ for a large part of the Civil Service’s overall recruitment, and specialising schemes more to provide a pipeline of talent into individual professions within government, the Fast Stream has lost its focus on elite leadership talent. And a scheme with a thousand recruits every year cannot hope to provide an offer which caters to the experiences and needs of the most talented individuals. Instead, the Fast Stream fits all fast streamers to the same broad pattern of experiences, and leaves their development up to chance – meaning the most talented are increasingly more likely to leave than stay.

The Fast Stream must be reoriented around the knowledge and hard-edged skills leaders of the future will need to thrive. This paper sets out a new model: to ensure the best individuals are identified to join the Fast Stream, and that fast streamers’ talents are consistently nurtured and managed, even once they have left the programme.

In doing so, it aims to bolster the Fast Stream’s brand, fulfilling the ambition of the Declaration on Government Reform for it to be “among the best graduate programmes in the world”.⁷²

⁷² Cabinet Office, *Declaration on Government Reform*, 2021.

Bibliography

Aldi. 'Aldi and Lidl: Graduate Recruitment Schemes Key Part of Success'. *The Guardian*, 29 December 2015.

Bank of England. 'Future Talent'. Webpage, 2024.

Birkinshaw, Julian, Maya Gudka, and Steve Marshall. 'What Leadership Development Should Look Like in the Hybrid Era'. Blog. Harvard Business Review, n.d.

Cabinet Office. 'A Skilled Civil Service: Reforming the Fast Stream'. Blog, 5 November 2023.

———. *Civil Service Fast Stream: Recruitment Data 2019, 2020 and 2021*, 2020.

———. *Civil Service Fast Stream: Recruitment Data 2024*, 2024.

———. *Declaration on Government Reform*, 2021.

———. *Fast Stream Annual Report*, 2024.

———. "'The Privilege of Public Service" given as the Ditchley Annual Lecture'. Webpage, 1 July 2020.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. *The Indian Administrative Service Meets Big Data*, 2016.

Catherine Haddon. 'Permanent Secretaries'. Webpage. Institute for Government, 12 March 2020.

Civil Service Careers. 'Civil Service Fast Stream'. Webpage, 2024.

Civil Service Fast Stream. 'Understanding the Application Process'. Webpage, 2024.

Civil Service HR. *Fast Stream and Early Talent Annual Report*, 2016.

Connor, H, W Hirsh, and L Barber. *Your Graduates and You: Effective Strategies for Graduate Recruitment and Development*. Institute of Employment Studies, 2003.

Cuddy, Alice. 'ENA: The Elite French School That Trains Presidents'. *BBC*, 21 April 2019.

Dow, Pamela. 'HR Britain: How Human Resources Captured the Nation'. *New Statesman*, 28 November 2024.

Dunton, Jim. 'Cabinet Office Tables 6.75% Pay Offer for Fast Streamers'. *Civil Service World*, 15 August 2023.

———. 'Fast Streamers Vote to Accept "Breakthrough" Pay Offer'. *Civil Service World*, 30 August 2023.

FDA. “A Victory for All Our Members Who Voted for Industrial Action”: The FDA’s Breakthrough on Fast Stream Pay’. Webpage, 20 November 2023.

Friedman, Sam. *Navigating the Labyrinth: Socio-Economic Background and Career Progression in the Civil Service*. Social Mobility Commission, 2021.

Gandon, Amy. *Civil Unrest - A Portrait of the Civil Service through Brexit, the Pandemic, and Political Turbulence*. Reform, 2023.

Government People Group. *Civil Service People Plan 2024-2027*, 2024.

High Fliers. *The Graduate Market in 2023*, 2023.

Hill, Joe, Charlotte Pickles, and Sean Eke. *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*. Reform, 2024.

Kaye, Simon. *Reimagining Whitehall: An Essay*. Reform, 2022.

KCL International School for Government. ‘Education’. Webpage, 2024.

Mansfield, Iain. ‘Why Have Applications to the Civil Service Fast Stream Plummeted?’ Blog, 18 March 2024.

Markson, Tevye. ‘Cabinet Office to Scrap Fast Stream Line-Management Roles’. *Civil Service World*, 18 March 2024.

———. ‘Fast Stream Hits 50% STEM Grads Recruitment Target’. *Civil Service World*, 26 October 2023.

———. ‘Generalist Scheme Axed in Fast Stream Revamp’. *Civil Service World*, 6 October 2023.

———. ‘Government Removes Generalist Track from Graduate Leaders Programme’. *Public Technology*, 10 October 2023.

Ministry of Transformation and Public Service. ‘Civil Service Recruitment Practices in Other Countries’. Webpage, September 2018.

Mirza, Munira. ‘How the British Elite Lost Its Way’. Blog. Engelsberg Ideas, 27 June 2024.

NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme. ‘Pay & Benefits’. Webpage, 2024.

Ofqual. *Ofqual’s Approach to Regulating the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Qualifications Sector*, 2024.

Public Service Division. ‘Public Service Leadership Careers’. Web Page, 17 April 2024.

Schwartz, Barry. ‘More Isn’t Always Better’. Webpage. Harvard Business Review, June 2006.

Silverman, Rosa, and Flora Bowen. “‘There’s a Sense of the Government Hating Us’: Inside the Civil Service Fast Stream Collapse”. *The Telegraph*, 15 March 2024.

The Commission for Smart Government. *Instilling a High Performance Culture in the Civil Service*, 2021.

The Times. 'Top 100 Graduate Employers'. Webpage, 2024.

Tomlinson, Helen. 'Leading Development'. Blog. Civil Service Fast Stream, 3 March 2020.

Urban, Jordan, and Teodor Grama. 'Civil Service Fast Stream'. Webpage. Institute for Government, 2 June 2022.

Woods, Ngaire. 'Building a New Elite'. Blog. Blavatnik School of Government, 28 April 2021.

REFORM

ISBN: 978-1-910850-73-2



@reformthinktank



@reformthinktank@bsky.social



www.reform.uk