

Power with purpose

Final report of the Commission
on the Centre of Government



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About the Commission on the Centre of Government

The Institute for Government's Commission on the Centre of Government looked at why No.10, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury do not always work as well as they should and what could be done to radically improve the centre of UK government.

This report is the product of a year-long research process involving evidence from a wide range of practitioners and experts, from former prime ministers to leading scientists, from senior civil servants in the UK and overseas to leaders in local government, the private sector and charities.

The work of the commission has benefited immensely from the advice, insights and experience of our 16 commissioners. Our analysis and conclusions are far stronger as a result of their input to evidence sessions and our discussions over the past year.

We have, however, at no stage asked our commissioners to personally sign up to all the conclusions and proposals set out in this report. It reflects the views of the Institute for Government, the chair and the deputy chair.

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Executive summary

The Commission on the Centre of Government has concluded that No.10 Downing Street, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury are not capable of meeting the challenges facing the United Kingdom in the 2020s and beyond. The centre of government must become more strategic, better able to set direction and hold the rest of government accountable for delivery.

There will be a general election by January 2025. The subsequent government formation is the time to implement our proposals, which will better enable any prime minister and political party with a clear plan to create the conditions in which that plan can become reality.

A returned Conservative government would need to identify priorities to replace the 'pledges' that have shaped Rishi Sunak's agenda to date. Keir Starmer has set out five 'missions' for change, which Labour would pursue.

The reforms we set out here would give whoever forms the next government a better chance of success, creating strengthened, united political leadership at the heart of government, and a new way of ensuring Whitehall's time and money is directed to long-term, cross-cutting priorities.

Seven proposals to improve the centre of government

1. The government should agree its priorities at the start of a parliament and announce them as part of a modernised King's Speech.
2. The prime minister should appoint an Executive Cabinet Committee made up of a few key ministers.
3. The prime minister should appoint a new, senior first secretary of state with responsibility for delivering the government's priorities and ministerial responsibility for the civil service.
4. The Cabinet Office and No.10 should be restructured into a Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and a separate Department for the Civil Service.
5. There should be a new statute for the civil service and the Civil Service Board to hold its leadership accountable for reform priorities.
6. The roles of cabinet secretary (accountable to the prime minister) and head of the civil service (accountable to the first secretary) should be filled by separate individuals.
7. The government's priorities should be fully reflected in a new shared strategy, budget and performance management process owned collectively at the centre of government.

The problems with the centre of government

The UK was the first country in the world to have a prime minister and a system of cabinet government. For many years after the system emerged in the 18th century it worked well. But in recent decades, cracks have emerged. The UK has become a highly centralised country with a closed, and weak, centre.

The prime minister has over time become ever more of an executive leader of the government, but the support they are given has not kept pace with their responsibilities. The centre of government fails to set and maintain an overall strategy for the government to follow. The resulting vacuum is filled by the powerful Treasury.

Governments do not do enough to translate their manifesto and other policy ambitions into priorities for government linked to the outcomes they want to achieve. Cabinet – at one point the UK government’s chief decision making body – has ceased to be effective. It retains an important constitutional and political role, but the big decisions are taken elsewhere.

The institutions of the centre themselves have not fared much better. No.10 is underpowered but compulsively involved in detail, with ambiguous structures that undermine the clarity of instruction from the prime minister and encourage in-fighting. There is an inward-looking bunker mentality, too closed to the external expertise and outside perspectives that are necessary to make the best decisions. The centre has become disconnected from the lives of the citizens on whose behalf it works.

The Cabinet Office, founded to serve cabinet and its committees, has become bloated and unfocused. Despite the talent of many of its people, it is failing in its core role of supporting the prime minister and cabinet.

The relative strength of the Treasury, set against the weakness of No.10 and the Cabinet Office, distorts decision making across government, and its relationships with other departments can be dysfunctional, reinforcing silos through a budget setting process that makes it harder to tackle the cross-cutting and long-term problems facing the country.

The UK is an over-centralised country and, while powers have been increasingly if erratically devolved, the centre of government has not kept pace. Decision makers instinctively control and centralise. The centre has not adapted to the consequences of devolution for its own role.

The civil service's leadership lacks authority – nobody is running the civil service from the centre. The cabinet secretary's job has become so broad as to be impossible. There is insufficient pressure or impetus to address urgent capability gaps in the skills, workforce planning and talent management of the civil service. An artificial separation between policy, delivery and analytical teams means that policy decisions are made without taking operational constraints into account. The opportunities offered by new technology are often missed.

Not everything is broken. The Treasury is a high-performing department with a strong culture. The No.10 private office is a close-knit team serving very different prime ministers with loyalty and skill and the prime minister's office is where relations between ministers, their political advisers and the civil service tend to be at their best. The Cabinet Office has driven cost-savings and capability improvements across government. The system is full of excellent people – politicians, special advisers and civil servants.

But the centre simply does not work well enough. Prime ministers come into office with the best of intentions to tackle the toughest problems. They begin their tenure incredulous that their predecessors have failed to make more progress. But they are often then humbled by the challenge, defeated by long-term, cross-cutting and deep-rooted problems that the centre of government is inadequately designed to address.

Urgent change is needed

The UK is facing an acute set of policy challenges, including stagnant economic growth, intractable regional inequalities, the generational task of building energy security and tackling climate change, chronic problems in public services, an ageing population and decaying infrastructure.

Lord Rees, the astronomer royal, told the commission how difficult it is to predict future technological or social changes: “You can’t predict the rate of progress and we have to accept that.” But we can make a fair assumption that technological change, above all AI, will have a major impact. It has the potential to transform our lives in exciting and positive ways, but it might also lead to an increased threat from extreme risks. As philosopher Toby Ord told the commission: “The pandemic has reminded us that the world remains vulnerable to civilisation-shaking risks. The UK needs to take action to increase its resilience to meet these challenges”.

Moments come when change becomes necessary. War and economic strife are often the spur. But at other times, as with the Northcote–Trevelyan report in the mid-19th century and the Haldane report in 1918, which together created the modern civil service, the logic for change simply becomes overwhelming. 2024 is such a moment.

The Commission on the Centre of Government

We launched the commission in March 2023. Over the past year it has considered the functions and structures of No.10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, and the processes and relationships that operate within them.

We have gathered evidence intensively, learning from a wide range of practitioners and experts, from former prime ministers to leading scientists, from serving permanent secretaries in the UK and overseas to leaders in local government, the private sector and civil society. We have drawn evidence from three main sources:

when the centre of government worked best in the past, how the centre of government works in comparable countries (and in other parts of UK government), and what can be learnt from complex private sector organisations.

We recognise that there are many factors that weigh heavily on the effectiveness of the centre that we cannot address. Foremost is the quality of the prime minister's leadership. Nor can we influence the economic and political context in which the centre operates, including the size of the government's majority in a House of Commons.

The talents of officials and advisers in the centre, and how well the civil service is managed, are also vital as we discuss later. More general questions on how the government as a whole can hire, retain and manage the most capable people, and address the urgent problem of staff churn, are covered at length in other Institute for Government research. We also recognise that while we strongly advocate for the recruitment of the best people into public service, we cannot ourselves hire talented officials or performance manage out bad ones.

The question of what power and policy should be devolved to which tier of government has major consequences for the centre, determining the matters for which it is responsible. This report sets out ways in which the centre can more effectively align its approach to devolution to its priorities, and recognises that the highly centralised nature of the UK can cause problems. But we do not make proposals for the future of devolution policy or the union. These are the subject of ongoing research at the Institute.

Institutions and processes shape the context and the incentives that influence how people behave. They form the landscape of the centre of government and can be improved by conscious design. Our proposals therefore focus on the institutional architecture and functions of No.10 and the Cabinet Office, their relationship with the Treasury, and the processes of decision making at the centre of government.

Proposals for change

We make seven main recommendations for change.

1. **The government should agree its priorities at the start of a parliament and announce them as part of a modernised King's Speech.**

At the start of each administration the prime minister should take the lead in the development of a set of *Priorities for Government*. The aim should be to translate manifesto promises and other policy ambitions into a coherent programme that directs government activity and frames priorities that cut across departmental boundaries.

The priorities should be agreed and announced at the beginning of a parliament as part of a modernised King's Speech, and will be a statement of the government's ambitions and objectives – including the key outcomes that will constitute success – much more than a list of legislation. The priorities need to be ambitious and tangible. They should be debated and endorsed by parliament, then developed into a detailed, published framework based on evidence and open discussion with people who understand what is happening on the ground.

2. **The prime minister should appoint an Executive Cabinet Committee made up of a few key ministers.**

To develop these priorities and to manage the strategic objectives of the government, the prime minister should appoint an Executive Cabinet Committee. The executive committee's core responsibilities should be strategic – to distil the *Priorities for Government* and recommend them to full cabinet, to hold departments to account for delivery of these priorities, to agree the government's fiscal rules, spending envelope and departmental budget allocations, and to revisit these matters as necessary over the course of the parliament.

Cabinet is constitutionally important, as is most obviously demonstrated when prime ministers are weak, but it is not a functioning decision making forum. This is partly because it

is too big, and the most successful prime ministers have, in their different ways, used a core group of ministers to make strategic decisions. Shaping key decisions in a smaller and more functional group before they are discussed and endorsed by the full cabinet (supported by a lean and powerful new secretariat) is not only legitimate but necessary.

The executive committee, and the centre as a whole, needs to be more open to external expertise through both formal and informal means.

3. **The prime minister should appoint a new, senior first secretary of state with responsibility for delivering the government's priorities and ministerial responsibility for the civil service.**

They will sit on the executive committee and work closely with the chancellor to manage tensions between the government's fiscal objectives and the rest of the government's agenda – allowing the prime minister to retain a strategic, long-term view. They will chair the Civil Service Board, and will work closely with the prime minister and sit within the prime minister's office, replacing the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and so not adding to the number of ministers.

4. **The Cabinet Office and No.10 should be restructured into a Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and a separate Department for the Civil Service.**

Most prime ministers have at one time or another considered creating a department for the prime minister. We believe the case for doing so is now compelling. The Cabinet Office and No.10 should be restructured into a Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) and a separate Department for the Civil Service (DCS).

The prime minister is the executive leader of the government and should be supported as such. A stronger, more stable DPMC focused on servicing the core functions of the centre of government is needed. It is also time to recognise that treating the Cabinet Office as a separate department is a convenient

fiction that obscures more than it clarifies. It is more honest, and more effective in avoiding duplication and confusion, to match departmental structures to political reality as it exists. A refreshed structure in the centre will also resolve the damaged reputation of the Cabinet Office, an unfortunate but recurrent theme of our evidence sessions.

The DPMC will set the direction of the government and bolster the direct, strategic support for the prime minister. It will be housed in a modernised Downing Street and 70 Whitehall complex, and structured to ensure clearer staff responsibilities including:

- a group focused on government priorities, providing policy expertise, economic advice and analysis, performance and delivery functions to track progress and unblock delivery
- the cabinet secretariats, plus a new executive committee secretariat
- a joint analysis and assessment centre, building on improvements in analytical capacity made during and since Covid-19.

A stronger, more strategic DPMC will be better able to devolve and decentralise policy to other departments, public bodies and tiers of government. For the centre to operate effectively, functions that can be managed by the rest of government, and by those outside government, should be delegated elsewhere. A more strategic centre would only do the things it could add value by doing, supporting delivery and maintaining oversight without getting in the way.

A new DCS reflects the importance of high-quality leadership and management of the civil service. The corporate centre of the government needs officials with the authority to set standards and the expertise to get them right. The department will take on the leadership, management and capability of the civil service, including the teams responsible for setting and enforcing functional standards of practice, civil service talent, learning and development, and modernisation and reform. It will also have a remit to ensure that policies and budgets take

delivery considerations into account. The first secretary of state will be the secretary of state for the department, with a minister of state for the civil service (attending cabinet) taking on much of the day-to-day responsibility.

These will be important changes to the machinery of government at the centre. The Institute for Government is usually the first to urge caution around such changes – they can be disruptive and distracting. But we have concluded that the current structure inhibits effective delivery of government priorities to the extent that this step must be taken. Creating a new DPMC would certainly be a significant undertaking, but is necessary, achievable and worth the cost.

5. **There should be a new statute for the civil service and a Civil Service Board to hold its leadership accountable for reform priorities.**

The DCS will be responsible for policy on the civil service, underpinned by a new statute for the civil service and a Civil Service Board to hold the leadership accountable for reform priorities and to receive and scrutinise departmental accounts. Civil service ministerial and official leadership will remain at the heart of the government, directly connected to delivering the *Priorities for Government*, but now with its own clear organisational and leadership structure.

6. **The roles of cabinet secretary (accountable to the prime minister) and head of the civil service (accountable to the first secretary) should be filled by separate individuals.**

There are two distinct leadership roles for civil servants and they should be filled separately. First, the cabinet secretary, leading the DPMC, working as the prime minister's principal civil service adviser and brokering decisions; and second, the head of the civil service, leading the DCS, with statutory responsibility for maintaining the capability of the civil service and accountability to parliament for so doing.

Both will be closely involved in the executive committee and advising on the government's priorities. The cabinet secretary is accountable to the prime minister. The head of the

civil service is accountable for the management of the civil service to the first secretary as chair of the Civil Service Board, while being personally performance managed by the cabinet secretary. Both the cabinet secretary and the head of the civil service would participate in the executive committee, and the head of the civil service would be physically closely located to the cabinet secretary

7. **The government's priorities should be fully reflected in a new, shared strategy, budget and performance management process owned collectively at the centre of government.**

We are not proposing an institutional split of the Treasury. More effective is to harness the power of the Treasury to better support collective government objectives. But the department's strategic dominance and bilateral approach to budget allocation means that to achieve this decision making must be overhauled.

To ensure the *Priorities for Government* are translated into a coherent strategy, collective government priorities will be fully reflected in a new, shared, strategy, budget and performance management process at the centre of government. This will be managed by the secretariat in the new DPMC. Other DPMC teams, the Treasury and DCS will work up and put proposals to the executive committee. The process will be built around a multi-year spending review to set incentives for long-term planning, aligned to the length of the parliament and the *Priorities for Government*. It will cover the most important long-term, cross-cutting objectives of the government, requiring departments to develop shared, joined-up plans and spending bids.

The cabinet secretary and the head of the civil service, as well as the Treasury permanent secretary, would be fully involved in resource allocation. There would be a single performance framework to track, evaluate and effect delivery of the government's priorities.

There is no perfect way to structure the centre of government, but we believe our solution is the best approach. It is radical, practical and deliverable. It will allow the prime minister to set a clear strategy and lead the country dynamically and effectively.

The United Kingdom deserves better. This report sets out our blueprint for change.



1. The purpose of the centre of government



The centre is the guardian of the strategy and the prime minister is the mainstay of the centre.



Lecture by **Sir Kenneth Berrill**

Former head of the Central Policy Review Staff (1974–80)¹

The centre's primary function is to set government strategy

Government is hard. Irreconcilable trade-offs, unresolvable disagreements and competing priorities have always been intrinsic to its existence. As the former prime minister Sir John Major said in a 2022 speech at the IfG, “while government can do much, it cannot do everything. All problems cannot be swiftly and painlessly resolved on demand: it is an impossible task.”

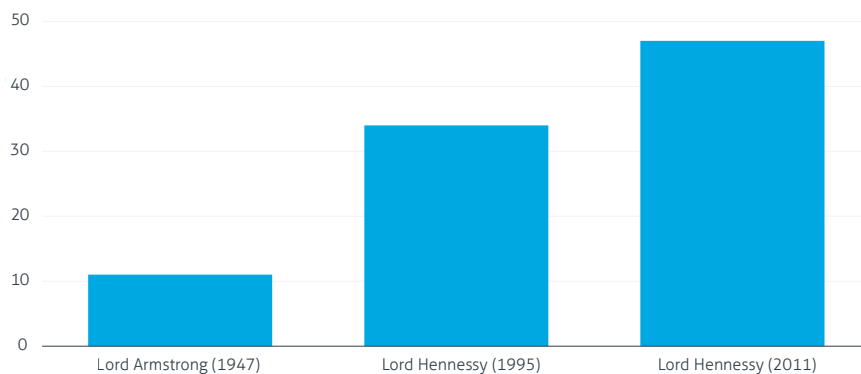
The complexity of governing is compounded by the technological innovation of the last two decades and the increase in tiers of government – both of which bring benefits, but have also changed the way governments need to lead from the centre. Long-standing trends like slow economic growth and an ageing population have combined with extreme events like the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine to create an interconnected set of domestic and international policy challenges on a scale not seen for decades. The centre of government needs to be able to navigate these challenges.

The task of the centre is above all to support the prime minister to set direction, and to develop and execute the government's strategy – by which we mean **a plan of action to achieve a defined set of objectives**. In government, this includes how priorities are determined and resources allocated, how institutions are organised to collaborate, and how policies and services are delivered.

Constitutionally, the prime minister is still 'first among equals', but in practice they have become the individual to whom all of government – and indeed at times the whole country – looks to set the UK's course.²

As the prime minister's responsibilities have grown, so has the number of roles they are expected to perform. In 1947, the future head of the civil service William Armstrong conducted an audit of prime ministerial functions and came up with 12. Historian Peter Hennessy repeated the exercise in 1995 and found 33. A follow-up conducted by Hennessy and Andrew Blick in 2011 returned 47.³

Figure 1 Number of prime ministerial functions identified in successive stocktakes, 1947–2011



Source: Institute for Government analysis of successive stocktakes of prime ministerial functions undertaken by Lord Armstrong in 1947, Lord Hennessy in 1995, and Lord Hennessy and Professor Andrew Blick in 2011. Notes: The 2011 assessment contains some functions specific to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition then in power. The full list of functions can be found in written evidence submitted by Lord Hennessy to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in 2011.

The prime minister's effective power and influence have similarly grown. It was not so long ago that even priority policy areas were considered the near-exclusive domain of the relevant secretary of state, to the extent that if asked a question about their brief at Prime Minister's Question time, a prime minister should give way to a secretary of state.⁴ Contrast that with the regularity with which Rishi Sunak uses press conferences to issue updates on his personal commitment to 'stop the boats' – a policy for which the Home Office is responsible but that is gripped tightly by No.10.

This increase in responsibilities makes it harder for the prime minister to keep sight of their core role: setting strategy. As Sir Tony Blair told us, being an effective prime minister is "like being a chief executive. You must have a very clear strategic objective as to what you want to do. Otherwise ministers and the system do not get a clear message."⁵

The structure around the prime minister (and chancellor) at the centre is the only part of government able to see across domains and make programmatic – and fiscal – trade-offs between policy areas, using its convening power to ensure that activity across government is aligned to a coherent strategy. The other important functions the centre ought to perform include the following:⁶

Key functions of the centre of government

Leadership and management

- holding the rest of government to account for implementing policies in line with agreed priorities
- setting an example of a high-performance culture in which ministers, civil servants and political appointees work together towards shared goals
- challenging departmental practice by using central units to incubate and catalyse change
- managing the civil service, maintaining its capability to serve current and future ministers
- supporting the prime minister to make political and public appointments
- maintaining the government's authority in parliament and ability to pass legislation.

Co-ordination

- brokering agreement and resolving disputes
- supporting and, where necessary, co-ordinating departments and sectors on cross-cutting issues
- safeguarding national security and co-ordinating emergency response to keep the country and citizens safe.

Communications and other duties

- communicating with the public, explaining what the government is doing
- otherwise supporting the prime minister and other ministers leading the government from the centre.

All of these functions are important. But as Blair told the commission:

“[the centre of government] should be laser focused – [it] has got to be strong because you have to drive the direction of government and make sure there is coherence. It’s got to be able to have a strategic direction, and on key priorities go into the detail.”

Setting the government’s strategic direction is the centre’s core purpose – and the most important thing that it is currently failing to do.

WE NEED JUSTICE
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RECOGNISE ALL VICTIMS
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RECOGNISE ALL VICTIMS
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factor 8



2. Problems with the centre of government

 There is a gap at the centre of Whitehall – a conspicuous lack of a single coherent strategy for government as a whole. 

Shaping Up: A Whitehall for the Future,
Institute for Government, 2010⁷

The UK is a highly centralised country with a weak centre.⁸ The executive's three central institutions – No.10, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office – are insufficiently strategic and too often less than the sum of their parts. The relationship between the three is unstable and highly contingent on changing relationships between individuals at the top of government. No.10 is particularly underpowered yet compulsively gets involved in detail. The Cabinet Office has lost its focus. The relative strength of the Treasury distorts decision making in a way that ripples out across government. All this leaves the centre unbalanced, leading to unnecessary tensions between its institutions and worse outcomes for citizens.

The centre is not strategic and governments fail to define their priorities

Many new or returning prime ministers have recognised the importance of setting out their vision after taking office, when they speak for the first time outside the door of No.10 or at their first cabinet meeting. David Cameron held up his party's manifesto at the first meeting of his cabinet after the 2015 election, saying that "if we've promised it, we're going to deliver on it".⁹ In 2016, Theresa May's reference to "burning injustices" on the steps of Downing Street were intended to define her premiership.¹⁰ Three years later

Boris Johnson's mission to "get Brexit done" dominated his time in office, at least until Covid hit.

The prime minister's ideas are not translated into priorities for government

The prime minister's broad approach is rarely translated into the outcomes they actually want to achieve, or an articulation of the trade-offs they are prepared to make to get there. This leaves a strategic vacuum at the heart of government.¹¹ Politicians understandably campaign in broad terms and work hard to preserve their political room for manoeuvre. And the prime minister's scope to implement their ideas will be restricted by the political and economic context of their administration. But UK governments are prone to too much strategic ambiguity that ultimately undermines their ability to deliver their priorities and manifesto promises.

As Paul Drechsler, the former president of the Confederation of British Industry, told us: "A soundbite alone is not a strategy." Government requires decisions, and decisions are best made in the context of a coherent framework of priorities. As another witness to the commission put it: "You can't have lots of different strategies that undermine each other. If you want to be effective you need an overall strategy that adds up and drives coherent policies across government."

A strategic gap is a long-standing problem

The IfG wrote more than a decade ago of the "conspicuous lack of a single coherent strategy for government as a whole".¹² At no point in the 10 years since has this gap been filled. And the gap existed for many more years prior. As long ago as 1970, a white paper published by Ted Heath's government identified the risk of governments "losing sight of the need to consider the totality of their current policies in relation to their longer-term objectives".¹³ More recently, the Resolution Foundation and the Centre for Economic Performance's *Economy 2030 Inquiry* argued that the problem has been particularly acute on the economy, with Britain lacking a coherent and consistent economic strategy for decades.¹⁴

The UK government at Westminster is an outlier in persistently avoiding producing a programme or set of *Priorities for Government*. It is normal for the Scottish and Welsh governments to publish a programme for government, including during periods of a governing majority or single party rule. We heard from a range of interviewees that objective-setting methods such as these helped to guide government activity.

In systems with a long history of coalition government like Germany and the Netherlands, formal agreements between the governing political parties tend to set specific policy objectives.^{*15} Canadian prime ministers use 'mandate letters' to "outline the objectives that each minister will work to accomplish, as well as the pressing challenges they will address in their role". These letters contain cross-cutting objectives and a preamble explaining the most relevant whole-government priorities, and ministers are normally performance managed on their delivery, although mandate letters alone do not amount to a programme for government.¹⁶

British prime ministers have tried writing similar letters, but they have not gained purchase. However, there has been one recent UK example of a programme for government: that produced by the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, which structured much of that administration's activity. The then minister for government policy, Oliver Letwin, said that it determined "essentially the entirety of the domestic policy agenda of the government".¹⁷ It stuck because the cost of one party departing from the programme was high, as demonstrated by a tit-for-tat argument when the Conservatives stepped back from commitments the Liberal Democrats felt had been made on House of Lords reform, and were 'punished' when the junior party proceeded to sink Conservative-backed constituency boundary changes.

* For example, see the 2021–2025 Coalition Agreement between the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Greens and the Free Democrats.

But overall, the programme was an efficient tool with which to work and took hold – in no small part because of the conscious effort made by the prime minister and deputy prime minister to embed it early in the coalition. Ultimately, David Cameron and Nick Clegg chose to invest major political capital in setting out, with specifics, a plan for their five-year term.

The coalition programme for government had limitations

Arguably the coalition government's 'long-term economic plan' and associated 'austerity' spending cuts were as important an animating as its programme, guiding trade-offs and decision making as much as ticking off a list of achievements from the programme for government. And the programme was a list of actions rather than a guiding set of outcomes that the government wanted to achieve.

The risk of such a list of policies is it proves inflexible and becomes a straitjacket for the government when the context changes or promises turn out to be unattainable or unwise. Such a programme can direct activity in areas where the government came into office with a firm policy but give little direction in unanticipated situations. If, in 2019, the incoming Johnson administration had drawn up a coalition-style programme for government it would not have helped to navigate the extreme events that followed like the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

But, as Margaret Thatcher said, to get things done "you have to have some stars to steer by, and the stars have to be constant".¹⁸ Replicating the 2010–15 programme for government could help, but more useful still would be an evolution of that programme designed to give ministers, the civil service, other tiers of government and civil society a clear direction on the principles and outcomes that the government wished to pursue.

Prime ministers need to give themselves the best chance to "rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance".¹⁹ This is especially important for a prime minister coming into office with a small number of long-term and cross-cutting goals – as signalled, for example, by Keir Starmer with the Labour Party's five 'missions'. Without a proper plan to underpin a prime minister's

objectives, government activity will be poorly structured and tend towards dealing with immediate circumstantial pressures at the expense of core and more transformative objectives. This has too often been the case in recent governments, with prime ministerial attention skewed towards short-term fire-fighting, media management and external engagements, serving as displacement activity from the real problems of governing.

A closed and controlling centre leads to poorer outcomes

An unfocused centre too often descends into micro-management, replicating or second-guessing the work of departments, public bodies and other tiers of government. Prime ministers can forget that legislative power sits with departments, as do budgets. Secretaries of state “have all of the civil servants and all of the money”.²⁰

When the centre micro-manages it runs into trouble. The ‘Network North’ announcement made by Rishi Sunak at the 2023 Conservative Party conference is a recent example of this problem. The initiative was held closely by No.10, away from departmental officials, leading to serious flaws in the policy, as well as presentational errors. The latest evidence suggests that Network North will mean that popular routes like London to Manchester will actually have reduced passenger capacity.²¹

Policy developed by the centre also reduces the bandwidth for No.10 to focus on what we argue it should be doing – setting strategy. Professor David Richards and his colleagues argued in their written evidence to the commission that the “strategic capacity of Number 10 [is] limited by the irresistible temptation to intervene in matters of detail”. This creates a vicious cycle, because as one interviewee put it, “without a coherent strategy from above, people naturally end up micro-managing things because there isn’t anything else to do”. Micro-management squeezes out the space to think strategically, with the resulting lack of direction encouraging further micro-management.

A lack of strategic clarity at the centre adds to the related but distinct problem of over-centralisation. As previous IfG research concluded: “England is an unusually centralised country in terms of the ways it is administered, and its governing structures organised”. This can add to ineffective relationships between the tiers of government in England and across the four nations.^{22,23,24}

The centre of UK government has not kept up with the consequences of devolution for its own role and responsibilities, as demonstrated by, for example, inconsistent intergovernmental relations (IGR) between the four nations and incomplete IGR within England.²⁵ Devolved and local governments feel the pull of No.10’s centralising instinct, whether exercised directly or through sponsor line departments. During the Covid-19 pandemic Boris Johnson’s government opted to establish a centralised, national Test and Trace function – staffed by expensive consultants – rather than make full use of local public health experts who had been operating similar functions for over a century.²⁶

Another example of the controlling centre is the levelling up fund, a core component of Johnson’s flagship policy, which perpetuated UK government’s reliance on competitive funding mechanisms that limit local authorities’ room for manoeuvre. A more recent and extreme instance was No.10 (under Sunak) oversight of UK government’s efforts to roll-out chess tables across parks and public spaces, requiring local authorities to bid for tables at a cost of £2,500.²⁷

The relationship between the centre and devolved and local government is naturally more complex than between the centre and departments, because there is less (or no) requirement on other governments or authorities to follow central government priorities. But a confident and well-organised centre should be able to set direction for its own priorities, understand how those are reflected in the varying powers and responsibilities at different levels of government, and ultimately get out of the way of delivery in local and devolved government.

The centre is also too closed to be able to integrate the information and expertise those outside government have to offer. Witnesses to the commission stressed that businesses, charities and front-line public services in particular often have immediate and direct understanding of the consequences of government policies, or the problems that need to be addressed, but their voices are too frequently lacking in discussions at the centre. Examples of the impermeability of decision making at the centre identified by recent IfG research include the Treasury's long-standing control of tax policy and the limited outside input that has previously been sought in the development of the Cabinet Office's National Security Risk Assessment.^{28,29}

The processes used to support strategic decision making at the centre remain far too closed to input from outside experts and citizens. More open ways of working would help the centre make better informed decisions.

The Treasury's power distorts prioritisation and decision making

The vacuum left by No.10 and the Cabinet Office is filled by the Treasury

Lord Barwell, the former Downing Street chief of staff, told the commission: "If the prime minister doesn't set strategy for the government then the Treasury will do it through spending reviews." In practice Treasury-managed processes fill the strategic vacuum at the centre of government by making trade-offs between departments' competing bids for finite resources. Decisions over which policies get funded combine to create a *de facto* strategy.

Treasury processes have at different times been more, or less, influenced by the prime minister. Prime ministers can usually make a case to the chancellor on individual spending decisions, if the issue is important enough to elevate and relationships between the two most powerful figures in the government are sufficiently functional.

But even prime ministers who are closely aligned with their chancellors usually lack the clear framework of priorities (and underpinning principles) that would enable them to set direction. Furthermore, and again regardless of their relationship with their chancellor, prime ministers are structurally weak in relation to the Treasury – without the time, strategic support, economic advice or opportunity to influence decision making from start to finish.

The Treasury's control over the allocation of public funds makes it far more powerful than most finance ministries worldwide.³⁰ But combining this role with the Treasury's responsibilities as the UK's economic ministry sees the department's power manifest in other ways too. As well as – in effect – setting whole-government strategy, the chancellor develops and 'owns' the government's growth strategy, macroeconomic policy and fiscal rules, which frame the context for all budgets and so ultimately, all policy. Chancellors, deploying the power of the Treasury, have a tendency to 'bounce' departments into policy – something described by No.10 adviser Bernard Donoghue as long ago as the 1970s and demonstrated repeatedly since.*

The Treasury also has sole and closely guarded control of tax policy, which undermines attempts at long-term planning for the tax system and gives the chancellor free rein to pull too many rabbits from too many hats.³¹ Responsibility for economic policy – ostensibly shared between the Treasury and various incarnations of the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) – is hoarded by a powerful Treasury when the relationship with DBT becomes dysfunctional, as it frequently does, often reflecting conflicts between their respective political leaders.

It is important that a strong Treasury expresses its views on the economic and strategic merit of departmental plans. And it is also important for the Treasury, as guardian of the public finances, to be able to say 'no' to spending departments. But by

* A more recent example being the Treasury's approach to domestic policy and funding under Gordon Brown. One insider from the New Labour years described the Treasury's approach on, for instance, education funding: "We rang up departments saying you're going to get some money... the press release in your name can be picked up from the department this afternoon."

leaving whole-government strategy processes to be run from and dominated by the Treasury, successive prime ministers have failed to perform their principal responsibility to set the government's strategy and ensure it is translated into its policy, budgets and so therefore delivery. It was for this reason that the then minister without portfolio Peter Mandelson wrote to Tony Blair in May 1997 warning against allowing government strategy to become "a purely Treasury-driven exercise".³²

Spending is too often misaligned with the government's priorities

The Treasury's dominance means that there is often a misalignment between the government's priorities, policy and budgets. This can be, but is certainly not always, the result of disagreement between the prime minister and chancellor – the two institutions beneath them, and the ways they work, are also part of the problem.

After the Conservatives' December 2019 general election victory, Boris Johnson made it a centrepiece of his administration to "unite and level up" the country.³³ Efforts to define what this meant failed from the start of his government. The former deputy cabinet secretary Helen MacNamara wrote that "identifying a clear and bold programme for government was very much unfinished work" in January 2020.³⁴ It took over two years for the government to publish its levelling up white paper (understandably delayed by the pandemic, but a lag that still left a core part of the government's agenda in limbo).³⁵

This meant that the 2020 and 2021 spending reviews were left having to budget for an as yet undefined policy programme. When the white paper was finally produced, its objectives were restricted to what could be achieved within those budget allocations – entirely the wrong way around for an important policy priority.

This is not a new problem. Gordon Brown famously had huge influence over the Blair government's domestic policy via the Treasury's tight control of budgets and spending reviews, with limited involvement from the prime minister. Blair's economic

adviser, Derek Scott, recalled an occasion in which the prime minister was even moved to ask Brown to “give me a hint” ahead of the 1998 budget.³⁶ The introduction of public service agreements in the 1998 spending review helped to mitigate this problem and to co-ordinate the centre’s priorities between Nos.10 and 11.³⁷

David Gauke, a Conservative minister in the Treasury during the 2010s, also recognised this dynamic, saying “there’s generally not a massive amount of openness from the Treasury”, which can regard that as necessary for controlling public finances, and that prime ministers “don’t have anything like the same resources” as the Treasury.

However, its power does not mean the status quo works well for the Treasury either. Often it is left to make trade-offs between departments’ plans without an adequate framework by which to judge compatibility with the government’s overall priorities.

Treasury officials are conscious of this problem. Since 2020 efforts have been made to set ‘priority outcomes’ for each department. These are agreed between the centre and departments, intended to guide bids for resources and the Treasury’s scrutiny of those bids, as a step towards aligning budgets and priorities. But the system works better in theory than in practice. As we found in a 2022 IfG paper, priority outcomes lack the political buy-in to drive strategy and do not always align to political priorities, including of the prime minister. They can also be inconsistent in their specificity and it is unclear how sincerely they are used to guide negotiations over budget allocations.³⁸ Civil servants in the Treasury’s public spending group are left to interpret and predict trade-offs where more explicit collective government prioritisation would help align resources to priorities.³⁹

There is not enough counterbalance to Treasury 'orthodoxy'

The Treasury's overarching control means that its priorities, and ultimately those of the chancellor, dominate strategic decision making. These priorities are reflective of finance ministries worldwide and are in many ways welcome and justifiable.* Effective government needs a strong department with a focus on inflation control, managing public spending and promoting trade.⁴⁰ But while these are the right convictions for a finance ministry, they do not amount to a set of principles for shaping *all* government policy.

A government will always need to balance its fiscal priorities with other objectives. And departments will at times differ on how the government's objectives should be aligned with the need for financial sustainability. The Treasury's involvement is vital. But if it is only Treasury principles being applied then the government will too often make the wrong decisions.

As well as being uniquely powerful in Whitehall, the Treasury is also arguably the most 'political' department, being especially responsive to the priorities of its chancellor. This means the chancellor's priorities, however they interact with the government's overall priorities and change over time, dominate the strategic processes overseen by the department.

Bilateral Treasury processes do not support cross-cutting priorities

Spending reviews are largely conducted through bilateral negotiations between the Treasury and individual line departments (though with variable oversight by No.10), incentivising secretaries of state to focus their submissions solely on priorities directly within their control. This frustrates efforts to encourage cross-cutting planning. The Public Accounts

* Referred to by some as Treasury 'orthodoxy' and the subject of another recent IfG report, see: Wilkes G, Bartum O and Clyne R, *Treasury 'orthodoxy': What is it? And is it a problem for government?* Institute for Government, 2024.

Committee recently identified “inconsistent joined-up in spending decisions and allocations” as one of the main barriers to better cross-government working.⁴¹ This means the centre, the only part of government positioned to identify and overcome these cross-departmental tensions, too often fails to do so.

This is a problem. Many of the most chronic policy issues that face the UK are cross-cutting, of which preventative health care is an example. Responsibility for public health policy, and its budget, sits with the health department, while many levers to reduce obesity sit variously with Defra (food regulations), DCMS (advertising regulations), DLUHC (local government) and the Treasury itself (tax and other economic policy) among other departments.⁴² For other issues, such as social care, the benefits can accrue in one department (DHSC in the form of reduced demand for acute health care) while the costs – economic, political or legislative – sit in another (DLUHC in the form of social care provision).

The way budget allocations are decided has not always been so bilateral. Margaret Thatcher’s ‘Star Chamber’ negotiations led to John Major’s ‘EDX’ cabinet committee on public expenditure allocation.⁴³ New Labour revived the ‘Star Chamber’ to oversee spending reviews and public service agreements in the 2000s. And the coalition used its ‘Quad’ in a similar way. But since 2015 there has been a lack of an equivalent forum to make allocation deliberations more collective and collaborative.

The development in 2021 of a ‘Shared Outcomes Fund’ was a more specific recognition of this problem. This was introduced to “incentivise departments to work collaboratively across challenging policy areas” and develop joint budgets for these policies.⁴⁴ But, focused as it is on small pilots, in the context of government spending it is tiny – just £100 million budgeted in its third round. Treasury-commissioned thematic reviews have, in the past, also been used to inform cross-cutting plans and budgets. Fifteen such “cross-departmental reviews” were used

to budget for key policy areas in the 2000 spending review.⁴⁵ But despite more recent examples, such as Dame Carol Black's 2020 review into drugs, they have been used much more sparingly by recent governments.⁴⁶

Even when encouraged to submit cross-departmental bids to spending reviews the silos win out. Cat Little, then second permanent secretary of the Treasury, told the Public Accounts Committee in 2023 of the Treasury's disappointment with the lack of cross-cutting bids from other departments at spending reviews, recognising that "we are going to have to do even more going into the next spending review" to create cross-cutting budgets, including "more top-down requests for bids".⁴⁷ When the centre identifies the need for cross-cutting planning, and encourages departments to do so, a process geared around negotiations with individual departments will inevitably skew effort and ministerial focus towards departmental silos. Reform to the process itself remains vitally important.

Cabinet is not an effective strategic decision making forum

The cabinet is a constitutionally and politically important institution. Collective responsibility operates on the principle that decisions are signed off by cabinet, and the prospect of sitting round the cabinet table is a strong career incentive for government MPs and junior ministers alike. Giving secretaries of state a forum to speak on cross-government policy is important and can help the prime minister 'judge the mood' of their cabinet and the wider parliamentary party.

The cabinet can be influential. When a prime minister is weak, it can exert substantial influence over the direction of the government and so the country. During the second half of Theresa May's tenure, her cabinet was fundamental to setting the government's direction over Brexit. James Callaghan found himself similarly constrained by his cabinet in the 1970s, with meetings lasting for days on end in an effort to resolve disagreements on economic policy.⁴⁸

But full cabinet is almost never a functional decision making body. An aide to Tony Blair, speaking in the 2000s, described it as having “died years ago”.⁴⁹ By 2010, Kenneth Clarke felt on his return to government that cabinet discussions had become “quite cursory... merely held so that the cabinet can be told what is going on”.⁵⁰ Nick Clegg said that he could “count on the fingers of one hand the instances where I felt that cabinet discussion changed the trajectory of policy in a big way”.⁵¹

Part of the problem is its size. As early as 1958, public intellectual Cyril Northcote Parkinson observed in a famous collection of essays that cabinet had grown too large to be a decision making body. At that time 22 people attended cabinet. Today, attendees regularly number more than 30.⁵²

The principles of effective meetings are the same in any sector. Academic studies show that the best size group for a serious discussion is somewhere between six and eight.⁵³ Leadership groups in the private sector do not have the same pressure to balance ideological views in the top team, and secretaries of state are responsible for vast swathes of the economy and civic life in a way that top executives are not. But by way of comparison, large and profitable corporations tend to have far smaller executive boards: a 2023 study found that the 150 largest FTSE companies had an average board size of 10 people, a third of the size of the cabinet.^{54,55}

Cabinet’s membership has also been driven more by considerations of political balance than capability. The former No.10 adviser Polly Mackenzie described to us how prime ministers appoint secretaries of state like “casting a reality TV show”. Careful political composition of cabinets is, of course, essential for a prime minister. Thatcher’s early cabinet was balanced between ‘wets’ and ‘drys’, Blair’s between Brownites and Blairites, and May’s between leavers and remainers. But for a government to achieve its objectives, talent and capability matter just as much as political stability.

Another problem is the culture of leaks and briefing to the media that has long been part of meetings, preventing any sensitive discussion. May's cabinet leaked incessantly.⁵⁶ On taking office, Boris Johnson tried to address the problem, issuing instructions that "there must be... no leaking; no breach of collective responsibility".⁵⁷ It did not work. Dominic Cummings, Johnson's chief adviser, said that during Covid, full cabinet's "constant leaks meant it was seen by everyone in No.10 as not a place for serious discussion."⁵⁸

Prime ministers assemble informal smaller groups to make decisions

For these reasons most prime ministers have assembled smaller groups of key colleagues to make the most important decisions. Thatcher, Major and Blair did so frequently – with Blair using a "big guns" meeting to "focus on top level priorities".⁵⁹ Brown settled on a 'horseshoe cabinet', with a mix of advisers and ministers.⁶⁰ Even tighter was the coalition government's 'Quad' – the prime minister, deputy prime minister, chancellor and chief secretary to the Treasury.

During the first part of the Johnson administration the 'XS' (Brexit strategy) cabinet committee, involving the prime minister and five others, made the critical strategic decisions on Brexit.^{61,62} Chief adviser Dominic Cummings said that during Covid "much of government involved a) largely Potemkin meetings with lots of people and formal notes etc but which deliberately did not engage critical issues and b) much smaller groups where critical issues were discussed".⁶³

Cabinet committees vary in quality and should be better run

Some formal cabinet committees have worked well but others are ineffective.⁶⁴ Too often they fail to grapple with trade-offs or find long-term solutions, with ministers reading from scripts – to defend prepared departmental lines – and officials who better understand the detail not fully participating.⁶⁵ Lord Blunkett said cabinet committees were “dysfunctional” because:

“Either you have an annotated agenda where to all intents and purposes decisions have already been made and the job of the Chair of the Committee is to get them through in as speedy a time as possible; or there is genuine disagreement which will have to be settled out of the committee because a row in committee and a vote is neither helpful nor acceptable.”⁶⁶

The strategy and operations structure that developed during Brexit, with officials sitting alongside ministers and actively contributing to discussion, is widely considered to have raised the quality of meetings. A government ‘lessons learned’ document described how:

“all departments supported having officials in attendance alongside Ministers, and said it was helpful to have experts in the room who are able to answer questions immediately”.⁶⁷

Cabinet committees are an important tool at the centre’s disposal to ensure government is geared towards its priorities. But the structure and management of these committees is too often ineffective and so limits their usefulness.

No.10 and the Cabinet Office are confused and underpowered

Most prime ministers, either in office or afterwards, have been critical of the weakness of all or parts of No.10 and the Cabinet Office. Thatcher, Blair and Johnson all sought ways to strengthen them.^{68,69,70} It is important that the institutions at the centre that provide direct support to the prime minister are responsive to their priorities and ways of working. But a balance needs to be struck, and the risk is that the centre is left with loosely defined or ambiguous structures that, rather than strengthening a prime minister's support, can undermine it. This is too often the case in No.10 and the Cabinet Office.

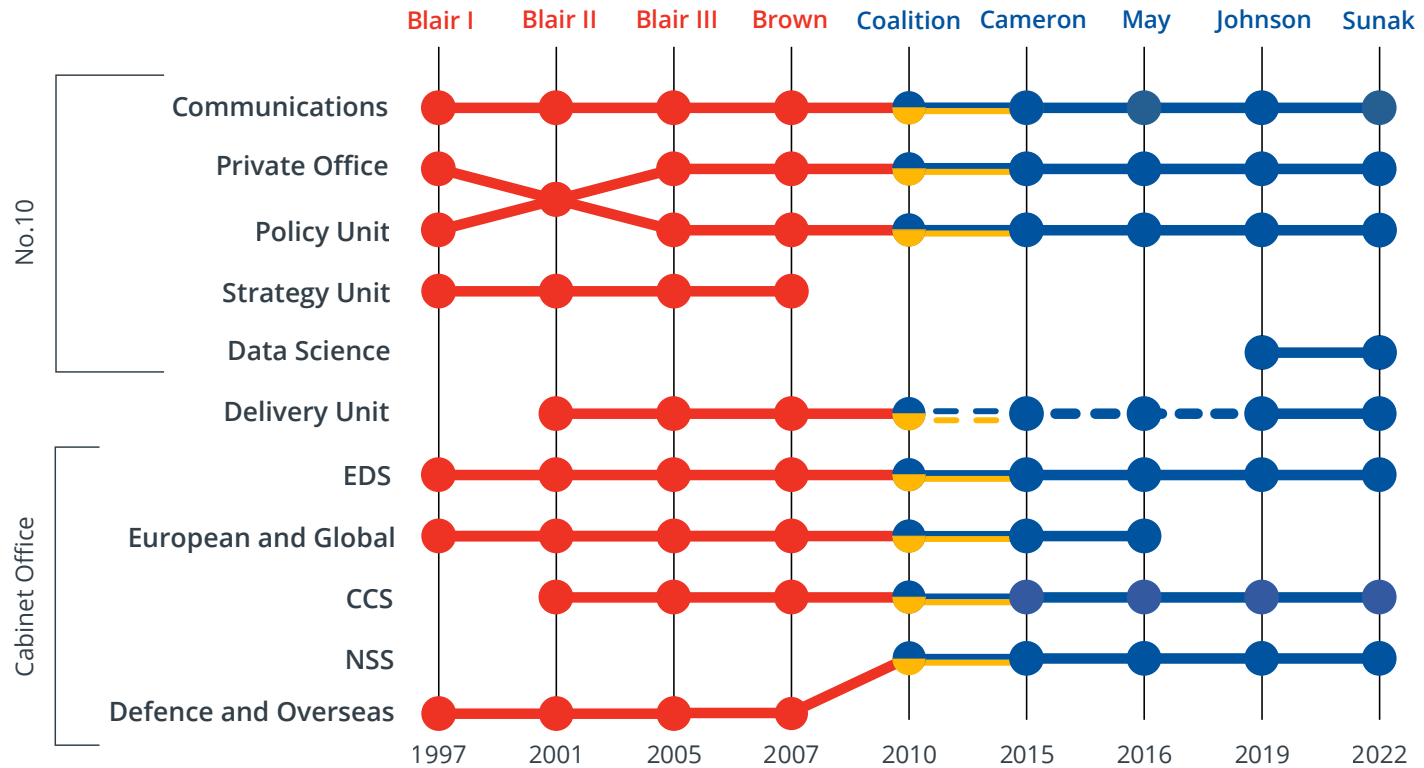
No.10 is too weak to set a clear direction

No.10's weakness does not primarily arise from lack of resource. It is a small office by the standards of Whitehall but that is because it has very limited policy or delivery responsibilities of its own. Its current total headcount of around 350 is very high by historical standards: it is five times the size of the staff when Thatcher was in office (70) and still more than a hundred people larger than at its peak during Blair's tenure (225).⁷¹

Most of those we heard from for this project argued that No.10 was now too big, with the increase in staff numbers leading to confused remits, a loss of focus on core priorities and an exacerbated tendency towards a 'court-like' working environment. One former No.10 adviser told us that the increase in staff means that "if you ask 'who is the person responsible for X' it is hard to get a straight answer".

Much of this increase in the number of people has been to expand existing capabilities rather than build new ones. For example, in 1986 Thatcher's policy unit had eight members; by January 2024 Sunak's policy unit included around 25 people.⁷² The broad continuity in the structure of the units in No.10 and the Cabinet Office is illustrated overleaf.

Figure 2 Selected units in No.10 and Cabinet Office, 1997–2022



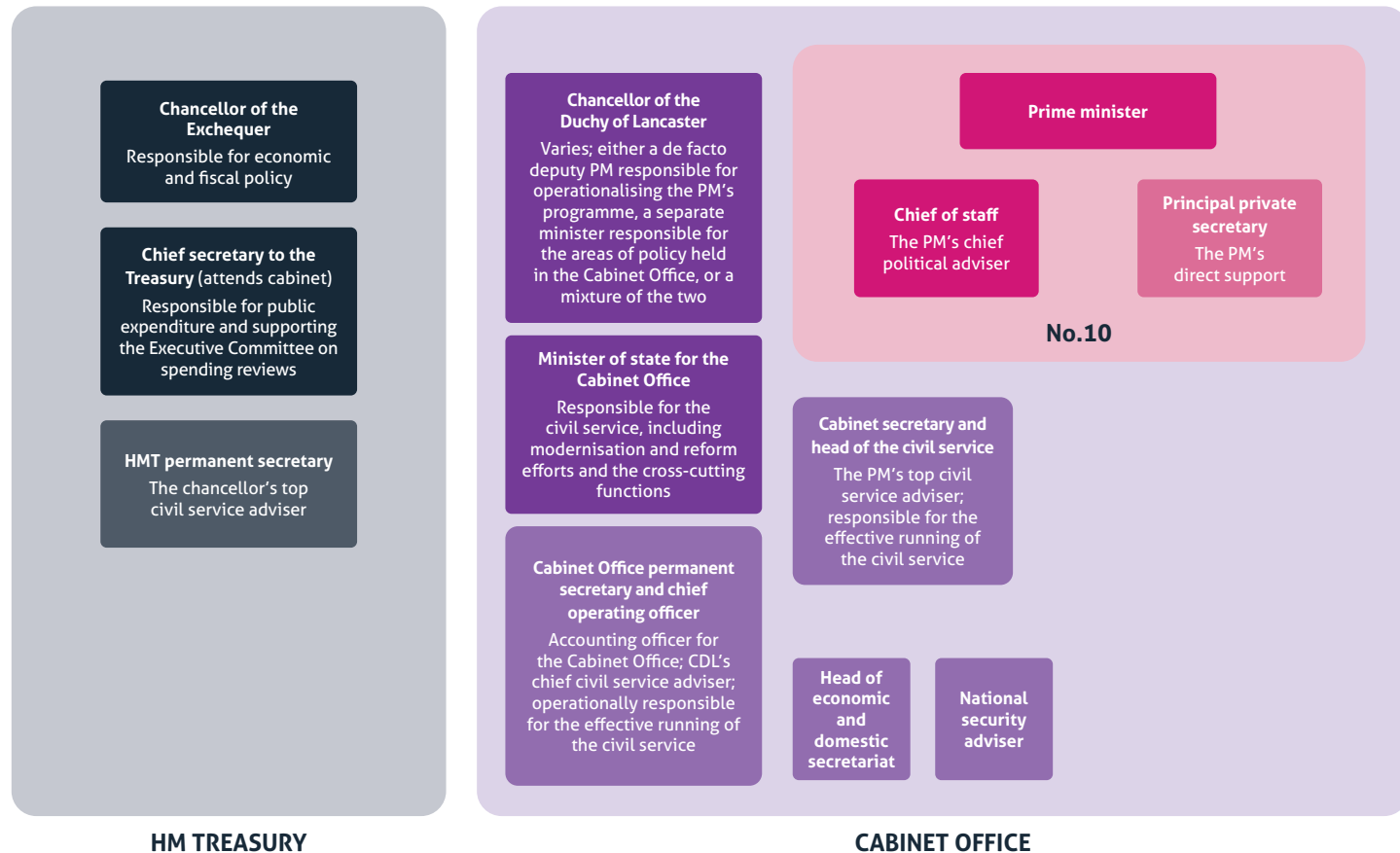
Source: Institute for Government analysis. Notes: The delivery unit was abolished in 2010 and recreated as the implementation unit in 2012. It was subsequently based in the Cabinet Office until the Johnson administration, when it moved back into No.10 and reverted to being called the delivery unit. EDS = economic and domestic secretariat, CCS = civil contingencies secretariat, and NSS = national security secretariat.

Rather than a lack of resource, the problem is that resource has not been dedicated to the right things. As the former No.10 deputy chief of staff Baroness Finn put it at the commission's launch event: "The structure [of No.10] hasn't massively changed but the numbers have changed enormously and I don't think that has necessarily made it more effective."⁷³

For much of the last 20 years, No.10 has broadly been modelled on the way it was organised during Blair's second term. 'Peak Blair' was often cited by witnesses and interviewees as the period in which No.10 operated most smoothly in recent times. However, a focus on recreating an ever larger version of Blair's No.10 is too backward looking. The world has changed and Blair himself told the commission:

"Today I would have a completely different skillset at the centre of government. I would be looking for people with real experience of working at the top level in technology. It's inconceivable that you wouldn't have some office of science and technology going across the centre."

Figure 3 Current structure of the centre of government



Source: Institute for Government analysis. Notes: Civil service roles are represented by a lighter shade of the relevant colour.

The challenges of government have also evolved in the decades since. Problems tend to emerge more quickly and, in the face of 24-hour news cycles and a more fragmented and adversarial media environment, there is more pressure for them to be resolved at pace.⁷⁴ The opportunities are also greater. Governments today have new tools available to them, most notably the ability to collect, assess and analyse vast quantities of data in a way that makes the cross-domain consequences of policy decisions clearer in real time.

The analytical capability to support the prime minister's oversight of key issues has improved but remains insufficient. The creation in recent years of '10DS' (a No.10 data science function) and the Joint Data and Analysis Centre (JDAC) in the Cabinet Office have helped. But No.10 should have more analytical capacity, and key decision makers need to use it more and better.⁷⁵

The other main gap in No.10's capability is economic. All major decisions and problems have an economic component. But economic policy making has had too little prime ministerial involvement. The chancellor has the full machinery of the Treasury at his disposal, while the prime minister has a very small number of capable but institutionally weak officials.

Nigel Lawson, who himself went on to become a powerful chancellor, said that the totemic 1981 budget was:

"very much [the then chancellor] Geoffrey Howe's budget... Thatcher was of course deeply interested and she was also getting a certain amount of advice from the Downing Street... policy entourage, but it didn't really make any difference to the budget in any way".⁷⁶

Blair had a single economic adviser who "reportedly struggled even to have access to the papers he needed in the role".⁷⁷ Gordon Brown's National Economic Council, which had access to a collection of expert external advisers, helped to strengthen the economic advice going into No.10 during the financial crisis, but did not translate to a long-lasting improvement in standing civil service economic expertise in Downing Street.⁷⁸

Johnson's 'joint economics unit' ended up falling into the chancellor's orbit despite its staff being hand-picked by No.10. Liz Truss planned to make No.10 her government's "economic nerve centre", but in her brief time only succeeded in establishing a tiny economic unit.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, having so many claiming (not always credibly) to speak with the prime minister's authority has reduced prime ministerial effectiveness, rather than increased it. A former No.10 adviser argued that it has meant

"there are a lot of people in No.10 (and the Cabinet Office) empowered to request information from departments and to ask them to justify themselves, but to no real end: too many of those people lack the power to change anything, or do very much useful with the information they gather."⁸⁰

Physical space in No.10 is also a problem. Staff work in converted cupboards and bathrooms. The interior is a warren that is complex to navigate, raises barriers to collaboration, and accentuates the court-like atmosphere. Digital infrastructure is retrofitted and there are faulty electrics and a mouse problem.

Sir Alex Allan, the former principal private secretary to the prime minister, has called the building "not fit for purpose".⁸¹ Jonathan Powell has said that one of his biggest regrets was that the Blair operation continued to work in No.10.⁸² Dominic Cummings also saw the building as a big limiting factor, but failed to convince Boris Johnson to abandon it.^{83,84}

At times when staff have moved out of No.10 they have found it helpful. During the 2000 fuel crisis Powell, Sir Jeremy Heywood (then the prime minister's principal private secretary) and a group of oil company chief operating officers moved into an open-plan office in 70 Whitehall, which Powell credits with improving the government's response.⁸⁵ During Theresa May's tenure, key personnel including chief of staff Gavin Barwell similarly moved into a 'war room' in 70 Whitehall ahead of some crunch Brexit votes, which Barwell felt improved decision making.⁸⁶

The Cabinet Office is unwieldy and has lost its sense of purpose

The Cabinet Office's core purpose is to facilitate collective decision making by the cabinet and cabinet committees – resolving disputes and building consensus around policies. Over time the department has accrued a variety of other functions, including emergency response, intelligence and security co-ordination, corporate management of the civil service and constitutional policy.⁸⁷

Very few witnesses or interviewees had positive things to say about the current Cabinet Office. One described it as the “worst place I’ve ever worked”. While not going as far, Ciaran Martin, who worked in the department through the New Labour and coalition administrations, argued that its staff are “without a common mission”. One director general previously told the IfG that it “is like working in pre-Garibaldi Italy. It’s a set of principalities of varying quality and differing character and a very transient workforce.”⁸⁸

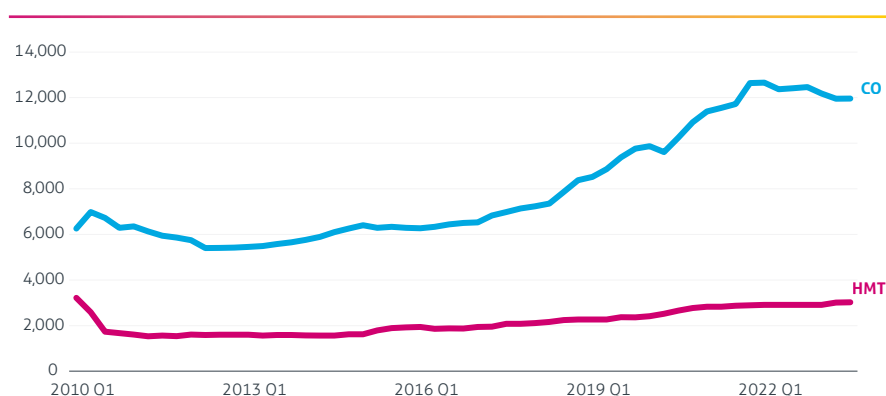
The Cabinet Office has become a place where, as Michael Gove told the Covid Inquiry, governments “shove... responsibilities that do not appear to fit conveniently or easily elsewhere”.⁸⁹ This includes policy and operational teams that ought to be based in departments, such as the Office for Veterans’ Affairs (more logically in the MoD), or the GREAT campaign to boost the UK’s image and exports overseas (business and trade). One witness described it as “a jigsaw where the picture on the box bears little resemblance to its contents”, getting involved in more, and more eclectic, policy issues beyond its core remit to bring coherence and co-ordination to government.

Alongside taking on responsibilities that do not fit with its core mission, the Cabinet Office has failed to effectively discharge responsibilities that are theoretically core to its purpose. For example, it has not consistently been able to manage a single, clear picture of government performance and translate this into a system for improving delivery. As a result, businesswoman and former government non-executive director Miranda Curtis told the commission that the government “lacks the structures that

underpin any other organisation, in particular a consistent set of centrally held data which everyone can rely on while managing their department”.

Like No.10, the Cabinet Office’s staff numbers have grown enormously. Overall headcount was 6,260 full-time equivalent employees (FTE) at the start of 2010, more than doubling to 15,290 by the middle of 2023.⁹⁰ Witnesses and written evidence submitted to the commission argued that such growth without an accompanying clarification of the department’s purpose and priorities was an important factor in diluting its coherence.⁹¹

Figure 4 Civil servants, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, Q1 2010 to Q3 2023



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q1 2010 to Q3 2023. Notes: Figures relate to FTE staff numbers in departmental groups, and correct for transfers of staff that were the result of machinery of government changes.

Unlike No.10, the expansion of the Cabinet Office has occurred largely because it has built new capabilities. Most notably, it now houses government’s corporate functions – various cross-government technical and operational teams. The functions have improved the capability of government. But they have further complicated the Cabinet Office’s sense of itself, with the brokering and policy-focused ‘west wing’ of the department and civil service management-focused ‘east wing’ awkwardly bolted together. Lord Maude’s 2023 review argued that incorporating the functions into the Cabinet Office had led to “blurred responsibilities and extremely confused lines of accountability”.⁹²

Not all the growth of the Cabinet Office relates to the corporate functions. There were 44 civil servants in the economic and domestic secretariat in 2010; the Cabinet Office's latest data shows that it now houses 116 people, including 36 senior civil servants (although structural change accounts for some of that growth).⁹³ There are, at the latest count, 35 permanent secretaries and directors general scrapping for influence across the whole of the Cabinet Office.⁹⁴

The No.10–Cabinet Office split creates duplication and confusion

Historically, No.10 and the Cabinet Office performed distinct functions, at least in theory. No.10 would directly support the prime minister, while the Cabinet Office would support the cabinet, so facilitating the work of collective government. The distinction between the two has come to be less relevant over time. The Cabinet Office's own website describes its first purpose as to "support the Prime Minister and ensure the effective running of government".⁹⁵

Even the cabinet secretariats, which are formally "responsible for the functioning of Cabinet governance" and so brokering collective agreement, have a particular relationship with and responsibility to the prime minister.⁹⁶ Under Johnson, the secretariats were instructed that their "ministerial accountability flowed through the prime minister only", something we understand continues to be the case in the Sunak administration.⁹⁷

There is value in the secretariats having a degree of distinctiveness from the prime minister. It helps build credibility with departments which, when the relationship works, trust the Cabinet Office as an honest broker. But acting as the voice of No.10 to departments, and as the voice of departments to No.10, means the Cabinet Office speaks for both and speaks for neither – an example of what Professor Andrew Blick has called its "institutional schizophrenia".⁹⁸ While on occasion it can be useful to the prime minister, more often it creates confusion and tension with departments and No.10, both of which are unclear exactly with what authority the secretariats speak. In situations where prime

ministers try to avoid conflict with their colleagues by relying on the 'plausible deniability' that the Cabinet Office does not operate under their control, confusion increases still further.

In a bloated Cabinet Office, the secretariats can sometimes be too distant from the prime minister's thinking to speak authoritatively for them. This leads to cross-government processes designed to support collective agreement instead being retrofitted to a decision coming from No.10. This wastes time and effort, and contributes to a view in other government departments – particularly strong at present – that they are oppressed by the centre. Again, the physical layout of the centre reinforces the problem. The separation of No.10 and the Cabinet Office in 70 Whitehall makes it harder to co-ordinate between the two, creating physical and psychological distance between teams.

Cabinet Office teams are pulled in different directions. Under Johnson, Gove and his special advisers were "often pushing at an ill-defined boundary", trying to co-opt Cabinet Office machinery for their own ends despite the Johnson team's stated desire that much of it serves solely the prime minister.⁹⁹ Helen MacNamara argued to the Covid Inquiry that:

"this uncertainty did not help with the confusion over who was doing what in response to Covid-19 particularly in the first few months when different people in the Cabinet Office had different working relationships with either Mr Gove or Mr Johnson. Or both. Or neither."¹⁰⁰

We heard that another consequence of the confused remits between No.10 and the Cabinet Office is the tendency for teams to duplicate work between the two organisations. The resulting inefficiency is a problem in itself. But it can cause other problems when multiple parts of No.10 and the Cabinet Office believe themselves to 'own' a particular issue. Interviewees described the difficulties this causes for the rest of Whitehall when multiple teams commission overlapping but contradictory work from departments, often with urgent deadlines. This can add to the sense outside the Cabinet Office and No.10 that the centre, rather than setting the government's strategic direction, is a hindrance.

An opaque centre of government is hard to scrutinise

The way the centre of government is set up makes it difficult for parliament to scrutinise how decisions are made. The ungainly remit of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) reflects this confusion, covering the Cabinet Office, the civil service, No.10, the prime minister and the various policy teams working at the centre. This makes it hard for the committee to develop a coherent programme.

The prime ministerial aspects of No.10 and the Cabinet Office are particularly under-scrutinised, with Liaison Committee appearances by the prime minister, happening just three times a year, rarely being able to interrogate the performance of departments. This is in part because the committee's membership – comprised of chairs of other committees – means that discussion remains largely siloed and tends towards topical rather than structural issues.

The structure of government and absence of whole-government strategy makes it near-impossible for parliament to properly hold government to account for its performance on strategic questions. The structure of select committees is, for the most part, designed to ensure proper scrutiny of the work of each department, but this means they are ill-equipped to study cross-cutting matters (with the exception of a few thematic committees and the recent, but rare, use of 'guesting' and joint committee inquiries).¹⁰¹

The centre struggles to manage its talent

The widespread view among witnesses and interviewees was that No.10 officials and political appointees in recent administrations had entered the centre with less experience than their predecessors. One witness reflected on the need for an increased number of "serious people" at the centre. As one of our commissioners argued: "In a business, a CEO would be surrounded by an experienced C-suite; No.10 does not provide the prime minister with equivalent support."

Witnesses suggested that the need for more expert outsiders is particularly felt.¹⁰² The civil service's clunky recruitment processes and uncompetitive pay make it difficult to draw in external recruits and 'in-and-out' careers are far less common than in the private sector.¹⁰³ Kate Bingham, the former head of the Vaccine Taskforce, told us:

"People in government need to be forward looking and able to recognise the emerging technologies which will change how we live, but that is not currently the case at all. So many of the solutions will come from industry but government is instinctively suspicious of it. The only way of dealing with that is getting more people from industry working in the civil service."

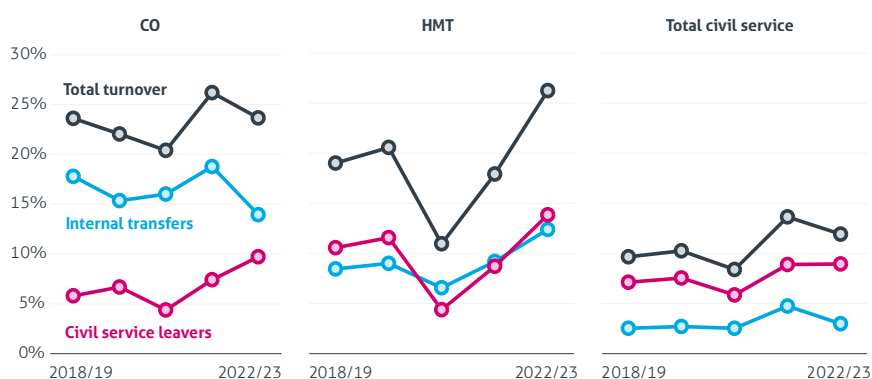
But, as Jonathan Powell, Blair's chief of staff, put it, the civil service still tends towards a "monastic culture" where civil servants "come in at 21 and leave at 65". Things have improved in recent years, but many of the people occupying the civil service's most senior policy roles have not spent an extended period outside government.¹⁰⁴ As the Maude Review recommended, the civil service should get better at valuing "the insights that new recruits bring from their previous experience".¹⁰⁵

The most senior ranks in the centre also lack demographic diversity, which means that important perspectives are missed. The civil service overall is a relatively diverse institution but at the centre gaps remain. For example, the former deputy cabinet secretary Helen MacNamara argued that during Covid it was "clear that the female perspective was being missed in advice and decision making".¹⁰⁶ Written evidence to the commission raised the same problem deriving from a lack of socioeconomic diversity at the centre of government.¹⁰⁷

Lee Cain, the former No.10 director of communications, has said that "young working-class women and men struggle to get ahead... when I first entered Downing Street I got the distinct feeling that some senior officials thought I should be content simply to be there."¹⁰⁸ Recent efforts to relocate Treasury officials to Darlington reflect the need to diversify departmental officials' regional backgrounds and perspectives.¹⁰⁹

Finally, staff turnover in the centre is high, leading to a lack of institutional memory and domain knowledge.¹¹⁰ Sir David Lidington, the former Cabinet Office minister, told the IfG: “After four years, I had done longer in post than any of the officials or ambassadors who were working to me, which created some interesting meetings. I would sometimes know the stuff more than they did.”¹¹¹

Figure 5 Civil service staff turnover, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, 2018/19–2022/23



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2018–23. Notes: Total staff turnover is the sum of civil service leavers and internal transfers of staff.

Nobody runs the civil service from the centre

The centre of the civil service lacks authority

The most senior civil servant at the centre of government is the cabinet secretary, who is also normally the head of the civil service. But for all his status (and so far it has always been a 'he') he has limited power to actually run the 500,000-strong institution, instead relying on "cajolery and persuasion" to get things done.¹¹² This situation reflects a long-standing structural problem of a lack of authority at the centre of the civil service to set standards about how departments go about their business. For any organisation to change – let alone one as large, disparate and with as many entrenched ways of working as the UK civil service – senior leaders at the centre need to have the authority to properly co-ordinate activity.

Permanent secretaries, as the civil service leaders of departments, are the key figures in maintaining and improving capability across the whole civil service. But their accountabilities are fundamentally confused. A permanent secretary is accountable to their secretary of state – the dominant, day-to-day relationship in a department. They are also accountable to the cabinet secretary as their line manager, and to the prime minister as the person who determines their appointment and heads the government they serve. And, finally, they are personally accountable for the effective and efficient use of public money to parliament and the Public Accounts Committee.

This is already a far from straightforward working arrangement but puts permanent secretaries in an impossible position when these obligations conflict, and requires them to choose to elevate different aspects of their accountability depending on the situation. Instructions from the central leadership of the civil service can be sidestepped if they are in tension – or are perceived to be in tension – with permanent secretaries' obligations to their department or secretary of state.

A persistent example of this is the inconsistent adherence to the civil service's 'functional standards' on practices such as HR and commercial, which departments broadly choose to follow by consent.¹¹³ The current arrangement enables senior civil servants to view modernisation and reform programmes as 'faddish', inconvenient or not right for their department, avoiding participation in the knowledge that ministerial sponsorship will likely wane or disappear at the next reshuffle.¹¹⁴ This has not been helped by high ministerial turnover in the Cabinet Office – there have been 13 ministers for the Cabinet Office and 10 chancellors of the Duchy of Lancaster since 2010.¹¹⁵

There is no constructive pressure from outside the civil service to improve

This lack of central authority persists in a system where there is similarly limited external pressure on the leadership of the civil service to improve capability. The most senior civil servants are doubtless sincere in their efforts to improve the institution, but senior permanent secretaries know that they will be judged more on how well they respond to short-term pressures from ministers, than on their long-term stewardship of the civil service.

There is no shortage of internal boards and committees to manage the civil service. The Civil Service Board "is responsible for the strategic leadership of the civil service, to make sure it works as a coherent and effective whole and has the capability both now, and in the future, to respond to any challenges".¹¹⁶ A People Board, a Senior Leadership Committee and other groups sit alongside the main board. That is all well and good for the internal management of the civil service, but means that pressure to improve comes from inside the civil service itself – sometimes effective, but prone to institutional capture – and from ministers, who are understandably less interested in the long-term health of the civil service than the success of their policy and political programme. Ad hoc critical media briefings are often the main external pressure on the civil service, but they can put the institution in a defensive crouch rather than encouraging openness to reform.

The cabinet secretary's job has become impossible

The cabinet secretary is also the head of the civil service, an arrangement that – with the brief exception of a split in the roles in 2012–14 – has held since 1981. The two roles are very different. One is about providing advice to the prime minister on the most crucial policy, constitutional and ethical matters – as the former cabinet secretary Jeremy Heywood put it, “basically everything that is important, that is on the PM’s mind and is No.10’s concern”.¹¹⁷ The other is about managing a huge system and visibly leading an organisation of over 500,000 people.

There has been a rationale for both roles being done by a single person. Being the head of the permanent bureaucracy gives the cabinet secretary more executive authority when advising the prime minister on what will or will not work, be legal or cost effective. And when important but – to a prime minister – second order issues around government effectiveness arise, the cabinet secretary, as head of the civil service, has the influence to take the prime minister’s views and implement reform. In this sense, both roles can be mutually reinforcing.

But a single person doing both jobs also creates problems. The most obvious is that being the head of the civil service is an enormous role, but one to which the cabinet secretary can only dedicate a small part of their time. As Heywood told the IfG in 2015: “For many people this would be one of the biggest things they did; it is just number five on my list.”¹¹⁸ Another problem is the difficulty in finding a person with the skillset for both jobs. Someone who is excellent at helping the prime minister pick their way through tough policy problems or resolve tensions in the cabinet is unlikely to also be the best person to take overall responsibility for the workforce strategy of an organisation of such scale.

This has contributed to the problems that successive governments have encountered when attempting to drive through civil service reform. Michael Gove’s 2021 *Declaration on Government Reform* is a recent example in a long line of plans to be announced with high expectations that has achieved comparatively little.¹¹⁹

Lord Maude was right in arguing at an IfG event following the publication of his *Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service* that there is no senior leader in government with the ability to drive reform through.¹²⁰ With the bulk of their time spent on the demands of being cabinet secretary, the head of the civil service rarely has the bandwidth to provide sustained commitment to reform.

All of this undermines civil service capability

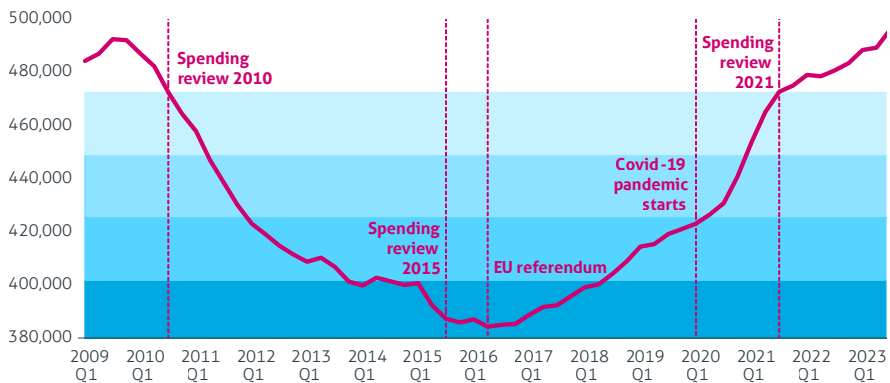
For all the skill and commitment of individuals and localised successes, the lack of a clear organising authority at the centre and a deficit of external oversight has made the civil service a less capable institution. This is reflected in the absence of cross-civil service workforce planning, a failure to embed operational considerations in policy decisions, and slow adoption of technology.

The centre has repeatedly failed to plan the civil service workforce

The civil service's weak corporate centre has created a gap in workforce planning. For all the succession of worthy strategies and initiatives about people in the civil service, there has been insufficient grip on the recruitment, retention and management of its large workforce, or focus on how its capacity maps on to ministers' priorities.

The lack of robust workforce planning causes several problems. Repeated rounds of redundancies and recruitment – often of similar types of people – have seen the size of the civil service ebb and flow over time, with little obvious rationale or plan and at unnecessary cost, frequently in pursuit of arbitrary and inefficient headcount targets. The civil service shrank by 21% between 2010 and 2016, before increasing to the same size in the years since as government geared up to leave the EU and respond to the pandemic. Civil service leaders cannot predict the future, but – with the right leadership at the centre – the institution stands a better chance of being prepared for the challenges and risks it is likely to face in the years to come.

Figure 6 Civil servants, Q1 2009 to Q3 2023



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2023. Notes: Figures refer to FTE staff numbers. Each 5% decrease in FTE since the 2010 spending review is represented by a darker shade of blue.

Inadequate workforce planning because of a lack of authority at the centre means that fundamental problems like staff churn, real-terms pay erosion, reliance on expensive private sector consultancies and skills development are not tackled.¹²¹ And external recruitment suffers because civil service leaders are unable to impose consistent standards and norms.^{122,123}

Policy decisions are made unmoored from operational constraints

Within departments, permanent secretaries are responsible for ensuring that the civil service has the capability, and is organised, to implement ministers' policies. At the centre, the chief operating officer, chief people officer and head of the civil service are responsible for doing the same across government. However, without the clear authority to manage and plan the workforce and its capabilities across government, this function cannot be properly executed.

This means that policy priorities often hit operational barriers that could have been avoided, especially where policies have consequences across the responsibilities of multiple departments. The Institute's *Performance Tracker* illustrates how the policies of the Home Office in relation to the police have contributed to the mounting pressure on the Ministry of Justice's courts and

prison capacities.¹²⁴ Another example is the common difficulties departments have managing capital projects, as they squeeze administrative support too far or persist with over-optimistic plans, despite the efforts of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority to provide central support.¹²⁵

Cross-government practices are not enforced consistently

The government has made progress in improving the consistency of practices such as HR, procurement and finance between departments since the introduction of the 'functional model' in the 2010s.¹²⁶ But a lack of clarity over who is responsible for setting standards for implementation on different issues – the departmental permanent secretary, the head of function or the head of the civil service – continues to limit the standardisation of practice across government. Departments operating with a high degree of federalised autonomy are prone to following centrally defined practices in markedly different ways.¹²⁷ Examples, cited in our research, of projects that experienced difficulties because of these tensions included the introduction of the internal audit agency and the roll-out of the Treasury's OSCAR II system for financial management.

The opportunities of technological change are missed

The technological revolution of the last 30 years – and the rapid increase in AI capability that looks set to dominate the next few – has not been sufficiently adopted into Whitehall's ways of working. Much of the government's internal architecture lags behind the times. Civil servants deal with a vast number of emails and cannot rely on automated triaging of the information they receive; digital record-keeping is, in the words of the former Cabinet Office minister Sir David Lidington, a "ghastly mess".¹²⁸ The submissions process is convoluted, with much still done on paper. John Glen, the minister for the Cabinet Office, was right to say at the IfG's 2024 annual conference that AI and technology could improve civil service productivity and effectiveness, but to admit that government was only in the earliest stages of adopting it.¹²⁹

Part of the reason that Whitehall continues to be poorly equipped to take advantage of the technology revolution is that there has historically been no home at the centre of government for officials' working on internal research and development. The GDS is exceptional at producing citizen-focused products, but largely does not see its job as producing internally-facing products. The Incubator for AI is a recent attempt to address this gap but is a small (albeit growing) team early in its development. The lack of a central team with the authority and remit to pursue these changes is a consequence of inability of the centre to take an activist role in driving efficiency and improvement across government.

The problems with the centre must be resolved

This chapter has set out the fundamental problems with the way the UK manages the centre of government. The centre is not strategic. It does not adequately set top-level priorities, and is consequently unfocused. It is buffeted by events rather than being able to retain a focus on the things that matter. And it struggles to coordinate the big, cross-cutting and long-term priorities that most governments are focused on delivering.

No.10 is too weak to set direction; the Cabinet Office is too large and has a confused remit. The Treasury fills the vacuum left by the two, which results in whole-government strategy being set according to its own priorities, rather than the collective conclusions of the whole centre. Nobody runs the civil service from the centre, which means the institution is less effective than it should be and crucial capability necessary to deliver the government's agenda is missing. The centre struggles to manage its own talent effectively, with high churn and too few expert outsiders.

Combined, these problems are a big part of why UK government is struggling to meet the moment, and will continue to do so until changes are made. The rest of this report sets out our blueprint as to what those changes should be.



3. Reforming the centre



My ideal model of government would be the same, in principle, for any major business or public sector organisation: a clear mission, a hard strategy, an organisation to deliver it and the necessary means of financing it.



Letter from Peter Mandelson to Tony Blair, 31 May 1997.¹³⁰

The centre does not exist in isolation. Its effectiveness depends on any number of external factors, many of which cannot be directly controlled by a prime minister. The political situation and size of a government's parliamentary majority, the geopolitical context, the economy, and any number of unexpected events will shape the authority of a prime minister and how their centre of government works.

The personal attributes of the prime minister are also hugely important. They are the single most important person in the government. If they have outstanding leadership qualities then the government is far more likely to succeed – if they do not then it is likely to fail. As President Eisenhower said, an "organisation cannot make a genius out of an incompetent".¹³¹ The quality of other ministers, special advisers and civil servants is also of paramount importance.

But the structures and processes at the centre matter too. While a well-designed centre of government cannot make up for an ineffective prime minister, a poorly designed one can detract from what a competent prime minister can achieve. Failures in the government's response to Covid-19 were due to a combination of weaknesses in political leadership and confusion and incoherence in No.10 and the Cabinet Office. Theresa May's decision to create a new Department for Exiting the EU inevitably set up competing

objectives between the new department, No.10 and the Cabinet Office, undermining the policy making and negotiations around Brexit. Tony Blair's government failed to grip public service management until he redesigned his No.10 machine.

As the former prime minister Gordon Brown wrote in his autobiography: "We will have to find new ways – a reorganisation of No.10, reform of the Cabinet Office, a better system for appointing ministers and stronger parliamentary scrutiny – both to manage this century's new inner circle of decision makers and to hold it to account."

This chapter proposes improvements to the centre of government in light of the problems identified above. Our recommendations focus on the structures, processes and functions of the centre of government. While high-quality people are of paramount importance, this report cannot hire talented officials, performance manage out low-performing ones, or convince an incoming prime minister to appoint particular ministers. What it can do is recommend structural changes that would create a high-performing environment in which talented people want to work.

The principles of an effective centre

There are different ways to organise the centre and the model will in part depend on the personal preference and style of key figures and the circumstances in which they find themselves. Jeremy Heywood rightly stressed how important it is that the centre "works for the governing philosophy of the prime minister of the day".¹³² But while some flexibility is helpful, too much fluidity is confusing ineffective. We have identified 10 core principles in which our proposals for reform are grounded, that should guide the design and operation of any centre of government. The centre of government should:

Ten principles of an effective centre of government

1. Only do what can only be done at the centre and delegate everything else to departments, public bodies, other tiers of government or those better placed outside government.
2. Prioritise outcomes for the public.
3. Assign money as needed to core priorities, with resourcing decisions collectively owned by ministerial leaders.
4. Do not allow short-term imperatives to crowd out long-term thinking.
5. Use evidence when making decisions and taking calculated risks.
6. Maximise the effort spent on top priorities.
7. Ensure clear alignment between responsibility for achieving priorities and accountability for doing so.
8. Be a place where talented individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds want to work in pursuit of common goals in a high-performing and supportive environment.
9. Be open to outside input, and encourage the learning of lessons from history, overseas and other sectors.
10. Encourage external scrutiny by parliament and others.

Prime ministers should announce a set of priorities at the start of a parliament

The strategic vacuum at the centre of government must be filled. The prime minister should, soon after their first comments outside No.10, develop a more detailed articulation of their priorities for government.¹³³

This framework – the *Priorities for Government* – should be a small set of top domestic and international priorities. Most of these would be long-term objectives that stretch over more than one parliament, with short and medium-term milestones linked to the parliamentary cycle. They would not be a list of specific policies as in the manifesto but should include a sense of prioritisation, to support the centre to make trade-offs between competing plans when allocating resources.

Each priority should be reflected in measurable outcomes. Priorities would often be cross-cutting and would have a lead secretary of state responsible for overseeing progress, as well as other secretaries of state responsible for contributing in different ways. The priorities should include a set of underlying principles to guide the government's approach, to which the centre adheres when making strategic trade-offs. For example, the government's approach to devolution and decentralisation, to the balance between acute and preventative spend on public services, or to private sector involvement in public services, could be reflected in these principles to guide decision making.

The *Priorities for Government* should be developed and published by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC; see below) with input from the Treasury, the Department for the Civil Service (see below) and other departments, in the early weeks of a parliament. The process of developing the priorities should draw on expertise and perspectives from across and outside government, including the sectors, communities and citizens affected by the policies in question.

The prime minister would begin the development of these priorities in preparation for a modernised King's Speech. The current speech is constructed around and focuses overwhelmingly on a list of the legislation the government plans to introduce in the upcoming parliamentary session. This only provides a partial view of planned government activity and can encourage governments to introduce unnecessary legislation to signal priorities when non-legislative solutions might suffice. The King's Speech should be broadened to be the first articulation of a new government's priorities, a sense of prioritisation between those priorities, and the principles underpinning them. Canada's 'speech from the throne', delivered by its governor general, is one model to examine.¹³⁴

The occasion of the monarch making such a speech, it being debated in parliament and then passed by both houses, would enhance the status of the government's programme and help its *Priorities for Government* become embedded into its work over the rest of its term of office. The priorities would then be further honed in the weeks after the King's Speech and, once finalised and agreed by cabinet, published within the opening few months of a parliament.

Setting clear priorities in this way is important because, as Jonathan Powell, the former chief of staff to Sir Tony Blair, argued to the commission, the prime minister and chancellor should have "the same basic priorities and both work to those priorities". Consistent alignment between the prime minister and chancellor is crucial because, as the former cabinet secretary and Treasury permanent secretary Andrew Turnbull explained, that relationship is the "San Andreas fault of government... the place where things can go most wrong".

This approach would enable the prime minister to translate their top, often complex, interdepartmental and long-term priorities into Whitehall's ways of working, and the policies and budgets of its departments. It would give secretaries of state and other ministers a clear sense of direction and help communicate expectations to the rest of government and beyond, giving those outside the centre the flexibility to make decisions according to the specifics

of an individual situation, rather than being highly prescriptive. Having set a direction, the centre of government should then aim to create the conditions in which other parts of the state contribute to shared goals in ways that best fit their circumstances, expertise and remits.

There must, of course, be room for priorities set at the start of a parliament to be adjusted as time goes on, but there should be a strong aspiration to retain a common purpose and agreed outcomes. The UK can learn from other countries which, in recent years, have experimented with different ways to set whole-of-government priorities, outcomes and strategies – such as New Zealand’s ‘wellbeing budget’, Canada’s ‘mandate letters’, the Welsh and Scottish governments’ ‘programmes for government’ and, in Scotland’s case, its National Performance Framework.^{135,136,137,138,139}

The prime minister should assemble an executive committee

For constitutional and practical political reasons, the prime minister needs to retain the institution that is full cabinet. But they would also benefit from a smaller, core group of ministers with whom to discuss the strategic issues facing government, which, as explored earlier, is often a more effective way of taking decisions.

Effective prime ministers always end up doing this anyway. But these core groups usually emerge organically over time rather than by design. We instead recommend that the prime minister sets the conditions for success early by formally establishing an Executive Cabinet Committee at their moment of maximum power, straight after an election. This sort of grouping is one common in other countries – for example, German governments tend to have a ‘coalition committee’, which interprets the programme for government and resolves disputes between departments, albeit in the different context of arbitrating between political parties – and provides an effective forum for decision making.

We propose that, as well as the prime minister, the executive committee includes the chancellor, first secretary of state (a new role, see below) and a very small number of other key ministers.

This cabinet committee would have responsibility for developing the *Priorities for Government*, which would then be recommended to the full cabinet for agreement. The executive committee would have the power of collective agreement for other, defined, strategic decisions. It would, for example, agree the government's fiscal rules and spending envelopes and allocations, ensuring that budgets are in line with the government's priorities. It would deliberate over other matters of strategy, such as the government's approach to devolution, but stay out of most day-to-day decisions on government policy, which would be made within other committees and departments as appropriate. Over the course of a parliament, the executive committee would oversee the performance of departments against the government's priorities.

In this way, the most important strategic decisions made by the government would be taken by a collective leadership team, not solely determined by either the prime minister in No.10 or the chancellor in the Treasury. A core team would have a consistent view of the most important matters of government business and would be collectively responsible for their agreement and oversight. This would also mean that, when an all-encompassing crisis strikes government – such as the Covid-19 pandemic – there would already be a coherent strategic decision making forum around which the government's response could be organised.

This group would be small and flexible, but with the formality and implications for collective agreement conferred by its status as a cabinet committee. A new executive secretariat would support its work from the DPMC (see below), preparing decisions and acting as the contact point with the Treasury and other departments for committee decisions. This would add the important civil service support missing from informal versions of similar groups of senior ministers in past governments.

Establishing an Executive Cabinet Committee of this form would recognise the reality of cabinet government today while prioritising the tenets of cabinet government as traditionally intended. For example, the 1918 Haldane report argued that, among the conditions necessary for the cabinet to “control the national executive”, were that it “should be small in number”, “meet frequently” and “be supplied in the most convenient form with all the information” needed to make decisions.¹⁴⁰

The prime minister should appoint a senior first secretary of state

At the heart of any executive committee will be the prime minister and chancellor. But we also propose that the prime minister should appoint a third senior minister, with ownership of the government’s policy programme. They would work closely with the chancellor to manage tensions between the government’s fiscal objectives and the rest of the government’s agenda, and take on any other delegated responsibilities the prime minister sees fit. This would free up prime ministerial time, allowing the prime minister to save their firepower for the most important issues and releasing them to take a more strategic, long-term view.

We propose giving the new senior minister the existing title of ‘first secretary of state’, traditionally used to recognise a minister’s seniority. They would act with the prime minister’s authority and sit on the executive committee, having a role in deliberating over the government’s key decisions, including on budgets and strategy. They would have responsibility for the civil service, including as secretary of state for the Department for the Civil Service (further discussed below). And they would chair important cabinet committees, positioning them well to oversee the delivery of the government’s key, cross-cutting priorities.

Recently, the most senior minister in the Cabinet Office (apart from, technically, the prime minister) has been the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL), who has been used as a fixer and policy broker. This brokering will continue to be necessary, but our first secretary would have a better-defined, more senior role as the minister responsible for the government’s policy programme. They

would work closely with the prime minister and sit within the prime minister's office, replacing the CDL and so not adding to the number of ministers.* The first secretary would be the ministerial equivalent of a chief operating officer, sitting alongside a chief finance officer (the chancellor) and chief executive (the prime minister).

The centre should open up to citizens, experts and other parts of government

Previous IfG research has found central government is still “too closed off from the experiences of the public, as well as from expertise held outside government and in other countries”.¹⁴¹ Teams across the centre should seek external input more often and invite more academics, businesspeople and members of civil society to contribute to discussions – crucially, before they reach the decision making stage. They should also make sure that once policy is made, there are fast feedback loops between front-line staff and policy makers in the centre. This would help to puncture Whitehall parochialism.¹⁴²

The executive committee would make decisions that set the context for the rest of government's work. But other cabinet committees would continue to play a central role in managing that work, with the prime minister matching committees to the *Priorities for Government*. Recent innovations that have improved cabinet committees' access to domain knowledge should be retained and expanded. In particular the 'strategy' and 'operations' committee model used during Brexit and Covid, with a rotating cast of civil servants (including front-line operational staff) attending according to the topic under discussion and able to contribute to the discussion, should be retained where appropriate.

Kate Bingham, the former head of the Vaccine Taskforce, told us that it is important government has “ongoing, valuable, two-way relationships” with industry so it better understands “new products, new approaches, new technologies, finding out what the

* Appointing a first secretary of state would not preclude a prime minister from also appointing a deputy prime minister. They could be the same person or two different people.

landscape is going to be.” The former head of the No.10 Policy Unit, Dan Corry, said that more engagement with charities would help to catch issues that “are starting to bubble up but that the data is not picking up”. By way of example, he said: “When we changed some welfare measures it was the charities who very quickly said it wasn’t working as intended, it was screwing everything up.”

To this end, a reformed centre of government should manage and draw upon standing networks of external advisers to provide expertise to cabinet committees and other decision making forums and to provide an ongoing link between sectors and decision makers. For example, an incoming Labour government looking to organise itself around its stated ‘missions’ could develop these networks of external advisers for each one, mirroring whatever interdepartmental governance was created within Whitehall. To entrench these networks external advisers should be supported by a team in the DPMC. This approach would learn from similar models for incorporating outside expert advice previously used at the centre of government, such as those supporting Gordon Brown’s National Economic Council during the global financial crisis.¹⁴³

This approach would also help to ensure that more sources of advice are available to ministers, to give them as complete a picture as possible of the consequences of their decisions and expose them to dissenting expert opinion to challenge orthodox thinking. Steve Baker, drawing on his experience as a minister in multiple departments, told us that it would be helpful for ministers, including at the centre, to have more “exposure to difficulties of making choices” rather than being faced with experts who put a “façade over disagreement in order to make it simple”. It would also help to embed civil society and businesses’ contributions in the operation of the public sector. Government priorities would benefit from using these external sectors as a means of implementing policy decisions.

Leaders of local and devolved government and the wider public sector would have a similar advisory role, where relevant, at the centre of government, beyond the important handling of intergovernmental relations. There may be caution about involving

such leaders in the moment of ministerial decision making – which could easily be confined to those working inside central government. But direct input to evidence gathering and debates about trade-offs would help ministers make better decisions.¹⁴⁴

The centre should also have more capacity to draw in evidence and expertise directly from citizens. It should use methods of democratic participation and deliberative engagement models to understand the perspectives of people affected by policy and input these perspectives into strategic decision making. This would make for a more open centre of government, with access to more of the information ministers need to set and deliver effective strategy.

As well as making better use of external perspectives, teams across the centre would benefit from standing part- and full-time secondment programmes open to experts across the public, private and social sectors, who would bring specialist skills and new perspectives. This is particularly important in subject areas that require policy makers to have some level of technical knowledge, like science and technology.¹⁴⁵ Existing officials should be encouraged to take secondments outside the civil service to experience a different professional environment and learn new skills.

Expertise should be valued more highly.¹⁴⁶ There have been times in the past when the centre was more open to external experts. During the Second World War the so-called ‘irregulars’ – prominent academics and businesspeople drafted into Whitehall – were instrumental to the UK’s success.¹⁴⁷ In the 1970s the Central Policy Review Staff hired scientists and economists under the leadership of Victor Rothschild, and Tony Blair’s strategy unit was a multi-disciplinary team that included people with a background in academia and the private sector.^{148,149} But at present, exceptional people without substantial experience in Whitehall can struggle to find entry routes or are put off by a bureaucratic recruitment process and rapidly declining real-terms pay. Expert outsiders need to be more actively recruited into the centre as part of ‘business as usual’.¹⁵⁰

Teams at the centre should comprise a mix of external recruits and existing civil servants – who themselves should include people who have spent their career in the civil service (including in line departments) and those who have followed ‘in-and-out’ career paths. There are some jobs in the centre that lend themselves to long-serving Treasury or No.10 officials and others where recruiting from the rest of Whitehall and outside the civil service is essential. A greater range of backgrounds would help to facilitate diversity of thought, incorporating different perspectives into the centre’s work. This is also where moving civil servants out of London can help. The Treasury-led Darlington Economic Campus (DEC) has been successful at building relationships with different types of stakeholders because it is based outside the capital. Having some Treasury officials based outside London is sensible to diversify the department’s thinking.¹⁵¹

As well as a range of backgrounds, people at the centre need a range of skills. We cover civil service skills extensively in other IfG reports, but emphasise here that experience of delivery is important. Officials and special advisers at the centre need experience of overseeing delivery projects in departments, public bodies and other organisations to help ensure that policy decisions are not divorced from implementation. People with STEM expertise also need to be better represented at the centre, to ensure data and analysis is properly embedded in decision making.

No.10 and the Cabinet Office should be merged to create a strong Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Part of the reason that successive governments have failed to develop and execute their strategies is because the prime minister does not have the right support structure. Solving the problem requires a new organisation – we propose the creation of a new Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). The DPMC would be created by merging No.10 and those parts of the Cabinet Office focused on the prime minister and brokering cabinet agreement.

Most prime ministers have at one time or another considered creating a new department like this at the centre. It is also a model used abroad, in countries including Ireland and Australia. The case for doing so in the UK is now compelling.

First, the prime minister is the executive leader of the government and should be supported as such. The current model should be replaced by a stronger, more permanent arrangement focused on servicing the core functions of the centre of government.

Second, the Cabinet Office has become ever more integrated with the interests and objectives of the prime minister. It is now time to recognise that treating the Cabinet Office as a separate department is a convenient fiction that obscures more than it clarifies. It would be both more honest and more administratively effective (avoiding duplication and confusion) to match departmental structures to political reality as it now exists.

The damaged reputation of the Cabinet Office is the final reason for a refresh. Criticism of the Cabinet Office was an unfortunate but constant theme of our evidence sessions. Its remarkable growth (even accounting for administrative headcount reallocations) and confused remit have undermined its reputation inside Whitehall and beyond. Externally the department was damaged by a perception, borne out by evidence at the Covid Inquiry, that it performed poorly in the early stages of the pandemic. Talented people have been tarnished by a fading brand.

There are three main arguments against creating any form of 'prime minister's department'. The first is that it would reduce the agility of No.10 and lead to a more "congested centre" with even more different voices speaking for the prime minister.¹⁵² Margaret Thatcher rejected plans for a prime minister's department in 1981 because it would "produce a strengthened bureaucracy" and not the "strengthened strategy section" she wanted.¹⁵³ We agree that a large administrative centre that man-marks and duplicates the activities of the rest of government, like the German *Bundeskanzleramt*, would be a mistake. Our proposed DPMC would be smaller than the total headcount of the current No.10 and prime

ministerially focused teams in the Cabinet Office. And the remits of its teams would be clear and focused on supporting the prime minister to deliver the government's priorities.

The second argument against is that a separate Cabinet Office is useful to the operation of government. That is both because it serves the cabinet rather than the prime minister alone, and because it gives the prime minister a certain 'useful distance' from collective decision making. But both rely on the convenient fiction, described above, that the Cabinet Office is currently in any meaningful sense a separate department, one step removed from the interests of the prime minister. They also assume that a deniable distance from collective decision making helps the prime minister. It does not – the leader of the government needs to own and stand by its most important decisions.

A final reason not to make a change is that machinery of government changes come with risk. They take a significant amount of time, cost money and can distract from priorities.¹⁵⁴ But our view is that the current structure inhibits effective delivery of government priorities to the extent that this risk must be taken. Creating a new DPMC would certainly be a significant undertaking, but is necessary, achievable and worth the cost.

A blueprint for the new Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

The DPMC would result in a stronger and more capable centre. It would be compact, responsive to the prime minister's needs and focused on the *Priorities for Government* set out at the start of a parliamentary term.

We have not conducted a full management audit of all the structures of the current No.10 and Cabinet Office. We also recognise that different prime ministers will quite reasonably want to organise their close support in different ways. But we propose four key organising groups within the DPMC, within which vital functions would sit. Many of these reflect existing teams and units, meaning the organisational cost of making the

change would be lower. But the essential improvement would be to bolster the support given to the prime minister while bringing together teams under more coherent leadership, reducing the likelihood of duplication and inefficiency or confusing the rest of government with inconsistent messages. Those key organising groups should be:

1. **The prime minister's personal support:** the private office, political team and communications team.
2. **The prime minister's priorities group:** the teams that directly advise the prime minister on policy, the economy, delivery and performance issues relating to their agenda.
3. **The cabinet secretariats:** the teams that support cabinet, its committees and the brokering of collectively agreed government positions – on economic and domestic issues as well as national security matters.
4. **The constitutional and propriety functions:** the teams that serve the prime minister in performing his or her important constitutional role and administrative functions; for example, advising on propriety and ethics in government.

The remainder of this section describes the functions for which each of the organising groups would be responsible.

Figure 7 Proposed structure of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

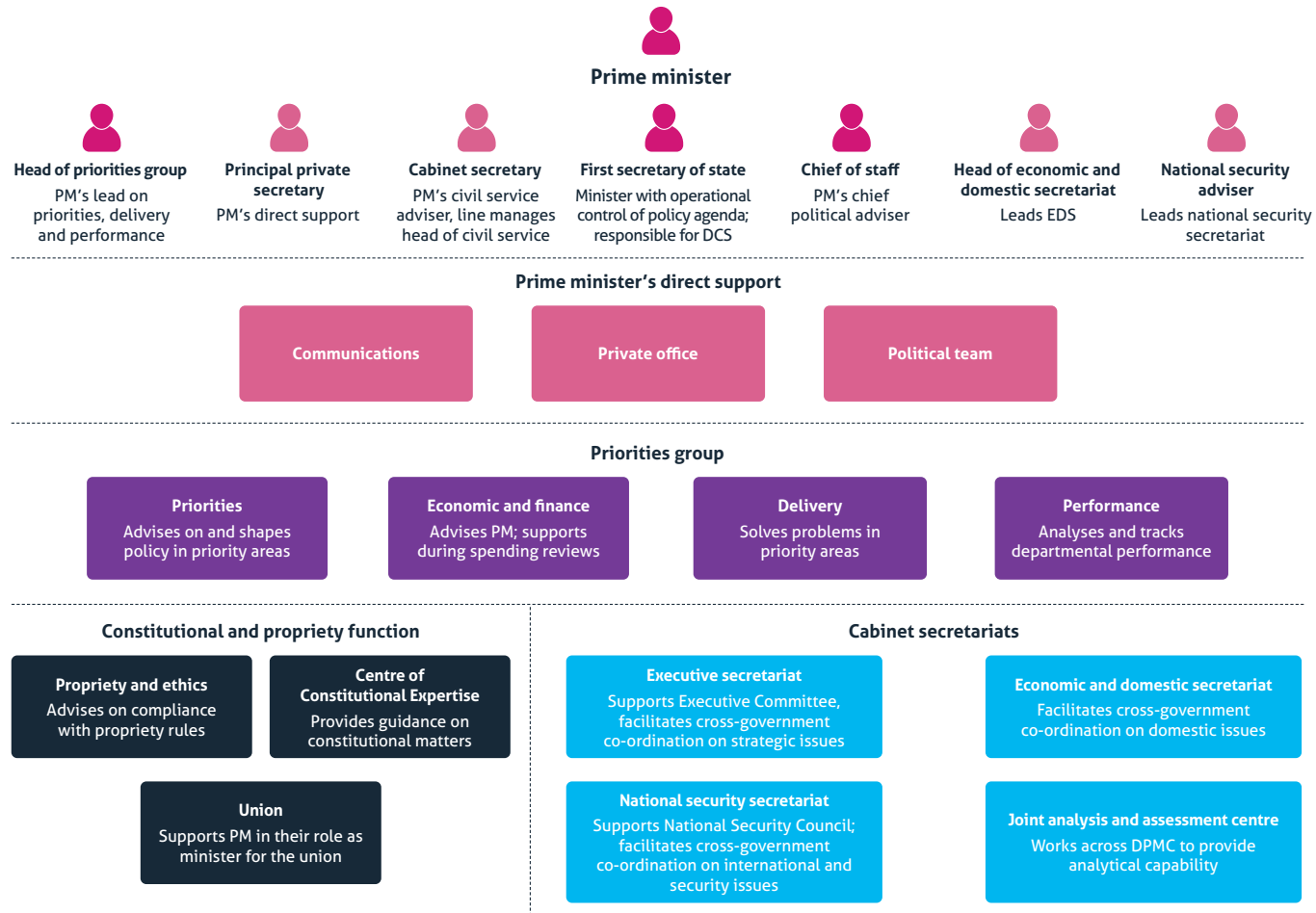


Figure 7 source: Institute for Government proposals. Notes: Civil service roles are represented by a lighter shade of the relevant colour. The head of the priorities group is represented here as a political appointment, but could also be a civil service appointment. The parliamentary business and legislation committee would continue within the economic and domestic secretariat.

A senior leadership team to direct activity

The groups we introduced above and describe below would be led by the most senior officials in the DPMC. The most senior civil servant in the department would be the cabinet secretary. They would be supported by a core leadership team made up of the prime minister's PPS (heading the group giving the prime minister direct government support), the head of the priorities group, the heads of the domestic secretariat and national security secretariat, and the prime minister's political chief of staff. The constitution, inter-governmental relations and propriety teams could either be managed separately or alongside the domestic secretariat.

The senior leadership group would run the DPMC, be the prime minister's core advisers and allocate resources across the department. They would act as guardians of the government's priorities, holding teams to account for maintaining focus on the long-term and cross-cutting objectives expressed in the *Priorities for Government* and ensuring that there were no barriers to close collaboration between teams. They would also be able to assemble resources to deal with the inevitable reactive activity that any centre of government must be able to handle.

The prime minister's direct support

There will be a small number of teams directly around the prime minister that contain their closest advisers – both political and official. The private office is the core of the prime minister's official support system; the chief of staff and political team are their most trusted political advisers; and the communications team helps the prime minister communicate with the public and connect them to their political agenda.

A principal private secretary and small private office

Led by a principal private secretary (PPS), the No.10 private office is the essential connection between the prime minister and the rest of the government. Private secretaries would remain the authoritative official transmission mechanism through which decisions go to the prime minister, and are then noted for action by others in the centre and line departments. They also act as an informal sounding board and 'sense-check' for the prime minister and their political team.

The private office has a long history and few prime ministers have a bad word to say about their private secretaries. In any case, where problems arise through personality clashes or under-performance, a private secretary will not last long. The private office is effective because it has a clearly defined remit, it communicates with the unquestioned authority and voice of the prime minister, and it is a small, close and coherent team. It can always be sharpened and improved, but the model works and should be retained.¹⁵⁵

A chief of staff and political team

Since 1997 prime ministers have normally employed a 'chief of staff' as a political counterpart to the PPS. The duties of the role have varied considerably depending on prime ministerial preference and the character and skills of the person appointed. The chief of staff from 1997 to 2007, Jonathan Powell, described himself as someone:

"below the prime minister who brought together all the different parts of the [prime minister's] office... who can coordinate the political and the civil service sides, the press and policy, and the domestic and the foreign".¹⁵⁶

This model was largely replicated by Powell's successors Ed Llewellyn (working for David Cameron) and Gavin Barwell (for Theresa May). "The chiefs" – Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy, joint chiefs of staff for Theresa May from 2016–17 – were more actively involved in decision making and kept a particularly tight grip on the prime minister's time. Dominic Cummings, while refusing the chief of staff title (rightly noting that the job comes with influence

but management of very few actual staff), was more focused on driving through a specific policy agenda than co-ordinating for the prime minister.

There is no single model for an effective chief of staff – Powell himself told us that the job could take “many forms”. But they should transact business on the prime minister’s behalf rather than pursuing their own agenda. Chiefs of staff who have embraced the limelight and arrived with their own personal priorities have prompted questions about legitimacy and tended to have shorter and less successful tenures than those who aligned themselves very closely with the prime minister and stayed in the background. James Baker, a successful White House chief of staff under President Reagan, used to say that “the most important word in the [job] title is *staff*” and that “the people who don’t succeed... are people who like the chief part of the job and not the staff part of the job”.¹⁵⁷

The chief of staff has a key role to play in ensuring coherence in the government’s approach and messaging, across all departments and public bodies. To help with this, the chief of staff or their deputies would, in our model, be able to use the agreed *Priorities for Government* as the means to more formally set direction for special advisers. But the chief of staff does not need *managerial* control of special advisers across government as is the case in, for example, Canada. While there are some benefits to tighter central control over departmental advisers, there is also the risk that it would reduce the space for debate in government and disempower ministers, who would lose a rare trusted personal source of advice.

In addition to the special advisers working alongside civil servants in other DPMC units, the prime minister should continue to benefit from the support of a small political team. A prime minister needs a political secretary and other dedicated advisers focused on maintaining the connection between the centre of government and parliament, party activists and aligned external groups.

A communications team

A modern, proactive communications team is essential for any centre of government and the DPMC will need this function. But the current No.10 operation is still too much of a 'press office', with an in-built bias towards reactive communication and short-term time horizons. The creation of a new department is an opportunity to build a team that has a better balance between new and traditional media platforms and is able to listen to the public to understand concerns and policy preferences. Its aim should be to do more than manage daily media queries and instead build longer term trust and confidence by explaining what the government stands for and the strategic choices it is making.

The DPMC communications function would therefore focus more on strategic media interventions that further the government's agenda and protect the prime minister from the need to respond and react to the main stories each day. Sir John Major has talked of the challenges of the modern-day No.10 and of the "continuous scrutiny from an uncontrolled internet, a 24-hour media, and an increasing number of impatient special interest groups", and the prime minister needs more insulation from them.¹⁵⁸ To this end, the first secretary of state could make some of the interventions that currently fall to the prime minister and that do not require a 'leader of the nation' voice.

Having a more strategic and longer-term approach would also change the role of communicators away from purely managing the reaction to policies when they are announced and towards more active involvement in decision making itself. This would help reduce the chances of media or public reaction forcing a U-turn, which can be both personally embarrassing for a prime minister and prevent the government from pursuing its preferred objectives. It would also help to highlight when a policy is simply 'unsellable'. To facilitate this role, it would be sensible for the communications team to have a dedicated public opinion function – cutting-edge opinion polling, focus groups and participatory methods – to provide information on the changes the public want to see and how they are likely to react to new announcements.

This would build on existing expertise at the centre, although capability in participatory methods in particular would have to be substantially enhanced.

There is no need to build a DPMC communications function that is much bigger in terms of headcount. But the centre would benefit from more coherent brigading of the communications professionals across government to leverage the expertise and relationships held in departments. Locating some senior cross-government communications roles currently in the Cabinet Office in the DPMC to create a combined political and civil service function at the centre would help in this aim.

A priorities group

The prime minister's direct support, as described above, would remain largely as now. But the rest of the core DPMC will see greater change – teams should have clearer remits than at present, tightly focused on the *Priorities for Government*.

The prime minister needs a team to provide them with direct advice on their agenda. This must cover the priorities they should set out for the government and the specific policies they should pursue to achieve them; the progress of existing policies; and the performance of the departments and services central to their government's agenda. This is separate and distinct from the brokering function currently carried out by the Cabinet Office, which we discuss below.

At the moment, there are teams in No.10 – the policy and delivery units – that do some of this. But a new priorities group would bring them together under a single political and official leader able to synthesise and streamline advice – rather than having competing teams operating in a similar space and leaving it to the prime minister to join the dots. There are four main functions within this group, which could in practice be distinct teams under a single leader or organised around policy portfolios.

Advice on policy priorities

A priorities group must be able to offer policy and strategy support to the prime minister on the government's core priorities. This role is currently filled by the No.10 Policy Unit, but the evidence we heard suggested it has had a tendency to drift from this core focus.

Witnesses argued that recent incarnations of the policy unit have tended to work on areas beyond key prime ministerial priorities, reaching more deeply into departmental policy making with diluted and uncertain authority. This is not a new criticism, and things seem to get worse towards the end of governments when the search for new ideas becomes increasingly frenetic. Jonathan Powell has said that, towards the end of Tony Blair's tenure, "we had some younger advisers who would see Tony only rarely and did not really know his mind. We then had a problem of lots of different people from No.10 calling departments and giving different messages, which led to confusion and complaints from permanent secretaries."¹⁵⁹

The most effective iterations of the policy unit have been ones where a small and trusted group of advisers who knew the prime minister's mind were able to suggest priority initiatives and make sure that headline policies being worked up in departments were aligned with the prime minister's long-term goals. They had a consciously tight mandate, and while part of their role was to track policy development, instead of replicating the work of departments they added value that would otherwise be missed.

In the 1980s a substantial proportion of the unit were businesspeople or academics brought in from the outside. They were "encouraged to pick up ideas from the outside world... [and] stayed in touch with their former employers in business, commerce and the professions, and made visits... so that through this direct experience and contact with the 'real world' they could bring to the prime minister a dimension often overlooked by departments."¹⁶⁰ We heard evidence that this approach had not been consistently maintained in some of the more recent iterations of the policy unit.

In the new team there are two essential changes to be made. The first is that policy advisers should have a remit closely tied to the government's top priorities as agreed at the start of a term. This would minimise the extent to which the priorities group imposes itself on the general business of departments, instead reserving its firepower for the most important priorities.

Second, the number of advisers should be stripped back to around 10 people (roughly the same size as the policy unit under Thatcher). They would be a mix of political advisers and officials, all with deep expertise in the areas for which they are responsible. This would encourage the recruitment of experienced, talented people focused on making an impact in core areas of prime ministerial interest rather than talented generalists slightly aimlessly duplicating the work of departments.

Advice on economic and fiscal policy

Historically the prime minister has usually had limited support on economic and financial issues. This contrasts with other heads of government. The US president is supported by a council of economic advisers, established on a statutory footing.¹⁶¹ The council consists of three economists – usually with academic backgrounds – and around 20 to 30 support staff.¹⁶² The Singaporean prime minister is directly supported by a strategy group, which drives whole-government priorities on areas including economic sustainability and economic inequality and provides the prime minister with data and clout on economic and financial issues.¹⁶³

If the UK prime minister is to engage properly with the chancellor on spending reviews and other economic and financial processes then they need proper support to do so. As the former economic adviser to the chancellor, Tim Leunig, argued to the commission: "No.10 should be much more knowledgeable about and powerful over economic affairs." To achieve this there should be an economics and finance function in the DPMC. The team's function would not be to make policy, but to act as a source of advice on economic and financial questions, sense-checking departmental

submissions and working closely with the private office and rest of the priorities group to ensure that the thinking happening across government is aligned with the prime minister's agenda.

This function should be headed by a heavyweight adviser to the prime minister, acting as the Treasury chief economist's opposite number. The rest of the team could be comprised of civil servants and politically appointed expert advisers, learning from previous models such as BEIS' Industrial Strategy Council and the support to Gordon Brown's National Economic Council.¹⁶⁴

A prime minister establishing such a capability has often been seen as too politically difficult. Nigel Lawson resigned over Margaret Thatcher's reliance on Alan Walters; Sajid Javid, one of our commissioners, resigned when given an ultimatum to dismiss his special advisers to make way for the Johnson government's No.10–Treasury joint economic unit.

However, the long shadow cast by Lawson is something of a myth. He subsequently said that his problem was with Walters personally rather than the concept of economic support to the prime minister – and that it is “perfectly reasonable for a prime minister to have someone to help her challenge... the chancellor”.¹⁶⁵ Javid's resignation was over loyalty to his existing advisers and because the joint economic unit's personnel would be chosen by No.10 and replace his own source of advice. A prime minister and chancellor who work collaboratively together, with advisers that do the same, would still benefit from our model

If established astutely, in a way that did not undermine the chancellor's ability to choose their own special advisers or encourage the prime minister to try to centralise all economic and financial decision making, a strong economic team in the DPMC would become indispensable. It would facilitate the improved strategy process we outline below, during which the prime minister should work more intensively and effectively with the executive committee including the chancellor to set whole-government direction.

A modernised delivery function

Recent versions of the No.10 Delivery Unit have tended to track too many priorities and relied on reporting systems that feed information back too slowly from departments to the centre. Witnesses have viewed it as just one of many voices at the centre tracking delivery, leading to confusion.

The capability needs to be reinvented for the 2020s. To do this, there are some lessons to learn from history. Michael Barber's original unit was successful because it had prime ministerial patronage and engagement, used established subject experts and had what were, for 2001, fast feedback loops inside government to resolve problems with the implementation of policies.¹⁶⁶

The centre needs to learn from those successes, and adapt to the reality that problems can arise very quickly and often need to be resolved in real time. A reformulated delivery capability would be focused closely on a small number of the government's priorities and be staffed by experts in their sector, including some seconded from outside Whitehall. It would have trusted relationships across government and access to high-quality data, including from the Joint Analysis and Assessment Centre and performance function (see below). It would be able to act with the authority and engagement of the prime minister, but only on a narrow set of key priorities. Importantly, it would be a team focused on resolving big problems, not performance assessment and tracking departmental activity (the responsibility of others in the DPMC).

The priorities group will need to be able to identify and act on problems rapidly, made possible by the single performance system recommended elsewhere in this report. Rishi Sunak's 'five pledges', and particularly the commitments to cut NHS waiting lists and to 'stop the boats', are examples of priorities that would have benefited from a renewed and more focused approach to delivery support from the centre.

An ability to monitor performance

The prime minister needs to be able to analyse departmental performance against the *Priorities for Government*, and hold ministers and permanent secretaries to account for achieving progress.¹⁶⁷

In our model this would be the responsibility of a performance capability in the DPMC, with a remit to support the prime minister, first secretary of state, and the and executive committee.

Building on existing work to develop a government-wide single project performance management platform, known as GRIP (the Government Reporting Integration Platform), this team would maintain a shared view of performance across the centre and departments and notify relevant DPMC teams when programmes are going off track and provide analysis of trends.

While smoother reporting mechanisms mean that increasingly complete and useful performance data can be collected, tasking a central team with staying on top of *all* government programmes would lead to excessive bureaucracy and dilute the attention of those working in the centre. The performance capability within the priorities group would track the progress of core government priorities and programmes – flagging to delivery specialists when problems arise – and servicing the work of cabinet committees, most notably the executive committee, so it can base discussion and decisions on timely data.

The cabinet secretariats

The cabinet secretariats, brokering policy decisions and supporting cabinet committees, would be a core part of the DPMC serving the cabinet as well as the prime minister. The secretariats have worked best when modest in size and divided into coherent teams with clear remits. The exact structure has differed depending on the context, but tends to cohere around three themes: economic and domestic, international (including European), and national security. In whatever way the remits are constituted, the model works and should be a core part of the DPMC.

We also propose two new teams. First, a small dedicated secretariat supporting the executive committee, which could sit within existing structures; for example, the economic and domestic secretariat. And second, a new Joint Analysis and Assessment Centre, which would work in a similar way to the Joint Intelligence Organisation.

Strong national security and resilience functions

The National Security Council (NSC), supported by the national security adviser (NSA) and national security secretariat (NSS), has existed since 2010. It emerged to reflect the view that contemporary security threats were both internal and external and should be viewed together, as well as a reaction to the lack of challenge to the government's Iraq policy as it was developed in 2002-03.

The siloed structure of the NSS has failed to address the challenge of integrating domestic and international policy making, but the establishment of the NSC has overall been a positive development. Experts emphasised to the commission how important it was for there to be a strong national security apparatus in the prime minister's office. The major security questions around, for example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine or Chinese involvement in UK infrastructure ultimately require the prime minister to make decisions, and international diplomacy on these issues is usually conducted at head of government level.

But the NSC could be used more effectively. It too often discusses smaller, tactical decisions rather than setting whole-government strategy – a problem that has got worse under recent prime ministers. The number of ministers who attend NSC meetings and its formal cabinet committee status means that too often people round the table feel the need to intervene on side issues, dragging the meeting away from strategic considerations.

The NSC should be reformed to focus more explicitly on addressing the large strategic questions. The US equivalent on which it was based is geared to the president's agenda and there is a good case for the UK to follow suit. COBR can be used for crisis decision making, so the NSC should be able to concentrate on longer term

questions, like the UK role's in the Indo-Pacific and how the UK can maximise its influence on European security now that it is outside the European Union. While the foreign and defence secretaries should remain important voices, the prime minister's central role in making strategic trade-offs means the NSC should ultimately be something that works to them and them alone, allowing them to set the strategic paradigm under which the rest of government policy sits.

For this to work effectively the NSS, which services the NSC, needs to build deeper subject matter expertise, more akin to its US equivalent. More political input from No.10 has, in recent years, come from the prime minister's foreign policy adviser. There remains a need for the NSC, serviced by the NSS, to ensure that key decision makers in the centre receive the best possible advice and that decisions made translate into action. This would require a marked improvement in collaboration between the centre and departments, a relationship that is too often competitive. The NSA's role is vital, both in co-ordinating the national security apparatus and liaising with foreign counterparts.

But unlike other policy areas where implementation has to be at departmental level, this area – which often involves dealings with other heads of government – is one where much of it will be the responsibility of the DPMC. This requires strong direct support to the prime minister. In our model the cabinet secretary, with lighter responsibilities to manage the civil service, could play more of a role in this area – one in which they traditionally had more focus – although holding the NSA role alongside their cabinet secretary brief would be a mistake.

Just as much in need of improvement is the civil resilience structure at the centre. As Nancy Hey argued in her written evidence to the commission: "Effective institutions are essential for managing risk." The IfG has recommended adopting a modified 'three lines of defence' model for resilience, which separates out responsibilities for risk management, oversight and audit.¹⁶⁸ Keeping day-to-day risk management in departments – the first line of defence – is sensible, but runs the risk of fragmentation with systemic and cross-cutting risks falling through the cracks.

So a strong co-ordinating and enforcement function at the centre of government – the second line of defence – is key to ensuring that departments are managing their risks effectively. The third line of defence – audit – also needs strengthening, as scrutiny of preparedness has been limited.

The recent separation of the civil contingencies secretariat into crisis response (through the COBR unit) and preparedness (resilience directorate) is a positive step but it is unclear yet whether this will be sufficient to improve the resilience directorate's ability to unify and check departmental preparations more widely.

It is essential that the new DPMC has the capacity to play that co-ordination and assurance role ahead of future crises, whether that be extreme weather events, biological attacks or nuclear accidents, as well as having the capability to engage effectively with other tiers of government and charities to encourage a society-wide response where necessary.

An economic and domestic secretariat

The economic and domestic secretariat (EDS) is the team that supports the cabinet secretary and prime minister to reach collective cabinet agreement on domestic policy decisions. It brokers where there are disagreements, supporting the prime minister on their priorities. It is also responsible for the parliamentary business and legislation committee, which develops the legislative programme as a whole as well as ensuring each bill is ready for introduction to parliament. EDS would work closely with the priorities group, acting as a gateway for domestic and economic departments into the DPMC.

The secretariats would be the key day-to-day gatekeepers between the DPMC and the rest of government. Officials in the relevant secretariat would be the escalation point for senior departmental officials, and it is the secretariat that could convene DPMC colleagues from other teams as necessary.

When a reactive response is needed the DPMC senior leadership team would have the authority to assemble response teams drawing from units across the DPMC as required.

An executive committee secretariat

There would also be a new senior secretariat team – the executive secretariat – to support our proposed executive committee and prepare its papers, including those on economic, spending and fiscal decisions. This could sit within EDS or as a dedicated standalone team. This part of the secretariat would be primarily focused on the proactive government agenda as set out in the *Priorities for Government*.

A Joint Analysis and Assessment Centre (JAAC)

For the most difficult policy and delivery problems in government, particularly those that cut across departmental boundaries, the DPMC must have access to better data, insights and evidence to inform its activity. As the Public Accounts Committee identified earlier in 2024, many cross-government projects, in particular, are “hindered by missing or inadequate data”.¹⁶⁹

The need for this was exposed most clearly during the early stages of the pandemic, when key decision makers in No.10 struggled to get access to the data they needed. Emails obtained by the Covid Inquiry, with the subject “data driving me mad”, showed that the prime minister’s chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, and senior No.10 official Tom Shinner were frustrated at the quality of information at their disposal. They reported that data was often confused, with “similar sounding things that are different – often explained by different time periods... or aggregated to be England only/UK wide inconsistently”.¹⁷⁰

A recent IfG report also found that during the pandemic the Cabinet Office did not have good structures for drawing together evidence from different departments and presenting ministers with a common understanding of the analysis. Instead, departments – including the Treasury – shared analysis strategically to support their particular point of view.¹⁷¹ This was an ineffective way to make decisions.

The creation of the Covid Taskforce, with substantial capacity to synthesise, analyse and assess data, and the data science unit 10DS in No.10 to provide direct support on the prime minister’s priorities, significantly improved the government’s response. The Covid Taskforce was subsequently repurposed into the Joint Data and Analysis Centre (JDAC).

Both 10DS and JDAC do valuable work. The creation of the DPMC would be an opportunity to build on these improvements, further strengthening analysis and assessment capability in the centre of government. A new integrated Joint Analysis and Assessment Centre (JAAC), created out of and combining the two units, would allow the centre to undertake all-source, multi-disciplinary, multi-domain assessments of information and analysis to provide a shared, probabilistic view to decision makers, including the prime minister and executive committee.* In a crisis like Covid, this would help the centre to unify departmental analysis and responses, encourage data sharing and help decision makers to draw together a wide range of information to design policy responses based on shared understanding of the situation. And outside of crises, it would help to improve and cohere analysis of cross-cutting policy issues and innovate with emerging technologies and approaches.¹⁷² The rest of the DPMC would be able to commission work from it and ought to work closely with its analysts to improve the quality of policy advice.

* The commission has worked alongside the 2023 Heywood Fellow, Jonathan Black, to consider the opportunities to improve information and insight at the centre of government and our paper published alongside this report covers this proposal in more detail.

We also recommend that JAAC take on overall responsibility for the futures and scenarios work that is currently spread over a number of places, in particular the Government Office for Science (GO-Science). It could decide relevant future scenarios and issues on which to work and co-ordinate across government. Where relevant, this could support meetings of ministers or permanent secretaries to discuss policy responses. It could also involve horizon scanning for key risks and issues.

Constitutional policy, propriety and ethics and parliamentary liaison

In general the DPMC should not be a department of policy teams: these are best housed in line departments. Policy leads on non-core matters would, in our model, be repatriated to departments – for example, veterans' affairs to the Ministry of Defence, major events to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the GREAT marketing campaign to Business and Trade, borders to the Home Office and so forth.

The exception is policy on the constitution, propriety and ethics, the union, intergovernmental relations and parliament – which properly sits at the centre of government. The prime minister and cabinet secretary need a source of authoritative advice on constitutional matters and having this advisory function at the centre is crucial. The Institute for Government's *Review of the UK Constitution* argued for a 'centre for constitutional expertise': this would form part of the DPMC.¹⁷³

Propriety and ethics also properly sits at the centre. But, as the IfG has argued before, there is value in separating the advice being given to ministers and the prime minister about ethical issues from the investigation function often performed by the cabinet secretary or the prime minister's ethics adviser. The advisory function should sit in the DPMC, while the investigatory function should be led by a – strengthened – independent ethics adviser.¹⁷⁴

Having expertise on the union is also crucial. Sir John Elvidge, the former Scottish government permanent secretary, told us:

“You need a clear and sophisticated understanding of devolution at the heart of government... when things go wrong, it’s often not malice but because someone at the UK government end simply didn’t understand the structure of the devolution settlement.”

Interviewees in Northern Ireland stressed the particular responsibility the prime minister has for maintaining effective and orderly government in the devolved nation and the importance of them having access to expertise to facilitate this. An understanding of devolution at the centre is also crucial to understanding the roles and responsibilities of tiers of government in relation to the *Priorities for Government*.

The government in parliament group, which supports the government’s legislative business, would also remain at the centre, linked with the legislative affairs team currently in No.10. The prime minister and their team need to be closely connected with the passage of government legislation.

A modern working environment

Downing Street has huge historical and symbolic resonance and no prime minister has wanted to be based anywhere else. However, the constraints of the building mean that it is impossible to create anything resembling a modern and well-designed workplace. The physical inadequacy of No.10 reinforces many of the problems of the centre we identify, especially the tendency towards a bunker mentality, competing centres of power and poor co-ordination of cross-cutting problems.

The creation of the DPMC is the moment to begin to tackle this problem. In other sectors a great deal of work goes into how to design buildings conducive to high performance and it is time for the centre of the UK government to follow suit.¹⁷⁵ The prime minister should continue to be based in No.10 Downing Street, with an office adjacent to the cabinet room and access to the state rooms above. It would be important for the famous front door and

corridor into the cabinet room also to remain. But much of the rest of the working space across the Downing Street and 70 Whitehall footprint should be redesigned into an open, professional environment. The 'link door' between what is now No.10 and the Cabinet Office should be removed to enable the creation of a single DPMC complex.

This will take time. There will be planning, logistical and security implications. But unless a prime minister starts work on this change at the same time as they set the government's direction after an election, nothing will happen.

The civil service should be led and managed by a new Department for the Civil Service

The civil service is responsible for delivering the government's priorities, so high-quality leadership and management is essential. It is a failure of the centre of government that the corporate management of the civil service is so often overlooked – housed as it is in an under-appreciated part of the Cabinet Office. The cabinet secretary, nominally in charge, is only able to dedicate a small portion of their time to leading the institution – the rest consumed by their responsibilities as chief policy adviser to the prime minister and secretary to the cabinet. Civil service leadership must be given the status and authority it deserves.

The creation of the DPMC provides the opportunity to establish a new, separate and strong Department for the Civil Service (DCS). This department would be responsible for leading and managing the civil service more actively than at present, and would include teams working on:

- the civil service functions, to set and enforce standards of practice across government
- learning and development, including ministerial and civil service training to ensure that they have the skills they need
- modernisation and reform, to direct, organise and support departments' efforts to achieve civil service reform priorities.

It should also include:

- the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, the government's centre of expertise for infrastructure and major projects
- a cross-government research and development function, building on the Incubator for AI, to identify and harness opportunities to improve civil service productivity using new technology. This would bring UK government in line with many private sector organisations and international governments – replicating, for example, the function performed by the Singaporean government's open government products division
- the senior leadership committee and a beefed-up future talent committee, to proactively shape the careers of senior civil servants, and a well-resourced secretariat to support these committees.

The DCS should be structured as a ministerial department reporting to the first secretary of state. A strong minister of state who attends cabinet, similar to the chief secretary to the Treasury, should be appointed to supporting the first secretary in managing the day-to-day operations of the department. This would ensure the civil service's political and official leadership remain at the heart of the government, directly connected to delivering the *Priorities for Government* set out in the King's Speech, but now with its own clear organisational and leadership structure.

A dedicated DCS has existed before. In the 1970s, the then Civil Service Department was regarded as marginalised and so proved ineffective – ministers and civil servants need to take steps to guard against that happening again.¹⁷⁶

To that end the relationship between the DCS and the Treasury will be particularly crucial to embedding the new department. Reflecting its responsibilities for the government functions (requiring collaboration with the Treasury on public spending) and with responsibility for overall policy for the entire civil service, including workforce management decisions, the DCS must play a key role in the reformed, more collaborative approach to budgets

and spending reviews we discuss below. Decisions affecting the civil service – especially budgetary questions – will require the input of the DCS, with agreement brokered through the executive committee. DCS sign-off should be required for civil service pay remit guidance and it should have responsibility for policy on civil service pensions.

The department should also have input into the construction of the *Priorities for Government*, in particular advising the first secretary of state on the implications of the government's plans for civil service resourcing.

The proposals that follow are designed to empower this new DCS and make sure it has the authority it needs. They centre on a statutory underpinning for the civil service, a new head of the civil service to whom all permanent secretaries report, a board to hold the civil service accountable, and a close reporting link into the first secretary and prime minister.

A statutory underpinning for the civil service would strengthen the civil service department and the head of the civil service

The creation of a new DCS would help to ensure that the corporate management of the civil service is given deserved attention. But, while valuable, a new department alone is insufficient.

As discussed above, the head of the civil service does not currently have the authority to lead the organisation effectively, and diffuse permanent secretary accountability creates confusion over when – and whether – they are accountable to their secretary of state, parliament, the prime minister or the head of the civil service.

This federated structure of the civil service, of course, reflects the UK's cabinet system of government, and secretaries of state and permanent secretaries reasonably tend to operate in their own domains. Yet the civil service is also an institution in its own right, and there are areas where the centre, through the head of the civil service, must be able to drive change and enforce consistency

across departments. The centre needs to be able to initiate and pursue civil service-wide reform efforts, if there is any chance of rectifying the long-standing, deeply embedded and systemic problems that hamper government effectiveness.¹⁷⁷ And the head of the civil service must also have the power to plan and develop the long-term capabilities of the civil service if it is going to be able to deliver ministers' priorities in the future.

The situation can be remedied, and the head of the civil service given clear mechanisms to lead and manage the institution, by placing the civil service on a new statutory footing. As the IfG has argued in *A New Statutory Role for the Civil Service*, doing so would resolve the current lack of clarity around what ministers and civil servants are responsible for, which causes confusion and allows the performance of vital functions such as resilience planning to fall through the cracks.¹⁷⁸ A statute would set out unambiguously the responsibilities of civil servants, and so what they should be held accountable for. It would operate by placing a stewardship accountability directly on to the head of the civil service and permanent secretaries, making them responsible for ensuring the civil service is able to effectively serve the government of the day while retaining the ability to serve future governments.

The head of the civil service would lead the DCS as its permanent secretary, line manage all permanent secretaries (apart from the cabinet secretary), and be personally responsible for leading and managing the institution. They would also attend the executive committee and be based physically close to the prime minister and cabinet secretary. Both the line management relationship and the statutory responsibilities on permanent secretaries, operating in parallel with those on the head of the civil service, would give the head of the civil service the levers necessary to ensure that the centre was able to lead and manage the institution effectively. This would establish the DCS as a strong department and equal partner with the DPMC and the Treasury at the centre of government.

A Civil Service Board would hold senior civil servants to account

The DCS and the head of the civil service would be held to account by a new Civil Service Board, which will provide an independent source of oversight and accountability. Chaired by the first secretary of state and with its membership comprising ex-civil service and non-executive members, as well as the head of the civil service, the board would oversee the leadership and direction of the institution. It would also receive departmental accounts for scrutiny. It would be held to account by parliament, including through regular reporting to the relevant select committee.

The head of the civil service should be a separate job reporting to the cabinet secretary

The roles of cabinet secretary and head of the civil service should be separated. Even the most capable cabinet secretaries have not been able to give leading the civil service the attention needed, and our proposed model creates a set of new responsibilities for the head of the civil service.

Splitting the jobs would allow the head of the civil service to focus on elements that are neglected at present, but have been more prominent in the past. For example, David Laughrin – private secretary to Sir Ian Bancroft, one of the last heads of the civil service who was not also cabinet secretary, in 1978–80 – has described how Bancroft devoted significant amounts of his time to the management and career development of senior civil service staff.¹⁷⁹

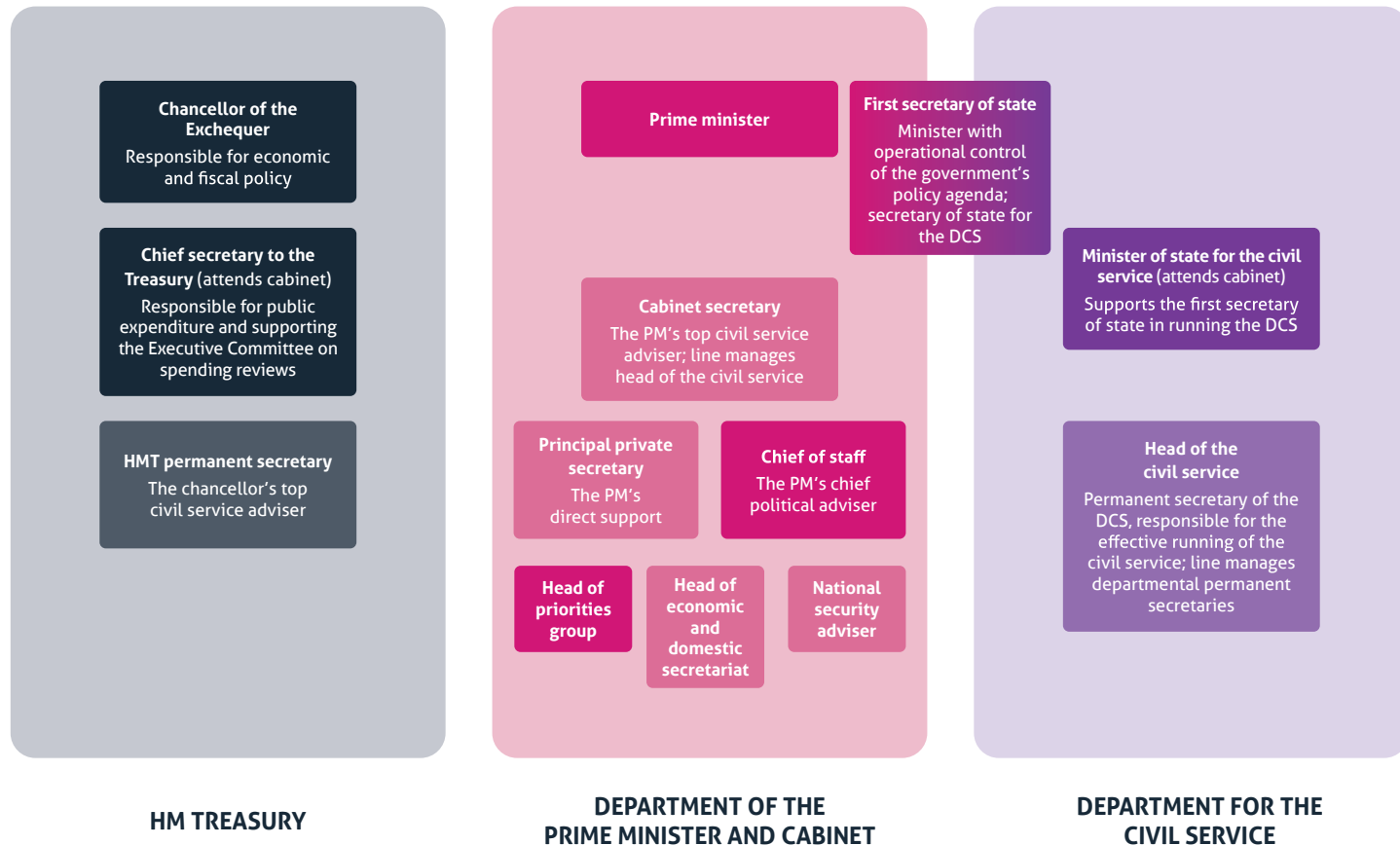
We acknowledge that the cabinet secretary, as the civil service official closest to the prime minister, would retain a great deal of influence over the operation of government. That is why we propose that the cabinet secretary continues to be the most senior civil servant and personally performance manages the head of the civil service, while remaining the chief policy adviser to the prime minister, the secretary to the cabinet and the de facto permanent secretary of the DPMC.

In turn, our proposals would substantially empower the new head of the civil service to manage the institution. They would have a statutory responsibility, and consequent authority, to maintain the capabilities of government and be permanent secretary of the new DCS. Managing all the other permanent secretaries below the cabinet secretary would give them the convening power necessary to mould the permanent secretary cadre into more of a cohort, with a focus on improving the civil service as an institution – somewhat like New Zealand’s public service leadership group, which is convened by their head of the civil service-equivalent, the public service commissioner. Lastly, the head of the civil service would have an important role in the strategy and budget process we propose to influence and advise on departmental budgets – including for the administration of the civil service.

Previous experience of splitting the cabinet secretary and head of the civil service roles has not always been successful. But our model would provide the head of the civil service with the real heft that previous iterations have lacked. In the 1970s successive heads of the civil service were weak, but this was largely because they led a civil service department that was overseen by a minister of state or parliamentary secretary rather than a powerful first secretary of state and DCS-equivalent to the chief secretary to the Treasury; not underpinned by a civil service statute; and was not held to account by a Civil Service Board.

From 2012–14, Sir Bob Kerslake held the role of head of the civil service but he did this as a part-time role combined with his position as permanent secretary of the local government department. Many important responsibilities, including performance management of permanent secretaries, remained with the cabinet secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood. The failure of this model in the past was due to these contingent factors, not because of an inherent problem with splitting the roles.

Figure 8 Proposed new structure of the centre of government



Source: Institute for Government proposals. Notes: Civil service roles are represented by a lighter shade of the relevant colour. The head of the priorities group is represented here as a political appointment, but could also be a civil service appointment.

A new approach to public expenditure is needed – not a Treasury split

A machinery of government change should not be the first solution

For all the reasons set out in the opening chapters of this report, the imbalance of power at the centre of government between the prime minister and chancellor, and between No.10 and the Treasury, needs to be addressed. Whether or not the two most senior political leaders are aligned, the existing processes and balance of power are not working. This conclusion has led many to argue that the Treasury should be structurally split, usually in one of two ways.

The first is by taking responsibility for economic growth policy out of the Treasury and moving it, either to the Department for Business and Trade or a new department, to externalise a policy tension currently held inside the Treasury and reduce the risk of it being deprioritised compared to its public finance responsibilities. A separate voice at the cabinet table would, it is argued, mean more focus on economic growth.

The second is to remove the allocation of public expenditure to departments and policy programmes – but not the setting of the overall spending envelope – from the Treasury to elsewhere at the centre. That could be to No.10 and the Cabinet Office or, in the case of Lord Maude’s recommendation in his 2023 review, into a new Office of Budget and Management (OBM) to sit alongside civil service management responsibilities.¹⁸⁰ The aim of this split would be to address the strategic vacuum described above and better align outcomes, policy, budgets and capacity across government.

These proposals are trying to solve genuine problems and both arguments are strong. We, however, have concluded that they do not point to the most direct or precise solution to the problems identified by the commission. The first split would not address

the problem of the strategic vacuum.* Distancing economic growth policy from wider government strategy would be unwise. Despite their multiple responsibilities, chancellors remain a powerful voice for 'growth' around the cabinet table and the alignment of that priority with public expenditure brings value. The deprioritisation of economic growth can be a problem but is also the result of short-termism and a lack of a coherent strategy, which are primarily political problems rather than the result of departmental structures.¹⁸¹

The second split has more potential. Moving public expenditure into No.10 or a new OBM would mean closer alignment with aspects of the government's policy, and the management of the civil service. But it would also create new divides – for example, between public expenditure and civil service management in the OBM, the strategic advice to the prime minister and policy portfolios of the DPMC, and the macroeconomic expertise and tax functions of the Treasury.

Priorities, budgets and policy need to be agreed collectively – none should be driven by the Treasury alone

Rather than reaching for a machinery of government change, which anyway seems unlikely to happen in the near future, the problem of strategic misalignment must be addressed more directly. The failure is not inherent in the Treasury's role in public expenditure, which is appropriate given the expertise and other functions it holds, but rather in the Treasury's control of the budgetary processes that effectively set whole-government strategy.

The question the government needs to answer is not whether public expenditure should be the responsibility of the Treasury, No.10, the Cabinet Office, or a new department entirely. It is how the government's *overall* approach to public expenditure, and

* It has also been tried before, with the short and ultimately unsuccessful existence of the Department of Economic Affairs during Harold Wilson's government in the 1960s.

strategy more broadly, can be managed collectively and coherently across the centre, and under the more direct leadership of the prime minister and their top team – including the chancellor.

We set out below our answer to that question, in the form of a new strategy and budget process that would better translate long-term and cross-cutting priorities into delivery. Some experts, in reviewing these recommendations, were supportive in principle but sceptical that the Treasury, under the direction of any chancellor, would commit to a more jointly owned approach. In the event that a government implemented these proposals and found that to be true, it would then be appropriate to revisit more structural solutions, such as those recommended by Lord Maude.

The *Priorities for Government* should be embedded in a new, collective strategy and budget process

The new executive committee should own a single strategy and budget process based on the government's priorities

For new prime ministers to enact their administration's core missions or goals it is not enough just to articulate them as priorities in the way we have recommended. These priorities must in turn be reflected in policies, budgets and operational plans across government.

Our proposal to achieve this is a new strategy and budget process – managed between the DPMC, Treasury and the DCS. It would build upon the existing model of the multi-year spending review to better plan for long-term, cross-cutting priorities. While the Treasury would retain its role in managing public expenditure, our approach would remove its sole control of these core strategy and budget processes. They would be rooted instead in collective decisions.

This process would begin with the development of the *Priorities for Government*, first articulated at the modernised King's Speech and then further honed into a clear framework of priorities,

measurable outcomes and underlying principles, as described above. This acts as the cornerstone of the subsequent strategy and budget process we recommend, from which plans can be made and trade-offs decided.

The executive committee, chaired by the prime minister, would act as the primary political forum in which all important strategic decisions would be discussed and agreed. The chancellor would develop a fiscal strategy, and recommend it to the executive committee to approve, that sets levels of taxation, expenditure and debt consistent with meeting the *Priorities for Government*.¹⁸² Fiscal rules, the overall spending envelope and tax policy would flow from this strategy, based on a range of scenarios in response to OBR forecasts and in line with the government's priorities.* These too would be agreed and owned by the executive committee.**

The committee would also agree a devolution strategy, as part of this process, once each parliament. This would set out how UK government understood the roles, responsibilities and powers of each tier of government, including as they relate to the *Priorities for Government*, and how intergovernmental relations would be managed to co-ordinate collaboration between the tiers of government.

After the executive committee agrees the spending envelope, process and timeline for the spending review, the chief secretary to the Treasury and the first secretary of state would jointly lead discussions and negotiations with departments over their bids and plans. These would include collective discussions with rotating casts of secretaries of state for each of the government's priorities, learning from previous 'Star Chamber' approaches used by the governments of Margaret Thatcher, John Major, New Labour and the coalition. This would replace the currently bilateral negotiations

* Which would help to avoid the misalignment between tax and other policy across government; for example, seen in the relationship between tax and net zero policy in recent governments, analysed by [this IfG report](#).

** In a separate report the IfG has argued that the way fiscal rules are used should also be reformed. For example, fiscal rules should use ranges rather than single points as targets, they should treat investment differently to current spending, and they should 'bind' the government in the third, rather than fifth, year.

between the Treasury (with varying oversight from No.10) and departments with a more collective form of deliberation in which cross-cutting plans could be honed across and between departments to deliver the priorities. Difficult trade-offs would be escalated to the executive committee to discuss, who would then take final, collective agreement over budget allocations.

The collective political ownership of strategy at the centre would be mirrored and supported by joint official mechanisms, too. This would start with equity of information between the DPMC, Treasury and the DCS. Departments' spending review bids, and all supporting information, would be submitted to each concurrently, with each department playing a role in scrutinising and assessing these bids, based on shared analysis by relevant teams in each department, including Treasury spending teams, the DPMC's priorities group and the DCS's civil service functions.

Representatives of the DPMC and DCS teams would work closely with the Treasury's public spending group – including general expenditure policy (GEP)* and spending teams – throughout the strategy and budget-setting process, also drawing on advice from outside experts like charities. The executive secretariat would be responsible for brokering a settled position between HMT, the DPMC, the DCS and other relevant departments on advice and proposals being discussed at the executive committee.

The new process we recommend would also promote long-term planning. It would be aligned to the length of the parliament and the agreed *Priorities for Government*, budgeting for five years for resource spending (refreshed every three years). Capital spend would be budgeted to cover longer term time spans where appropriate, depending on the type of project in question.

* GEP is a team within the Treasury's public spending group, which advises Treasury ministers on how to plan spending at the budget so that it fits within the overall spending envelope and aligns with the government's priorities. Unlike most teams in the public spending group, which advise on the merits of proposals from a particular department, GEP will be advising on how to trade off proposals between departments.

This would build upon the effective aspects of the existing multi-year spending review while addressing the problems identified above. It would better align government priorities with policy, plans and budgets. It would incentivise more outcomes-focused and, critically, long-term planning across government. And it would rebalance the centre of government. The prime minister would take a more direct role in setting and translating the strategy of their government, supported but not dominated by the Treasury. Input from the DCS, meanwhile, would ensure that the agreed strategy is deliverable in practice and at pace.

Even when the prime minister and chancellor are fully aligned in their views, our solution enables greater institutional alignment between the Treasury and the rest of the centre, facilitating coherent cross-cutting policy making. A point at which there are strong and coherent relations between the prime minister and chancellor would be the opportune moment to bring about these changes.

This kind of more collective decision making over strategy and budgets has, as discussed above, become too alien to the UK. But it has been shown to work in other countries. Canada, for example, has operated a 'two key' system during Justin Trudeau's premiership. The finance minister generally takes the lead on financial decisions but the prime minister has substantial input, and both the prime minister and finance minister are required to sign decisions off, giving the prime minister an effective veto.¹⁸³

The Netherlands, meanwhile, enacts its frequent coalition agreements via a more decentralised budget process in which ministries have greater power – within pre-agreed fiscal limits – and cross-departmental groups are used to devise changes in strategy for priority areas.¹⁸⁴ There is no reason, beyond historical baggage, for a similar approach not to work in the UK.

Departments should develop cross-cutting plans and bids to deliver priorities

Many of the *Priorities for Government* in our proposed model would inevitably and consciously be cross-cutting, requiring action and budgeting from multiple departments (as well as other parts of the state and other sectors), because the toughest problems facing the country are complex and interconnected. Our new strategy and budget process will address this problem – and improve upon the bilateral basis through which most budget allocations are negotiated now between the centre and individual departments – by requiring the development of more genuine cross-cutting bids from departments to deliver those priorities.

This would build on the existing but inadequate approach to defining 'priority outcomes'.¹⁸⁵ In the new model, spending review bids on cross-cutting government priorities would be led by a single secretary of state, working with a single permanent secretary accounting officer. But those senior figures would lead groups of other secretaries of state and permanent secretaries of departments with a role in delivering each priority to develop coherent joint strategies and accompanying bids for resource to match those priorities.¹⁸⁶

In setting the terms for this process, the executive committee would insist that plans were developed with greater input from front-line public services, civil society and other experts and people with experience of the policy areas in question. Groups of ministers responsible for each priority would discuss and negotiate their joint bids with the chief secretary to the Treasury and the first secretary of state at the centre, before ultimate deliberation by the executive committee. Similar approaches have been taken before, such as in the 2000 spending review, which used 15 'cross-departmental reviews' to set strategy and funds – in some cases pooled budgets – for subsequent cross-cutting programmes such as Sure Start and on criminal justice reform.¹⁸⁷

Successful bids for each of the government's priorities would then be managed on the basis that a named secretary of state and accounting officer were ultimately accountable for the priority's delivery. The responsibility for individual projects and programmes within each priority would be shared and delegated across departments as required. This builds on the range of approaches to organising cross-government activity already made possible by the Treasury's guidance, *Managing Public Money*.^{188,189}

Different governance and accountability models would be required to support cross-cutting delivery of the various strategies and budgets agreed through this process. The approach to management would depend on the nature of the priority and the work involved. Some projects and services would be largely managed by a single department while contributing to a cross-cutting priority, like the Home Office's Police Uplift programme and its role in the cross-government efforts to reduce crime. Other work would need the direct leadership and delivery of multiple departments. A recent example would be the Net zero systems tool – an interdepartmental programme that received funding via the government's 'shared outcomes fund'.¹⁹⁰

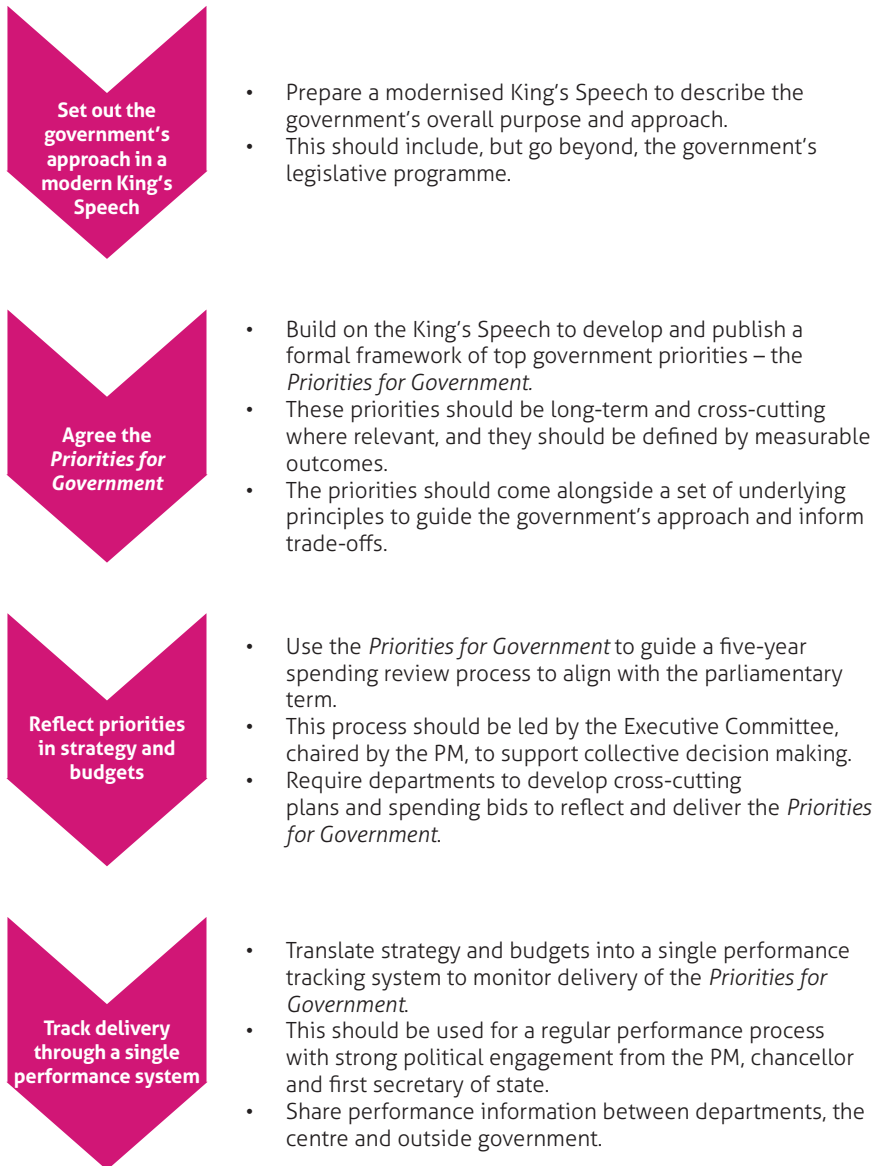
Delivery should be tracked through a single performance system

Once the government's strategy and budgets have been set by the process recommended above, the centre needs to be able to track delivery of its priorities using a single, regularly updated performance platform shared across government and led by the DPMC, as discussed above. Miranda Curtis argued to the commission that most successful organisations have "connective tissue" that allows different parts of the organisation to collaborate towards the same goal or purpose. A consistent, practical performance framework is a good example of such "connective tissue" and is needed at the centre.

This single performance framework would create the shared understanding across government needed for rapid feedback loops and effective performance management. The system would be managed by the performance function within the DPMC. It would be flexible, allowing departments to organise their own internal delivery plans as relevant for them, provided they share the right information across government – there is no need to force plans into restrictively consistent, long, static reports.¹⁹¹ This would build on the progress made via the existing 'GRIP' performance system, described above, that has recently been introduced at the centre of government.

Critically, the system would fuel an important performance rhythm across the DPMC, DCS and Treasury, through which the prime minister, first secretary of state and chancellor, alongside the cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, can oversee the delivery of the government's priorities. This performance process should have a range of outside input to break down the centre's tendency towards insularity. Outside experts, sector leaders and citizen engagement should, for instance, contribute to any performance stocktakes undertaken as part of this process. And progress against this framework would be published regularly to encourage outside scrutiny and collaboration.

Figure 9 Proposed strategy and budget process



Source: Institute for Government proposals.

A stronger, more open centre would benefit from better scrutiny

This report has recommended various ways for the centre of government to open itself up to outside input. Its strategy would be informed by the perspectives of those it would affect and those responsible for its delivery. The centre would make much greater and more routine use of external advisers to enrich its decision making. Its teams would be strengthened through regular secondments to foster collaboration between sectors around the government's priorities. And deliberative participation would be used to bring citizens' perspectives into the heart of government much more directly.

A more coherent, focused and open centre would also improve parliamentary and other forms of scrutiny. With the right set of oversight arrangements, ministers and civil servants would be better held to account, reinforcing better decision making at the heart of government.

Outside parliament, civil society groups and others would be better able to understand how decisions are made and priorities set. In parliament, the creation of the DPMC will require a new departmental select committee, explicitly focused on the prime minister and their department. That committee could be a sub-set of the Liaison Committee but should meet regularly to scrutinise the work of the DPMC and to hold the first secretary of state and cabinet secretary, as well as the prime minister, to account. It would cover policy functions in the DPMC, like constitutional and union matters, as well as the general operation of the department.

The new first secretary should appear alongside the prime minister at their usual thrice-yearly Liaison Committee sessions. This recognises their role as a vital support to the prime minister. The Liaison Committee might also want to hold a dedicated session with the prime minister and first secretary of state at the start of a parliament, to scrutinise the *Priorities for Government* once they have been published.

A new DPMC committee, and Liaison Committee scrutiny of the first secretary (in addition to the prime minister, as now), would free up the existing Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to focus on the civil service. Its remit will be amended to become the forum to hold the DCS, and the leadership of the civil service as a whole, to account. This committee will also dock in to the new Civil Service Board, holding sessions with the first secretary of state as the chair of the board and minister responsible for the civil service, and questioning board members about how they are performing their duties.

The new arrangements we propose for aligning government priorities with spending decisions should also enable more effective scrutiny. The new DPMC select committee could examine the operation of the government's executive committee and its supporting teams, to take a view on the overall approach to strategic decision making. And in terms of scrutinising cross-cutting priorities themselves, clarity about the government's approach would enable a further development of welcome joint working between committees.¹⁹²



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Conclusion

This is a vital moment for the governance of the UK. A set of serious and interconnected policy challenges – including stagnant economic growth, struggling public services and the challenge of reaching net zero – provide the backdrop for a 2024 general election that could either give the Conservative Party and Rishi Sunak a renewed mandate or make Keir Starmer the Labour Party's first prime minister for 14 years.

The centre of government must be strengthened, rationalised and opened up. Regardless of which party wins the election, what policies they pursue in government and any changes they may make to give other tiers of government different or new powers, the reforms in this report must be prioritised.

The structures at the centre have repeatedly failed prime ministers and will do so again unless lasting improvements are made. The ambitious agenda of an incoming prime minister will founder unless they change how the heart of government works.

Prime ministers thinking about reinventing the centre – and they all end up considering it – do not have the luxury of time. The risk is that a reorganisation is hastily drawn up in an attempt to seize a fleeting moment when change is possible. By conducting an intensive year-long research process now, before the general election, we have done the thinking that prime ministers are never able to do. Synthesising analysis from politicians, current and former senior civil servants, and leaders from overseas and local governments and the private sector, has allowed us to make proposals based on research that the civil service and political parties will always have insufficient time and perspective to carry out themselves.

Our seven proposals for change provide a blueprint for the centre that is ready to be implemented and we urge whoever forms the government after the next election to adopt them as a priority.

Appendix 1: Implementing the recommendations

This report sets out the reforms that would most improve the centre of UK government. The way in which these changes are implemented will determine their likelihood of success.

After the forthcoming general election there will be a government with a new mandate. To implement our recommendations, that government should:

Before the next election

- *For the government* – commission advice from the civil service about rapidly implementing these proposals and the timetable for doing so after polling day.
- *For the opposition* – focus on messages and questions to share during access talks with senior civil servants, prioritising plans for the creation of a Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and a new strategy and budget process building on a multi-year spending review.
- *For all main political parties* – develop an understanding of how policy priorities and manifesto pledges will be translated into an early, modernised King’s Speech.

Upon government formation

- Announce the creation of a Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and a Department for the Civil Service, but recognise that full implementation will take a period of months, to be aligned with the government’s first spending review.

-
- Appoint a first secretary of state and a minister of state for the civil service (attending cabinet) as part of the first tranche of ministerial appointments.
 - Create an executive committee and assign membership, including the chancellor and first secretary. The first meeting of the committee could immediately follow the first full cabinet meeting, to grip the government's key strategic decisions from the beginning.

The first 21 days

- The prime minister should prioritise setting up the secretariat for the executive committee and leading the committee and secretariat in the preparation of the *Priorities for Government*, based on work carried out before the election. This will mean preparing a new King's Speech setting out these priorities, which is then endorsed by parliament. The speech will include but not be limited to the legislative programme, and set the strategic context and priorities for the first spending review.
- Make the machinery of government changes to create the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Department for the Civil Service, recognising this will take several months of design, planning and engagement to fully implement.

The first three months

- Using the King's Speech as a starting point, run a six-to-eight week process to develop a detailed framework of *Priorities for Government*. This should be led by the executive committee and the secretariat in the DPMC, with contributions from the Treasury and departments on each priority area. These priorities should include measurable outcomes and the underlying principles that will guide the government's decision making. The *Priorities for Government* should be captured in a document developed by the executive committee and agreed at cabinet.

The first six months to a year

- Run the new strategy and budget process, following the setting of the *Priorities for Government*. Its timing will depend on how the scheduling of the general election falls into the budgetary calendar and fiscal context. A new government elected in October or November 2024, for example, might choose to use one year 'roll-on' allocations to give itself the time to undertake this process.

Appendix 2: Full list of recommendations

The prime minister should announce a set of priorities at the start of a parliament

- The King's Speech should become a more comprehensive statement of the government's strategic approach, ambitions and principles at the start of a parliament. It should include a sense of prioritisation among the government's aims.
- The King's Speech should mark the beginning of a process by which the government establishes a single set of priorities, along with underlying principles as to the government's approach to achieving them, published in the early weeks of a parliament. The priorities should be developed with input from across and outside government.
- Each priority should be accompanied by measurable outcomes, and a lead secretary of state, alongside other contributing, responsible secretaries of state, should be assigned to each. The principles contained in this document would, through parliament, be used by the centre to make trade-offs between competing plans for finite resources.

The prime minister should assemble an executive committee

- A new executive committee should be established at the heart of government, with a very small membership of five or six. That should comprise the prime minister, chancellor, the newly defined role of first secretary of state, and a small number of other key ministers. Formally, the executive committee would be constituted as a cabinet committee, with a new executive secretariat supporting its work.

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- This committee should have responsibility for developing the *Priorities for Government*, for agreement by the full cabinet. It will agree the government's fiscal strategy, fiscal rules and spending review allocations, ensuring that budgets are aligned with priorities. Over the course of a parliament, it will oversee the performance of departments against the *Priorities for Government*. It will not take day-to-day decisions on policy.

The prime minister should appoint a senior first secretary of state

- A first secretary of state should have ownership of the government's policy programme, working closely with the chancellor and freeing up prime ministerial time. The post holder will sit within the prime minister's office, and be the secretary of state for the Department for the Civil Service (outlined below).

The centre, including its committees, should draw on outside expertise alongside a diverse range of skills and experience

- Through cabinet committees, the centre should more often seek external input during the decision making process. The government should invite more academics, businesspeople and civil society representatives to contribute to discussions before decisions are made. Such input should be sought through standing networks of external advisers.
- The centre should use methods of democratic participation and engagement to better understand the perspectives of those affected by policy and factor them into strategic decision making at the centre.

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- Teams at the centre should establish standing part- and full-time secondment programmes open to experts across the public, private and social sectors. Expert outsiders need to be more actively recruited into the centre as part of 'business as usual', which requires better recruitment processes and more competitive pay for those with specialist skills to earn salaries closer to their market rate. Officials in the civil service should be encouraged to take secondments outside central government.
 - Teams at the centre should comprise a mixture of external recruits and existing civil servants with experience at the centre and in departments. Civil servants working in these teams should include those with backgrounds in STEM, delivery and management, to improve diversity of skills and thought.

No.10 and the Cabinet Office should be merged to create a strong Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

- The DPMC should combine No.10 and the parts of the Cabinet Office that focus on supporting the prime minister and brokering cabinet agreement. This will create a stronger, more permanent arrangement, with teams clearly focused on servicing the core functions of the centre. The headcount of the DPMC should be less than that of its constituent parts as they exist now. The DPMC should comprise four principal groups in which all the functions could be organised:
- The prime minister's direct support containing their closest political and official advisers:
 - A private office, led by a principal private secretary.
 - A chief of staff, focused on transacting business on the prime minister's behalf and ensuring cross-government coherence around overall approach and messaging. Such a figure will be able to use the agreed *Priorities for Government* to formally set direction for special advisers, but without full managerial control of them. The chief of staff will be complemented by a small political team, including a political secretary.

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- A communications team, which should focus on strategic media interventions, protecting the prime minister from responding to day-to-day news. The first secretary of state should be deployed for issues that do not require a 'leader of the nation' voice. The communications team should also be more actively involved in decision making processes, with a dedicated public opinion function. The creation of the team should involve locating senior cross-government communications roles within the DPMC.
 - The prime minister's priorities group to advise on the government's agenda, with functions including:
 - Advice on policy priorities, including deep specialist knowledge and a focus on long-term implications.
 - An economic and finance team to act as a source of personal advice to the prime minister. Its head should be a heavyweight appointment – the opposite number to the Treasury's chief economist.
 - A modernised delivery function to focus on resolving problems with top priorities, rather than tracking performance. It should be highly focused on the government's priorities and staffed by experts in their areas. The unit should have trusting relationships across government and access to high-quality data, with rapid feedback loops enabled by the single performance system recommended elsewhere in the report.
 - An ability to monitor performance against priorities to hold ministers and civil servants to account for delivery, and to maintain a shared information picture across the centre and departments from which performance analysis could be drawn.

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- The cabinet secretariats to broker policy decisions, support cabinet committees and act as the key day-to-day gatekeepers between the DPMC and the rest of government. Including:
 - Strong national security and resilience functions building on existing apparatus, to focus on strategic questions of security and establish a strong 'three lines of defence' approach to preparedness and resilience.
 - An economic and domestic secretariat to support the cabinet secretary and prime minister to reach collective cabinet agreement on policy decisions.
 - An executive committee secretariat to support the new executive committee making key strategic decisions, including on budget allocations.
 - A Joint Analysis and Assessment Centre. This centre would improve the DPMC's access to data, insights and evidence to inform its strategy. The team will be created out of and combine the existing Joint Data and Analysis Centre (JDAC) and 10DS (No.10's data science function). It should allow the centre to undertake all-source, multi-disciplinary, multi-domain assessments of information and analysis to provide a shared, probabilistic view to decision makers including the prime minister and executive committee.
 - Constitutional and propriety functions – including: an authoritative source of advice on constitutional matters, propriety and ethics, and parliamentary liaison. This group should also be the source of expertise on devolution and the union.

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- The senior leadership team of the DPMC should support the cabinet secretary – who will remain the most senior official in the department and across government – and consist of the prime minister’s PPS (heading the direct support group), the chief of staff, the head of the priorities group, and the heads of the economic and domestic secretariat and national security secretariat. This team should act as guardians of the government’s priorities and co-ordinate the work of the department.

The civil service should be led and managed by a new Department for the Civil Service

- The Department for the Civil Service (DCS) should be established alongside the DPMC. The department should be responsible for leading and managing the civil service. It should include teams working on the civil service functions, civil service learning and development, and modernisation and reform.
- The DCS should be a ministerial department reporting to the first secretary of state. Its permanent secretary should be the head of the civil service. A strong minister of state who attends cabinet, similar to the chief secretary to the Treasury, should be appointed to support the first secretary in running the department.
- The roles of cabinet secretary and head of the civil service should be split, recognising the reality that no individual can carry out both roles effectively. In this model the cabinet secretary will remain the most senior civil servant. The head of the civil service is accountable for the management of the civil service to the first secretary as chair of the Civil Service Board, while being personally performance managed by the cabinet secretary. Departmental permanent secretaries will work to the head of the civil service.

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- The head of the civil service, as the DCS permanent secretary, should line manage all permanent secretaries (except for the cabinet secretary), and be personally responsible for leading and managing the civil service.
 - The DCS should be strengthened by placing the civil service on a statutory footing. This should set out unambiguously what officials are responsible for, and therefore what they should be held accountable for. This should place accountability for maintaining the capability of the civil service directly on to the head of the civil service and permanent secretaries – thereby giving the head of the civil service the levers they need to effectively lead and manage the institution.
 - A new Civil Service Board should be established, providing an independent source of oversight and accountability, and overseeing the leadership and direction of the civil service.

The *Priorities for Government* should be embedded in a new, collective strategy and budget process

- Building on the existing model of the multi-year spending review, a new strategy and budget process should be managed between the DPMC, Treasury and DCS.
- This process should see the executive committee function as the primary political forum in which all strategic decisions are discussed and agreed. The chancellor should develop a fiscal strategy, approved by the executive committee, that sets levels of taxation, expenditure and debt consistent with the *Priorities for Government*. Fiscal rules and the overall spending envelope should flow from this strategy – again owned and agreed by the executive committee.
- The executive committee should also develop a devolution strategy, once in each parliament, as part of this process.

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- All departments' budgetary bids should be negotiated with a combination of secretaries of state jointly responsible for each cross-cutting priority, the first secretary of state (or other DPMC and DCS ministers) and the chief secretary to the Treasury, before discussion and agreement at the executive committee. This will replace the largely bilateral negotiations between the Treasury and departments with a more collective form of deliberation.
 - This process should rely on equity of information between the DPMC, DCS and Treasury. Spending review bids from departments, and all supporting information, should be submitted to each concurrently, and should be scrutinised by each, based on shared analysis – with the new economic and finance team in the DPMC playing a key role. The executive secretariat should be responsible for brokering shared analysis and advice between the DPMC, the DCS and the Treasury.
 - This process should be aligned to the length of the parliament and the agreed *Priorities for Government*. It should budget for five years of resource spending (refreshed every three years), with capital spend budgeted to cover long-term horizons depending on the project in question.
 - This process should also require the development of more cross-cutting budgetary bids, jointly developed and submitted by more than one department. Such bids will be led by a single secretary of state and permanent secretary, who will organise groups of secretaries of state and permanent secretaries to develop coherent joint strategies and accompanying resource bids to match the government's agreed priorities.
 - Delivery of the government's priorities should be tracked through a single, regularly updated performance platform, shared across government and led by the DPMC. It should be managed by the performance team within the DPMC, and have a range of outside input.

A stronger, more open centre will benefit from better scrutiny

- The creation of the DPMC would require a new parliamentary select committee, focused on the prime minister and their department. This could be a sub-committee of the Liaison Committee, but should meet regularly to hold the prime minister, first secretary of state and cabinet secretary to account.
- The new first secretary of state should appear alongside the prime minister at their usual Liaison Committee sessions. The Liaison Committee should run a session to scrutinise the *Priorities for Government* at the outset of a parliament.
- The current Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee should continue to focus on the civil service, but with a revised remit to ensure it can also scrutinise the DCS. It should also dock in to the new Civil Service Board, including by questioning members of the board.

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