

**Alex Chisholm has had a busy first year as civil service chief operating officer. Now the UK is looking towards its recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, he tells Beckie Smith about his priorities for the months ahead, and how the plans for civil service reform are shaping up**

Alex Chisholm



By **Beckie Smith**

15 Jun 2021

Over the last year that Alex Chisholm has been chief operating officer of the civil service and Cabinet Office permanent secretary, very much has been said about Whitehall reform. It was a high-profile priority of the prime minister's former top adviser Dominic Cummings, whose pre-No.10 writings on the subject – and indeed some when he was in the building – meant the inner workings of the government machine suddenly had an unusually high prominence in the national discussion.

Concrete details on what changes might be in the offing have been slow to emerge, though – understandably, since the civil service has had one or two more pressing priorities to focus on.

But as the UK starts to emerge from the worst throes of the coronavirus pandemic – and now the country has finally left the EU – the gears are turning again.

As well as the not-inconsiderable tasks of helping guide the civil service through a pandemic and the Brexit transition period, Chisholm has been working behind the scenes on turning those gears.

“It’s been a tremendous year from the perspective of the challenges that we’ve had to face and we’ve risen to. I’m filled with admiration, genuinely, for what the civil service has been able to do. We’ve all had a really powerful sense of mission – that’s never been stronger,” he says, listing some of the many huge pieces of work civil servants have pulled together since the pandemic struck – among them the furlough scheme, the vaccine rollout and the Universal Credit support for people who lost jobs.

While all of that has been happening, “we’ve been biding our time [on reform]... but we haven’t wasted that time, because there’s been a terrific element of consultation across the civil service,” Chisholm says. “We’ve also been quite reflective about what we can take from the pandemic and, indeed, from the EU exit process, the Integrated Review and other experiences about what needs to be done differently and better.”

Data has been a big focus of the government’s work this year, with analysis of stats from across government informing the Covid response and datasets being opened to the public, and Chisholm says he wants to build on civil servants’ skills in that area to improve the way services are delivered.

He also wants to encourage what he calls, in classic mandarin style, “integrated solutions to interconnected challenges” like the government’s levelling-up agenda; the net-zero-goal; economic recovery from the pandemic; increasing trade under the “Global Britain banner”.

All of these cut across departments and UK administrations, “so it is enormously important that we are really joined up in an effective way,” Chisholm says.

As part of that, he has been working with No.10, the Treasury and the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, on a “one centre approach” to coordinating work towards these ambitious goals. That thinking has shaped government’s approach to planning this and last year’s spending reviews, the management of government’s more than 200 major projects, and the introduction of new Outcome Delivery Plans (see box).

He is also working to embed a new approach to risk management, he says, referring to external reviews such as the one being conducted by Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy non-executive director Nigel Boardman in the wake of the Greensill scandal (see box), and a review of the Cabinet Office by one of its erstwhile ministers, Lord Francis Maude.

Chisholm acknowledges that all of this – along with addressing the Conservative Party’s 2019 manifesto commitments – “hasn’t had the same level of attention” it normally would, given the dual crises civil servants have been working on in the last couple of years. “So I’m keen to make sure... that we really redouble our efforts to make a success of those things and tackle inequalities that have become even further exposed during the experience of the pandemic.”

As well as the very real inequalities affecting the UK population the government must address in the wake of the pandemic, the civil service still has inequalities of its own.

A report from the Social Mobility Commission last month found people from disadvantaged backgrounds are still “significantly underrepresented” within the civil service. Those that make it sometimes struggle to climb the ladder because of what it called “alienating and intimidating” unspoken behavioural codes that their better-off colleagues have learned through their upbringing and privileged education. In fact, the number of senior civil servants from working-class or “low social economic backgrounds” has actually fallen slightly from 19% in 1967 to 18% now.

Asked about the report, Chisholm says the civil service now compared to when he joined more than 30 years ago is like “chalk and cheese”. “It’s unbelievable, the progress that’s been made,” he says, noting that 62% of civil servants went to a non-selective state school and 31% identify as coming from a lower socio-economic background. The senior civil service – including the top echelon of permanent secretaries – is now “as open to women as men”, he adds. “So that’s really helped, I think. When you look at the top of the organisation, if you feel that people like you are not represented amongst that group, it’s discouraging.”

He says talent schemes focused on underrepresented groups, internships and apprenticeships are all good ways to address the remaining disparities.

Attracting a more diverse civil service is “about the profile of the organisation”, he adds, nodding to the ongoing drive to move more civil servants out of London. “I think if the profile of the organisation is that you need to be in an old-fashioned looking building in Whitehall or Westminster, that is much less inviting than something which is in a town or city near you – and also where it feels very modern, it’s very visible, it doesn’t feel locked in the past.”

He points out that many of the new government hubs that departments are moving officials into as part of the Places for Growth programme are “glass and steel constructions”. And seeing the officials that appear in front of those buildings at press conferences and turn up at local meetings, working with businesses and local authorities “will help change people’s perception about what the civil service is like”, he adds.

“But I think that it’s already seen as being very open to people from any background. And we just need to nudge a couple more points on the dial to really, truly make sure that every aspect of it is representative and inclusive.”

The government has always had outposts outside London, and it will take more than a few office moves to make the civil service representative of the many UK regions it serves. Chisholm says unlike previous attempts, this programme isn't focused as heavily on moving delivery-focused roles.

“So that is different this time around: we've got a lot of policy roles as well. Also that many senior civil servants are transferring roles as well as the more operational and junior roles,” he says.

“That won't be a surprise to HMRC or the Department for Work and Pensions, for example, which have always had a strong representation across the whole of the UK. But it is a change for a number of very policy-heavy departments,” he says.

He says another thing that will make a “big difference” to the programme's success is a strong ministerial presence. “Ministers will always attract people around them for meetings and for visits and all of that. And so if ministers themselves want to work outside of London offices, that sends a really positive message.”

Recent press releases about office openings have signalled ministers will spend time in their “second homes”, and housing secretary Robert Jenrick has promised to spend “as much time as I can” in his ministry's new Wolverhampton HQ. Exactly what that looks like remains to be seen, though, and CSW wonders if some politicians might take some persuading to get out of the big smoke.

“A lot of it will vary between individuals. And of course, the location of their constituency can make quite a difference,” Chisholm says. And, he points out, parliament's rules around voting and other matters often dictate when MPs need to be in Westminster. Asked if that could prove a serious barrier to ministers working out of regional offices, Chisholm answers carefully: “I think that some evolution of parliamentary practice will definitely help with multi-site working across the UK... I need to be careful not to exceed my brief because these are parliamentary rules, but it's probably something to consider as well around equal opportunities for participation between the sexes as well – and people at different stages in their careers and in their parenting, for example, or with caring responsibilities.

“So there are probably a number of ways in which I suspect parliament will want to evolve to become a fully modern organisation, making use of that technology and responding to social change around it.”

What about permanent secretaries? The Social Mobility Commission's recent report suggested one way to ensure departments' new regional offices are more than just outposts would be to have two to three perm secs outside London. Can Chisholm see that happening? “I think it's increasingly likely, not least because a number of departments now have two permanent secretaries, often with more of an operational support or delivery role. So that at least doubles your chances – probably more than doubles of chances, because very often the workforces that are involved in those more operational roles are themselves very largely outside of London,” he says.

“So from the perspective of being closer to the people that you are leading, there's a lot to be said for new locations.”

He points out that Angela McDonald, who became second permanent secretary at HM Revenue and Customs last summer, is based in Leeds. Having leaders outside the capital means civil servants are “more visible” and seen as more accessible to the public – and for both the reform plans and the levelling-up agenda, he says, that can only be a good thing.