

# Strategic, Capable, Innovative, Accountable: Four Steps to Smarter Government

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## Headline proposals

At the end of the Commission's year-long programme of work, this paper sums up our analysis, and sets out a four-step plan to make government fit to tackle the challenges our country faces.

July 2021



## THE COMMISSION FOR SMART GOVERNMENT

The Commission for Smart Government is an independent initiative to consider how to make public administration more effective. The Commission is a project of [GovernUp](#), which is an independent, non-party research initiative that offers evidenced-based solutions for all political parties to adopt. The 12 workstreams are:

Assessment	<i>What have been the standout successes and failures of recent public administrations, and what can we learn from them?</i>
Best Practice	<i>What are the examples of best practice in the UK and around the world from which we can learn?</i>
Talent & Competence	<i>How do we equip civil servants with better skills, recruit and remunerate to attract the best and incentivise success, and share knowledge?</i>
Project Management	<i>How do we ensure government has the right skills and systems in place to commission and manage big projects successfully?</i>
Finance	<i>How do we ensure stronger financial management, strip out cost and drive efficiency?</i>
Structures	<i>How should we improve the current Whitehall structure, with its small yet overlapping centre and siloed departments, to make decision-making more effective and less bureaucratic?</i>
Devolution	<i>To what extent should we devolve more power and decision-making to local bodies, and how can this be achieved while maintaining a proper role for the UK Government?</i>
Accountability	<i>How can we make the system, including ministers and civil servants, as well as agencies, regulators and arms-length bodies, more accountable?</i>
Technology	<i>How can we deploy technology more effectively and rapidly to improve public services?</i>
Data	<i>How can we ensure that decisions are evidence-based and informed by data?</i>
Ministers	<i>How can we make ministers and advisers more effective in their jobs?</i>
Appointments	<i>How can we ensure that the appointments system attracts the best and aligns with the Government's priorities?</i>

## COMMISSIONERS

<b>Michael Bichard</b>	Lord Bichard KCB is a crossbench peer in the House of Lords and chair of the National Audit Office. He was formerly Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and the first Director of the Institute for Government.
<b>Deborah Cadman</b>	Deborah Cadman OBE is Chief Executive of Birmingham City Council, and previously of the West Midlands Combined Authority.
<b>Camilla Cavendish</b>	Baroness Cavendish of Little Venice is a former Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit.
<b>Suma Chakrabarti</b>	Sir Suma Chakrabarti KCB was until recently the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. He was formerly Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for International Development.
<b>Ian Cheshire</b>	Sir Ian Cheshire was the Chairman of Barclays UK plc until 2021. He was formerly the Government Lead Non-Executive Director 2019-2020.
<b>Phaedra Chrousos</b>	Phaedra Chrousos is the Chief Strategy Officer for Libra Group and a former commissioner for the US Technology and Transformation Service.
<b>Chris Deverell</b>	General Sir Chris Deverell KCB MBE is the former Commander of UK Joint Forces Command.
<b>Jayne-Anne Gadhia</b>	Dame Jayne-Anne Gadhia DBE FRSE is a businesswoman and the founder and Executive Chair of the start-up Snoop.
<b>Martin Gilbert</b>	Martin Gilbert is the Chairman of Revolut and the co-founder and former CEO of Aberdeen Asset Management.
<b>Verity Harding</b>	Verity Harding is a Visiting Fellow at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge University, where she is on secondment from her role as Global Head of Policy and Partnerships at DeepMind.
<b>Nick Herbert</b>	Lord Herbert of South Downs CBE PC (Chair) is a former Conservative minister.
<b>Margaret Hodge</b>	Rt Hon Dame Margaret Hodge DBE MP is a Labour Member of Parliament, a former minister, and the former Chair of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee.
<b>Husayn Kassai</b>	Husayn Kassai is the co-founder and CEO of Onfido.
<b>Daniel Korski</b>	Daniel Korski CBE is the co-founder and CEO of PUBLIC and a former Deputy Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit.
<b>Paul Marshall</b>	Sir Paul Marshall is Chair and Chief Investment Officer of Marshall Wace LLP and a former Lead Non-Executive Director at the Department for Education.
<b>John Nash</b>	Lord Nash is a businessman and Government Lead Non-Executive Director. He is a former minister.
<b>Mark Rowley</b>	Sir Mark Rowley QPM is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.
<b>Gisela Stuart</b>	Baroness Stuart of Edgbaston PC is Lead Non-Executive Director at the Cabinet Office and a former Labour MP and minister.
<b>Jacky Wright</b>	Jacky Wright is the Chief Digital Officer for Microsoft US.

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## Introduction

The Covid epidemic has not only deepened the challenges facing our country, which were already profound. It has revealed that our system of public administration urgently needs a fundamental overhaul. As politicians begin to focus on rebuilding, it is crucial that they do not pass over the opportunity and the necessity to reform the machinery of government. For without change no amount of ambition or rhetoric will be sufficient to ensure that policy goals are delivered.

The very scale of the task facing government might encourage leaders to put the intricacies of systemic reform aside. The view of the Commission for Smart Government is that this would be precisely the wrong response. It is because the challenges are so great, and the world in which government is operating is changing so fast, that government must reform itself, or fail. The policy proposals we set out are all do-able, but they are not modest. They are radical because that is what is needed to ensure that government is equal to the task and promises can be met.

### *Strategic, capable, innovative and accountable*

The four words we have chosen to characterise the proposals in this document – **strategic**, **capable**, **innovative** and **accountable** government – are straightforward to say and understand intellectually, but much more difficult to make a reality. Governments all around the world, even the best, struggle with them.

But if we look at the UK, could we really use these words, hand on heart, to describe our system? For all the heroic work of so many across the public services, and achievements of which we should be proud, the pandemic has shown that government here, over many years and regardless of party, has not been strategic, capable, innovative, or accountable enough. If we are honest, we could have said that *before* the pandemic, looking at the longstanding inability of our system to find solutions to so many challenges – social care, housing, skills, the relationship between different levels of government, to name a few. Now we face immense and additional challenges: dealing with the deficit and debt, delivering net zero, truly equalising opportunity, making a success of Britain's new position in the world.

### *Our shared beliefs*

So, our first shared belief as a Commission is that **reform can no longer be a niche debate** engaged in largely by the likes of retired Whitehall mandarins or think tankers. It is one which should be of deep interest to everyone in the political, public service and business worlds, and

indeed to the public as a whole. It needs to extend across the whole nation, and take in government in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and in England away from London.

Second, the starting point for thinking about reform, and the test of any reform proposal, needs to be **‘does this make government work better for the people?’** Of course, this does not mean ignoring technical but important issues, such as how government departments are organised, data standards and HR processes, but it should always be clear why change is supported by more than intellectual arguments, and helps government do its job of making things better for our society, especially those most in need of opportunity and a better life. This test has two important consequences:

- **Different parts of government must work effectively together.** This means significantly shifting the current default towards departments’ and public services’ funding, activity and accountability being organised entirely separately. None of the big challenges ahead – recovery from the pandemic, levelling up, net zero or our global success – will be tackled successfully without breaking down Whitehall fiefdoms. They also require effective partnership across tiers of government, between Westminster and the devolved administrations, and between national and local governments. Parliament has a role to play too, by organising more of its scrutiny around outcomes, rather than organisations.
- **‘For the people’ means ‘for all the people’,** and that means strong attention to equality and diversity, making it a matter of serious substance, not gestures or fashion. It means being honest about the ways services too often let down the very people in our society who most need them. It means being willing to shift resources and radically redesign those services so that they support success and opportunity rather than respond to failure.

Third, **reform needs to encompass the way all the players in government work, ministers, political appointees and public servants,** and make their experience of working more positive and fulfilling. So, our approach is to look for ways that Ministers, as well as public servants, can be more effective. We also believe strongly that government is only able to perform for citizens if it is also a great place to work. Reform should be a positive experience for those who work in government. Narratives about ‘Whitehall wars’ or ‘hard rain’ have rightly been left behind, not least because of the experience of Covid, with a shared realisation that there are failings across our system of government that we need to fix together.

Fourth, in a world of enormous challenges and constantly accelerating technical change, **it is impossible to be too radical.** The story of government reform in this country and elsewhere is far more often of missed opportunities caused by insufficient radicalism and persistence, than

the reverse. We need to be clear-eyed about the extent to which government is not working, and where merely tuning up the current approach falls far short of what is needed. This is particularly true of technology. With the pace of events and technological change accelerating all the time, we simply cannot maintain an increasingly analogue government in a digital age. Can we be surprised if, under tremendous pressure, players in government improvise ways of responding to the pace of events if the formal, proper, systems, are simply too slow and cumbersome to work? The UK has at so many times in the past led the world in transforming its government institutions to meet new challenges. It can do so again.

Last, but not least, **we need a smart approach to standards**. High standards in public office are vital. Where they are perceived to fall, they stop government working properly and undermine public confidence. But, as with equality and diversity, the focus should be on substance, not form and process for their own sake. If processes intended to protect standards are not intelligently designed, they risk impeding legitimate and pressing operational demands. If the front door is not open to bringing in the outside talent and help which modern government needs, the risk is that the back door is sought. As we debate new governance to maintain standards, we must ensure that its design and purpose enables government to be open to outside expertise, not closed.

### *Seizing the moment for radicalism*

It is encouraging that the current Government is beginning to focus on the necessity of reform required. Shortly before our launch, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, said: “if this Government is to reform so much, it must also reform itself.”<sup>1</sup> Just recently, that commitment has been reaffirmed. The Prime Minister has signed the Government’s Reform Declaration, saying: “reform is necessary now – not as an end in itself, but as a means of delivering the better Britain the public demands and deserves.”<sup>2</sup> His signature alongside the Cabinet Secretary’s shows that both, rightly, see reform as a joint endeavour, not one side correcting faults which are exclusively on the other side.

But Ministers surely know that they need to go further. For all its strong intentions and much good content, our view, in keeping with our conviction about radicalism, is that the Government’s programme needs to be more comprehensive and more ambitious.

Some of our proposals address aspects of government which are not addressed at all in the Declaration, or certainly not nearly enough. On other aspects of reform, the Government is right in its diagnosis and intentions, but we offer proposals which are more developed or more radical than those in the Declaration. We hope they will be seen as useful both by the current Government and by leaders in politics and public service more widely who have an interest in

driving real change in our country: they are intended to make government work better for any future administration.

A strength of the Commission has been its openness to expertise and contributions from others. The Institute for Government's<sup>3</sup> published work and expertise have been especially helpful, and we noted Policy Exchange's own Commission recommendations<sup>4</sup> with interest. We set out to develop existing thinking and be ambitious in our approach. Our working model generated analysis and ideas through distinguished business and public service leaders working alongside expert researchers. It sought to draw in experience from the corporate sector, public services and overseas, through interviews, evidence sessions and discussions with other governments. We have held numerous evidence sessions, both public and private, and produced ten discussion and policy papers, all of which can be find on our website, [www.governsmarter.org](http://www.governsmarter.org).

I would like to thank my fellow Commissioners for their dedication to this work over the past year and for bringing their formidable collective experience and insight to bear. I would also especially like to thank the Commission's Project Director, Sophie Miremadi, and Research Director, Martin Wheatley, who have provided outstanding service, as well as Andrew Slinn, Francesca Reed, Tess Kidney Bishop, Simon Kaye, and Adam Hawksbee who provided research for our work.

The GovernUp project, which began in 2014 and which has powered the Commission, will continue. The hope of everyone who has been involved with this report is that it will catalyse real change in our system of government, reform that should now be an imperative for political leaders who want to improve our country for the better.

**Nick Herbert**

*Chair*



# FOUR STEPS TO SMARTER GOVERNMENT

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## I. **Strategic** government

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- Create a **Prime Minister's Department, streamlining and subsuming the Cabinet Office**, to provide stronger support to the Prime Minister and Government in bringing departments together, defining and delivering on strategic goals, and bringing about government reform.
- Set up a **Treasury Board** in the Prime Minister's Department, led by the Chief Secretary, **to provide strategic direction and oversight of the Government's programme, including the current spending responsibilities of the Treasury**. The Board would operate a best-in-class system of financial planning, a **Plan for Government**, replacing the current spending review.
- **Scrap nearly all Cabinet Committees** and replace them with a small number of powerful Ministerial Boards responsible for each of its main goals, overseeing strategy and delivery, allocating resource against priorities in a dynamic way.

## 2. **Capable** government

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### **Priority and leadership**

- **Build the concept of 'the Public Service'**, bringing together the Civil Service, local government, health and others, across the four nations of the UK. Set up a Public Service Board, headed by the Cabinet Secretary, and including leaders from its different parts.
- **Transfer the role of Minister for the Civil Service away from the Prime Minister**, so it gets full-time attention in a separate Cabinet-ranked role in the Prime Minister's Department, which would oversee an **Office for Public Service Effectiveness**.
- **Make the Civil Service Commission a powerful talent management watchdog**, instead of a narrow regulator of external recruitment, headed by someone with an external background.
- **Make Government reform one of the main priorities in the Plan for Government**, with Government reporting annually on progress on reform. **Set up a Government Futures Unit** to look 5-15 years ahead, selling its insight internationally as well as informing UK government.

- **Start making it happen right away:** set up a small, powerful team, headed by a minister and drawing in corporate expertise, to define and start the change process.

### *How departments are led and run*

- **Turn Departmental Boards into genuinely powerful bodies** through which ministers develop effective policy, oversee delivery, and take key decisions on personnel.
- **Replace the Permanent Secretary role with a Chief Executive** as the senior Civil Service post in departments, with a clear focus on strategy, execution, and organisational effectiveness.

### *Ministerial capability and ways of working*

- **By exception, enable people to serve as ministers without having to be parliamentarians,** with Privy Counsellor status, to allow additional talent to be brought in from outside government and Parliament. Enable Parliamentary accountability through the creation of oral question committees.
- **Allow each Secretary of State to create a Council of Advisers,** like the Treasury's Council of Economic Advisers, to bring outside expertise into the department.
- **Create a new Prime Minister's Office and Ministerial Centre** to replace No.10 as the Prime Minister's working office and bring all ministers' London bases together, in the QEII Centre, Marlborough House, or on the redeveloped Parliamentary Estate.

### *Talent*

- **Set up the Queen Elizabeth II School of Public Service,** a world-leading executive training programme equivalent to leading business school offers in the private sector, with a campus base, in which aspiring civil servants, public sector leaders and politicians will be trained together, based on a redefined set of leadership requirements.
- **Introduce a technology requirement for all new SCS to demonstrate digital capabilities before promotion** as part of a wider package of core skills requirements for entering the SCS – the 'SCS Standard' – including numeracy and data management, financial management, project/programme/portfolio management and substantial operational delivery experience outside Whitehall. Existing SCS staff to meet these requirements within two years.
- **Set up a Crown Headhunter to turbocharge the hiring of external talent.** Make a reality of the default assumption that all roles should be open to outside recruitment by dismantling current process and cultural barriers to external hiring.

- **Reduce the number of civil servants and increase pay**, raising talent density.
- **Abolish outdated annual performance reviews** and develop an evidence-based system that is focused on driving improvements, encouraging ambition and innovation. Emphasise candour and real-time feedback, and improving managers' skills in coaching.
- **Create shared Combined Crown Offices in strategic locations**, transforming the ambition of the Beyond Whitehall programme to create greater shared capacity in places – including shared commercial teams, digital platforms, and skills and training programmes between central government, local government and other parts of the public service.

### 3. **Innovative** government

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- Embed digital to drive transformation of services rather than just overlaying it on analogue processes. Establish **new Digital Task Forces with the remit to design and deliver new services**, where necessary disregarding departmental boundaries, using the latest digital tools, operating in the open, with a new digitally enabled rewiring design agreed by spring 2022.
- **Create personalised mobile government access**: just as gov.uk has become the store front of all government services, regardless of department, so **the government should now offer a corresponding HMG app**, as the Italian government has or akin to the NHS app, with all non-health services available, including local services, to ensure greater personalisation of services.
- **Digitally enable government**: mandate APIs in all contracts with a data component where exposing the data is in the public interest, set a target to move all government services to the cloud by 2023 with departmental and individual rewards for early adoption and speedy progress, and identify the top 10 datasets that should be maintained centrally for the benefit of the whole government and appoint custodians to manage them.
- Create a **Crown Fellows scheme**, a cadre of 1,000 talented people, recruited from inside and outside government, to be placed in all levels of government across the four nations to power delivery of the core priorities and support innovation.
- **Set up Joint Local Action (JOLT) teams**, bringing together talented people from all sectors to carry out radical experiments in service design.
- **Set up an Amazon-like marketplace for government** in place of the Crown Commercial Service to help innovators better offer new solutions and officials understand possible solutions.

- **Scrap red boxes, other paper-based approaches to information flows, and outmoded technology such as e-mails**, in favour of modern workflow-management tools, to enable ministers to manage better the flow of information and decisions to them, and to keep on top of departmental performance.
- **Overhaul government consultations**, in favour of early engagement, with as much use of digital as possible; openness to radical solutions; and a focus on how to make things better for the citizen.

#### 4. **Accountable** government

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- **Give each minister on appointment a formal and public ‘Commission Letter’**, laying out what they are expected to accomplish and with public reporting on performance.
- **Safeguard integrity of appointments to non-executive boards and Councils of Advisers** either by the Commissioner for Public Appointments and Civil Service Commissioner respectively, or a new equivalent process, for example an appointments board including independent members.
- **Create an ‘Ofsted for government departments’**, a structured annual process for assessing departments’ effectiveness to common standards, with published results, and with the assessment as the principal measure of Chief Executives’ effectiveness.
- **Use Local Net Promoter Scores** for government: experiment with a combined measure of citizen perceptions of public service in local areas to guide priorities for improvement and innovation.
- **Give every citizen access to government spending and performance data** through the government app, along the lines of Canadian and Singapore exemplars.
- **Set up tough PAC-style hearings** to scrutinise the performance of metro mayors and council leaders, **with reinvigorated local audit** generating ammunition.

## Reform: imperative and opportunity

### UK Government: losing its leading edge?

***“The quality of the UK's legislative and executive institutions has diminished in recent years. Policymaking... has become less predictable and effective.”*** Moody's, October 2020

As in other spheres, the UK has often led the world in finding better ways to run a government. Particularly at times of national crisis, it has innovated successfully. Putting a single department (the Treasury) in charge of running government's income and expenditure was a response to naval failures in the Dutch Wars. The Crimean War and the weaknesses of public administration which it revealed was a big part of the context for adopting the principle of recruitment on merit, and further fiscal reforms. Both World Wars led to major innovation in the workings and structure of government. Fiscal reforms have featured more recently too, through the development of a systematic approach to planning and managing public expenditure from the early 1960s onwards, through accountable budget-holding in the 1980s, to the more recent adoption of resource accounting.

We argued in our initial paper last year that the UK was no longer at the leading edge. In different ways, both the financial ratings agencies and the public have been signalling distrust. We pointed to a lack of organisation and capacity to act strategically, weakness in bringing about change effectively, a lack of impetus, ambition and investment in data and technology, and outdated approaches to managing people.<sup>5</sup>

If these concerns were justified before the pandemic crisis, we pointed out that it had, in many respects, made them even more painfully apparent, particularly in the extent to which government was unprepared for the crisis, and in the UK's very high death rate compared with other comparable economies. Addressing weaknesses in the way the UK is governed is now therefore a central challenge for our society.

### Learning from the pandemic: successes

***“The instruction I was given by the Prime Minister was to save lives as soon as possible, so we had a very clear goal.”*** Dame Kate Bingham

The experience of the pandemic has also, however, generated some positive lessons: that it is possible for UK government to move mountains. This has been apparent in the extraordinarily

rapid design and implementation of the furlough scheme and business support programmes, in finding accommodation for all street homeless people and, above all, in the vaccines programme. In the face of early assumptions that it would be years before mass deployment of a vaccine, the UK's programme secured the development and manufacture of sufficient vaccines to start mass roll-out before any other large countries, and the organisation of the vaccinations themselves has been a masterpiece of rapid planning and roll-out.

Successful results on vaccination and other fronts have not been accidental. They have been based on 'doing government well'. In the case of the financial support programmes, the ability of government to implement huge programmes within weeks rested on years of earlier good work on the design of HMRC and DWP programmes, and development of digital platforms. Tackling street homelessness involved appointing a leader from outside government with strong credentials, and a clear focus on moving quickly to achieve the necessary outcome by any means. Success on vaccines was achieved by being willing to set up a single-purpose organisation at speed, and by appointing a leader with credentials in pharmaceutical research and investment. That leader, Dame Kate Bingham, has pointed out the importance of clear mandate, in her comment quoted above.

Yet the Government's decision to tackle the vaccine challenge in unconventional ways was widely attacked before the success of the programme became apparent. A *Sunday Times* leader questioned Dame Kate's credentials and whether the Government was right to appoint an outsider to her role.<sup>6</sup> There were other attacks on her by the media and Opposition politicians, illustrating the need to win over sceptics by demonstrated success.

If the weaknesses of British government, apparent before the pandemic, and further laid bare during it, demonstrate the imperative of reform, successes over the last year tell us that it is possible for government to achieve extraordinary successes, and the ingredients which make that possible: clarity of purpose, organising to deliver, and looking for the talent to lead and staff government functions from where it may best be found. Above all, these examples illustrate our point that the test of whether government works well or not is its impact on people: these interventions were successful, not in some abstract sense, but **because they made a dramatic difference to physical and economic well-being.**

## After the pandemic: “winning the peace”

**“The reform Hitler forced on Whitehall was undone by the peace because neither the politicians nor the senior Civil Service tried or cared to devise its peacetime equivalent. This represents probably the greatest lost opportunity in the history of British public administration.” Lord Hennessy<sup>7</sup>**

As we complete our project, we can be cautiously optimistic that we are emerging from the pandemic crisis, and moving into a new phase. Yet this phase is no less challenging. The recovery of the economy will take many years. The aftermath leaves massive challenges for the public services, notably restoring the performance of the NHS in the treatment of other conditions, the recovery of lost education, and backlogs in the justice system.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Government is committed to press on with the programme on which it was elected, notably forging a new future outside the EU, net zero and levelling up.

With such a demanding agenda, government reform stands at a crossroads. There is no inevitability about the impetus for reform created by the pandemic surviving into the next phase. Government *could* revert to type. As Whitehall historian Lord Hennessy chronicles, that is what happened after the Second World War. For example, ‘the irregulars’ – expert and talented external recruits brought in to tackle the many difficult and unique challenges of wartime – went back to business or academia, and traditional beliefs among Civil Service leaders about difference between government and other corporate organisations reasserted themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Alternatively, political leaders can recognise that the case for reforming would be overwhelming without the pandemic; that the pandemic has both reinforced that case and demonstrated many of the crucial components of it; and that institutional reform is at least as vital to the success of government in the next phase. Indeed, it may be even more vital when the nature of the challenge will be more hard slog than immediate existential threat. There must be no sense that ‘business as usual’ will be sufficient to manage the phase into which the country is now moving, when it was necessarily set aside during the pandemic. There is a better way to run a government, and one which is vital for the nation’s future success.

As our Chair explains in the Introduction, our view is that the next few months will determine whether or not reform is sufficiently ambitious in scope and radicalism to be on the right track. As it stands, the programme is undeveloped on certain critical aspects. On others, it correctly identifies the issues, but current proposals do not go sufficiently beyond incremental improvement. It needs clear structures and accountability for implementation.

Figure I below summarises our views about the strengths of the proposals in the Declaration, and about the ways in which reform needs to be more ambitious.

The comparison leads us to a number of observations:

- The Government’s proposals have a strong focus on people issues, but appear underweight on our other themes.
- The balance between incremental change and that which will be genuinely innovative and transformative seems to favour the former, at the moment.
- Under our four headings, the Government’s thinking appears least developed around Strategy. Yet weaknesses in strategic capability and processes undermine the prospects for success of the other elements.

**Figure I: Government reform programme and how Commission proposals would expand/support it**

Theme	Government proposals	Commission
<b>1. Strategic government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation Task Force</li> <li>• Annual Cabinet/Perm Sec meetings to review government priorities</li> <li>• Outcome Delivery Plans</li> </ul>	<p>In our <a href="#">initial paper</a>, we pointed to “the current failures of strategy – longstanding unresolved policy problems, lack of proper plans for known future challenges, resilience and lack of capacity for change management.” These remain: for example, the widespread external comment about the gap between intentions and plans on levelling up and net zero.</p> <p><b>Our proposals are for radical reform of structures at the centre of government and the planning of spending and activity, so that action and resources are aligned around identified top priorities.</b></p>
<b>2. Capable government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Departmental delivery boards</li> <li>• Review of Civil Service governance</li> <li>• NED challenge of departmental performance</li> <li>• Strengthen Government Major Projects Portfolio</li> <li>• Delivery Unit</li> </ul>	<p>In our initial paper, we found that “Government too often lacks the effective systems of management, delegation, partnership, and accountability which are needed for effective performance, change, innovation and improvement.”</p>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government projects academy and project delivery framework</li> <li>• Strengthened spending controls framework</li> <li>• Training programme for ministers</li> <li>• 22k jobs outside London by 2030 (Beyond Whitehall)</li> <li>• New entry routes for professionals from outside government</li> <li>• Encourage entrants with high demand skills</li> <li>• Interchange with devolved administrations</li> <li>• Boost secondments out</li> <li>• Curriculum and training campus, digital learning</li> <li>• Attendance/active participation by officials in Cabinet Committees</li> <li>• Refresh apprenticeships strategy</li> <li>• Set durations for SCS appointments</li> <li>• Capability-based pay</li> <li>• New performance management framework for SCS</li> <li>• Diversity and inclusion strategy</li> <li>• Clear standards for all functions</li> <li>• Review of Arm's Length Body effectiveness</li> <li>• Domesday Book of government property</li> </ul>	<p>Government clearly recognises the need for improvement on this front, and has included a large number of specific measures in its Declaration.</p> <p><b>We make proposals about the leadership of change from the top of government, to strengthen leadership and governance in departments, to enable ministers to work more effectively, and to open up Civil Service talent.</b></p>
<p><b>3. Innovative government</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central Digital and Data Office</li> <li>• Single digital sign-in</li> <li>• Reporting on outdated IT systems</li> <li>• Mandating interoperability</li> <li>• Data open-ness</li> </ul>	<p>In our initial paper, we said “what was once cutting edge is now lagging behind. Focus and investment have shifted, ambition has dipped, and clarity of purpose has dimmed.”</p> <p>It is clear from its Declaration that the Government recognises the need for step change and is proposing some correct measures on digital and data.</p> <p><b>Our proposals, however, incorporate a much higher level of ambition, on redesigning digital services around the citizen, a single Digital department like many other countries, and on procurement. But innovation is</b></p>

		<p><b>about people and ways of working too. Our paper includes proposals to enable people who work for government to be more creative.</b></p>
<p><b>4. Accountable government</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of accountability</li> </ul>	<p>In our initial paper, we pointed to ways in which British government is not accountable enough – unclear definition of responsibilities, unclear definition of success and lack of management and outcomes data to monitor it, and patchy, often ineffective external scrutiny and accountability.</p> <p>Government is therefore right to want to re-examine accountability.</p> <p><b>Our proposals offer proposals for consideration in that review, to make ministers and the Civil Service leadership of departments more accountable and to open up government to scrutiny and challenge.</b></p>

# Making it happen: the four steps to Smarter Government

In our ten discussion and policy papers, we have made a large number of detailed proposals to help government work better. They are summarised on pages 9-12. This section offers some more explanation, under our four headings of strategy, capability, innovation and accountability, and links them to our other papers, where the proposals and the reasons for them are explained in more depth.

## I. Strategic government

More detail on these proposals and the evidence supporting them can be found in the following Commission papers:

[Designing government for a better Britain](#)

[How can government improve financial and business planning?](#)

[Why is government failing to deliver projects successfully?](#)

### *An underdeveloped aspect of reform?*

Strategy – creating the systems and capability which will enable the government to set and stick to a clear direction – is the aspect of reform which, we suggest, is least developed in the Government’s current proposals as they have been set out.

Strategy matters because, without the right approach, the other elements of reform will be ineffective:

- It is the best way of responding to criticism that the Government is trying to do too much to do it well.
- It is a vital foundation for reforms which address capability: capable to accomplish what? Improvements to delivery and the management of people need to be anchored in understanding of strategic purpose.
- It helps drive innovation: again, understanding of strategic purpose guides decisions about where to focus innovative digital transformation and new ways of working.

- It is a necessary basis for effective management of the array of government major projects. Its lack, we have argued, contributes to the lack of active management of the biggest, most complex projects across government.<sup>10</sup>
- It supports effective accountability, by enabling a clear presentation of the Government's ambitions and providing a basis for effective scrutiny.

The Government's June 2021 Declaration certainly demonstrates recognition of the importance of key elements of strategy. It talks of "being clear-eyed about our priorities" and about being more disciplined about priorities. It restates the new approach to departmental planning announced in the 2020 spending review, with much more focused Outcome Delivery Plans (ODPs).

The intent is clear, and the ODP approach should help *departments* become more strategic. However, past experience, and corporate and international experience suggests that specific reforms to systems and capability *at the whole-of-government level* are needed to enable the Government to set and maintain a clear strategic path. The UK's mechanisms for getting the whole of government to pull together are currently too weak.

We share this view with others. In a recent paper, Alex Thomas of the Institute for Government has said: "a prime minister needs a support structure that allows him or her to set direction, identifies critical points for intervention and holds departments, their agencies and other tiers of government to account for running things effectively and making change happen."<sup>11</sup> Policy Exchange's Commission also found that: "Reform to the structures of central government has not kept pace with the complexity of modern policy and delivery challenges."<sup>12</sup> There has been widespread comment about the need to translate the Government's ambitions on net zero and levelling up into a clear definition of what they mean and how they are to be taken forward.

Serious and respectable external observers are arguing that the Government needs urgently to create a much clearer strategic bridge between strategy and action. On two of its key priorities:

- Lord Heseltine recently argued that: "Levelling up becomes part of the political imperative but there's no coherence or strategic plan behind it."<sup>13</sup> Turning the levelling up ambition into noticeable change for people in the parts of the UK affected by decades of poorer economic performance is a vital goal for the Government. Yet not being able to get its wheels turning convincingly is a real threat to its credibility.
- The Committee on Climate Change has said: "Net Zero and the recent legislation of the Sixth Carbon Budget set a clear direction, but these now need to be developed into a full strategy for delivering the necessary decarbonisation."<sup>14</sup> The COP26 Presidency is a great opportunity

for the UK to provide global leadership. Yet the increasingly noticeable gap between intentions and action risks undermining our country's credibility.

### ***What should the Government do about it?***

Our view is stark. The Government cannot be strategic without organising its centre to provide the necessary leadership. At the moment:

- The Cabinet Office is well-resourced, with a budget of over £600m a year and nearly 6,000 staff (of whom six are of Permanent Secretary rank and 25 of Director General or equivalent rank).<sup>15</sup> Yet structures are confused: providing strategic leadership for the Government's programme, and overseeing reform of government effectiveness, are both vital tasks. They are linked, but they are also distinct, and structure needs to reflect that. No serious corporate would attempt to separate strategy about goals and activity from the strategic planning of resources.
- Decision-making processes and ways of working do not support the Prime Minister and Cabinet effectively enough in taking decisions, described by one observer with close personal experience as: "time-sinks, mostly fig leaves...often used as a forum for ministerial ego trips or territorial battles."

We suggest three bold steps to enable the Prime Minister to lead the Government in forming and maintaining an effective strategy.

- Create a **Prime Minister's Department, streamlining and subsuming the Cabinet Office**, to provide stronger support to the Prime Minister and Government in bringing departments together, defining and delivering on strategic goals, and bringing about government reform.
- Set up a **Treasury Board** in the Prime Minister's Department, led by the Chief Secretary, **to provide strategic direction and oversight of the Government's programme, including the current spending responsibilities of the Treasury**. The Board would operate a best-in-class system of financial planning, a **Plan for Government**, replacing the current spending review.
- **Scrap nearly all Cabinet Committees** and replace them with a small number of powerful Ministerial Boards responsible for each of its main goals, overseeing strategy and delivery, allocating resource against priorities in a dynamic way.

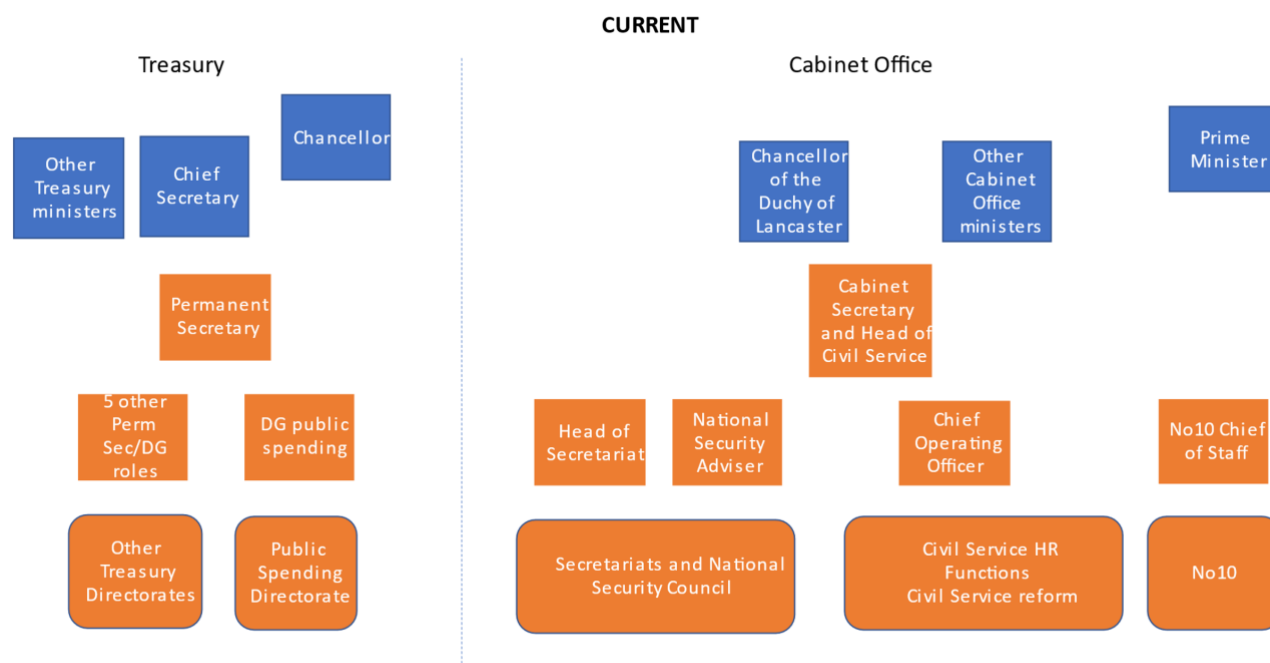
Figures 2 and 3 overpage show (in simplified form) the current structures and the new Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, with its three components, the Prime Minister's

Office, the Treasury Board and the Office of Public Service Effectiveness. The three proposed components all support the three complementary aspects of the Prime Minister's leadership role:

- A small, high-powered, personal office.
- Support in defining strategy and policy and assuring progress across the Government's main priorities, making sure departments work effectively alongside each other.
- Bringing about transformation in public service effectiveness.

The proposed structure is similar to Singapore, where units with similar distinct remits all form part of the Prime Minister's office.

**Figure 2: Current structure of the centre of government**



Note: highly simplified; excludes current special -purpose taskforces on Covid and borders

**Figure 3: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet**

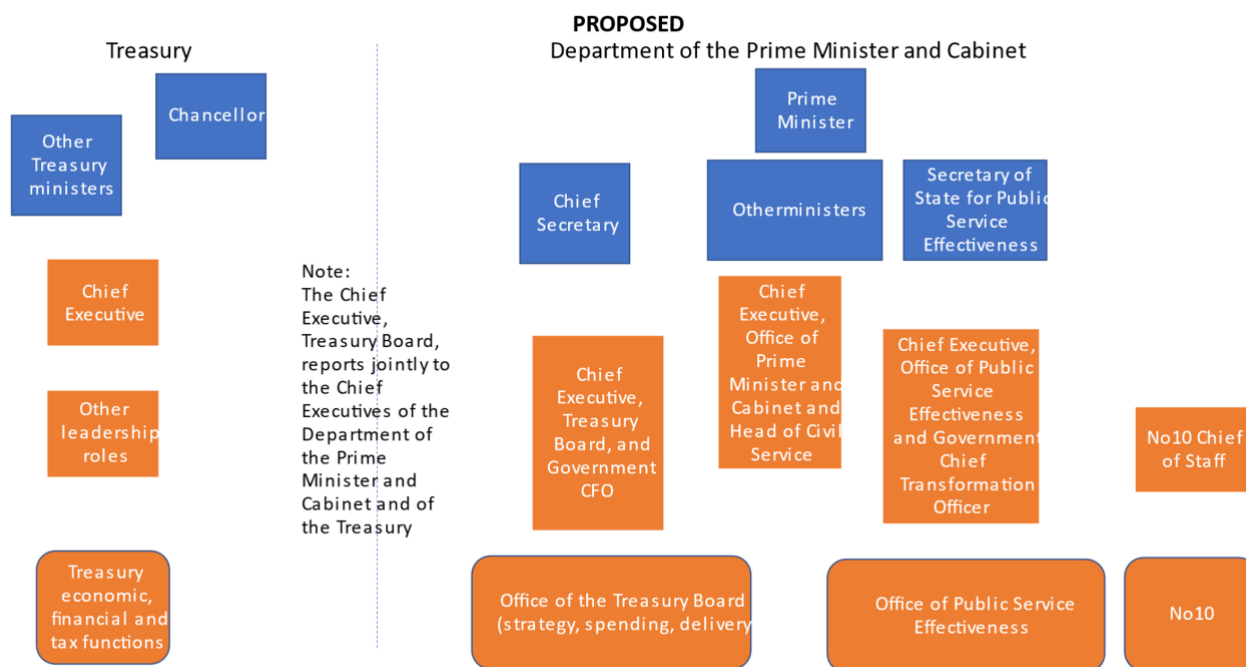
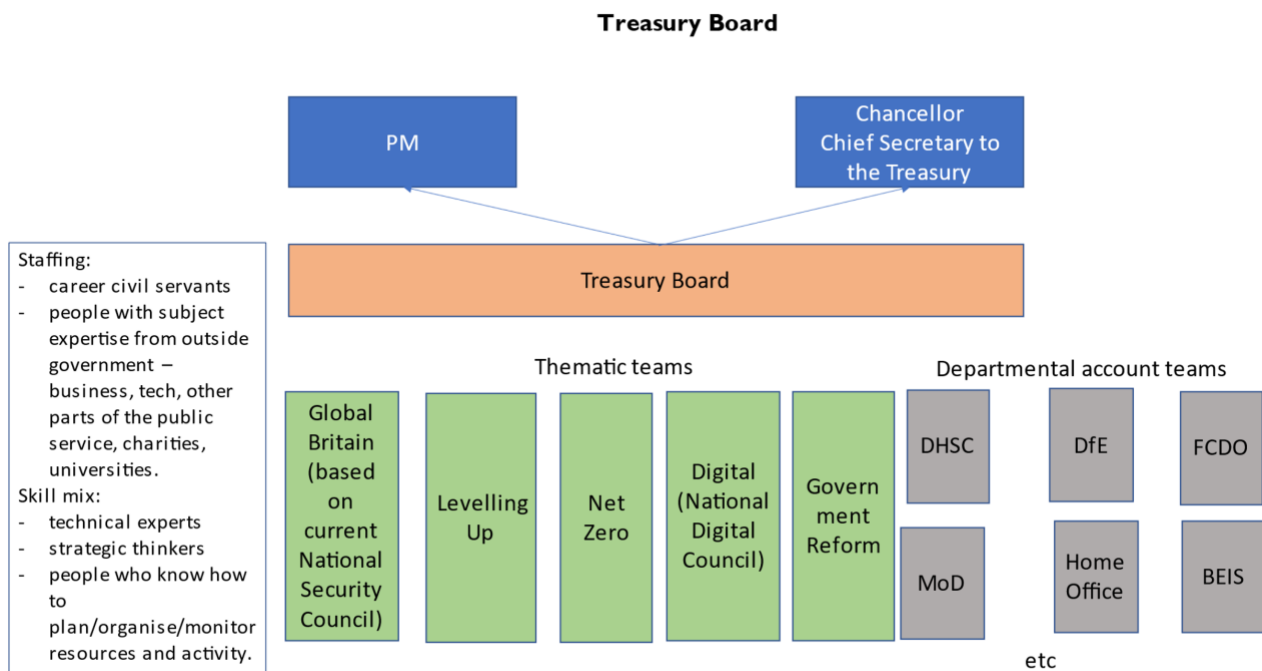


Figure 4 below sets illustratively how the Treasury Board would be organised.

**Figure 4: Treasury Board**



It would support the Government's key strategic planning process, the Plan for Government, the concept of which is summarised in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Plan for Government**

**Plan for Government**

Working out across government as a whole how money and activity can make things happen in line with the government's intentions:

- Shift away from setting budgets department by department towards planning for outcomes and intended impacts, maximising the combined impact of departments' spending.
- How spending can best be allocated across public bodies to secure the best impact, for example shifting resources from dealing with policy failure to preventing it; moving from a primary emphasis on setting budgets for organisations towards allocating funding, across government as a whole, for the achievement of outcomes.
- How money can be invested in the short term to avoid wasting larger sums in the medium to long term.

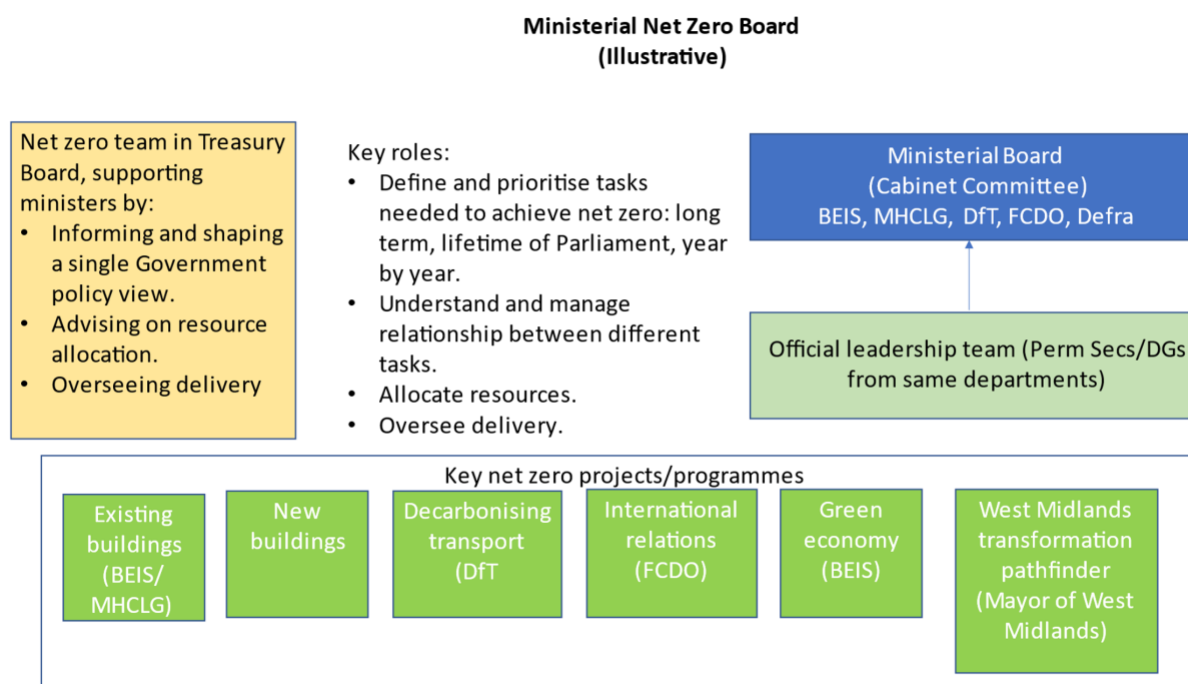
Detail in *How can Government Improve Financial and Business Planning?*, in particular:

- What we should learn from corporates and other countries (pp.16-36)
- Recommended approach for the UK (pp.37-45)

Figure 6 sets out how the new proposed Ministerial boards would work, and how their approach would be different from the current Cabinet Committee approach. They would carry out two crucial tasks:

- They would provide collective leadership for the Government's big priorities, which require effective cross-cutting working.
- They would provide active and effective management of the programme and project portfolios which will form a major part of the delivery of each of the priorities.



**Figure 6: Ministerial Boards – Illustration**

This proposed new approach, with its strong emphasis on planning and organising around priority outcomes, has implications for Parliamentary scrutiny. The Government should encourage Parliament to consider how it can scrutinise effectively, for example by developing its own cross-cutting scrutiny structures.

## 2. Capable government

More detail on these proposals and the evidence supporting them can be found in the following Commission papers:

*Why is government failing to deliver projects successfully?*

*Departmental Boards: Boosting Reform*

*Instilling a high-performance culture in the Civil Service*

*Ministers: effective political leadership in government*

The Government knows that current approaches are not good enough at translating intentions into successful results. Its Declaration says: “We will act together, as one government team, to deliver for citizens.”<sup>16</sup> The Government recognises the importance of talented people.

The Government has established a Delivery Unit, and the Declaration sets out proposals on accountability, functions, project management, strengthening the role of government non-executives, and external partnership. It has also emphasised the need to get different parts of government working together. As Michael Gove said: “We must be ready to create new structures in government to deliver particular policies and projects where the accountability is vested in a single lead minister and one senior responsible official – but where the delivery team is drawn from different departments and agencies.”<sup>17</sup> The Declaration sets out plans for changing recruitment, training, compensation, performance management and other aspects of talent management. It recognises that the development of talent is important for politicians as well as ministers.

Our proposals for enabling government to be capable address four aspects:

- **Priority and leadership:** the step change in capability will not come about unless government, at the centre, organises itself to make it happen. There is political commitment from the very top. Our proposals would make sure that commitment is wired into the role and workings of the centre of government.
- **How departments are led and run:** the governance and leadership of departments needs to be overhauled. The Declaration includes commitments to address the way departments are run; our proposals offer some specific suggestions.
- **Ministerial capability and ways of working:** our proposals build on the Government’s plans for better ministerial training and offer other ideas for enabling the Prime Minister and ministers generally to work more effectively.

- **Civil Service talent:** the Declaration includes many sensible improvements. Our proposals suggest ways of bringing about a step change ambition and impact, to put government on the leading edge in managing people.

### *Priority and leadership*

- **Build the concept of ‘the Public Service’**, bringing together the Civil Service, local government, health and others, across the four nations of the UK. Set up a Public Service Board, headed by the Cabinet Secretary, and including leaders from its different parts.
- **Transfer the role of Minister for the Civil Service away from the Prime Minister**, so it gets full time attention in a separate Cabinet ranked role in the Prime Minister’s Department, which would oversee an **Office for Public Service Effectiveness**.
- **Make the Civil Service Commission a powerful talent management watchdog**, instead of a narrow regulator of external recruitment, headed by someone with an external background.
- **Make Government reform one of the main priorities in the Plan for Government**, with Government reporting annually on progress on reform. **Set up a Government Futures Unit** to look 5-15 years ahead, selling its insight internationally as well as informing UK government.
- **Start making it happen right away:** set up a small, powerful team, headed by a minister and drawing in corporate expertise, to define and start the change process.

Far more people work in public service than in the Civil Service: in the NHS, police, local government, schools, in arm’s length bodies, private sector and third sector organisations operating under contract. Whether someone working in public service happens to be a civil servant, as defined in the legislation on the Civil Service, is entirely the product of history. If government is truly to organise itself around citizens and places, it needs to be able to take a view of its effectiveness across the whole of public services.

However, the Cabinet Office provides leadership only for the Civil Service. Government needs to pay attention to the whole public service. Government should start to organise its thinking on effectiveness across the whole of public service. It should set up a board of distinguished public service leaders, headed by the Cabinet Secretary, to set about this.

Our proposals above about strategy and delivery should apply to government reform, as much as any other priority. Reform will not happen by itself, without sustained clarity of purpose, a clear strategy, and oversight of implementation. The Government therefore needs to adopt reform as one of its headline priorities, and make it part of the new regime proposed above

(pages 21-25) for ministerial oversight of strategy and delivery. It should report annually about the progress it has made.

Reform cannot, and should not, be conceived as having an end date. Current plans need to be pursued and brought to completion. By the time that has happened, there will be new challenges, and new opportunities. Government should be on the front foot in understanding these changes and responding to them. It should therefore set up a Government Futures Unit to think 5-15 years into the future. The Unit's insight would help rebuild the UK's reputation as a well-run country, and elements of it could be exploited commercially through advice to other governments.

We argued above (pages 19-20) that the current combination, in the Cabinet Office, of support for the Government on its programme as a whole, and on Civil Service effectiveness and reform, results in confusion of purpose and unclear leadership. We therefore propose that a powerful minister, with Secretary of State status, should lead a separate Office of Public Service Effectiveness in the Prime Minister's Department, to provide the necessary distinct leadership. This leadership role should be reinforced by transferring the formal responsibilities of the Minister for the Civil Service from the Prime Minister to the new role – though the Prime Minister should continue to put his personal authority behind government reform through occasional powerful interventions.

We suggest the Government's commitment to reform needs to be reinforced through the creation of an independent institution providing oversight and scrutiny of talent and effectiveness. The Civil Service Commission's current role is narrowly concerned with regulating external recruitment to the Civil Service. This addresses one serious risk to talent management and a capable Civil Service, that otherwise people could be appointed because of personal connections with ministers or senior civil servants. However, we agree with the Government that there are other risks: excessive barriers to external recruitment, poor training, a lack of parity of esteem for different disciplines. These need to be tackled under the leadership of our proposed Office of Public Service Effectiveness, but there is a case for an independent watchdog, operating as a critical friend across all aspects of effectiveness.

### Reorient and expand the remit of the Civil Service Commission

The new remit would be to:

- Publish a regular and honest assessment of public service capability and risks to it.
- Make legally binding recommendations to the Government on actions to be taken to address weaknesses.

In view of the expanded remit, the First Commissioner appointment should be of someone with extensive leadership experience outside the Civil Service, with particular reference to strategic people management.

Establishing the reform programme and reshaping organisations to support it will be a considerable task in itself. The Government needs to put in place clear initial leadership of a project team. We suggest this should include a Minister of State, an official project lead and some people with corporate experience (for whom existing government non-executives could be a source) to produce a transformation plan within three months.

### *How departments are led and run*

- **Turn Departmental Boards into genuinely powerful bodies** through which ministers develop effective policy, oversee delivery, and take key decisions on personnel.
- **Replace the Permanent Secretary role with a Chief Executive** as the senior Civil Service post in departments, with a clear focus on strategy, execution, and organisational effectiveness.

Non-executives achieve impact, both at departmental level and in cross-government discussions. Independently chaired audit committees work well, and outside formal processes, non-executives contribute their experience and insight, in particular helping to address the tendency of Whitehall discussions to be ‘non-operational.’

With a small number of exceptions, however, the effectiveness of formal board processes is limited, key constraints being the exclusion of non-executives from the formative stages of strategy and policy development, and the motivations and capabilities of ministers. Both non-executives and ministers can feel frustrated.<sup>18</sup>

### Strengthen departmental boards

- Give them formal responsibility for assuring the soundness of departmental plans and project portfolios.
- Further strengthen and formalise the role of non-executives in talent management through the establishment of a Remco or “People Committee” in which ministers, non-executives and top officials can focus on ensuring the right people are in the right roles.
- Set down the key elements of board effectiveness in a one-page statement and including board performance in assessments of departmental capability.
- Involve non-executives, alongside civil servants, in discussion with ministers about policy development on departments’ priority outcomes.
- Decide and document how the Secretary of State, lead non-executive, and Permanent Secretary, lead and manage the work of the Board, and the relationship with other governance bodies, should be decided between them and documented. With the Prime Minister’s backing, ministers should be carefully briefed and prepared for their Board leadership role and assessed on it.
- The integrity of non-executive board appointments should either be supervised by the Commissioner for Public Appointments or a new equivalent process, for example an appointments board including independent members.

It is important that the role of the Civil Service leaders of departments, currently Permanent Secretaries, is clearly defined, and with the correct emphasis: on leading the departmental side of the dialogue with ministers about strategic policy development; on ensuring the department delivers its functions effectively; and that its effectiveness is improved. This is, in practice, how many Permanent Secretaries have operated, and the departmental assessments which we propose (pages 44-45 below) would provide the basis for consistent assessment of their performance. But it now needs to be put beyond doubt that Civil Service leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is something completely distinct from the courtier role popularised by the fictional Sir Humphrey Appleby. “Permanent Secretary” is a job title which does not convey the professional leadership which is at the heart of the role. We therefore propose that, as in New Zealand, the Civil Service leader of a department should be called the Chief Executive.

### *Ministerial capability and ways of working*

- **By exception, enable people to serve as ministers without having to be parliamentarians**, with Privy Counsellor status, to allow additional talent to be brought in from outside government and Parliament. Enable Parliamentary accountability through the creation of oral question committees.
- **Allow each Secretary of State to create a Council of Advisers**, like the Treasury’s Council of Economic Advisers, to bring outside expertise into the department.

- **Create a new Prime Minister's Office and Ministerial Centre** to replace No.10 as the Prime Minister's working office and bring all ministers' London bases together, in the QEII Centre, Marlborough House, or on the redeveloped Parliamentary Estate.

UK constitutional presumptions mean that it is vital that, in most cases, ministers continue to be appointed from members of Parliament, most usually the Commons, but with some Lords ministers too. However, we can see a strong case for supplementing Parliamentary talent with appointees with specific expertise, to take responsibility for issues which would benefit particularly strongly from a minister with strong background.

On some occasions, Prime Ministers have appointed expert non-Parliamentarians simultaneously as peers and ministers. But this approach carries with it shortcomings, notably the tendency for Lords ministers to take on factotum responsibility for answering in the Lords for their department, and sometimes others, on issues well beyond their core brief.<sup>19</sup>

Another option would be to appoint genuinely non-parliamentary ministers. This would allow for expert ministers while avoiding the problems associated with appointment via the Lords. Although this would be a “considerable constitutional innovation”, it is possible.<sup>20</sup> As with Lords ministers, the House of Commons could develop mechanisms to ensure these ministers were adequately scrutinised. For instance, the Business and Enterprise Committee noted that “the Standing Orders provide for a Minister of the Crown, whether or not a Member of the House [of Commons], to make a statement and answer questions upon it in a grand committee, meeting in a large committee room.”<sup>21</sup> Some of the controversy this past year over the status and accountability of David Frost, Dido Harding and Kate Bingham could have been avoided if it had been possible to appoint them straightforwardly as ministers, with mechanisms for Parliamentary accountability.

Generally, UK ministers have had limited scope to make their own appointments to advisory roles. In principle, they are limited to two special advisers, though that limit seems often to be breached.<sup>22</sup> There have been other routes for making personal appointments, notably the appointment of specialist advisers for up to two years.<sup>23</sup> Since the time of Gordon Brown, Chancellors have appointed a Council of Economic Advisers.<sup>24</sup> In 2013, the Coalition Government offered Secretaries of State the option of setting up Extended Ministerial Offices (EMOs). Take-up was initially slow, it is suggested because the process was cumbersome and some required features were not attractive to ministers.<sup>25</sup> However, after the 2015 election, five offices were established – only for Theresa May to remove the option after she became Prime Minister in 2016.<sup>26</sup>

Despite their brief history, there is some evidence that EMOs enabled new kinds of talent to be brought into departments, distinct both from the career Civil Service and special advisers.<sup>27</sup> We therefore propose that all Secretaries of State should be able to appoint (in less bureaucratic language than EMOs) a Council of Advisers. There should be a minimum of regulation, in keeping with the intended purpose of enabling ministers to secure very specific personal support which they need. We suggest:

- A cap of six on the number of advisers.
- A clear definition of their role, as distinct from special advisers: that they are to be appointed to support ministers either on specific topics, or on aspects of departmental effectiveness (for example) digital which are of particular ministerial interest.
- Their appointment is linked to the tenure of the Secretary of State (though an incoming Secretary of State could retain advisers).
- Obvious bars are applied: close family, pecuniary or other inappropriate relationships with the Secretary of State or other ministers, and that they are ‘fit and proper’, for example in relation to criminal records. Improper behaviour by a minister in using their appointment powers should be a breach of the Ministerial Code.
- The integrity of Council of Adviser appointments should either be supervised by the Civil Service Commissioner or a new equivalent process, for example an appointments board including independent members.

10 Downing Street is an outstanding historic building at the heart of Westminster, and highly suitable as the personal residence and ceremonial base of the Prime Minister. However, our evidence sessions and the experience of Commissioners who have worked there lead us to suggest it is not a suitable location for his working office.<sup>28</sup> Although ministers spend some time in their Parliamentary offices, near to each other, their main offices are in departments. Creating a single office for ministers, such as the Beehive in New Zealand, would help build a sense of team across the Government, and symbolise the commitment to breaking down organisational barriers and working together on the main priorities.

Creating a single modern workplace for the Prime Minister and other ministers would be a powerful symbol of the Government’s determination to create a modern, smart, government. Options for location include the QEII Centre, Marlborough House or the Parliamentary Estate. The latter is being refurbished, and, since ministers need to spend significant time there anyway, and have offices in the Parliamentary Estate, there is an obvious benefit in terms of security and cost to locating their main offices there.



## Talent

- **Set up the Queen Elizabeth II School of Public Service**, a world-leading executive training programme equivalent to leading business school offers in the private sector, with a campus base, in which aspiring civil servants, public sector leaders and politicians will be trained together, based on a redefined set of leadership requirements.
- **Introduce a technology requirement for all new SCS to demonstrate digital capabilities before promotion** as part of a wider package of core skills requirements for entering the SCS – the ‘SCS Standard’ – including numeracy and data management, financial management, project/programme/portfolio management and substantial operational delivery experience outside Whitehall. Existing SCS staff to meet these requirements within two years.
- **Set up a Crown Headhunter to turbocharge the hiring of external talent**. Make a reality of the default assumption that all roles should be open to outside recruitment by dismantling current process and cultural barriers to external hiring.
- **Reduce the number of civil servants and increase pay**, raising talent density.
- **Abolish outdated annual performance reviews** and develop an evidence-based system that is focused on driving improvements, encouraging ambition and innovation. Emphasise candour and real-time feedback, and improving managers' skills in coaching.
- **Create shared Combined Crown Offices in strategic locations**, transforming the ambition of the Beyond Whitehall programme to create greater shared capacity in places – including shared commercial teams, digital platforms, and skills and training programmes between central government, local government, and other parts of the public service.

The Government has indicated that it wants both to improve both ministerial training and to adopt a more systematic approach to Civil Service skills and training. We suggest that there is actually a very strong case for bringing together the training of emerging talent from all parts of public service through a single programme.

### Queen Elizabeth II School of Public Service

Core skills for senior leadership should include: Strategy; Digital transformation; Portfolio management; financial planning; Significant operational delivery experience (in a delivery agency, local government or in the private sector); political astuteness; organisational and change management. To date, leadership training has placed insufficient emphasis on management skills.

In order to cultivate these skills, government should work with a leading academic institution to establish a global Executive Masters of Public Administration. An interdisciplinary, international platform for advanced leadership development, pooling the best research and faculty from around the world. It should teach leadership through hands-on problem solving on real-world cases from the public sector and corporate world, leveraging peer-to-peer learning. It should be offered to political and administrative leaders alike from across international, national, regional and local government.

There should be a particular focus on digital transformation, applying leading-edge thinking in digital disruption from the top business schools to a public sector context. Working with a business school would allow for some mixing with those on executive MBA courses on certain modules, which could help to break down the cultural barriers between the government and the private sector. A programme along these lines, targeted at a sufficiently senior level, would also help to encourage the interchange of talent and ideas between different parts of the public sector, whether civil service and ministers or Whitehall and local government. It could help to address the deficit in management skills among ministers and in the senior civil service before they reach the very top roles.

Realising the promise of digital transformation will require a major commitment to raise the digital acumen, or 'TQ' of the civil service. The complexity of transformation projects, and the pervasiveness of their impact, requires the full engagement of the whole senior leadership team, each one understanding their role in the transformation and feeling confident in execution.

All new senior civil servants should be able to demonstrate knowledge of how to lead the implementation of technology, digital procurement, data management, and understanding of relevant new and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, and how these can be deployed ethically to improve efficiency and service delivery for the citizen.

This should be part of a wider package of core skills requirements – the 'SCS Standard' – including numeracy and data management, financial management, project/programme/portfolio management, and substantial operational delivery experience outside Whitehall. As a condition for promotion to the SCS, officials (and external applicants) must be able to show relevant capabilities through a combination of accredited training and experience. Appointments without meeting the 'SCS standard' should be by exception, and all existing SCS should meet the standard

within two years. An ‘Advanced SCS Standard’ should set out expectations for progression to Director General level and beyond.

The Government’s approach to recruitment currently lags the best corporates, and is also increasingly being outpaced by the wider public sector. In-house headhunters – known as ‘Talent acquisition’ – is a key function in the corporate sector, based on understanding the sector, and actively seeking out the best talent.

### **Crown Headhunter**

In-house capability, which would:

- Energetically seek out external talent in both private and public sector, for both Civil Service roles and public appointments.
- Manage relationships with external headhunters to ensure they are incentivised to open up talent pools from more diverse professional and social backgrounds.

Current pay frameworks can be a constraint in hiring or retaining exceptional people, especially in roles requiring specialist skills, such as project management or digital. The gap between Civil Service pay and the private sector is widening, and the salaries of civil servants are also considerably lower than their equivalents in the rest of the public sector. As Policy Exchange’s Commission on government reform has argued, it is necessary to increase civil servants pay in order to be competitive in the market – and this may be most straightforwardly achieved by reducing the number of civil servants overall. We agree, and would go further: it is desirable in any case to improve the ‘talent density’ – the concentration of high performing staff – in the civil service. The progress of departments in improving ‘talent density’ should be assessed as part of the new capability reviews.

Annual reviews are a poor means of driving future performance, and are increasingly being abandoned in the private sector. The forthcoming review of performance management should radically overhaul the current system, based on three fundamentals: collecting better data on performance, recognising success and driving improved performance.

This must be informed by analysis of leading-edge practice elsewhere, behavioural insights and rigorous internal research and evaluation. Individual performance assessments should be linked to clear evidence of impact, but linking KPIs for team goals too closely to personal performance management risks disincentivising ambition and innovation; a more sophisticated approach is

required. The complex policy and delivery challenges facing government require departments and different parts of the public service to work together. They need to be addressed through models of resource allocation and accountability addressing barriers to effective joint working in the UK's current strongly departmental approach. Government reforms in New Zealand offer a model. They could be applied both to the Government's biggest priorities, like net zero and levelling up, and to longstanding 'wicked issues' like homelessness and the rehabilitation of offenders. There have been successful innovations of this kind in response to the pandemic, like the Border and Protocol Delivery Group. The Treasury has been looking to support such approaches through its Shared Outcomes Fund.

### Joint Ventures – how they work in New Zealand

The Public Service Act 2020 provides new legal structures for:

- “Interdepartmental executive boards” whose purpose is “to align and co-ordinate policy, planning, and budgeting activities for two or more departments.”\*
- “Interdepartmental ventures”, to deliver services or regulatory functions on behalf of two or more departments.\*
- “Joint operational agreements” “to provide a formal structure for co-operative and collaborative working arrangements between public service agencies.”\*
- Functional leadership, similar to the UK functions, giving specific authority to certain chief executives to lead functions across government.\*

*Example: family and sexual violence*

- A Ministerial group, led by a Justice minister, with representation from the ministries of Social Development, Māori Development, Children and Seniors;
- Governance by the Chief Executives who currently sit on the Social Wellbeing Board: the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Children and Families, Health, Maori Development, Social Development, Education and Justice;
- Support for the Chief Executives from a Director and dedicated business unit;
- A joint venture Budget allocation of over NZ\$200m;
- Bespoke arrangements for advisory input from the Maori community and external experts.

Detail in *Designing government for a better Britain*, pp.28-30

### 3. Innovative government

More detail on these proposals and the evidence supporting them can be found in the following Commission papers:

*Better Digital Government: Obstacles and Vision*

*Better Digital Government*

*Designing government for a better Britain*

*Smart Devolution to Level Up*

*Instilling a high-performance culture in the Civil Service*

*Ministers: effective political leadership in government*

Learning lessons from the pandemic, the Government is clearly committed to improving its use of technology and data. Michael Gove has said: “We need to rethink all of government so it responds effectively and rapidly, and in the same tailored fashion, as the digital platforms citizens have become used to.”<sup>29</sup> Specific commitments in the Declaration include a Central Digital and Data Office, a single sign-in for all government services, mandatory reporting of the risks and costs of outdated IT systems, and interoperability for all new systems.

This approach and the Commission’s, as set out in our two papers on digital and technology, are very closely aligned. In this paper, we both suggest specific ways of giving effect to changes which the Government has signalled, and make additional proposals to boost further the ability of government to create innovation through digital and new ways of encouraging innovation by civil servants.

- Embed digital to drive transformation of services rather than just overlaying it on analogue processes. Establish **new Digital Task Forces with the remit to design and deliver new services**, where necessary disregarding departmental boundaries, using the latest digital tools, operating in the open, with a new digitally enabled rewiring design agreed by spring 2022.
- **Create personalised mobile government access**: just as gov.uk has become the store front of all government services, regardless of department, so **the government should now offer a corresponding HMG app**, as the Italian government has or akin to the NHS app, with all non-health services available, including local services, to ensure greater personalisation of services.
- **Digitally enable government**: mandate APIs in all contracts with a data component where exposing the data is in the public interest, set a target to move all government services to the

cloud by 2023 with departmental and individual rewards for early adoption and speedy progress, and identify the top 10 datasets that should be maintained centrally for the benefit of the whole government and appoint custodians to manage them.

- Create a **Crown Fellows scheme**, a cadre of 1,000 talented people, recruited from inside and outside government, to be placed in all levels of government across the four nations to power delivery of the core priorities and support innovation.
- **Set up Joint Local Action (JOLT) teams**, bringing together talented people from all sectors to carry out radical experiments in service design.
- **Set up an Amazon-like marketplace for government** in place of the Crown Commercial Service to help innovators better offer new solutions and officials understand possible solutions.
- **Scrap red boxes, other paper-based approaches to information flows, and outmoded technology such as e-mails**, in favour of modern workflow-management tools, to enable ministers to manage better the flow of information and decisions to them, and to keep on top of departmental performance.
- **Overhaul government consultations**, in favour of early engagement, with as much use of digital as possible; openness to radical solutions; and a focus on how to make things better for the citizen.

#### **Commission for Smart Government: Principles for digital government**

From *Better Digital Government*, p.7

In our discussion paper we laid out a number of principles that we believe should guide digital services, including the importance of:

- Designing services for users' privacy, technical security, and data integrity;
- Focusing relentlessly on the users' need and feedback;
- Adopting a 'test and learn' approach to digital services;
- Setting clear and open targets for success;
- Working in the open, ideally auditably and under clear governance arrangements.

From the proposals in the Commission's policy paper on digital, we highlight three proposals of particular importance.

First **establishing new Digital Task Forces** with the remit to design and deliver anew selected cross-cutting services that are currently run by departments, and build cloud-based government services from the ground up, focused on the needs of citizens, communities and businesses. These should be overseen by a minister, with a Permanent Secretary-level official in charge,

supported by a high-calibre Chief Digital Officer. To be effective, Task Forces will require specialist recruitment, ringfenced resources, and power to change how departments are currently working, including legacy systems.

Second, as an increasing proportion of internet usage and citizen engagement with services happens online, the Government should develop an easy-to-use, mobile-first app: the gateway to all government services from tax paying to benefit receipt, from parking fines to passports. This is likely to be a single digital facade to services run by central government, local government and other parts of the public service. There should be a consistent user journey, design and feel for all government services.

Third, the Government needs to fix some technical, but critical, foundations for the kind of digital government that citizens have come to expect. The centre of government needs to set digital standards, and departments need to follow them:

- **Make sure different digital services can interact with each other** – for example a vaccination administration centre sharing data with a citizen’s electronic healthcare record. The Government needs to mandate modern standardised APIs (application programming interfaces) in all contracts with a data component where sharing or processing the data is in the public interest.
- **Make rapid progress on cloud computing**, with benefits including increased efficiency, reduced demands on IT resources, flexibility, collaboration across departments and safer file sharing. The Government should set a target to move all its services to the cloud by 2023 with departments and individuals rewarded for early adoption and speedy progress.
- **Create, clean up, and make accessible important data sets.** The Government needs to set standards for the exchange and verification of data across government. It needs to fund new infrastructure to improve data quality. It should identify the top ten datasets – those linked to its policy priorities – and put people in charge of managing them for the benefit of government as a whole.

To deliver the promise of levelling up and achieve challenging carbon reduction targets, government will need to focus talent at the local and regional level and disrupt current ways of working, because incremental change will not be sufficient. We propose **a cadre of 1,000 ‘Crown Fellows’**, an infusion of highly effective people drawn from across the public and private sectors, academia and the third sector, able to bring their skills and varied experience to bear in catalysing change in the areas of most urgency.

The Government should test new ways of working, with a particular emphasis on experimentation, and understanding and improving citizens' lived experience. **'Joint Local Action Teams' (JOLTs) would be cross-organisational, place-based joint ventures, bringing together local government, the local presence of government departments, like DWP, arm's length bodies, health, the police and other local public services, depending on the issue being tackled.** At least as important, they would harness the insight and effectiveness of local business and the third sector.

## **JOINT LOCAL ACTION TEAMS (JOLTs)**

### **Purposes:**

(1) to bring together all parts of government, and local business and the third sector, to design and deliver innovative and successful local approaches to national priorities. For example:

- (net zero) – home energy retrofit, decarbonising transport.
- (levelling up) – transformation of adult skills provision, housing regeneration.

**JOLT teams will have a clearly defined mission based on desired outcome (for example carbon reduction or increase in regional GVA) and geographic scope, fit for their individual purposes.**

(2) to spearhead new style of government: collaborative, innovative, agile, unbureaucratic, harnessing people with a wide spectrum of professional and personal backgrounds.

**JOLT teams will draw on talented people in cities and regions from a wide range of social and organisational backgrounds, and on civil servants in new regional hubs. Central to their approach will be experimentation, test and refine, with learning informing their own work and delivery elsewhere.**

### **The main elements of JOLT teams' work will be:**

- **Strategy:** working out how to deploy resources and activity to bring about the intended outcomes, resulting in a defined set (portfolio) of projects with planned outputs, together achieving the outcomes. For longer term outcomes, there will need to be interim measures of achievement.
- **Innovation:** the project portfolio should include some innovation and experimentation, with necessary checks and controls to understand success or failure at early stages and correct as necessary.
- **Delivery:** overseeing the delivery of projects, taking action to address underperformance, and in a dynamic but controlled way.
- **Evaluating performance to refine the strategy:** through periodic reviews based on monitoring and evidence, adapt strategy to shift resources and activity towards most successful approaches.



- **Partnership with business and local institutions:** making the most of the insight, resources and capability of local firms, universities and other institutions
- **Citizen and community involvement and ownership:** building public consent and achieving visible impact through, for example co-design through citizens' assemblies, and getting community groups involved in delivery.

### **Funding and accountability**

These are ideas for an initial, pathfinder, phase. If successful, the approach should become business as usual for much local activity, and would likely require a different approach.

- A single political and single executive leader (the latter with Accounting Officer-type role). Flexibility to mix and match across public service, for example metro mayor and senior civil servant, minister and council CEO.
- Leaders chair boards bringing together main public sector players, business and the third sector, according to mission and local opportunity, providing direction, oversight and visibility of the project to participating organisations
- Resources pooled into a single budget.
- Public accountability via open publication of financial and performance data and a scrutiny process linking into national audit and accounts process but with strong local involvement.

Detail in *Designing government for a better Britain*, pp.31-33

Procurement of digital services and products needs to be radically improved, reflecting the fact that the majority of services will in future be digitally-enabled. Government organisations have been too slow to adopt SaaS-models (software distribution models in which cloud providers host applications and make them available to end users over the internet). Government rarely uses and modifies already-created platforms in other countries - for example Denmark's grant management platform.

The problems associated with procurement extend to non-technology products too. To that end, the Government should use the opportunity provided by the Procurement Green Paper to rethink the effectiveness of the G-Cloud – the Crown Commercial Service's platform for public sector customers to purchase cloud-based computing services. It should explore how to set up a more open, Amazon-like marketplace for government, that allows more technology companies to access government opportunities, and for officials to access a wider range of possible solutions.

This would entail a fundamental re-design of the approach to tendering, contract design and payment models that go alongside this marketplace.

The way departments provide ministers with information and secure decisions from them is outdated and does not realise the opportunities for modern technology to improve decision-making and enable ministers to work more effectively. Whether through continued reliance on papers in traditional red boxes, or outdated electronic processes like e-mails and the circulation of PDF documents, current processes too often are cumbersome and involve high overheads and distraction for both ministers and officials. Modern workflow applications, adopted corporately by departments with appropriate protocols and safeguards, would make it easier for ministers to have clear visibility of departmental performance, interact with officials, special advisers and others flexibly and efficiently, and ensure proposed action is soundly based, for example with properly completed business cases.

Finally, government's traditional approach to contact with citizens and civil society about policy and service design is outdated and ineffective. It is too much characterised by formal consultations, which take place too late in the policy development process to allow genuine challenge and enable government to be open to innovative ideas, and really informed about the experiences of citizens and businesses. If consultations generate any value in return for the resources put into them, it tends to be fine-tuning rather than fundamental rethinking. Departments should:

- Begin engagement much more in the formative stages when big questions are still unresolved.
- Base the process much more on asking open questions about how respondents would bring about a stated outcome, rather than a critique of detailed proposals developed in the department.
- Focus on the impact on service users and citizens, using digital and other modern methods to widen the discussion beyond the usual suspects, for example to small businesses, small local voluntary organisations, and citizens themselves.

Formal, legal, consultations are often required by legislation. They are also an important means of managing risks of legal challenge. They will need to continue, as important compliance mechanisms. However, better engagement and openness to new thinking at earlier stages will inform them better and lessen the risks of controversy.

## 4. Accountable government

More detail on these proposals and the evidence supporting them can be found in the following Commission papers:

*[Designing government for a better Britain](#)*

*[How can government improve financial and business planning?](#)*

*[Smart Devolution to Level Up](#)*

*[Instilling a high-performance culture in the Civil Service](#)*

*[Ministers: effective political leadership in government](#)*

- **Give each minister on appointment a formal and public ‘Commission Letter’**, laying out what they are expected to accomplish and with public reporting on performance.
- **Safeguard integrity of appointments to non-executive boards and Councils of Advisers** either by the Commissioner for Public Appointments and Civil Service Commissioner respectively, or a new equivalent process, for example an appointments board including independent members.
- **Create an ‘Ofsted for government departments’**, a structured annual process for assessing departments’ effectiveness to common standards, with published results, and with the assessment as the principal measure of Chief Executives’ effectiveness.
- **Use Local Net Promoter Scores** for government: experiment with a combined measure of citizen perceptions of public service in local areas to guide priorities for improvement and innovation.
- **Give every citizen access to government spending and performance data** through the government app, along the lines of Canadian and Singapore exemplars.
- **Set up tough PAC-style hearings** to scrutinise the performance of metro mayors and council leaders, **with reinvigorated local audit** generating ammunition.

There is currently no formal, public, mechanism for setting out the Prime Minister’s expectations of Secretaries of State. Former ministers have often felt they were appointed without clear steers. Based on the strategic clarity we suggest should be brought about by our proposed changes to structures and processes at the centre, we suggest that the Prime Minister should set out clear expectations in short, hard-hitting ‘Commission Letters’. The letters should be published, and progress against the expectations in them should be part of the transparency information which we propose the Government should make available digitally (see pages 45-46 below).

### Canada: mandate letters

The Prime Minister assigns objectives to cabinet ministers in “mandate letters”. They set out:

- The principal objectives the Prime Minister envisages for each minister and how ministers should work together.
- The Government’s approach on transparency, the media, engagement with civil society, and cross-party collaboration.

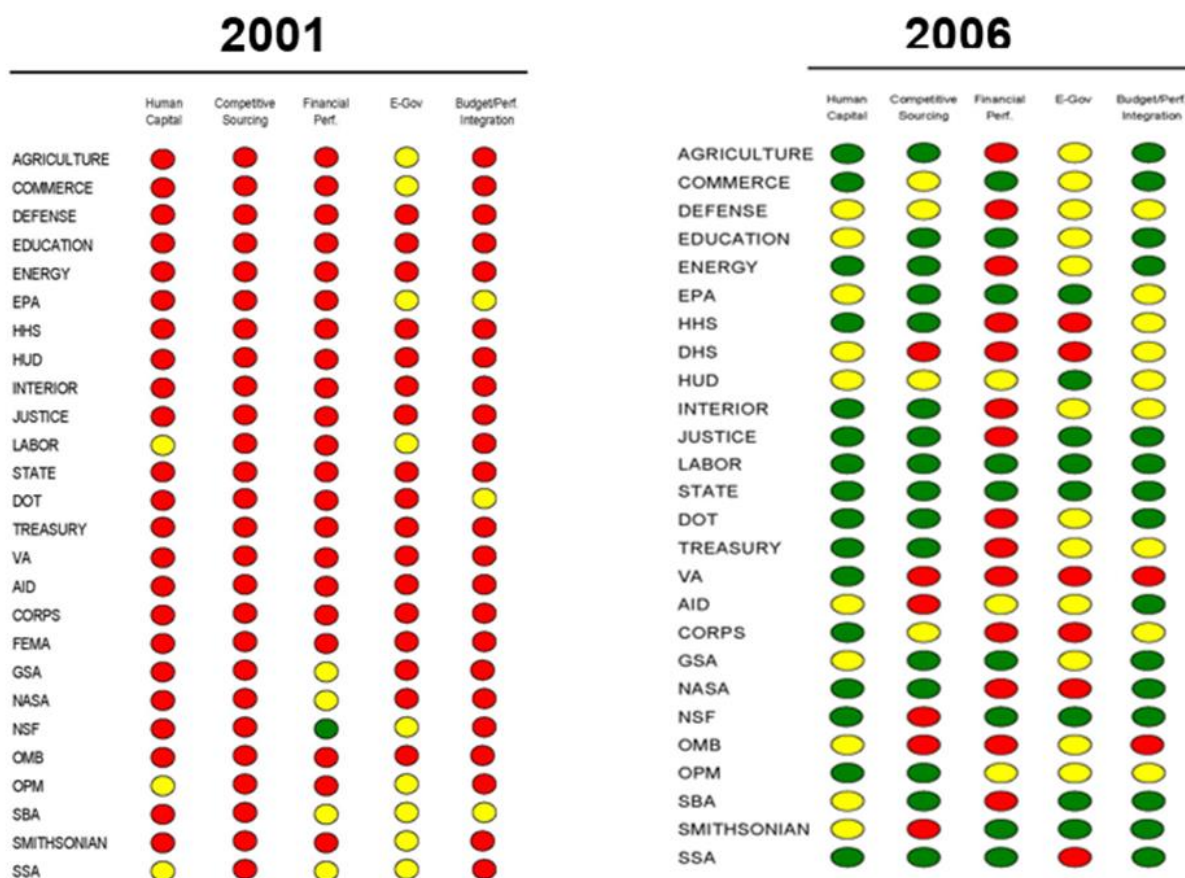
Letters are typically issued with the formation of a new government after an election, but can be updated, as they were for instance in January 2021 to prioritise aspects of the fight against and recovery from Covid-19. The letters are now published online, and the public can track the progress ministers have made toward objectives on a dedicated website. The letters are one way the Prime Minister holds ministers to account.

We are proposing that departmental boards should be given a more powerful role, and that Secretaries of State should be able to set up Councils of Advisers. Government will benefit from talented people being recruited to these two distinct kinds of roles. But there need to be proper standards safeguards. Ministers should make the appointments, but the process should be overseen in one of two ways, either by:

- The Commissioner for Public Appointments (non-executives) and Civil Service Commission (for Councils of Advisers); or
- An appointments panel including independent members.

There is also no formal, comprehensive, and consistent process for assessing the effectiveness of government departments. This is in contrast to many operational public services, which are subject to scrutiny by inspection and regulatory bodies (like Ofsted and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary). There was a process (capability reviews) which operated between 2005 and 2012, but it was abandoned under the Coalition.<sup>30</sup> There are useful overseas exemplars for the assessment of government departments, notably a standardised scorecard (illustrated in Figure 7 below) operated by the Bush administration in the US, and, still current, the New Zealand government’s Performance Improvement Framework. The Government should set up a similar process for assessing departments, to inform its programme to improve effectiveness, and to provide transparency. It should invite the devolved administrations to participate in the process.

Figure 7: US assessment of agency performance



Public services collect and publish large amounts of data about specific aspects of performance of individual public services. But that is not how government is experienced by citizens. For them, what matters is the combined quality of infrastructure and public services, of “what has the Government ever done for us.” Customer-facing business increasingly attach weight to measures like “Net Promoter Score”: This works by asking customers “How likely are you to recommend us to a friend or colleague?”; the answers are scored 0-10. The Net Promoter Score is the percentage of customers who are promoters (those who scored 9 or 10) minus the percentage who are detractors (those who scored 0 to 6).<sup>31</sup>

Such a measure, applied to people’s experience of government, could be a powerful tool, providing insight and driving performance:

- It would enable government to see how citizen experience of government as a whole varies between different places. This would be useful in the context of levelling up.

- It would enable government to see how experience varies between people with different experiences and life backgrounds, usefully for thinking about how public services as a whole meet the needs of, for example, the relatively privileged compared with those with multiple vulnerabilities.

The UK has some strong transparency institutions, for example the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Committee on Climate Change. But its transparency about public spending and performance is patchier. Departmental plans were not published in full, and it is not clear yet whether their successors, Outcome Delivery Plans, will be. The Treasury is encouraging continuing improvement in departments' annual reports. There are two aspects to this: how easily information can be accessed; and how comprehensible it is to non-experts.

Other countries show how imaginative use of digital platforms can enable citizens to find out about spending and performance without having to hunt down obscure documents from multiple web pages, and in a format which is easy to explore and understand. The Singapore Government publishes a report card, accessible on citizens' smartphones via a QR code (Figure 8). The Canadian government makes financial, performance, and workforce data about all departments available through a single, explorable, visually attractive web application. The UK Government should do likewise.

**Figure 8:** Singapore government report card



The UK has strong scrutiny institutions at national level, notably the Commons Public Accounts Committee, supported by the independent National Audit Office. The effectiveness of scrutiny and audit at regional and local level is far patchier. This is a missed opportunity, with the growing

number and prominence of metro mayors, and with the government's known interest in addressing disparities of prosperity, life experience and public service performance in different places. The increasing financial vulnerability of many local councils also indicates the need to ensure robust financial audit.<sup>32</sup> We therefore propose regional PAC-style bodies made up of local councillors and MPs to scrutinise the metro-mayors, supported by vigorous new arrangements for local audit, looking at the combined impact of spend in local areas.

## Conclusion: reform into action

Government reform is at a critical juncture. Before the pandemic, there was mounting evidence that government is not performing as well as it should. The pandemic has added to the case for change in a variety of ways. The Government has now published its reform Declaration, which, as Michael Gove has made clear, is not intended to be the last word.<sup>33</sup>

However, there is no inevitability about successful reform. As we have noted, World War II brought about significant impetus for change, yet the clock was turned back afterwards. Our predecessor initiative, GovernUp, drew attention to the tendency for there to be “all change but not enough change.” There can be a lot of reform activity, but “there has been a tendency for success to be, at best, partial; and even, at some times, to stall or go into reverse...reform has not significantly addressed key issues, has often lacked clarity, and implementation has been patchy.”<sup>34</sup>

The Government's ambition and intentions are laudable. The Declaration has some strong content. But in our view there is much further to go to build an effective strategy for systemic change, and to ensure that it is delivered. We hope that our proposals will provide the challenge and ideas needed to drive the step-change in government reform which Britain needs.



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