



Social Mobility  
Commission

# Navigating the labyrinth

Socio-economic  
background and career  
progression within  
the Civil Service

Research report  
May 2021



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Socio-economic background and career progression  
within the Civil Service

## About the Commission

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England.

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## About the Author



Sam Friedman is a Commissioner at the Social Mobility Commission and Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics (from August 2021). He has published widely on class, culture and social mobility, and recently co-authored 'The class ceiling: why it pays to be privileged' (Policy, 2019). He is also the author of 'Comedy and distinction: the cultural currency of a 'good' sense of humour' (Routledge, 2014) and co-author of 'Social class in the 21st century' (Penguin, 2015). He is currently working on a new book (with Aaron Reeves) looking at the historical development of the British elite, drawing on the entire 120-year database of Who's Who.

## Acknowledgements

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### The Social Mobility Commission

Sanctuary Buildings  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT.

### Email

[contact@socialmobilitycommission.org.uk](mailto:contact@socialmobilitycommission.org.uk)

# Table of contents

Foreword	5
A reflection from the Civil Service's Social Mobility Champion	8
Executive summary	10
Introduction	16
Methodology	21

**1**

<b>Understanding socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service</b>	<b>27</b>
How socio-economically diverse is the Civil Service?	28

**2**

<b>Barriers to progression: Unpicking the (hidden) rules of the game</b>	<b>38</b>
2.1 'Accelerator roles' and organisational guides	39
2.2 Exploiting organisational ambiguity	44
2.3 The London vortex and the 'Whitehall effect'	49
2.4 Occupational specialisation – policy versus operational	53
2.5 Dominant behavioural codes: studied neutrality and the ideal civil servant	58
2.6 Downplaying privilege	65

**3**

<b>Cumulative barriers: Connecting socio-economic background to gender and ethnicity</b>	<b>70</b>
(Not) bringing your whole self to work:	
Women's experience of social mobility	72
Experiencing class stereotypes of Blackness	79

Appendices	84
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# Foreword



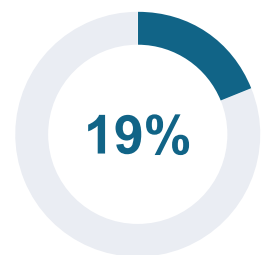
The Civil Service is both renowned and respected throughout the world, yet few see inside its ivory towers. Its 445,480 strong workforce, based in towns and cities across the UK, span everything from customs and benefit officers to policy chiefs and permanent secretaries. What it takes to ‘make it’ in the Civil Service however has, for many years, been unclear.

As one of the largest employers in the country, the Civil Service is a role model for fair recruitment and diversity initiatives. Its model practices set a benchmark for all employers. The organisation is already recognised for its transparency in publishing annual workforce statistics on gender, race and disability. But its record on socio-economic diversity has rarely been scrutinised and not for several decades.

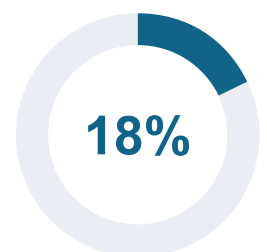
Our report, the first independent data-driven analysis of social background and career progression in the Civil Service, and a complement to our work on progression out of low pay, contains some difficult home truths. It shows civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the organisation and even if they do “get in” they struggle to “get on”.

Only 18% of senior civil servants are from working-class or low socio-economic backgrounds while the figure is 43% among the most junior grades. Strikingly the composition of the Senior Civil Service has barely changed since 1967, the last time this data was collected.

Those from advantaged backgrounds are also more likely to work in the Treasury or the Foreign Office, hold policy rather than operational jobs and work in London, near the centre of political power.



of the SCS from low socio-economic backgrounds in 1967



of the SCS from low socio-economic backgrounds in 2019

This study is based on data from an internal Civil Service survey which had around 300,000 respondents. But we have also conducted over 100 hour-long interviews which give deep insights into how people progress in the Civil Service, how they get to the top and how they subtly use existing networks. The right accent and a ‘studied neutrality’ seem to win through at every stage of their career. Even at the lower end of the profession, progress is thwarted for those who don’t know the rules.

**300,000+**  
**respondents**

to the internal  
Civil Service  
People Survey

Emotional detachment and understated self-presentation are seen as the behavioural hallmarks of senior civil servants, perhaps in contrast to their political leaders. But this ‘neutral’ behaviour can be both alienating and intimidating for those from working class backgrounds.

**over**  
**100**

hour-long  
interviews

Those working in Ministers’ private offices or who have led during a national crisis, for example, tend to get promoted, often helped by senior colleagues with similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Those left behind tend to be in operational roles – where bottlenecks occur and progress is slower or non-existent. The barriers to advancement are there from the start.

The Civil Service is acutely aware that it needs to do better. It has made progress on socio-economic diversity and inclusion and has introduced blind recruitment techniques to ensure fair competition. However, as the study shows, getting in is not enough and more action is needed to nurture career progression.

We set out a bold action plan including getting better data on the Senior Civil Service, ensuring equal access to sought after jobs, setting good practice guidance on promotion and providing more access to policy experience.<sup>1</sup> We propose too an information campaign to break the taboo around talking about social class in the Civil Service.



This report should act as a catalyst for all employers to shift their thinking...



Ultimately the Social Mobility Commission also believes that socio-economic background should be enshrined in law as a protected characteristic.

The cross-departmental plan, which would have to be coordinated by the Cabinet Office, should set targets for the number of Senior Civil Service, private office and policy roles moved out of London, to help career progression in the regions.

The barriers to progression identified here extend far beyond the Civil Service. This report should act as a catalyst for *all* employers to shift their thinking on socio-economic inclusion from who ‘gets in’ to who ‘gets on’. And we strongly

<sup>1</sup> Please see the accompanying Action plan on socio-economic progression for the Civil Service.

believe that the recommendations outlined in our action plan can drive positive change in a range of different professions.

This isn't just the 'right' thing to do; it's not just about challenging inequality of opportunity, wasted talent, continuing class privilege or helping a small group get to the top. It's also about building more effective workforces for everyone. Evidence shows that organisations work better, and are more creative, when they have people from different backgrounds, offering different perspectives. This is even more imperative when one's role, as in the Civil Service, is to shape what Britain looks like.

These findings make clear that while the Civil Service leads in many ways on socio-economic diversity and inclusion, more work is urgently needed. The Commissioners hope the Cabinet Secretary and Chief People Officer will now endorse our action plan to ensure that the Civil Service leads by example on diversity and inclusion, encouraging other employers to follow suit. Only then can we start realising a Britain which truly showcases the skills and talents of everyone, irrespective of their background.

**Steven Cooper and Sandra Wallace**

Interim Co-Chairs



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steven Cooper".

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sandra Wallace".



# A reflection from the Civil Service's Social Mobility Champion



Whitehall Street, London

This report from the Social Mobility Commission acknowledges that the Civil Service has provided strong leadership on improving diversity and inclusion. In Government, we have a responsibility to reflect the people we serve, and to harness the broadest range of diverse talent to help us solve complex problems, innovate and deliver the very best public services.

But there are many areas in which we need to make more progress, and increasing our socio-economic diversity is one of them.

As Social Mobility Champion, I know that a lot of great work is being done across the Civil Service to improve socio-economic diversity. We have overhauled our graduate recruitment programme; extended our outreach and internship programmes; and begun to introduce mentoring and sponsorship schemes in many Departments to support people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Our social mobility staff networks provide energy and inspiration for this work. Civil Service organisations feature strongly in the Social Mobility Foundation's Social Mobility Employer Index Top 75.

Yet there is clearly more work to do for us to mainstream best practice across the wider Civil Service. One of the most important steps we have taken is to strengthen our data and insight on socio-economic diversity. We have worked

with the Office for National Statistics, academics, private sector employers and the SMC to create a set of measures for employers to use to collect data on the socio-economic background (SEB) of their workforce. In 2019 we included these measures in our annual Civil Service People Survey, and that allowed us the unique opportunity to collect what is probably the world's largest dataset on workforce socio-economic diversity.

This report offers some important insights. Some of the themes it explores are ones I have also heard talking to colleagues right across the Civil Service, and at all grades, about social mobility. The sense that there is a route to the top that those from more privileged backgrounds find easier to navigate; the more limited opportunities for advancement for staff in operational roles or who live outside London; the cumulative barriers experienced by people from working class backgrounds who are also women or from ethnic minority communities.

We are strongly committed to driving progress on socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service. No-one should be held back from achieving their full potential because they come from a less privileged background. We are already acting on many of the findings and recommendations in this report – for example we are extending apprenticeships and moving hundreds of Senior Civil Service jobs out of London. I hope it will help us to focus our efforts on the actions that will have the most impact.

On behalf of the Civil Service leadership team I'd like to thank the Social Mobility Commission and Dr Sam Friedman for leading this work.

**Bernadette Kelly**

Civil Service Social Mobility Champion  
Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport

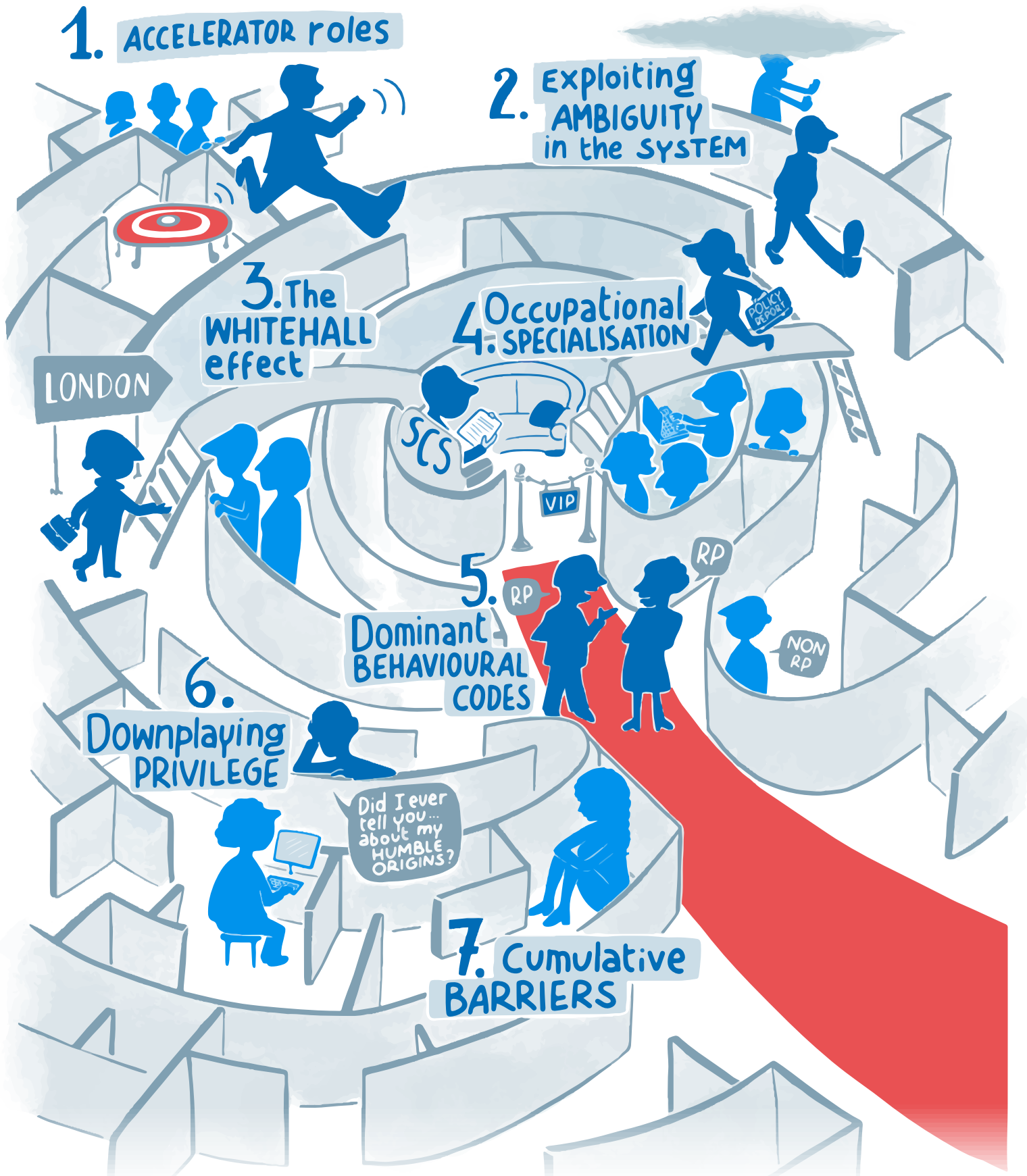


A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bernadette Kelly".



# Executive summary

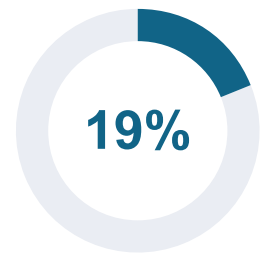
## Navigating the labyrinth



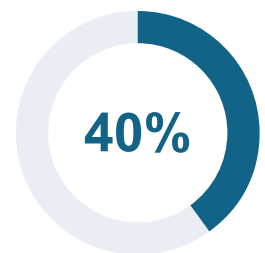
The Civil Service is one of the country’s largest employers, employing 445,480 people across the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> It is a trailblazer for diversity efforts and aims to be the UK’s most inclusive employer, setting the direction for others to follow.<sup>3</sup> This report, the first ever independent, data-driven investigation of how socio-economic background shapes career progression in the Civil Service is the next chapter in this pioneering approach. It demonstrates the urgent need to put class and socio-economic inclusivity at the centre of this drive toward inclusion and fairness. Specifically, we examine the UK’s largest workforce dataset on socio-economic diversity, alongside over 100 in-depth interviews.

People from low SEBs in:

policy



operations



## What we found

- Civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the Civil Service, and even when they ‘get in’ they struggle to ‘get on’.
- Only 18% of senior civil servants are from working class or low socio-economic backgrounds.
- The proportion of senior civil servants from high socio-economic backgrounds is higher today than in 1967 (although this partially reflects the widespread expansion of professional and managerial jobs since the 1960s).<sup>4</sup>

The evidence shows that those from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs) are less likely to work in areas of the Civil Service that accelerate progression, notably departments including Her Majesty’s Treasury, professions like policy, and the roles which give exposure to the political epicentre of Whitehall.

For example:

- Only 12% of those working at the Treasury are from a low SEB versus 45% at the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Only 19% of those working in policy are from low SEBs versus 40% in operational roles (for example, running front-line services).

There are strong regional divides too:

- Only 22% of London-based civil servants are from working class or low SEBs.
- This compares to 48% in the north-east.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office, [Civil Service statistics 2019](#), 2019. The latest 2020 figures indicate the Civil Service has grown to 456,410 but we use 2019 figures in this report as our analysis draws on the 2019 Civil Service People Survey.

<sup>3</sup> Cabinet Office, [A brilliant Civil Service](#), 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Halsey, A. H., Crewe, I. M., Social survey of the Civil Service, *The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969. Please read the Introduction for a detailed explanation on how Halsey and Crewe’s methodology differed from ours and why this should not be considered as a direct comparison.



Inside the Banqueting House, Whitehall, with ceiling painted by Peter Paul Rubens

## From ceiling to labyrinth

There is a strong 'progression gap' within the Civil Service, so that the higher you progress, the less likely you are to find people from low SEBs. However there does not appear to be a 'class ceiling'. Instead, our analysis suggests that a more apt metaphor is the idea of the Civil Service as a 'labyrinth'.

This reflects both the size and complexity of the Civil Service and the fact that progression is rarely simple or direct. While there is a viable route to the centre for everyone, this route is largely hidden; there is a formal set of guidelines around progression and an informal set of rules and norms. And while formal processes around progression are often highly sensitive to issues of diversity and inclusion, our interviewees explain that it is mastery of the unwritten rules that provide the most effective roadmap through the labyrinth. Moreover, it is in unpicking these hidden rules where those from low SEBs face the strongest barriers and those from high SEBs have the greatest advantages.

## The unwritten rules of progression

The first of these unwritten rules is that securing certain high profile jobs leads to fast-tracked progression. These roles give exposure to Ministers and senior officials – notably in private office, the 'central' departments, running a bill team, securing a leading role during a national crisis, or as a Minister's private secretary. Yet knowledge of these so-called 'accelerator roles' is often contingent on access to 'organisational guides': senior colleagues who help navigate the hidden rules of the labyrinth. We find that these guide relationships are often forged on the basis of cultural similarity and, as senior staff are disproportionately from advantaged backgrounds, this tends to benefit those from high SEBs.



In this report we use 'socio-economic progression gap' to convey that the higher you progress in the Civil Service, the less likely you are to find people from low SEBs; they become further under-represented at every grade of seniority.





Peace Gardens and Town Hall in Sheffield, Yorkshire

Second, in negotiating progression opportunities, civil servants routinely face situations where formal career guidance is unclear. These ‘grey areas’ include interactions with hiring managers, requests for promotion, threats to leave, and embellishing job applications. While those from higher SEBs tend to exploit the ambiguity of these ‘interpretative moments’ and cultivate opportunities, those from lower SEBs often report confusion or ethical discomfort.

But the hidden rules do not just revolve around who you know and how you deal with uncertainty but also where you work. Physical proximity to Ministers via the Civil Service’s Whitehall offices remains critical for building ‘visibility’ and top-grade posts are still disproportionately located in central London. However, the ability to access a London ‘career track’ is stratified by socio-economic background; those from low SEBs who grow up outside of London and the south-east tend to ‘sort’ into regional positions because they lack the economic resources to migrate to the capital and often have cultural and familial reasons for wanting to stay where they grew up.

Fourth, we find that those from low SEBs often opt into operational career tracks which have clear bottlenecks and therefore limit progression. Some join at lower operational grades and become locked into operational tracks, while others join at higher grades but still sort into operational roles as they see the skillset as more transparent, tangible and meritocratic.

Another key reason for this occupational sorting is that many from low SEBs see policy work as dependent on mastering a behavioural code – what we call ‘studied neutrality’ – that tilts in favour of those from advantaged backgrounds.

Studied neutrality has three key dimensions:

- 1 a particular received pronunciation (RP) accent and style of speech
- 2 emotionally detached and understated self-presentation
- 3 an intellectual approach to culture and politics that prizes the display of in-depth knowledge for its own sake (and not directly related to work)

Those from low SEBs find this code alienating and intimidating but one which they must assimilate in order to succeed.

We also find evidence that those from advantaged backgrounds often downplay or deflect their socio-economic privilege. Specifically, we show that 1 in 4 of those who self-assess as coming from low SEBs have actually had advantaged upbringings. Interviews reveal that this is rooted in ‘origin stories’ where people reach back beyond their own upbringing to locate their background in extended family histories of working class struggle or upward mobility. Yet this often blinds them from considering the socio-economic advantages they have enjoyed, or the role their actions may play in erecting socio-economic barriers to progression.

Finally, we also identify specific barriers to progression for women and Black (African/African Caribbean) civil servants from low SEBs. While White men from low SEBs often consciously draw on their working class background in developing their personal ‘brand’, women from low SEBs are much more likely to conceal their backgrounds at work, reporting that ‘bringing their whole self to work’ only leaves them vulnerable to negative judgement from colleagues. In addition, Black civil servants report routinely battling classed stereotypes of Blackness that are both offensive and bear no resemblance to their actual lives and experiences.



**1 in 4**

of those who self-assess as coming from low SEBs have actually had advantaged upbringings

## The action plan [See the full plan](#)

These findings make clear that while the Civil Service continues to lead in many ways, when it comes to socio-economic diversity and inclusion, more work is needed. We have drawn from our wider work on progression, including our work on progression out of low pay, and our experience helping employers address progression, as well as consultations with key Civil Service stakeholders, to create an action plan for the Civil Service.<sup>5, 6, 7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [Learning ladders: adult training and progression out of low pay](#), 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [Increasing in-work training and progression for frontline workers](#), 2020.

<sup>7</sup> View our resources for employers on progression here: <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/progression/>.



To achieve change, we have identified 14 actions that we believe should form the basis of a Civil Service action plan and associated programme of work to tackle disparities in progression. The recommended action plan is published as an accompanying document to this report.

The cross-departmental plan will need the endorsement of the Cabinet Secretary and the Chief People Officer and effective coordination by Cabinet Office. The programme will need resources and authority to drive change and hold individual departments to account.

The key components of the plan are:

- improving data to better understand how socio-economic background shapes progression pathways and the composition of the Senior Civil Service (SCS)
- equalising access to information about accelerator roles; providing specific guidance on good practice in the 'grey areas' that surround promotions
- demystifying policy work and providing opportunities for lower grade operational staff to get policy experience
- adapting and evolving the Places for Growth initiative to reduce the possibility that it limits opportunities for lower SEB staff already in London
- using an information and communications campaign to break the taboo around talking about social class within the Civil Service
- tackling culture and behavioural codes that can favour polish over performance, particularly in development schemes

## Where next?

The Commission will remain interested and engaged in the Civil Service's response to our findings. The conclusion of our work acknowledges powerful inter-linking issues. Certain aspects of Civil Service improvement may necessitate the evolution of the UK's current parliamentary practices. We hope to engage Parliamentary authorities to conduct a complementary report on Parliament's wider workforce, to ensure that our nation's political epicentre is also actively promoting socio-economic diversity and inclusion.

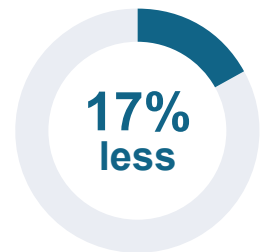
## 14 actions

should form the basis of a Civil Service action plan

# Introduction



In contemporary Britain it quite literally pays to be privileged. Even when those from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs) gain access to professional occupations, they go on to earn on average 17% less than colleagues from more advantaged backgrounds – a ‘class pay gap’ that persists even when they have same education, training and experience.<sup>8</sup>



But what does this class pay gap mean for employers? Are staff from working class backgrounds unfairly held back in their careers? Do they face a ‘class ceiling?’ And, if so, how should employers respond?

average ‘class pay gap’ of people from low SEBs

The Civil Service is uniquely placed to address these questions. While reaching the top of the Civil Service was historically tied to socio-economic background, a series of reforms introduced after World War 2 explicitly aimed to open up the route to the top.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup> These reforms were partially successful; in 1929 only

<sup>8</sup> The Social Mobility Commission [State of the nation](#), 2019; The Social Mobility Commission, *The Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness*, 2017; Friedman, S. and Laurison, D. *The Class Ceiling*, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> The most prominent of these was the establishment of the Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB) in 1945 which aimed to provide a meritocratic process for selecting senior administrators to the Civil Service Fast Stream. It was further reformed in 1982 after Sir Alec Atkinson recommended that there should be greater emphasis on attracting candidates from a wider social pool (Hennessy, P. Whitehall, 1981: 512–520).

<sup>10</sup> Several studies document how the higher Civil Service was dominated by those from private schools and professional and managerial backgrounds in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Kelsall, R. *Recruitment to the higher Civil Service: how has the pattern changed*, 1974; Guttsman, W. L. *The British political elite and the class structure*, 1974; Boyd, D. *Elites and their education*, 1973; Heath, A. *Social mobility*, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Boyd also finds a slight increase over time in the openness of the higher Civil Service between 1939–1970 (Boyd, D. *Elites and their education*, 1973).

7% of senior civil servants came from low SEBs, this rose to 19% by 1967.<sup>12</sup> However, the very top echelons of the Senior Civil Service remain dominated by those from extremely privileged backgrounds. For example, our joint work with the Sutton Trust, *Elitist Britain*, showed as recently as 2019 that 59% of serving permanent secretaries had attended an independent school.<sup>13</sup>

Yet we know little about how these trends connect to the wider Civil Service workforce. In addition the last time data was collected on the class backgrounds of all senior civil servants was 1967.

Certainly, a strong *commitment* to increasing social mobility has continued in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Not only has the Civil Service consistently placed multiple government departments within the top 75 of the Social Mobility Employer Index (15 in 2020), it has also made pioneering changes to improve socio-economic diversity within its flagship graduate development programme – the Civil Service Fast Stream. It has developed a set of questions that all employers can use to identify socio-economic background, and the Social Mobility Commission has further advanced the guidance.<sup>15, 16, 17, 18, 19</sup>

### From access to progression

The Civil Service has devoted considerable energy to address these issues. So far these interventions have especially focused on outreach, attraction and hiring. Indeed, Civil Service recruitment is built on fair and open competition, made on merit, and have extensive processes designed to achieve this. This is not surprising. Most politicians, academics, policymakers and employers currently tend to conceptualise social mobility as an issue of who ‘gets in’.

**15**

government departments placed within the top 75 of the Social Mobility Foundation’s Social Mobility Employer Index in 2020

<sup>12</sup> Halsey and Crewe look here at civil servants’ fathers’ occupations and compare the proportion of those with fathers in ‘professional, managerial and technical occupations’, ‘skilled non-manual occupations’ and ‘skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations’. It should be acknowledged that although the socio-economic composition of the SCS remains broadly the same as in 1967, the occupational structure of the UK has changed significantly in the last 50 years. This means that the socio-economic origins of those in the UK population in 1967, what might be termed the recruiting ‘pool’ for the SCS, included a much higher percentage of those from working-class origins (Halsey, A. H. and Crewe, I. M., *Social survey of the Civil Service, The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Social Mobility Commission and the Sutton Trust, [Elitist Britain](#), 2019.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/improving-social-mobility-in-the-uk-civil-service-and-beyond>.

<sup>15</sup> Cabinet Office, [Measuring socio-economic background in your workforce: recommended measures for use by employers](#), 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Cabinet Office, [Socio-economic diversity in the Fast Stream: the Bridge report](#), 2016.

<sup>17</sup> The Social Mobility Foundation, [Social Mobility Employer Index](#), 2020.

<sup>18</sup> The Civil Service has also pioneered internal changes such as creating board-level champions, creating departmental social mobility networks and building a cross-government social mobility action plan.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/measurement/>.



Yet there is a danger of reducing social mobility to the issue of access. It assumes that the impact of socio-economic background finishes when a person enters an organisation or career. We believe it is imperative that employers start to challenge this assumption; to interrogate socio-economic diversity *within* organisations and how socio-economic background shapes career *progression*.<sup>20, 21</sup>

With this project, we take a significant stride toward filling this gap; shifting the socio-economic focus from access to progression; from who ‘gets in’ to the Civil Service to who ‘gets on’.

And to conduct this analysis, we used the Civil Service’s 2019 Civil Service People Survey (CSPS). This dataset was the first that incorporated socio-economic background questions and furnished us with the ability to provide a wide-ranging socio-economic analysis of over 300,000 civil servants.

We first show that those from higher socio-economic backgrounds are not only over-represented in the Civil Service as a whole, but that this skew is particularly acute in certain work locations such as London, departments like Treasury or DCMS, and in professions like policy.



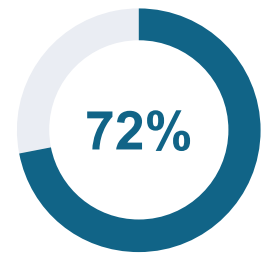
Employers should shift the socio-economic focus from access to progression

<sup>20</sup> This gap was identified by the APPG on Social Mobility who recommended in 2019 that the Civil Service should ‘look specifically at progression, performance, and pay, to lead by example for other professions’.

<sup>21</sup> See the Social Mobility Commission’s 2020 [Financial and professional services toolkit](#) as one example of this effect outside of the Civil Service.



We also find that those from advantaged backgrounds dominate the Senior Civil Service; 72% are from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Tellingly, this is higher than in 1967, the last time such data was collected.<sup>22</sup> This contrasts strongly with gender and ethnic-minority representation, where the Civil Service has become significantly more representative over time. The percentage of senior civil servants who are women, for example, has grown steadily from 17% in 1996 to 45% in 2019 (and to 46% in 2020), and the representation of Black and minority ethnic senior civil servants has grown from 4% to 8% from 2006 to 2019 (and to 9% in 2020).<sup>23</sup>



in the SCS  
from higher  
socio-economic  
backgrounds

Second, the report draws on over 100 in-depth interviews to explore the drivers of the socio-economic progression gap. Here our analysis suggests seven unwritten rules of progression that act as barriers for those from low SEBs and enablers for those from high SEBs:

- 1 access to informal guides and accelerator career tracks
- 2 negotiated opportunities in moments of organisational ambiguity
- 3 the 'Whitehall effect'
- 4 bottlenecks in operational career tracks
- 5 dominant behavioural codes
- 6 downplaying of socio-economic privilege
- 7 cumulative barriers (for women and Black civil servants from working class backgrounds)

#### A note on comparing change over time

It should be acknowledged that the 1967 analysis of the Senior Civil Service we report on here differs from our analysis in three ways; first, they looked at only civil servants' fathers' occupations rather than the occupation of the main breadwinner when the respondent was 14 as we do here (although Labour Force Survey analysis suggests that in 80% of cases this is still the father – see footnote 30); second, they used an occupational schema, The Registrar General's Social Class (RGSC), that was replaced by the NS-SEC schema in 2001. The formulation of

<sup>22</sup> This analysis was undertaken at the request of the Fulton Committee by Halsey and Crewe and makes up Volume 3(1) of the Fulton Report. It is based on a representative sample survey sent to 5,187 civil servants, which yielded a 96% response rate (Halsey, A. H. and Crewe, I. M., Social survey of the Civil Service, *The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969).

<sup>23</sup> Institute for Government, Gender balance in the Civil Service, 2020; Institute for Government, Ethnicity in the Civil Service, 2020; Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics 2019, 2019; Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics 2020, 2020.



the socio-economic classes in these schemes are based on different theoretical assumptions (see footnote 33) but are broadly similar when collapsed to a three-class schema. Analysts have estimated a continuity level of 87% across the two occupational schemas.

Third, and most significantly, the occupational structure of the UK has changed significantly in the last 50 years; in particular there has been a widespread expansion of professional and managerial jobs and a contraction of manual working-class jobs. This means that the socio-economic origins of those in the UK population in 1967, what might be termed the recruiting 'pool' for the SCS, included a much higher percentage of those from working-class origins. Indeed, if we estimate the relative rates of mobility into the SCS using occupational class data collected 15–20 years before the Kelsall data (1951) and our data (2002) then it seems that the odds ratio of reaching the SCS from professional/managerial backgrounds as opposed to non-professional/managerial backgrounds has fallen by ~50%, suggesting that the chances of reaching the SCS for a child born into a non-professional family have increased.

This could also be evidenced by another measure of privilege, the percentage of SCS who are privately educated, which has decreased over time. In 1967, for example, 37% of the SCS were privately educated compared to 25% today. Over that period, the proportion of the population who were privately educated stayed stable at around 7%, although other changes to schooling – notably the prominence of grammar schools – have occurred. It is important to remember here, however, that it is difficult to compare these different measures and this means any direct comparisons should be approached with caution.

Nonetheless, we do think Halsey and Crewe's analysis indicates that the overall socio-economic composition of the SCS has remained broadly stable over time, even if this does not necessarily mean it is as closed or exclusive in terms of recruitment.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Halsey, A. H. and Crewe, I. M., Social survey of the Civil Service, *The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969; Kelsall, R., Recruitment to the higher Civil Service: how has the pattern changed, 1974 and Kelsall, R., Higher civil servants in Britain, 1955; for more on changes in the occupational structure see Bukodi, E. and Goldthorpe, J., Social mobility and education in Britain: Research, politics and policy, 2018; for more on differences between RGSC and NS-SEC classifications see Pevalin, D. and Rose, D., 'The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification: unifying of social and sociological approaches to the conceptualisation and measurement of social class in the United Kingdom, 2002.

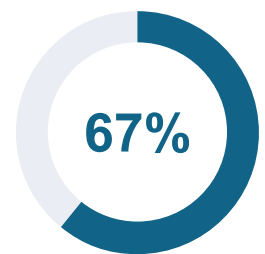
# Methodology

This research took place in two stages. First, we analyse social mobility into, and within, the Civil Service.<sup>25</sup> This data includes 308,556 respondents (approx. 67% of all civil servants). It thus allows us to quantitatively analyse not only the socio-economic composition of the Civil Service as a whole, but to provide a more granular lens on how this composition varies by gender, ethnicity, region, department, profession and grade.<sup>26</sup>

The CSPA measures the socio-economic background of civil servants in four ways:

- type of school attended
- parental educational attainment
- self-assessment of socio-economic background
- parental occupation

In this report we focus on parental occupation. We do this for several reasons; it provides a symmetrical view of civil servants' social mobility (comparing their own occupation to that of their parents), it allows us to analyse those who have disadvantaged *and* advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, it allows us to benchmark against wider labour force and historical Civil Service data, and it is the 'key question' that the Social Mobility Commission recommends



of all civil servants took part in the CSPA

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<sup>25</sup> While we requested the analyses detailed in this report, the CSPA data was analysed by the CSPA survey team due to privacy and operational concerns.

<sup>26</sup> Completion of the CSPA is not compulsory for civil servants but the response rate is high at 67% (308,556/462,963). Note, these figures do not reconcile with Official Statistics about the size of the Civil Service due to different decisions about who is invited to participate in the People Survey and who is counted in Official Statistics. See [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/867302/Civil-Service-People-Survey-2019-Technical-Guide.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/867302/Civil-Service-People-Survey-2019-Technical-Guide.pdf).

employers adopt when measuring socio-economic background.<sup>27, 28</sup> We include supplementary analyses using the other socio-economic background measures in the Appendix.

### What is the Civil Service?

The Civil Service is co-ordinated and managed by the Prime Minister, and accountable to the public. As an organisation, it's politically impartial and independent of government. Civil servants work in central government departments, agencies, and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs).<sup>29</sup>

The Civil Service provides services directly to people all over the country, including:

- paying benefits and pensions
- running employment services
- running prisons
- issuing driving licences
- staff also work on policy development and implementation

The Civil Service does not include government Ministers (who are politically appointed), members of the British Armed Forces, the police, officers of local government or NDPBs of the Houses of Parliament, employees of the National Health Service (NHS), or staff of the Royal Household.

To measure parental occupation we refer to the CSPS question asking the occupation of the respondent's main income-earning parent when they were 14.<sup>30</sup> 95% of respondents answered this question and 70% disclosed a characteristic.<sup>31</sup> Based on answers to this question we then group civil servants' parental occupation into the simplified three-class schema of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) devised by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Table 1 highlights example occupations in each of these three NS-SEC classes.

<sup>27</sup> In contrast, measures such as school type (where focus is on private school attendance) and FSM eligibility tap only fairly extreme advantage *or* disadvantage.

<sup>28</sup> See <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/measurement/>.

<sup>29</sup> Civil Service, [About us](#), Accessed March 2020.

<sup>30</sup> According to LFS data in over 80% of cases this is the occupation of the father – see Friedman and Laurison, *The class ceiling*, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> 'Disclosing a characteristic' means those selecting a response other than 'prefer not to say' or 'don't know'.



York, North Yorkshire

In the report we refer to those whose parents did 'professional or managerial' occupations as coming from 'high', 'privileged' or 'advantaged' socio-economic or class backgrounds. Those whose parents did 'intermediate' occupations we refer to as 'short-range socially mobile'. Finally, we refer to those whose parents did 'routine, semi-routine, lower supervisory and technical' occupations, or whose parents 'never worked', as coming from 'low', 'working class' or 'disadvantaged' socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>32, 33</sup>

We use the terms low SEB and working class background interchangeably because while 'socio-economic background' is the dominant term used within the Civil Service and in many organisations, this term often does not resonate with people's own experience of their background. In contrast, the term working class remains popular and, for many, an important source of identity and pride. Moreover, the term working class background is often used in Social Mobility Commission and other academic research that draws on NS-SEC categories.

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**32** We acknowledge that there is some conceptual ambiguity surrounding the meaning of these terms. However, we think these terms are useful in clarifying the relational distinction between the three origin groups we examine here, and are all widely used in academic literature on social mobility.

**33** The NS-SEC aims to differentiate positions within labour markets in terms of both their income, economic security and prospects of economic advancement, and their 'work situation'. Work situation refers primarily to location in systems of authority and control at work, although degree of autonomy at work is a secondary aspect. It distinguishes three forms of employment regulation: service relationship (where the employee renders service to the employer in return for compensation, which can be both immediate rewards (for example, salary) and long-term or prospective benefits (for example, assurances of security and career opportunities); labour contract (where the employee gives discrete amounts of labour in return for a wage calculated on the amount of work done or time worked; and intermediate (where forms of employment regulation combine aspects from both the service relationship and labour contract).

**Table 1 What occupations are in each category? (ONS National Statistics Socio-economic Classification example occupations)**

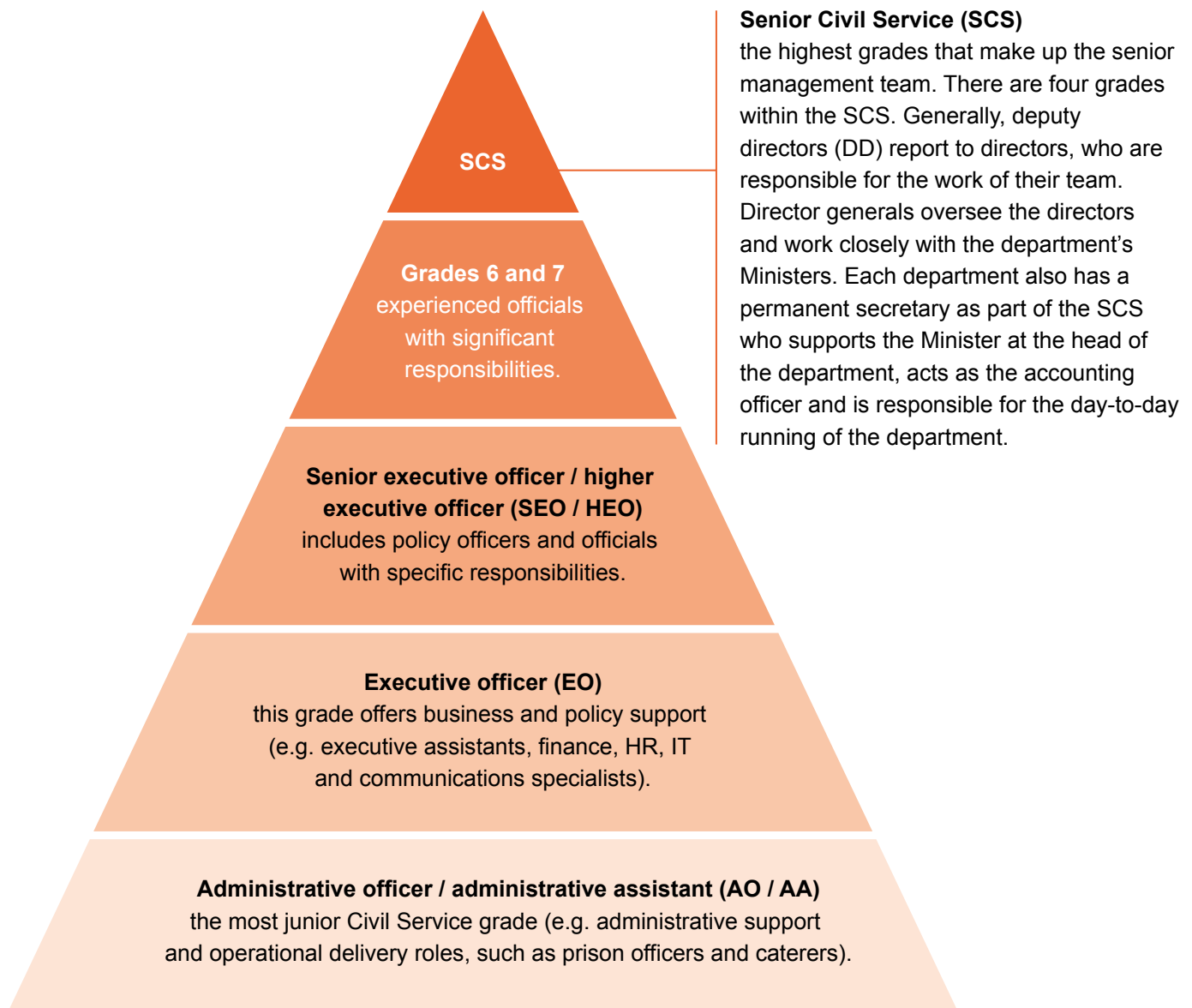
Classification	Example occupations
Professional/managerial SEB; those whose parents were in this category are referred to as ‘advantaged’, ‘privileged’ or ‘high socio-economic background’	accountant, solicitor, medical practitioner, scientist, civil/mechanical engineer, finance manager, chief executive, large business owner, teacher, nurse, physiotherapist, social worker, musician, police officer (sergeant or above), software designer, bank manager
Intermediate SEB	secretary, personal assistant, call centre agent, clerical worker, nursery nurse, small business owner (who employed less than 25 people such as: corner shop owner, small plumbing company, retail shop owner, single restaurant or cafe owner, taxi owner, garage owner)
Working class SEB; those whose parents were in this category are referred to as ‘working class’ or ‘low socio-economic background’	postal worker, machine operative, security guard, caretaker, farm worker, catering assistant, sales assistant, HGV driver, cleaner, porter, packer, labourer, waiter/waitress, bar staff, motor mechanic, plumber, printer, electrician, gardener, train driver

The second stage of the project aimed to explore civil servants’ experience of career progression and understand what barriers or enablers those from different backgrounds faced in pursuing their careers. To examine these issues we first conducted 12 preliminary interviews with social mobility stakeholders within the Civil Service before moving on to undertake 104 in-depth interviews with civil servants at Grade 7 and above in four departments – HM Treasury (HMT), HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC), Cabinet Office (CO) and Department for Transport (DfT). Departments were chosen to reflect variations in the socio-economic diversity, grade makeup and occupational specialisation across the Civil Service.<sup>34</sup>

**34** As Figure 3 shows, HMT is the most socio-economically exclusive department, HMRC is one of the most socio-economically diverse departments, and DfT and CO are ‘average’ performers, sitting in the middle of the Civil Service departments. HMT is also dominated by higher-grade civil servants and has a strong policy focus, as does CO, whereas HMRC and DfT have a strong operational focus, and HMRC employs a large percentage of civil servants at junior grades.



**Table 2** The grade structure of the Civil Service



As Table 2 illustrates, we grouped grades into five broad Civil Service categories. We chose to concentrate interviews on Grade 7 and above to keep a focus on progression into and within the Senior Civil Service, and to keep the scope of the study manageable.<sup>35</sup>

To recruit interviewees, articles asking for volunteers were placed on each of the four participating departments' intranet page. 659 civil servants from Grade 7 and above volunteered to be interviewed and from this an interview sample was constructed that was broadly representative of each department in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and region of origin. The demographic contours of the interview sample is included in the Appendix.

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that there may not be important socio-economic barriers to progression at more junior grades and, to this end, we would welcome future work examining such questions.



Interviews were conducted online between June and October 2020.

81 of the interviews were conducted by Dr Sam Friedman and 23 of them were conducted by a team of four social researchers from HMRC. The interview topic guide (see the [Appendices](#)) was structured over four sections:

- We began with a set of questions that probed interviewees' socio-economic background (using all four of the questions included in the CSPA – see Methodology).
- Second, we asked interviewees to describe their career trajectories to date, allowing them to narrate the key moments and crucial junctures in their own words.
- Third, we asked a number of more specific questions about their career, about the culture of the Civil Service and the Senior Civil Service, and whether they feel their career has been held back in any way.
- Finally, we ended each interview by briefly explaining the progression gap in the Civil Service (Figures 4 and 5), which show that the higher you progress, the less likely you are to find people from low SEBs, and we asked for their reactions and reflections on this finding.

All interviewees have been anonymised in this report and names replaced with pseudonyms.



## SECTION 1

# Understanding socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service





# How socio-economically diverse is the Civil Service?



The Cabinet Office

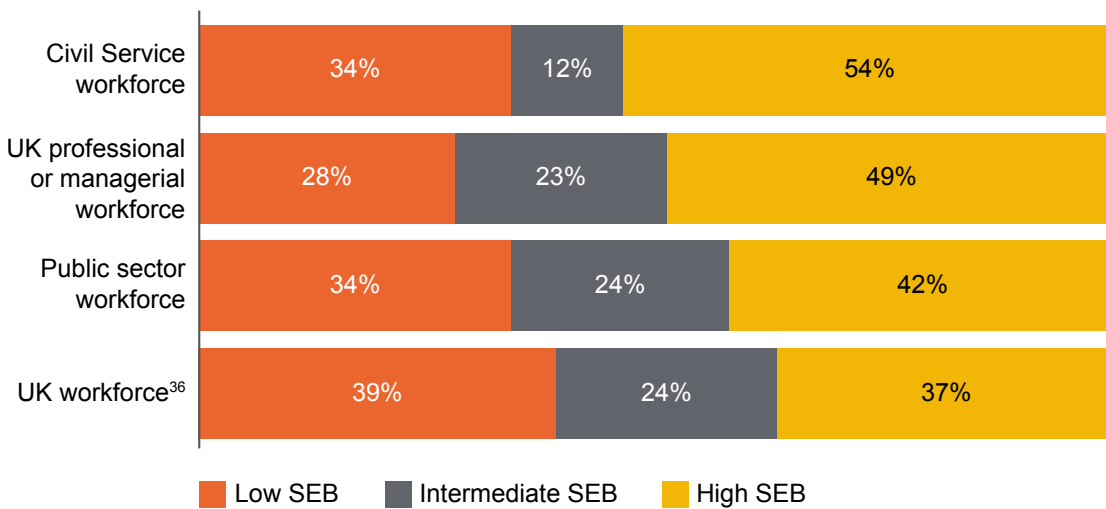
## Key findings

- People from high SEBs are significantly over-represented in the Civil Service; 54% are from high SEBs compared to 37% in the UK workforce.
- The London-based workforce is significantly less socio-economically diverse; 66% are from high SEBs compared to 41% in the north-east.
- Those from low SEBs are particularly under-represented in departments such as Treasury and DCMS, and within the policy profession.
- Even when those from lower socio-economic backgrounds ‘get in’ they struggle to ‘get on’; the Civil Service becomes more socially exclusive at every grade.



Figure 1 shows that over half of Civil Service staff are from advantaged professional or managerial backgrounds, while a third are from working class backgrounds. To place this in a comparative context, Figure 1 also shows the socio-economic makeup of the UK workforce, the public sector and those working in other professional and managerial occupations – drawing on data from the ONS Labour Force Survey.

**Figure 1 Parental occupation of civil servants, UK workforce, professional/managerial occupations and public sector**

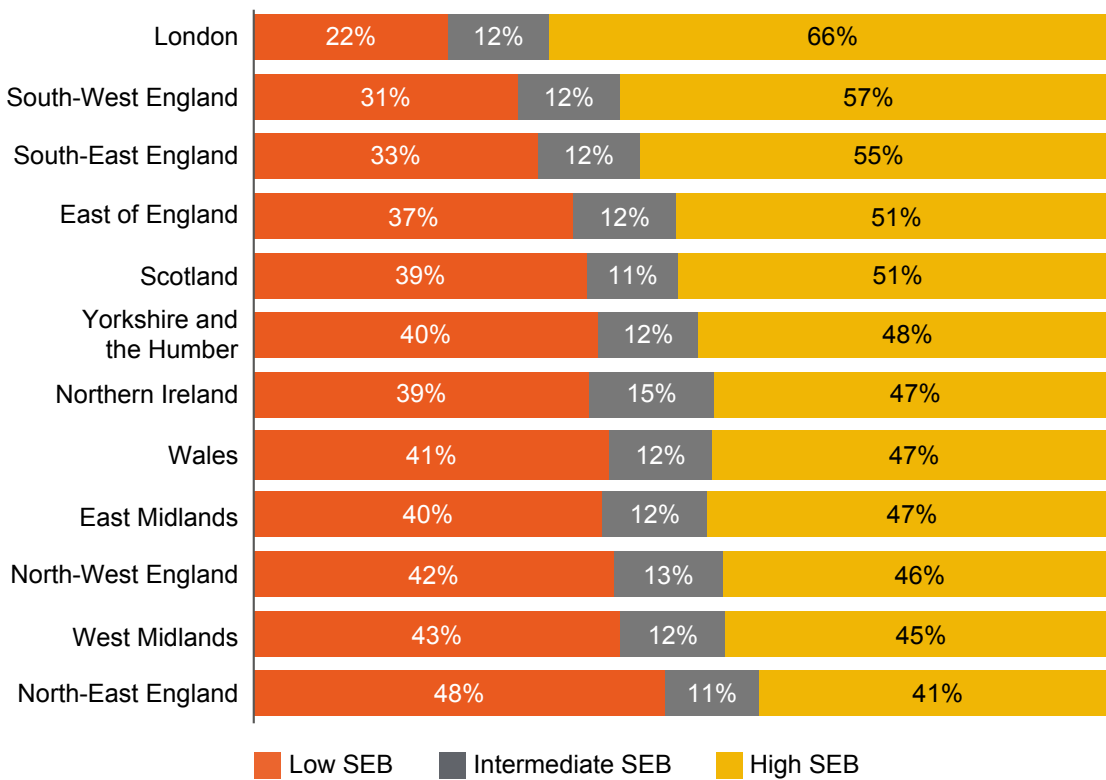


The Civil Service is more socio-economically advantaged than the UK workforce

This shows that the Civil Service has significantly more staff from high SEBs than any of these comparison groups. For example, 54% of civil servants are from advantaged professional/managerial backgrounds compared to 37% in the national workforce. The proportion of civil servants from working class backgrounds is also significantly lower than in the UK workforce.

Considering the size and complexity of the Civil Service it is important to look at how its socio-economic composition varies according to region, department, profession and grade. This more fine-grained analysis is telling. Figure 2 shows, for example, that civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly under-represented in London; only 22% are from working class backgrounds compared to 48% in the north-east. There is also a ‘north-south divide’ here, with the three most socio-economically exclusive work regions located in the south of England and two of the three most socio-economically open areas located in the north of England.

<sup>36</sup> Social Mobility Commission, Simplifying how employers measure socio-economic background: An accompanying report to new guidance, 2020 (updated 2021).

**Figure 2 Work location of civil servants by parental occupation**

London-based civil servants are significantly more socio-economically advantaged

Next we look at variation by department. Figure 3 shows that socio-economic variation is even more marked here; HM Treasury, the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport have a very low representation of staff from low SEBs – around 1 in 10 – whereas in HM Revenue & Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions their representation is similar to those from advantaged backgrounds.<sup>37</sup> This differential holds even within departments' SCS, though we note that no departments' SCS makeup is representative of the national population.<sup>38</sup>

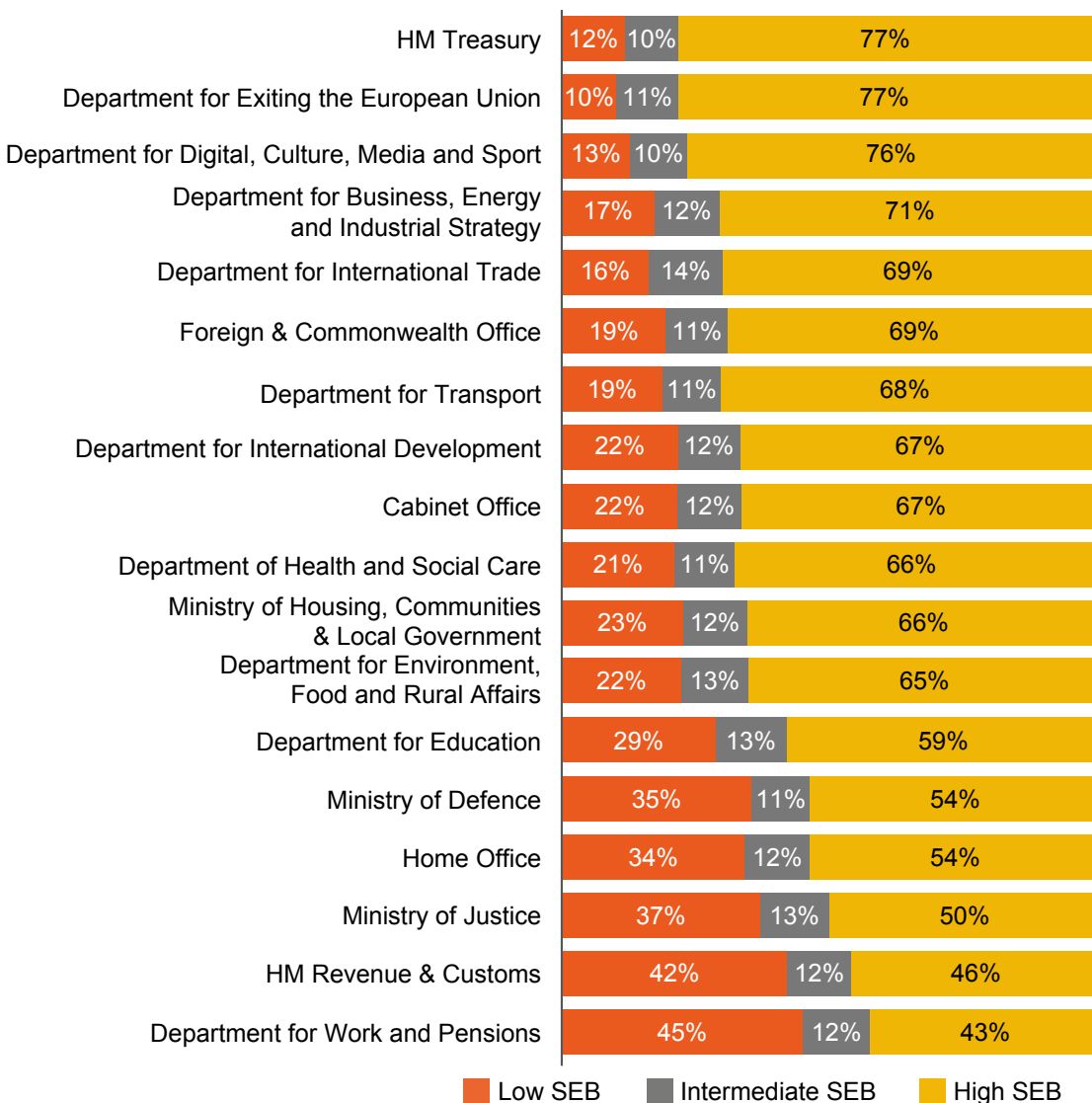
Looking at the type of school attended also shows strong departmental differences. As Appendix Figure 2 shows, 26% of Treasury staff and 22% of Foreign & Commonwealth Office staff (rising to 48% among FCO SCS) were privately educated versus just 5% in HM Revenue & Customs and 4% in the Department for Work and Pensions.

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that since the data was collected some departments, such as DEXEU, have disbanded and others, such as FCO and DFID, have merged.

<sup>38</sup> At Treasury those from high SEBs rises at SCS level to 82%.

Finally, we also see strong socio-economic variation according to whether civil servants work in policy or operational roles.<sup>39</sup> The policy profession (which represents the work area of 8% of those in the CSPS) is notably less socio-economically diverse, with 70% of staff from professional/managerial backgrounds and only 19% from working class backgrounds. In contrast, only 47% of those in operational roles (who make up 54% of the CSPS) are from high socio-economic backgrounds and 40% are from low socio-economic backgrounds. It is worth noting here that the CSPS survey team were unable to provide data on the socio-economic composition of other professions and functions due to problems in coding and self-reporting.

**Figure 3 Civil service departments by parental occupation<sup>40</sup>**



The Treasury is the most socio-economically exclusive department

<sup>39</sup> Due to problems coding which professions and functions civil servants belong to, we were unable to identify the socio-economic composition of other professions. We make recommendations on this in our accompanying Action plan on socio-economic progression for the Civil Service.

<sup>40</sup> It is important to note that since the data was collected some departments, such as DEXEU, have disbanded and others, such as FCO and DFID, have merged.

“ While many people from low SEBs secure admission into the Civil Service, they do not go on to progress in the same way as those from more advantaged backgrounds.”



## From ‘getting in’ to ‘getting on’

While these findings certainly indicate the Civil Service has a long way to go on socio-economic diversity and inclusion, it is important to note that it has devoted considerable efforts to address these issues of access and recruitment. This is understandable. Most politicians, academics, policymakers and employers tend to conceptualise social mobility as an issue of who ‘gets in’.

Yet there is a danger of reducing social mobility to the issue of access. It assumes that the impact of socio-economic background finishes at the point of occupational entry. But the reality is that while many people from low SEBs secure admission into the Civil Service, they do not go on to progress in the same way as those from more advantaged backgrounds.<sup>41</sup> Figure 4 demonstrates that the Civil Service gets consistently more socio-economically exclusive at every grade; at the lowest grade, Administrative Assistant/Officer (AA/AO), 45% of staff are from high SEBs, but this rises to 72% among senior civil servants (SCS).

<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that as well as unequal rates of progression, there may be an important relationship between socio-economic background and who leaves the Civil Service. Unfortunately, we do not have the data to examine this here, however one of our recommendations is for strengthening data in this area – see Recommendation 2.

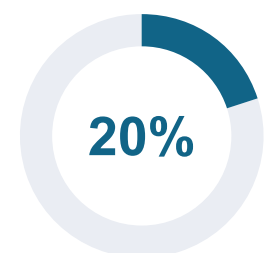


Three points of comparison are revealing here. First, in 1967, 67% of the SCS were from high socio-economic backgrounds, 10% were from intermediate backgrounds and 19% were from low socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>42</sup> Changes since 1967 in both the occupational structure of the UK and the way occupational socio-economic classes are measured mean this should not be considered a direct comparison. However, this data nonetheless indicates that the overall socio-economic origins of the SCS, and therefore the likely socio-economic feel and atmosphere of the SCS, has remained stable over time.

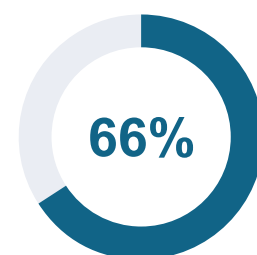
Second, the SCS is also exclusive when compared to other professions (drawing on data from the ONS Labour Force Survey); only medicine has more people from high socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> And strikingly this gap compared to other professions seems to have only increased over time. For example, in 1967, the SCS contained the same percentage of those from high socio-economic backgrounds (67%) as those employed nationally in other professional and managerial occupations. However, today the SCS looks significantly more exclusive; 72% of the SCS are from high socio-economic backgrounds versus 49% among those employed in other professional and managerial occupations (see Figure 1).

Third, the socio-economic progression gap in the Civil Service is not new. In 1967, the SCS was similarly socio-economically exclusive compared to the rest of the Civil Service. For example, those from high socio-economic backgrounds made up only 23-33% of civil servants in the lower grades or classes, and 35-36% of those in intermediate grades, versus 67% within the SCS.<sup>44</sup>

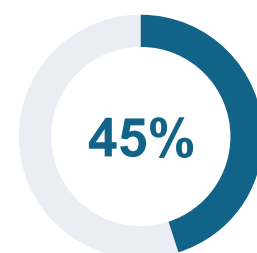
### Working in London



of all civil servants



of SCS



of G6/G7

<sup>42</sup> Halsey and Crewe look at fathers' occupation of assistant secretaries (Grade 5) and above, using the Registrar Generals Social Class schema (the precursor to NS-SEC) that distinguishes fathers in professional, managerial and technical employment, routine non-manual or white-collar work, and skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. They also report that 4% of SCS have fathers employed in occupations classed as 'other', however they do not elaborate on what types of occupation or non-employment make up this category. As the RGSC schema did not include the self-employed, we speculate that this 'other' category may include many SCS whose fathers were self-employed (Halsey, A.H and Crewe, I. M. Social Survey of the Civil Service, *The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969).

<sup>43</sup> Friedman and Laurison, *The class ceiling*, 2019; Halsey, A. H. and Crewe, I. M., Social survey of the Civil Service, *The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969.

<sup>44</sup> Halsey, A.H and Crewe, I. M. Social Survey of the Civil Service, *The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969 (p.19). Halsey and Crewe refer to lower or 'subordinate' civil service classes as 'clerical', 'scientific assistant', 'technical works' and 'draughtsman', and 'intermediate' classes as 'executive' and 'experimental officer'. They consider higher classes to be 'administrative', 'legal', 'scientific officer' and 'professional works group'. Significantly, in 1967 the 'legal' class was more socio-economically exclusive than the administrative class – 81% were from high socio-economic backgrounds. It should also be acknowledged that the SCS has grown considerably over time relative to the rest of the Civil Service. In 1967, there were 2,681 people in the 'Administrative Class' (now known as the SCS), representing the top 0.4% of the Civil Service. In 2019 the SCS had grown to 5,970, constituting the top 1.3% of the Civil Service.

It should be noted here that, due to poor reporting within the CSPS, we are unable to analyse the socio-economic composition of those employed at different grades *within* the SCS.<sup>45</sup> However, data on independent schooling indicates that the socio-economic exclusivity of the very top grades of the SCS is likely to be even more pronounced. For example, while Figure 5 shows that 25% of SCS attended an independent school, analysis in *Elitist Britain* reveals that this figure rises to 59% among permanent secretaries.<sup>46</sup> This compares to just 7% of the population who attend private school.<sup>47</sup>

These socio-economic progression effects are strongly connected to socio-economic trends by department, location and profession explored above. For example, there are far more top-grade posts located in London than elsewhere; while 20% of all civil servants work in London, the capital is home to 66% of all SCS and 45% of all G6/G7 staff, the grades just below SCS. In contrast, 12% of civil servants are based in the north-west but it houses only 3% of SCS and 7% of G6/G7 staff.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, less socio-economically diverse departments such as DCMS and Treasury tend to employ more people at senior grades, whereas those working in departments like DWP and HMRC tend to be mainly in junior roles and outside the capital.

This, in turn, is closely linked to what type of work civil servants do. Most socio-economically exclusive departments are strongly skewed towards the policy profession whereas more socially open departments tend to have a strong emphasis on operational delivery. For example, while approximately two-thirds of Treasury and half of FCO staff work in policy, at HMRC the figure is only 9% and DWP only 12%. In understanding who gets ahead in the Civil Service, then, it is important to consider the propulsive power of being in London, working in policy and in prestigious 'central' departments.

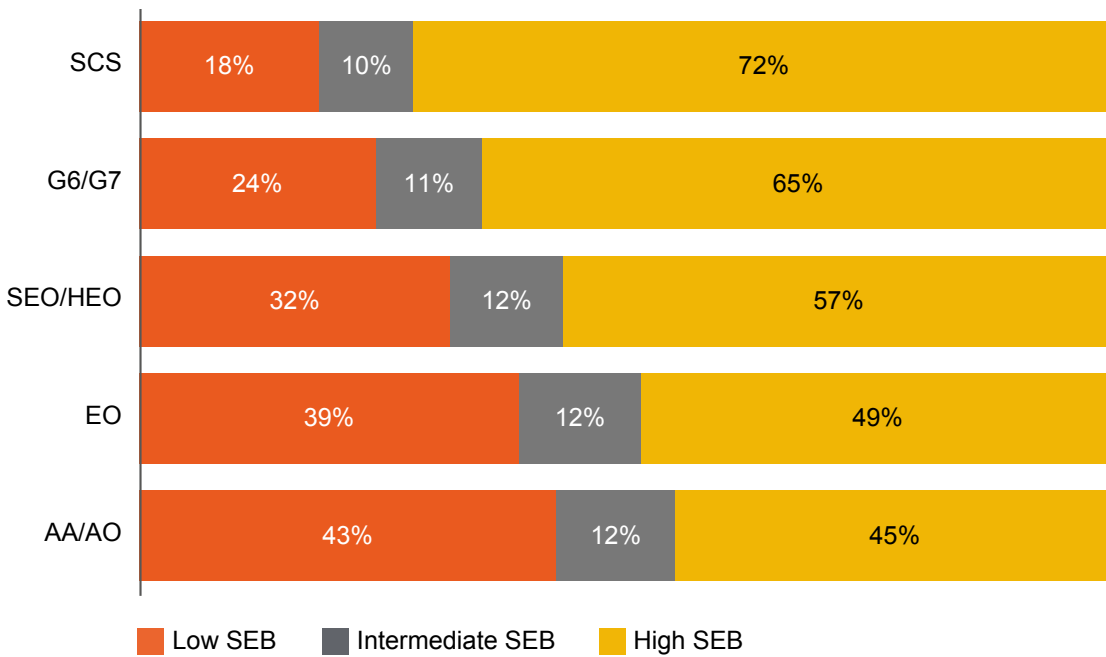
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<sup>45</sup> Some departments had answer options for SCS1, 2 and 3, whereas many only had 'SCS' as a response option – for further details on why this may be important see Barberis, P, *The elite of the elite: permanent secretaries in the British higher Civil Service*, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Social Mobility Commission and the Sutton Trust, [Elitist Britain](#), 2019.

<sup>47</sup> This figure, 7%, is the most recent figure available and been consistent for several years. Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019](#), 2019.

<sup>48</sup> These calculations were made based on the 2019 Civil Service statistics bulletin, which corresponds with the 2019 CSPS data used in this report. This indicates that of 5,970 senior civil servants in 2019, 3,920 were based in London versus 190 in the north-west and of 50,290 G6/7 civil servants, 22,720 were based on London versus 3,380 in the north-west (Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Statistics 2019*, 2019).

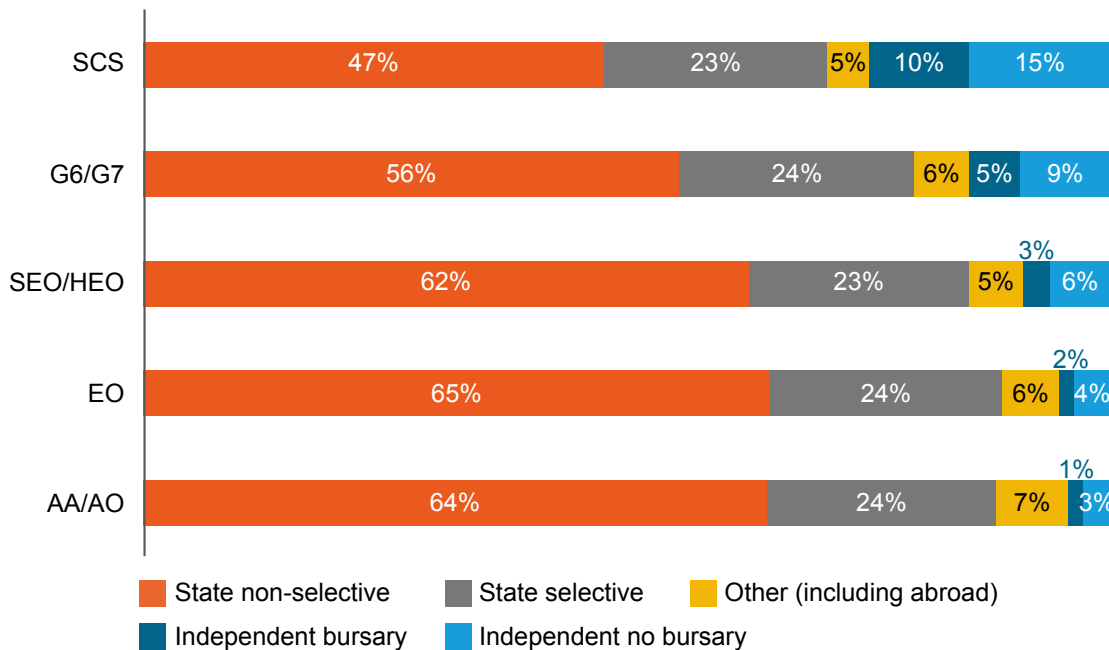
**Figure 4 Civil service grades by parental occupation**

The Civil Service gets more socio-economically exclusive at every grade

Significantly, this progression gap by socio-economic background is also clear when analysing other socio-economic background measures in the CSPS. To provide one example (others are included in Appendix), Figure 5 shows the schooling type of civil servants at different grades. It shows that while only 4% of AA/AO staff were privately educated, the figure among SCS is 25%.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, while 56% of AA/AO staff have parents educated below degree level, this falls to only 33% among the SCS (Appendix 1). Whatever way you measure it, then, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are severely under-represented at the upper echelons of the Civil Service.

<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that the percentage of SCS who are privately educated has decreased over time. In 1967, for example, 37% of the SCS were privately educated (Halsey, A.H and Crewe, I, M. *Social Survey of the Civil Service, The Civil Service* 3(1), 1969, p.25).

**Figure 5 Civil Service grade by type of school attended between ages 11–16 in 2019 Civil Service People Survey**



There is also a socio-economic progression gap by school type

## From ceiling to labyrinth

Figures 4 and 5 indicate that the Civil Service becomes more socio-economically exclusive as staff progress through the grades. Significantly, however, our data is not able to detect a ‘class ceiling’; even within the SCS nearly one in five are from low socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>50</sup> Ceiling metaphors imply an absolute barrier at the top of organisations, while at the same time suggesting that access to mid-level positions is fair and open. This does not accurately describe the socio-economic profile of the Civil Service. Not only is there a socio-economic gap at nearly every grade but more generally a single, unvarying obstacle fails to convey the variety and complexity of challenges that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds face in their career progression.

Instead our analysis suggests that a more useful metaphor is the idea of the Civil Service as a labyrinth.<sup>51</sup> This captures both the tremendous size

<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting again here that a ceiling may still exist *within* the SCS. As mentioned, due to poor reporting within the CSPS, we are unable to see the socio-economic composition of the five grades that exist within the SCS.

<sup>51</sup> Here we draw on the influential conceptual framing provided by Eagly, A and Carli, L. *Women and the labyrinth of leadership*, 2007. They argue that the labyrinth is a better metaphor than glass ceiling to capture the barriers women face in reaching leadership positions in elite occupations in the US. They note: ‘as a contemporary symbol, [the labyrinth] conveys the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for... for women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected... the metaphor acknowledges obstacles but is not ultimately discouraging.’





The Gurkha Staircase, inside the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

and complexity of the Civil Service, where *all* individuals must navigate an elaborate maze to reach the prize at the centre: a leadership position. And like a labyrinth, our participants explain that progression within the Civil Service is not simple or direct. While there is a viable route to the centre, this route is hidden to most. There is thus a formal set of rules around progression and an informal or unwritten set of guidelines:

“Very little of it is explicit, there’s a lot of implicit stuff. So, obviously there’s formal processes and, you know, the Civil Service bureaucracy is your friend on social mobility to some extent. Like there’s a bigger paper trail on promotions than I’ve seen elsewhere. But it’s about the extent to which that’s actually driving decisions rather than just sort of collecting paper. Because lots of people beaver away doing the competencies, you know, trying to tick each box. And sort of miss the bigger picture of, actually, can you spot the hidden rules? Or do you know people who can help you decode them?”

— Mark,<sup>52</sup> Director, low SEB

As Mark underlines here, an important theme that emerged in interviews was that while ‘formal’ Civil Service processes tend to be highly sensitive to issues of equity, it is the hidden rules that tend to ‘drive’ promotion decisions. And, as we explore in the next chapter, it is in unpicking these hidden rules where those from lower socio-economic backgrounds face the strongest barriers, and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds have the greatest advantages.

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<sup>52</sup> All names are pseudonyms to preserve participant anonymity.

## SECTION 2

# Barriers to progression

Unpicking the (hidden) rules of the game





## 2.1

# ‘Accelerator roles’ and organisational guides



## Key findings

- Certain Civil Service jobs help to facilitate fast-track progression, such as working in private office, in ‘central’ departments, running a bill team, securing a leading role during a national crisis, or as a Minister’s private secretary.
- Awareness of such ‘accelerator’ roles is contingent on access to either senior ‘guides’ or networks such as the Fast Stream, which provide invaluable knowledge about how the Civil Service works and how best to navigate it.
- Guide relationships are often forged on the basis of cultural similarity and, as senior staff are disproportionately from advantaged backgrounds, this advantages high SEB staff.

Career progression in many industries is strongly tied to securing access to valuable work; jobs that provide exposure to senior gatekeepers or high-profile projects. The Civil Service is no different. Indeed one of the most powerful ‘unwritten’ rules within the CS is that if one can secure access to certain early or mid-career jobs, this will precipitate fast-track career progression:

“So, my sense from quite early on was that there was a secret code as to how to get on. There were these folk that worked in the Treasury, had done certain things... they knew about ‘the velvet drainpipe’, as you hear it described. The way up and through. And they’d clearly done it, and they had a language to speak about it.”

— Aaron, Director, high SEB

Interviewees pointed to five types of ‘accelerator roles’:

- first, an early posting in a private office
- second, significant experience in a ‘central department’ like Treasury or within high-prized areas of Cabinet Office such as Number 10 or the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat (EDS)
- third, running a bill team<sup>53</sup>
- fourth, securing a leading role during a national crisis
- fifth, an ‘ultra pipeline job’ such as a private secretary for a prominent Minister<sup>54</sup>

These roles, interviewees explained, not only provide experience on high-profile projects, teams or workstreams, but also expose individuals to a range of skills in a short timeframe and ensure ‘face-time’ with Ministers, special advisers and high-ranking SCS staff. These individuals in turn often act as gatekeepers for future progression opportunities.

Significantly, accumulating these sort of accelerator roles was connected to a particular pathway or track through the Civil Service – what Aaron and others called ‘the velvet drainpipe.’<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> All Government Bills originate in departments and have a bill team of civil servants assigned to oversee the drafting and passage of the Bill, as supervised by the sponsoring Minister. Draft Bills also have Bill teams, who tend to participate in the pre-legislative scrutiny process in Parliament.

<sup>54</sup> Each Minister typically has a small group (2–6) of civil servants (‘private secretaries’) who support their daily work.

<sup>55</sup> According to Hennessy ‘the velvet drainpipe’ was first discussed in public by Lord Bernard Donoghue in a television interview in 1987, and described the ‘gilded funnel through which a smooth arts-educated elite from the public schools’ move into the Fast Stream and subsequent valuable postings. Hennessy describes this as the ‘cloning mechanism’ by which the SCS ‘reproduces itself generation after generation’ (see Hennessy, Whitehall, 1989: 513).



“You look at [...] the sort of greats, and they’ve all been Cabinet Office, Treasury, private offices and just sort of bounced round a very narrow thing.”



Her Majesty's Treasury

### How we define departments

In this report, we call ‘central’ departments those with oversight and central coordinating remits: Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and Number 10. These departments have levers of influence and strategic control over other departments and thus act as important ‘gateways’ for progression.

The existence of accelerator roles runs counter to formal guidance on progression in the Civil Service. Here the emphasis is on building ‘success profiles’ by accumulating a wide variety of skills in different areas.<sup>56</sup> Of course this is still important for general Civil Service progression, but interviewees stressed that for those aiming to reach the SCS, and particularly the upper grades of SCS, a narrower trajectory was prized:

“There’s sort of the official mantra which is, you know, do some operational work, do some policy, do something in a region. But in fact, you look at [mentions three permanent secretaries] and, you know, the sort of greats, and they’ve all been Cabinet Office, Treasury, private offices and just sort of bounced round a very narrow thing.”

— Peter, Deputy Director (DD), high SEB

What is striking about discussions of these fast-tracked or ‘back-door’ trajectories is that they were rarely articulated by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These interviewees often expressed

<sup>56</sup> Civil Service Success Profiles framework ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/717279/Success\\_Profiles\\_Overview\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/717279/Success_Profiles_Overview_2018.pdf)).

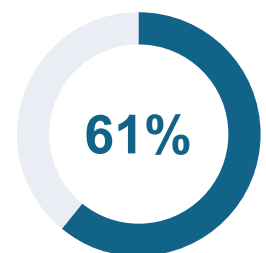
a vague sense that there were more valuable jobs or departments – an ‘unofficial tick-box CV’, as Laura (Grade 7, low SEB) put it – but they were rarely able to elaborate on the details. In contrast, those we interviewed from high socio-economic backgrounds were often not only consciously pursuing such tracks but talked at length about targeting these roles as part of their career plan. For example, Rina (Grade 6, high SEB) explained that her ‘move into Treasury was very intentional... my plan was always to get more high-profile roles in the department with a view to going into the centre’, while Tony (DD, high SEB) acknowledged that he manoeuvred into private office in ‘a very calculated way’ because it’s a ‘stepping-stone’ or, as Roisin (Grade 6, high SEB) explained, it provides opportunities to ‘engineer situations which will help a Minister need interaction with me.’

There is also indirect evidence of these different career tracks in the CSPS data. Those from low socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely to have been in their current job, organisation and the Civil Service, for longer than those from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. For example, among civil servants who have been in their current job for under six months, 61% are from high socio-economically backgrounds whereas they make up only 44% of those who have been in the same job for the last 20 years. The implication could be that people from low SEBs are more likely to stay in post and not progress.

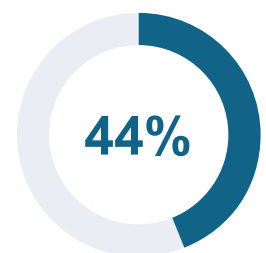
But why is awareness and understanding of these ‘hidden’ career tracks so stratified by socio-economic background? Our interviews indicated that this is largely about who knows about such pathways: who has access to valuable informal information. This kind of tacit knowledge is rarely written down but acquired through workplace communication with colleagues who have the know-how. Many interviewees explained that one environment where this information circulates, and is widely shared, is the Fast Stream – which is dominated by those from high SEBs.<sup>57</sup>

Yet most important were relationships with senior colleagues. These individuals acted as *organisational guides*, imparting informal information and helping civil servants to navigate the hidden rules of the labyrinth.<sup>58</sup>

For example, Jim (Director, high SEB), explained how a senior colleague had been instrumental in convincing him to take a role in Cabinet Office when he had wanted to continue at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural



High SEBs in their current job for under six months

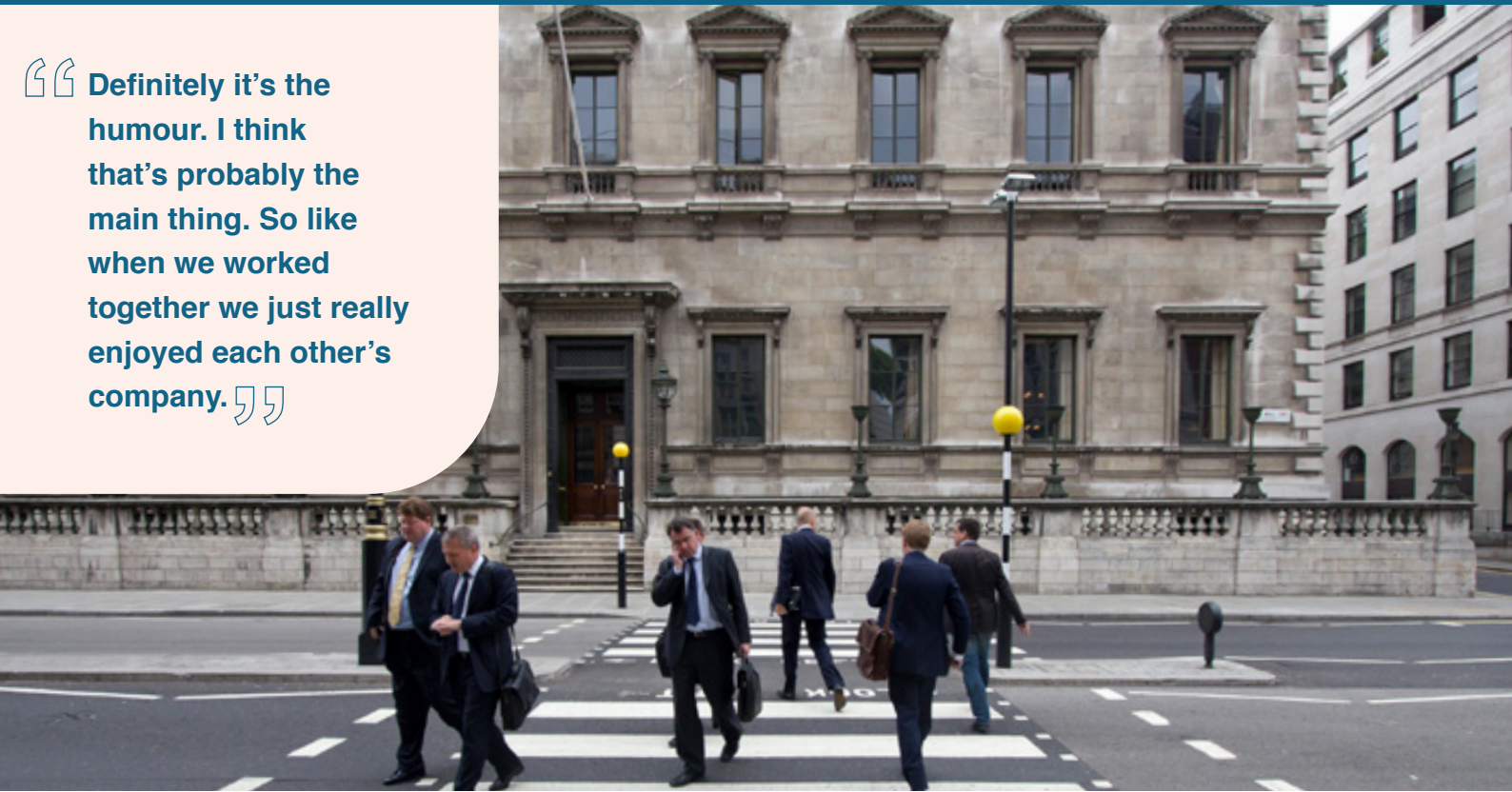


High SEBs in the same job for the last 20 years

<sup>57</sup> Cabinet Office, [Socio-economic diversity in the Fast Stream: the Bridge report](#), 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Guides are somewhat different to sponsors, described in previous work (see Friedman and Laurison, *The class ceiling*, 2020). In particular, guides do not have the same ability as sponsors to circumvent formal progression procedures to fast-track their sponsees.

“Definitely it’s the humour. I think that’s probably the main thing. So like when we worked together we just really enjoyed each other’s company.”



Pall Mall

Affairs. ‘I was just thinking about the work I enjoyed, but I don’t think I quite understood how important that advice was in terms of getting into the centre, and actually... probably getting to where I am now’.

Significantly, these ‘guide’ relationships rarely hinged on work. Instead, they were almost always established in the first instance based on a sense of cultural connection or affinity – shared leisure pursuits, shared tastes and shared humour. As Jim went on to explain: ‘Definitely it’s the humour. I think that’s probably the main thing. So like when we worked together we just really enjoyed each other’s company’.

Discovering such similarities was often described as a ‘spark’ that helped to forge and then sustain guide relationships, acting as a powerful glue and facilitating a sense of trust and bonding. However, research has long established a clear relationship between socio-economic background and such tastes, interests and lifestyles.<sup>59</sup> In this way, as guides tend to be senior and therefore themselves disproportionately from high SEBs (see Figures 4 and 5), the valuable guidance they impart tends to benefit those from advantaged backgrounds.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Sociologists call this dynamic ‘homophily’ or the tendency for people to be attracted to, and build relationships more easily with, others who are similar in terms of racial identity, gender and/or class background (see Rivera, L. Pedigree, 2016; McPherson, M et al, Birds of a feather: homophily in social networks, 2001).

<sup>60</sup> It is worth noting that such homophilous guide relationships were sometimes also forged among senior and junior colleagues from low socio-economic backgrounds, and often with the explicit aim of promoting social mobility.

## 2.2

# Exploiting organisational ambiguity



## Key findings

- Civil servants seeking advancement of grade or salary routinely face situations where formal guidance on behaviour is unclear.
- These ‘grey areas’ include interactions with hiring managers, requests for promotion, threats to leave, and embellishing job applications.
- Those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to use the ambiguity of these ‘interpretative moments’ to negotiate promotion opportunities.
- In contrast, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds generally express confusion and uncertainty, as well as a sense of ethical or moral discomfort.



In the pursuit of career progression, civil servants routinely face situations where formal guidance on action or behaviour is unclear. These instances, which likely apply in many organisations, represent distinct ‘interpretative moments’ where it is up to the individual to decide what actions are appropriate.<sup>61</sup> Examples of such ‘grey areas’ include interactions with hiring managers, requests for promotion and temporary promotion, threats to leave, and embellishing job applications – all of which, as we explain below, were frequently mentioned during interviews. In these instances, where expectations are unclear, those from different socio-economic backgrounds react very differently. Those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to use these scenarios to negotiate promotion opportunities, whereas those from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to react more cautiously, expressing either ethical discomfort or rejecting such practices.

The most prevalent ‘interpretative moment’ that civil servants must negotiate is communication with hiring managers or senior civil servants when applying for a job, or when speculatively enquiring about future job opportunities. Approaches to this varied widely. Among many we spoke to, and particularly among those from higher socio-economic backgrounds, the first step is to reach out via email or phone and then organise a time to talk in-person. These are commonly known as ‘fireside chats’ or, as Jim (Director, high SEB) put it, ‘pre-interview interviews’. All interviewees agreed they had an important bearing on progression prospects. This was partly because they give people the opportunity to gain more specific information about what hiring managers are looking for from candidates. But most acknowledged that such exchanges were about more than just information gathering; they were an opportunity to ingratiate, to ‘sell yourself’ to an important gatekeeper:



These instances represent distinct ‘interpretative moments’ where it is up to the individual to decide what actions are appropriate.

“Interviews are so formal, you can’t move from the questions, so I do think [fireside chats] sometimes have that self-promotion function. So I would probably find a relatively casual way to mention some relevant previous experience. But it works less well when someone’s on sell. Like it’s meant to be like a relatively quick, light interaction.”  
— Olivia, DD, high SEB

“Yeah, I will certainly be trying to, like, leave that positive impression... be charming... and I would certainly try and agree with as much as, you know, was appropriate, but not too much... you don’t want to be a sycophant.”  
— Aarash, Grade 6, high SEB

<sup>61</sup> Calarco J, Negotiating opportunities, 2018.

As these accounts demonstrate, ingratiation is key to ‘fireside chats’ but at the same time must be carefully veiled: ‘You don’t want to be a sycophant’, as Aarash explains. Similar dynamics were described in other important areas of ambiguity, such as requests for promotion or threats to leave. Here interviewees would describe lobbying their line manager on the basis that their current workload or level of responsibility warranted a promotion, or signalling to a line manager that they are a ‘flight risk’ looking for other jobs.

A final area of ambiguity concerns the application and interview process for new jobs. Here civil servants are asked to provide detailed examples of previous experience that demonstrate how they align to key ‘behaviours’ that underpin ‘success profiles’. The issue here, according to many, is that hiring managers do not verify the content. This means staff are free to embellish aspects of their application:

“Under the, sort of, standard interview system, you turn up and get asked, like, four questions, and you deliver a long spiel about each and it doesn’t need to have any bearing to reality. Like, I’m pretty sure I could walk in, say something completely fictional that happened to somebody else, and it wouldn’t matter, so long as I did it convincingly. And you certainly get into a position where somebody like me, who is relatively inexperienced but can massage the narrative is in a much better position than somebody who’s got 10 years of experience but does not talk the talk.”

— *Stuart, DD, high SEB*

Again it was those from high socio-economic backgrounds who had most often exploited the ambiguity of interpretative moments to broker opportunities. This was typically presented as simply an expression of assertive or strategic thinking:

“I think there is a thing here that, actually, if you don’t ask you don’t get. And some people sit in the Civil Service and do what they’re told. And you know that’s fine but you’ve got to realise you’ve got to look after yourself and play, a certain amount, play the game.”

— *Owen, Director, high SEB*



#### Hiring

managers do not necessarily verify the content of applications.

This means staff are free to embellish details.

“ I find the whole idea that someone needs to talk to the right people, and it’s not enough that I do a good job, really really hard.”



In contrast, those from working class backgrounds typically approached interpretative moments with caution. They were often confused about what constituted acceptable behaviour and expressed discomfort with the ethics of more strategic approaches:

“ I find it morally really difficult, because I want to do well because I deserve to do well. And I find the whole idea that someone needs to talk to the right people, and it’s not enough that I do a good job, really really hard.”  
— Jo, Grade 6, low SEB

As Jo’s account illustrates, low SEB interviewees tended to register strong objections to manoeuvring strategically. First, such actions were seen as interpersonally ‘false’ and involved hiding calculated, self-interested motives; second, they were seen as unfair, rewarding those willing to circumvent formal procedures and ‘sell themselves’; and third, there was a strong sense that such behaviour did not constitute ‘proper work’. Significantly, many traced their objections back to values inculcated during their upbringing:<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> This finding is supported by other studies showing those from low SEBs are less willing to ‘play politics’ at work and less likely to put themselves up for promotion unless they perceive it to be in the interests of others (Belmi, P., & Laurin, K. Who wants to get to the top? Class and lay theories about power, 2016; Stern, I and Westphal, J. Stealthy footsteps to the boardroom: executives’ backgrounds, sophisticated interpersonal influence behavior, and board appointments, 2010).

“ So it’s kind of something that’s instilled into you, that hard work pays off; I come from that background of, I’ll go in and do my job, do my job exceptionally well, that will get recognised and I will get a promotion on that. But then you get to Grade 7, 6, SCS, up there, and it becomes, ‘this will put you on his/her radar’, ‘let them know your face’, ‘let them know you’re interested in doing this’, and I just have to overcome this internal resistance that somehow it’s cheating... I mean my dad worked as a mechanic and you don’t schmooze as a mechanic, you spend eight hours underneath a massive lorry, come out covered in oil and go home, do you know what I mean? (laughs). ”

— *Samantha, Grade 6, low SEB*

Our intention here is not to adjudicate between these different interpretations of organisational ambiguity.<sup>63</sup> What we show here is simply that how people act in these ‘moments’ tends to be patterned along socio-economic lines. These differing interpretations are significant because, at present, with formal expectations unclear and unwritten, this organisational ambiguity works to unfairly advantage the career progression of those from more privileged backgrounds. Not only are their actions more strategically orientated toward progression but, according to our interviews, tend to be valued higher by those in gatekeeping positions. Senior SCS staff we interviewed, for example, described such behaviour as demonstrating ‘initiative’, ‘drive’, and ‘ambition’. Thus until the Civil Service is more explicit on what constitutes good practice in these areas, this ambiguity will continue to act as a significant barrier for many from lower socio-economic backgrounds and will limit the Civil Service’s talent pool.

As Donald observes:

“ I certainly feel we could be much clearer about how decisions are made and what information is necessary. But I think a lot of it is, people have an interest in keeping these decisions in a grey area because they know how to operate in that grey area. And they sort of figure that other people don’t... ”

— *Donald, Director, intermediate SEB*

<sup>63</sup> However, it is worth noting that some studies have argued that the assertive and ‘overconfident’ approach of those from high SEBs is often mistaken for intelligence and their subsequent over-reward has negative consequences for organisations (Belmi. P. et al, The social advantage of miscalibrated individuals: the relationship between social class and overconfidence and its implications for class-based inequality, 2019).



## 2.3

# The London vortex and the 'Whitehall effect'



LONDON

## Key findings

- There are more top-grade posts available in London and proximity to Ministers is critical for increasing one's 'visibility' and progression prospects within the Civil Service.
- The central departments (HM Treasury, Number 10 and Cabinet Office) are predominantly staffed by London-based civil servants; however, the ability to access a London 'career track' is stratified by socio-economic background.
- Those from working class backgrounds (who grow up outside of London) tend to 'sort' into regional positions because:
  1. They lack family economic resources to migrate to London
  2. They have cultural and familial reasons for wanting to stay where they grew up.
- This has significant implications for 'Places for Growth,' the Civil Service's programme to move more positions outside of London and into the regions.

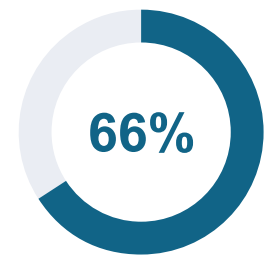
The hidden rules of progression in the Civil Service do not just revolve around who you know and what you do but also where you work. As illustrated in Figure 3, while the workforce looks fairly similar in most parts of the UK, those working in London are significantly more likely to be from advantaged backgrounds. This spatial divide has important ramifications for career progression. For example, it is well-known that there are far more top-grade posts located in London. For example, 66% of all senior civil servants and 45% of all G6/G7 staff are based in the capital compared to 3% and 7%, respectively, in the north-west.<sup>64, 65</sup>

Yet the importance of London is not just about the absolute number of senior posts available. It is also about what many called the ‘Whitehall effect’. Central to this phenomenon is the tyranny of the division bell; Parliamentary votes must be made in person, Ministers need to be located within easy access of the House of Commons and, as such, Whitehall has evolved to provide offices nearby.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Cabinet meetings are held in Number 10 and require Ministers to be physically present.

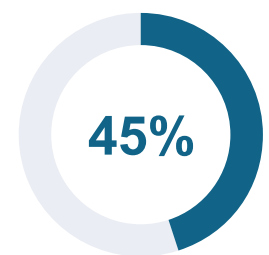
Proximity to Whitehall, therefore, is critical for increasing one’s ‘visibility’ within the Civil Service – particularly among senior civil servants and Ministers. Face-to-face communication was seen as critical here – with meetings easier to set up and rapport easier to build.

Unlike the other unwritten rules of progression explored so far, most civil servants we spoke to were fully aware of the Whitehall effect. However, their ability to access this accelerating London ‘career track’ was stratified significantly by socio-economic background. Interviews suggest this is often about patterns of domestic migration, particularly among those joining at higher grades, with migrants to top-grade posts in London disproportionately likely to be from privileged backgrounds. We find that civil servants from lower socio-economic backgrounds are much less likely to have the familial financial support to migrate to London to take up career opportunities, and often have important cultural and familial reasons for wanting to stay in the areas they grew up. For example, many described having a strong connection to their hometown, with family roots in the area spanning generations, a good quality of life, and important emotional ties. Family connections also produced practical reasons for staying, particularly among parents with young children

Based  
in London

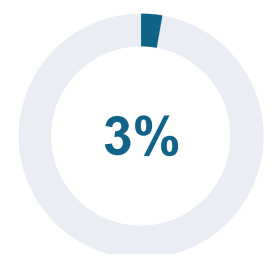


of SCS

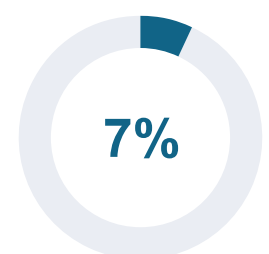


of G6/G7

Based in the  
north-west



of SCS



of G6/G7

<sup>64</sup> Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics 2019, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> London accounts for 20% of all civil servants versus 13% in the north-west – see Institute for Government, Whitehall monitor 2020, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> The division bell is the bell that signifies Members should get to the floor of Parliament to take a vote.

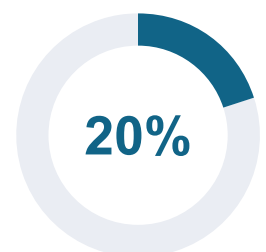
“ Proximity to Whitehall, therefore, is critical for increasing one’s ‘visibility’ within the Civil Service – particularly among senior civil servants and Ministers. ”



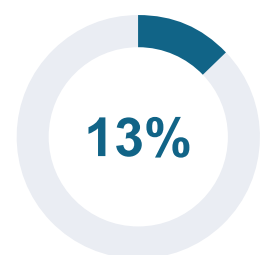
who worried that moving would disrupt the lives of their children or who drew on family to mitigate childcare costs, or who cared for elderly relatives.<sup>67</sup>

Trajectories began to diverge, in particular, as interviewees entered the Civil Service or during the first part of their careers. While many from high SEBs had straightforwardly sorted into roles in London, many from low SEBs recalled making explicit decisions not to apply for roles in the capital. Instead they opted for (often less high-profile) roles in regional offices. Significantly this was often a reluctant decision, based on concerns about negotiating high living (and particularly housing) costs in the capital or lacking the financial resources to bring up a family.

Shaun’s story illustrated this bind. Now in his early 40s, Shaun (low SEB) had spent 15 years progressing swiftly from AO to Grade 6 in the north-west, where he was from. He was keen to progress further but with only one long-serving SCS in his office, he knew this meant a move to London. This, however, was something he said ‘would never be financially viable’ and also did not appeal for cultural and familial reasons. Shaun described a strong



of civil servants work in London



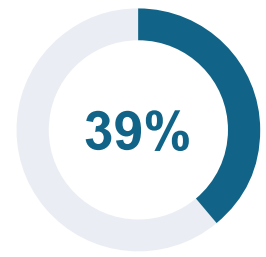
of civil servants work in the north-west

<sup>67</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [Internal migration and social mobility: moving out to move on](#), 2020.

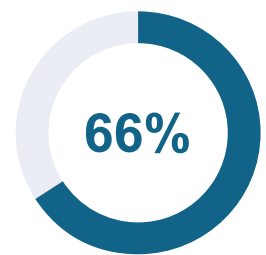
sense of connection to the area he had been brought up in, and now worked, in terms of the local community and relationships with extended family: ‘It’s frustrating because I would like to push on but the risks are just too high – why would I disrupt my whole family just for a promotion?’.

Notably, these findings accord strongly with recent research showing that 75% of those who move to London to access higher professional and managerial backgrounds are from advantaged backgrounds, and recent SMC work exploring the myriad practical, financial and emotional reasons why people may not want to ‘move out to move on’.<sup>68, 69</sup> Moreover, this migration effect is also supported by research showing that the socio-economic composition of London civil servants skews strongly to those from advantaged backgrounds when compared to those working in the capital who originate from London.<sup>70</sup> This shows that those from working class backgrounds, even when they’re brought up in the capital, may similarly struggle to access the coveted Civil Service London career track.

The announcement in the March 2020 budget that the government would move 22,000 civil servants out of London and into the regions is welcome to address some of the findings mentioned above. However, how this is accomplished is critical. Without proper consideration of job functions, grade levels, specific departments or accelerator roles moving out, it risks concentrating those from higher SEBs even further in London.<sup>71</sup>



All Londoners from from professional or managerial backgrounds



London-based civil servants from professional or managerial backgrounds

<sup>68</sup> Sutton Trust, [Elites in the UK: pulling away?](#), 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [Internal migration and social mobility: moving out to move on](#), 2020.

<sup>70</sup> 39% of Londoners are from professional or managerial backgrounds versus 66% among London-based civil servants (Friedman, S. and Macmillan, L. *Is London really the engine room?*, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> HM Treasury, [March 2020 Budget speech](#), 2020.



## 2.4

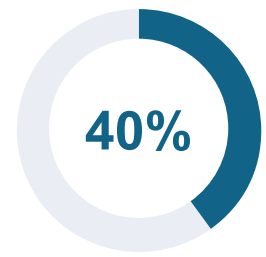
## Occupational specialisation – policy versus operational



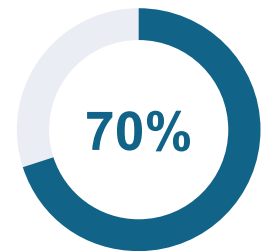
### Key findings

- Those from low SEBs often opt or 'sort' into operational career tracks which have ceilings or bottlenecks in terms of progression.
- Some join at lower grades where work is operational and therefore progress along an operational track.
- Others join at higher grades but still sort into operational roles as the skillset is seen as more transparent, tangible and meritocratic.
- The policy skillset is seen as vague and dependent on mastering behavioural codes which are not inclusive and favour those from advantaged backgrounds.

Civil servants not only opt or 'sort' into particular work locations but they also make important decisions about the type of work they want to do. Some types of specialisation are patterned strongly according to socio-economic origin. As we have already demonstrated, those from working class backgrounds are notably over-represented in operational delivery roles (40%) whereas those from more advantaged backgrounds are significantly over-represented in policy roles (70%). These divisions are strongly connected to the progression gap, as interviewees suggested that the proportion of operational versus policy roles reduces considerably at higher grades.<sup>72, 73</sup> Furthermore, policy 'generalists' have historically dominated the highest levels of the SCS.<sup>74</sup> Policy expertise, in other words, remains key to reaching the centre of the labyrinth. In this section we explain why those from low SEBs sort into operational rather than policy roles, and why this is such a strong driver of differences in progression by socio-economic background.



Low SEBs in operational roles



High SEBs in policy roles

Our interviews indicate that occupational sorting takes place in two ways. First, it is connected to the grade at which people join the Civil Service. For example, while those from high socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to enter via the Fast Stream (equivalent to HEO/SEO), those from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to join at lower grades.<sup>75</sup> At these grades, a disproportionate number of jobs are in operational delivery and therefore, when these individuals begin their career progression, they often do so along an operational track. Yet this often leads to a 'catch 22' at higher grades where these individuals must accumulate experience in different work areas in order to progress but their narrow operational experience puts them at a disadvantage (particularly relative to those on the Fast Stream) in securing such roles. This forces many to continue on operational career tracks that then have bottlenecks or ceilings.

Tracey, for example, had worked her way up at HM Revenue and Customs from EO to a G7 operational role. She has been doing the job for over six years and was keen to progress. Yet she explained that her operational skillset precluded her from applying for '90% of G6 roles that come up'.

<sup>72</sup> We sought to corroborate this using official Civil Service data but unfortunately the Civil Service was unable to give us an occupational breakdown of roles within the SCS.

<sup>73</sup> Due to problems coding which professions and functions civil servants belong to, we were unable to identify the socio-economic composition of other professions.

<sup>74</sup> [The Fulton report](#), 1968.

<sup>75</sup> 68% of those appointed to the Fast Stream in 2016 came from professional or managerial backgrounds whereas those with parents working in routine or manual occupations made up just 8% of those appointed. Bridge Group, [Socio-economic diversity in the Fast Stream](#), 2016.



But sorting also takes place among those who enter at higher grades. Among our interviewees who had joined via the Fast Stream, for example, we found that those from working class backgrounds had still been much more likely to sort into operational career tracks or explicitly sort out of policy career tracks. Yet such decisions could rarely be described as a simple matter of ‘choice’. Indeed most acknowledged the appeal of policy – the greater status, autonomy and creativity often associated with such work.

Two linked reasons were frequently given for opting not to take this path:

- 1 That the skillset required for operational roles can be more meritocratically learnt, demonstrated and evaluated, and...
- 2 Policy skills are vague and progression is dependent on mastering a set of behavioural codes that are not inclusive and tilt in favour those from advantaged backgrounds.

### Policy and operational roles

In the CSPS dataset, used here, individuals self-selected whether they belong to a range of professions, including policy and operational roles. Because of this, there is no exact definition of each. However, generally, examples could include<sup>76</sup> the following:

**Policy roles:** the policy profession designs, develops and proposes appropriate courses of action to help meet key government priorities and ministerial objectives, such as how the education and health and care system should work.

**Operational roles:** civil servants who run the front line services that citizens use, such as processing visas, passports and driving licences, and job centres.

<sup>76</sup> More information on operational and policy professions are found here: [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service-operational-delivery-profession](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service-operational-delivery-profession); [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service-policy-profession](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service-policy-profession).

Harriet, now a Director (from a low SEB), provided a useful example. After completing the Fast Stream, she explained that she deliberately turned down a number of policy roles and instead opted 'for a big operational role at [national transport hub]'. This, she said, 'felt more comfortable' and it was clearer 'what the job was about'. Later when she was a Grade 7 she was again offered a 'high-profile' policy job in tax. Again, though, she opted to stay on the operational track, telling us:

“Policy work is so ambiguous it's really hard to know who is good and who isn't, and yeah [in Fast Stream policy roles] I learnt the ropes of how you get things done in a central department, but the stuff I've always enjoyed more is where you can see a tangible output, and yeah I think that probably comes to what I was used to as a kid, people did stuff, they made something, produced something.”

— Harriet, Director, low SEB

Others echoed this idea that the skillset was more transparent and demonstrable in operational roles, and that progression was accordingly more 'meritocratic' in large operational departments like HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP):

“In HMRC – there is no hiding place. You definitely, in terms of operational, if you are getting promotion, it is very unusual to think, well, how did that happen? People have to earn their stripes.”

— Geoff, Grade 6, intermediate SEB

In contrast most interviewees agreed, regardless of background, that the knowledge and skills required in policy were more ambiguous. Of course policy work demands many tangible skills – the ability to synthesise information, to interpret evidence, solve problems creatively, work to tight deadlines, and write concisely and coherently. However, most acknowledged that the essence of policy work is demonstrating 'good judgement' in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity:

“Ambiguity is a really good word, being comfortable with it, being able to exist in it. And it all comes down to good judgement in a way. So, there's judgement in the information you gather. There's judgement in how you put it together and in how you present it. And then at certain times it's a selling point, or a persuading point. There's no point coming up with the best option if no one agrees with you.”

— Bill, Director, high SEB

As Bill notes here, the inherent uncertainty of policy work (where no-one can foretell the success of a particular decision) places a heightened emphasis on



The skillset 'is seen as more transparent and demonstrable in operational roles.



nurturing an image of competency, of cultivating a belief – especially among Ministers – in one’s ‘good judgement’ and expertise. Thus there is a particular premium in policy on being able to perform – to conform to what Ministers and SCS expect a policy ‘mandarin’ to look, sound and speak like – because this functions as an act of ‘persuasion’, a proxy for good judgement or high-quality advice that is difficult to definitely demonstrate in the moment:

“ I think actually distinguishing between perfectly fine performers and excellent performers can be very difficult [in policy]. And you probably do use self-presentation as a proxy, like when I was in that meeting with them, were they pushing? Were they articulating it?”  
 — Joy, Director, high SEB

In the policy environment, then, the success of the final product is inherently uncertain and therefore the expertise of the professional is particularly subjective and contestable. What is often deployed to plug this uncertainty, our interviews suggest, is a certain performance of competence that is strongly connected to self-presentational cues associated with an advantaged socio-economic background.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, a number of interviewees from advantaged backgrounds acknowledged this connection between ambiguity, performance and privilege:

“ The answer may not be perfect, we may not have the evidence, but I feel quite comfortable that we’ve done the best job we can. And I think that’s probably linked to a sort of inherent sense that, you know, a feeling of comfort in the setting. And I think Ministers probably feel more comfortable hearing uncertainty from someone like me than they would from someone who, you know, is a younger, Muslim, working class woman.”  
 — Miles, DD, high SEB

Miles’ view here was shared by many; that those working in policy tend to feel more comfortable (whether consciously or not) hearing uncertainty – in terms of policy proposals or outcomes – from people that look, sound and speak a certain way. This is important, in relation to socio-economic diversity, because it links strongly to the mastery of behavioural codes which we explore in the following section.

<sup>77</sup> Ashley found similar effects in ‘front-office’ roles in investment banking where there is ‘heightened ambiguity of knowledge’ (Social Mobility Commission, [Socio-economic diversity in life sciences and investment banking](#), 2015).

## 2.5

# Dominant behavioural codes: studied neutrality and the ideal civil servant



## Key findings

- The key behavioural code at the top-grades of the Civil Service revolves around mastery of ‘studied neutrality’.
- This incorporates a particular RP accent and style of speech, an emotionally detached and understated self-presentation, and an intellectual orientation to culture and politics that foregrounds the display of in-depth knowledge for its own sake.
- Interviewees agree that studied neutrality is weakly correlated to performance or ability yet remains an important aspect of perceived ‘fit’.
- Those from low socio-economic backgrounds find this code alienating and intimidating but one which they must assimilate in order to succeed
- Diversity and inclusion initiatives aimed at ‘increasing confidence’ ignore how dominant behavioural codes act to inhibit some people and embolden others.

This section explores how powerful behavioural codes or norms within the Civil Service act as a barrier to the inclusion and progression of those from low SEBs. Clearly, the Civil Service is too vast to talk of one uniform culture. In fact, interviewees regularly talked of multiple different ‘cultures’ – whether at the regional, departmental or professional level. However, our analysis suggests that there is a cross-cutting and unwritten behavioural code that underpins notions of ‘merit’ in prestigious central departments, prestigious professions like policy, and within the Senior Civil Service more generally. While this is likely to be weakly correlated to intelligence or ability, mastering it nonetheless plays a pivotal role in demonstrating elusive and nebulous ideas of ‘fit’.

The central principle underpinning this dominant behavioural code is the idea of neutrality. This of course has a clear and legitimate function. Civil servants answer to the government of the day rather than any one political party and therefore political neutrality is clearly critical to upholding the principle of impartial public service. However, we repeatedly heard that behavioural expectations around neutrality extend beyond political impartiality. Neutrality, instead, is valued more as an overarching disposition, a studied way of being, encompassing particular styles of speech, self-presentation, communication, even lifestyle and recreations.<sup>78</sup>

Studied neutrality has three key dimensions. First, it involves a certain package of expectations around accent and style of speech. Central here is the idea that Received Pronunciation (RP), synonymous with an advantaged background, is routinely read as a signal of ‘neutrality’:<sup>79</sup>

“There is a definite style of speaking... that kind of neutral-ish RP accent, like trying to place yourself as from nowhere... so I think most people in the SCS end up having an accent that is quite similar, at least the ones who are in the central teams, and replicate the style, the rhythms... there is a kind of go-to neutrality, same voice, same accent. And it is very like: ‘I’m objective, my analysis is objective.’”  
— Isaac, DD, high SEB

What is striking here, as in many similar comments, is how Isaac draws a connection between accent (as well as attendant aspects of speech such as speed, tone, timbre) and a wider conception of neutrality; of being able to carry

<sup>78</sup> Here we draw on the notion of the ‘somatic norm’ identified by Puwar in her research on the SCS (Puwar, N. *Space Invaders*, 2004).

<sup>79</sup> Language and accent have long been associated with class division in Britain with different working class regional accents traditionally counterposed to the standardised RP of the upper-middle classes (Donnelly, M et al, *A sociolinguistic perspective on accent and social mobility in the UK teaching profession*, 2019).

out more ‘objective analysis’, particularly in the context of the SCS and policy work in central departments.

In contrast, regional accents are cast as impinging on this embodiment of neutrality, with those from working class backgrounds frequently reporting feeling misread as aggressive, loud or too passionate:

“ I think if you’re from a working class background and you have like quite a deep, maybe gruff voice... I don’t know how well you’re going fare. It’s like a raised eyebrow, like ‘Oh, tone it down’... I probably spent the better part of a year feeling I didn’t want to stay in the Treasury... [I] used to put on a bit of an accent or try to enunciate a little bit better. Ridiculous and... humiliating [laughs] when I look back on it.”  
— *Pauline, DD, low SEB*

While the construction of RP as the ‘neutral’ voice of the Civil Service may appear like an innocuous professional practice, what interviews illustrate is that it acts to tacitly designate middle-class voice, pitch and tone as ‘normal’. In contrast, the regional accents of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (and some from high SEBs) act as a barrier, marking them out as outsiders that lack the ‘natural’ linguistic resources to be legitimately recognised.<sup>80</sup>

Others went further than accent, connecting the idea of neutrality to other self-presentational behaviours; to being softly-spoken, calm, unflappable, emotionally detached, restrained, understated:

“ I think there’s a general suspicion of people who are too passionate, a sense of ‘we’ve seen it all before’ and a pretence of being, you know, nicely detached from it all in a sort of cynical jaded way.”  
— *Rob, Director, Intermediate SEB*

“ I don’t see anyone getting emotional. Maybe that’s because it’s sort of filtered out before [SCS]. But I think if someone did get very concerned, that would probably be frowned upon. Self-control is really prized.”  
— *Oyinda, DD, high SEB*

Third, this construct of studied neutrality extends to the expression of interests and lifestyle in the workplace. This is not about having the exact same taste palette, but rather sharing certain cultural touchpoints – being able to make, or respond to, casual conversation about theatre, art galleries and foreign



Received Pronunciation (RP) is routinely read as a signal of ‘neutrality’

<sup>80</sup> Puwar finds similar results in her study of the SCS (Puwar, N. *Space Invaders*, 2004).





Sir Alex Allen, a former Senior Civil Servant who windsurfed into work in the 1980s to beat a train strike

holidays, for example, or understanding the use of Latin and cricketing metaphors in work meetings:

“There’s so much Latin and that really is real. You know, I know that is a bit of a stereotype but it is so real. You know, you’ll be in a Ministerial meeting and they’ll sort of talk in Latin but they’re sort of making what you’ll realise later is a sort of joke about Brussels that everyone sort of understands and laughs.”

— *Kristine, DD, Intermediate SEB*

However, by far the most popular topic of non-work conversation among civil servants, all interviewees agreed, was politics. Yet knowledge of, and interest in, politics must be articulated in a particular way. This is partly and understandably about maintaining political impartiality and understanding how to deliver policy for the government of the day. But beyond party-political neutrality, many explained that what is particularly prized is a particular knowing display, where in-depth knowledge is prized, even when it does not necessarily inform policy. As Nigel says, it is a ‘sort of political nerdery’ (Nigel, Director, high SEB) that is valued for its own sake and consciously displayed in informal work settings.

🗨️ When I get feedback one of the things [staff from low SEBs] raise is the degree to which the conversation is all about politics and about, you know, people on Twitter that everyone's following or certain blogs or certain podcasts and I'm not sure a lot of that is strictly necessary to do our job. That stuff is not going to answer whether or not we should put more money into housing benefit this year [laughs]. You know, the majority of the country are not reading these effing tweets. Probably the entire audience for this tweet that we're discussing at the moment is in this room [laughs].🗨️

— Alistair, DD, high SEB

Studied neutrality, then, cannot be easily reduced to one particular aspect of occupational culture. Instead it is a package of behaviours, a way of being at work, that other civil servants – mainly senior civil servants from high socio-economic backgrounds – know when they 'see it'. And crucially mastering it is crucial to getting on. It is a key way of signalling that you are the 'right type' of civil servant, that you 'fit'.

Significantly, in terms of this report, it is possible to trace the dispositions that make up studied neutrality – relating to particular forms of language, accent, self-presentation and a disinterested appreciation of culture and politics – to an advantaged upbringing and socialisation. These are forms of what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls 'embodied cultural capital'.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, it is possible to locate notions of studied neutrality running through the history of the Civil Service. Here, it has particular antecedents in the understated, cultured figure of the 'gentleman' Senior Civil Servant. Historical accounts of the SCS, particularly up until the 1980s, stress not only the dominance of men from very privileged class backgrounds (including the top public schools and Oxbridge) but also a particular workplace culture where generalism was privileged over expertise, discretion and decorum keenly

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<sup>81</sup> Bourdieu distinguished two types of embodied cultural capital; first, modes of *comportment* imprinted in early childhood through prolonged immersion in a particular set of socio-economic conditions that leaves physical traces *in* and *on* the body – in accent, inflection, gesture and posture, as well as styles of dress, etiquette and manners. Second, he connected these to particular ways of thinking and feeling. The material affluence of the educated upper-middle classes, he argued, afford them a certain distance from necessity that is then reflected in the way they socialise their children. In particular, they have the time and space 'freed from [economic] urgency' to inculcate a propensity for what he called 'symbolic mastery'. This includes a certain mode of using language, including an elaborate vocabulary and 'correct' grammar, as well as particular ways of *seeing* and *listening* to culture. He calls this the 'aesthetic disposition' – a refusal of cultural experiences that are considered easy, facile or sensational, and instead an insistence on a 'disinterested' aesthetic lens, where true artistic beauty can only be experienced if one separates oneself from any emotional investment in an art work. For Bourdieu, the key point about the aesthetic disposition, as well as other aspects of symbolic mastery, is that they tend to be (*mis*)recognised as legitimate; they function as widely recognised signals of cultural distinction, 'natural' sophistication, intelligence even (Bourdieu, P. The forms of capital, 1986).



10 Downing Street

observed, and a wider intellectual orientation highly prized.<sup>82, 83</sup> In this way, it is possible to see studied neutrality as representing, at least in part, the historical legacy of an overwhelmingly privileged (White, male) majority who, over time, have been able to embed their own ideas about the ‘right’ way to behave in the upper echelons of the Civil Service workplace.

Studied neutrality thus not only acts to render the workplace a more natural fit for some, it also acts as a powerful barrier for those from low SEBs, who describe struggling to fit, adapt or assimilate. Integral to these accounts was often an underlying anxiety about making ‘mistakes’ in one’s execution of studied neutrality, or concealing parts of one’s identity that don’t ‘fit’, for example as explored in Section 2.5. Lara summed up the feeling:

“ I guess that disconnect has become more apparent as I’ve become more senior, between how I see the world and how I present myself and my confidence to talk... and a kind of shared language and a shared tone I don’t feel I have... a sense of... I don’t really fit, my background doesn’t fit... and it just feels like a slightly alien world to me still... it’s not necessarily intended to exclude, but I think part of the fact I haven’t got further is because I just don’t get it.”

— *Lara, Grade 6, low SEB*

<sup>82</sup> Kelsall found that in 1939, 71% of SCS had been to public or private schools (see Kelsall, R. “Recruitment to the higher Civil Service: how has the pattern changed, 1974).

<sup>83</sup> Guttsman, W, *The British political elite*, 1963; Scott, J. *The upper classes: property and privilege in Britain*, 1982; SCS were key players in what Annan called the ‘intellectual aristocracy’ – see Annan, N. *Our Age*, 1990; O’Brien, D. *What price evidence? The ethics of office and the ethics of social science in British cultural policy*, 2016.

Like Lara, many interviewees from working class backgrounds explained how such crippling feelings of imposter syndrome had affected their willingness to push for progression. Moreover, beyond a simple barrier to progression, such dislocation had often exerted a significant psychological or emotional toll. In particular, many noted the irony of the Civil Service's stated encouragement to 'bring your whole self to work' in the context of their own experience of managing or concealing difference:

🗨️ **Victoria:** So, there's this thing about 'bringing your whole self to work'. But, I think most people don't actually do that. Because, I would have thought if people are actually bringing their whole selves to work, there would be less consensus [laughs].

**Interviewer:** So you don't necessarily bring your whole self to work?

**Victoria:** Yeah. I think there's something about how I talk that isn't right here. There's just a style of presentation [that] people like here. And, you've got to be able to approximate that. But being myself and just talking naturally just feels so uncomfortable. So I just kind of withdraw. 🗨️

— *Victoria, Grade 7, low SEB*

Struggling to adapt to dominant behavioural codes often leads those from low SEBs towards what Victoria describes here as 'withdrawal' in the workplace. This is important because, in turn, it likely affects how such individuals are read by senior gatekeepers and how attributes like visibility or confidence are assessed. Victoria, for example, also mentioned in her interview that she is often told by managers that she needs to be more confident. Like many others we spoke to, however, she explained that there are many areas in her life – with her friends and family, for example – where she feels perfectly confident and is seen as such by those around her. In other words, it's not that she and others lack confidence per se, but that certain environments, especially when they are infused with powerful behavioural codes, act to inhibit some and embolden others.



Struggling to adapt often leads those from low SEBs towards what Victoria describes here as 'withdrawal' in the workplace.



## 2.6

## Downplaying privilege

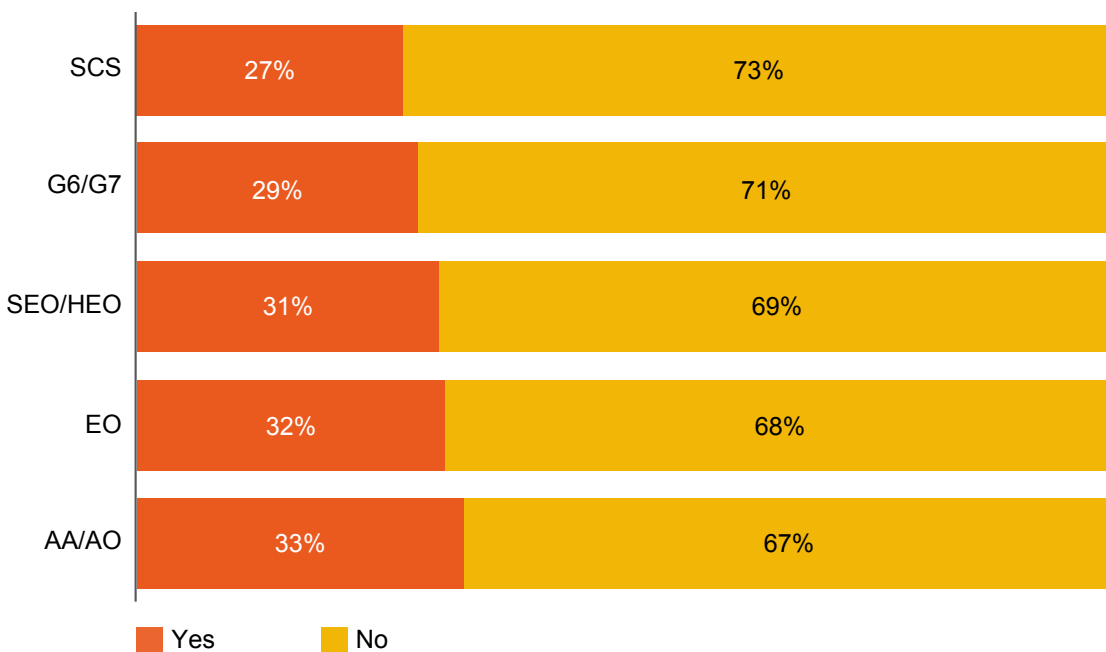


### Key findings

- 1 in 4 of those who *self-assess* as coming from a low socio-economic backgrounds actually have parents who did professional or managerial jobs.
- These people often locate their 'origin' not in their own upbringing but in extended family histories of upward mobility or working class struggle.
- This blinds them from considering the privileges they have enjoyed and their role in erecting socio-economic barriers to progression.
- It may also affect the broader impetus for change within the Civil Service, as it indicates that those in senior grades may believe there is more socio-economic diversity than there really is.

So far this report has considered civil servants' socio-economic or class background using a range of measures – most prominently parental occupation. However, these objective measures of socio-economic origin don't necessarily align with people's own self-assessment of their background. For example, although Figure 4 showed that those from objectively low socio-economic backgrounds drop off strongly at higher grades, Figure 6 shows that the percentage of civil servants subjectively identifying as 'low socio-economic background' remains broadly similar across all grades.

**Figure 6 Civil Service grade by those describing themselves as coming from a low socio-economic background (or not) in 2019**

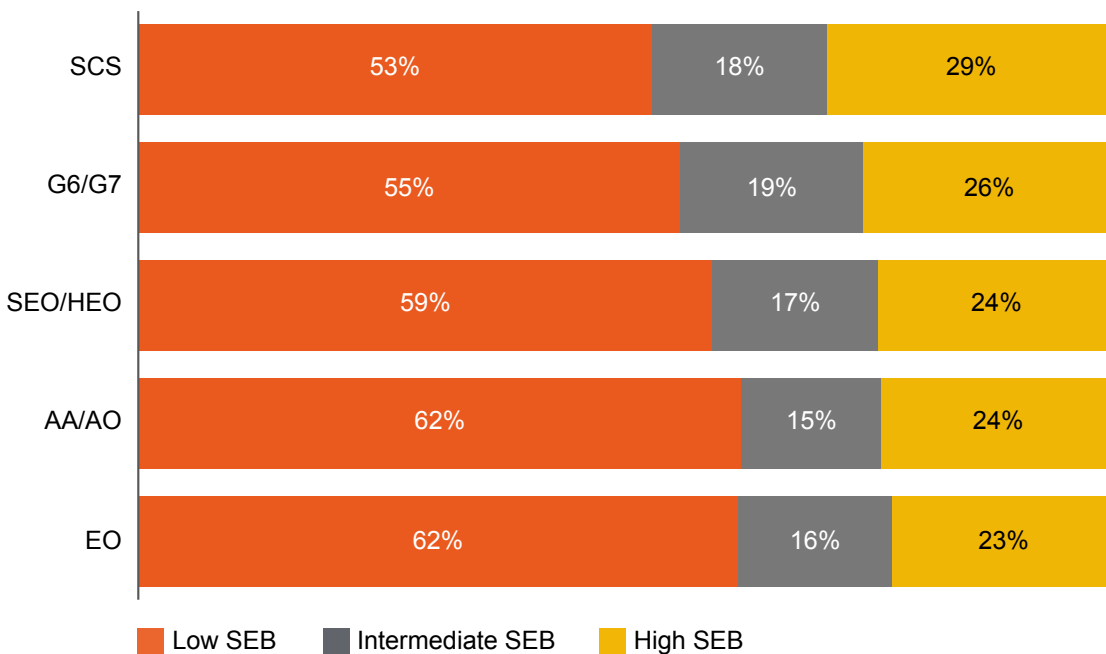


Despite the progression gap by socio-economic background, those self-identifying as low socio-economic background is similar across grades

Figure 7 suggests that one reason for this discrepancy may be that those from 'objectively' high socio-economic backgrounds often self-identify (or 'misalign') as coming from a low socio-economic background.<sup>84</sup> For example, Figure 8 shows that nearly 1 in 4 of those who see themselves as coming from a low socio-economic background actually come from high socio-economic backgrounds, in terms of parental occupation. Moreover, the proportion of those (mis)identifying in this way increases at higher grades (29% at SCS versus 23% and 24% at EO and AA/AO).

<sup>84</sup> Nationally representative survey data in the UK similarly finds that those from advantaged backgrounds often 'misalign' their origins as working class. In the latest available data, from the British social attitudes survey, 24% of those from high socio-economic backgrounds in professional/managerial jobs identify as working class (Evans, G. and Kelley, J, social class: why are we still working class?, 2016).

**Figure 7 Civil Service grade by parental occupation (NS-SEC) among those who answer 'yes' to self-identifying as coming from from a low socio-economic background in 2019**



1 in 4 of those who self-assess as coming from low socio-economic backgrounds were objectively calculated to have parents who did professional or managerial jobs.

How might we explain this? Interviews provide some insight. While most interviewees identified a 'subjective' socio-economic background that 'correctly' matched their objective background, among those from more advantaged backgrounds approximately 30% 'misaligned' as coming from either working class or lower socio-economic backgrounds, or as being long-range socially mobile.

Typically, when asked to describe their socio-economic background, these interviewees narrated their sense of self less in terms of their own upbringing and more in terms of their parents' upbringing or even the experiences of their grandparents:

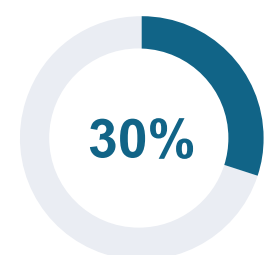
“Although I grew up with two teachers, I think I felt more working class because my parents were both first generation university. They both grew up in a working class family... so the consciousness of my upbringing was... I felt much more working class.”

— Mike, DD, high SEB

“My parents and I would define myself, psychologically, as working class. So my dad, he went to what would then have been called a polytechnic for his engineering degree, he was certainly the first person in his family. None of his siblings or extended family went to uni. So yeah my parents got more comfortable as I got older, but I identify more with working class.”

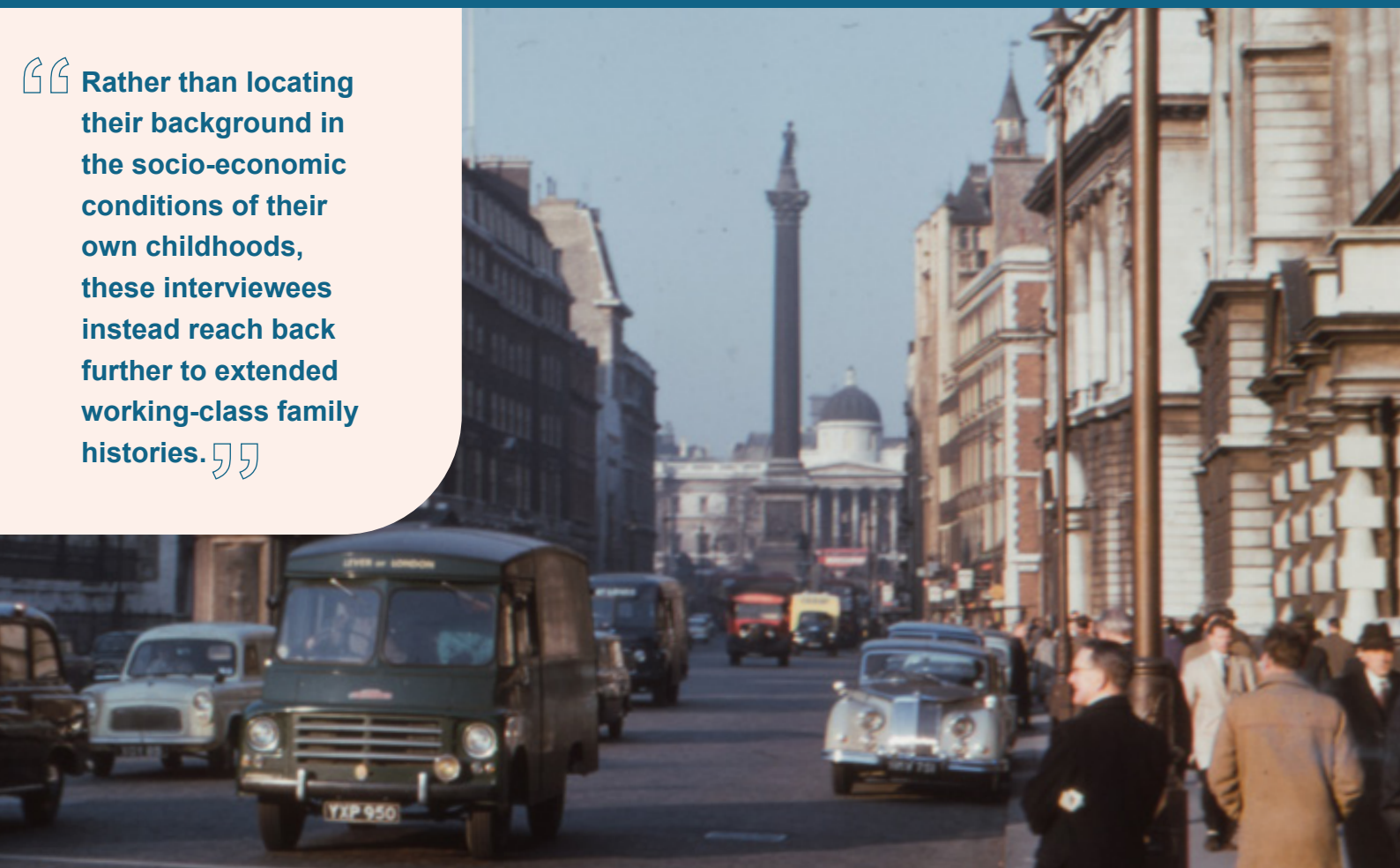
— Alex, Director, high SEB

Among interviewees from more advantaged backgrounds approximately



'misaligned' as coming from lower SEBs

“ Rather than locating their background in the socio-economic conditions of their own childhoods, these interviewees instead reach back further to extended working-class family histories.”



Whitehall and Nelson's Column in 1962

Rather than locating their background as rooted in the socio-economic conditions of their own childhoods, these interviewees instead reach back further into their extended family histories. Here they find stories of the past – of working class struggle, of upward social mobility, of meritocratic striving – that provide powerful psychological frames for understanding their own identity.<sup>85</sup>

This doesn't necessarily mean these should be considered 'misidentifications'. After all, in the vast majority of cases these interviewees 'correctly' identify the socio-economic conditions of their working class ancestors and simply argue it is the legacy of this history that scaffolds their identity. Indeed such claims have some objective basis; the socio-economic position of grandparents does have an effect on a person's life outcomes.<sup>86</sup> Equally, some identifications seemed to be rooted in interviewees' sense of their *relative* privilege. For example, when describing their own socio-economic origin, many explicitly compared themselves to Civil Service colleagues from *more* privileged backgrounds.

<sup>85</sup> Significantly, recent research finds similar results among accountants, actors, architects and those working in television (Friedman, S. et al, *Deflecting privilege: class identity and the intergenerational self*, 2021).

<sup>86</sup> Chan, T and Boliver, V, *The grandparent effects in social mobility*, 2013.



Yet we should not overstate these qualifications. This ‘grandparent effect’ on life outcomes and social mobility is very small in comparison to parents.<sup>87</sup> And we should not forget that the vast majority of our interviewees identified their socio-economic origin as rooted in the occupational status and economic resources of their parents rather than their extended family.

In this way, multi-generational understandings of socio-economic origin can also be read as contributing to the socio-economic progression gap within the Civil Service. This is because it seems to blind some civil servants from reflecting on the socio-economic advantages that have shaped their own backgrounds and careers. These interviewees tended to ignore (or not reflect on) the advantages that have flowed from, for example, attending private school or benefiting from parental wealth in facilitating house purchases or supporting migration to London. Instead, by positioning themselves as ascending from humble socio-economic origins, these interviewees sought to tell an upward story of career success ‘against the odds’. This means they often inaccurately present themselves to colleagues as socio-economic outsiders, who have overcome significant barriers within the Civil Service, and whose progression is therefore unusually meritocratically legitimate.

“There’s sometimes a lack of self-reflection. So when I was at one of my training courses and we were talking about backgrounds, and it was like, ‘Oh, I’m working class my granddad was a miner.’ ‘Oh, that’s nice what did your dad do?’ ‘My dad’s a headteacher.’ It’s that people aren’t willing to open their eyes sometimes and that lack of self-reflection also plays into unconscious biases because people aren’t thinking ‘what judgements am I making’ that may not be fair on this stuff.”  
— Roger, Grade 7, low SEB

As Roger’s account demonstrates, this downplaying or deflecting of privilege is significant because it prevents these civil servants from reflecting on the ways in which their behaviour may be implicated in the barriers or enablers identified elsewhere in this report. It may also affect the broader impetus for change within the Civil Service on issues of socio-economic diversity. If civil servants, and particularly those in senior grades, tend to believe there is more socio-economic diversity than there really is, this will likely affect their motivation to meaningfully tackle the issue.



When some identify with their parents’ or grandparents’ working class background, it can blind them from reflecting on the advantages they have had in their lives and careers.

<sup>87</sup> Engzell, P. et al, It’s all about the parents: inequality transmission across three generations in Sweden, 2020.

## SECTION 3

# Cumulative barriers

Connecting  
socio-economic  
background  
to gender and  
ethnicity





Recent research has shown that in Britain's higher professional and managerial occupations, women and certain racial-ethnic groups from working class backgrounds face a distinct double disadvantage in terms of earnings.



Jane Nassau Senior, Britain's first female civil servant (1828–1877). Painting by George Frederic Watts (1859).

Socio-economic background is not the only mechanism through which people may be excluded from top jobs in the Civil Service.<sup>88</sup> For example, a now fairly extensive body of research has documented the barriers that women and those from ethnic minority backgrounds face in the Civil Service. Yet it is important to remember that inequalities associated with all of these demographic characteristics rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they very often build on each other and work together. For example, recent research has shown that in Britain's higher professional and managerial occupations, women and certain racial ethnic groups from working class backgrounds face a distinct double disadvantage in terms of earnings. In this way, we stress here the importance of seeing individuals as the sum of multiple, complex social characteristics that together constitute interacting features of their identities.<sup>89, 90</sup>

In the following sections we explore this by showing how the socio-economic composition of the Civil Service varies by gender and ethnicity. We also draw on interviews to delve into the experiences of women and particularly Black African/Caribbean civil servants from low socio-economic backgrounds, identifying a number of specific barriers to progression that these individuals tend to face.

<sup>88</sup> Wyatt, M. and Silvester, J. Reflections on the labyrinth: investigating Black and minority ethnic leaders' career experiences, 2015; Institute for Government, [Women in Whitehall](#), 2015.

<sup>89</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [State of the nation 2018–19](#), 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Friedman and Laurison, [The class ceiling](#), 2019.

# (Not) bringing your whole self to work

## Women's experience of social mobility



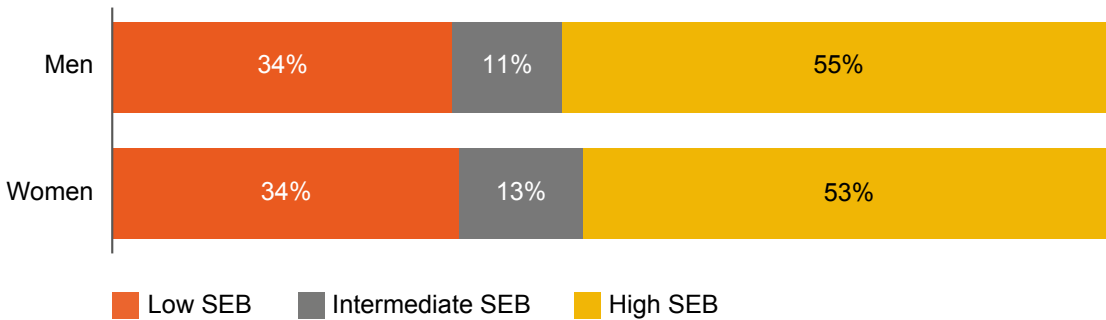
### Key findings

- There is little difference in the overall socio-economic composition of male and female civil servants.
- Low SEB women are more under-represented at senior grades.
- Low SEB men are more likely to talk about their background at work and feel comfortable displaying markers of this (such as accent, language and tastes).
- For some White men, such 'origin talk' can even confer advantage, allowing them to resist dominant behavioural codes and 'brand' themselves as senior leaders with a unique perspective.
- In contrast, low SEB women largely choose to conceal their background, presuming such a disclosure will only leave them vulnerable to negative judgement.
- Feeling unable to inhabit one's 'authentic self' often elicits a sense of withdrawal and self-elimination from the stakes of career progression.



Figure 8 shows that while civil servants from advantaged backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the Civil Service, there is very little difference in the socio-economic composition of male and female civil servants.

**Figure 8 Civil Service by parental occupation (NS-SEC) for those identifying as men or women in 2019 Civil Service People Survey**

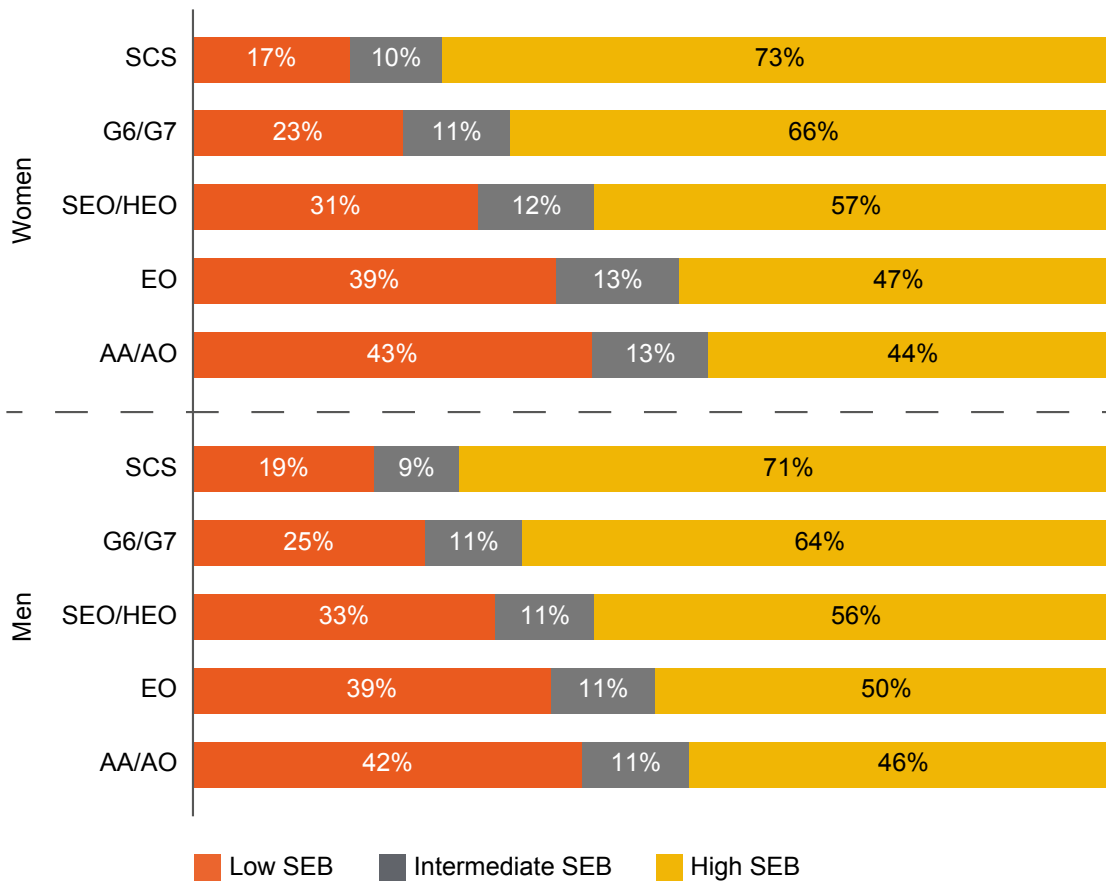


The socio-economic composition of the Civil Service is similar for men and women

However, this overall composition hides small but potentially telling gender differences by grade. As Figure 9 demonstrates, while the number of civil servants from non-professional/managerial backgrounds falls sharply for both men and women as they ascend the grades, this drop-off is slightly steeper for women than men. For example, the percentage of non-professional men falls from 54% to 29% between AA/AO and SCS (a difference of 25%) while for women it falls from 56% to 27% (a difference of 29%). These are modest differences but nonetheless suggest tentative evidence that women from low socio-economic backgrounds may indeed face cumulative barriers in progressing their career within the Civil Service.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> It is worth acknowledging that these differences may be attributed to differential non-response and, at the SCS grade, relatively small absolute numbers. The problem of small numbers is less of an issue at the Grade 6 and Grade 7 level, however, and to put these differences in perspective, we calculate for illustrative purposes that approximately 950 more women from non-professional backgrounds would be employed at the Grades 6/7 level if the socio-economic progression gap was the same for women as it is for men. According to the Civil Service Statistics Bulletin 2019, there are approximately 23,600 women employed at G6/7, of which 10,400 are from non-professional backgrounds (44%). However, if the proportion of women from non-professional backgrounds were 48% (which is what the proportion of non-professional women would be if there was a decline of 18% rather than 22%) then there would be approximately 11,350 women from non-professional backgrounds at Grades 6/7 (11,350 - 10,400 = 950 more women from low SEB).

**Figure 9 Civil Service grade by parental occupation (NS-SEC) for women and men in 2019 Civil Service People Survey**



The progression gap is somewhat bigger for women from low socio-economic backgrounds

One way we might make sense of this potential cumulative barrier is to turn to data exploring the different ways men and women think, feel and talk about a low socio-economic background *at work*. A key question we asked in interviews was whether people were happy talking about their background within the Civil Service. Although many interviewees maintained that such topics rarely come up in conversation, most – and especially those from higher socio-economic backgrounds – explained that if it did they would be happy to share their story. However, among those from low socio-economic backgrounds this was a much more difficult subject. And there was a striking gender split in responses. Most (although not all) men said they happily talked about their origins. This was also reflected in the People Survey Data. As Figure 10 shows, male civil servants are much more likely to subjectively identify as low SEB.

**Figure 10 Civil servants who self-assess as coming from a low socio-economic background by gender identity in the 2019 Civil Service People Survey**



Men are more likely than women to self-assess as coming from a low socio-economic background

Indeed White male interviewees often expressed a sense of pride about their working class background and the way this was reflected in their accent and self-presentation. Nathan (Director, low SEB) was typical:

“ I definitely don’t think I play a role. I think I am who I am at work. I’ve never consciously changed how I act to, sort of, be more obviously middle-class.”  
 — Nathan, Director, low SEB

In contrast, almost every low SEB woman we interviewed (25/28) said they deliberately chose not to talk about their background at work, often even working to actively conceal it:

“ I don’t tell people my background, you know, that’s a thing I hide. And, you know, if I did say what my dad did, I would always say, ‘Oh, he’s an HGV driver,’ because that’s a bit, you know, better than that he drives a lorry and moves furniture. There’s always a bit of trying to push it up a bit.”  
 — Steph, DD, low SEB

“ I’ve never shared my background at work, just being in a social mobility network is a step for me... why wouldn’t I? I think it’s partly a sense of shame, judgement, what would it gain me to say that? It would mark me out as even more different.”  
 — Nicola, Grade 7, low SEB

What is striking in these accounts is the sense of shame and embarrassment these women report in relation to their backgrounds, and their belief that ‘bringing their whole self to work’ would only leave them vulnerable to the negative judgement of colleagues. Instead, these women often work hard to conceal markers of their origins and recount elaborate attempts to modulate their self-presentation and assimilate or mimic the kind of behavioural codes discussed in Section 2.5.

“ I don't tell people my background, you know, that's a thing I hide. ”



But why does disclosing a low socio-economic background appear to carry such different connotations for men and women? Many women explained this in terms of the greater stigma attached to female (versus male) working class identities in Britain:

“ There is no benefit to being a working class girl, there absolutely isn't. Whereas being a bit laddish working class is almost quite a nice thing for middle class men, and they like, see it as down-to-earth or whatever. But I mean there are no traits that I can think of immediately that I would display as a positive demonstration of being a working class woman. ”

— Rosie, Director, low SEB

Now contrast Rosie with another low SEB Director, Jason. Jason was from a working class family in the north-west. He told us he had always been 'quite relaxed' about talking about his background. And although he had retained a strong accent he explained that, rather than a barrier, this has helped him 'stand out from the crowd'. In fact, since joining the SCS, Jason had increasingly begun to use his working class background as 'the centrepiece of [his] pitch' for various senior jobs; 'there's a story to tell', as he put in. 'So at the moment it's a net positive.'



Significantly, Rosie and Jason's divergent experiences echo an extensive body of research.<sup>92</sup> As many sociologists have highlighted, there is no female equivalent of the heroic tale of the 'working class boy done good'. Instead, women's desire for upward mobility is often portrayed as a marker of pretence, pushiness or social climbing.

But why does this type of identity suppression matter? Interviews pointed towards two important implications. First, it was clear that such suppression had often left a significant emotional imprint; 'it is one of those things in my self-conscious that still makes me feel a bit inferior', Tracey (Grade 7, low SEB) explained. For Sarah (Grade 6, intermediate SEB), such inferiority was even felt as a physical sensation:

🗨️ I don't think anyone has asked me what my parents do. But I think if they did I'd probably feel quite stressed. Like it's something that I do actually have a physical response to. 🗨️

For others this imprint was expressed more in terms of the emotional labour required to corral presentations of self into an appropriate behavioural form, or through an underlying anxiety about making 'mistakes' in one's execution of dominant behavioural codes.

🗨️ I probably never actively talk about my childhood and maybe I am kind of suppressing it to fit in... because I suppose [pause] I assume that my background is so different to theirs that maybe I would feel a kind of sense of shame. I guess on a like fundamental level everyone wants to just fit in, wants to be liked. So, yeah, I just don't want to like give them a reason to think that I'm not one of them, maybe. 🗨️  
— Alice, Grade 7, low SEB

This emotional or psychological burden is important to register in its own right. It both speaks to a longstanding literature on the 'hidden costs' of upward mobility, as well as underlining the way in which these costs are often strongly gendered, particularly in terms of their capacity to generate feelings of shame and embarrassment.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Lawler, S. Getting out and getting away: women's narratives of class mobility, 1999; Skeggs, Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of class and gender: becoming respectable*; Loveday, V. [Embodying deficiency through 'affective practice': Shame, relationality, and the lived experience of social class and gender in higher education](#), 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Sennett, R., Cobb, J. (1977) *The hidden injuries of class*. Friedmann, S. *The price of the ticket? Rethinking the experience of social mobility*, 2014; Hanley, L. *Respectable: the experience of class*, 2016.



Manchester

Yet interviews also indicate that such suppression, and the emotional turmoil it precipitates, often has implications for the career *outcomes* of these women. For example, many described how classed feelings of imposter syndrome had significantly affected their willingness to push for progression:

“ I guess that disconnect has become more apparent as I’ve become more senior, between how I present myself and my confidence to talk... and a kind of shared tone I don’t feel I have... a sense of... I don’t really fit, my background doesn’t fit... and it just feels like a slightly alien world to me still... it’s not necessarily intended to exclude, but I think part of the fact I haven’t got further is because I just don’t get it.”

— *Lara, Grade 6, low SEB*

These findings illustrate the specific barriers to progression faced by women from low SEBs. While nearly all those from low SEBs report some struggle assimilating to dominant behavioural codes within the Civil Service, the example of Jason (and others like him) illustrate that White men are often able to overcome this by building a ‘brand’ as someone different, and achieve this by consciously drawing on certain markers of their working class background. In contrast, women very rarely report being able to position a low socio-economic background as a positive. Instead, most report an uneasy process of suppression and assimilation that is both exhausting and carries significant emotional costs.



# Experiencing class stereotypes of Blackness

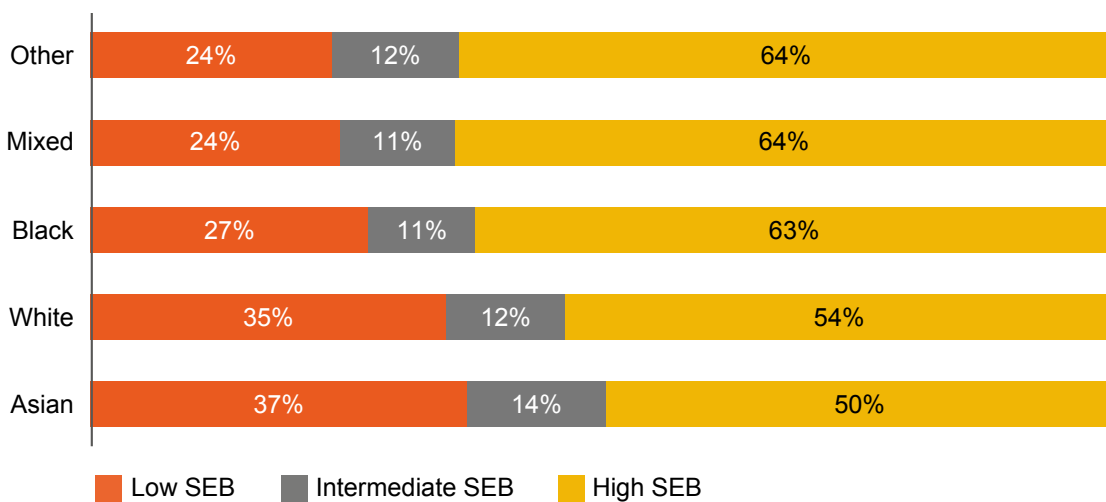


## Key findings

- Civil servants from ethnic minorities are more likely to be from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (except for those of Asian origin).
- The socio-economic progression gap is smaller for ethnic minority staff (but this partly reflects that a high SEB does not act as the same progression enabler for ethnic minority groups as it does for White staff).
- Black staff are often subject to negative and stereotypical assumptions about black working-class communities, irrespective of their own socio-economic background.

The relationship between ethnicity and socio-economic background in the Civil Service is complex. Figure 11 suggests that those from low socio-economic backgrounds are significantly more under-represented among Black, mixed and 'other ethnicity' civil servants than among those who are White and Asian. In other words, except for those of Asian origin, Other than White individuals who enter the Civil Service are disproportionately likely to come from high socio-economic backgrounds (compared to the socio-economic profile of Other than White groups in the UK as a whole). In this way, Figure 11 suggests that those who are ethnic minority and working class often face particular barriers in 'getting in' to the Civil Service.

**Figure 11 Civil Service by parental occupation (3-class version of NS-SEC) and ethnicity in 2019 Civil Service People Survey**



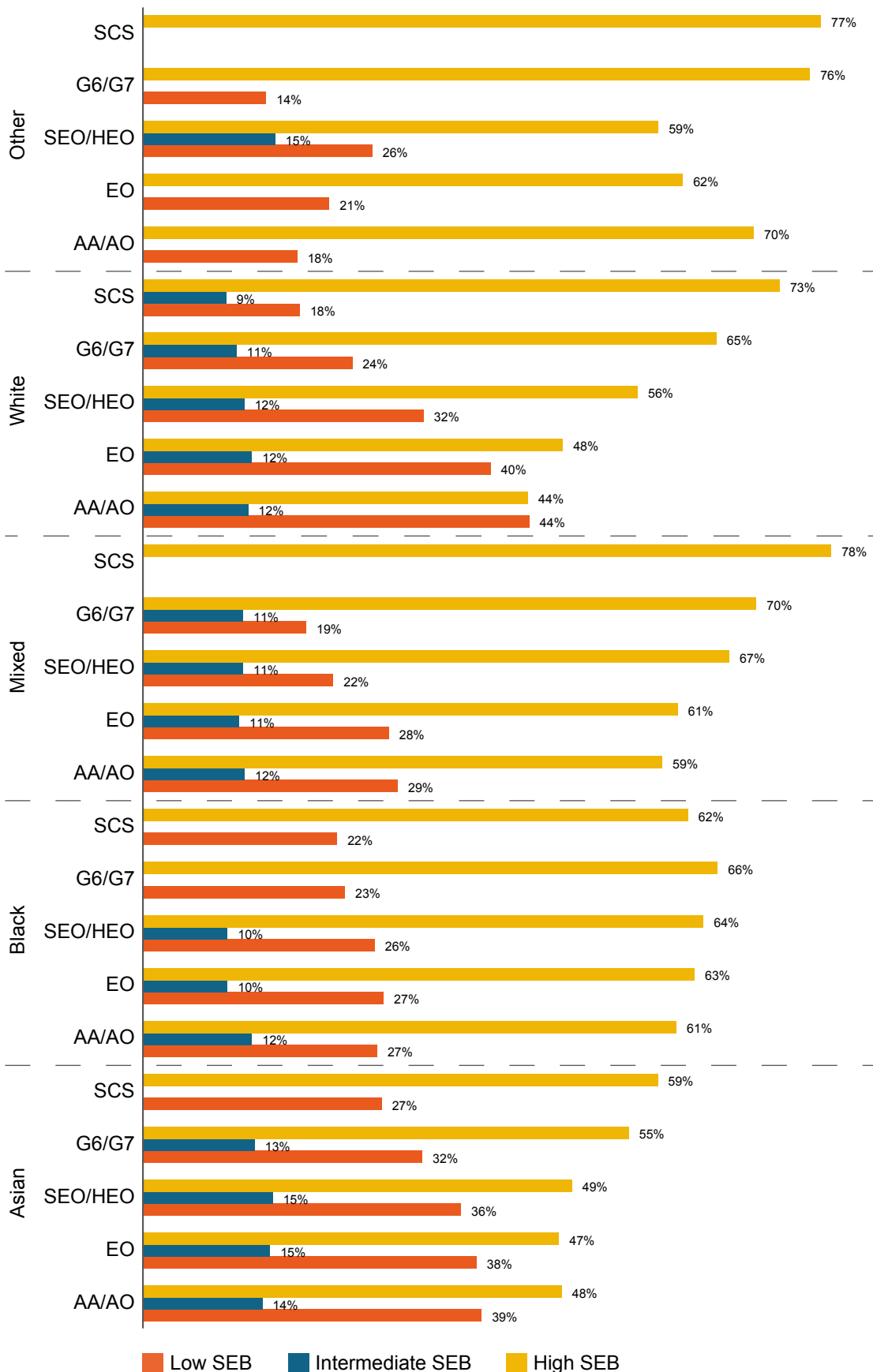
Civil servants from ethnic minorities are more likely to be from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds

Evidence of cumulative barriers in progression among ethnic minority groups is more muted. While Figure 12 indicates that most ethnic minority groups face some progression gap by socio-economic background (except for Black civil servants), this is markedly less pronounced than among White colleagues. This should be read as encouraging data, although there are important caveats. As mentioned, it may reflect the extra barriers and 'merit' that Other than White low SEB individuals must demonstrate to get into the Civil Service in the first place, which then means they are better placed or equipped to progress. Equally, interview data explored below suggests that the lack of a progression gap by socio-economic background for Black civil servants indicate that socio-economic privilege does not act as the same progression enabler as it does for those from other ethnic backgrounds, and particularly White civil servants.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>94</sup> There is evidence, for example, that Black individuals from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds often see dominant forms of cultural capital as White and racially exclusive (Meghji, A. Encoding and decoding Black and White cultural capitals: Black middle-class experiences, 2019).



**Figure 12** Proportion of civil servants at each grade level by socio-economic background and ethnicity



The socio-economic progression gap varies significantly by ethnicity.

**Note:** This figure contains missing data because the sample sizes were below the Civil Service threshold for reporting.

Our interviews also reveal the importance of a cumulative lens for understanding the specific barriers to progression that Black African/African Caribbean civil servants face. We should be clear that this is not to say that those from other minority ethnic groups do not face forms of cumulative disadvantage, just that within the limited sample drawn in this study such effects were not clear.

In contrast, it was clear that Black African/African Caribbean civil servants from low SEBs faced a number of distinct barriers. Many explained, for example, that the colour of their skin increased the visibility of their class-cultural difference in work settings. This was often described in terms of feeling ‘exposed’ or ‘surveilled’, of insecurities around accent or vocabulary being accentuated by racial-ethnic difference; of ‘being the only Black person in the room’, as Joy (Director, high SEB) put it. Moreover, these interviewees reported routinely battling the classed stereotypes of Blackness held by colleagues. Below are just a small selection of such examples:

“So yeah, you do get a lot of misconceptions, and people look at you and before speaking to you, judge you and just assume, ‘Oh, you live in London, you must come from the ghetto,’ and it’s like, no I don’t live in a slum, we’re not all in debt!”  
— *Martina, Grade 7, low SEB*

“Do I have to work against expectations? Absolutely. And that comes in many flavours. So, I’ve had instances when people get a bit tipsy in the pub, after a long week, they still might let certain things slip like, ‘Oh, you speak really well,’ and things like that. And you get a sense that’s based on some form of expectation, that someone born in [a country outside the UK] is going to sound a certain way, or they’re going to communicate in a certain way.”  
— *Hashi, Grade 6, high SEB*

“I was having a meeting and my manager started talking about, ‘Oh, you know, like Black-on-Black crime,’ and like nodding to me as if I would like know everything about this and I was just like, ‘What on earth is going on? Like why would that ever be something that you think you should say?’”  
— *Joy, Director, high SEB*



Our interviews also reveal the importance of a cumulative lens for understanding the specific barriers to progression that Black African/African Caribbean civil servants face.

“In my first role I met the person that I would be working with and she was asking me to look at a spreadsheet and for some reason she had to say the word ‘Northampton’ to me, I can’t remember, we were talking about police forces or something, and then she asked me in this tone, ‘Oh, do you know how to spell that?’ and she started spelling it out.”

— *Aiyden, Grade 6, intermediate SEB*

What is clear in these accounts is interviewees’ anger at these racist stereotypes, because they bear no resemblance to their everyday experience as Black British people from either middle or working class backgrounds.<sup>95</sup>

At the same time, interviews also underlined that Black civil servants from high socio-economic backgrounds do not enjoy the same advantages as their White colleagues. This was particularly clear in terms of dominant behavioural codes:

“I speak relatively better than most [laughs] so I’m given a pass, if that makes sense, but I do know that if I want to progress, I am going to have to get an interest in some of the things that they’re interested in, this and that theatre production, opera. But it’s difficult because if I do go to the theatre I go and see things that I relate to, and I’m sure they haven’t got an interest in seeing them.”

— *Nala, Grade 6, high SEB*

“It’s basically suited for the Oxbridge White middle class male type personality. I might be wrong, but I feel like anyone else who isn’t that, is adapting to that, rather than just being themselves... I think it’s just as simple as you don’t fit in. As I said, I’ve been quite fortunate. I went to good schools. I had every opportunity in life. I’ve been exposed to things that make it easier for me to adapt and project back a version of myself that fits that culture. But I’m still adapting, if you see what I mean.”

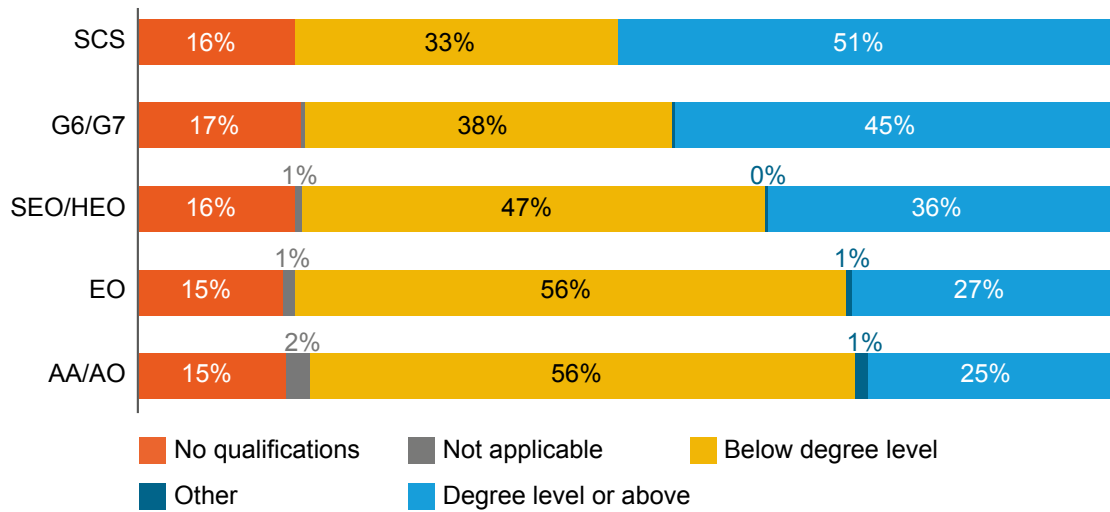
— *Ade, Grade 7, high SEB*

What is clear in these narratives is the sense that socio-economic advantage only partially confers a sense of fit. As Nala and Ade explain, mastering dominant behavioural codes often requires command of a specific *White* middle-class culture, with a set of very specific cultural touchpoints.

<sup>95</sup> Similar experiences are reported in Rollock’s report on Black female professors in higher education (Rollock, N, Staying power: the career experiences and strategies of Black female professors in UK higher education, 2020).

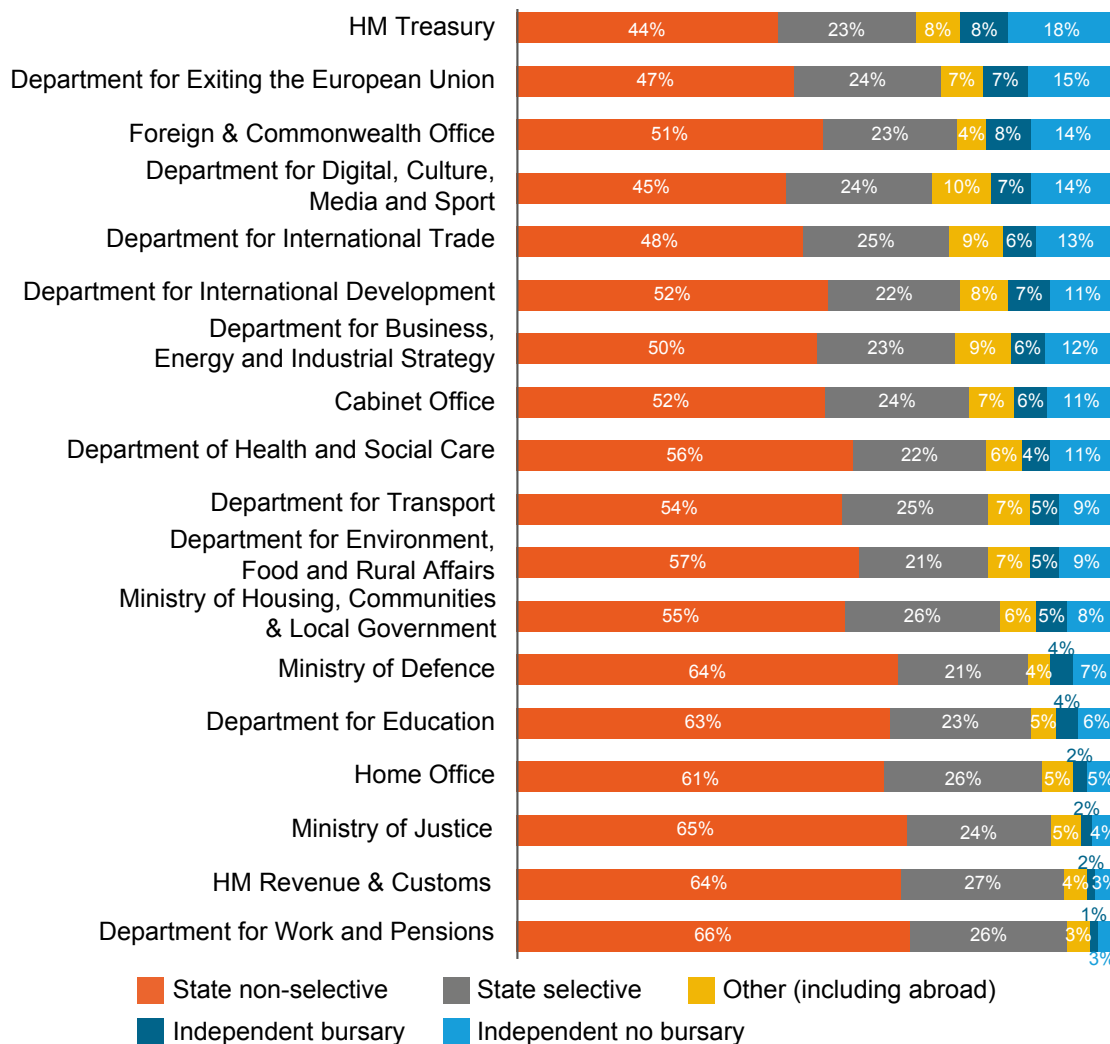
# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Parental qualification by grade



The majority of SCS have a parent with degree level education

## Appendix 2 School attended by department<sup>96</sup>



Over a fifth of some departments' staff were privately educated

<sup>96</sup> It is important to note that since the data was collected some departments, such as DEXEU, have disbanded and others, such as FCO and DFID, have merged.



## Appendix 3 Interview topic guide

### Section A: Socio-economic background (approx. 5–10 mins)

- Starting with your childhood could you say a bit about
  - where you grew up
  - what did your parents do when you were growing up?
  - how you got on at school
  - who or what were the key influences in your life?
- How would you describe your standard of living when you were growing up?
- What kind of activities did you do with your parents? Were you encouraged to follow any particular activities?

### Section B: Career progression (approx. 20–30 minutes)

#### Your career

- Can you tell me a little bit about your career so far?
  - What attracted you to the Civil Service?
  - Going back to your early years here...
  - Finally thinking back to more recent years...
- Do you feel you've reached your potential in terms of progression? Why?
- Have you felt confident that you've known what you need to do to progress?
- Have you ever thought about moving location/department to progress?
- Have you ever pushed for promotion/pay rise? If so, how? If not, why?

#### Networks

- Has there been anyone who has been particularly supportive during your career?
  - How did they help? How did you meet them?
  - Why do you think you have a connection?
- Do you think you are good at networking? Why?

#### Occupational Culture

- How would you describe the culture at the Civil Service?
  - Is it inclusive?
  - Do you think there are any unwritten codes/norms about behaviour/self-presentation/dress?
  - Do you think the culture is different in the SCS? Why?
  - How would you describe the culture in your department – any different?

[note for CS researchers: this is a key follow-up Q]

- Do you think things are different in policy/operational/delivery roles?
- Do you think any departmental cultures you've experienced have actually enabled your progression?

### **Section C: Management and promotion (for SCS only approx. 10–15mins)**

#### Your team (for SCS members)

- How many people do you manage?
- What attributes are you looking for from your team?
  - How important is sociability/personality?
  - How important is sharing interests/hobbies/tastes in your team?
  - Is it important that you like your staff or not really? How do you know you like someone?
- What makes a good SCS?

#### Recruitment and promotion decisions (for SCS interviewees)

- How involved are you in recruitment or promotion decisions?
- Can you take me through the process?
  - Do you use job specs?
  - What is the deciding factor? CV? Interview? Reputation?
  - Do you ever use informal meetings to sound candidates out? If so how do you do these?
- How important do you think things like appearance, style, speech are in these sort of instances?
- Do you take into consideration leadership training courses?

### **Section D: Progression by SEB in the Civil Service (15–20 mins)**

- So far we've found that those from low socio-economic backgrounds are significantly under-represented at the top grades (6–7 and SCS) and within this department
  - Why do you think this is?
  - Do you think it's a problem?
  - Do you see any potential solutions?
- Do you think people get ahead on merit in the Civil Service? If not, why?
- Do you think class background is important in the Civil Service? Why?
- Do you feel you or any of your colleagues have ever been discriminated against in terms of gender, race and/or background?

## Appendix 4 Interview sample

Category	Number of interviews
Men	50
Women	54
High SEB	46
Intermediate SEB	17
Low SEB	41
Grade 7	27
Grade 6	38
Deputy Director	22
Director	12
Director General	5
Permanent Secretary	0
East of Midlands	3
East of England	2
London	39
North-east England	6
North-west England	8
South-east England	12
South-west England	4
West Midlands	7
Yorkshire and the Humber	10
Scotland	7
Wales	4
Northern Ireland	2
Asian	10
Black	13
Mixed	4
White	74
Other	3
Treasury	26
Transport	23
Cabinet Office	24
HM Revenue & Customs	31
Civil service social mobility stakeholders	12



Social Mobility  
Commission

