

Anything to declare?

A progress report on the *Declaration on Government Reform* – and what should come next



About this report

This report assesses the progress the government has made on its reform plan, the *Declaration on Government Reform*. It argues that further and faster change is needed to avoid a missed opportunity for reform and sets out the areas that ministers and civil servants should prioritise for action.

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Summary

In June 2021 the government's reform plan, the *Declaration on Government Reform*, was launched. Signed by the prime minister and cabinet secretary, it sets out the government's proposals on how to improve its own operation.

The Declaration has a good level of overall ambition, even if it is vague in places. But there is a gap between the government's goals and the plans in place to get there. The 30 specific actions in the Declaration's annex, designed to connect the reform plan's high-level ambitions to practical changes, are insufficient on their own to do so. Many were already happening when the reform plan was launched.

Progress on the actions themselves has been mixed. And there remains plenty still to do in 2022 and beyond. Eight actions have been delivered:

- outcome delivery plans are in place
- a new central digital and data office has been set up
- an evaluation task force and a No. 10 delivery unit have been established
- the government major projects portfolio has been expanded
- a government major contracts portfolio has been set up
- an extraordinary cabinet has been held
- the senior civil service (SCS) performance management framework has been updated
- a diversity and inclusion strategy has been published.

Other actions have made some progress but are not complete. The government is making headway towards its target of moving 22,000 civil service roles out of London by 2030, with more than 15,700 roles announced as relocating – although only around 2,000 have moved so far. The government skills and curriculum unit has developed parts of a new training programme for officials, and a leadership college for government with three physical campuses is due to open this month. And pay based on civil servants' 'capability' has been introduced for parts of the SCS.

But most of these reforms are changes to processes or announcements about future changes, and it is too soon to tell what their impact will be.

There are also too many actions behind schedule. Plans to establish new entry routes into the civil service and increase secondments between central government and the devolved administrations, the private sector and overseas governments are progressing more slowly than hoped. And reviews of civil service governance and models of accountability for decision making have stalled, despite the critical importance of establishing clearer accountabilities in government. There is more to do to generate an urgency behind reform across the wider civil service and make the impact of reform felt outside the centre of government.

The Declaration aims high but so far its practical impact has largely been to give impetus to reforms that were likely to happen anyway rather than leading to new and radical change. Without new momentum and renewed attention from senior figures it risks becoming the latest in a succession of reform efforts that identify the same big problems but do not resolve them. Further and faster change is needed.

In this report we argue that the government should publish a new set of more ambitious, tightly focused and mutually reinforcing actions if it is to meet its reform ambitions. The government should also set out the outcomes they are designed to achieve and a plan to deliver them to appropriate deadlines, and dedicate more central resources to evaluating their impact. We would prioritise four areas:

- **Constructing clearer accountability in government:** meaning that mistakes are less likely to happen and to learn lessons more effectively after things go wrong.
- **Reducing churn:** addressing the rapid turnover of staff in key jobs to improve subject expertise and deepen relationships.
- **Increasing outside recruitment:** improving 'porosity' by recruiting more people from the wider public and private sectors, and attracting external subject experts and those with specialist or unusual skills, to widen the pool of talent, diversity of perspectives and knowledge base available to the civil service.
- **Creating a 'smarter centre' of government:** supporting the prime minister in setting direction, identifying critical points for intervention and holding departments, their agencies and other tiers of government to account.

Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, has said that he is committed to ensuring the civil service does not miss its opportunity to reform in the aftermath of the Covid crisis. But the momentum behind change is slowing. A new set of actions is needed to reinvigorate the reform effort and meet the ambitions set out in the Declaration.

Introduction

In an October 2021 lecture at Newcastle University, the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, said that the question that kept him awake at night was: “How are we going to avoid the ‘curse of the missed opportunity’?”¹ After the shock of the coronavirus pandemic had helped to expose structural failings in parts of British government and stimulated rapid improvement in others, Case committed not to let the moment for reform be lost. While recognising the strengths of the civil service, he vowed it would use the aftermath of the crisis to address long-standing weaknesses.

Four months earlier, the government’s reform plan, the *Declaration on Government Reform*, had been launched by the then chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove. Jointly signed by the prime minister and cabinet secretary and endorsing many of the ideas Gove put forward in his Ditchley lecture the previous year, the Declaration is the government’s own assessment of its weaknesses and sets out a vision for how it plans to improve.² An annex to the document contains 30 actions initially scheduled to be completed by the end of 2021, subsequently readjusted to the end of the 2021/22 financial year.³ An action plan for all of government – ministers are mentioned multiple times throughout the document – its main focus is nonetheless on reforming the civil service. It does not encapsulate every activity taking place as part of government reform, but is by far the most comprehensive outline of what the government intends to do.

The Institute for Government’s view is that the Declaration contains a good level of overall ambition, correctly outlining a desire to fix some of the biggest problems with the way government works, even if it is vague in places. But there is a gap between the government’s overall vision for reform and the plans it has put in place to get there, with the 30 actions alone being insufficient to reach the Declaration’s ambitions. Furthermore, progress on the actions has been disappointingly mixed and government reform has dropped down ministers’ and civil service leaders’ list of priorities. There remains plenty still to do in 2022 and beyond. Ministers and civil service leaders must reinvigorate their commitment to reform. And whatever their other merits, changes to the centre of government – and particularly the planned creation of a new office of the prime minister – cannot be allowed to starve the reform agenda of the resources and leadership needed for success.

Government reform is not an abstract activity; it affects the real-world outcomes experienced by citizens across the country. The government has an ambitious agenda to ‘level up’, build a ‘Global Britain’ and reach net zero by 2050, all while remaining committed to its election manifesto and dealing with a succession of crises at home and abroad.⁴ Further and faster progress on the reform agenda is critical to leaving the government better placed to deliver the defining planks of its agenda and successfully navigate turbulent world events. And it will mean that the civil service is better equipped to help any future administration to do the same. Particularly at a time when the government is facing substantial medium-term challenges including a growing cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine, the civil service being able to deliver – and being seen to do so – is important for citizens and the legitimacy of government.

Is the Declaration a good reform plan?

The government was right to launch a government reform plan

Managing the day-to-day activity of government is difficult and time-consuming, so administrative reform is often pushed out by more pressing concerns.^{5,6} To help mitigate this problem and generate momentum, publishing a government reform plan signed by the prime minister and cabinet secretary was a good idea. In the internal currency of Whitehall, the document was a signal to key internal power-brokers that they should invest time and institutional capital in reform, which they otherwise would have been more reluctant to do.⁷

Consolidating the reform plan into a single document was sensible. Presenting reforms as part of a single package gave civil service leaders and ministers a narrative hook to explain their vision for government reform, helping to generate internal support.⁸ The Declaration's collaborative writing process, which included input from a range of permanent secretaries and ministers, was worthwhile. Whitehall's federal structure means that it is important for key figures both at the centre of government and in departments to commit to the reform process.⁹ Engaging with them during the construction of the plan and incorporating their views on how things could be improved helped to ensure this was the case. It also improved the final plan, given that senior civil servants and ministers have valuable knowledge about what needs to change in government.

In an ideal world, government reform should be an ongoing process of continuous improvement. But Whitehall's federal structure and the pressures of day-to-day administration pose challenges to any reform effort. Publishing a discrete reform plan is a good way of mitigating them and the government was right to do so.

The government has the right overall ambition for reform, but the 30 actions are underwhelming

The main body of the Declaration sets out a suitably ambitious, albeit in places vague, overall vision for reform. Bold change is needed in many areas and evidence from public sector change programmes suggests that it is more ambitious reform plans that are most successful – they require organisations to commit to properly changing their ways of working rather than allowing them to treat reform as a side project.¹⁰ In pledging to “bring greater clarity to the roles, responsibilities and accountability of Ministers and senior officials when taking decisions”, expand and enhance training for civil servants and ministers, increase the movement of people between the civil service and wider public and private sectors (known as ‘porosity’), find ways to “better reward those who excel”, “champion innovation and harness science” and much more, the government identified long-standing weaknesses and promised to address them. It was also expressing sentiments that the Institute's existing body of work supports.^{11,12,13,14}

It was a good idea for the Declaration to provide a list of specific actions, each assigned to a senior responsible owner (SRO). Publishing specific actions helped to connect the reform plan's high-level ambitions to practical changes. SROs we

interviewed for this report generally agreed that being able to refer back to their action had helped them to make change happen. Many discussed occasions on which they had done so to stimulate enthusiasm, see off attempts to water their reform down, or win round key stakeholders. If a reform was one of the specific actions, this was used internally as evidence that the activity was important and deserved to be allocated resources.

Including a deadline for the completion of the actions was, in principle, a good idea. Deadlines can create a sense of urgency conducive to delivery. But assigning all 30 actions the same deadline despite large variation in the type of action and scale of ambition was a mistake. For example, the commitment to “implement plans to move 22,000 roles out of London by 2030” self-evidently has a longer delivery horizon than the 2021/22 financial year, explaining the awkward addendum of “confirming at least five major departmental relocations this year”.¹⁵ The benefits of a deadline are lost when it is not a clear and fixed point by which a certain action or outcome has to be delivered.¹⁶ Artificial deadlines create a sense of unreality and so fail to instil urgency. Instead of forcing all 30 actions to conform to a single deadline, a more nuanced approach separating them into cohorts would have been a more effective catalyst for change.¹⁷

Time, money and political capital are scarce resources in government. It is important for a reform process to use them in the most efficient way, which in practice means focusing resources on the reforms that will have the most impact in changing how government operates.¹⁸ It was therefore right for the Declaration to target many of its initial ‘people’ actions towards the SCS. The SCS has the most influence on the way the civil service works, including through managing staff. Of any ‘people’ reforms those directed towards the SCS will have the biggest knock-on effect throughout government. It is also a well-defined group, small in number compared to the rest of the civil service, and its members have common characteristics in their contracts and performance management. This means ‘gripping’ the SCS is easier than other groups, making reforms more practically actionable.

However, more broadly, there is a disconnect between the 30 actions and the overarching vision of the Declaration. For example, the actions relevant to the government’s ambition to “bring greater clarity to the roles, responsibilities and accountability of Ministers and senior officials when taking decisions” are to complete a review of civil service governance and a review of models of accountability for decision making. Completing these reviews would have helped to inform the government’s approach but all of the big decisions would still have needed to be made. Meanwhile, other areas mentioned in the body of the Declaration are entirely absent from the list of actions. For example, no action is designed to “promote mixed-disciplinary teams”, “set... a requirement to share data across departments” or ensure “ministers and permanent secretaries [have] clear responsibility for [ethical] standards in their departments”.

Furthermore, while taking a collaborative approach to constructing the document was prudent and it was right for the 30 actions to target its 'people' reforms at the SCS, the final set of actions are too focused on maintaining that collaborative approach at the expense of properly picking priorities. Government reform plans often become 'Christmas trees' on which senior leaders hang their favoured ideas.¹⁹ The inclusion of actions such as creating a central record of government property or introducing mandatory reporting of the costs and risks of outdated IT systems suggests that the Declaration exhibits the same tendency. Both of these reforms are good things to do, but will not profoundly change how government works and so dilute political and administrative energy that could have been directed at ambitious changes more helpful to reaching the Declaration's high-level ambitions.

The catalytic effect of the actions has also been undermined because many were already planned or in progress prior to the Declaration's launch. Examples include setting outcome delivery plans, relocating civil servants outside London and establishing a new curriculum and training campus for civil servants. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing – simply because actions were already planned does not mean they are not important or difficult to pursue. But it reflects the fact that, despite its aspirational rhetoric, the practical value of the Declaration so far has mainly been in making it easier to deliver reforms that were likely to happen anyway, rather than helping to encourage new and radical changes that otherwise might not have. Given the authority vested in the document as a blueprint for reform, this has been a wasted opportunity.

The Declaration, therefore, was more a statement of intent than a plan. The ambition in the main body of the document is good and it provides a sense of what the government sees as the 'end state' of government reform. But it gives much less confidence that the government has properly planned the practical steps it will take to get there.

Many of the proposals in the Declaration are not new and the next phase of reform should focus on delivery

Government reform is difficult. There are almost half a million civil servants spread across more than 400 central government departments and their associated agencies, each with their own cultures, priorities and practices.^{20,21} Meanwhile, ministers move between jobs at a far higher rate than private sector executives and are subject to powerful political incentives which reward activity around publicly visible priorities and not administrative reform behind the scenes.

People we interviewed for this report stressed that the size of government and the breadth of issues it covers mean it is more analogous to a conglomerate or a sector than a single business, the last of these being the unit at which reform plans usually happen in the private sector. The majority of private sector reform plans fail to achieve the objectives that they set themselves, so it is not surprising that in the additionally complex environment of government, failure is also common.²²

The difficulty of reforming government is one reason why many of the specific proposals in the Declaration mirror those from previous civil service reform efforts, as shown in Figure 1 below. Some of the Declaration's themes – such as employee skills and financial efficiency – are those with which any organisation should be constantly preoccupied. But that the same specific ideas constantly reappear suggests that solutions to the problems repeatedly identified over the past 50 years have often not been satisfactorily implemented.

However, government reform can and does happen. In some areas the civil service has changed a great deal since the turn of the century; for example, its workforce is more diverse and organised into increasingly coherent functional specialisms. And it has got better at reforming itself. The Civil Service People Survey shows that civil servants' perception of the way change was managed in their organisation became substantially more positive between 2009 and 2020.²³

In our initial analysis of the Declaration, we said that “just because some of the proposals are well known... does not mean that they are wrong”.²⁴ Indeed, it reinforces how important it is that they are implemented. The past 50 years have seen a repeated cycle:

- Problems with how government works are recognised and programmes of reform are launched to rectify them.
- There is some activity but not enough to solve the thorniest problems.
- Reform then subsides as ministers and officials lose interest.
- A few years later, new ministers and officials rediscover many of the same problems, which were never properly addressed.
- A new government reform effort is then launched to fix them – containing similar (and in some places identical) proposals as the previous programme.²⁵

This cycle has come at a cost. Failing to rectify the problems that it has consistently identified has ultimately meant that the civil service has been less effective than it might have been in supporting the government of the day, with negative consequences for real-world outcomes and its own legitimacy. The key question for the current reform effort is whether it can deliver enough change that this cycle is substantively broken and the next programme can move on to different challenges.

The Declaration was published at the right time – as Michael Gove noted in his speech at its launch, the aftermath of a crisis often provides fertile conditions for reform.^{26,27} Covid shone a light on areas where government could work better and there remains a window of opportunity to make serious progress towards solving perennial problems. Tackling them now would help the current administration deliver on its ambitions and leave the civil service better equipped to help future administrations do the same. Failing to solve them now will simply see the same problems continue to rear their head in the years to come.

Figure 1 Recurring themes in civil service reform plans²⁸

Making the civil service less London-centric	Porosity between the civil service and other organisations	Secondments into and out of the civil service	Linking pay to capability/ performance	Better training
<p>Fulton Report, 1968 "The Administrative Class of the Civil Service has been on easy and familiar terms...with London, less so with the regions"</p>	<p>Fulton Report, 1968 "There are people in business, the professions, nationalised industry, local government and the universities whose experience would be most valuable to the Service... A steady inflow of suitably-qualified older entrants with new ideas and relevant experience would, we believe, bring great benefits throughout the Service"</p>	<p>Next Steps, 1988 "A wide range of new arrangements will be needed, including... secondments to give [civil servants] the required experience"</p>	<p>Fulton Report, 1968 "We believe that it should be possible to reward merit by extra pay as well as by promotion"</p>	<p>Fulton Report, 1968 "There is an immediate need to...set up an extensive training programme, so that present civil servants who have not been given adequate opportunities for training in the past can acquire the knowledge and skills they need"</p>
<p>Lyons Review, 2004 "National public sector activity is concentrated in and around London to an extent which is inconsistent with Government objectives"</p>	<p>Continuity and Change, 1994 "There is already a substantial level of...exchanges from and to the Civil Service. But the Government is committed to improving upon this level of interchange"</p>	<p>Wilson Report, 1999 "we must...increase the number of secondments and involve people from other organisations in projects"</p>	<p>Wilson Report, 1999 "departments will work towards new pay and appraisal systems... to build a culture of continuous improvement...with pay based in future explicitly on relative performance"</p>	<p>Continuity and Change, 1994 "Better training for all and effective management development will be crucial to improving performance in policy making and service delivery"</p>
<p>Smith Review, 2010 "There remains considerable scope for further relocation and a continuing rebalancing of activity between central London in particular and the rest of the country...to achieve a proper balance between London and the rest of the UK"</p>	<p>Modernising Government, 1999 "We will bring more people into the civil service from outside. We will hold more open recruitment competitions for people at various career stages. We will make greater use of short-term contracts"</p>	<p>Modernising Government, 1999 "We will increase secondments to and from the rest of the public sector, the voluntary sector and the private sector"</p>	<p>Civil Service Reform Plan, 2012 "The SCS pay structure is no longer an effective mechanism for supporting a modern workforce, and there is an insufficient link between performance and reward... we will develop plans for a new SCS reward package"</p>	<p>Wilson Report, 1999 "departments will, by July 2000, start redirecting their training programmes better to support the capability of their managers at all levels to manage performance"</p>
<p>Declaration on Government Reform, 2021 "We will look beyond London to all corners of the UK, as part of our mission to be a government more like the country we serve"</p>	<p>Civil Service Reform Plan, 2012 "The barriers between the private sector and the Civil Service must be broken down to encourage learning between the two. A greater interchange of people and ideas will help to narrow the cultural gap"</p>	<p>Civil Service Reform Plan, 2012 "Both staff and the Civil Service gain from staff having greater opportunity for interchange, secondments and loans with other sectors and industries"</p>	<p>Declaration on Government Reform, 2021 "We will reward people for being exceptional in what they deliver for the public...we will link rewards and bonuses to meeting...targets and demonstrating wider performance"</p>	<p>Declaration on Government Reform, 2021 "We will invest in training for civil servants and for Ministers, with high standards for online provision as well as the creation of a new physical campus... to equip our people with the skills and knowledge they need to tackle the challenges of the future"</p>
	<p>Declaration on Government Reform, 2021 "We will develop new entry routes from industry, academia, the third sector and the wider public sector, with flexibility to suit those who want to build a career in government and those who want a shorter tour of duty"</p>	<p>Declaration on Government Reform, 2021 "[We will] develop a pipeline of secondments from the Civil Service into major organisations within the UK and internationally, including other governments...as a core part of talent development...we will use...outside secondees to challenge conventional thinking"</p>		

How much progress has been made on government reform?

The reform plan has had a mixed start

In February 2022, the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and No. 10 chief of staff, Steve Barclay, sent a letter to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) giving an update on the progress the government had made towards meeting the Declaration's objectives.²⁹ Of the 30 commitments made in the Declaration's annex, 23 were directly addressed. Barclay reported that six had been fully delivered, substantial progress had been made on a further ten, while progress had been slower than planned on seven.

Barclay's letter was commendably honest, closely matching our own assessment of the progress made at that time. It is a good development that the government was willing to report on its activities openly and credibly. Being transparent about successes and failures improves the effectiveness of government by opening it up to outside input, expertise and scrutiny. It also improves trust in government communications.

The six actions that Barclay said had been delivered were:

- publishing outcome delivery plans
- establishing the central digital and data office
- setting up the evaluation task force and No. 10 delivery unit
- expanding the government major projects portfolio
- setting up a government major contracts portfolio
- holding an extraordinary cabinet attended by ministers and officials.

Since his update two more commitments have been fulfilled. A diversity and inclusion strategy has been published and the SCS performance management framework has been updated alongside revised arrangements for permanent secretaries.

Other actions have made some progress. More than 15,700 roles have been announced as relocating outside London by 2030, making headway towards the target of 22,000, although only around 2,000 roles have moved so far. The government skills and curriculum unit has developed a curriculum, of which four of five 'strands' are currently available. The levelling up white paper also announced a 'leadership college for government' with three physical campuses, due to open this month.³⁰ And capability-based pay has been introduced for SCS1 and 2 – although for the action to be fully completed it will need to be extended further, including to delegated grades.*

* Grades below SCS level.

But we cannot yet assess whether the above actions will have the desired tangible impact. Most are changes to processes or announcements about future changes, and it is too soon to evaluate their consequences for the effectiveness of government.

There are also too many actions on which minimal progress has been made. Barclay's letter recognised that actions 2, 3 and 5 – to establish new entry routes into the civil service, look at ways of encouraging entrants with specific, high-demand skills and increase secondments to the private sector and governments abroad – have made less headway. In some ways the porosity of the civil service has got worse over time and there is little sign yet of improvement – 20% of appointments to the SCS were from external applicants in 2019/20, down from 42% in 2010/11.³¹ Barclay also noted that action 4 on increasing secondments between the devolved administrations and the UK government has made little progress. And the reviews of civil service governance and models of accountability for decision making have stalled.

Overall, progress remains disappointingly patchy. Some of the actions were difficult but others were not that ambitious in the first place. Many reflected work that was already planned or in progress when the Declaration was published and so were not being delivered from a standing start. In areas of long-standing weakness such as accountability, even the relatively modest actions made little progress. It is fair to expect that more could have been done over the past 10 months.

Momentum behind government reform seems to be slowing

The corporate leadership of the civil service, notably cabinet secretary Simon Case and chief operating officer Alex Chisholm, insists that it remains committed to the Declaration. In his October 2021 lecture at Newcastle University, Case described the government as in the "foothills of these reforms" and acknowledged that "there is much more to do".³² Meanwhile, Chisholm told PACAC that the Declaration is "a core part of what the government is committed to" and has also said that his number one priority in 2022 is delivering on the reform agenda.^{33,34}

This is important. Interviewees felt strongly, backed up by relevant literature, that visible support from the most senior figures in government is crucial to the success of reform plans, particularly in their early stages.^{35,36} Officials want to see leaders show commitment to reform before they commit to it themselves and displaying that commitment publicly is important to create a sense of shared purpose and signal to the rest of the system that reform is a priority.

However, while Case and Chisholm's stated commitment to reform is positive, the 10 months since the Declaration's launch have been a very busy time. The government has been forced to continue dedicating resources to fighting the pandemic, particularly during the Omicron wave that emerged in December 2021. Brexit continues to change the way government works. The recent war in Ukraine has necessarily consumed much senior attention – on both the foreign policy and domestic response. And a series of self-inflicted scandals over standards in public life has created an environment of instability. The reform agenda, while not entirely starved of attention, has certainly slipped down the list of priorities.

Ministerial enthusiasm for the reform agenda looks increasingly uncertain. This has never seemed a personal priority for the prime minister and in the absence of his direct interest, another senior minister needs to take up the cause with the prime minister's backing. It was good that Steve Barclay echoed Case in recognising that the government was still in the "foothills" of reform in his letter to PACAC.³⁷ But while there appears to be no shortage of good intentions, the rapid turnover of Cabinet Office ministers over the past 10 months (with responsibility for government reform passing from Gove to Barclay to Jacob Rees-Mogg as part of the latter's broad portfolio) is indicative of an administration in which a myriad of other, more immediate issues are winning the battle for ministerial attention. If the Declaration's vision is to be achieved it will require ministers and their special advisers, as well as civil servants, to dedicate time and energy to government reform.

More positively, the reform programme currently enjoys important support from the Treasury. Institute for Government research has shown that with its grip on key levers and ability to provide or withhold funding for reforms, support (or at least permission) from the Treasury is crucial to the success of attempts to reform government.³⁸ Interviewees told us that the Treasury is broadly supportive of reform and that key senior officials in the Treasury and Cabinet Office have more productive working relationships than has sometimes previously been the case.

The 2021 spending review made the necessary funding available to multiple components of the reform agenda. This included £15 million over three years for the evaluation task force and £2.6 billion for cyber and the replacement of legacy IT (in addition to more than £600m dedicated to legacy IT at the 2020 spending review).³⁹ There was further funding for the Places for Growth programme, which co-ordinates civil service relocation, and the One Login project for a single sign-on to online government services.⁴⁰ All four of these, however, were in the government's plans before the Declaration's launch and so were likely to receive at least some funding regardless.

The reform programme remains in its early stages

When the Declaration was published, we said that "its success must be judged by how long the momentum for reform lasts, whether senior political attention persists... and how much change really happens over the coming years".⁴¹ There remains plenty to do if the government is to reach the Declaration's ambitions. At present the effects of the reform agenda have hardly been felt outside the centre of government. Hard work has undoubtedly gone into reaching this point, but thinking that the bulk of the job has now been done would be a big mistake.

The most successful government reform programmes sustain momentum for years.⁴² For example, the Next Steps initiative, best known for hiving off many of Whitehall's delivery functions into autonomous public bodies, lasted around eight years before tailing off. Next Steps was built upon the existing financial efficiency reform programme of Sir Derek Rayner, which sought to find ways of saving money in departments, in itself a rolling series of studies over half a decade.

The Bringing In and Bringing On talent programme that led to a substantial increase in the diversity of the civil service also lasted around five years.⁴³

If this reform effort is not to be the latest in a long line that identifies the same big problems but does not resolve them then the government must maintain momentum behind it. To do so it is crucial that both civil service leaders and ministers reinvigorate their commitment to the Declaration's agenda. Easing off now would mean failing to realise the potential of the reform effort. This would be a major missed opportunity – just the thing the cabinet secretary has said he is desperate to avoid.

What next for the Declaration?

The government should refresh the reform agenda

When the Declaration was launched in June 2021, government was in an unusually fluid state as it responded to the pandemic. Having just observed what did and did not work well during the Covid response, reform was at the forefront of ministers' minds. As the Covid crisis has receded, so has some of the bureaucratic flexibility and ministerial appetite for reform it engendered. But we are close enough to the crisis that some flexibility remains. A window of opportunity to make progress on reform continues to exist and the government must take advantage of it. Now is the moment for the reform agenda to be refreshed with the continuing and vocal support of Simon Case, Alex Chisholm, Steve Barclay and Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Refreshing the reform agenda should not mean rewriting the reform plan. The Declaration sets the right direction and flitting between plans now would merely reinforce the view held by a subset of civil servants that such plans are passing fads that can be waited out.⁴⁴ Reform involves civil servants changing their ways of working and this can be a painful process which some will avoid if they think it will be irrelevant in the medium term. So in substance and presentation, the refresh must be a continuation of the Declaration's existing vision, not a departure from it.

The prime minister's plan to create an office of the prime minister is an opportunity to develop the "smarter centre" of government to which the Declaration refers. But it is also likely to make successful government reform harder. It would mean splitting the Cabinet Office, with the parts that directly or indirectly support the prime minister likely to merge with No. 10, leaving the corporate centre as a separate entity – and probably a lower-status backwater.

To mitigate this, the prime minister should remain minister for the civil service and ensure that there is a senior cabinet minister responsible for government reform who can dedicate real time and energy to the agenda. It should also be clear that the cabinet secretary, the chief operating officer and the relevant minister are directly responsible for the reform agenda and personally accountable for its success or failure. Senior officials in the new office of the prime minister should also retain interest in reform and lend their authority to pushing it along when necessary.

The government should publish a new set of reform actions

'Reform' is not an abstract endeavour. It must be made real through tangible activity that actually changes how government operates. Publishing specific actions is one of the best ways to prevent reform becoming too abstract and as experience with the current set of 30 actions has shown, providing SROs with a mandate to refer back to is useful for driving change. Now that the current set of actions has expired the government should produce a new set, showing how it plans to reach the ambitions in the Declaration over the next few years.

These new actions should be more ambitious and focused than the original 30. It was right for the original set to focus its 'people' actions on the SCS and ministers, but in other ways there was not enough prioritisation of the most consequential reforms. Our research into civil service reform demonstrates the importance of a sharp focus on a limited number of well-resourced interventions.⁴⁵ Too many actions or actions that span too broad a scope disperse attention to the detriment of meaningful progress and the next phase of reform would benefit from fewer, better-prioritised actions.

The new set of reform actions should be separated into different cohorts, with actions matched to the delivery timeline to which they are best suited. The approach taken for the initial 30 actions, which all conformed to a uniform delivery timeline, should not be repeated. The expected outcomes of each action should also be set out, with actions regularly evaluated to determine if these outcomes are being achieved. If a reform turns out to be wrong, or of limited impact, ministers and civil servants should be able to confidently abandon it and communicate accordingly. This was something that Michael Gove recognised at the Declaration's launch, describing how its reforms would be "subject to the same rigorous evaluation we demand of all others" and that "some initiatives will have to be altered and adjusted, others may prove counter-productive, and there will, undoubtedly, be the need still to press even further and even faster in some areas".⁴⁶

The next phase of reform should recognise that government is a complex system

The new actions should reflect that many of the priorities for reform outlined in the Declaration are so-called 'systems problems', occurring because of complex interdependencies between lots of variables. For example, the core problem identified under the 'people' heading of the Declaration is that the civil service does not identify, recruit, train and deploy civil servants as well as it could. The factors that cause this do not exist in isolation and neither do the proposed solutions to the problem.

Take civil service churn. In his June 2020 Ditchley lecture on government reform, Michael Gove criticised "the whirligig of civil service transfers and promotions".⁴⁷ The Declaration aims to address this by committing to incentivise those with deep subject expertise to stay in post longer.⁴⁸ Of the original 30 actions, two targeted this problem: the introduction of capability-based pay and a commitment to set expected assignment durations on appointment for all SCS posts.

While both of these changes are worthwhile, churn is caused by multiple interacting factors. Constraints on increasing salary in post is one and a failure to properly communicate expected tenure lengths is another. But there is also a lack of formal career development for even the most talented civil servants, differences in departments' working environments that mean departments with low staff morale tend to see staff 'pushed' away, and also a sense that moving quickly and between departments is the best route to the upper echelons of the civil service.⁴⁹ Our research suggests that this last factor is the biggest driver of churn.⁵⁰

This means that the two actions in the Declaration targeting churn will make little difference on their own. If change is to happen, the government also needs to address the other reasons why churn exists and particularly the cultural expectation that moving jobs quickly and ranging widely is the best way to advance a career. Any reforms must also be mutually reinforcing. For example, the introduction of suggested assignment durations will mean little unless failing to adhere to them damages a civil servant's reputation and promotion prospects. Rapid movement between roles will continue to be incentivised until there is evidence that the path to the top is not to travel through various ministerially facing positions, dealing with tricky short-term problems before moving on.⁵¹ The chances of civil servants spending longer in post also fall if capability-based pay does not offer the opportunity for a salary increase quickly enough to prevent civil servants becoming dissatisfied and looking for another job. And the length of time civil servants are content to spend in a role without a pay rise will be influenced by their understanding of their expected tenure length.

While setting time-bound individual actions is a good idea, experience of the Declaration's actions so far has shown that this process can artificially segment reforms that support the same broad agenda and in some cases are mutually reliant or substantially interact.⁵² For example, the Declaration's commitment to increase intergovernmental secondments falls under a separate action to its commitment to increase secondments to the private sector and overseas governments and both are assigned to different SROs, despite their obvious overlap. Such arrangements create counter-productive friction between individual reforms and lead to perverse outcomes where different teams working on related reforms do not fully align or integrate their work. The new set of actions must be designed and overseen in a way that prevents this from happening.

The next reform actions should focus on four priority areas

Given the benefits of clear prioritisation, the new set of actions should particularly focus on reform in four key areas: accountability, churn, porosity and the centre of government. The government should prioritise employing the right people and keeping them in post long enough to make a difference, strengthening the capacity of the centre so it can set clear direction, and making clear who is accountable for success or failure in delivering government objectives.

These four areas are not exhaustive. For example, Jacob Rees-Mogg's public statements since being appointed to his new post overseeing government reform show that his priority is the efficiency of the civil service and particularly cutting staff numbers. Progress on the Declaration's ambition to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy will be helpful to achieving this goal – although proper workforce planning must inform any reduction in staff numbers.⁵³

But while efficiency is important, these four areas are where reform is needed most, because they address failings in the underlying wiring of how government works rather than the symptoms that result. The main body of the Declaration covered all four points but the first round of actions was not ambitious enough to deliver real change. Making progress on them in the next round of actions is a prerequisite for progress in other areas.

Accountability

The Declaration promised to “bring greater clarity to the roles, responsibilities and accountability of ministers and senior officials when taking decisions”, but minimal progress has been made on the subsequent commitments to review civil service governance and models of accountability for decision making.

Improving accountability is at the core of making UK government work more effectively. If accountability for policies or their implementation is unclear then mistakes are more likely to happen because ministers and civil servants will not be as incentivised to succeed. And clear accountability – to parliament and the public – is the way that lessons are learned after mistakes. Our view is that the relationship and responsibilities between ministers and civil servants are too ambiguous, and that it is too hard to unpick who is responsible for what.

We recently published a paper setting out the Institute’s contribution to improving accountability in government, arguing that the civil service needs a new statutory role to clarify its purpose, reinforce its standing and strengthen the partnership between ministers and civil servants.⁵⁴ Top civil servants would be given a clear responsibility to maintain the capability of the civil service to implement the programmes of current and future administrations, and there would be an oversight board to hold them to account. We also propose greater parliamentary scrutiny of the civil service and more formal reporting requirements from the civil service to parliament.

The government will, of course, reach its own conclusions, but should commit to addressing this problem as a matter of priority.

Churn

The rapid turnover of staff is one of the biggest problems for the civil service. It means that civil servants advising ministers often have shallow subject expertise and that institutional memory is weakened, resulting in the same mistakes being made because those formulating current policy have little or no recollection of past attempts.⁵⁵ We also estimate that it means up to £74m a year is wasted in recruitment, training and lost productivity.⁵⁶ The Declaration committed to incentivising people with subject expertise to stay in post for longer and some progress has been made on the actions to introduce capability-based pay and expected assignment durations. But as noted above, alone these will make little difference.

To properly address churn, reforms must also target the civil service’s lack of formal career development structures and the sense that in central government job-hopping is the best route to a successful career. The Institute has previously recommended that the government introduce formal career development structures tailored to reward staff (not just financially) for developing expertise and that permanent secretaries should be set a target level for staff turnover in their departments and held to account if this is not met.⁵⁷ We also recently proposed a new ‘anchor’ model for civil servants where job movement is managed around broad areas of subject expertise.⁵⁸ These ideas and others should be implemented as part of the Declaration’s next phase.

Porosity

Increasing the movement of people between the civil service and the wider public and private sectors is one of the central themes of the 'people' section of the Declaration. But the relevant actions are among those where it has proved harder to make progress. Particularly in recent years the civil service's record of hiring external candidates has been poor, with only 20% of appointments to the SCS in 2019/20 being from external applicants.⁵⁹

Increasing porosity would widen the pool of talent available to the civil service and bring new perspectives into Whitehall. This would help to mitigate the narrowness of thinking often found in Whitehall's policy making process.⁶⁰ It would also help to improve the capabilities of the civil service. Civil servants' experiences outside Whitehall would teach them new skills, while external subject experts and those with specialist or unusual skills would be more able to come into government to offer the benefits of their knowledge.

In his letter to PACAC, Steve Barclay reported that the civil service recruitment framework would be revised to increase the pace of progress on porosity. This is a start, but the government needs to do more. The Baxendale report's recommendations from 2014 should be revisited, including on recruitment and improving induction for new senior civil servants.⁶¹ The government should review the effectiveness of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, strengthening its ethical oversight to give the public and civil servants confidence that appointments from outside the civil service are made on a proper basis.

There should be increased resource dedicated to growing opportunities for secondments and fixed-term placements in the civil service, particularly given how difficult doing so has proven over the years, reaffirming the Declaration's commitment to giving those who want a "shorter tour of duty" a route to contribute to government. The government should examine ways to better identify, attract and provide appropriate career paths for external subject experts and those with specialist or unusual skills who could make a positive contribution to the civil service. And the government should continue to relocate senior and policy-focused roles outside London to attract and retain talented staff from different backgrounds who do not want to work in the capital.

A 'smarter centre' of government

Britain has the worst of all worlds: a highly centralised system of government without sufficient capacity to organise it from the centre.⁶² The Declaration commits to building a "smarter centre" and the creation of a new office of the prime minister is an opportunity to do this.

A prime minister needs a support structure that allows them to set direction, identify critical points for intervention and hold departments, their agencies and other tiers of government to account for running things effectively and making change happen. But at present, the centre of government is unable to do this. No. 10 and the Cabinet Office are organised in a way that offers limited policy and implementation support

to the prime minister. A stronger centre should not mean more centralisation of day-to-day work – that would take decisions further away from citizens and the front-line delivery systems in departments. But it should mean providing the prime minister with more support to set direction and deal with the most important government policy objectives.^{63,64}

The next phase of reform work should build on the recent creation of outcome delivery plans to set departmental objectives and incorporate these into how the prime minister's office works with the Treasury to hold departments to account. If, as we anticipate, the new office includes the Cabinet Office's co-ordinating secretariats as well as traditional No. 10 functions like a private office and policy unit, this is an opportunity to embed better accountability structures into the organisation of top priority government business.

However, creating a new office of the prime minister carries risks for reform if the main teams leading the programme are not part of the high-status prime ministerial office. Running a reform programme from a depleted Cabinet Office, or a low-profile civil service department, will be difficult. A "smarter centre" is one which not only supports the prime minister better but also allows the reform agenda to flourish. And as noted above, while the prime minister may have limited interest in the topic himself he must remain minister for the civil service and give his backing to another senior minister to lead on reform throughout the next phase of activity.

The way reform is led and managed will need to change

Currently, work on the Declaration is overseen by the Cabinet Office's modernisation and reform unit (MRU), a central team who "work across government to drive progress against the ambitions and commitments set out in the Declaration on Government Reform".⁶⁵ The reform plan's formal programme management mechanism is a monthly delivery board, attended by senior leaders including the cabinet secretary and the chief operating officer. SROs responsible for individual actions report their progress to the MRU, which compiles this data to be scrutinised at the monthly boards. Problems are noted and escalated as necessary.

The Institute's research on previous civil service reforms shows that central teams like the MRU can be an effective way of stimulating change. But doing so requires striking the right balance between the use of compulsion and persuasion. Central teams must combat the default assumption that they are 'just another central unit' trying to unilaterally impose the centre's will on other parts of government and creating a bureaucratic burden without adding value.⁶⁶ But they also need to be able to compel other parts of government to dedicate resources to reform if necessary. To do this they need to be adequately supported by senior leaders, who must make it clear that the unit is acting with their authority.⁶⁷

As its approach to constructing the reform plan exemplified, the MRU has won praise across government for its collaborative approach to reform; it seems to have avoided the danger of being 'just another central unit'. But there are questions over how much authority it has to compel other parts of government to engage with the Declaration's

agenda when necessary and an urgency to reform is yet to be felt by most of the civil service, particularly outside the centre. This is partly because it is not always clear that senior leaders have sufficiently lent their authority to the MRU. The next stage of reform needs to bolster rather than erode the authority and capacity of this central team, allowing them to more effectively co-ordinate across government and drive progress on the reform plan.

The MRU should also now focus more on evaluating the practical impact of the Declaration's reforms. Currently the unit spends relatively little time evaluating the output of the actions it monitors progress on, with SROs mostly left to evaluate their own work. This means that it is not well equipped to robustly evaluate whether the actions taking place under the umbrella of the reform plan are those to which scarce resources should be committed. The MRU must have the tools to ensure Michael Gove's commitment to "rigorous evaluation" can be delivered in practice. The unit should use the expertise of the new evaluation task force, established in the Declaration's first round of actions, to improve its capability in this area.

Conclusion

The *Declaration on Government Reform* was a welcome document and, although vague in places, ultimately contains a good level of overall ambition. But the reform programme has made a mixed start and there remains plenty still to do.

The Declaration's success will depend on how its high-level ambitions are delivered in practice and whether problems with the way government works actually improve. But there is a gap between the government's overall ambition for reform and the plans currently in place to get there. Now that the deadline for the initial actions has passed, the government should commit to a new set of more ambitious, tightly focused and mutually reinforcing actions. These new actions should particularly focus on four key areas where change would be most consequential: accountability, churn, porosity and building a 'smarter centre' of government.

The cabinet secretary is right to worry about the "curse of the missed opportunity". The coronavirus pandemic exposed many of the failings of British government but also provided an opportunity to make meaningful progress in correcting them. Failure to do so will ultimately mean worse outcomes for citizens. The onus is now on the government to deliver.

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