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A manifesto for delivery: 14 ideas for a better Whitehall

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After a decade of disruption, the country faces a moment of national reflection. For too long, Britain has been papering over the cracks in an outdated social and economic model, but while this may bring temporary respite, it doesn't fix the foundations. In 1942 Beveridge stated: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching." 80 years on, and in the wake of a devastating national crisis, that statement once again rings true. Now is the time to fix Britain's foundations.

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Reimagining Whitehall is one of the major work streams within this programme. This paper is part of our Reimagining Whitehall series.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reform would like to thank Newton for kindly supporting this paper and the series of senior-level roundtable discussions which informed it. We would also like to thank all attendees at these five roundtables, in particular the five speakers.

These five roundtables and speakers are listed below:

- 'Designed to deliver – from ideas to outcomes' with Dame Dr Emily Lawson DBE, Head of the No.10 Delivery Unit
- 'A modern machine: embedding corporate capabilities throughout Whitehall' with Sapana Agrawal, Director, Modernisation and Reform, Cabinet Office
- 'Thinking differently: achieving a cognitively diverse civil service' with Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary, Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities
- 'Delivering what works: building a Whitehall that learns' with Catherine Hutchinson, Head of the Evaluation Task Force, Cabinet Office
- 'An innovation mindset' with Sarah Munby, Permanent Secretary, Department for Science, Innovation & Technology

14 IDEAS FOR BUILDING A WHITEHALL TO DELIVER

Idea 1: Elevate the operational and delivery-focused aspects of policymaking within the civil service policy profession unit, bringing these into parity with policy expertise.

Idea 2: Create intergovernmental and interdepartmental institutions to tighten the feedback loop between central and local government and build cross-functional collaboration through the Whitehall system.

Idea 3: Where local systems are sufficiently mature, ensure that powers are devolved to local or regional authorities to help drive delivery.

Idea 4: Ensure that we are actively learning from the work of cross-cutting and silo-busting teams such as the No 10 Delivery Unit, with a view to iterating upon their practice with delivery-unit style teams within every government department and to support the work of major whole-government initiatives like missions.

Idea 5: Engage in a skills-mapping exercise, informed by the practice of the successful Government Digital Service, to help identify and leverage existing talents within the Civil Service. This should ultimately be used to help inform a full-scale strategic workforce plan.

Idea 6: Adapt recruitment practices to help ensure a wider range of experiences and cognitive approaches are incorporated into Whitehall processes.

Idea 7: Adapt development, advancement, and promotion practices to build cognitive diversity and the presence of expertise throughout the civil service.

Idea 8: Foster ‘connecting and convening’ skillsets, with the ability to draw together and make best use of multi-disciplinary teams from across the system, as part of development practices such as the ‘future leaders’ programme.

Idea 9: Pilot the use of departmental innovation sandboxes, hubs where teams are invited to develop novel policy ideas and delivery approaches outside the usual hierarchies of civil service work. Teams can apply to develop an idea ‘within the sandbox’.

Idea 10: Build incentives for innovative practices within departments with policies to ensure that departments themselves benefit from a share of any major efficiency savings or productivity benefits that are achieved through innovative working (instead of these automatically being held by Treasury).

Idea 11: Strengthen the evaluation task force so that it is able to go further in driving a stronger evaluative capability across Whitehall.

Idea 12: Adopt a proactively transparent ‘publication by default’ policy for evaluations of project work taking place within Whitehall, ensuring transparency and encouraging a culture of accountability.

Idea 13: Develop new forums for sharing good practice between different teams (and different tiers of government) to help feed into the policy development process and enhance learning across and between departments.

Idea 14: Require evaluation and delivery processes to be incorporated into project and programme planning from the earliest stages.

1. Overview: the system itself must deliver

There is a tendency to be overly dismissive about Government's ability to deliver. Yet, amid high-profile difficulties, it is not hard to also identify the significant successes of recent years. These successes can tell us much about the system in which public sector teams operate, the obstacles that can trip their best efforts, and the changing conditions in which delivery occurs. Most importantly, every success story is also a story about the ways in which the people involved found ways to overcome or work around a variety of blockers in order to deliver on a real priority.

- The delivery of the London Olympics was widely regarded as a spectacular success — one that occurred in response to the unavoidable constraints and requirements of the International Olympic Committee, and despite a system where collaboration between tiers of government and strategic management of major projects can be incredibly difficult.¹
- The Vaccine Taskforce (VTF) rapidly initiated a successful, transformative programme of vaccination, something that many commentators considered to be impossible. To do so, it found itself in friction with a broadly risk-averse and distracted Whitehall system.²

In both cases, it is telling that successful delivery was not primarily managed directly by Whitehall, but within a specialised, carved-out delivery environment. The Olympics were organised by an 'arms-length body', while the VTF was a specially created interdepartmental unit that operated quite differently to the government machinery that surrounded and worked with it.³

When these carved-out approaches work, they represent an important way for government to promote delivery. But they are not a universal panacea.

The next government of the United Kingdom, whichever political party becomes its driving force, will be confronted by a notable double test of combined and overlapping external and internal challenges. The UK faces numerous external challenges — some already in progress, some in their earliest stages, and many unprecedented — which will place immense demands on the policymaking, administrative, and implementation systems at the core of the State. Simultaneously, those very systems experience, despite efforts from successive governments, a great deal of inertia.

To respond, the Whitehall system itself will be called upon to build its ability to deliver, especially for priorities that cannot be easily 'held' by quasi-external bodies. This effort could be greatly enhanced by learning from the innovative approaches taken by the creative officials who are already working to modernise the practices of the civil service, inspired in part by the success stories above.

The Whitehall system faces challenges both to effectively deliver and to implement internal change. This double-bind severely inhibits the ability of the Whitehall system to achieve the priorities of the government of the day. But by building upon existing efforts to drive change within the system, such as the work of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and the Evaluation

¹ Emma Norris, Jill Rutter, and Jonny Medland, *Making the Games: What Government Can Learn From London 2012* (Institute for Government, 2013).

² Oxford University, "Another War Is Coming", Kate Bingham DBE, Delivers Romanes Lecture', Web Page, 24 November 2021.

³ Department of Health & Social Care, 'A Review of the Vaccine Taskforce', Web Page, 30 September 2022.

Task Force, and by creating space for more radical, innovative, and cognitively diverse approaches, these barriers to delivery can be minimised — or even removed altogether.

1.1 Challenges and triumphs

Whitehall faces an urgent need to evolve its delivery mechanisms to tackle challenges such as extensive NHS waiting lists, housing shortages, and ambitious net-zero targets. These challenges are illustrative of the complex obstacles faced in contemporary governance, and the need to modernise and reform government's approach when addressing them.

The health system delivery challenge

The NHS faces critical pressure due to rising demand for healthcare services, partly driven by an ageing and increasingly unhealthy population, but also by weaknesses in the 'upstream' system of public services which, ideally, would help to prevent or divert demand from the acute end.⁴ Under these circumstances, capacity issues are deepened by outdated infrastructure and inefficiencies in patient management. To improve access to healthcare, streamline processes, and ensure the sustainability (in every sense) of the system, a multi-pronged approach will be required, alongside willingness for foundational reform.

The housing crisis challenge

Housing shortages, meanwhile, both contribute to the nation's ill-health and have wider implications for the state of the economy and the social fabric. Central government has set out a target of 300,000 newly built homes per year (some industry experts estimate the annual need at 340,000). At present, around 240,000 new homes are built each year, representing an improvement from the year-on-year low of 125,000 builds in 2012-13.⁵

Yet continued insufficient construction and an uneven distribution of available housing stock are married to regulatory barriers and perverse local incentives that stymie planning. Addressing this challenge will mean teasing out the balance between local and national population interests and exploring innovative new approaches to regulation and the financing of house construction. All the while, these policies must integrate effectively with other areas of social policy to ensure that construction does not occur without necessary improvements to local infrastructure and service provision.

The net zero challenge

The objective of achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 represents a formidable test, made all the more difficult by parallel issues such as those outlined above. While the UK has made significant progress toward this target by increasing the proportion of energy grid contribution from renewable or sustainable sources, much of the 'low hanging fruit' has now been picked. Further progress will entail a comprehensive overhaul of much of the UK's infrastructure, encompassing transport systems, industrial processes, and residential heating systems.⁶ Government will need to invest, foster technological innovation, and motivate behavioural shifts among the public. There are significant potential economic benefits

⁴ Sebastian Rees, Patrick King, and Charlotte Pickles, *Reimagining Health: A Framing Paper* (Reform, 2022).

⁵ Wendy Wilson and Cassie Barton, *Tackling the Under-Supply of Housing in England* (House of Commons Library, 2023).

⁶ Jennifer Castle and David Hendry, 'Five Sensitive Intervention Points to Achieve Climate Neutrality by 2050, Illustrated by the UK', *Renewable Energy* 226 (2024).

from such a transition, but these will depend on an effectively upskilled workforce, and an intelligent regulatory regime.

These are not the only challenges facing the next government, and the list will likely grow given technological and demographic trends and geopolitical instability. To navigate such complexity, the system will need to change.

Whitehall has demonstrated commendable delivery capability on its own terms, particularly when clear and effective leadership works closely with civil servants to affect change. An extensive programme of state educational reforms, spanning multiple administrations and even multiple governing parties, are now beginning to yield significant improvements — though unevenly distributed — in average educational outcomes.⁷ Building upon the introduction of academies and revisions to curricula in 2000, ‘free schools’ were introduced during the Coalition years more than a decade later, and have been developed further in the years since. This represents more than two decades of broadly consistent policy development within a single issue area, something nearly unheard of in Whitehall. Initial institutional resistance to the reforms have for the most part given way to the view that these often difficult reforms have effectively delivered an improvement in standards and international standing for UK schools.

Learning from such instances of success, and others, while creating scope for innovative, diverse, and learning-centred approaches may yet establish a government system that is equal to the tasks it faces in the years ahead.

1.2 About this manifesto

This paper is informed by a series of senior-level roundtable discussions involving leading civil servants from across the Whitehall machine, alongside further discussions with practitioners and policy experts. It explores both the barriers that stand in the way of more effective delivery and the policy ideas that could help to overcome them.

The paper’s content is organised across four dimensions of potential Whitehall reform to achieve a more delivery-focused system:

- **Machinery:** Structural and systemic changes to the ‘machinery of government’ to establish the environment and incentives for effective delivery
- **People:** Ensuring the presence of a highly skilled, capable, and cognitively diverse workforce
- **Innovation:** Fostering the culture and conditions to yield highly innovative and creative approaches to problem-solving and delivery on priorities
- **Learning:** Engineering a robust system of evaluation and learning to help drive continuous improvement throughout the system

⁷ OECD, ‘PISA 2022 Results: Factsheets, United Kingdom’, Web Page, 5 December 2023.

2. Enhancing the machinery of delivery

As noted above, to be effective the 'Whitehall machine' must itself be primed for delivery. As things stand, civil servants with a clear direction and mandate to bring about a certain outcome will often find themselves struggling to make progress within a highly compartmentalised and insular structure.

Departments operate in silos, inhibiting the flow of information and the kind of cross-cutting cooperation that major policy challenges often demand.⁸ There is also a marked disconnect between policy formulation and implementation, leading to policies that are sometimes infeasible or make little sense on contact with the actual conditions in the places where implementation happens.⁹

The gap between central and local/regional government systems — often filled with mutual misunderstanding and even distrust — exacerbates this challenge, as was vividly demonstrated by instances of poor coordination and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Addressing these structural inefficiencies could involve enhancing existing delivery units and promoting cross-functional collaboration. Such reforms must emphasise outcome-driven changes supported by robust senior civil service (SCS) leadership. Approaches to reform the machinery might include elevating the operational aspects of policymaking to the same stature as policy expertise, fostering intergovernmental collaboration, and devolving powers to regional authorities where appropriate, thus building a more integrated, and responsive governmental apparatus: a strong centre at the heart of a network of delivery-empowered public authorities.

2.1 Obstacles

Fragmentation and lack of cohesion

A critical barrier to efficient delivery is the entrenched siloed structure within Whitehall, which impedes seamless inter-departmental collaboration and information sharing. This fragmented approach often results in disjointed policies with compromised implementation effectiveness.

Policy formulation and implementation gaps

The disconnect between policy design and execution continues to result in well-intended policies that fail to materialise effectively on the ground. This misalignment not only undermines policy success but also public trust in government efficacy.

⁸ House of Commons Liaison Committee, *Promoting National Strategy: How Select Committee Scrutiny Can Improve Strategic Thinking in Whitehall*, HC 31, 2024.

⁹ House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, *The Work of the Civil Service: Key Themes and Preliminary Findings*, HC 253, 2017.

¹⁰ Richard Machin, 'UK Local Government Experience of COVID-19 Lockdown: Local Responses to Global Challenges', *Local Economy* 38, no. 1 (2023).

Centralised vs. local government dynamics

Over-centralisation has led to a detachment from localised insights, which is crucial for tailored policy responses. This central-local disconnect dilutes the potential impact of national strategies on local realities.

One feasible source of solutions to these problems would be to enhance the Whitehall machine with greater use of cross-cutting 'delivery units'. Notably, this would require a genuine focus upon outcomes in order to ensure that changes are not being made simply for the sake of making changes. Like all previous efforts at reform, effective leadership among senior civil servants and ministers would be essential.¹¹

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¹¹ Charlotte Pickles and James Sweetland, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Why Whitehall is so Hard to Reform* (Reform, 2023).

3. People: skills, capabilities and cognitive diversity

A good machine is impotent without good people to work within it. As Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister of Singapore said, “you need good [people] to have good government”. While there is work to do to ensure Whitehall is both attracting and retaining talent too often, where talent exists, it is not appropriately specialised, developed, or promoted.

Whitehall currently faces significant challenges in recruitment processes, workforce planning, and the utilisation of diverse skill sets and perspectives within its ranks. Recruitment is often slow and convoluted. A 2022 Civil Service survey revealed that 45 per cent of departments face significant delays in recruitment, impacting their ability to attract top talent, while planning is hampered by inadequate data and competing departmental priorities.

Underutilisation of skills and cognitive diversity fosters an environment that can promote groupthink, so that valuable insights and experiences which could be decisive for delivering on government priorities may remain untapped.¹²

To counter these deficiencies, it will be imperative to streamline recruitment, implement comprehensive workforce planning based on robust data sharing across departments, and foster an environment that values diverse cognitive perspectives. Initiatives such as skills mapping exercises and the adaptation of recruitment to encompass a broader range of experiences will be crucial. Furthermore, development programmes should aim to cultivate skills that enhance the ability to integrate multidisciplinary teams effectively.

3.1 Obstacles

Inefficient recruitment and planning

Current recruitment practices are not only slow, but also often confusing and opaque to outsiders and insiders alike. This means that managers often fail to attract or retain talent capable of innovative thinking and execution, primarily due to outdated selection criteria that rewards conformity over creativity.

Homogeneity and ‘groupthink’

There is a notable tendency to under-use the diverse skills and cognitive capacities that are present within the civil service. There is also a tendency for those within the system to develop and prioritise behaviours and approaches with common features rather than prizing unorthodox or unusual thinking. This leads to a homogenisation of ideas and approaches, which can at times stifle the wider system’s capacity for innovation and adaptability. This groupthink can be a major impediment to delivery.¹³

¹² Joe Hill, Charlotte Pickles, and Sean Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall* (Reform, 2024).

¹³ Pickles and Sweetland, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Why Whitehall Is so Hard to Reform*; Amy Gandon, *Civil Unrest - A Portrait of the Civil Service through Brexit, the Pandemic, and Political Turbulence* (Reform, 2023).

Inadequate recruitment, workforce planning and utilisation of skills and diversity mean that Whitehall is not getting the best out of its people. Reforming recruitment processes to be more inclusive and streamlined will attract a broader spectrum of talent. Introducing strategic workforce planning that includes skills forecasting will align future recruitment with anticipated government needs. Promoting an organisational culture that values diverse perspectives and dissenting voices will enhance problem-solving and policy innovation.

Idea 5: Engage in a skills-mapping exercise, informed by the practice of the successful Government Digital Service, to help identify and leverage existing talents within the Civil Service. This should ultimately be used to help inform a full-scale strategic workforce plan.

Idea 6: Adapt recruitment practices to help ensure a wider range of experiences and cognitive approaches are incorporated into Whitehall processes.

Idea 7: Adapt development, advancement, and promotion practices to build cognitive diversity and the presence of expertise throughout the civil service.

Idea 8: Foster 'connecting and convening' skillsets, with the ability to draw together and make best use of multi-disciplinary teams from across the system, as part of development practices such as the 'future leaders' programme.

4. Innovation within the system

Innovation is essential for a dynamic public sector, yet it remains insufficiently embedded within everyday operations. There are notable instances of innovative practices within Whitehall, such as the creation of both the Advanced Research Invention Agency (ARIA), and a trend-leading AI Safety Institute. The Department for Business and Trade's use of AI to streamline export documentation processes is an excellent example of innovation enhancing efficiency — even more so when these approaches are learned from to help inform experiments in other parts of the government system.¹⁴

Despite these higher profile examples, however, there is far less emphasis placed on the fostering of more everyday innovative practices. The public sector often faces a lack of incentives for innovation, with a cultural aversion to risk-taking that can stifle creative problem-solving.

4.1 Obstacles

Limited scope and scale of innovation

Innovation within Whitehall is often isolated and not sufficiently scaled, lacking a systematic approach to embedding innovation as a core aspect of the civil service operation.

Cultural resistance to risk

A prevalent risk-averse culture inhibits experimentation and adoption of potentially groundbreaking policies, with failures often stigmatised instead of being seen as learning opportunities.

These obstacles reflect a (sometimes overstated) cultural bias against highly innovative approaches, and toward risk-averse practices. This is not uncommon within public services: taxpayers' money is at stake, and a very high premium is placed upon efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Familiar practices, shaped by cognitively homogeneous actors (see previous section), will often represent a 'safer' route to achieving outcomes. Projects which appear to be failing will often be ended before potential benefits have a chance to emerge — not so much 'failing fast' (which is an important aspect of a versatile, learning system) as building-in a bias against alternative approaches.

The irony of this position is that some efficiencies will be missed when innovative approaches are not actively fostered and welcomed.¹⁵ Meanwhile, risk-aversion is a short-term instinct that can store up longer-term risks when these are not factored into the calculation by officials or politicians. Redirecting funds for a major investment in building nuclear power generation capacity might feel risky in immediate terms, but should be weighed against the considerable risks in a decade's time of an inadequately resilient or sustainable energy mix.¹⁶

¹⁴ Department for Business & Trade, 'Ensuring the Safe and Effective Use of AI in the Department for Business and Trade', Web Page, 13 March 2024.

¹⁵ Patrick King, *An Efficiency Mindset: Prioritising Efficiency in Whitehall's Everyday Work* (Reform, 2023).

¹⁶ Ryan Bourne, 'Our Long Record Prioritising Present Over Future Has Cost Us in Every Way', *The Times*, 1 September 2022.

The policy levers available to influence culture are limited. Systems can be adapted to alter the implicit or explicit incentives that shape behaviour, while leadership can be specifically tasked to set a different set of examples for other team members to emulate.

More experimentally, innovation — and the potential for radical improvement in delivery of government objectives — might be fostered by carving out dedicated ‘space’ within departments where different rules can apply that might help foster more innovative approaches. This could take the form of a ‘sandbox’ system. Teams would propose a particular project for development within such a ‘sandbox’. Approval means being able to work more autonomously, access a specifically earmarked source of internal funding, and identify delivery approaches and partners to upscale a new approach to the level of a localised pilot, making use of specially allocated funds to test the viability of the new approach within a year-long project. Teams working within the sandbox would adopt a ‘fail fast, learn faster’ approach, where small-scale pilot projects are used to test innovative ideas without significant risk. Projects being developed within one departmental sandbox could also engage with parallel teams in other departments to work together on aligned goals, fostering productive links that cross institutional boundaries.

Idea 9: Pilot the use of departmental innovation sandboxes, hubs where teams are invited to develop novel policy ideas and delivery approaches outside the usual hierarchies of civil service work. Teams can apply to develop an idea ‘within the sandbox’.

Idea 10: Build incentives for innovative practices within departments with policies to ensure that departments themselves benefit from a share of any major efficiency savings or productivity benefits that are achieved through innovative working (instead of these automatically being held by Treasury).

5. Learning and evaluation

Effective evaluation and learning are crucial to prevent missteps in governance and policy implementation. Despite the growing success of the Evaluation Task Force, there is often a reluctance to engage in thorough evaluation due to fears of internal consequences or criticism.¹⁷ This is compounded by a lack of clarity about what constitutes 'good' evaluation and insufficient sharing of best practices.

Strengthening the Evaluation Task Force and adopting a transparent approach to the publication of evaluation outcomes can drive more robust evaluative practices. Establishing forums for the exchange of best practices and integrating evaluation into the early stages of project and programme planning will further enhance this capability.

5.1 Obstacles

Inadequate and inconsistent evaluation practices

Evaluation processes are often ad hoc and not integrated into the policy development cycle, leading to 'orphaned evaluations' where insights generated are disconnected from actionable outcomes.

Lack of incentives for rigorous evaluation

Current structures do not sufficiently reward thorough and ongoing evaluation, leading to sporadic and superficial assessment practices. Indeed, there is a tendency to actively avoid evaluation because of a widespread perception that it is designed to 'catch you out', while leaders in the system are often unlikely to insist that teams fulfil their obligations in this area.

Lack of clarity

Even if incentives for evaluation and learning were to exist there is limited clarity as to what 'good' evaluation looks like, and limited cross-departmental sharing of best practice.

The Evaluation Task Force has been effective in beginning to articulate a standardised vision of what good evaluation looks like. This can be built upon by ensuring a relentless focus upon outcomes — ensuring that evaluation is not simply an end in itself — and stronger SCS leadership encouraging and demanding evaluation.

¹⁷ King, *An Efficiency Mindset: Prioritising Efficiency in Whitehall's Everyday Work*.

Idea 11: Strengthen the evaluation task force so that it is able to go further in driving a stronger evaluative capability across Whitehall.

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6. Conclusion

The Whitehall system stands at a crossroads. There is a clear path to enhanced delivery capability.

Achieving this will require a concerted effort to refine the machinery of government, empower the people who make it work, incentivise and create spaces for innovative approaches, and commit to a learning culture underpinned by thorough evaluation processes.

These goals are mutually supportive. The aim to embed learning and evaluation in the policy development and delivery systems of Whitehall will be contingent upon a workforce that includes individuals with specialist capabilities and areas of expertise. Standardisation and transparency of evaluation will help to identify the best ways to coordinate teams and ensure cooperation across different departmental silos. Less siloed working will make direct collaboration and engagement across Whitehall and with local authorities easier.

While significant strides have been made in these areas, the pace of improvement must accelerate, supported by a culture of strong leadership and a commitment to systemic and ongoing reform. Most challenging of all is the fact that some of these factors — cultural norms within the system, the quality of leadership — cannot be directly altered, in every case, by a new or changed policy.

The whole-system shift required for a true delivery focus in Whitehall begins with the measures recommended in this paper, but must ultimately also be underpinned by the political will to recognise government reform as the necessary precondition for realising the many ambitions of the UK's next Prime Minister.



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