

Written evidence from the Better Government Initiative

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee: Strategic Leadership in the Civil Service: Building Future Capacity

1. The Better Government Initiative (BGI) is an informal body of people with practical experience in government at a very senior level who have no links to particular political parties (www.bettergovernmentinitiative.co.uk).

2. This submission responds to most of the questions posed by the Committee, in a slightly revised order. In preparing it we have drawn on readily available, published material in a subject area of no security sensitivity where communication to civil service leaders, staff at all levels and potential partners might be thought to be of cardinal importance. We have found, however, a paucity of coherent explanation of the civil service's learning and development strategy, plans and programmes.

3. The civil service employs staff at a variety of levels mainly in non-Whitehall roles. Perhaps inevitably, however, debate tends to focus on "Whitehall", on more senior roles, and high-profile development schemes such as the fast stream. This partial focus needs to be borne in mind in what follows.

Executive Summary

4. Our general conclusions are:

a) A coherent explanation of the civil service's learning and development strategy, plans and programmes does not seem to be publicly available (paragraph 2).

b) To sustain itself the civil service needs staff of the required quality who are well led and take pride in their work and have the trust of Ministers and Parliament. It is reasonably well placed in these dimensions. Staff at all levels need to give more attention than has traditionally been the case to the 'reputation management' of the service (paragraphs 5-7).

c) Staff at all levels need to understand what is special about the civil service as well as the characteristics it shares with other organisations. We do not consider the level and depth of understanding of the Civil Service Code to be satisfactory (paragraphs 8-11).

d) All civil servants need a combination of technical skills and understanding of the government context appropriate to their role. We consider specialist and generalist labels to be unhelpful (paragraphs 12-15).

e) Staff need learning and development opportunities in government-related knowledge and professional skills, opportunities for continuous professional development, help with career planning, and learning and development and career experience which are mutually reinforcing. The record in a number of these dimensions across the service is difficult to establish but we doubt it is adequate for the needs of effective government. In particular the current 'churn' with civil servants moving posts frequently is having adverse effects on the building up of career experience in specific areas of government (paragraphs 16-22).

f) There is no magic formula for how learning and development should be delivered and the balance between in-house and outsourced provision. The British government

has adopted a different delivery model to that elsewhere, with complex accountability arrangements and limited performance information. Under these new arrangements (compared with the last days of the National School of Government) there has been a marginal improvement in staff attitudes to the learning and development offer, but there is a way to go before it is perceived as positively as other aspects of a civil service career (paragraphs 23-27).

How should the Civil Service sustain itself as an institution?

5. The present leadership of the civil service has the duty to ensure that the service has the capacity to serve both the present and future governments on the basis of the framework in Part 1 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 unless and until Parliament were to put in place a revised framework. This stewardship role is not, and nor should it be, conducted independently of the elected government and is not as sometimes misrepresented self-sustaining or self-serving unrelated to the future needs of government. The Prime Minister and other Ministers have a duty to maintain the machinery of government as a whole in a fit state for their successors of whatever party and in our experience take this duty extremely seriously. It might be easier to fulfil this responsibility if there were effective, non-partisan channels to develop a shared understanding between the political parties of the attributes and skills needed from the civil service, allowing for longer term and more strategic planning and development.

6. Like other institutions if the civil service is to sustain itself as a successful and high-performing organisation it needs staff of the required quality and commitment who are well led and take pride in their work. Evidence from the Civil Service People Survey suggests that the civil service has a level of engagement in line with other organisations in the United Kingdom, and that staff are committed to their work and have confidence in their immediate manager, while scores for senior leadership are lower but with an upward trend in some important dimensions. We welcome the leadership provided by the present Head of the Civil Service and the strong emphasis on celebrating excellence through Awards ceremonies, etc.

7. The civil service as an institution also needs the trust of Ministers and Parliament and of the public who fund its work and deal with it on a daily basis. (In the Ipsos MORI 'Veracity Index' of whether professions can be trusted to tell the truth the civil service is in the middle of the pack but with largest percentage improvement of any profession since 1983). Given the civil service's relationship with Ministers and politically-impartial status it can be difficult for the leadership to speak out in support of the institution. But, within these constraints, we believe staff at all levels need to give more attention than has traditionally been the case to the 'reputation management' of the service.

How does the Civil Service build its future capacity?

8. The civil service performs a wide variety of functions that bring with them specific sector requirements. More generally its future capacity needs to seek to anticipate changing demands on government and opportunities for new delivery models offered by, for example, technological developments. At a broad level the key dimensions of capacity might be seen as leadership, strategy, governance structures and processes, accountability requirements human resources, finance, and underpinning infrastructure (information systems buildings, other assets, etc.). Although this inquiry focuses mainly on the human resources dimension other aspects are no less important.

9. These dimensions apply of course to organisations in the private, public and third sectors and lessons about best practice and the knowledge, skills and experience of individuals are transferable between them. But we should also note that the civil service operates in a particular accountability framework to Ministers and Parliament, and has governance structures and processes needed, for example, to underpin Ministerial control and to seek to ensure equal treatment of citizens. Staff need to understand what is special about the civil service as well as the characteristics it shares with other organisations.

How are Civil Service values understood and sustained?

10. Civil service values should be inculcated in induction training and subsequent training and development and reflected in staff behaviours and their assessment. Obviously the difficulty of and complexity in applying the individual components of the values will vary according to the nature of the job. The civil service has in the past perhaps assumed that the values would be underpinned by tacit knowledge acquired by staff through experience over lifetime careers. Now that staff at all levels are being recruited directly into the service, it is important that induction is effective and that new staff particularly at more senior levels can work with mentors to understand some of the nuances of the values.

11. It is difficult to judge how effective the current arrangements are. The People Survey includes questions about awareness of the Civil Service Code, of how to raise a concern under it, and confidence that a concern raised would be investigated properly. Responses to all three questions have become substantially more positive since the Survey in 2009. It may be thought encouraging that 92 % are aware of the Code, though only 68% have sufficient understanding of the Code's detail to know how to raise a concern. On another reading of the results, the 2017 People Survey had a response rate of 67% who might be thought likely to represent the more interested and committed members of the service. Yet within this sub-group 8% were not even aware of the Code. We do not consider this level and depth of understanding to be satisfactory

What do Civil Servants need to know and what is the appropriate balance between specialist and generalist skills?

12. Given the variety of functions performed, the range of professions engaged, and the differing requirements of for advisory, delivery and management roles at different levels within the service's component organisations, what civil servants need to know is an extremely complex issue. Mapping these requirements is itself a huge task and explaining the system coherently and meaningfully to staff at all levels has proved extremely difficult.

13. In this communications task labels are very important. There is an old and unhelpful saw about the civil service that its policy functions were best conducted with generalist administrators on top and specialists on tap. These generalists were also not only capable of policymaking in relation to any subject but also could along the way act as finance or HR directors (or the two combined). These concepts and terminology were attacked some 60 years ago in the Fulton report, some of us thought put to death in the Professional Skills for Government reforms of the mid-2000s, but have proved difficult finally to lay to rest. The Fulton critique equating generalist with amateur is regularly revived as a stick to beat the civil service with. Unwisely the civil service itself continues to use such terminology, as apparently in its "Generalist" fast stream.

14. We think it would be helpful to unpack these issues with labels with less historical baggage and which offer more clarity. We note that the new ‘Success Profiles’ being introduced in the civil service “to attract and retain people of talent and experience from a range of sectors” have five elements for success: “ability, technical, behaviours, strengths, and experience.” Technical is defined as “the demonstration of specific professional skills, knowledge or qualifications”.

15. We agree that all staff need these technical skills and should be seen as specialists in the early stages of their careers. These technical skills can in some areas in part at least have been acquired before joining the civil service and can then be further augmented alongside other learning and development. They need to be complemented for all staff, in a breadth and depth relevant to their work and management level, by knowledge and skills specific to the work of government and its relationship to Parliament, to the subject area in which they work, and to the vision and values of the civil service. It is difficult to think of a snappy label for this “Government-related” knowledge and skills but imparting it from induction onwards is a key learning and development task. Obviously this is not the same as “generalist skills”. As staff in every field move to more senior positions where in most cases leadership and management skills come to the fore, they cease to be “specialists”. But again the traditional “generalist and specialist” labels do not capture this progression.

What learning and development provision in the Civil Service is required?

16. Against this background the civil service needs to ensure that its staff have:

a) In every case the background “government-related” knowledge and skills appropriate to their role on induction and updated and developed with career progression.

b) Specific professional skills, knowledge, or qualifications appropriate to their role and chosen career pathway.

c) Opportunities for continued professional development (CPD) linked to career progression.

d) An understanding of different roles within professions, help with career planning, and guidance on knowledge skills and qualifications in relation to career pathways.

d) Learning and development and career experience which are mutually reinforcing in developing expertise.

17. Of course not all of this provision needs to be commissioned by or provided by a civil service learning and development organisation. For example, at graduate-trainee level a number of civil service professions recruit staff who already have the relevant qualifications. Chartered bodies and Science and Engineering related institutions, for example, provide frameworks and opportunities for CPD including learning and development networks. The challenges here are for Heads of Profession and line managers to make clear their expectations and to encourage (and appropriately fund) staff development in this way.

18. Among the twelve Fast Stream schemes for home civil servants, five have entry requirements that specify degree subjects. These provide an obvious foundation on which to build subsequent professional development. Seven do not specify a particular academic background. Of these, the finance, human resources, digital, data & technology, commercial, finance, and project delivery streams all link to a single civil

service profession. The last, titled “Generalist”, appears to be a label for everything not covered elsewhere but, though the link is not explicitly made, feeds amongst others the policy and operational delivery professions. Entrants to each of these streams and subsequent professions needs to understand the knowledge needed for different roles within that profession and whether and how this is to be accredited. For some such as finance and human resources there are professional bodies to provide such accreditation. The operational delivery profession has linked its training and development to the Chartered Management Institute. The most difficult case is the policy profession for which there is no obvious external analogue or ready accreditation body.

19. Following the reforms of the civil service in the 1970s, including the creation of the Civil Service College, it was recognised that policy civil servants needed an in-depth grounding in the structure and working of government, the political context, economics and other disciplines and approaches relevant to evidence-based policy making. Policy civil servants also need grounding in the subject area of their department or cluster of related departments. We would have wished to test how current arrangements meet these requirements but could not find publicly available information about learning and development requirements for policy civil servants or how these were reflected in the Civil Service Learning prospectus, which appears to be accessible only to serving civil servants.

20. We welcome the development of the Civil Service and LSE Executive Master of Public Policy (EMPP) programme, which we assume to be for high- flying policy professionals. What is perhaps striking about that programme is that it includes core modules on, for example, political science and public policy, empirical methods for public policy and economic policy analysis that would seem an essential part of the tool kit of any policy profession civil servant at grade 7 and beyond (and others with policy responsibilities) but appear to be being provided to only a small part of the cohort.

21. As to the fourth element in paragraph 16 above - clear signposts about how learning and development relates to career pathways within professions - we are aware of one model example on “HR Career Pathways” produced by the HR profession to cover the 3500 HR Professionals within the civil service. Other examples of best practice may exist but were not readily identifiable from a public search. We remain sceptical about whether sufficient support is available to heads of profession in developing such plans.

22. As to the all-important link to experience, as we have argued in evidence to PACAC before, we do not see how this will be achieved under the current “system” of self-managed careers, competition-for-every-post, and unregulated high turnover. While this problem has been recognised by the top management of the civil service, we have seen no evidence of measures to tackle it being put in place.

What is the appropriate model of provision of learning and development?

23. We would expect any civil service learning organisation to provide a balance between in-house and outsourced provision, and we do not believe there is any magic formula for achieving that. Commissioning and course development/direction needs to be guided by a depth of understanding of the particular roles and requirements of the civil service within its constitutional context. A learning and development organisation is a potentially important tool in supporting desired change in the culture of the organisation and the behaviours of staff and might therefore be closely coupled to those at the centre and in departments seeking such change. At the same time many

government processes have analogues elsewhere and one objective is to tap into such wider excellence, which can best be done by wider partnerships and networks. Digital-based design and delivery requires expertise more available in the wider market. For some face-to-face interactions top quality external practitioners may have more impact

What lessons can be learnt from other jurisdictions?

24. We would expect that lessons could be learnt from other jurisdictions with a similar constitutional framework, broadly similar civil service values, and which are recognised to have a high-performing civil service, such as Canada and Australia and New Zealand (which have a combined learning organisation). There are differences between the delivery models of these two organisations and nor do they seek to cover the breadth and levels of training and development Civil Service Learning. They need also to be seen alongside the Civil Service leadership Academy. But we might note key similar features in their governance, including clear top level Ministerial as well as civil service support for their goals, and an organisation led by people of seniority and distinction, credible within both government and the wider public policy/public administration academic community. Each is a self-standing organisation that provides an annual report on its objectives, performance and resource use.

25. The British Government has adopted a very different model. Training and development are provided by two organisations, neither of which appears to have any public profile or accountability in its own right. A distinguished HR Director General on behalf of the civil service as a whole initially drove Civil Service Learning forward and, as his day job role was in the Home Office, that rather than the centre of the civil service provided its home. Civil Service Learning's business model appears to be one under which a small in-house team commissions work through prime contractors who in turn sub-contract to other suppliers. The initial prime Contractors were Korn Ferry Hay Group with partners focused on the SCS and KPMG "co-creating an innovative learning offer that meets the needs of the Civil Service, departments and professions" to quote the press release announcing the contracts. The Leadership Academy was then established in parallel but as part of the Cabinet Office, with an initial focus on leadership development for the Senior Civil Service. We are unsighted on how the Civil Service Learning contracts have performed or why the civil service developed "top quality executive learning" through the Korn Ferry Hay Group and in parallel established a Leadership Academy

How much does Civil Service Learning provide a coherent professional development for civil servants at all levels?

26. Because of the governance arrangements for Civil Service Learning and the absence of public information on the courses it provides we are not in a position to judge the extent to which it provides coherent and effective professional development.

What has been the effect of changes to the provision of learning and development in the Civil Service?

27. The only information we have on which to judge the impact of these changes is staff attitudes from the People Survey, which is obviously only one dimension in judging the value of investment in learning and development. This asks four questions about learning and development and provides a learning and development benchmark. This benchmark score was 50% in 2009 and then fell away to a low of 43%, before climbing back to reach a high of 53% in the latest survey. The Survey measures nine factors that influence employee engagement. Learning and development has the third lowest score. So the headline conclusions might be that the disruption caused by the

slow death of the National School of Government has been overcome, there has been a marginal improvement in staff attitudes to the learning and development offer, but there is a way to go before it is perceived as positively as other aspects of a civil service career.