



How to improve collaboration across government

IfG–Oracle roundtable 13 October 2020

In summer 2020, the new chief operating officer of the civil service, Alex Chisholm, launched a reform and modernisation programme – Shaping Our Future Together.¹ He said that this programme would examine ways to meet the challenges facing the civil service, notably by looking at the case for more collaboration across government.²

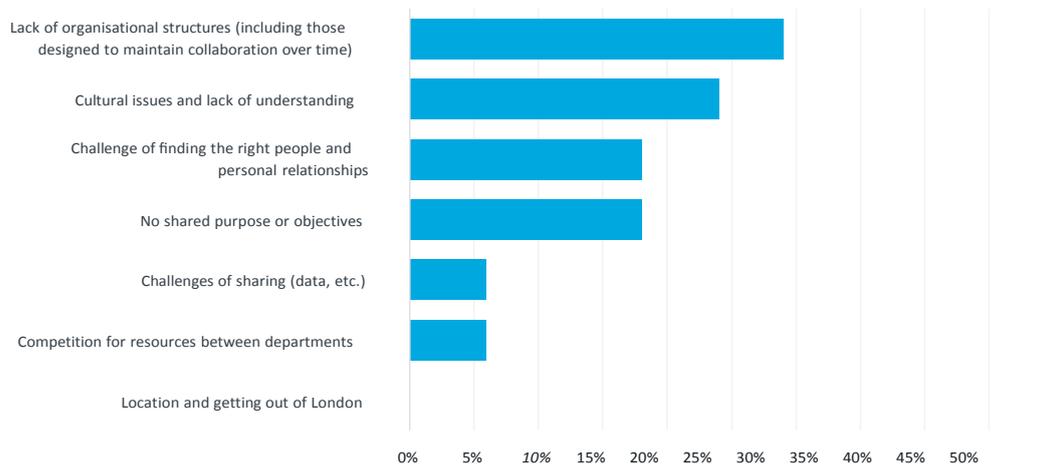
The idea of ‘joining up’, collaborating and working across departmental and other public bodies to meet government’s objectives has been part of reform plans since at least the 1990s. Collaboration is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means of delivering better results for the public by meeting their needs in a seamless way. According to successive governments, its other benefits include saving money, reducing duplication and promoting innovation.³

In the last few years, civil servants have worked across departments on programmes to manage the UK’s exit from the European Union, the transition period and the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, successful examples of joined-up working across government are not common enough, and there is limited work that has been done on the practical benefits of departments working together for citizens.⁴

The Futures Survey⁵ conducted by the civil service in June 2020 identified insufficient collaboration across teams as the main challenge to overcome for government to deliver better public services. That requires breaking down departmental silos and changing the way public spending and accountability work.

The Institute for Government organised a roundtable with civil service leaders and representatives from the devolved governments in October 2020 to discuss collaboration and joining up. Participants talked through the main cultural and practical barriers to civil servants working together more effectively. They voted on the main obstacles to overcome and discussed solutions the government could adopt to tackle them.

Figure 1: **Main barriers to collaboration in government**



Source: Institute for Government analysis. Seventeen participants provided answers to the live poll and voted on the top three obstacles.

Having the right structures in place to join up

Lack of organisational support

The most frequently cited issue concerned the organisational structures to build and maintain collaboration in government, which are not strong enough. Having good structures in place is important to help establish working across boundaries as part of ‘business as usual’.

This is difficult when both management responsibilities and accountability rest with departments which are led by one secretary of state and run by a single permanent secretary – who is also the accounting officer. This can make it more difficult for departments to work together, especially since the Treasury asks that “in any joint activity, there must be a single accounting officer so that the lines of responsibility are clear”.⁶

It is also hard to find the right people to work with inside government. The sheer size and complexity of the civil service makes it difficult to find others working on similar projects, or to identify where best practice exists.

Government can help civil servants work across boundaries through existing mechanisms

The most radical way to join up government would be to redesign it. Currently each government department has its own identity, and to an extent its own way of doing things, despite some overlap. This can make cross-government work difficult. The traditional, siloed departmental structure is at odds with growing calls for government to deliver seamless services to people regardless of how many organisations are working together in the background to enable this. The latter approach has often been adopted in the digital space. For instance, the Government Digital Service (GDS) launched Service Communities in 2017 to focus on delivering ‘end-to-end’ services to citizens. In practice, this involved designing dedicated webpages on starting a business, how to hire someone, and more.^{7,8}

At the other end of the scale, participants discussed using existing structures to work more effectively across government and the public sector. For example, the Local Resilience Forums introduced by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 enabled ‘Category 1’ emergency responders (police forces, local authorities, NHS trusts and other organisations) to respond jointly to crises. These 42 forums took on important roles in no-deal Brexit planning, and later improved planning and co-ordination for responding to coronavirus.⁹ Similarly, in 2019 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government set up a network of nine local authority chief executives to better engage with local government while it was preparing for EU exit.¹⁰ This network also played a role in helping government deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Another option is to strengthen the arrangements that emerge during crises like coronavirus. The pandemic has offered opportunities for different parts of government to work together to achieve common goals. Barriers have been broken down and some of the disincentives to collaboration disappeared as government responded to the crisis. Participants argued that formalising some of these arrangements could enable them to last beyond the pandemic. However, it is difficult to sustain these outside a crisis and there is more to driving this change than good intentions and service-level agreements or memorandums of understanding, as we discuss in the next section.

The government already has structures at its disposal to foster collaboration, including:

- **Joint units:** these are a frequently used method of delivering across departmental silos. There are currently joint units to deal with export controls (spanning the Department for International Trade, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence) and autonomous vehicles (across the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Transport). Attendees argued that not having a single minister in charge means a ‘turf war’ is less likely.
- **Cross-government forums:** such forums can enable ministers to work more effectively together. For example, they have been used between the devolved and UK governments. They provide a way for ministers to have regular conversations rather than engaging in a one-off or haphazard way. In 2019, the government set up

the EU Exit Strategy and EU Exit Operations cabinet committees to help with no-deal preparations. These enabled ministers to attend daily meetings and to discuss readiness, with some success.^{11,12}

- **Funding mechanisms:** during the 2019 spending round, the Treasury launched the Shared Outcomes Fund to enable different parts of government to collaborate in pursuit of specific goals. It funded pilots to deal with complex social problems like drug misuse, among other issues.¹³ The 2020 spending review built on these efforts and allocated funding to enable six departments to work together to support families facing particular problems that span their remit such as unemployment, crime or domestic abuse.¹⁴ These initiatives can provide extra incentives for departments to join up and think over problems through a cross-government lens.

In the absence of formal structures, civil servants can also work informally to develop services that meet citizens' needs (such as the GDS's Service Communities). However, this requires being able to easily connect with the right people. This has proved harder to achieve than might be expected. One way to simplify making these connections is to have online people directories, which some departments have set up for internal use. The Government of Canada has experimented with this and set up a public online directory enabling anyone to search for the names and contact details of officials working in specific organisations.¹⁵

Another idea for supporting joined-up working was having some ministerial offices outside London, notably to collaborate with other civil servants or to ease collaboration with relevant partners.

The culture of the civil service can make it difficult to work together

There are few incentives at the departmental and individual level

Participants highlighted that departments and individual civil servants lack incentives to work with others. Departments compete for resources – especially during spending reviews – and focus on their own priorities.¹⁶ Because of the lack of shared accountability, blame or credit tend to be attributed to particular senior officials or ministers, reducing their incentive to collaborate. Further, departments meeting their own goals can result in some costs or problems shifting to other parts of government.¹⁷ For instance, the National Audit Office has advised that government examine the contribution of welfare reform to the level of homelessness.¹⁸

These issues may also make officials reluctant to invest resources in projects that deliver benefits to other departments. Embarking on joint projects also carries risks if it involves departmental teams giving up control over time and budgets. Finally, government organisations are concerned about the challenges of sharing sensitive data. Some departments have, we understand, taken as long as 20 months to agree data-sharing arrangements.

Individual civil servants also lack incentives to work jointly with others:

- Individuals or directorates can have **competing agendas**. Roundtable participants suggested that the prospect of opposition in some parts of government to the policies civil servants in other parts are trying to deliver is a powerful disincentive to reach out to others.
- **Time-poor civil servants** may find it difficult to forge trusting relationships with colleagues.
- Working with others also requires openness. Some civil servants may already have a specific solution in mind and therefore be **less open to challenge** from elsewhere in government.
- **Performance management** for individual civil servants may not encourage or recognise the value of working with others.

The geographical distribution of the civil service can also act as a barrier. Around 68% of senior civil servants are based in London. The capital has 10 times as many senior civil servants (SCS) as the next two individual regions with the highest numbers (Scotland and the South West).¹⁹ This can make it more difficult for them to get insights into other parts of the country or to work with relevant partners.

For example, it could be particularly beneficial for certain departments to be represented in some parts of the UK which have major relevant manufacturing clusters, so that officials can work more closely with local authorities or the private sector.²⁰ Similarly, programmes to co-locate different departments in regional offices could encourage officials to work with colleagues in other areas, particularly where goals and objectives align.

Figure 2: **Location of civil servants by grade in each region (headcount)**

Region	Whole civil service	AO/AA	EO	SEO/HEO	Grades 6 and 7	SCS
London	20%	9%	16%	26%	45%	68%
North West	12%	15%	14%	10%	7%	3%
Scotland	10%	12%	11%	10%	8%	5%
South West	9%	6%	8%	13%	10%	5%
South East	9%	10%	10%	8%	6%	3%
Wales	8%	9%	8%	7%	5%	5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8%	8%	9%	7%	6%	3%
West Midlands	6%	7%	7%	6%	4%	3%
North East	6%	10%	6%	5%	3%	2%
East	5%	6%	5%	4%	2%	2%
East Midlands	5%	6%	5%	4%	2%	1%
Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2020.

Government could further encourage civil servants at all levels to work together to deliver better results

Operation Yellowhammer – where different parts of government planned for short-term disruptions associated with a no-deal Brexit – saw civil servants from different departments build strong, trusting relationships with each other. Those involved worked more effectively once they had a clear understanding of the expertise and insights each partner could bring, one participant said.

Collaborative leadership – as opposed to heroic leadership from a single individual – can deliver benefits. Some parts of government, like the National Leadership Centre, are already encouraging civil service and public sector leaders to work together to solve the difficult problems they face. Some senior public leaders are in favour of this model, but it is often unclear what it might mean in practice. One approach could involve permanent secretaries or other senior officials having specific objectives, shared with others, to work across government. An attendee noted that there was also scope for this type of leadership to extend beyond the public sector to the private and third sector.

Senior civil servants only represent about 1.4% of the civil service workforce. The other 418,000 full-time equivalent civil servants below SCS grade should also feel able to work across government to deliver better results for citizens. Giving more weight to working effectively with others as a performance criterion could encourage different behaviours. Participants agreed that having even a few individuals who are ‘super-spreaders’ or evangelists of working across government can make a difference by enabling meaningful connections. The civil service can learn from the digital community, where more people are confident in reaching out to others for help in forums ranging from Slack channels to Twitter.

The civil service should also be more active in building the right skills and behaviours. For example, it could learn from the experience of new employees who come from different sectors or walks of life. Civil servants will also benefit from secondments or exposure to the private or third sector, which can enable them to better understand other perspectives. Induction programmes and training also have a role to play in building the right skills. This was an area that participants noted the new Government Skills and Curriculum Unit in the Cabinet Office could continue exploring. The Civil Service Fast Stream is a unique platform for developing future leaders who are used to working across government as a default where it is needed.

The civil service’s culture could also evolve to enable more joining up. The former chief executive of the civil service, Sir John Manzoni, and others had already pointed to the risk-averse nature of decision making in government, which itself discourages working with others.²¹ Greater openness to risk-taking is a common theme when discussing civil service reform. There can be a tension with the responsibility to manage public money effectively, which is monitored by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, but good civil servants should be able to manage the risks. Cultural change should also mean more focus on learning – including from others – rather than blame.

A 'just culture' of openness to reflection and learning has delivered results in aviation and nuclear security, and could help improve collaborative work across departments or agencies, particularly where there are risks involved.²²

Greater transparency makes it easier to share learning and promote collaboration, and may be part of the solution. For example, Scotland's National Performance Framework aims to improve health and education outcomes and reduce poverty.²³ It features indicators of government progress which are publicly available. One participant noted that having publicly available and easily accessible indicators meant officials could discuss what was not working. Similar approaches exist elsewhere; the state of Washington launched Results Washington in 2013 to monitor progress on the economy, among other priorities.

Other ways participants suggested to encourage the right behaviours include researching and publicising the benefits of working jointly with others, and pushing for greater diversity among civil service leaders.

Little clarity on shared purpose and objectives

Working together, but why?

The final barrier participants touched on is the lack of emphasis on why collaborating with others matters. Some of this comes down to poor communication of the benefits of working together to deliver services seamlessly to people. Collaboration is not an end in itself but a means of achieving better results for the public. In itself it is of little value, and policymakers need to be clear why it is beneficial and what form it will take.

Another difficulty is balancing the priorities not only of different departments, but of different local areas. Achieving a common purpose does not mean ignoring regional or local tensions, but working so that objectives complement each other where possible.

Proponents of joining up should explain why it is desirable

Those wishing to work across government or the wider public sector should set out clear objectives. They should also explain what benefits working with others could deliver. One way to do this is to corral organisations and people around shared missions, not just aligned interests. For example, in its efforts to improve resilience to cybercrime across government, the police, local government and the private and third sectors, the Scottish government developed a framework involving a shared strategy with clear goals, and national delivery plans.²⁴

The civil service has an advantage in that it can come together in a way that other sectors cannot – partly due to commercial pressures linked to companies competing together. Having a permanent civil service should be an asset when it comes to working across silos and building relationships. However, as noted above, while departments compete for resources this will remain difficult.

Attendees also discussed the role ministers should play in encouraging joint working and setting goals for collaboration. Some suggested that ministers could ask civil servants to work more effectively with other parts of government in the same way that they can ask for better data quality. Other participants disagreed, and argued that civil servants have a duty to work as effectively as they can, including with others, and that ministers should not have to request this. Some ministers are open to officials working across departments and are known to challenge civil servants on how 'seamlessly' their policies are delivered to citizens. However, there was agreement that this vision tends to become lost further down within government – including at more junior levels, where the reality of departmental silos bites.

Other contributions included ideas for how to set clear goals, such as reorganising government by key outcomes, and being clear where policy initiatives have an impact on other parts of government.

Conclusion

Poor collaboration is the main obstacle facing civil servants in delivering better outcomes for the public. The civil service is well aware of this, but the difficulty of making change a reality is deeply entrenched within its structures and culture.

The discussion hosted by the Institute for Government showed that government is far from powerless to solve this particular problem. It has many options available which need not be as radical as changes to the machinery of government. From partnerships or joint units to funding mechanisms, the government has already enabled teams across government bodies to deliver joint objectives that benefit people.

Ongoing civil service reform presents a unique opportunity to build on existing good practice. Now is the time to initiate a step change in how the civil service delivers for the people of the UK.

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