

Heywood Quarterly

Building resilience for a new reality

Summer 2026

8th Edition

Contents

Editor's Letter	4
The future of warfare	7
Resilience in an era of systemic shock	12
Leadership lessons from vaccines to defence	19
Inside the machine	25
Why public deliberation is a useful tool for policymakers	36
Test, learn and grow: A new way of working in government	41
The elusive prize of prevention	48
What government risks getting wrong about AI adoption	54
Public service, private motives and a parish murder	58
Mid-Term Transitions Series	60

Editor's Letter

At a friend's birthday party some years ago, guests had to sing for their supper by declaring, then justifying in a 60-second 'presentation', their favourite word in the English language.

Mine wasn't, and still isn't, 'resilience' – but in the current economic, political and security context it might have been an interesting and reassuring choice. As a country, as a government and as individuals buffeted by daily threats, uncertainties and unpredictabilities, we'd all like to believe that we're individually and collectively resilient, able to recover, adapt or "bounce back" quickly from difficulties, misfortune and unexpected change.

The reality is that most of us aren't.

In the private sector, a huge army of consultants, spurred on by volatile markets and by the disruptions of the pandemic, has been preaching organisational resilience for years. Now wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the growing likelihood of systemic shocks in energy and cyber, are exposing new vulnerabilities in policymaking, our public institutions and our understanding of long-term risks.

I hope this edition of the Heywood Quarterly will provide some inspiration for those across government striving to make us more robust.

How much we should actually spend on defence, of course, is a live political debate and one that falls outside the remit of this publication. In the opening article, though, you'll find some fascinating insights into the changing nature of warfare by the Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Rich Knighton. Drawing on a recent visit to the drone-dominated landscape of Ukraine, Sir Rich points out how, over the sweep of history, "destructive power and the distances between protagonists have grown"; he suggests that space, cyberspace and artificial intelligence will be the next big frontiers of war. In a future issue, we hope to come back to what all this means for the Ministry of Defence; for the moment, at least, the nature of future threats and what the CDS calls the 'dizzying' pace of change have been made abundantly clear.

Rosehanna Chowdhury may not be on the defence front line, but as CEO of the relatively new UK Resilience Academy she is charged with making us safer and more secure. She argues persuasively that resilience is the job of a whole nation (citing the cases of Finland, New Zealand and Singapore) and that choices made by governments, local authorities, emergency services and communities long before a crisis occurs often determine how effectively we respond. "Preparedness should sit alongside good policy design and effective delivery as a routine part of how government operates," she writes; it should not be "treated as a specialist or exceptional concern."

If one of Rosehanna's takeaways is that "[resilience] capability is built through exercising, testing assumptions and learning," Madelaine McTernan could be its living embodiment. Between December 2020 and September 2022, Maddy was Director General of the Vaccine Taskforce (VTF), a joint unit of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department of Health and Social Care, responsible for securing Covid vaccines for the UK. She is now Chief of Defence Nuclear at the Ministry of Defence, the umbrella term for those organisations and the submarines that deliver our nuclear deterrent. While these two roles might seem worlds apart, her article highlights important and salutary common leadership themes: the importance of having a focus on purpose, on trusting data yet accepting risk, on being willing to change course, on prioritising outcomes over process and on driving pace.

Leaders set the tone for all organisations, but good policymaking requires much more besides. How do we evaluate policy and how do we know what's really working? That's a question which has long been troubling Adam Coutts, a Research Fellow at the Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge, who helped design and evaluate one of the UK's largest social policy randomised controlled trials in the Work and Health Unit at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In a challenging article, Adam says the relationship between academic researchers and government policy practitioners is one of mutual frustration and calls on government departments to better acknowledge the role of methodological rigour, academic independence and the capacity of academics to build institutional memory.

Continuing the theme of better policymaking, Catherine Taylor highlights her highly positive experience of helping run a public deliberation workshop. Public deliberation brings together a diverse group of citizens – often in what is known as a citizens' assembly – to engage deeply with complex issues, consider evidence, hear a range of perspectives and reflect before reaching conclusions. She concludes that the UK Government "at all levels should be using deliberation more consistently when designing and delivering policy so as to achieve better policy outcomes and strengthen societal trust and cohesion."

The next two articles put a welcome spotlight on public service delivery. Nick Kimber, Director of Public Service Reform at the Cabinet Office on secondment from local government, assesses the early results of the Test, Learn and Grow initiative and argues that, by rolling out this approach across the country, central government in partnership with local communities can make a big difference to citizens' lives. Warren Heppollette, writing from Greater Manchester, believes devolution is key and sees signs of hope that attempts to direct more resources towards prevention of poor social outcomes are starting to bear fruit.

Our last full article in this edition contains a timely plea for government not to 'passively adopt' AI. Its author Michael Padfield, Head of Strategy in the Incubator for Artificial Intelligence (the UK Government's Applied AI team), illustrates how citizens are already ahead of the state in using Large Language Models (LLMs) as credible alternatives to government services. "In the medium term," he concludes, "we should meet the market where it is heading and shape it... or else we will fail to adapt to how citizens are using the tech in the real world."

For a little light relief over the summer, Penny Stephens' cosy crime thriller *Till Death Us Do Part* – complete with a public service dimension – is reviewed on pp 57–58 by Sophie Cliff. Finally, we have excerpts from our new Mid-Term Transition Series, including insights from Simon Case, Mark Sedwill and Adam Coutts.

Tim Dickson, Editor in Chief.

The future of warfare

Sir Rich Knighton, Chief of the Defence Staff, on the next-generation battlefields

The way humans fight has changed dramatically through history, driven by emerging new technology and war itself. With the rate of change in technology now faster than at any other time in human history, we can expect how war is fought to change significantly over the next few years.

I was given a first-hand insight into some of those changes when I visited Ukraine a few weeks ago.

While I was there, I was taken to the area northwest of Pokrovsk to meet soldiers who had been fighting on the front line. They wanted to show me the juxtaposition of the old Soviet-style Corps headquarters and the most modern and lethal example of what passes for today's hand to hand combat.

In the 9th Corps headquarters there were large maps on the wall with pins stuck in them and string threaded between them, signifying the front line or concentrations of troops. The headquarters was hidden in a nondescript building in the middle of a small town – it was a scene that would have been familiar to those who had fought in that region in the Second World War.

From the Corps HQ I moved to the 425th Assault Regiment headquarters, a bit closer to the front line. There I met young men who had been fighting for Ukraine since the start of the war. Soldiers who had been civilians, painters and decorators and van drivers when Russia invaded. Their commander was a bear of a man, with biceps bigger than my thighs and with scars on his face from the battles he had fought.

The battle for Pokrovsk was being run from his headquarters. In half a dozen rooms in a civilian building in the countryside, men in uniform sat behind computer screens with digital maps and live feeds from drones flying over the town. These drones were being used to look for the enemy, to attack enemy positions and to destroy other drones. In some cases, the grainy pictures on the screens were in fact the intercepted signals from Russian drones, a real-time window to the battle.

The fighting in and around Pokrovsk was fierce. Fighting at close quarters amongst the rubble was still a fundamental part of the battle, but both sides relied increasingly on relatively cheap mass-produced drones to find and kill their enemy. At night they would move under the cover of a thermal blanket – a sort of invisibility cloak – to avoid being seen by thermal imaging cameras on the drones.

A little further away from the front line, we changed vehicles and were taken in separate unmarked cars by Ukrainians from the Unmanned Systems Force to a secret location. Inside the makeshift headquarters, large TV screens were stacked one on top of the other four or five high against the wall. Here they flew the drones that were operating across many kilometres of the front line in the region. When the pilots weren't flying, they were sleeping or resting in Japanese sleep pods just outside the ops room. On the screens, we could see live feeds from the drones as they hunted their enemy.

The father of the unmanned systems force, Mykhailo Fedorov, was made the Minister of Defence for Ukraine in his mid-thirties. His close team was made up of scientists, engineers, former businessmen and economists, all of whom care deeply about their data. Attacks on targets are recorded from the drone's camera and uploaded on an internal feed. These are then independently assessed, the results posted on a big screen in the centre of the wall. If the claimed kill is confirmed, it is added to the running total of Russians killed that day, that week and that month. The total increased by eight in the two hours I was in the building.

Each type of target, such as an artillery piece, radar or a person, has a number of points associated with it, which an operator earns for those they hit. The points can then be spent by the operator on new drones via a closed website with the look and feel of any other online store. This data allows operators and their units to be ranked, with that ranking then shared across the force.

I suspect, like me, many will find this gamification of killing uncomfortable, even macabre. But the story illustrates the changes that technology is enabling in the way war is fought today.

None of this was part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces when the war started. The pace of change is dizzying.

Are drones changing warfare fundamentally? When I was in Ukraine, I wondered whether their use represented the same sort of evolutionary change as, say, the machine gun or artillery. War has often accelerated the adoption and exploitation of new technologies, with losses on the battlefield killing off the old ideas more quickly than any committee in peacetime. The use of drones in Ukraine is just the most modern manifestation of this process.

At the same time, the physical distance between those waging war has continued to grow. While warfare started on land – then moved to the sea and eventually the air – today, warfare has expanded its horizons into space and cyberspace.

Space-based technologies provide critical intelligence, allow navigation across the globe and enable global communications. Such technologies are vital to the modern way of war, and as I look to the future it seems clear that whoever controls space and has access to these technologies has an advantage. Until recently, Russia was using Elon Musk's Starlink satellite constellation to control and help guide Russian long-range drones in Ukraine. When this access was removed earlier this year, we saw a significant reduction in their use by Moscow.

With space conferring such an advantage on those with access to it and capability in it, some have argued that this is where the next big war will start.

Russia and China are already trialling satellites that grapple on to other satellites so as to move them out of orbit or simply shield them so they can't communicate. We have even seen evidence of Russia developing weapons, including nuclear weapons, for space. In response, we are improving our ability to understand what is going on up there and developing bodyguard satellites to fly near our own satellites to protect them.

Cyberspace has also become an increasingly important battleground. The Ministry of Defence has been subject to over ninety thousand Russian cyber-attacks in the past two years. Unlike our conventional concepts of conflict, cyberspace has no obvious borders and conflict is not triggered by an invasion at a particular moment in time; instead, it is perpetual.

Furthermore, cyberspace offers the opportunity to directly influence the human mind in what has become known as cognitive warfare. Where traditional warfare focuses on physical destruction, cognitive warfare seeks to manipulate information, exploit biases and disrupt trust through psychological operations, misinformation and cyber-influence campaigns. By shaping how individuals and societies interpret reality, adversaries can undermine morale, sow discord and weaken resolve without firing a shot.

I am instinctively sceptical about how potent cognitive warfare might be – after all, these approaches have only had mixed success in political campaigns and product advertising. I am also conscious, however, that I might be falling into the trap of failing to comprehend the implications of this advancing technology. Especially with artificial intelligence (AI) and social media, cognitive warfare will become increasingly sophisticated and an important part of the way warfare is conducted. Artificial intelligence that matches human levels of intelligence across virtually all domains might also signal the first change in the nature of warfare rather than simply its character.

As I look to the future, the confluence of almost limitless commercially available computing power, increasingly sophisticated AI models and ubiquitous battlefield

sensors providing massive data sets will drive and enable huge advances in robotics, targeting and precision. As a result, I expect uncrewed systems and increasingly autonomous systems to be an ever more important part of future wars. These will also drive big changes in the way we organise, equip and use our armed forces to protect and defend our interests. Ukraine has already shown how a country without a navy can, through creative and courageous use of maritime drones, neutralise the mighty Russian Black Sea Fleet.

The emergence of artificial general intelligence (AGI) raises further questions. It will, by definition, do things that we currently rely on humans to do – perhaps even better. AGI will speed up the process of discovery and adaptation enormously. That has, until now, been an entirely human act. It will inevitably also raise ethical concerns about who makes decisions and whether it might make war more likely.

It is easy to foresee a moment of ‘runaway’ where the models supported by the robots are learning and adapting faster and faster, meaning that they get further and further ahead of potential adversaries. Could winning that race mark the moment when an unassailable superpower emerges? Could that technology actually act as a deterrent and reduce the prospects of war, or does it trigger another arms race? Could it enable truly effective cognitive warfare?

In truth, I don’t know – and neither did the various AI models that I asked.

Conclusion

We must avoid the brutality of war where possible. I see that as a fundamental part of my job. I ask myself every day how we can deter our adversaries and persuade them not to do something daft. That is why defence matters.

Looking to the future, I don’t foresee a change in the root causes of war. Specific triggers might be different, but the fundamental nature of war as a violent and bloody act caused by people, power and politics has been consistent for millennia.

Right now, I feel that we are living through the most dangerous period of my working life. The shifting balance of power, the fraying of the old order and growing competition generate instability and uncertainty. The risk of miscalculation and escalation is real.

And the war in Ukraine is shining a light on how wars of the next decade and beyond will be fought. Throughout history we have seen how technology and war have catalysed change in how we fight. Destructive power and the distances between protagonists have grown.

The next big changes are likely to be driven by artificial intelligence. Like in so many other applications, its use in war is making things go faster and become more

efficient. But as AGI emerges – and I am sure it will – it could mark as significant a discontinuity in progress as the atomic bomb.

Recently, I spoke to a group of military officers and civil servants in the early stages of their careers on the basis that they will be leading defence in the future – not me.

The results of that discussion might seem surprising. Whereas many senior officers were preoccupied with the more futuristic scenarios and opportunities, the younger cohort in their discussion frequently came back to factors associated with continuity and particularly the idea of war as a human endeavour, that whatever the role of technology, it would continue to rely on having humans “in the loop”.

I was struck, and actually rather reassured, by the young troop leader who made clear that she did not think her soldiers would follow her if she presented them with orders written by AI, rather than her own clear understanding and direction.

This gave me optimism that even if we cannot foresee all the challenges that these young people will face in their defence careers, at least they will face those challenges with a humanity, an intelligence and imagination that would equally have done credit to their and our predecessors. Rather than being concerned about the future of defence, they were more preoccupied with the defence of the future.

Sir Rich Knighton is the Chief of the Defence Staff. This article is an abridged version of a lecture given in ‘The Future of...’ series at Clare College, Cambridge.

Resilience in an era of systemic shock

Rosehanna Chowdhury explains how and why the UK should build a whole-of-society response

As a member of the COBR operations team in the Cabinet Office early in my civil service career, I got a taste of why it's important to be resilient in the modern world. Two events in particular, the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud in 2010 and the Japan earthquake and tsunami in 2011, stayed with me. Both, at the time, might have seemed to be distant incidents unfolding thousands of miles away, but for the UK Government they rapidly became matters of domestic consequence.

The volcanic ash disruption, for example, soon became more than an aviation issue. The immediate priority for the Government was the large number of British nationals stranded overseas as airspace across Europe closed, leaving many unable to return home. But the effects quickly spread far beyond travel. There were concerns about supply chains and the movement of key imports and exports, alongside public health questions relating to air quality, aircraft safety and the impact of volcanic ash on jet engines. And as the disruption coincided with the Easter holidays, many teachers were unable to return to the UK in time for the start of term, creating secondary pressures on schools, parents and local communities. Likewise, following the earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear incident in Japan, there were urgent concerns about the safety and wellbeing of British nationals in Tokyo, alongside wider questions around travel, food imports, manufacturing supply chains, energy policy and the broader economic implications of disruption in our highly interconnected society. More recently, the Heathrow substation fire in 2025 resulted in more than 1,300 cancelled flights, affecting hundreds of thousands of passengers and creating disruption far beyond the airport itself. What began as a local infrastructure incident quickly became a national issue, with consequences for transport networks, businesses, supply chains and public confidence. It was another reminder that in an interconnected society, the impacts of disruption rarely remain confined to a single organisation or sector.

Fast forward to today and national resilience has taken on a new urgency in a TUNA (Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel and Ambiguous) and VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world. Or my own take on it – the unprecedented use of the word unprecedented!

Geopolitical developments in recent years have reinforced just how profoundly the operating environment has changed. Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought war back to the European continent, with consequences felt far beyond the battlefield through energy security, cyber threats, economic disruption, disinformation and pressure on global supply chains. More recently, the conflict involving Iran has again

demonstrated how rapidly instability overseas can affect national security, global markets and domestic resilience on fuel supplies and energy prices.

These developments echo warnings from Anne Keast-Butler, Director of GCHQ, that the UK is increasingly operating in a “grey zone” between peace and war: a space characterised by cyber attacks, hostile state activity, disinformation and persistent pressure below the threshold of conventional conflict. In this environment, the distinction between external security and domestic resilience is becoming increasingly blurred.

Last year’s Strategic Defence Review acknowledged the growing importance of homeland defence and societal preparedness. Resilience is no longer solely about responding to emergencies after they occur (as with the ash cloud and the tsunami), but about ensuring that the UK’s institutions, infrastructure, economy and communities are prepared to withstand sustained periods of disruption and uncertainty.

Crises themselves are changing. They are rarely isolated incidents with clear boundaries and a single lead agency. Instead, they cascade, compound and converge. Acute shocks interact with existing vulnerabilities, creating consequences that spread across sectors and systems in ways that are difficult to predict and increasingly difficult to contain. Many of the most significant vulnerabilities are embedded within systems that most citizens never see. For example, undersea electricity interconnectors now provide around 10% of the UK’s peak power demand. A disruption affecting those connections would not remain an energy issue for long; it would have implications for businesses, public services, supply chains and communities across the country. Understanding and managing these interdependencies is becoming one of the defining challenges of modern resilience. Too often, however, governments’ resilience strategies are designed around how to deal with isolated incidents, with clear boundaries and defined lead agencies. A modern resilience model, by contrast, needs to anticipate and mitigate interconnected, compounding and cascading risks, operating environments that have become degraded and the cumulative impact of long-term pressures that weaken response capacity before a crisis even begins.

This is the context in which the UK Resilience Academy (UKRA), launched just over a year ago, has been working with government, local responders, businesses, voluntary organisations and community leaders to equip them and their people to respond and recover from disruption on a national scale. As resilience practitioners often observe, plans alone do not create resilience. Capability is built through exercising, testing assumptions and learning together before a crisis occurs.

What other countries teach us about resilience

Looking internationally, different nations have taken different paths, but common themes emerge. Those that perform well in crises tend to mobilise society as a whole, learn relentlessly from real events, plan for the build-up of long-term pressures as well as sudden shocks and invest heavily in people and preparedness.

Mobilising society as a national asset: Finland

Finland's approach is often cited as world-leading because it treats resilience as a societal endeavour, not a government programme. Under its model of comprehensive security, every sector – from energy and transport to education and media – has clearly defined roles in maintaining national continuity. Hybrid threats and hostile state activity are treated as enduring conditions to be planned for, not exceptional events.

Crucially, Finland actively cultivates public trust through transparent communication and civic education. From a young age the Government encourages citizens to understand their role in national preparedness. Businesses, particularly those operating critical infrastructure, are fully integrated into planning and exercising. The result is a system in which preparedness is part of everyday institutional life. Citizens, businesses and public authorities understand that continuity during crises depends on shared responsibility and sustained investment long before disruption occurs.

Learning from real crises: New Zealand

New Zealand demonstrates the power of learning and adaptation. It applies its long-standing '4 Rs' framework – Reduction, Readiness, Response and Recovery – consistently across national and local government.

Following major events such as the Christchurch earthquakes and the Whakaari/White Island eruption, New Zealand invested heavily in structured lessons-learned processes, leadership development and system reform. It is expected that local communities will maintain a degree of self-sufficiency during the early stages of a crisis, thereby reducing pressure on national response mechanisms and enabling resources to be prioritised where they are most needed. Importantly, local autonomy operates within a coherent national framework rather than independently from it.

Planning for the long term: Singapore

Singapore's strength lies in disciplined long-term planning and institutional clarity. It explicitly treats slow-burn risks such as water scarcity, climate impacts and demographic change as national security concerns. Agencies operate with high interoperability and a shared doctrine, and carry out regular rehearsals.

Public preparedness campaigns are highly practical, focused on ensuring citizens understand what actions to take during disruption and why those actions matter.

Singapore demonstrates the value of combining long-term planning, institutional discipline and public engagement within a coherent national resilience strategy.

Youth engagement and long-term preparedness

One area where several international resilience models are particularly strong is in youth engagement and civic preparedness. Countries such as Finland and Singapore recognise that resilience is not built only through institutions, but through public understanding developed over time. Media literacy, civic responsibility and national continuity are introduced early, helping younger generations understand both the risks modern societies face and the role citizens play in responding to them.

The idea of engaging youngsters in the art and practice of government more generally has long mattered to me personally. When I was 16, I learnt about the Civil Service at a school event and invited myself to work experience in the Cabinet Office – which is how I found my way into the Civil Service. After being appointed Schools Champion for the Civil Service by Sir Jeremy Heywood, we worked together on schools outreach and social mobility initiatives designed to broaden young people's understanding of public service and national leadership. That work was grounded in a shared belief that talent, confidence and civic contribution exist across every community, but opportunity and exposure to those opportunities are not always available to all. Through programmes connecting schools with senior civil servants, we sought to demystify government, raise aspirations and strengthen engagement with public institutions.

That experience continues to shape my thinking as Chief Executive of the UK Resilience Academy, where we have recently introduced a pilot programme with local schools focused on helping 16–18 year olds understand contemporary risks, crisis leadership, misinformation, community resilience, the role they can play during disruption and possible careers in this field. The aim is to equip a generation that will inherit an increasingly complex risk environment with greater confidence, awareness and civic capability.

Long-term national resilience depends not only on systems and structures, but on whether future generations feel connected to the institutions, responsibilities and collective effort that resilience requires.

This also highlights the role of communities in building resilience. Resilience is woven through our neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools and, above all, the partnerships that connect them. There is a simple truth at the heart of resilience. The first person to respond to an emergency is rarely a uniformed responder; more often it is a neighbour, friend, colleague or passer-by. The strength of those local relationships can often determine how effectively communities withstand and recover from disruption.

International experience reinforces this point. Research following both the Japan earthquake and Hurricane Katrina in the US found that communities with strong social networks and high levels of trust recovered more quickly than those without them. More recent research by the National Consortium for Societal Resilience (UK+) demonstrates the economic argument, showing that every £1 invested in societal resilience generates an estimated £35.12 in public value and savings.

What this means for the UK – and for you

Taken together, the international examples illustrate that high-performing resilience systems have to be built over time through sustained investment, institutional clarity and public participation. The UK Government Resilience Action Plan signals a clearer focus on system-wide risk, cross-government coordination and strengthened preparedness. As a country we now need to reframe how we talk about risk and preparedness, recognising that resilience is a practical capability that drives better decisions under pressure. Preparedness should sit alongside good policy design and effective delivery as a routine part of how government operates, rather than being treated as a specialist or exceptional concern.

For those shaping policy, strategy and delivery across Whitehall, this has direct implications. Resilience considerations should inform policy development from the outset rather than being introduced retrospectively after systems fail under pressure. Decisions about procurement, workforce design, digital transformation, infrastructure investment and service delivery all shape the UK's ability to absorb and recover from disruption.

For example, the recently established National Energy System Operator (NESO) has a unique statutory duty to provide independent advice and guidance to build security and resilience across Great Britain's energy system. This reflects a broader shift in thinking with resilience as a core consideration in long-term planning, system design and investment decisions. As the UK's energy system becomes increasingly interconnected and reliant on digital technologies, renewable generation and cross-border infrastructure, NESO's role demonstrates how public bodies are beginning to embed resilience into strategic decision-making. Similarly, the Ministry

of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Stronger Local Resilience Forum Trailblazers Programme is exploring how mayors, council leaders and Local Resilience Forums can work more closely together to strengthen local leadership, accountability and preparedness.

A call to action for leaders

The UK stands at an inflection point. The threats we face, whether state-sponsored, natural, technological, economic or social, will continue to evolve. Our response must evolve faster.

Resilience, ultimately, is the work of a whole nation. It is shaped every day by decisions made across government, local authorities, emergency services, businesses and communities. Whether developing policy, delivering public services, managing critical infrastructure or leading organisations through change, choices made long before a crisis occurs often determine how effectively we respond when it does. Resilience is built through how risks are understood, how partnerships are formed, how resources are prioritised and how honestly uncertainty is addressed. It is not the product of a single plan or institution, but the cumulative effect of decisions that strengthen our capacity to anticipate, adapt and recover.

For leaders across Whitehall and beyond, this raises a number of important questions. Has resilience featured as a regular discussion at your executive committee or senior leadership team? Have you considered not only your own organisational vulnerabilities, but also those of your critical suppliers and delivery partners? In an interconnected world, organisations are often only as resilient as the weakest link in the systems on which they depend.

Who else needs a seat at your table when considering preparedness and response? Are relationships with local responders, infrastructure providers, voluntary organisations and neighbouring organisations strong enough before a crisis occurs? What are the critical services your organisation must continue to deliver during disruption and have you identified the people, skills and resources needed to sustain them? Just as importantly, have those individuals been trained, exercised and equipped to operate effectively under pressure?

The central question is no longer whether disruption will occur, but whether the UK's businesses, government departments, communities and other institutions are sufficiently prepared, adaptable and coordinated to manage it effectively when it does. That challenge belongs to all of us. Building a more resilient United Kingdom will require not only stronger systems and institutions, but the leadership, partnerships and civic participation needed to sustain them.

Rosehanna Chowdhury is CEO of the UK Resilience Academy.

Leadership lessons from vaccines to defence

Madelaine McTernan, Chief of Defence Nuclear at the Ministry of Defence, explains how Covid and nuclear converged

People sometimes ask me how I ended up as Chief of Defence Nuclear in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), not having had a background in either defence or the nuclear sector.

Whilst it isn't immediately obvious, there is a thread. I thrive on analysing problems: identifying issues, developing solutions and implementing them. After starting my career as a corporate lawyer, then spending more than a decade in mergers and acquisitions in investment banking, I moved to the Civil Service almost nine years ago. Here the breadth, variety, complexity and criticality of the challenges is often greater than in the private sector. It continues to keep me fully engaged.

Working on the response to Covid for over two years as Director General of the Vaccine Taskforce (VTF) allowed me to apply skills developed previously in both private and public sector roles, as well as learn a lot more about building and managing high-performing teams. I moved to the MoD three years ago and set about applying some of those lessons to the Defence Nuclear Enterprise (DNE), one of the four areas within the Department.

Although the context is starkly different now in many respects, with a long-term mission rather than a time-limited, crisis-defined remit, my time at the VTF has proved to be invaluable in my defence job. In this article, I'll explain why.

From vaccines to the nuclear deterrent

I got involved in the search for a Covid vaccine early in 2020 when the Treasury asked if I would represent HMG's interests in the commercialisation of Oxford University's candidate vaccine technology (subsequently licensed to AstraZeneca and now credited with saving many millions of lives worldwide). The VTF was formed in April that year, comprising a senior team with wide-ranging experience across the public and private sectors and academia (from science and public health to venture capital and manufacturing), underpinned with core policy and programme skills. We initially had a clear and singular objective: secure a Covid vaccine as soon as we could.

I spent most of that first year leading the deals to acquire our portfolio of candidate vaccines before taking over as the Director General of the Taskforce in December 2020, just as the UK was becoming the first country in the world to start a vaccine

deployment programme. We had been first to secure deals with both Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca, we were the first to roll out their vaccines, first to launch a booster programme in the autumn of 2021 and the following year, and first to secure a bivalent vaccine (targeting two variants of Covid). Later that year, we also agreed a landmark partnership with Moderna to establish UK research, development and manufacturing facilities (opened in Harwell in 2025) which are scalable to provide access to up to 250 million doses of their vaccines per year. That deal is a vital part of protecting the country against a future pandemic.

There is a bit of a myth – born of the extraordinary scale of the impact of Covid on people, the healthcare system and the economy – that VTF was somehow freed from the shackles of normal government processes and that we had authority to cut through the rules. It is true that resources and attention were unusually focused on a single issue with clear alignment on that goal across government. In reality, though, the VTF was simply a modest number of people reporting ultimately to the Prime Minister through the business and health departments, who had no significant delegated authority and whose decisions actually attracted greater ministerial oversight than normal day-to-day government business. Yet we were able to operate with the speed and agility required to deliver our mission and enable NHS partners to deliver theirs through the phenomenal vaccination programme.

Sustaining our nuclear deterrent – my current mission – does not share many characteristics with the Covid challenge. Whereas we were able to wind up the VTF towards the end of 2022, we might never be able to declare the DNE's work complete. The UK's nuclear enterprise has grown over decades, starting with our involvement in the Manhattan Project in the 1940s. I have visited the Trinity test site at White Sands, New Mexico and dug out original papers from the archives at Kew which include contemporary observations by Professor Sir James Chadwick, the British physicist who won the 1935 Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering the neutron in 1932 and who worked on the development of the first atomic bomb. "Although everything happened almost exactly as I had imagined it," he wrote of that Trinity test in 1945, "the reality was shattering... I am filled with awe when I look back on this moment. It was a vision from the Book of Revelation".

Although nuclear weapons have not been used since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, nuclear weapons continue to, and increasingly, feature as a global threat as major powers develop and expand their arsenals. For this reason, we are modernising the UK's nuclear deterrent to deter this most extreme threat to our national security.

The Royal Navy deployed the first ballistic missile submarine, HMS Resolution, in 1968 and we have maintained a nuclear-powered and armed submarine fleet ever since. It provides us with an assured second-strike capability. Undetected, on patrol somewhere in the Atlantic, these submarines are capable of delivering truly

awesome destructive force, even in the event that the UK has suffered a catastrophic attack first. One of the first, and most sombre, duties of a new Prime Minister is to write their instructions for such an eventuality (the 'letters of last resort') which are kept in safes on the submarines. The knowledge that even in such extreme circumstances we can inflict retribution at such scale delivers the deterrent effect that serves to underpin the UK's national security.

The DNE is the umbrella term for the organisations that together deliver our nuclear deterrent on behalf of the Prime Minister, the only person who can authorise the use of nuclear weapons. It houses a complex portfolio of the most advanced and awesome capabilities including submarines, warheads and nuclear fuels as well as much of the infrastructure and facilities that it takes to build and sustain the deterrent.

The DNE's mission to 'Deliver the capability, deter the threat, protect the nation' is as important as it has ever been. Defence spending, including on the nuclear deterrent, was deprioritised as the Cold War era receded. But as threats have resurged and the old norms are challenged, we have entered a third nuclear age. The scale of modernisation that we are now undertaking in our deterrent systems is unprecedented.

Translating the Taskforce lessons

As I was putting together my initial strategy for the DNE, I drew on several lessons from my time at the VTF. I have outlined some of the key ones below.

Focusing on purpose will strengthen the team

Saying you need to have a clear objective seems obvious. But defining and repeating our strategy to deliver it underpinned the VTF's ability to move quickly when we needed to. It meant ministers were already familiar with our plan when we asked them to make decisions. That clarity can be harder to define in a more complex portfolio such as the DNE, but articulating the overall mission, the strategy to deliver it and the sub-strategies for its critical components will help drive team cohesion and maximise effectiveness with stakeholders.

A strong sense of mission was the critical motivation for many of my VTF colleagues. In the MoD the overriding characteristic (military and civilian) is purpose. That has been a firm foundation on which to strengthen the concept of the DNE working together to deliver something consequential. We now even have our own badge, designed by the College of Arms, informed by the Naval Historical Branch and approved by His Majesty the King in 2024 (see illustration).



Alt text: The badge for Defence Nuclear Enterprise. A blue circle with gold text reading Defence Nuclear Enterprise. In the centre is a golden sea-griffin holding a trident. Around the circle is an olive wreath and on top of this sits a crown.

Be data-led but accept risk where necessary...

Data is the foundation of good decision-making: seek it, interrogate it, test it. Decision-making about Covid was notoriously difficult as, like the virus itself, our understanding of it evolved over time. We sponsored some incredible research but we couldn't always wait for the results to inform key decisions. Had we waited for more certainty we would not have secured vaccines as soon as we did. Data is a critical tool but sometimes we need to accept the risk of what we do not, or cannot, know.

...But be willing to change course

Not every VTF early decision turned out to have been the right call. And there was some criticism where we reversed course on a couple of projects. But, particularly when spending taxpayer funds, driving value is a constant objective and so means we must be willing to adapt to new information. This was not always easy for teams who had expended effort developing a particular course of action, but the ability to show agility and adjust our focus was key to continuing to secure the right outcomes.

Prioritise outcomes over process

Government is complex, with multiple stakeholders within and outside departments, different approval processes, governance structures and assurance requirements. These processes mostly serve to underpin good decision-making but sometimes the result is over-indexing on the process itself rather than defining a path to best serve the objective. And many of these processes are self-imposed. We therefore introduced a single approval forum bringing ministers together in one panel rather than a series of submissions and discussions with individual departments. Our industry partners adopted a similar approach, running processes in parallel rather than sequentially. The VTF worked closely with them to map processes and identify steps that could be expedited to minimise the amount of time it took, for example, for vaccine doses to get from manufacturers to people's arms.

Drive pace

With time a critical factor, the VTF was a very intense, seven-days-a-week endeavour. With multiple major programmes that span decades, the DNE may seem different but the reality is that speed of delivery is equally important.

Not long after I had arrived at the MoD, I showed my senior team a poster I had designed with a view to articulating this idea. It was a picture of Eliud Kipchoge finishing the London Marathon in the incredible time of just over two hours. I had added a headline: 'The Defence Nuclear Enterprise – a marathon at sprint pace'. This didn't land particularly well. After all, most of us would struggle to run at Kipchoge's pace for more than a few seconds – it isn't sustainable. But that notion that time is a valuable resource we must not squander is still key. We settled for the slogan 'Every day counts'.

Leverage experience and expertise

The VTF steering group had breadth and depth in expertise and experience. We didn't always agree but we were able to test our approach from different perspectives. What would the private sector do? How would academics approach a particular question? What levers does government have?

I am lucky that the breadth of the DNE equally guarantees this range of expertise and rich experience. Being able to bring together experts on everything from nuclear physics to commercial considerations to deterrence policy can be extremely powerful. We continue to drive integration and collaboration across our teams to leverage this.

The will to succeed

Although at the time we didn't articulate a particular VTF culture, across the senior team I noticed a common characteristic: the will to succeed.

I remember being told that, statistically, even once a vaccine reaches phase three of clinical trials it only has a 10–15% chance of becoming licensed. While we spent a lot of time thinking about which candidate vaccines had the greatest chance of success, I don't remember spending much time worrying that they wouldn't work. Not because we were convinced they would, simply because this was beyond our control. We needed to select those we thought had the greatest chance of success and then the important thing was to be focused on ensuring that – if they did work – we would be able to deploy them as quickly as possible in the largest volumes to the NHS.

I have found this approach of 'what will it take?' a powerful tool. Instead of asking 'can we?', it's better to frame the question 'how can we?'. It helps move away from solutions overly constrained by the way we might usually do things towards thinking about what would need to happen to secure a successful outcome.

Madelaine McTernan CB is Chief of Defence Nuclear at the Ministry of Defence.

Inside the machine

Adam Coutts highlights worrying fault lines in the relationship between academics and government

Each year UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the national funding agency for scientific research, directs billions of pounds towards university research. Yet the relationship between academic researchers and government policy practitioners is increasingly one of mutual frustration. The formal structures for cooperation are weak and the practical barriers substantial.

Academics rarely spend extended periods inside government. Only around 110 UKRI policy fellows have been placed since the scheme began in 2021, against a UK academic workforce of over 220,000.¹ Effectiveness is even harder to establish. A systematic review identified 1,923 research-policy engagement initiatives worldwide but found that only 6% had any publicly available evaluation of their impact.² We have built plenty of infrastructure for connecting research to policy. But do we know whether any of it works?

This article draws on a four-year research secondment to the Work and Health Unit at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), where I helped design and evaluate one of the UK's largest social policy randomised controlled trials, and on conversations with serving and former officials, politicians and colleagues across the academic and policy worlds. My argument is simple. The fix is not more evidence, and it is not another scheme for exchanging it. It is to put independent researchers inside government on sustained terms, working with officials on the same interventions and testing what actually works, rewarding the people who do that work and building the standing capacity that lets institutional memory survive between projects.

The e-lephant in the room is the role of artificial intelligence. Government is pouring money into it, and if knowledge leaves when a researcher leaves, why not store it in a system that never resigns? Maybe civil servants do not need evidence reviews and what works centres anymore when Claude can do it in three hours? It is a fair question, and I will come back to it. The short answer is that an LLM model can hold evidence but not judgement and knowledge of local conditions and networks. Does

¹ UK Research and Innovation, 'Policy fellows', ukri.org (accessed 2026).

² K Oliver, A Hopkins, A Boaz, S Guillot-Wright and P Cairney, 'What works to promote research-policy engagement?', *Evidence & Policy*, 2022, 18: 691–713.

an LLM know what young Gary trying to get a job is doing in Barnsley and his struggles? No. judgement and empathy are what government is short of. What I found inside

I came to this trial from the outside. I was an early career researcher at Cambridge. I had come across JOBS II, a group work programme for unemployed people, through my own research and PhD work ten years earlier.³ Once I saw that DWP was running it, I started contacting people there to find a way in. It took me over a year to reach the official who invited me to help design the trial; three other DWP staff had already told me it was not possible. In fact, one even said the research was not needed given they were already achieving good outcomes on existing employability programmes. This is not unusual.

Academic researchers rarely know who to approach or how independent research fits into the policy process. Analysts inside government are not findable online, and their roles are opaque to outsiders.

In the four years I was inside the department, six secretaries of state came and went. The trial outlasted all of them.

How decisions really get made

The public story is familiar: objective officials supply the evidence, ministers take the political decisions. Former senior officials describe something different. They are not simply passing findings to ministers but constructing an interpretation and coherent story of what is realistic at that time. They draw on political intelligence, operational knowledge, institutional memory and whatever evidence they can find. What reaches the minister is not the academic evidence published in a journal but an official's judgement of what it means politically and what may work for the media, for the public and on-the-ground at that time.

A study of more than a hundred junior officials found that, rather than following any template or method, they relied on what the researchers called “improvised expertise”. This involves collating bits of knowledge from various sources and

³ T Knight, R Lloyd, M Rayment et al., An Evaluation of the Group Work (JOBS II) Trial, Department for Work and Pensions, 2021; S Wang, A Coutts, B Burchell, D Kamerāde and U Balderson, ‘Can Active Labour Market Programmes Emulate the Mental Health Benefits of Regular Paid Employment? Longitudinal Evidence from the United Kingdom’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 2021, 35: 545–565.

reacting to private office demands and media coverage.⁴ Senior officials I spoke to recognised the pattern: decision-making was ad hoc, different teams working in fundamentally different ways. This is not an argument against official judgement. It is an argument for giving officials better material and information with which to judge and assess. The real question is not whether policymakers have read the relevant research, but whether the frameworks they use to interpret it are any good. As David Halpern has observed, the more familiar a problem feels, the more certain officials become that they understand it, even when that certainty rests on very little.⁵ An embedded researcher earns their place here: not by supplying more evidence but by improving the judgements that decide how it gets used.

At DWP the problem was never a shortage of evidence but the lack of a shared way to connect employment support to mental health outcomes. No amount of extra research would have supplied that; sustained presence inside the institution did, working with analysts to reframe the question in terms they could act on. The trial happened only because of deliberate design: external funding for an embedded researcher, the cross-departmental Work and Health Unit and the compliance systems and people that kept the randomised design intact.

Whether evidence shapes a decision also depends on timing, political climate and who is in the room. At DWP the employment teams emphasised the employment results and the psychologists the wellbeing ones, from a single trial that produced both. An embedded researcher sees this and can push for a fuller reading; someone publishing from outside cannot.

Resistance and trust

The cultural resistance runs deep on the academic side too. When I began the secondment, several colleagues who work on welfare told me I had gone over to the dark side. The remark is revealing and disappointing. It reflects a view, common in parts of the social sciences, that working with government on employment policy is not a way to improve people's lives but a form of complicity with a system that harms them. The incentive structures reinforce the distance. I have been told more than once, applying for tenured academic posts in the UK, that what is required is five first-authored journal articles. Four years inside government designing and evaluating a major trial counted for little.

⁴ E C Page and B Jenkins, *Policy Bureaucracy: Government with a Cast of Thousands*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 48–52.

⁵ D Halpern, *Fixing the Holes in Economics: Better Theories for Better Growth*, Behavioural Insights Team Working Paper, May 2025, pp. 8, 54.

Trust sits underneath all this. Officials need to know that an academic collaborator will deliver sober, rigorous analysis rather than use the platform to make a political argument. Too many, in officials' experience, treat engagement as a chance to denounce the whole framework as a product of austerity or neoliberalism rather than to improve a programme. This is not a caricature. It is a real barrier, and it pushes officials towards a handful of trusted individuals rather than opening engagement more widely.

A lost tradition

This weakness was not always the norm. Between the late 1990s and the early 2010s government commissioned large-scale social policy evaluations that brought academics into sustained, structured contact with delivery on a scale not seen since. The New Deal for Communities (1998 to 2010) was a £2 billion programme in 39 of England's most deprived neighbourhoods; its national evaluation, led by Sheffield Hallam University, ran for nearly a decade across a consortium of fourteen research organisations.⁶ The National Evaluation of Sure Start (2001 to 2012), led by Professor Edward Melhuish at Birkbeck, ran five interlocking research modules over eleven years.⁷ The Employment Retention and Advancement demonstration (2003 to 2007) was, at the time, the largest randomised controlled trial of a social policy ever conducted in this country, explicitly to build UK capacity for experimental evaluation.⁸

These programmes shared features largely absent today: long time horizons, serious investment in evaluation, multidisciplinary teams with sustained access to administrative data and a genuine appetite for learning. They were also an unmatched training ground. Much of that has been lost: the programmes ended, the teams dispersed, and under austerity the appetite for large social experiments faded.

⁶ E Batty, C Beatty, M Foden, P Lawless, S Pearson and I Wilson, *The New Deal for Communities Experience: A Final Assessment*, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010.

⁷ J Belsky, J Barnes and E Melhuish (eds.), *The National Evaluation of Sure Start: Does Area-Based Early Intervention Work?*, Policy Press, 2007.

⁸ J A Riccio, H Bewley, V Campbell-Barr et al., *Implementation and First-Year Impacts of the UK Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Demonstration*, DWP Research Report No. 412, 2007.

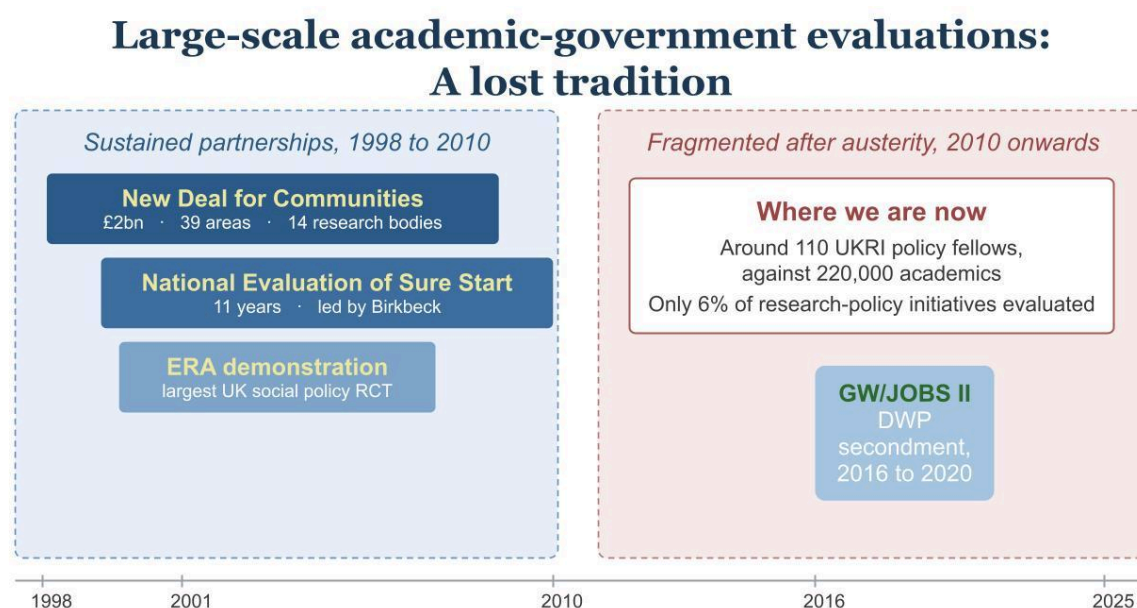


Figure 1. Large-scale academic-government evaluations: a lost tradition.

Alt text: A timeline showing large-scale academic government evaluations between 1998 and 2025. These are broadly split into two categories, sustained partnerships between 1998 to 2010 and fragmented after austerity after 2010. In sustained partnerships, there is: New Deal for Communities, £2bn, 39 areas and 14 research bodies; National Evaluation of Sure Start, 11 years, led by Birkbeck; and ERA demonstration, the largest UK social policy RCT. In the austerity period sits around 110 UKRI policy fellows against 220,000 academics and only 6% of research-policy initiatives; as well as GW/JOBS II, the author's DWP secondment between 2016 and 2020.

Where we are now

Where evaluations of current engagement schemes exist, the findings are sobering. A recent evaluation of a £3.9 million programme to build academic capacity for policy engagement found it improved individual skills but had no effect on policy outcomes, and that the most experienced benefited most, widening the inequalities in who gets to engage.⁹ Personal networks remain the system rather than a workaround: when policymakers need academic expertise they turn to informal contacts or commission think tanks, often bypassing universities altogether. The shift shows up in who

⁹ M Mäkelä, A Boaz and K Oliver, 'The Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) Programme in England: A Mixed Methods Evaluation', Evidence & Policy, 2025.

government pays to do its research. A 2018 parliamentary answer listed at least nine universities among DWP's recent research contractors;¹⁰ today the department's live portfolio of around 35 projects is led entirely by commercial research firms, with not a single university as lead.¹⁰

None of this means nothing is being done. The What Works Network, set up in 2013 and now spanning thirteen centres, has built real demand for evaluation; the Behavioural Insights Team made fast, practical trials normal; and since 2021 the Evaluation Task Force, a joint Treasury and Cabinet Office unit, has trained thousands of civil servants and built a public registry of evaluations.¹¹ These are real gains, and the Treasury deserves credit. But they fall short of the scale the problem demands, and are aimed mostly at the Government's own analytical capacity, not the harder task this article is about: getting independent researchers inside departments and keeping them there.

There is an asymmetry at the centre, too. As David Halpern has pointed out, the Treasury demands rigorous evidence from departments seeking funding but is far less exacting about its own fiscal choices.

A crowded market

Academics now work in a crowded market. Think tanks, management consultancies and commercial research firms all compete to shape policy, and on speed, flexibility and ease of contracting (the things procurement values most), they will always win. Ethics review, data-access negotiations and publication timelines make academic work look slow next to a consultancy that can start on Monday and has access to the procurement channels of Crown Commercial Services. That friction is real, and it explains much of the shift in the DWP figures.

What can academics help with?

The first thing is methodological rigour, uncovering what is really going on in trials or departments through ethnographic, embedded fieldwork. Think tanks and consultancies can describe what is happening and recommend what to do, but no consultancy was going to design and supervise a multi-year randomised controlled trial inside DWP over four years. The second is independence that survives the

¹⁰ UK Parliament, Written Question 136293, 17 April 2018; GOV.UK, 'Current DWP Research Being Undertaken by External Organisations', updated 1 April 2026.

¹¹ Evaluation Task Force, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, gov.uk/government/organisations/evaluation-task-force.

contract: peer-reviewed research is verifiable and adds to a public record that outlasts any political cycle, whereas a consultancy report belongs to the client and is often buried in an archive. The third is capacity that lasts. An embedded academic can train analysts, share evidence and networks, introduce methods and build institutional memory; a think tank or consultancy delivers a report and moves on. The cost of getting this wrong is not only intellectual. Government spent around £1.4 billion on management consultancy in 2022 to 2023.¹² A six-month academic buyout costs a university roughly £40,000 to £50,000. Not a like-for-like comparison, but a gap of that order is hard to ignore.

What both sides need to hear

What government needs to hear	What academia needs to hear
You are invisible to us. Organisation charts, staff lists and research portfolios are not published. Academics cannot find you unless through personal university networks.	Policy impact is incremental. Refining an existing programme is real impact. Transforming the political system is not the bar.
Data access is your bottleneck. No standard protocols. Every request is negotiated from scratch. Publishing rights go unresolved.	Sober analysis, not soapboxes. Officials need to trust that you will deliver evidence, not denounce the framework. No blaming it on neoliberalism all the time!
Your research is undersold. Academics have no idea how rigorous your analytical work is. Publish case studies.	Your timelines are sclerotic and outputs esoteric. A journal article two years after the window closes is no use to a practitioner. Out of date!
Build on the fellowships that work. The UKRI policy fellowships already show researchers can be embedded in departments. Scale them across social policy rather than starting over.	Reward policy work in hiring. Until promotion committees value secondments, early-career researchers will not take the risk.

What needs to change

The quick wins cost almost nothing and could be delivered within six months at departmental level: publish organisation charts and staff directories so outside researchers can find the right people; create template data-access agreements with

¹² National Audit Office and HM Treasury, UK Government Consultancy Spending Data, 2022–23.

standard rules on publishing rights; and have analytical teams publish short, readable case studies of their own work.

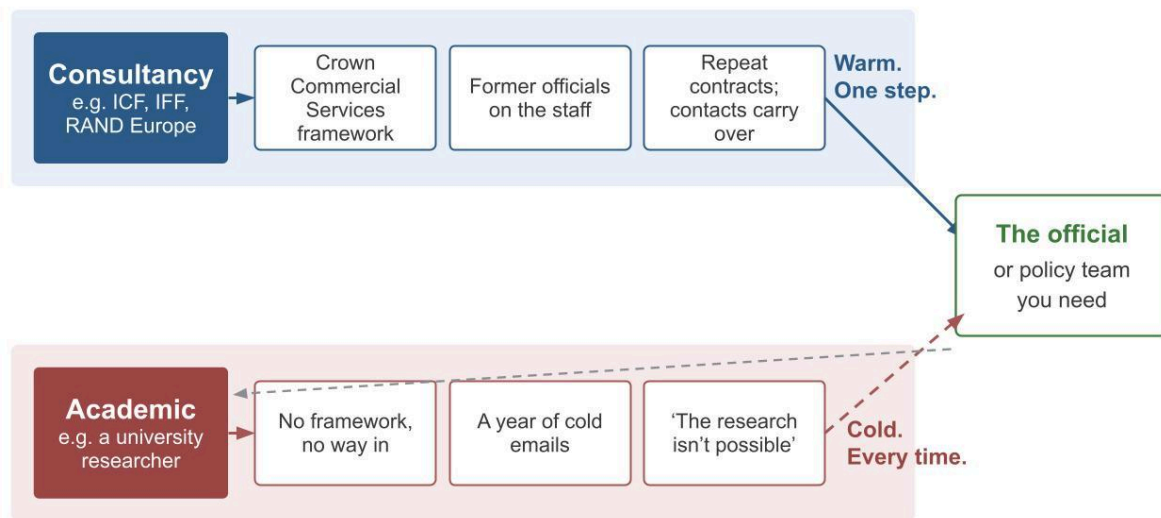
The medium-term changes need cross-departmental coordination and modest funding, and the place to start already exists. The UKRI policy fellowships, run by the Economic and Social Research Council, have since 2021 placed researchers inside departments and What Works centres for up to 18 months, and come close to the model this article argues for. The task is to scale and stabilise them, extend them across social policy, economics and public health, and act on the lessons from their evaluations: clear partnership agreements, more than one point of contact to survive staff churn and proper peer support.¹³ UKRI should also attach funding to the Areas of Research Interest departments already publish, and add an Evaluation Fellows stream modelled on the United States Office of Evaluation Sciences, with researchers embedded to design and run the trials that test whether policies work.¹⁴

The structural changes need sustained political will. The schemes that work should be put on a permanent footing and funded as such, so capacity and relationships are not rebuilt from scratch each spending round. And the role of a chief social science adviser, removed in 2010 and only partly revived as the National What Works Adviser between 2013 and 2022, should be restored on a permanent footing, the more easily because the Evaluation Task Force already runs the What Works Network.

¹³ J Benson-Egglenton and M Flinders, 'Understanding the Dynamics of Research Policy Fellowships: An Evaluative Analysis of Impacts and Ecosystem Effects', *Evidence & Policy*, 2025, 21: 257–278.

¹⁴ G Mulgan, *Evidence Ecosystems and the Challenge of Humanising and Normalising Evidence*, International Public Policy Observatory, 2024.

Two routes to the same official



The project ends, the researcher leaves, the knowledge goes too, and the next one starts cold again

Figure 2. Two routes to the same official.

Alt text: A chart showing two pathways to the official or policy team. The first is consultancy, for example ICF, IFF, RAND Europe. This route goes from Crown Commercial Services, to former officials on the staff, to repeat contracts which carry over. This is classified as warm and one step. The academic route, for example a university researcher, which starts with no framework or way in, a year of cold emails, and the response "the research isn't possible". Ultimately when the project ends, the researcher leaves with the knowledge, and the next project starts cold again.

The case for hybrid careers

It is hard to take seriously a critique of government from someone who has never been inside it, yet in the university public policy schools it is the norm. It is equally hard for an official who has only ever worked in Whitehall to see how a policy actually lands on-the-ground in our communities. The response is not better communication across the divide but more people who have stood on both sides of it.

The trial I helped run held together because someone could keep the randomised design and the daily reality of a jobcentre in view at the same time and hold the two when they pulled apart. I came to that work from a university rather than from inside government, which is the point: it took someone willing to cross the boundary. The analysts I worked with kept and used the evidence, knowledge and networks after I left. None of that survives where academics comment from outside, officials commission from inside, and the two meet only at the report stage.

What AI cannot do

I promised to come back to artificial intelligence, and this is the place. If the worry is that knowledge leaves when a researcher does, the instinct now is to capture it in a model and have done. AI is good at that narrow task. It can store what a trial found, summarise a literature and keep a record that never retires or changes teams. But evidence was never the scarce resource. judgement is. Knowing which finding fits the case in front of you, which caveat matters, when a result is too fragile to act on and when it is solid enough to defend to a minister, none of that can be generated by a model or handed over in a document. It is built by doing the work, and it lives in people.

Three levels of reform: A sequenced approach

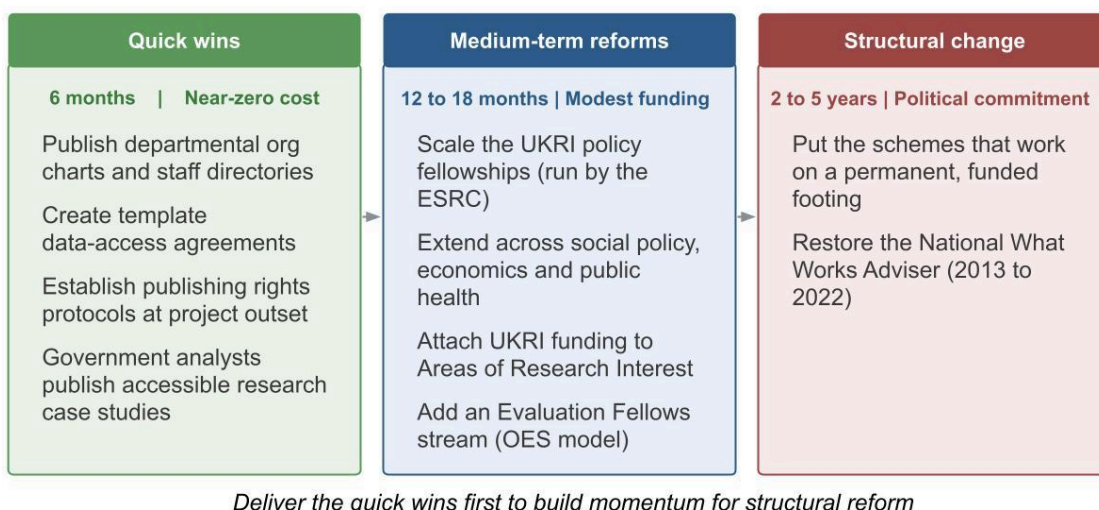


Figure 3. Three levels of reform: a sequenced approach.

Alt text: A chart showing the three levels of reform. The first level is 'quick wins' which can be completed in six months with near-zero cost. These include: publishing departmental org charts and staff directories, creating template data-access agreements, establishing publishing rights protocols at project outset, and government analysts publishing accessible research case studies. Level two is medium-term reforms, taking 12 to 18 months and needing modest funding. These include scaling the UKRI policy fellowships (run by the ESRC), extending across social policy, economics and public health, attaching UKRI funding to Areas of Research Interest and adding an Evaluation Fellows stream (OES model). Finally, structural change, which takes 2 to 5 years and requires political commitment. This includes putting schemes that work on a permanent, funded footing and restoring the

National What Works Adviser (2013 to 2022). The author notes we should deliver the quick wins first to build momentum for structural reform.

The deeper problem

Departments now work with academics the way they hire the big consultancies: a brief is written, a contract let, a deliverable received. Officials have become customers. They commission and procure with great skill but produce less of the thinking and own less of the design of policy than they once did. So when an academic arrives to collaborate rather than deliver, the people across the table are set up to buy a product, not to build knowledge alongside someone. Embedding researchers is a good option, because you cannot relearn how to produce by procuring more cleverly. You do it by keeping people in the building who still do the work.

The country and the Civil Service are stretched, and short of exactly this: people who can do serious research and understand how a department works from the inside. Rebuilding that group is one of the cheapest and most useful things government could do. It costs a fraction of what government spends on consultants, and unlike a consultancy report it leaves skills, memory and judgement behind. The point of all this is to get things done and make people's lives better, in society and in government.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Matt Leach (Building Centre and the Built Environment Trust); Jennifer Dixon and Dame Carol Black, who supported the research idea and funding; and James A. Riccio (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation) for their comments, suggestions and insights. For a list of citations, please [see the full article online](#).

Adam Coutts is a Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, Centre for Business Research.

Why public deliberation is a useful tool for policymakers

Catherine Taylor shares lessons on gauging citizens' opinions at a two-day workshop

As a nation, we conduct extensive opinion polling. Polling by government departments and organisations, such as YouGov and the National Centre for Social Research, provides a rich baseline of information on the views of the UK public. In economic 'domains', for example, polling reveals a considerable amount about UK public attitudes to trade, technology and energy. We can also gain insights into how citizens view the 'forces' acting on the global economy, in particular geopolitics and the behaviour of key actors, such as the United States, China and the European Union.

In our work for this year's Heywood Fellowship, which is examining the UK's role in the changing global economic order, we have been able to draw some initial conclusions from traditional polling about what the UK public thinks. However, polling can only tell you so much – it offers a snapshot of people's opinions through their immediate reactions to a question. It does not help you to understand the reasoning that sits behind those views, which is why we turned to a second source – a technique known as public deliberation.

What is public deliberation?

Public deliberation brings together a diverse group of citizens – often in what is known as a citizens' assembly – to engage deeply with complex issues, consider evidence, hear a range of perspectives and reflect before reaching conclusions. Participants are randomly selected to be representative of the broader population. Unlike traditional polling, deliberation reveals the values, trade-offs and reasoning that shape public preferences once participants are given time, information and space to think.

Deliberative approaches have been credited with generating more informed and nuanced insights than polling: reducing perceptions of elite bias (enabling more diverse and often unheard groups to be involved in shaping policy); revealing what people really care about once they understand the context; reducing polarisation and creating constructive dialogue between people who may not otherwise interact; and encouraging longer-term thinking.

Although many citizens' assemblies are initiated by civil society organisations, an increasing number are commissioned by public authorities at the municipal, regional, national and supranational levels. Notable examples close to home include the two assemblies commissioned by the Republic of Ireland's national legislature, which contributed to the legalisation of same-sex marriage and abortion, as well as Climate Assembly UK, which was commissioned by six House of Commons Select Committees to explore public preferences around how the UK should address climate change. More recently, in 2023, the government-funded Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy conducted a series of citizens' juries on UK trade policy. In terms of current deliberative work for central UK government, we are aware that the UK Cabinet Office is currently running a 'People's Panel' on a digital ID system. There is also growing interest from the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

The Heywood Deliberation

Thanks to funding from our sponsors – the Heywood Foundation, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Department for Business and Trade – we were able to run a two-day deliberative workshop in April, held at the Fellowship Team's HQ at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government.

Through the workshop, we aimed to better understand the rationale for views on the global economic order, which we had drawn from the polling data, and how these views varied across key demographic groups. We also wanted to test some of our research with the public and understand which of our possible future strategies or policy choices were most likely to achieve consensus.

We worked with two UK organisations to ensure methodological rigour and credibility in the design and delivery: the Sortition Foundation, which provides a civic lottery service for recruiting participants for deliberative events and which uses a selection process called 'sortition', a bit like jury selection; and the Involve Foundation, which provided participant support, mentored us through the design and delivery of the workshop, trained our table facilitators and provided lead facilitation during the event. The Sortition Foundation secured 26 participants who represented a microcosm of the UK population across gender, age, ethnicity, disability, education, political persuasion and geographic location.

The core question we asked participants was whether we needed to change our approach to the global economic order to achieve sustainable prosperity for the UK and rising living standards. The first day's deliberation delved into issues around the balance between openness and efficiency versus security – particularly in relation to trade – as well as the extent to which we should prioritise British economic interests over international openness. Day two then centred on the UK's position in the global economic system – which countries we should partner with and how. Participants were asked how the UK should respond if other countries were to use their economic

power against us and whether we should trade and invest mainly with big economic blocs like the US, China and the EU, or build relationships with countries more similar to us in size or values.

Challenging the traditional international economic posture

Before the workshop, we had been concerned that people would find the UK's international economic policy a difficult topic. Yet, despite the complexity of the issues covered and the fact that we kept participants indoors for two days over a beautifully warm and sunny spring weekend, these concerns proved to be unfounded. All participants engaged fully in what were thoughtful and lively discussions.

We will provide more detail in our final publications in the autumn. However, an overall conclusion that emerged from the session was a divergence between the way the UK traditionally places 'big bets' on the global economy and the UK public's view of our place in the world.

In our January publication, we described the UK's traditional international economic posture as that of an 'activist globaliser': we support the US-led economic order and have promoted more globalisation of markets and backed rules-based systems; and we have made implicit 'big bets' that other states will want to join this globalising system, and that global openness is a positive and enduring trend.

The workshop, by contrast, suggests that the UK public views UK foreign and trade policy predominantly through a lens of economic self-interest, and participants felt change is needed. They expressed a desire for the UK to be more proactive and more willing to challenge existing orthodoxies in global economic relations. At the same time, there was a clear expectation that any shift would be handled carefully and with sensitivity to context. As one participant noted, "The UK model of globalisation in its economy has become its weakness" but the Government needs to be "pragmatic in [taking] destiny into its own hands." Participants also overwhelmingly prioritised British economic interests over global connectedness and openness. National preference was particularly strong in relation to ownership of critical national infrastructure such as transport, energy and water.

Key success factors

Having reflected on the value of the workshop to our fellowship research, we offer the following takeaways to policymakers when considering deliberation as a technique:

Be explicit with participants about the purpose and how the results will be used. Many full deliberative processes result in formal recommendations to government. We were clear that participants' views would be collated and findings communicated to government via our overall fellowship recommendations.

1. Ensure participants are selected through sortition to ensure participation is diverse and mirrors the wider public, as far as possible.
2. Do not underestimate the public's ability to engage with complex issues but, at the same time, ensure material is clear, jargon-free and not overwhelming in volume. It needs to be accessible to all.
3. Bring in experts in deliberation to advise on design and delivery. Use a structured format with unbiased presentations, small group discussions, plenary sessions and time for reflection with regular breaks.
4. Skilled and neutral facilitation is crucial for supporting participants to communicate in productive and respectful ways, enabling everyone to be heard while avoiding louder voices dominating.
5. Focus on trade-offs, not just preferences. Public deliberation is most valuable when it tackles hard choices.
6. Combine deliberation with other sources of input. As the Heywood Fellowship, we have used a range of techniques to engage our stakeholders.

Rebuilding democratic trust

As policymakers operating in a democracy, the main route we have to understanding what the UK public thinks about any issue is the electoral process. Political parties publish manifestos setting out their intended actions and policies, voters consider those policies and then elect the people they want as their representatives.

Elections, however, are infrequent and upholding democratic systems requires consistent attention. This is especially the case currently with democracy under pressure globally, as authoritarian movements gain ground; polling in Britain reveals that public trust in institutions is low and falling. UK polling data reveals a populace that is not merely critical of specific policies but is increasingly sceptical of the entire system of governance and the state's ability to deliver on its fundamental responsibilities. A [record 45% of Britons noted in 2024 that they "almost never" trust governments of any party](#) to put the nation's interests first, a significant increase from 34% in 2019.

Given the range and scale of the challenges facing any government at the moment – from geopolitical uncertainty, squeezed budgets and competing priorities, to increasing societal division – successful delivery of a government's agenda will depend not only on sound policy design but also on public understanding and

consent. Policymakers therefore need to be on the hunt for ways to build trust in, and strengthen, the democratic process.

Institutionalising public deliberation, which is already happening in many countries and at all levels of government, is one way to address this deficit. The [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\) has set out a guide for policymakers](#), drawing on numerous examples across member countries and proposing eight possible models. These range from a permanent citizens' council with one-off citizens' panels (as is the case in Belgium) to a legal requirement for public deliberation before certain types of decisions are made (as is the case with the French 2011 law on bioethics).

Moving the 'flotilla' in the same direction

Lucy Smith's work as the previous Heywood Fellow underscored that any successful and enduring national strategy must be built through open policymaking and the alignment of views from both within and outside government, thereby creating a 'flotilla' of actors all moving in the same direction. As the current Heywood Fellowship team, we have seen the value of deliberation in creating space for constructive dialogue between policymakers and the public and between different demographic groups. It is our firm view that the UK Government at all levels should be using deliberation more consistently when designing and delivering policy so as to achieve better policy outcomes and strengthen societal trust and cohesion.

Catherine Taylor is Visiting Practitioner as part of the 2025-26 Heywood Fellowship team. A UK diplomat for over 20 years, Catherine most recently led the team responsible for the UK's relationship with the OECD.

Test, learn and grow: A new way of working in government

Nick Kimber highlights the urgent need for better collaboration between Whitehall and local communities

At the beginning of last year, a small team of public sector employees in Sheffield celebrated a fourfold increase in the number of children applying for early years, pre-school literacy support.

What was unusual about their achievement was not so much the exponential increase in take-up as the methods used and the cross-functional and cross-departmental composition of those involved: individuals drawn from the local council (Sheffield's family hub services), the Mayoral Combined Authority, the Department for Education's (DfE) Behavioural Insights team, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Cabinet Office.

In just 12 weeks the Sheffield team identified the problems, listened carefully both to users and those with existing frontline perspectives, then tested changes on a small scale before further iterating, scaling up or stopping various experiments. The end result has been a series of well-targeted interventions to help children take those vital first steps towards reading and writing. Since then, as part of the Government's Places for Growth programme, the council, Mayoral Combined Authority and the Sheffield policy campus have doubled down on their collaboration, pioneering new approaches to sharing data that enable all partners to better understand what happens to young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEETs). The approach is putting down deep roots in the region.

These South Yorkshire innovators, it should be stressed, weren't initially part of a multi-million pound programme with all the bells and whistles that come with that sort of initiative. Some of them were building on a lifetime of expertise working with families, others were walking into a family hub for the first time. Their ways of working involved workshops which allowed them to better define the problem, as well as 'play, chat and learn' sessions at schools and nurseries through which they gathered varied perspectives and tested different intervention styles.

The team hasn't cracked the problem for the whole country – not even for South Yorkshire. But if others like them scattered around the UK could adopt their experimental and innovative approach, chances are that this Government would be well on the way to delivering on one of its national priorities.

Such test and learn methods – as well as co-design and relational ways of working – are already familiar in many areas of local government and the voluntary sector. But with the notable exceptions of the Social Exclusion Unit in the 2000s and the Government Digital Service more recently (at least in respect of its digital content and transactional services), they are not everyday practice in most other public sector organisations and systems. In central government, test and learn is still the preserve of a handful of exceptional teams, pepperpotted across Whitehall and often siloed within the work of larger units.

In my view, the Sheffield example gets to the heart of reform of our public services and provides a template for how central government can deliver rapid change, in partnership with local communities and in ways that make a real and immediate difference for citizens.

The gap between policy and delivery

In October 2024, Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced the establishment of the Test, Learn and Grow (TLG) initiative, partly a programme, partly a coalition for change inspired by the sense that a chronic failing in the UK is the gap between policy and delivery. That was followed by Pat McFadden's landmark speech in December of that year, which set out this Government's interest in the 'how' as well as the 'what', serving as a call to action to public servants to heed Prime Minister Keir Starmer's oft-stated view that those on the frontline, encountering the same patterns day in and day out as they support citizens, have the best understanding of what works.

The thinking behind Test, Learn and Grow is that by starting small with any intervention and ensuring that you test assumptions and produce real world evidence before investing further time, money and attention in any given course of action, you create more value for citizens more quickly. By involving practitioners alongside policy generalists from the beginning, you achieve better results within policy, regulation and funding. By working alongside citizens and civic society, you increase trust and legitimacy, reducing risk and speeding up delivery.

In this way we can begin to address the scepticism about government services and institutions felt by citizens and communities not just across Britain but across most democracies. The Test, Learn and Grow programme has been shaped by the interactive methods used in design and digital communities, by a long-term trend towards devolution and by the rise and maturing of place-based working as a distinct and valuable practice. It sits alongside and reinforces structural reforms led by MHCLG which seek to stabilise local government and then renew the long-term capabilities of the local state.

Working initially across [10 local authority areas](#) in England, Test, Learn and Grow will help support policy delivery, scaling up prototypes and – crucially – learning about what gets in the way and what the centre can do to reduce barriers. Partners represent a mix of communities: cities, towns, rural and coastal communities. After the initial design phase (including the work above with Sheffield), the programme officially launched in July last year and in June 2026 the Government announced a £10m fund to boost regional test and learn capacity.

Growing the conditions for change

The big danger of Test, Learn and Grow is that pilots stay in the realm of the exceptional, never quite moving to lasting, system-wide improvements. So how we ‘grow’ the work is essential. We are thinking about this in three ways.

Rapid diffusion

How do you share the learning about the Sheffield team’s achievements in a way which means organisational practices proven to work can be adapted and adopted in, say, Blackpool or Brent?

One problem is that while places which invest in evaluation and socialising learning are, in effect, creating a public good, they are generally not incentivised to do this. They have to do so on top of the hard work of delivering core services. That’s why it rarely happens. National government could help provide these system-wide incentives, look for new ways to experiment and be an active participant in this learning.

We need to give this role in learning a name, create reasons to be involved and build a strong platform to support it. [Nick Pearce and Gavin Kelly have written about the Beveridge Report](#) and explain how it is often misunderstood as the work of a single heroic reformer in Whitehall. On the contrary, they point out, Beveridge was built on the foundations of decades of experimentation – often at the local level – and of seeing in devolution (both to the nations and to regional and local government) an opportunity to drive change and a more pluralist approach to policy development.

The new £10m Test, Learn and Grow Capability Fund will provide up to 20 locations with £500,000 each over two years to build their own public sector innovation capacity. Rather than treating these places as mere testing grounds for Whitehall, the fund empowers an initial cohort to act as regional convenors. Their resources will

grow local skills, run new test and learn projects and diffuse insights across wider regions and sub-regions.

Historically, most pilots designed and funded at the centre are top-down and one-way – something decided on in Whitehall and tested in local areas before being rolled out nationally. We need to turn this logic inside out, with central government rolling up its sleeves and working alongside localities and communities, learning together and applying the lessons in partnership.

Formal rules and frameworks

While they may be useful and necessary for big top-down public sector projects, formal rules and frameworks do not necessarily encourage a Test, Learn and Grow approach.

Take the public sector business case process, intended to help secure value for money and drive better decision-making. The current guidance (the Green Book) and the way it is interpreted works in the appraisal of a certain category of project and programme. Specifically, it is suited to relatively predictable and controllable environments, where both the inputs and intended outcomes are largely fixed over time and there is a clear moment of ‘completion’. This could be a physical infrastructure project like a bypass. In such cases, spending significant time upfront to develop a business case based on comprehensive assumptions about requirements makes sense – investing this energy upfront mitigates financial and delivery risk later on.

Where the current Green Book norms (what they say but also how they are interpreted and applied by practitioners) work far less well is for complex and unpredictable system-level change, where the inputs and outcomes are moving targets, where there are high levels of uncertainty and no end point when the programme is truly complete. Many, if not most, initiatives to radically improve policy, services and outcomes for citizens fall into this category. All test and learn efforts do. Crucially, these challenges are often more about the way the Green Book is used rather than the guidance itself. The Green Book is not just about calculating a straightforward ratio of value of benefits to value of costs. It is about carefully defining the outcomes that we want to achieve and identifying the best projects or policies to achieve those outcomes. It involves developing a theory of change, assessing deliverability and risk and ensuring ‘strategic fit’ with other government initiatives.

Rather than focusing upfront efforts on predicting all inputs, costs and benefits over the phases of any system-level programme, we would be better to assess whether these programmes are clear on outcomes, hypotheses, the nature of the opportunity, alignment of stakeholders and the availability of the right types of resources. These principles which are already central to good Green Book practice and the five case model but not widely practised.¹⁵ Reform is in train, with significant recent changes to simplify the Green Book, to ensure it takes into account place-based priorities and a major programme to simplify controls through Project Reset. Moreover, the Government has just released an update to the Magenta Book by introducing a dedicated [new annex on test and learn](#). This is a massive shift that supports the collection of robust yet proportionate evidence at every iterative stage of delivery. Embedding these steps is key, as is going further so that non-digital policy and delivery is supported by frameworks that acknowledge agility and iteration.

Funding and accountability

Another challenge lies in the UK's funding and accountability frameworks. Currently, these are overwhelmingly constructed along departmental lines on narrow parts of the citizen's service journey. Too often the broader outcome is missed, users find services disjointed and we intervene later than we should to help people with complex needs. For the same reasons, those on the frontline have only limited flexibility on how to do things differently and are constrained in how they respond to what service users need. We must place more emphasis on improving awareness of these cultural barriers, as well as seeking mechanisms to tackle them.

With this in mind, TLG is collaborating with MHCLG to work with localities and explore how we can pool budgets to give more flexibility to the frontline, making it easier for local places to join up and apply a test and learn approach. This intervention is one of a portfolio of initiatives aiming at integrating and joining up services at the local level, alongside a new outcome framework for local government, Integrated Settlements (a simplification of funding) and programmes like Changing Futures focused on supporting citizens experiencing multiple disadvantage. These examples show how the existing framework is evolving rather than setting up new systems from scratch. Integrated Settlements, incidentally, will enable Strategic Authorities to operate with increased local flexibility and more streamlined accountability. Furthermore, new measures in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill aim to enhance local accountability and scrutiny alongside increased mayoral powers.

¹⁵ The Green Book's five case model requires a Strategic, Economic, Commercial, Financial and Management Case.

A coalition for change

If test and learn is to take root, the centre should reflect especially hard on how regulation can promote learning while at the same time providing the necessary assurance. One step might be for regulators to build a picture and tell a story of what is working well and not so well in a locality, and why.

Existing practices like the public sector business case, the funding framework and regulatory inspection have a rationale. They exist, like [GK Chesterton's fence](#), for a reason: erected with good intentions and put in place in response to legitimate concerns (the safeguarding of vulnerable citizens, maintaining spending within budgets and ensuring accountability for public expenditure). But there's a growing case that some of these practices now obstruct rather than support public goals. In complex domains – most of what we are dealing with when we're thinking about public services – risk is better managed by iterative planning based on real world information.

I have spent 15 months as a civil servant – having spent 15 years in local government – and am beginning to gain a basic fluency in my 'second language'. There is much that is different between life in local government and the wider public sector, but what is clear is that everywhere in Whitehall you will find good, caring civil servants motivated by public service. The problem is that the change they want to see is still largely dependent on individuals taking action themselves, within a system that is often risk averse. Change will not come through a chain of command or traditional levers, certainly not at the pace it is needed. It will require a movement, not just of the 500,000 people employed by the UK Civil Service, but of the 5 million public servants across the country and the millions more working across civic society.

The good news is that there is already a plethora of networks – from the [Better Way Network](#), to [One Team Gov](#) and New Local's [community power network](#) – sharing remarkably similar values and principles. Test, Learn and Grow recently launched its own complement to this (further information at the end), convened by a series of high-profile public servants from central and local government whose involvement makes a powerful point about the two-way bridge between Whitehall and communities and the need for collaboration. They include Beth Russell, Second Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, Catherine Howe, Chief Executive of Dorset Council, and Emma de Closset, Chief Executive of UK Community Foundations. Janet Hughes, former Director General of Public Sector Reform at the Cabinet

Office, has also been one of our convenors and is intending to rejoin after her sabbatical in the autumn.

My Home Office colleague Paul Morrison (also one of our convenors and formerly Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate) recently set up a network of more than 100 Whitehall directors, all interested in new ways of working and collaboration. Through it, he's championing a mindset he calls "Coming Home", a bottom-up approach that aims to connect all members of the senior civil service to a place to which they have an emotional connection, using their experience and networks to add value to a community they love. The Pride in Place programme provides a similar opportunity for the whole of central government, not just those working directly on a 'programme', to connect to the 200 or so neighbourhoods who will be involved, so that as a civil service we think 'neighbourhood and community' first.

Change is an [emotional project](#), not just a technical one. You can't enact change from behind a desk and you can't solve problems through deft drafting without experience of, and a feeling for, the matter at hand. Remember the words of the woman who gave life to arguably the most positive representation of a public servant this century (and a local government officer no less): Amy Poehler. No doubt with Leslie Knope at her shoulder, she wrote that "The doing is the thing. The talking and worrying and thinking is not the thing."

Nick Kimber is Director of Public Service Reform at the Cabinet Office, seconded from local government. You can join the TLG community on [LinkedIn](#).

The elusive prize of prevention

Warren Heppollette explains how devolution can help drive better-targeted and more cost-efficient public services

My journey in public service was prompted by my experience 33 years ago in Moldova, an Eastern European country struggling to be reborn as its economy collapsed under the shock of the breakup of the Soviet Union. The result for many of its citizens at the time was a raw, Hobbesian nightmare, particularly for the poor, the old and the disabled, dependent as they were on a government incapable of mediating between competing freedoms. My short time there as a teacher left me with a profound, and life-changing belief in the power and the necessity for public services, and indeed government more broadly, to support a fairer society and enhance the collective wellbeing of all its people, not just those who most need its help.

The UK, thankfully, is no Moldova. But today we face a similar crisis of trust, with a 2024 Ipsos poll reporting that 71% of the British public believe public services are failing to meet their expectations, amid widespread perceptions of declining quality, poor responsiveness and lack of accountability.

Intensifying demand and cost pressures are well documented elsewhere, but what's not always appreciated is the growing complexity and acuteness of many social needs: growing housing insecurity, increasing specialist education and children's social care needs, and unsustainable levels of economic inactivity affecting families. The results in many parts of the country are heartbreaking.

The good news for those seeking both to find less costly interventions and design better outcomes is the growing shift to a more preventative model for public services in the UK. This can be seen in the NHS Ten Year Plan, which includes a greater emphasis on proactive care, the support for children with special educational needs which aims to help them get the most from school and college, and the independent review by Sir Charlie Mayfield into how employers can better promote healthy and inclusive workplaces (the Keep Britain Working report).

Nobody ever disagrees with the theory that acting and investing earlier to address issues such as mental health, employment barriers and social isolation will lead to better targeted public services. But that ambition in government is consistently overwhelmed by the absence of any belief that this can be scaled up and sustained. The rest of this article will look first at the barriers to a more preventative approach, examining the progress of Greater Manchester's National Prevention Demonstrator, and why I believe this innovative initiative is a model that the rest of the country should follow.

What's frustrated 'prevention' in the past

The barriers which have undermined previous attempts to direct more resources towards prevention in public services are both systemic and practical. I see five.

- **Silos and fragmentation** – Traditional patterns of funding, policy and regulation often fail to acknowledge the complex relationship and interactions between different needs. Improving health, for example, requires a mix of medical intervention alongside social and behavioural actions; improving school attendance and attainment requires assisting families under pressure as well as being able to meet needs directly in school; improving people's employability relies on measures which support their self-belief and address their health, skills and opportunity development.
- **The 200-mile screwdriver** – Too often, Whitehall frames policies which reach into distant neighbourhoods with solutions cultivated in a single department or associated with limited, short-term funding. These drive narrow, partial responses, divorced from local needs and wishes. Local leaders and practitioners often have no choice but to work with these programmes, especially when the alternative might be no funding at all.
- **Marginal experimentation** – Initiatives to encourage prevention are sometimes tacked onto an unchanged mainstream delivery model, and thereby lose their impact. Funding associated with prevention is also more often discretionary, the mainstream interventions inevitably being the more dominant. A sustained move towards prevention can certainly be ignited as a result of experimentation, but it will only become embedded when it enters the mainstream.
- **Forecasting vs foresight** – Resource planning and budget setting tend to be based on linear extrapolations of historic patterns of demand. But much projected demand can be addressed through preventative approaches. That doesn't necessarily mean more services; it could, for example, involve better aligning existing support with residents and communities motivated to help themselves.
- **Investment risk** – By definition 'prevention' outcomes are uncertain and hard to measure, success often being what doesn't happen; attribution of causes (particularly in complex, multifactoral environments) is hard to gauge. Without mechanisms for sharing risks and benefits, policymakers will be less likely to divert resources away from traditional areas of demand.

These barriers perhaps suggest why mission-based government – framing a grand objective such as establishing an inclusive economy, building health-creating neighbourhoods or creating the conditions for young people to leave formal education with a sense of hope – is so difficult to achieve in practice. It requires local actors to seize the opportunity to connect the full range of contributions to that mission.

When government over-specifies the solution, it inspires only project management. [Peter Hyman](#) has written brilliantly about this, reflecting on how the complexity of today's problems requires thinking across the Civil Service in the same way that Da Vinci's apprenticeship spanned arts and science and connected insights across disciplines.

Greater Manchester – demonstrating a pathway to prevention

The potential for devolved administrations to deliver mission-based policy has long been acknowledged. That's why the Government has supported Greater Manchester Combined Authority's initiative, announced late last year, to establish a 'Prevention Demonstrator' across Greater Manchester, to develop and implement public service delivery so as to prevent poor outcomes for residents and high service costs. The objective is to fix the foundations of a person's life – such as housing, access to education and access to employment opportunities – as a means of preventing ill health from social and economic detriment, and of improving lives, as well as reducing pressure on acute services.

Local leaders believe Greater Manchester's potential rests on its high level of existing devolution and integrated funding; the coterminous boundaries between health and local government, a relationship deepened with the Deputy Mayor for Health soon to be accountable both to the Secretary of State for Health and to Greater Manchester through the Mayor; strong innovation and digital capability; Greater Manchester's established place-based model (Live Well) which has a track record of collaborating across boundaries to deliver person-centred care via neighbourhood teams; and strong cross-system leadership, with shared institutional commitment to integrated delivery.

The Demonstrator's focus will be on tackling economic inactivity linked to ill health, social complexity and demand-side pressure across health, housing and local government. It will explore opportunities to pool budgets and reprofile public service spending towards prevention and highly decentralised governance models.

Early results

The Prevention Demonstrator should be seen in the wider context of the Greater Manchester Strategy 2025-2035, launched by the Mayor last summer, which aims to

create a thriving city region where everyone can live a good life. The strategy reflects a collective vision for the next decade, emphasising the importance of prevention and community engagement to achieve these goals. It aims to address poverty, worklessness, poor health, trauma and insecure housing, challenges that are driving demand in every public service but the rising cost of which is avoidable.

Live Well, Greater Manchester's delivery model for Public Service Reform, is another radical approach that reflects the reality that wellbeing, independence and good health are created in and by communities themselves, not by services. Services should be organised around people, families and communities in ways which make sense to them, removing the silos of Whitehall departments and providing support earlier in their lives.

The model aims to demonstrate that prevention offers financial benefits in the shape of reduced pressure on hospitals and emergency services, improved labour market participation, better value for public spending over time and strengthened accountability and trust.

It's still early days for all these initiatives but Greater Manchester has been on a journey for many years which has already resulted in the sort of changes which a more preventative approach will deliver. Positive developments include:

- The effect of devolution on healthy life expectancy. This has been evaluated by the Health Foundation and the University of Manchester, which concluded that "Greater Manchester had better life expectancy than expected after devolution. The benefits of devolution were apparent in the areas with the highest income deprivation and lowest life expectancy, suggesting a narrowing of inequalities. Improvements were likely to be due to a coordinated devolution across sectors, affecting wider determinants of health and the organisation of care services."
- Community-led approaches to prevention. Wigan now has the highest proportion in England of young adults with a learning disability supported in their own home and 9% fewer people in long-term care compared to similar populations; it is the Care Quality Commission's highest-rated social service authority in England. At the same time it is the lowest spender on long-term care relative to its population in the North West of England.
- A pan-Greater Manchester programme to support GP practices actively seeking to identify and support patients with the most unmet health needs. As a result, every GP practice in Greater Manchester now reviews patients with the highest risk of heart disease and diabetes. By targeting 135,000 at-risk cardiovascular disease patients and delivering 73,000 enhanced reviews, it is

estimated that the region has avoided 200 strokes and 180 heart attacks, generating £6.7m of gross fiscal savings in the first year.

- Working Well programmes. These have supported more than 70,000 Greater Manchester residents to date, unpicking a wide range of barriers to work through relational approaches. By July 2023 more than 25,000 people had found employment, many of whom would otherwise not have been likely to move into work without specialist intervention.
- Strengths-based approaches to reablement. Manchester's Better Outcomes Better Lives – working with people earlier and encouraging greater independence - has achieved savings of more than £39m per year.

A national blueprint

Greater Manchester's ambition is not only to reduce the current pressure on public services in the region but to create a national blueprint for reform. To help roll this out, we will be developing playbooks and delivery tools.

We will be building on existing civic data assets so as to strengthen the ability to predict, target and track the moment and effectiveness of preventative action.

We will build an economic model for prevention which identifies preventative spending and assesses whether it is sufficient to meet current and future demand. We are already working with the Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland to utilise and further develop tools (such as those developed by CIPFA) to measure and track prevention expenditure.

Finally, we will develop a blueprint of what components are required for a successful mission-led approach, and an evaluation framework which tracks progress in near real-time, assesses value for money and captures the experience of both residents and front-line practitioners on how it feels to work together.

The key insights so far are: one, that collaboration is the force multiplier for the prevention demonstrator; two, that public services cannot change without re-establishing trust between citizens and the state; and three, that community is the first line of defence against rising risk.

The depth of collaboration between communities and frontline teams now required will have to go beyond what has previously been seen in pursuit of shared missions and that will test the limits of existing devolution. The aim is not simply to stop bad things from happening, but ultimately to unlock community power and human

potential. If we replenish the public's belief in the power of government to do good, so much the better.

Warren Heppolette is Director of the Prevention Demonstrator, Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

What government risks getting wrong about AI adoption

Michael Padfield says the Civil Service must undertake transformation, not passively undergo it

A friend turning up to court with an AI assistant instead of a lawyer; a father trusting a chatbot over his family doctor; a mother confiding to an algorithm, not a therapist – what three years ago would have been the stuff of dystopian fiction is for many the Britain of 2026.

Outside of Whitehall, the rush to adopt AI is challenging the long-held relationship between citizens and the state. Large Language Models (LLMs) are providing credible alternatives to government services; they are enabling mass objection to government projects with floods of (AI generated) letters and, by threatening seismic changes to the labour market, may even be rewriting the social contract.

And yet in government, against this backdrop of extraordinary change, many discussions around AI have a narrow focus on getting officials to adopt commercial tools to achieve efficiencies.

This framing around “AI adoption” ignores the upheaval taking place in the real world and condones a future in which officials are passive recipients of technologies that offer only pockets of productivity in an otherwise unchanged system of government.

As the ground moves beneath our feet, government must undertake, and not undergo, this transformation. In the short term this will require providing system-wide access to the best tools and capabilities. In the medium term, government will need to shape the development of technology to meet citizens where they are, not where we want them to be. And in the long term, we need to build public institutions that serve a society transformed by abundant intelligence.

Access to tools and capabilities

Adoption focuses us on the user of a tool, conjuring up civil servants refusing to engage or lacking the training to make change. But in many cases officials don’t even have access in the first place. The AI Security Institute handles the most powerful models in the world before their public release and the Incubator for AI (i.AI) builds products with the latest tools; at the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, prison officers are managing cell occupants on whiteboards and planning officers pore over hand-drawn maps to decide planning applications.

These are of course extremes, but even in central departments different technology estates prevent the simplest interoperability. Officials cannot collaborate on live documents, let alone access an AI tool built by another team. Transforming the state will be impossible while this is the case.

Part of the solution is building robust platforms for AI services. The Government Digital Service's new internal Single Sign-On process allows users to log into tools from different departments. For the Incubator, this has enabled us to now offer tools like Minute (transcription) and Parlex (parliamentary analysis) across the public sector, triggering a significant uplift in usage. Consult (consultation analysis) will soon join them, having already been tested on more than twenty-five consultations and saved over twenty thousand hours of work.

Conceiving of "adoption" as a platform problem, as well as a tooling and training problem, is necessary if we are to harness the full potential of AI. Estonia is building towards an "agentic" state, in which AI agents can take actions on behalf of citizens and officials, meaning services adjust dynamically to user needs and policies adapt to real-world outcomes. This will only be feasible with a secure platform that can authenticate, authorise and audit the work of agents within clear legal frameworks.

While we can argue whether a truly agentic state is desirable, narrowly focussing on tools only available to officials will leave citizens having to navigate digitally fractured public services in which their needs are partially understood and the solutions inadequate.

Mass adoption, and the expected benefits that follow, cannot be delivered without building out the infrastructure to make tools available, scalable and interoperable, and will not happen in full without considering how we build securely for AIs as well as officials. These aspects must come into the discussion on AI adoption.

Shaping the development of technology

Though some remain sceptics, vast swathes of the public are already rushing to use AI. The [Lady Chief Justice has commended](#) how AI is enabling individuals to better represent themselves in proceedings. In health, [OpenAI data shows that millions are turning to AI to diagnose issues](#). In education, a whole host of AI tutors are on the market.

This changes the debate from what problems should citizens solve with AI (they have already decided), to what level of capability should the state provide and how to shape what is on the market to best serve citizens. Adapting to the changing needs of the public, of course, is something the state has always contended with – digital services are still relatively new – but never on this scale and at this rate of change.

In high risk areas like health, equipping expert doctors with the latest models may be more desirable than releasing a public-facing tool directly advising citizens. But lower risk areas may be different. In May 2026, the Government Digital Service released GOV.UK Chat to help the public navigate information on GOV.UK, whether that be understanding childcare entitlements and finding apprenticeships, working out first-home schemes or retirement benefits.

More interesting is what the Government can do to shape the technology. Here are three ways. Firstly and most simply, we should make sure that every live government page is as up to date as possible, so AIs can call on the best information.

Secondly, if we can do this securely, we should make government data more available, so that companies can build tools better suited to UK needs. This may mean sharing anonymised data from court proceedings and planning decisions. We have had some success helping startups by putting UK law and the parliamentary record into machine-readable forms. The better data models can use, the more aligned they will be to UK interests.

Thirdly, we can set standards for providers to compete against. For example, in education, the Incubator is not only co-designing and testing AI tutors with schools, but is also building technical benchmarks, alongside teachers, so that companies can ‘hill-climb’ against government-set standards on safety and pedagogy.

Undergoing transformation is letting unproven tools loose on the general public. Undertaking it requires updating content, publishing data and stating our expectations to help the industry build better things.

What kind of society do we want to build?

A world of abundant intelligence changes everything. But a narrow focus on “adoption” risks hollowing out a process without ever asking what it was for.

We might build tools to analyse consultation responses, the responses themselves written by AI, without thinking about what democratic engagement was meant to achieve in the first place.

We might run AI decision engines over planning applications themselves drafted by AI and forget to consider the role of taste and aesthetics in architecture and design.

We might field AI tutors to coach students through AI-set and AI-marked exams, for careers in knowledge work made redundant by technological advances, without questioning what the classroom is for. Are we optimising for a career well started, or a life well lived?

None of this is an argument against building such tools. Indeed we are building them in i.AI. They solve problems and, done well, could pay dividends for years. But this cannot be “job-done”. We must keep asking what the process is for, rather than seeking automation for automation’s sake.

And there is a graver failure than hollowing out a process: failing to protect what should never be automated at all. We already observe certain ethical red lines, where we do not adopt a technology even if it is capable of the task, for example in autonomous weapons and in some surveillance technology. But as the technology progresses, the red lines may erode, the Overton window may shift and other areas may fall into scope. Does this apply, for example, when AI can decide a case more consistently than any judge?

You may think this is far-fetched, but [experts suggest the length of tasks AI can complete autonomously is doubling roughly every four months](#). Even if this is wrong, we can confidently say that the services we design today will meet a very different world in five years.

Closing thoughts

Adopting tools without critical thinking will not lead us to where we want to be. In the near term, our efforts need less onus on adoption at the individual official level and more onus on platforms – making technology available, scalable and interoperable for use by humans and AI.

In the medium term, we should meet the market where it is heading and shape it, rather than buy what is off the shelf, or else we will fail to adapt to how citizens are using the tech in the real world.

In the long term (whatever that means in this ever accelerating world), we as civil servants should support ministers to be opinionated about what public services are for and build our institutions to deliver on that.

None of this is free or easy: it asks for real investment, and for some institutions built for an age of scarce intelligence to change. Politicians will have to lead this. But the Civil Service must meet this moment with seriousness and radicalism, and be willing to discuss the deeply technical systemic changes required. In this way we can undertake and not undergo transformation – and provide the best possible outcomes for citizens.

Michael Padfield is Head of Strategy in the Incubator for Artificial Intelligence, the UK Government’s Applied AI team.

Public service, private motives and a parish murder

Sophie Cliff reviews *Till Death Us Do Part*, by Reverend Penny Stephens, 2025

Not every novel has a cast of credibly imagined cabinet ministers and special advisers. But with a husband who was the real-life Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office between 2014 and 2020 and Permanent Secretary of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport between 2006 and 2013, author Penny Stephens is arguably in an ideal position to weave an authentic Whitehall backdrop into what one reviewer has described as her 'cosy crime thriller'.

Marriage, love, death and grief are part of everyday life for the church. But in *Till Death Us Do Part*, the Reverend Clare finds herself grappling with these emotional dramas outside her normal comfort zone, following a particularly mysterious murder at a wedding.

The unusual 'fatal stabbing with a cake knife' takes us – through Clare's eyes – on an informal murder investigation alongside the police enquiry. Along the way we meet a wide circle of friends, family and acquaintances, many of them disarmed by Clare's trustworthy occupation, oblivious that they are quietly being sussed as murder suspects.

Given the low likelihood of multiple violent incidents surrounding a single wedding, I did at times have to suppress the rational part of my mind when reading this book. But I'm glad I persevered.

Like Clare, and helped by my very brief previous detective stint, the novel incited in me a desire to engage in the art of deduction, even if the sheer number of possible perpetrators (all well built-out characters) created an unnecessarily convoluted 'whodunnit' web. The identity of the murderer kept me guessing to the end.

The novel's two standout features – giving it an edge and identity within what is a crowded literary genre, as well as reason for Heywood Quarterly readers to take note – are the public service and religious dimensions.

For those inside government, it's instructive to see the unique and nuanced relationship between officials and politicians explored in a fictional setting. For those outside the corridors of power, the book offers insights into the high stakes of a political career, mixing the complex dynamics of ambition, reputation and privacy. Its accuracy? We'll never quite know, but we can speculate.

Reverend Clare is a strong choice as lead character, a family-oriented woman committed to her job and with a strong moral code. That said, she betrays occasional flaws, for example in her jealousy-infused monologues when faced with her husband's ex-partner. Overall, her ability to gently and intelligently get under the skin of other people draws the reader in and shows the layperson (if you pardon the pun) the value of good clergypeople.

I will need to bite my tongue if Clare encounters too many more violent crime scenes in the sequel, *Forgive Us Our Trespasses*, which was released on 16th July 2026. But this is a strong debut for the author and should make particularly enjoyable reading for those keen to better understand our administrative, religious and political worlds.

Sophie Cliff is a civil servant and project delivery professional at the Department for Transport.

Mid-Term Transitions Series

Mid-term changes in the occupant of No 10 Downing Street are becoming almost routine – this summer saw the fifth mid-term change of British Prime Minister in ten years.

Such moments create both challenges for the Civil Service and an opportunity to look again at government priorities. Heywood Quarterly asked two former Cabinet Secretaries, Mark Sedwill and Simon Case, and Dr Adam Coutts, Matt Leach and Maria Pravda for their reactions.

[Follow this link to read the full articles](#) – here are some highlights.

Machinery before ministers – Mark Sedwill

“A change of Prime Minister is read abroad as a signal, whatever the domestic explanation for it, and allies and adversaries seek to interpret it. Live negotiations do not pause for a leadership contest – a trade round, a defence commitment, a position ahead of a summit – and someone has to be able to tell a foreign counterpart, credibly, whether Britain’s position is going to change or remain the same. The practical discipline is straightforward. The new Prime Minister’s first calls to allied leaders should happen within hours and days, not weeks. Ambassadors need lines to give quizzical counterparts before they have to ask. And officials managing an ongoing negotiation should assume, unless told otherwise, that the UK’s position holds through the transition, rather than wait for fresh instructions that might take weeks to arrive.”

“The sharpest lesson from the last decade of transitions is also the least understood outside the centre: the machinery-of-government decision that shapes a new government is not administrative housekeeping – and it is not really a first-day decision, either. It has to be settled in the days before, because appointing the great offices of state is itself a Day One act, and a Prime Minister cannot appoint ministers to jobs that do not yet exist or that might be abolished or reconfigured. It is the first substantive policy choice of the incoming Prime Minister, taken before the Government exists, and it hardens into fact faster than almost anyone entering office expects.”

“The scale of economic transformation now required – across labour and capital markets, energy security, welfare and pensions, skills, defence, public-service productivity – has to move at the pace the underlying trends are moving, leaving no room for scarce political bandwidth on second-order policies that please activists without shifting the trajectory.”

Let's write down the mid-term transition rules now – Simon Case

“The adverse impact of these frequent changes on the good governance of the United Kingdom, and on the consistency of direction given to the Civil Service, is clear. Business leaders have lost count of the number of industrial strategies launched from Whitehall since 2016; nurses and doctors are bemused by the number of NHS investment and recovery plans. We can forgive foreign leaders for having to ask their staff before meetings to remind them who the current UK Prime Minister is. Through most of our recent transitions from one Prime Minister to the next, the incoming leader has usually been keen to emphasise a break with their predecessor's policies, rather than focus on those elements of continuity that ran through previous administrations of the same political hue.”

“As with access talks, the recent practice in mid-term transition periods has been to stick as closely as possible to the principles relating to general elections. Official resources should not be used by candidates to further their leadership campaigns and significant new announcements should be avoided. This latter restraint is especially challenging, particularly in an era when Prime Ministers and their teams become focused on Prime Ministerial legacies after they have announced their intention to step down. We appear to have become very accepting of legacy-focused announcements, speeches and foreign travel, in a way which would appear to be at odds with both the harsh political realities and the spirit of the approach specified in the Cabinet Manual for general elections.”

Why we should devolve job support – Adam Coutts, Matt Leach and Maria Pravda

“The NHS and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are the two great front doors of the state, the institutions through which almost everyone meets government at some point in their lives. Yet they could hardly feel more different. The NHS, for all its flaws, is the nation's carer: trusted, there to look after all of us. The DWP is too often its polar opposite, seen by many as an arm of enforcement that treats people, often at their most vulnerable, as suspects and cheats. Its own disability assessments are wrong so often that around 70% of appeals against them succeed, many on evidence the department already held.”