THE CIVIL SERVICE

The Civil Service

Returning authority over the machinery of government to the ministers who answer for it, and making that machinery able to deliver.

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The civil service is staffed by many able and dedicated people. The problem is the system they work in. Ministers answer to Parliament for everything their departments do, yet their say over who leads their department is limited to a choice among candidates others have assessed, they cannot remove those who fail and often cannot obtain advice that the law will let them act on. Officials are promoted by moving from job to job rather than by mastering one, and the machine has grown by more than a third in a decade without becoming more capable.

This is the last part of the veto state. Courts, arm's-length bodies and politicised charities constrain ministers from outside. An unaccountable civil service constrains them from within. A government elected to change the country needs a machine that will help it to do so.

The answer is not to abolish the principle of a permanent, impartial civil service appointed on merit. It is to restore the line of accountability at the top, where policy and delivery are decided, and to make the rest of the machine smaller, more expert and focused on what it is for. Every past attempt at reform was diluted after the election that was meant to deliver it, so this programme is designed to be ready, in draft legislation and a rewritten code, before a government takes office.

This paper proposes:

- **A new centre.** Abolish the Cabinet Office. Create a Department of the Prime Minister to drive the government's programme and a Department of the Civil Service to run the workforce.
- **Ministers who choose their senior officials.** Ministers appoint permanent secretaries on fixed terms, as in Australia, and appoint directors general from fields that include outside candidates. Permanent secretaries appoint directors, subject to a ministerial veto. Each minister may appoint a small office of outside experts.
- **Performance and expertise.** Ministers set the objectives of permanent secretaries and directors general, and the objectives of other senior officials follow from each department's charter letter. Senior officials who fail can be removed. Promotion rewards depth of expertise and delivery rather than movement between posts.
- **A smaller machine.** Every department publishes a costed audit of its functions. Functions with no current purpose are abolished and stop recruiting, so that numbers fall as people leave, with the 2016 level as an indicative ceiling for non-frontline staff.

- **Legal advice ministers can act on.** Advisory lawyers return to departments. Advice that a policy is unlawful is signed, graded and shown to the minister in full, and the guidance on legal risk is approved by Parliament.
- **An impartial service that serves the government of the day.** The Civil Service Code is revised to make prompt and faithful implementation of lawful decisions the core of impartiality. No staff network may act as an interest group inside government.
- **A service for the United Kingdom.** The service's purpose is written into law as serving the long-term interests of the United Kingdom. Major decisions are assessed against the programme's stewardship test, and new civil servants must be British or Irish citizens.

This paper does not change civil service pay or pensions.

1 How the civil service grew

The civil service had 384,230 full-time equivalent staff in June 2016, the smallest it had been since the Second World War. By June 2026 it had about 523,000, an increase of some 139,000 or 36%. Numbers rose in 23 consecutive quarters from the summer of 2016.

MEASURE	FIGURE
Full-time equivalent staff, June 2016	384,230
Full-time equivalent staff, June 2026	About 523,000
Increase since 2016	About 139,000 (36%)
Growth in the operational delivery profession	More than 63,000 (30%)
Growth in the policy profession	About 19,600 (118%)
Growth in the digital and data profession	182%
Headcount, 31 March 2026	557,825

Some of that growth reflects real demands, including the work Britain took back from the European Union, the pandemic and caseloads in the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and HMRC. But the policy profession more than doubled, and the centre of government has grown faster than the departments it is meant to coordinate. Headcount targets set in 2022 and a cap in 2023 did not hold, because they removed posts without removing the work.

Capability has not grown with size. In January 2026 the minister leading the government's civil service reforms observed that only seven of 7,000 senior civil servants had been placed on plans to address underperformance in the previous year, and that two had been dismissed. More than half of the senior civil service received a bonus. A system in which almost no one is found to underperform is not one in which performance is managed.

2 Who answers?

A minister is answerable to Parliament for every decision taken in their department. Accountability without authority is not accountability. A minister who cannot choose the officials who lead their department, set their objectives or remove them when they fail answers for results they cannot control.

The present settlement was put into statute by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. It requires civil servants to be selected on merit on the basis of fair and open competition, gives the Civil Service Commission the power to interpret and enforce that requirement and confines the people ministers may appoint themselves to a small number of special advisers. The Civil Service Management Code, which governs appointment, management, conduct and dismissal, is written and interpreted largely by officials. For permanent secretaries, the Commission runs the competition and the Prime Minister chooses from the candidates it finds appointable. The Secretary of State who must work with the appointee is consulted but does not choose, and a permanent secretary who has lost the minister's confidence can leave only through a negotiated departure.

Merit and impartiality matter. A permanent service that does not change with each government protects continuity, institutional memory and the citizen's right to be treated fairly by the state. But the most senior roles are not like the rest. Permanent secretaries, directors general and directors decide how policy is designed and whether it is delivered. At that level, the minister's confidence is part of what merit means.

The programme therefore draws a clear line. The senior layer is appointed by ministers, on fixed terms, from fields that include outside candidates, and answers to them. Below that layer, appointment on merit by fair and open competition continues, with a narrower and clearer definition of impartiality.

3 A new centre

W1 Abolish the Cabinet Office and create a Department of the Prime Minister

The Cabinet Office has accumulated functions that range from the Prime Minister's support to government property, procurement, digital services and the management of the civil service. It serves too many masters to serve any of them well, and it has become a centre of power that answers to no one in particular.

The Cabinet Office will be abolished. Its functions will be divided between two new departments and the departments best placed to carry them out. A Department of the Prime Minister will bring together the Prime Minister's office, the Cabinet Secretariat, the delivery and policy units and the national security secretariat. It will be led by a chief of staff appointed by the Prime Minister and will hold the government's programme, monitor delivery against each department's charter letter and resolve disputes between departments. Both new departments will be staffed from the Cabinet Office's existing posts, so that the reform reduces the size of the centre rather than adding to it.

W2 Create a Department of the Civil Service

The management of the workforce will be separated from the direction of policy. A Department of the Civil Service, under its own minister, will be responsible for recruitment standards, workforce data, training, the Civil Service Code and the function audit in section 6. Britain had a Civil Service Department from 1968 to 1981, and the principle of separating the machine's management from the centre's political direction is sound.

W3 Give every department a charter letter

On appointment, each Secretary of State will receive a published charter letter from the Prime Minister setting out the department's priorities, the results it must achieve and the measures by which it will be judged. The charter letter will be the basis for the objectives of the department's senior officials and for the Department of the Prime Minister's monitoring of delivery.

4 Ministers and their senior officials

W4 Ministers appoint permanent secretaries on fixed terms

Each permanent secretary will be appointed by the Secretary of State, with the agreement of the Prime Minister, for a fixed term of up to five years, renewable once. The Secretary of State may choose from candidates inside or outside the civil service. The Department of the Civil Service will run the search and present a field of qualified candidates, but the choice will be the minister's. Each appointment and the reasons for it will be published.

This changes the present arrangement in three ways. The choice moves from the Prime Minister, choosing among candidates the Commission has found appointable, to the Secretary of State who must work with the appointee. The field is opened to candidates from outside the civil service. And the appointment becomes a fixed term that can be ended for loss of confidence.

A permanent secretary may be removed before the end of their term by the Secretary of State with the agreement of the Prime Minister, with the reason recorded and reported to the relevant select committee. A permanent secretary removed in this way will receive a fixed payment of six months' salary, set in advance, so that removal is a decision about confidence rather than a dispute about misconduct and does not carry the cost of paying out the rest of the term.

This follows the Australian model for departmental secretaries, who are appointed for fixed terms on the Prime Minister's recommendation and can be removed. The extension of ministerial appointment to directors general in W5 goes further than Australia, where the senior executive service below secretaries is appointed on merit under the oversight of the Public Service Commissioner. It is a deliberate choice, because in Britain directors general lead the main areas of a department's work and decide much of whether its policy is delivered.

W5 Ministers appoint directors general, and permanent secretaries appoint directors

Directors general will be appointed by the Secretary of State on the advice of the permanent secretary, from fields that include outside candidates. Directors will be appointed by the permanent secretary from fields that include outside candidates, and the Secretary of State may veto an appointment. Ministers

will choose the people who lead each department's main areas of work without spending their time on every senior appointment. Statute will define merit for these roles to include experience of delivery, management and expertise gained outside government, so that a lifetime in the civil service is no longer the default qualification. The Civil Service Commission's role at this level will change from choosing appointees to auditing that the process was open and that appointees were qualified, and it will report its findings to Parliament. Every appointment at these levels, and the reasons for it, will be published.

Appointments at these levels will be made for terms linked to the delivery of specified objectives. Directors general may be removed on the same basis as permanent secretaries, and directors by the permanent secretary.

W6 Ministerial offices

Each Secretary of State may appoint a ministerial office of outside experts, such as policy specialists, engineers, commercial negotiators, data scientists and lawyers, to work alongside officials on the government's priorities. Ministers in Australia and France have offices of this kind, and in Britain the existing special advisers are too few and too narrowly defined to fill the role.

Members of a ministerial office will be temporary appointees whose posts end with the minister's. They will be bound by a code of conduct, will not line-manage permanent civil servants and will be published by name, role and salary band. The number of members for each Secretary of State and for junior ministers will be capped in the Civil Service Bill, and each office will have a budget set by the Department of the Civil Service and published annually, so that ministerial offices remain small teams of experts rather than a parallel department.

W7 Objectives set by ministers and removal for failure

The objectives of each permanent secretary and director general will be set by the responsible minister, drawn from the department's charter letter. The permanent secretary will set the objectives of directors and other senior officials so that they follow from the same letter, and objectives will be published at the level of each department. Performance against them will be assessed each year. A senior official who fails to meet their objectives without good reason will be placed on an improvement plan and removed if they do not improve. The Department of the Civil Service will report annually on the number of senior officials assessed as underperforming and the action taken.

5 Expertise

W8 Reward expertise and staying in post

Promotion in the civil service is too often achieved by moving post, so that officials leave the work they have just learned to do. Promotion will instead reward depth of expertise and delivered results. Officials will be able to progress in grade while remaining in post, specialist career paths will be created for engineering, commercial, digital, data, legal, scientific and project delivery professions and minimum tenures will apply to roles leading major projects.

W9 Open the service to outside talent

A defined share of senior roles will be filled by open external competition each year, and lateral entry will be made straightforward at every grade. Appointments of outside specialists for fixed terms on particular programmes will be routine rather than exceptional.

W10 A staff college for government

A civil service staff college will train officials in the skills modern government needs, including commercial negotiation, project delivery, data, technology and the use of artificial intelligence, on the model of Singapore's Civil Service College. Progression to senior roles will require completion of its courses or demonstration of equivalent capability.

6 A smaller machine

W11 Publish a costed audit of every function

Within its first year, every department will publish a costed list of the functions it carries out, the staff and money each uses and the legal or policy basis on which it rests. Ministers will review each function in public and decide whether it continues, is transferred, is automated or is abolished. The Department of the Civil Service will publish the results across government.

The audit will also end duplication. For each corporate function, including legal, digital, procurement, human resources, finance and communications, it will name one accountable owner for each activity and remove work that is done twice. Some functions will rightly have both a central core and specialists in departments, such as shared digital infrastructure with departmental product teams, or central procurement expertise with commercial specialists embedded in programmes, but no activity will have two owners.

W12 Abolish functions with no current purpose and let numbers fall

Functions marked for abolition will stop recruiting at once. Their staff will be redeployed to functions that continue where they have the right skills, and the rest of the reduction will come from the officials who leave the civil service each year in the ordinary course of things. This keeps down the redundancy bills that have made earlier reductions costly and keeps the officials the service most needs.

Each department will receive spending limits for administration by function, so that savings are locked in and posts cannot quietly return. Frontline operational roles, such as border control, prison officers and benefit and tax caseworkers, will be protected from the reduction, although the way they work will be reviewed like any other function.

Much of the growth since 2016 has been in frontline operational roles, which are protected. For non-frontline staff, the 2016 level is an indicative ceiling rather than a fixed destination. Numbers are expected to fall within it over two Parliaments, which on the latest figures by profession implies a reduction in the order of 75,000 posts. The audit will decide the size the service needs and where reductions fall, and it may show that fewer posts are needed than the ceiling allows. The new capabilities the programme requires, including infrastructure delivery, technical procurement, sovereign computing and the industrial missions, will be counted separately, so that they are built rather than squeezed out.

Natural departures will not fall only in the functions being abolished. Staff in abolished functions will therefore join a redeployment pool with priority for vacancies, voluntary exit will be offered to those who cannot be redeployed and recruitment to scarce specialist roles will continue throughout. The government will report each year on progress against the ceiling, together with spending on consultants and contractors, so that reductions in staff are not replaced by outsourcing. The same annual report will show, department by department, the hours saved, the posts left unfilled and the tasks no longer done by hand as a result of automation and artificial intelligence, so that claims of productivity can be tested against results.

W13 Sunset new administrative duties

Administrative duties placed on departments by new secondary legislation or statutory guidance will expire after ten years unless Parliament or the responsible minister renews them, so that the work and the posts attached to it do not outlive their purpose. Existing duties will be tested through the function audit in W11.

7 Legal advice ministers can act on

Until 2012 most departments employed their own lawyers. Between 2012 and 2015 advisory lawyers were brought together under the Treasury Solicitor, which became the Government Legal Department in 2015, and that department now employs more than 3,000 people. Consolidation brought efficiencies, but it also created a single body whose advice can stop a minister acting. The guidance on legal risk has changed with successive Attorneys General. The guidance issued in September 2026 restores the principle that a minister may properly proceed where there is a tenable legal argument, but it can be rewritten as easily as its predecessors. The case for reform therefore rests on who owns legal advice, whether ministers see it in full, who is accountable for it and whether the rules last.

W14 Return advisory lawyers to departments

Lawyers who advise departments on policy will return to those departments, under the permanent secretary and accountable to the Secretary of State. The Government Legal Department will continue to conduct litigation for the government.

W15 Signed, graded and complete advice

Any advice that a proposed policy is unlawful, or carries a significant risk of being found so, will be signed by a named lawyer, will state the risk on the scale set in the guidance under W16 and will be shown to the minister in full. A minister who disagrees with the advice may refer the question to the Law Officers.

W16 Legal risk guidance approved by Parliament

The guidance on how legal risk is assessed and when ministers may proceed will be laid before Parliament and approved by both Houses, so that the threshold for acting, including the principle that a minister may proceed on a tenable legal argument, does not shift with each Attorney General.

W17 Defend what is tenable and allow outside counsel

Where a minister decides to proceed with a policy for which there is a tenable legal argument, the department's lawyers will be under a duty to defend it. Each Secretary of State may also commission advice from outside counsel from the department's own budget without central approval.

8 An impartial service for the government of the day

W18 Revise the Civil Service Code

Impartiality means serving the government of the day, whatever its politics, faithfully and promptly. The Civil Service Code will be revised to make the prompt and faithful implementation of lawful ministerial decisions the core of that duty. Officials will continue to give honest advice, to refuse to act unlawfully and to stay out of party politics. Unauthorised disclosure of advice or of the government's deliberations will be treated as gross misconduct, whatever the motive. Protected disclosures under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, which allows genuine wrongdoing to be reported, will remain protected.

Recruitment and promotion will be on merit alone, consistent with the end of demographic targets in Restoration and Renewal. Time spent on activity unrelated to the department's objectives will be reduced, and officials will be expected to work from the office unless their role requires otherwise.

W19 No staff network acts as an interest group

Staff networks organised around religion, ethnicity or any other group identity will have no official recognition, no departmental funding, branding or working time and no role in consultation on policy or in speaking for staff. Officials remain free to meet as private associations outside working hours, as any group of colleagues may. Any attempt by a network or its members to influence government policy from inside the service on behalf of a group will be a breach of the Civil Service Code.

The rule applies to staff networks inside the state. It does not affect the established Church and other Christian bodies, which engage with government on policy through their public channels, consistent with the Christian character of the national inheritance set out in Restoration and Renewal.

9 A service for the United Kingdom

The closing test of the programme asks of every decision whether it strengthens the nation's ability to reproduce itself, increases the inheritance available to the next generation, expands national capability, creates abundance, strengthens a common national culture, expands individual agency and enables Britain to shape the future rather than adapt to decisions made elsewhere. A civil service that serves the United Kingdom should apply that test as a matter of routine.

W20 Write the service's purpose into law

The Civil Service Bill will state that the civil service exists to serve the Crown, the government of the day and the long-term interests of the United Kingdom. The stewardship test itself will be set out in the Civil Service Code rather than in statute, and the Bill will provide that the statement of purpose creates no duty that can be enforced in the courts, so that it cannot become a new route for challenging the decisions of ministers.

W21 Stewardship assessments for major decisions

Cabinet papers and submissions on major spending, regulatory and legislative decisions will include a full stewardship assessment against the seven questions of the test, replacing the equality impact assessments that end with the repeal of the Equality Act. The assessment will also set out the effect on the national balance sheet: the assets built or depleted and the liabilities left to the next generation. Other submissions will address the test only where a decision materially affects one of its questions, so that the assessment changes decisions rather than adding standard paragraphs to every paper. Ministers will own the trade-offs the assessment exposes.

W22 Charter letters and stewardship reports

Charter letters and the objectives of senior officials will be framed by the stewardship test. Each department will publish an annual stewardship report alongside its accounts, setting out how its work has added to or drawn down the nation's inheritance.

W23 The national interest in negotiations

In international negotiations, officials' mandate is the interest of the United Kingdom as defined by ministers. No international standard, recommendation or guidance will be adopted into domestic practice without a decision by the responsible minister, consistent with the sovereignty principle.

W24 British and Irish citizens

Appointment to the civil service will be open to British citizens and to Irish citizens, consistent with the franchise in Restoration and Renewal and the Common Travel Area. Other nationalities will no longer be eligible for new appointments. Existing civil servants of other nationalities will keep their posts, but posts reserved for British citizens will be extended to all senior roles and all posts that advise ministers.

10 Territorial application

The civil service is a reserved matter, and civil servants serving the Scottish and Welsh Governments are members of the Home Civil Service. The Northern Ireland Civil Service is separate and is a devolved responsibility.

FIELD	APPLICATION
UK government departments and their officials	United Kingdom
Officials serving the Scottish and Welsh Governments	Appointment powers in W4 to W6 exercised by the devolved First Ministers for their own officials, if those governments agree. Other measures apply as members of the Home Civil Service
Northern Ireland Civil Service	The Northern Ireland Executive will be invited to adopt equivalent measures
Government legal advice	UK government departments

11 Legislation and delivery

The programme will be delivered through a Civil Service Bill, which replaces Part 1 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, and through changes to the Civil Service Management Code, the Civil Service Code and the Ministerial Code that do not require legislation. Both the Bill and the revised codes will be drafted before the government takes office, so that they can be introduced and adopted in its first session.

INSTRUMENT	MEASURES	CONTENT
Civil Service Bill	W4 to W6, W13, W16, W20, W24	Ministerial appointment and removal, the statutory definition of merit, the Commission's role, ministerial offices, sunset of duties, parliamentary approval of legal risk guidance, the statutory purpose and nationality
Machinery of government orders	W1, W2, W14	Abolition of the Cabinet Office, the two new departments and the return of advisory lawyers to departments
Civil Service Management Code and Civil Service Code	W7 to W10, W15, W17 to W23	Objectives and removal, promotion and tenure, external recruitment, the staff college, legal advice, the revised duty of impartiality, staff networks, the stewardship test, assessments and reports and the negotiating mandate
Spending Review and Estimates	W11, W12	The function audit, abolition of functions and spending limits for administration by function
Prime Minister's letters	W3	Charter letters for every department

Phasing is set out in years from taking office.

PHASE	WHAT HAPPENS
Before taking office	Draft the Civil Service Bill and the revised codes. Prepare the charter letters and the design of the new departments.
First months in office	Issue charter letters. Create the Department of the Prime Minister and the Department of the Civil Service by order. Begin the function audit. Introduce the Civil Service Bill.
Year one	Publish the function audit. Stop recruitment to abolished functions. Return advisory lawyers to departments. Appoint permanent secretaries under the new terms as the Bill comes into force.
Years two to five	Open the staff college. Apply the new promotion and external recruitment rules. Report each year on progress against the indicative ceiling and on spending on consultants and contractors.
Second Parliament	Bring non-frontline numbers within the indicative ceiling, or to the lower level the audit shows is needed, and review the effect of the reforms on delivery.

A civil service that serves the government of the day faithfully, whose leaders are chosen by and answer to ministers and whose size follows what the state needs to do is not a threat to good government. It is the condition of it.