



Submission on Civil Service Reform

With reference to the DfE

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Overview

This paper draws on thirty conversations, together with output from an EPI hosted and edpol sponsored roundtable. Contributors were, current and former SpAds, policy advisers and civil servants, practice experts, other education professionals, ministers and academics - over forty in number. Most recommendations are derived from these sources, with a few based on other edpol research.

The first section covers common civil service issues, the second policy making in the DfE and the third, how the civil service effects change in education. The familiar generic issues are institutional memory; siloed approaches; use of experience; diversity and culture. Each sub-section is followed by recommendations. There are about fifty in all, ranging from high to low-level. They recognise the inevitable messiness of policy making, such as unrealistic time pressure, ministerial directives, budget cuts, reversals of policies, incomplete initiatives and of course, political primacy. Accepting these, recommendations are generally incremental, but collectively, they represent significant change in process and culture. Major themes include the following:

It is time to reinstate the status of experienced domain experts. Whitehall has over-invested in the strategic consultancy model, where every problem should be solved from first principles. Consequently, those who really know a department, its history and those it serves are undervalued. Recognition, remuneration and promotion need to be reset, to reflect the value of experience and expertise.

Consultation should cease to be a dirty word. It should not automatically mean 'group think' or 'the lowest common denominator'. It is harder to consult; it requires time and flexibility, but the abiding benefit is change that is more enduring.

Research and evidence must be better suited to purpose (accessible, timely, relevant). It should break out of the quantitative straight jacket, include more empirical study and focus on major system change. In the DfE this includes, building deeper internal knowledge and supporting a capability to provide evidenced based policy options in key areas (see edpol CEEP).

edpol has an outsider's perspective and from this vantage there seems to be other opportunities to progress:

- the civil service should decentralise and delegate wherever possible. The calls for more regional voices, domain expertise, non-governmental representation and diversity would all be better served.
- the approach to policy making should differ by department. It must take into account the greater or lesser extent that service delivery is reliant on people's motivation and initiative.
- in the DfE specifically, civil servants should correct the disconnect between issuing directives and advocating empowerment. Practitioner buy-in is important, and for them, policy change should be minimal, motivational and timely.

This is a small snapshot of the material that follows. There is this paper, plus an appendix of the roundtable discussion and an attachment with extracts from the many other conversations.

1 Civil service: generic challenges and recommendations

1.1 Institutional Memory

'Lack of institutional memory is the single most annoying thing about working in Whitehall... If we can have scientific advisors, why can't we have historical officers to say what has and hasn't worked'. This is the view of an experienced and respected former SpAd. Similarly, from an ex-civil servant: *'Institutional memory is a problem and why policies come forward again every five to ten years'* and *'Part of the driver of change is lack of institutional memory'*. The implications are amplified by the short tenure of most Secretaries of State and junior ministers.

Lack of institutional memory is driven by many factors including the promotion of generalists over specialists; the breaking up of teams and departments; running down support resources; and the weakness of arm's length and non-governmental bodies.

A graduate on the Civil service Fast Stream programme will typically be in any department for no longer than six months. Those at the top of the civil service are more likely to be promoted to roles such as Permanent Secretary due to skills accrued across departments - *'It is very difficult to build up expertise. If you want to get promoted, you have to move to where opportunities are'*. And within the Civil service, there is almost a pejorative view of anyone who stays long enough in one department to build up expertise *'the people who stay put are the receptacles of knowledge but perform relatively poorly'* and *'if you build up expertise, the perception is you've got stuck'*

Discontinuity and lack of memory are also evident at the operational, project level. Experts who work with the civil service were concerned that *'people are moved around constantly, no one is on the team from beginning to the end'*; another remarked, *'a project with the university had three different project officers'*. The consequence is that *'people don't have ownership long enough to see things through'*, *'people don't feel accountable and [have a tendency] to think short term'*

Internal resource that might support institutional memory has been reduced. The closure of the Sunningdale College was regretted by quite a few. Many departments have closed their libraries, and although the DfE archive lists policies from 2002 onwards, it contains no other information, such as whether the policy worked. Another commented, *'There used to be a computer system that held records of old policies and outcomes. It was last updated in 1996'*.

There's now a greater reliance on individuals for institutional memory so this is precarious situation. SpAds move on, often with their ministers and almost always during a change of government. Senior civil servants and policy specialists will also move at some stage.

Not only does lack of memory lead to policy repetition, there is also less consideration of how new policies align with existing educational practice and policies. The wider implications of a

new policy are not always anticipated, considering where conflict might arise with practitioners and other stakeholders.

Finally, the institutional system surrounding the DfE is relatively weak. There are fewer arm's length bodies in education compared with most other large departments (see edpol *The need for Stability* appendix). Non-governmental organisations such as sector bodies, professional and representative bodies are fragmented and relatively immature in terms of their institutional strength and continuity (see edpol study).

1.1.1 Recommendations

- There is a need for both departmental expertise and cross departmental generalists. Promotion opportunities between the two should be comparable.
- More balanced teams should include both domain experts and generalists. These teams should be stable *'to avoid going back through the same issues again and again'*.
- It is important for some DfE civil servants to know about complementary departments like housing, social care and social services.
- Ministers and senior civil servants need to set the tone, valuing the historical understanding gained from experienced civil servants.
- There should be historical officers that are experts on - what has come before and what have been the consequences.
- There should be more post-evaluation of policy to add to the stock of institutional learning.
- Care should be taken when there is a change of government to capture or compensate for departing expertise.

1.2 Siloed approaches

Overly narrow perspectives and priorities can run counter to effectiveness and limit the capacity to develop fundamental solutions. There were many comments about initiatives not being joined up within the DfE and between departments and that *'Cross departmental planning is an issue and lots of people have tried without success to fix this'*.

Within the department project work is a favoured organisational approach. These can maintain direction while team members move in and out. However, while *'projects help speed, they do not help coherence, too many are siloed and not joined up with each other'*. Discussions with existing civil servants indicated a low level of understanding about what was going on elsewhere in their own department, a sense that this was nothing to do with them.

There is also a DfE disconnect from other departments, when there should be an understanding of the wider system, in order to make good policy in schools. *'In education you need to know how local government works, how social service works, how social care works and understand the pressure on local authorities'*. It was explained that in the early stage of austerity *'local government invests a lot in children and when budgets were cut, this was not taken into account'* and *'Every government has tried without success to tackle disadvantage for example.'*

The answer is not more tinkering but system thinking across the nexus of government - fewer things, but more radical. And they need to be joined up across government and departments’.

Opportunity Areas were said to be an interesting study. A huge amount of learning has come out of it - the civil servants who had to engage proactively in detail have learnt a lot. They now have a more sophisticated understanding of the local context than previously and this had highlighted how Opportunity Areas should have initially been more cross-discipline e.g. social services, housing, transport etc.

Disappointingly, when there are areas of cooperation, it can lead to turf wars between Ministers, and arguments as to who ‘owns’ a certain policy. Whitehall boundaries are also particularly flexible, and major areas of policy are regularly shuffled between departments.

1.2.1 Recommendations

- The Central Secretariat team should enable proper cross-government working and help ministers to see that more radical change requires an holistic approach across departments.
- Permanent Secretaries should do more to encourage collaboration between and within departments.
- Permanent Secretaries, Directors and deputy directors should identify where team interdependency lies, especially as policy initiatives play out into the real world.
- The implementation of initiatives across teams should be planned together, so that the collective impact on recipients is understood.
- Project teams should maintain their membership i.e. there should be far less churn amongst team members.
- There is a need to cut through within departments and between departments, with multi-disciplinary groups, to improve coordination and understanding, and to keep an eye on focus and delivery.

1.3 Relevant Experience

As noted under consultation, integration and contact with the educational world is ad hoc and episodic. The value of experience is recognised but there appears to be institutional obstacles to taking advantage of it.

Several contributors felt that it took a long time to really know a specific area, so domain knowledge is certainly of value. For example, *‘it takes a civil servant six months to understand Initial Teacher Training’*. It was also said that *‘Deputy Directors should have deep expertise so that they can make high quality recommendations – Ministers could then trust officials’*.

Civil servants believe they are already undertaking more work with schools and colleges and that the department is very open to practitioners. However, there were mixed views about how much impact was made by those with relevant experience. One senior ex-civil servant commented *‘when people with educational experience were brought into the civil*

service, they were often spat out because culturally they didn't fit. Outside experts didn't adapt to the civil service ways'.

Teachers in Residence is operational but only on a small scale; there is a teacher network in the department but very different views about how influential this is; it was argued that the civil servants' role is to 'present evidence' and therefore teachers' experience was devalued. There were comments that a lot of the teacher experience is Teach First and London biased, providing a homogenous viewpoint and 'group think'.

It was pointed out that Scotland (and Singapore) had '*greater permeability between the department and the sector, with a lot of movement between the two...it ensured a fluidity between teachers and civil servants*' (These are however smaller nations and proximity and smaller groups may help to connect people).

1.3.1 Recommendations

- The Civil service should increase their work with schools and colleges to reduce the sense of disconnect.
- There should be more opportunities for civil servants to work in places of education including taking on the useful role of school and college governorship.
- Civil servants need to visit schools so they can gain a better understanding of what it is like in different schools in different areas; urban, rural and inner-city, with different LAs, differences in school leaders etc.
- Teacher secondment into the civil service and recruitment of ex-teachers should be encouraged but ensure a wide representation in terms of regions, school type and teacher background.
- England should try to learn from the Scottish experience where there is greater permeability between the civil service and teaching profession. There should be more of '*an open door between the two*'.

1.4 Diversity and Culture

A lack of diversity and prevalence of dominant cultural norms in the civil service have been criticised: '*The Civil service reflects the very strange culture - it is alien to people who don't think the same way*'. This conformity seems to be defended under the guise of policy making disciplines and standardisation, but it clearly has downsides, '*If [the Civil service] has a comprehensive intake, then it is a homogenous comprehensive. There is a lot of groupthink, particularly at senior management level - where a lot of the people come from a very similar background*'.

There is a strong thread that in general, and particularly as more senior levels are reached, the civil service is not sufficiently diverse. This can apply to gender, ethnicity, school background, post 16 education, university type and occupation. This is a problem, as '*decisions made in Whitehall will impact upon different communities in very different ways*', yet there is little reflection of this in the policy input process.

As reported elsewhere, recruits from ‘the outside’ can find acclimatisation difficult and while there has been an increase in teacher representation, these predominantly have a Teach First and London background, which is again quite narrow.

The recruitment and application process come in for comment: talented and different thinkers are lost *‘because of the recruitment verbiage; the people who don’t have the requisite competencies - whatever that might mean – are repelled from it all’*.

On the side of potential applicants, there is also insufficient understanding amongst ethnic groups, about the importance of the civil service and what it does, leading to a failure in it becoming an ‘approved’ career option.

1.4.1 Recommendations

- There should be a different way of bringing people into the civil service; that is, without going through the current application process and the psychometric tests.
- Secondments should be open to non-traditional applicants, with an opportunity to transfer to a full-time role later.
- Overt promotion policy should increase diversity at senior levels
- Recruitment material and recruitment targeting needs to be improved to attract a more diverse intake.
- Teacher secondees and Teachers in Residence should be selected to improve diversity.
- Concrete efforts should be made to increase diversity at the most senior levels of the civil service.

2 DfE Policy Formation: challenges and recommendations

2.1 Policy making capacity

While the very senior civil servants in the DfE can be relied upon to provide a professional response to policy questions and on policy development, there is a consistent view that much of the rest of the department is largely engaged in implementation and maintenance. This is a missed opportunity, because if expertise was supported more thoroughly through the department, a sustainable engine of policy could be development, that is rooted in greater experience.

Roundtable participants believe that the Head of Policy Professionalism is more recognised now, than when the Institute for Government took a poll in 2017 (when only 42% of civil servants recognised their HoPP). The Director of Strategy at the DfE also has both the strategy unit and some of the central research and analysis functions reporting. This group has employed specialist policy advisors (some who were known to and worked directly with ministers, and some who were Policy Fellows with specific subject expertise). Ideally, these form cross-department teams on specific issues and can add extra strategy and policy capacity to specific teams if needed, through a flexible pool arrangement. There are also a small number of 'policy advisers' who sit in the Secretary of State's Private Office.

These senior appointees, *'have more opportunity to do blue sky thinking as they typically don't manage staff, as well as not managing budgets, legislation'* or as someone else said, *'scanning beyond the horizon and thinking about the next rather than the now'*. However, another questioned *'whether the Strategy Units actually perform this function...as there's not much major policy making going on: it is mostly co-ordinating responses to requests from the centre'*.

There are also policy teams associated with the circa 180 Departmental Directors, but there has been a general view that here, policy work is more limited. *'There is no protected time and civil servants are incredibly busy ...because there is so much time spent on implementation'*. *'Civil servants' primary purpose is to implement. Nobody in any government department thinks about what is needed and sends up an idea to a minister' 'there isn't time to do that because it means taking somebody off something else which is important'*.

This time pressure and conflicting priorities would seem to negate some of the benefits of the Policy Professional programme. While it has made progress over the last two to three years, with all Civil Servants part of a profession - *'I'd definitely say that things are a lot better than they were in 2017...up to half of teams in DfE would describe themselves as policy teams'*, these Civil Servants also have to engage in implementation and maintenance. So, while there is seemingly 'an abundance of policy teams' there may not be the resources available, exactly when required.

2.1.1 Recommendations

- Policy teams at the deputy director level, should be encouraged to build-up subject matter expertise and sustain this over time. It requires keeping teams together, protecting the expertise they develop and allowing employees to progress while staying in the team.

- In all cases, policy teams should be linked to an internal research and evaluation capability, with access to external research capacity. In this was a “body of evidence” can be created in particular policy areas.
- External advice should come from a more wide-ranging group of experts and/or secondments into the policy teams (see consultation).
- Current and former civil servants, SpAds and advisers who were involved in previous work in the policy area should be consulted to maintain institutional memory.
- The existing civil service Competency Framework focuses heavily on internal factors such as ‘Empowering’ and ‘Confident, engaging people’. More externally facing and delivery orientated competencies should be given, priority such as ‘Inspiring and setting direction’ (‘seeing the big picture; changing and improving; making effective decisions’).
- Persist with Strategy Units and revive the Ministerial Extended Office concept ‘*A larger Ministerial policy office acting with the civil service, using policy expertise and knowledge, could also improve stability, and make it less dependent on the man or woman in situ*’.

2.2 Policy options in a time-pressured environment

Civil servants and ministers are under pressure to deliver, with the general consequence that the policy making area of their job is rarely awarded enough time. As one roundtable contributor put it, ‘*the civil service is asked within a day or a week to come up with something that looks presentable to people*’ and ‘*Politicians stop listening when the civil service says that the time scales are unrealistic*’. One SpAd remarked that the only time for thinking was, ‘*in a taxi or sat in a bath*’.

Time pressure can come from the cycles of spending reviews; pledges from manifestos and Prime Ministerial announcements; management of the news agenda; responses to concerns and criticism or simply ministerial ambition. ‘*This is a systemic issue, partly because everything is driven by political imperative and the need to move quickly*’, so as a result ‘*there is insufficient time to consider policy*’.

Accordingly, one experienced civil servant advised that, ‘*It is good if you’ve got a ready-made solution should your area fall under the ministerial spotlight*’. It was said that external organisations can help time-poor policy officials by providing potential policy ideas ‘*to keep up your sleeve*’. ‘*If you’re asked to speak to a minister, have policy ideas ready*’.

Of course, there are also ministers who have preconceived policy initiatives, wish to curtail discussion and can be quite directive. ‘*Ministers don’t say ‘Go away and think about this and then tell me some things we can do*’. It is more, ‘*I think this is the best idea - now go away and tell me how to implement it*’.

2.3.1 Recommendations

- Increase the demarcation between policy at the micro level (to aid practitioners) and policy at the macro level (to improve system effectiveness).

- At the macro level, be prepared to defend slower system level policy making and implementation, so that there is time to consider unintended consequences and policy interdependencies.
- Recognise that new policy (at the micro or macro level), need not be about “innovation”. It can be developed from the review and refinement of existing and historic policy and practice, both from the home nations and overseas jurisdictions.
- For all macro levers at the system level (in education), senior civil servants should be familiar with the generic options and the evaluated evidence (see paper on Centre for Evidence in Education Policy). This will permit civil servants to a) respond quickly to Ministers who are inevitably under time pressure b) immediately move into an informed policy discussion
- Abide by the guidance of the civil service Policy Lab 3.1.1 A strong departmental base *‘Policy review. Ensuring that there is regular scrutiny of existing and emergent policy... There should be a more sustained engagement with policy issues and policy systems, rather than seeing policies as discrete interventions’*.

2.3 Consultation

Consultation takes place for internal learning, for policy development and for policy implementation. While these exercises are generally acknowledged as valuable - culture, time and poor process seem to work against wider and more genuine consultation.

Consultation for learning is probably in better shape than consultation for policy development (see ‘Relevant Experience’ section). There is more interplay with practitioners, stakeholder and advisory groups, some user centred design expert panels and so forth. Even so, many have expressed concerns about the episodic nature of this interaction, a cynicism about focus groups, a lack of engagement with people working *‘on the ground’*, a greater need *‘to get out and visit schools’* and a culture of *‘people will come to us’*.

The most influential education policy consultation takes place by a small group of internal people, with another small group of external people, and there are accusations that this creates an echo-chamber. A widespread view has been that *‘politicians are all looking to confirm their own bias’*. Ministers and advisers are said to bypass the civil service and ‘consult’ with their own favoured contacts. Ministers may only trust a small group of experts, concerned others will leak initiatives, or give them the wrong type of advice. Anyone who runs counter to the flow, risks being deemed, *‘an enemy of promise...part of the blob’*. And this feeds down to civil servants, who become wary of recommending experts who may not understand the agenda. Everyone knows cases of, *‘civil servants who ended up leaving because their ideas were not acceptable to ministers’*.

In other instances, it is said *‘The DfE need to consult and talk more widely but are afraid to because they won’t like the opinions they receive’*. Consultation can become a token effort, solely listening to people who agree with the department. Time pressure also works against consultation, with

responses often required in a matter of weeks, (an example from a university with an already heavy workload). Above all, there is no formal process to access and learn from experts. Some Ministers use working groups, individual civil servants can use their own networks, there are ad-hoc researchers - whilst unions, OFSTED and OFQUAL will all seek influence.

Many contributors thought that the DfE were consulting on the 'how', rather than the 'what' i.e. how will you make this work? *'Consulting that goes on before policy is finalised has only limited space'*. More typically, *'by the time the paper comes out for consultation the decisions have been made'*. Policy officials ask how can we make this more palatable, what announcements will make this more effective? Consultation can often be a *'pain in the arse exercise that you have to go through,'* so its bearing is limited.

2.3.2 Recommendations

- Ministers should show the evidence and consultation process they have used, when putting forward policy proposals in White papers.
- Wider consultation needs to take place much earlier in the process so that there is real engagement. The DfE must persuade Ministers of the benefit of sector buy-in to new policy decisions. From Policy Lab 2.1 Policy Fundamentals, *'Have policy makers sought out and analysed ideas and experience from the 'front line', overseas and the devolved administrations?'*
- The whole consultation process needs to be more systematic, with a wider appreciation of who the experts are.
- Ministers should limit their own and SpAd consultation, recognising the limitations of informal approaches and wherever possible, should go through the Civil service and be part of formal processes.
- The DfE should make the education ecosystem more cognisant of the need to feed in policy. There needs to be more people outside of the Civil service who understand how the policy making process works. *'There are big organisations with big ideas who have no idea that they can, or how to, influence policy'*.
- User centred design is an improvement and needs to be taken further: with wider use, more penetrating questions and rigorous work on user responses to really understand requirements.

2.4 Research and evidence

The use of research and evidence is fraught with problems. Timing, quality, selection, availability all come into play, making this a highly contested area. Progress has been made at the practice level, with What Works and the EEF, but there is no comparable objectivity or systemic approach at the policy making, macro level.

As noted, time pressure is a serious problem *'the cycle of research and evaluation nowhere near aligns with the cycle of politics and the spending cycle – it's always been a problem'*. Ministers express disappointment if six months is needed to fully understand a policy area. Then there is the

challenge of understanding the complex education system in real time *'the question is, what's happening today in twenty-three thousand schools?'*

With an abundance of 'research and evidence' on both sides of many arguments, the material that agrees with the minister may then take precedence. *'There is huge pressure on the Civil service to bend and filter evidence, to retro fit evidence to support policy proposals'*. This cherry-picking approach is particularly evident when using overseas comparison studies. There will always be one country to support a policy proposal, but there is a tendency to disregard country context and different policy interplay.

There are more pragmatic issues too. Most academic journals are behind paywalls, meaning the civil service cannot always access them, or at least, not quickly enough. The relevance of some academic work is in any event questioned. There is concern of academic bias and the quality of evidence may not be clear, unless careful checks are done on research methodology. There is little post-evaluation of policy *'I don't know whether my policies worked because they have not been evaluated'*. And there is more capacity to broadcast than receive: *'the DfE commission a lot of research, but few people read it'*.

2.4.1 Recommendations

- If the policy cycle time in politics is too fast, the civil service must have capacity to look at key issues over time and to develop and maintain evidenced based learning in these areas.
- Around generic policy options, in key policy areas, evidence should be systematically evaluated and synthesised. Simple, easily accessible summaries should be made available to everyone interested in education policy making.
- Ideally, in order to provide continuity and protect from political pressure, this capability should be arm's length or non-governmental.
- Think Tanks and stakeholder organisations should be encouraged by the DfE to consider and present policy options, rather than be prescriptive with single policy advocacy, and to also consider the interplay between different policy initiatives.
- Larger monolithic implementations should be mixed with smaller experimental initiatives, which provide room to innovate and to take risks.
- Testing locally should be far more common, with agreed criteria for success before role out and rigorous post-evaluation. This should apply for system level change and not just for practitioner experimentation.
- This area would be helped by the proposal for a Centre for Evidence in Education Policy (see separate paper).

3. Post-script on practitioner Workload and Motivation: challenges and recommendations

While education policy direction over thirty years has been relatively consistent, new policy initiatives have been extremely high¹. The edpol stability analysis (see edpol.net) links this churn to increased teacher workload, falls in teacher intrinsic motivation and poor teacher retention. As Estelle Morris has said in a recent Public First and edpol interview, *'A requirement to do this, a requirement to do that... it wears teachers down. If you're a teacher, it's all bits of paper. It all comes in. And it feels like constant change'*.

While there has been some help from the Reducing School Workload initiative and the Teacher Workload Unit, the extent of the problem and the scale of the necessary response is not appreciated. The difficulty for the vast majority of schools is that they have not experienced increased autonomy over the last thirty years and for very clear reasons: policy is more prescriptive; OFSTED requires conformity where policy legislation may offer latitude; there are other wide-ranging performance measurements and MATs add another and often significant layer of compliance. Exceptional leaders and a few smaller academy trusts have fought for autonomy and stepped outside these boundaries, but they are few and far between.

While championing autonomy and empowerment, *'We have moved into a culture of control through process, forms and bureaucracy...and bureaucracy always expands'*. This has led to *'a drive towards uniformity, that pays little regard to mass mobilization and the consideration of recipients'*. *'The form of implementation effects social aspects like behavioural incentives and this is not thought through'*, hence unintended consequences like teaching to the test; triple marking; narrowing of the curriculum and excessive levels of conformity in child behaviour. *'The sheer amount of regulation and policy right now has led to a diminishing return'*. Teacher creativity and initiative is no longer being encouraged and more policy directive makes matters worse.

The amount of existing policy direction and close management of schools needs to be fully understood by civil servants to ensure that policy implementation is fully thought through and has the desired impact. *'The what is easy, the how is important, but understanding the who and explaining the why is most important'*. The 'who' is 1.5 million public servants in education, or over a quarter of all public employees. The 'why' is the justification for a policy initiative that will convince practitioners of not only its value, but also its priority. This justification will be especially important in the post-covid era, after a prolonged period, where schools and colleges have been forced to rely on their own centre and place-based initiatives.

¹ It might be argued that over the last five years, policy initiatives have been relatively light. To the extent that this true, it is through happenstance rather than good measure. Schools and colleges have been bedding in curriculum and assessment changes; there have been modifications to primary curriculum; three changes to OFSTED key measures; safety requirements have changed; Opportunity Areas have brought changes to many schools; T-levels are in implementation. But this is relatively modest – partly because of an exceptionally high turnover of Secretaries of State; because of disruption from successive elections (otherwise we may have more Grammar Schools?) and because of the major distractions from Brexit and Covid.

3.1 Recommendations

- If the DfE and successive governments are serious about school autonomy, there should be a root and branch reappraisal of the DfE's indirect management of schools.
- The downside of 'directing' and 'regulating' (disempowerment and falls in motivation and retention), should be understood and minimised.
- The Policy Lab framework introduces 'Styles of Government' to civil service methods. Departments that rely on the intrinsic motivation of large numbers of staff, most notably education and health, have to acknowledge that in this framework they are acting in 'Stewardship', and only in this context should they be 'leading, influencing and informing'.
- A demarcation between practitioner and system policy should lead to far less of centrally directed practitioner policy. For every practitioner policy initiative, ask whether it is really required: where will it sit within the priorities of schools and colleges? Could it be left to the initiative of the school, college or MAT?
- There is insufficient recognition of what exactly is coming through to teachers. The Teacher Workload Unit should monitor all initiatives that impact practitioners, including data requests. This should include an appreciation of additional MAT requirements and the latest OFSTED requirements. This intelligence should:
 - identify the capacity of recipients to absorb more change.
 - lead to a strict priority ordering and ultimately placing limits on policy directives.
- The DfE should build a longitudinal record to understand the impact of policy change on teacher retention (and include changes made by OFSTED and other arm's length bodies).
- Changes to systems, e.g. accountability, curriculum, assessment, school and college management- these should be more considered, evidenced based and built upon longer-term time horizons. For those who wish it, this preparation will provide a suitable foundation for more radical change.

edpol is a five-year project to support longer term planning in state education: in order to reduce policy churn, increase practitioner job satisfaction and improve school productivity. Further material and contributor backgrounds can be found at edpol.net

Appendix

EPI and edpol roundtable 14th October 2020

Civil Service reform and the challenge of evidence-based policy

Structured summary from discussion

Attendees:

David Laws - EPI (Chair), ex Minister	Jonathan Simons – Public First, ex SpAd
Hardip Begol - Woodward MAT, ex DfE	Sam Twiselton – SHU, consulted by DfE
Nick Brook – NAHT, ex DfE	David Weston – TDT, consulted by DfE
Kate Chhatwal – Challenge Partners, ex DfE	Natalie Perera – EPI, ex DfE
Sam Freedman – Ark EPG, ex SpAd	Chris Paterson - DfE (observer)
Sarah Lewis - DfE	Patrick Wall - Edpol (observer)
Alastair Falk - FED (observer)	

The views and opinions below are unattributed quotes and paraphrasing of individual comments: they reflect the discussion and are not necessarily supported by all attendees. There should be no inference of unanimity. Further this was not meant to be a balanced assessment of DfE/Civil Service strengths and weaknesses, rather a focus on possible areas for improvement.

1. Civil Service/DfE: Potential areas for improvement

1.1 Support specialists

“We must move people around less often to develop expertise and insight”.

- It is in the power of the civil service to have less movement and to have more balanced teams, ones that include policy specialisation. Otherwise you have to go back and rethink things over and over again, there is a genuine issue about instability.
- The Civil Service is not set up to reward development of deep expertise. It is to support generalisation and moving around departments. There is no recognition of the value of building up expertise and diversity.

1.2 Still nurture cross-departmental management and experience

“People shouldn’t always stay in the same policy area because it’s important to know how the system joins up”.

- In education you need to know how local government works, how social service works, how social care works and understand the pressure on local authorities. There must be an understanding of that wider system to make good policy in schools.
- Opportunity Areas are an interesting study. A huge amount of learning has come out of it. Including the Civil Servants who had to engage proactively in detail -they have learnt a lot. They now have a more sophisticated understanding of the local context than previously. This highlights how Opportunity Areas should’ve been more cross discipline e.g. social services, housing, transport etc.

1.3 Build balanced teams

“There must be balance within teams”.

- We need to value people’s historical expertise and don’t see them as the old cynics. There must be sector expertise and the bright forward-looking people. We lean towards the latter too much.
- At the end of the Labour administration in the [XX Department] we lost most of the long-service civil servants to early exit. Balance was lost within teams, which tilted towards younger, inexperienced civil servants. We had lost much of the institutional memory to learn lessons from past experience.

1.4 Keep teams together

“Some team members know they will move on and the short-term thinking is damaging”.

- Usually, there is a project way of doing things – a small team focused on their benefits because that’s efficient for the team. The time limited nature and people coming in and out of teams means many people don’t feel accountable - because they’re thinking short term. If you “talk about longer than six months”, they know it won’t be them, it’ll be someone else..
- Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy has been done well and there is a lot of learning from it. Conceived from the beginning that it is a joined-up thing with lots of complex moving parts and that someone would be needed to hold the ring across the piece. [An experienced leader] has done this but it’s not sustainable. Longer term relationships like this can help those who are consulted to explain to others the constraints within the system. It needs to be more systematic and permanent.

1.5 Increase Diversity

“There is another perspective, and this is important when decisions affect very varied communities”.

- If [the Civil Service has] a Comprehensive intake, then it’s a homogenous Comprehensive. There is a lot of groupthink, particularly at senior management level - where a lot of the people come from a very similar background.
- There is insufficient understanding amongst ethnic groups about the importance of Civil Service and what it does, in order to promote it is an “approved” career option.
- When people with education experience were brought into the Civil Service they were often spat out because culturally they didn’t fit. Outside experts didn’t adapt to the Civil Service culture in ways of going about making policy, including the approval process.

1.6 Change the culture

“The application process to the Civil Service reflects the very strange culture -it is alien to people who don’t think the same way”.

- There should be a different way of bringing people into the civil service, that is, without going through the current application process and the psychometric tests. We lose talented and different thinkers because of the way we recruit - the people who don’t have the requisite competencies - whatever that might mean.
- There is a lot of emphasis on the Civil Service values and the Noland Principles. Gus O’Donnell brought out “the Four Ps” (pride, passion, pace, professionalism) but there is no interest in passion amongst the most successful people in the higher CS positions. The people who are passionate about an education agenda typically leave the Civil Service. There is something in the culture that works against them.

- [Contrary view: Civil Servants have to carry out the Ministers' views, even if they disagree. Therefore, passion has to be kept in check]

1.7 Benefit from front-line experience

"People should be allowed to spend time in the education sector to get experience".

- There should be more of an open door in and out of the DfE. Permeability in Scotland and the moving of expertise around the system at every level - this is evident in Ontario as well. You could feel the impact of this overtime, there was more reality and realism in terms of the decision making.
- The Civil Service should work more with schools and colleges. There should be more opportunities for Civil Servants to work on the front line. England contrasts significantly with Scotland, where there is great permeability between the department and the sector, with a lot of movement around those. It might be easier because it's a smaller community. It's ensured a good connection between the policy makers and the sector.
- In Singapore there is fluidity between teachers and Civil Service.
- Having more teachers and having more people spending more time in schools would be a good thing and being a governor is helpful. There is a sense of disconnect.
- [Qualification: Recently, people with only two- or three-years teaching experience, while bringing a lot of value, can receive too much credence - though their experience might still be limited. This can create groupthink because they come from similar schools' background, probably from London and Teach First.]

1.8 Create larger ministerial offices

"The Ministerial Offices are under powered teams".

- Ministerial offices are constantly passing things down and don't spend the time thinking through issues. A larger Ministerial policy office acting with the Civil Service using policy expertise and knowledge could reduce the disconnect. [Contrary view: they have huge power to disempower policy teams, and can result in policy teams being less likely to do their jobs properly].

2 Policy making: Significant challenges

2.1 Politicians have insufficient time for meaningful policy development

"There is insufficient time to consider policy properly".

- This is a systemic issue partly because everything is driven by political imperative and the need to move quickly. Consultation that is about real engagement needs to be much earlier in the process.
- There is a small "c" consulting that goes on before policy is fixed. But there is only very limited space for this thinking.
- The CS is asked within a day or a week to come up with something that looks presentable to people. The politicians and DfE need to be engaging much earlier with people on the ground.
- If there is space, ask organisations outside of the DfE to work on policy questions. You need to know who the experts are to then incorporate their views.

2.2 Civil Servants (in the DfE) have insufficient time for policy development

“Don’t underestimate how little time civil servants have for bottom up policy making”.

- People are so busy delivering, it is not set up to function [for policy making].
- Civil service reform can’t increase the time that is available for policy - because there’s so much time spent on implementation
- Nobody in any government department thinks about what is needed and sends up an idea to the minister [Assumed reference to new ideas: Ed]
- Civil Servants primary purpose is to implement. Ministers don’t say “go away and think about this and then tell me some things we can do”. It’s more “I think this is the best idea - now go away and tell me how to implement it”. Until that changes there can’t be any systemic change in the way policy is provided
- There is no protected time and Civil Servants are incredibly busy. Your job is not really to think about that. Rarely are Civil Servants asked to go away and think about something. You may vaguely have time coming back from a trip, in a taxi or sat in the bath - but your job is to manage the current system that we have.

2.3 Consultation takes place in an echo chamber

“Politicians are all looking to reconfirm bias”.

- There is an echo-chamber of a small number of individuals to confirm what ministers want to believe. Otherwise, you are an enemy of promise, you are part of the mediocrity, part of the blob.
- Consulting [by the DfE] is tokenistic - it’s to listen to people who will agree with them. The DfE is not interested in finding out what they don’t already know.
- The DfE is afraid to listen to views on the ground because they may contradict policy direction and there is no willingness to engage.
- Ministers increasingly decide who they engage with. Civil Servants are nervous about recommending a more diverse group who may know more on the topic.
- There is a cynicism about using focus groups. People roll their eyes at you because it’s seen as a tick box exercise.
- Civil Servants are afraid to speak truth to power.
- Yes, it is up to Civil Servants to provide policy response. But unless the minister is receptive, it works against Civil Servants and can threaten their career [to speak truth to power]. Civil servants now shy away from giving contrary ideas. “We know civil servants who ended up leaving because the idea was not acceptable to ministers”

2.4 Consultation is used to smooth policy implementation

By the time the paper comes out for consultation the decisions have been made - they are only consulting now on the “how”, not the “what”. How will you make this work?

Policy officials ask how can we make this more palatable? What announcement will make it more effective?

External engagement could certainly be stronger. Consultation was seen as a “pain in the arse exercise”, that you have to go through.

Most policy development isn’t done by civil servants rather is done by a very narrow group of people. You send down policy to make it look presentable.

2.5 Greater engagement is needed with the education sector

“The DfE does not engage with the education sector in any meaningful way”.

- This happened even with Labour, where there was great ideological alignment between politicians and “the blob”. But there were still issues in bringing the sector into the thought process at early stages.
- *Contrary view:* We do a lot more engaging with the sector than people realise, and we do it a lot more quietly. DfE officials are frequently out engaging with education organisations, Headteachers, MATs and local authorities but they don’t talk about it much. It does feed into the policy development discussions.

2.6 The value of evidence cannot be agreed

“Evidence is contested - it’s a social science”.

- The cycle of research and evaluation nowhere nearly aligns with the cycle of politics and the spending cycle - it’s always been a problem.
- Evidence bases are contested -you can always cherry pick something to put in a White Paper - to back up your proposal. Evidence isn’t a panacea.
- We can always find something to point to in the direction we want. The Civil Service has to present it as best they can. Political considerations will always override in certain circumstances.
- There isn’t enough research that might not have an immediate benefit but will have a longer-term effect.
- We should be realistic about what evidence can achieve. XX drove the Civil Service to present evidence - whatever it said.
- There should be more post-evaluation of policy. I don’t know whether my policies worked because they’ve not been evaluated. Can we force evaluation whether the minister wanted it or not?
- We have a deeply complex system and with DfE not having many leavers to manage in real time. It’s very hard for the DfE to know what’s going on - it’s hard to know what’s happening in real time. And you don’t have evidence of formal evaluation. The question is what’s happening today in 23,000 schools?

3 Policy making: opportunities for improvement?

3.1 Provide enough time for policy making

“There needs to be a belief in the engagement for consultation earlier on in the process”.

- That is a massive cultural shift in the DfE.
- There needs to be a space in the early stage, so that civil service who are the experts can get asked about XX policy. What do you think about it? What might they say about it? But there isn’t time to do that because it means taking somebody off something else which is important.
- Strategy units and Extended Ministerial offices are kind of set up to do this, but they don’t really have the expertise.

3.2 The DfE should reach out for sector knowledge and understanding

“You have to pull the specialist knowledge into the system”.

- There needs to be more people just outside of the Civil Service understanding how things work. [Major organisations don't know how to influence the DfE].
- It doesn't mean external people have all the policy answers, but they will know what goes on in their school and that's what you want. The Civil Service is getting better at that.
- There are a few people with the specialist knowledge that other people can lean on outside. An important consideration is whether the ecosystem around the DfE is cognisant of the need to feed in policy.

3.3 The sector should offer up knowledge and understanding

“There is a lack of policy-making capacity”.

- External organisations can help time-poor policy officials by providing potential policy ideas 'to keep up their sleeve'. If you're asked to speak to a minister have your policy ideas ready. It's good if you've got a ready-made solution should your area fall under the Ministerial spotlight. Organisations outside of the civil service (such as unions, think-tanks, the College of Teaching, research bodies) regularly develop evidenced policy proposals, but how permeable is the department – do they accept ideas from elsewhere?
- It depends where the ideas are coming from. Are we part of the blob - it's treated with deep suspicion, are we trusted? The question of permeability is really important, at what point are we engaging, at the very early stages of policy engagement, or earlier, here's an idea, seeding those ideas...

3.4 The specialist nature of policy development must be respected

“Policymaking is a discipline and it's a complicated thing to do”.

- Just because you're a good teacher doesn't mean you're going to be a good policy maker.
- A lot of people don't have an understanding of how system thinking works. A lot of people aren't good at giving practical advice on what can be done. This is why a small number of people are consulted

3.5 Think at the system level and across departments

“The weakness in our policy making is a lack of systems thinking and radical change”.

- Every government has tried to tackle disadvantage and generally feel they have not succeeded. The answer is not more tinkering but system thinking across departments - fewer things, but more radical things. And they need to be joined up across government.
- There is a need for greater use of empirical evidence in public policy making -both within departments and across sectors. People are incentivised to work in silos with their own budget.
- The central secretarial team operate in the centre but do not enable proper cross government working. This was evident in the 2010 spending review when the school budget was cut but didn't consider the impact of local authority budget cuts, health, welfare and housing cuts. It's an example of cross department working that generally needs improvement.

- We need to think big and this has to be cross sector. For example, poverty has to be addressed across health, justice, DWP, Treasury etc. You can't tell schools that they are responsible for all of this - Civil Service needs to create the connections between the different areas.