

Red light, green light: examining the government's progress on empowering its people

By Suzannah Brecknell 22 Apr 2022

In the final part of our series exploring the Declaration on Government Reform, CSW assesses progress against actions designed – according to the document – to ensure there are the “best people leading and working in government to deliver better outcomes for citizens”. Of the 30 actions in the Declaration on Government Reform to be completed by the end of 2021, nearly half are concerned with “people”. At the DGR's launch in June 2021, then-cabinet minister Michael Gove said ministers and officials were “collectively committed” to meeting its commitments and should be held to account. In that spirit, CSW has assessed actions under the people heading and rated them green (the goal has been completed), amber (the goal is not completed but looks set to be before the end of the financial year) and red (the goal is not on track to be completed). You can see how we rated progress on the performance and partnership actions here.

Implement plans to move 22,000 roles out of London by 2030, including 50% of senior civil servant roles, confirming at least five major departmental relocations this year...

According to a letter sent from Cabinet Office minister Steve Barclay to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in February, over 2,000 roles have already been moved outside of London, and more than 15,700 are committed for relocation by 2030. HMRC's Wellington hub The letter also confirmed that 15 central government departments and public bodies have announced their relocation plans, but Barclay added that “there is clearly more to do, and I will be working closely with colleagues across government to reinforce the need to relocate policy and senior decision making roles as part of this process, as we implement the single largest effort to decentralise government out of Whitehall in our history”.

Reinvigorate the interchange scheme for civil servants between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Work to improve the exchange of knowledge and skills between UK and devolved governments was already underway when the DGR was published. In March 2021, then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove announced plans to offer more Fast Stream places in the devolved administrations and territorial offices, create a new long-term loans scheme enabling 60 people to spend up to two years working on priority areas in a different administration, and to double the number of people taking part in the UK Government Interchange Programme, which offers officials a chance to shadow counterparts in a different administration. However, the letter to PACAC in February 2022 indicated that not all of these plans are fully up and running yet, saying: “There is further work required to identify where loans and secondments could be most impactful and to operationalise the approach.”

Establish new, appropriately and consistently managed entry routes for professionals from outside government, including for time-limited periods to be attached to specific projects or tasks. Work with the Civil Service Commission to review how it can encourage entrants with specific, high demand skills, particularly scientists and engineers. Develop a pipeline of secondments from the civil service into major organisations within the UK and internationally, including other governments, led by professions and departments, with support from non-executive directors, as a core part of talent development.

These three actions combine to form what government leaders are calling “the porosity agenda”. The aim, broadly, is to attract people to the civil service from a wider range of backgrounds, and it is, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC, “inextricably linked to realising the benefits of Places for Growth”. Barclay also asserts that work on this agenda “must go further,” stating that the proportion of appointments to the SCS from external applicants has halved over the past decade (from 42% in 2010-11 to 20% in 2019-20). “I have asked my officials to revise the civil service recruitment framework to help address this,” Barclay told MPs. Speaking to CSW this month, chief people officer Rupert McNeil said he was optimistic about the agenda thanks to recent recruitment drives which saw large numbers of successful external applicants. He added that the agenda is not “an end in itself”. “I would like to see a time where people come in at different points in their careers and then move out” Rupert McNeil “It’s actually about outcomes for citizens on the ground. To improve outcomes, who are the best people to do the job? Actually, if the system is really working, the majority of people who will be best qualified for the job will be people from within the central government sector. “That doesn’t mean you don’t need to ventilate your system and bring people in because no system is perfect, but I would like to see a time where people come in at different points in their careers for a period and then move out.”

Establish a new curriculum and training campus for government, with a new digital way to access learning, a mandatory induction package, and a data masterclass for the SCS.

The Government Skills and Curriculum Unit launched in January 2021, delivering on a promise by then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove to create a “properly resourced campus for training people in government”. The Cabinet Office said the updated curriculum would replace the existing training on offer and would have a “renewed emphasis” on technical and analytical skills. A January 2021 curriculum document set out plans for a new induction package, including resources for new starters “to break down some of the mystique around the civil service and its more arcane ways, and to kickstart new colleagues in their roles”. All new entrants below SCS grades should benefit from the new-style induction by 2022, the document said. An SCS data masterclass delivered by the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit underwent a successful pilot in spring 2021 and is now available as an online course.

Implement consistent non-executive director challenge of departmental performance, under the leadership of the government’s lead non-executive director.

This project is “on track to deliver a framework which allows non-executive directors to challenge the performance of departments in a consistent way,” according to the letter sent to PACAC in February.

Refresh the current apprenticeships strategy, with an emphasis on quality and relevance rather than numerical targets, including the development of a government administration apprenticeship.

Government first published an apprenticeships strategy in 2017, setting out how it would meet its commitment to deliver 30,000 apprenticeships by 2020. In April 2021 a new strategy was published, confirming that this goal had been achieved by March 2021, and urging departments to take an “apprenticeships first” approach to recruitment over the coming year to ensure they hit a target of recruiting apprentices equivalent to 2.3% of their workforce. The

document also said the government was “revising its approach” to apprentices, to focus on quality and rigour rather than just “a numerical target”. This strategy ran from 2021-22, and was positioned as short-term document, responding to the specific context of post-Covid recovery and the ongoing work of civil service reform. Work on an updated strategy is still ongoing, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC, with publication expected “in the coming months”.

Put in place a training programme for ministers, including project and commercial skills.

A series of ministerial masterclasses has now launched, with sessions including a science masterclass with government’s chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance, and a data masterclass with national statistician Sir Ian Diamond. Cabinet Office minister Jacob Rees-Mogg, speaking at the recent launch of a Digital, Data and Technology Playbook, described the training he received before starting his new role as “essential”. Rees-Mogg was appointed minister for government efficiency in February, and just before taking on the role he received training on how government procurement works from “people organising government procurement,” he said, adding light-heartedly: “So I had a head start when I got appointed – it’s unusual that I might know something about what I was about to take charge of, but there we go... I did, and that was extremely helpful.” “It’s unusual that I might know something about what I was about to take charge of, but I did, and that was extremely helpful” Jacob Rees-Mogg on his ministerial training

Set expected assignment durations on appointment for all SCS posts, taking account of the requirements of the role.

The aim of this action is to tackle high levels of churn in the senior civil service, an issue which has been associated with poor outcomes in various projects and policy areas. Guidance and implementation plans on this topic were expected to be put in place by March 2022, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC. However, government evidence submitted to the Senior Salaries Review Body in April suggested that work was still ongoing, stating: “We are working through the policy detail and implications of setting expected assignment durations and will provide an update to the SSRB in due course.” The evidence also provided detail on how the mechanism will work, saying it would apply to newly advertised roles, and “will not constitute a contractual change, but will instead be driven by a change in culture and organisational and vacancy holder and applicant expectations.” The expected duration of each post would be dependent on the project timelines or delivery requirements associated with that role, and would also take into account personal circumstances, the evidence states. Government also says that it is developing new plans for “milestone-based rewards” which will help to “incentivise individuals to remain in post for the duration of their expected tenure on a particular project,” since officials will not need to move posts to secure a pay rise. This system is “several years away”, according to the government evidence, but is expected to operate on a similar basis to pivotal role allowances which were set up in 2013 to address the same issue. Government says it plans to test the viability of this proposal in “a few departments” before providing more details to the SSRB next year.

Launch the new Government Projects Academy and Project Delivery Framework to build project delivery capability.

Both the Project Delivery Framework and Government Projects Academy had been launched before the DGR was agreed – the former has existed since 2018, when the project delivery function first published a set of capability standards. The most recent update to these standards was published in July 2021, at the same time as the DGR. The Government Projects Academy is a “faculty” of the wider Government Campus, and according to the Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s most recent annual report the Academy provides “a single, virtual hub to set professional standards, accreditation and training for project delivery professionals working across government to ensure we are building the expert skills and leadership needed to deliver major projects successfully”.

Publish a diversity and inclusion strategy to better promote fairness and performance.

Government’s new Diversity and Inclusion Strategy was published in February 2022, setting out its objectives as enabling a civil service which “understands and draws from the communities it serves, meaning that it draws talent from a range of communities and locations”; is “visible to everyone” – engaging communities to showcase what the civil service offers; is flexible to support “innovation, performance and engagement”; and “welcomes talent from wherever it comes – attracting the best talent from all backgrounds”.

Set a new performance management framework for the SCS – with targets to ensure visibility over delivery – alongside revised performance management arrangements for permanent secretaries that are closely aligned to the new departmental Outcome Delivery Plans..

Barclay’s letter to PACAC stated in February that a new performance management process which links to departmental Outcome Delivery Plans is now in place for permanent secretaries “and equivalent measures soon to be implemented across the rest of the SCS.” However, evidence submitted to the Senior Salaries Review Body states that full implementation of the framework has been delayed until the 2023-24 financial year. “This is to allow us additional time to work through our proposals with ministers to ensure they fulfil the ambitions set out in the Declaration on Government Reform. It will also provide departments with sufficient implementation time to ensure the new framework is properly rolled out,” the evidence says. Certain changes are being introduced which move towards the new framework, for example adding the four performance rankings – exceeding, high performing, achieving and partially met – into which senior civil servants will be sorted, to existing review documents. Civil Service HR has also reintroduced guided distribution, telling managers they should expect to see 5% of their SCS rated as having “partially met” their targets.

Implement capability-based pay, starting with the SCS..

Plans to implement a new system which rewards senior civil servants for developing skills and experience in post, rather than requiring people to move jobs for pay rises, were delayed in 2021 due to funding and economic uncertainty. But after the agreement of a multi-year spending review which included funds for the new system, pilots looking at pay bands SCS1 and SCS2 began in six organisations. Evaluation of these pilots is due to be ready by August 2022, and a full business case will then be developed and agreed with ministers. The new system is expected to be rolled out across SCS1 and SCS2 pay bands in the 2022-23 financial year, with first payments being made in 2023-24. Agreement to extend and develop a framework for SCS3 is also in place, according to Barclay’s letter to PACAC. The

Department for Work and Pensions is meanwhile exploring options for a capability-based pay system of its own that it hopes could make it a more attractive employer and help it develop a “more flexible, multi-skilled workforce”. In March, the department engaged a management consultancy to come up with proposals for a system that would use “reward as a lever to achieve workforce shift”, in preparation for a pilot study.

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