

Move fast. Fix things.

Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister Darren Jones' speech on rewiring Whitehall and building the new digital state.

[Introductory comments]

Diagnosing the problem

Everyone agrees that the status quo in our public services is not working.

To use a phrase the public will often refer to - the so-called broken state.

That's why the public, politicians - and yes civil servants - are all frustrated by the pace of change.

But this diagnosis is not new.

That's why the Prime Minister has asked for nothing short of a complete rewiring of the state.

It's also not new for a Minister in a role like mine to say how they're going to fix the state..

..And if we're honest, nor for the public to not believe a second of it.

So I want to try to tell you today, alongside the reforms I'm announcing, why I think this speech is different and the political argument that is in front of us about the future of our public services in the modern state.

This speech is not the traditional incremental change speech – where there are a few tweaks here and there, and the state is in continued decline.

Nor is it the populist's speech – where they tell you all your challenges are the fault of a broken state, and that the only answer is therefore to tear everything down.

Instead, this is a modernising speech...

..That calls for a new consensus on what the state does and how it does it.

We want Britain to be a richer, fairer and stronger country.

...That can face into the geopolitical and climate change induced winds of the world.

And that helps every single person achieve their aspirations...

Now whilst that's a broader debate about the shape and future of the British economy, and about our defence and security capabilities,

It is also a debate about how our public services equip, enable and support every citizen to play their part in that national endeavour to deliver that richer, fairer and stronger future.

So the question is - why are our public services today not working?

The public blame the so-called 'broken state' for the country not headed in the right direction.

In my view this is down to two things: first, after years of cuts to public investment, and second due to an inherent lack of competition to drive innovation.

It is for these two reasons that public sector productivity has fallen unacceptably, that we have unsustainable increasing costs, Poor outcomes and unacceptable customer experience.

The public rightly ask, if I can bank and shop online, in a quick and convenient way, then why can't I do that with my public services?

Whether sorting your childcare or booking your driving test in a stress-free way.

The answer is investment over cuts, and a new consensus over competition.

What do I mean by that?

Investment has to be in wholesale digital transformation of the state – a new digital platform, with the gov.uk app being the front door.

Public services that put you in control and are there when you need them, in the way you need them, at the time you want them.

These public services will be cheaper to run in the future and achieve better outcomes than what we have today.

[political content redacted]

So this pro-investment and digital transformation offer is the only way forward.

But to achieve it, the public must want it.

That will not be achieved through competitive forces, as it works in the private sector.

Because I don't believe you can inject the competitive forces of the private sector into the public sector either

Because let's be honest, I won't let your local hospital go broke and you can't change your community police officer.

[political content redacted]

Instead, we must build a new consensus with the public about the future of our public services.

Where we reimagine what the state does and how it does it, to enable everyone to succeed. Now some might say that's a nice idea but can it be done? I say yes, we've done it before.

[political content redacted]

But it pains me to know that for all the progress, [political content redacted] too many people are still being left behind.

Missed opportunities. Untapped potential.

A tragedy not just for them, but for the country.

That's why, within the walls of Whitehall, we have to focus on you...

... as a parent, patient, student, pensioner, and as a taxpayer and customer of public services.

That might sound like a simple thing to say. But it has not been the case to date. And it is for that reason why we've ended up with a proliferation of call centres, paperwork and the need to tell your story multiple times to different parts of government.

That has to change.

We have to move from interdepartmental arguments, internal policy papers, processes and discussions

to that new digital state that delivers public services directly to you - the customer...

... a state that uses modern technology to do the tedious admin that we spend so much time and energy processing right now, and then frees up our public servants to have the human interactions needed with a child, a parent or a patient.

In essence, a state that can move fast and fix things. The title of today's event.

A purposeful reference to the can-do culture of successful businesses like What3Words...

Who have seized the power of modern technology to create simple, cheap and convenient solutions to our problems.

This is the approach the government will now take.

It may require more fundamental restructuring of Whitehall in the future.

But in the meantime, I will direct Whitehall to move fast and fix the problems of today, whilst building the foundations of the new, digital state of tomorrow.

First, to the changes we have already made.

This section is aimed at a group of you in the room that have a particular interest in how the centre of government works. You know who you are...

One of the consequences of having too many layers of bureaucracy is that every decision requires approval from someone else.

We've created a system where everyone has a say, but no-one can act.

Take the High Speed 2 trainline, for example.

[political content redacted]

One of the reasons is that building a train line requires a lot of decisions. Who will build it; how, where, and when?

But almost every decision was subject not only to HS2 Ltd's internal assurance and governance checks;

but then from the Department for Transport...

...then the Infrastructure and Projects Authority;

... then the Cabinet Office and the Treasury – one after another.

One decision could take on average up to nine months with little to show for it at the end.

That's why, as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I launched "project reset". A programme to slash the bureaucracy and enable civil servants to move fast.

So, from April this year, there will be fewer repeated permissions required, giving those closer to real decision-making more freedom and autonomy in return for more accountability.

We've already run a pilot of this new scheme with HMRC on their plans to modernise the tech they use to crack down on tax evasion and let people file their taxes digitally.

The original plans had 40 different approval processes,

each one needing a time to write a paper, submit, review, feedback on it and amend.

This new scheme cut that from 40 to two. And saved around two to three months in the delivery timeline.

Fewer forms. More results. Less talking, More doing.

SCS modernisation

These changes will be part of how we modernise the senior civil service too...

... to improve how we work today in the legacy state, and to equip civil servants to build the new state.

Policy is an important part of how we understand a problem, come up with a solution and secure political consensus on how we go forward. But it is different to delivery, and we often conflate the two.

We should be honest with ourselves. The public do not care if we have drafted a beautiful policy paper that everyone in government agrees with.

They want to see real change in their community and the country.

That's why delivery – with a clearer understanding of how government gets stuff done, and whether change is really happening on the ground – is so crucial.

So, across the civil service, the government will now promote the doers, not just the talkers.

I will do so by changing the hiring criteria for Senior Civil Servants.

This means that, with time, at the top of the civil service we will have less experience of writing policy papers - but more experience of frontline delivery, innovation and from the private sector.

Now I know from working with many brilliant civil servants every day, who work long hours, that they are just as frustrated at the system as the rest of us.

They want to be the doers.

[political content redacted]

Our civil servants and trade union partners know that things must change. That is what they tell me and I will be working with them to make sure we do that.

But for all the excellent civil servants doing a brilliant job,

And given how many problems we face, I find it hard to believe that only 7 in nearly 7,000 senior civil servants were reported to be on a development plan for underperformance last year. And only 2 of them were dismissed due to poor performance.

Quite frankly, it is ridiculous to have a system where those not doing their job well are never dealt with.

So, from now on, top senior civil servants will have their performance marked against KPIs directly set by Ministers. And those under-delivering will be held to account. Instead of the so-called sideways shimmy to another team or another department if you're not performing, if you fail to perform I'm afraid you will be sacked.

But to reward the doers, I am also raising the bar that senior civil servants must hit to get a cash bonus. Bonuses are currently spread too thinly among the whole civil service who are deemed to be generally doing a good job.

We will therefore award higher, but fewer, bonuses to those exceptional civil servants who are delivering, innovating and going above and beyond.

National School of Government and Public Services

I want to make sure that for all the Civil servants who want to be the doers, we help them with the right training to success. And we are therefore announcing the establishment of a new National School of Government and Public Services.

A new centre for world class learning and development within the Cabinet Office, the School is being paid for by existing budgets and, crucially, savings recently agreed cross-government to end expensive outsourced contracts for training.

The process will not only build the school but also save tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

The new National School of Government and Public Services will bring high-quality training in-house, with a proper curriculum, to boost state capacity and give the skills needed to civil servants on technology and AI, strategic thinking needed to build a state for the future.

Innovation Fellows

Alongside training and rewarding our in-house civil servants, I will also go further to bring in external expertise.

Our No10 Innovation Fellows are a great example of this. Inspired by the US Presidential Innovation Fellows scheme, I was thrilled to champion the pilot when I was Chief Secretary at the Treasury.

Following the pilot set up by my predecessor Pat McFadden, I'm delighted to confirm today an expansion of the programme.

This follows a highly competitive recruitment campaign based on problem-solving and coding – with a success rate of just 0.7%.

We have secured talent from the likes of CERN, NASA and Y-Combinator...

... Bringing in the best and brightest in data science and AI to tackle problems in a completely new way.

By deploying these Fellows into parts of government – from Justice to Health – we are building in-house solutions with a data-first, digital-first approach...

This is not how government has traditionally worked - but it is now how government will.

The Innovation Fellows are deployed on Tours of Duty lasting between 6-18 months, working on a project-by-project basis.

They will be able to break out of the normal rigid hierarchies of Whitehall, and allow us to gain from their expertise without increasing the long-term size of the Civil Service.

Technology means we can do things quicker, easier and cheaper. This is the definition of productivity. And it is the purpose of innovation.

But innovation best thrives in small, dynamic teams. Not something we're used to in the Civil Service.

When Amazon was scaling, they applied the two pizza rule. If you couldn't feed a team with two pizzas, it was too large.

The theory is the larger a team gets, more time is wasted on updating and coordinating, rather than doing, and productivity falls off. More talking, less doing.

Taskforces

This matters when dealing with the most important problems facing the public.

Too often this approach of being able to move fast and fix things is only applied in a crisis.

Like the brilliant Passport Office, which only became brilliant after it spiralled into absolute chaos.

Or the Vaccine Taskforce - set up in response to the Covid pandemic and tasked with ensuring all of us had our COVID jobs as soon as possible.

How did they succeed?

They were supported with quicker spending decisions;

More autonomy to make well-informed but higher-risk bets than would normally be tolerated;

They were staffed at pace with the people that were really needed;

And they were given direct access to ministers, with the ability to bypass slower departmental processes.

A small team, working outside of the normal limits of their work environment, to achieve incredible results.

So today, I'm announcing that we will apply the Vaccine Taskforce model in "peace time", not just in a crisis.

These will be focussed on Prime Ministerial priorities,

And they will be tasked with bulldozing delivery obstacles, not spending weeks trying to answer policy questions.

They will be given the authority to exercise unique freedoms:

Freedom to hire the best talent from within the civil service at pace and expedited approvals for short-term appointments of external expertise...

They will be given freedom to procure... with faster decision-making that is normally the case.

And freedom to get on with the job... with prioritised business case approvals and increased delegated authority limits from the Treasury...

This will go hand-in-hand with the freedom and instruction of greater risk-taking...

supported by a direct line to the top of government within No10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury...

And with direct ministerial sponsorship at taskforce level to get the job done.

Conclusion

The changes I have announced today, on innovation, learning and development, quicker progression and higher pay for delivery expertise, and the bulldozing of bureaucracy, I argue are not individual, incremental changes as part of the legacy state,

but they are the start - the stepping stones we must take to build a new state that can move fast and fix things today.

The public are right to be angry about the state of our public services, especially when as taxpayers we are paying so much for them.

But the alternative futures are not what Britain needs.

[political content redacted]

Investment to transform the legacy state into the new digital state of the future..

A new consensus for a new approach to public services.

Nothing short of a complete rewiring of the state, a new state, that is built around you and is there when you need it most.

That frees up our public servants to be that human voice, that hand to hold, in times of need.

A renewed state that can move fast and fix things, to help you achieve the best life in front of you.

So that together, we can build a Britain that is richer, fairer and stronger..

... that gives you hope and opportunity for the future of your country and your family.

... That gives you the strength and skills to succeed.

So that through our collective endeavour, our the contribution to a national endeavour, we each fulfil our potential and deliver a Britain renewed.

Thank you very much.

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