DEMOS

THE HUMAN HANDBRAKE
HOW WHITEHALL CULTURE HOLDS BACK PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

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SEPTEMBER 2025

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

There is growing alignment around a new 'liberated' model of public services, as outlined in Demos's 2024 Future Public Services Taskforce: preventative, empowered, joined-up and innovative services, centred around people. Key government initiatives - such as 'Test, Learn and Grow' pilots - share these core principles, and examples across Whitehall are demonstrating the power of relational reform delivered in partnership with local government, civil society and the private sector.

Yet there is also evidence that the government's reform ambitions are narrowing, buffered by the pressure to deliver tangible change, and under extreme fiscal pressure. The mission-led government promised just over a year ago is giving way to a focus on voter pinch points, such as waiting times, and older, 'New Public Management' models of running public services.

In this context, and where relational reform remains the exception rather than the norm, Demos has launched a new programme of work – **Powering Public Service Reform** – to understand and dismantle the cultural and systemic blockers that hold back progress. The programme will deep dive on:

- Culture
- Accountability
- Funding
- Digital enablement
- Communications and narrative

This paper explores the cultural and systemic dynamics in Whitehall that result in reforms being delayed, diluted, de-scaled, or distorted beyond recognition. With a focus on the experiences of reformers from within and beyond Whitehall, and drawing on organisational psychology and change management in other sectors, the paper identifies the seeds of possible solutions.

Demos's mission is to design and build ways to upgrade democracy to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen. Public Service Reform is one of four central pillars of this agenda and crucial to delivering better outcomes from government and restore trust and confidence in democracy.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The lead author, **Amy Gandon**, is a policy researcher and former civil servant with over a decade's experience working in and around government. She served in five government departments - including a stint in its bureaucratic epicentre as the Deputy Head of Public Services in the Cabinet Office - and worked first-hand on multiple public service reform initiatives. Since leaving government, she has interviewed more than 100 civil servants about their experiences of working in Whitehall, building a rich picture of its culture and constraints. She now combines her role as a Fellow at Demos with a freelance research and policy practice, where she focuses on ideas to reform public services and the systems that sustain them.

Anna Garrod is Director of Policy and Impact at Demos, where she leads policy, engagement and communications, with a particular focus on Demos's Powering Public Service Reform and Citizen Economy pillars. Her career spans policy, influencing and research in philanthropy, statutory sector and civil society, with a focus on the power of coalition building, narrative change and participatory policy making to drive social change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores the cultural barriers that make public service reform so hard. Despite growing consensus around the need for preventative, joined-up and people-centred services, promising reforms often falter once they encounter the machinery of central government. The challenge is not a lack of ideas or intent, but the cultural dynamics that shape how Whitehall works.

Five features of the Whitehall system make this particularly the case:

- **Politics and the public sector are steeped in risk.** Whitehall is a high-stakes environment where mistakes can mean scandal or even questions of life and death. Defensive behaviours - hierarchy, moderation and control - are rational adaptations, but they come at the cost of innovation.

- **In Whitehall, getting ahead often means being a 'policy hero'.** Career progression favours polished performers who impress ministers, rather than collaborative leaders who prioritise delivery and system stewardship.

- **Scale and separation drive people into tribes.** Central government's vastness encourages silos and 'ingroup' thinking, leaving little space for trust or collaboration with colleagues in other departments or with frontline practitioners.

- **A tendency to favour standardisation and simplicity.** Whitehall's instinct is to seek uniform, tidy solutions. Yet genuine reform is often uneven, adaptive and locally specific - qualities that tend to be stripped away when innovation is scaled nationally.

- **Politics is impatient for quick, legible results.** Ministers feel they need visible, countable wins, when the most profound reforms often take longer to bear fruit.

These barriers are not immutable. They are understandable responses to a risk-laden environment, and they can be tackled. Other sectors - from healthcare to aviation - show how culture can be reshaped to create safe spaces for experimentation, reward collaboration, build trust across boundaries, embrace complexity, and tell more compelling stories of change.

This paper is not a final prescription but a starter for ten: deliberately imperfect, shared at a moment when our ideas are still emerging and clarifying. In this regard, Demos is trying to model the very principles of reform it argues for - working in the open, inviting critique and collaboration, and stress-testing ideas before prescribing solutions. The seeds of possible solutions are signalled here, but we want to hear from you: what resonates, what doesn't, and what we've missed.

Join the conversation via our posts on LinkedIn or Bluesky, or by emailing **Anna Garrod** (anna.garrod@demos.co.uk) or **Amy Gandon** (amy.gandon@demos.co.uk).

INTRODUCTION

The management guru Peter Drucker is often credited - perhaps apocryphally - with the line, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." And if that's true, Whitehall appears to have a hearty appetite. Time and again, ambitious public service reforms - like those hailed by the Government's *Test, Learn and Grow* programme - somehow get swallowed up by the system.

Over the past three decades, Demos - working with and alongside many others - has consistently made the case for modernising public services, showing that more person-centred, preventative services can improve outcomes and repair an increasingly fragile relationship with citizens. In 2024 we published our vision for "Liberated Public Services", setting out how the centre could liberate public servants, citizens and places to achieve this shift. Today, consensus on the need to reform our public services along precisely those lines is stronger than ever. The Government committed to these principles in the most recent Spending Review[1] and its flagship *Test, Learn and Grow* initiatives puts them into practice in places across the country.

The task today, therefore, is no longer about generating ideas. Or even about mustering political intent - though the enthusiasm is stronger in some quarters than others. The far greater challenge now is execution: delivering change through a Whitehall system with a long history of resisting the very preventative, joined-up reforms it professes to support. Public service reformers across the decades tell a similar tale: good ideas make contact with the central government machine and emerge in familiar ways: delayed, diluted, de-scaled, or distorted beyond recognition.

For this Labour government, the stakes could not be higher: they must deliver tangible improvement or risk their 'decade of national renewal' being abruptly curtailed. For the wider political system, the threat is ultimately no less existential, as an increasingly sceptical electorate disengages from democracy itself. In the context of the democratic doom loop, public service reform is no longer merely about efficiency or outcomes, but is a powerful route to rebuild trust and re-engage citizens.

Tackling this challenge head on, Demos' *Powering Public Service Reform* programme will shine a light on and tackle the **systemic, often unspoken, blockers** that stand in the way of genuine reform.

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1   HM Treasury (2025) Spending Review 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html (Accessed: 25 August 2025).

POWERING PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

Building on the success of the [Future Public Services Taskforce](#), *Powering Public Service Reform* is Demos' new programme - launched in July 2025 - to understand and overcome the deep, systemic barriers that hold back genuine reform. Despite a growing consensus around services that are preventative, joined-up, and people-centred, too often promising ideas falter once they encounter the machinery of Whitehall. Risk aversion, siloed structures, and short-termism remain powerful forces that distort or derail innovation.

The programme will combine research, convening and practical experimentation across five core workstreams:

- **Culture:** tackling the norms of hierarchy, central control and risk aversion that limit innovation.
- **Accountability:** reshaping systems that currently reward compliance and outputs over outcomes and learning.
- **Funding:** shifting fiscal frameworks that drive short-term crisis management instead of long-term prevention.
- **Digital enablement:** ensuring technology is used to transform services, not entrench old ways of working or simply to cut costs.
- **Communications and narrative:** finding more accessible, resonant ways to make the case for reform with political insiders, to enable the proliferation of ideas across the country, and to engage the public in the process.

At its heart, Powering Public Service Reform is about focusing relentlessly on changing the system - shining a light on why reforms stall, developing and testing solutions to unlock progress, and building a coalition of reformers across government and beyond to make them a reality.

Central to the *Powering Public Service Reform* programme is a commitment to working in the open. We want to share our thinking and ideas early, and engage others in a transparent conversation to develop and test them. This paper intends to kickstart the conversation around the first of our five workstreams: culture.

Drawing on interviews with reformers inside and outside government, we have identified **five characteristics** that make it difficult to build - and sustain - a reforming culture inside Whitehall:

1. **Politics and the public sector are steeped in risk**. Whitehall is inherently a high-stakes environment: mistakes can mean headlines or scandal or implicate officials in matters of life and death. This makes people especially prone to defensive behaviours that slow decision-making, stifle innovation and push them towards caution over curiosity.

2. **Getting ahead means being a 'policy hero'**. Career progression in Whitehall favours polished performers who can impress ministers in the spotlight, rather than collaborative leaders who prioritise delivery. This creates incentives for short-term wins and individual heroics over the quieter work of system stewardship. For reform, which requires humility, experimentation and cross-boundary working, the mismatch is stark.

3. **Scale and separation drive people into tribes**. Central government's vastness encourages officials to identify with their immediate teams, professions or departments, while those further afield – such as local services – are seen as outsiders. These tribal boundaries make it difficult to build trust, collaborate effectively, or share risk and learning.

4. **A bias toward standardisation and simplicity**. Faced with complexity, Whitehall reaches for neat and tidy rules and national uniformity. But genuine reform is often adaptive, uneven and locally specific, drawing its strength from context and relationships. The instinct to simplify and standardise can strip away these qualities and smother what makes innovation work.

5. **Politics is impatient for quick, legible results**. Ministers are under constant pressure to show visible, countable achievements: hospitals built, nurses hired, police recruited. By contrast, preventative, integrated and people-centred services often produce slower, less tangible outcomes that resist easy measurement. Without new ways of evidencing progress, reforms risk being dismantled before their benefits become clear.

WHY 'WHITEHALL'?

This paper uses the term *Whitehall* throughout. There are, of course, many other ways of referring to central government. *Whitehall* has the advantage of being more inclusive than alternatives such as *Westminster* (which conjures up Parliament or party politics), *the Centre* (which feels vague), or simply *the civil service*. Because politicians, advisers and officials all play a role in shaping the cultural dynamics at play, it is important to use a term that captures their interconnectedness.

Central government clearly extends well beyond the physical streets of Whitehall, both within London and across the country. The term is used here as a convenient but imperfect shorthand, trusting that readers will accept it in that spirit.

THE SIGNS OF CULTURE AT WORK

Since the launch of *Powering Public Service Reform* in July 2025, Demos has conducted interviews with 20 public service reformers, from former Permanent Secretaries and senior advisers to local government leaders, civil society chief executives and academics. These supplement the 100 interviews the author has conducted with civil servants about working in government since 2023.

Asked about examples of reform going right, their accounts are strikingly consistent. Successful public service reforms very often:

- **Rely on remarkable individuals and/or conditions** – change often happens under the leadership of unusual individuals who are prepared to 'take on the system', or in a hyper-rare set of circumstances when political support, funding availability and talent happen to line up perfectly. These 'unicorn' individuals can be Ministers or civil servants, but it is rare for the latter to be able to act without some sort of patronage from an enabling political figure. One former senior official who worked on a series of high profile reforms gave their impression that:

  "When I think back on what I achieved 20 years in Whitehall, it's pretty thin gruel, honestly. And when I think about the ingredients [of one of their successes] - a Minister who was genuinely interested, who had an appetite for genuine innovation and risk, who placed value on local learning and leadership, who built a coalition of disruptors around the frontline, and with £100m from the Treasury - I sort of think that might never happen in my career again."

  A number of interviewees described taking significant personal criticism, working outlandishly hard, or ignoring the incentives for professional advancement in order to get the right things to happen. In this respect, reform is *countercultural* - it takes bravery or 'upstream' exertion to achieve, rather than being business as usual. And as a result, it struggles to outlast the atypical conditions and special people that make it happen - and indeed, it can often prove exhausting and attritional for those individuals, so that staying isn't an option in any case.

- **Remain confined to pilots and prototypes** – when we think about some of the 'poster children' for local public service innovation, they are often insulated in various ways from the mainstream Whitehall system. Many are the result of external funding - for example, *Changing Futures* (with significant funding from the National Lottery) - or given small government pots that are tightly bounded by time and eligibility. Pilots offer a convenient means for the demand for change to be met, but without that change posing too much of a threat to the underlying system. And as Mark Smith and Andrew Laird articulate well in [this Mutual Ventures blog](#), the system rarely enables successful prototypes to proliferate.

- **Are triggered by crisis, rather than routine** – moments of crisis lubricate the system to think more imaginatively, and provide permission to take action that in 'peacetime' would have felt impossible. As one former senior official and now local government leader put it:

  "You only achieve some sort of reform if you align the right capacity and resources, and the right political capital… the minister has to be both powerful enough to be able to drive those policies forward themselves… and then, depending on what [it is], it probably needs agreement from the Prime Minister and Chancellor… And only when all of those things are aligned does change actually happen… And I think that's why you often see reform happen best in a crisis where all of those incentives sort of narrow down, and it's like, okay, the one thing we need to do is this."

  Whitehall would never have produced the furlough scheme or vaccine rollout were it not for the countervailing pressure of the Covid-19 pandemic. And indeed, the pandemic saw many local public service innovations, from re-housing the homeless to digital service delivery, often at significant pace. Calls for the entrepreneurial spirit that emerged in local and central government during the pandemic to be sustained, however, have been in vain as 'business as usual' norms reassert themselves.

- **Are subject to dismantling (and sometimes revival)** – even where successful initiatives do manage to take hold and scale to a national level, if they present an ongoing challenge to the prevailing norms of the system, they often find themselves being dismantled. Take Sure Start, which turned the Whitehall requirement for short-term political and financial returns on its head and built local integrated services for families in the expectation of a payoff in 10-15 years. It took surprisingly little time for Sure Start to be dismantled - in favour of short-term savings by the Coalition and then Conservative governments in the 2010s - before the idea came round again, this time as 'Family Hubs'.

Many of these patterns relate to the structures, processes and resources that dictate how change gets made in Whitehall, and which will be explored elsewhere in the Powering Public Service Reform programme. But interviewees emphasised that was not only these *explicit* aspects of 'how to get things done' in Whitehall, but also - and indeed primarily - the *unwritten* rules, assumptions and beliefs that made things the most difficult. That is, that the greatest barriers were *cultural.*

CULTURE: AN UNTAPPED LEVER OF CHANGE

Culture refers to "the shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems… that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel".[2] It is not just the formal values an organisation outwardly proclaims, but the unwritten rules and habits that shape everyday behaviour.

It is nigh-on impossible to understand change in a complex system or institution, like Whitehall, without thinking about culture. Anthropologist Mary Douglas argued that institutions not only constrain behaviour through rules and incentives, but they also *shape thought itself*. Institutions provide the categories, assumptions and ways of reasoning that make the world intelligible to those that inhabit them. They frame what counts as rational, risky, blameworthy or legitimate.[3]

By studying the underlying belief system that binds people in Whitehall, we can start to understand why professed policy intentions struggle to materialise in practice. Ideas or practices that clash with the prevailing norms feel dangerous or uncomfortable and can be resisted, whatever their logical appeal or practical benefits.

Yet despite the long history of cultural analysis in fields such as organisational psychology and management science, Whitehall's approach to culture is underpowered. Much ink has been spilt in reports, inquiries and reform strategies diagnosing the same recurring pathologies - risk aversion, excessive hierarchy, centralising instincts - and attributing them to 'culture.' But diagnosis has rarely been followed by serious attempts to apply the insights from other fields to make these cultural challenges tractable - striking, given how frequently Whitehall looks to the private sector for inspiration in other areas, from procurement to performance management. Too often, describing a problem as 'cultural' appears as a polite way of conceding defeat.

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2   Schein, E.H. (2010) Organizational Culture and Leadership. 4th edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
3   Douglas, M. (1986) How Institutions Think. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

The tone of past diagnoses has often been unhelpful too. By framing culture as a matter of personal failings - of officials, managers or leaders - rather than as a system of shared assumptions, reform efforts have veered towards blame rather than curiosity. This not only alienates those working inside the system, but also obscures the deeper dynamics that need to be understood if change is to stick.

Demos' intention is to move past the surface description of cultural traits and instead probe the human drivers that make them understandable. The task - in this paper and in the programme as a whole - is to work with the grain of those human tendencies, while drawing on insights and tools from organisational psychology and management science that can help address them. We begin by setting our five barriers, identified through interviews, that make it so difficult to build and sustain a reforming culture in Whitehall, alongside some very early provocations about how they might be overcome.

THE REFORM WE SEEK

In many ways, the five barriers below will be recognisable to Whitehall workers and watchers alike as reasons why *any kind of reform* is hard to get through the government system.

But it's important to emphasise that these features are particularly poorly suited to the kinds of reform the current government is seeking to effect - and for which Demos has long advocated. That is, public services which are:

- **Preventative.** The 2025 Spending Review (SR25) committed to "a focus on prevention, relying less on expensive crisis management".[4]

- **Integrated.** SR25 also promised to "integrate services so that they are organised around people's lives",[5] breaking down the silos often embedded in central government systems to join up services around citizens at the frontline. This was also integral to the Labour's 'mission-driven' approach to government, which shifts the focus from departmental turf wars towards shared outcomes that span multiple parts of government.

- **People-centred.** As well as being "organised around people's lives", the Government's flagship *Test, Learn and Grow* initiative has emphasised taking reform out of Whitehall and into communities, designing and testing solutions with the people affected.[6] This is often accompanied by a drive to make services less transactional or impersonal, and invest in the relationships that make citizens feel supported.

4   HM Treasury (2025) Spending Review 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html (Accessed: 25 August 2025).
5   Ibid.
6   Cabinet Office (2025) Communities across the country to benefit from 'innovation squads' to re-build public services, Press release, 16 July. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/communities-across-the-country-to-benefit-from-innovation-squads-to-re-build-public-services (Accessed: 15 September)

- **Devolved.** The English Devolution White Paper set out plans to expand mayoral powers and simplify structures for public services, while SR25 awarded more flexible, multi-year funding in a bid to "devolve power to local areas that understand the needs of their communities best".[7]

- **Innovative.** Then Cabinet Office minister Pat McFadden committed to making the state "more like a start-up," encouraging experimentation, iteration, and the simplification of bureaucratic systems.[8]

Yet - for reasons this paper sets out - these ambitions are the kinds Whitehall most struggles to deliver, in the face of cultural traits that push in exactly the opposite direction: towards short-term crisis response, towards departmental silos, and towards central control and safety-seeking.

7   HM Treasury (2025) Spending Review 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html (Accessed: 25 August 2025).
8   Cabinet Office (2024) Pat McFadden vows to make the state "more like a start up" as he deploys reform teams across country. Press release, 9 December. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pat-mcfadden-vows-to-make-the-state-more-like-a-start-up-as-he-deploys-reform-teams-across-country (Accessed: 15 September).

FIVE BARRIERS TO A MORE REFORMING CULTURE IN WHITEHALL

1. POLITICS, AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR MORE BROADLY, IS STEEPED IN RISK - BOTH REAL AND PERCEIVED

The human brain is hard-wired to resist change. From an evolutionary standpoint, unpredictability means danger: a rustle in the grass could be a predator, and treating it as such helped our ancestors survive. Uncertainty still activates the brain's threat circuitry today, surging levels of cortisol and even narrowing our vision.[9] This is bad news for government, whose fundamental business is to deliver change.

Politics creates a uniquely hostile environment for coping with the threat that change brings. The scale and importance of government's responsibilities implicate officials in questions of life and death, and the legitimacy of the political system rests on politicians' and officials' ability to deliver. The British media punish certain failures rapidly and robustly, and Parliament's attention is often captured by scandal and single incidents rather than chronic, systemic challenges. This creates a hostile backdrop for policymaking, where missteps can quickly become existential.

What is more, the task of reform brings particular risk, and especially the kinds of reform at play here. Building more innovative public services - as in the *Test, Learn and Grow* programme - requires testing new approaches, learning and iterating, and moving beyond the well-evidenced into the experimental. Oppositional forms of accountability - from NAO and Ofsted reports to select committee hearings - create the opposite incentives, away from embracing novelty and uncertainty and demanding quick, defensible answers. Public scrutiny is rightly essential to democratic governance, but the terms of that scrutiny are not always aligned with the task of long-term change.

In this context, it is unsurprising that Whitehall has developed defensive behaviours in response. As one former top official explained, "whenever anything goes wrong, you're blamed by the

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9   Scarlett, H. (2019) Neuroscience for Organizational Change: An Evidence-Based Practical Guide to Managing Change. 2nd edn. London: Kogan Page.

media, the opposition, whatever… so you keep your head down." The civil service system is replete with strategies that shield officials from the emotional discomfort of risk - the fear of failure, shame or blame - but which are ultimately disproportionate and impose significant costs on the state. For example:

- **Hierarchy.** Whitehall layers people to check and smooth out risk before it reaches a minister, whether to insulate the minister from making a mistake, or insulate themselves from ministerial censure. A single submission will likely pass through half a dozen hands before it lands on the Secretary of State's desk. This creates an excessively high bar for innovative ideas to 'get through', requiring every layer of the management chain to be comfortable with that level of risk. And for what is essentially a psychological comfort blanket, it goes a long way to explaining why the Civil Service is so much slower and more expensive than it needs to be. And it also dents the creative capacity and agency of officials themselves, as one former civil society leader put it:

  "There can be a learned helplessness..."It's above my pay grade." There's often not any curiosity about 'what could I do about this issue? Who could I reach out to? How could I widen my scope and agency to act?'"

- **Moderation.** Many will recognise a process whereby good ideas - borne out of a more forgiving environment for innovation (say, in local places or the third or private sector) - become diluted or warped in some way when they hit the central government machine. When the costs of failure are so high, it can become almost irresistible to pare back the scale, complexity or depth of change proposed. Whitehall's tendency to pilot endlessly is a case in point, reducing a scheme down to its smallest possible scale to limit the political and financial cost of failure.

- **Control.** One of the central promises of this reform agenda is to devolve power - handing more responsibility to local places and giving frontline professionals greater agency over the services they deliver. But Whitehall has long struggled with 'letting go'. As one former senior official remarked, "for both Ministers and officials, there is this deep-seated belief that 'if I can't see it, it isn't happening'." For as long as officials or Ministers feel they will still be held accountable for outcomes, the reflex is to over-specify, over-monitor and claw back control at the first sign of difficulty. As with these other impulses, soothing the discomfort of risk and uncertainty comes at the expense of its stated purpose, smothering the very innovation devolution is meant to achieve and diverting energy from improvement into compliance and reporting.

  A former senior official described a characteristic response to a failure in a public service hitting the headlines*:

  [A Prime Minister] was asked questions about [an event] in Prime Minister's questions and [they] didn't have very good answers… And all of a sudden, like, the organisation goes into overdrive in terms of grip, and the response is to say, "this will never happen again"... That's mad, and then it drives a response where we try to completely remove risk from the system… and in order to remove risk from the system, we're going to use the lever we have, which is to tell [public sector] workers what to do. And therefore, we're going to have 800 pages of statutory guidance telling them what the process is. And that doesn't keep that doesn't keep citizens safe, that keeps the government safe."

  *Details of the service implicated and event removed to preserve anonymity.

These tendencies should not be understood in a spirit of judgement. Most people placed under similar conditions would react in much the same way. Nor is Whitehall exceptional in this regard. (At times, there is even a faint undertone of snobbery in the defeatism about changing Whitehall's culture, as if the British state is considered so complex or sophisticated that the tools of organisational psychology or management science could not possibly apply.)

There are in fact well-developed frameworks in other high-stakes fields – from social work to aviation – that help people navigate risk without falling back on the kinds of defensive behaviours described above. Many have been applied successfully for decades. We're not yet at the point in this programme where we want to set out firm solutions, but below are a few early provocations and signals about the direction of travel.

THE SEEDS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Iterative methods and safe-to-fail testing. In digital service design, government has already shifted away from rigid 'waterfall' style planning towards agile approaches. Alpha and beta testing - trialling early versions, learning from users, and improving before scaling - has become standard in small, specialist pockets of government, as elsewhere in the tech sector. Iteration can help to generate the evidence and learnings to make innovation feel less risky.

What would it take to embed this mindset across policymaking more widely - treating reforms as prototypes to be tested and refined, rather than single high-stakes leaps?

Risk stratification. Many industries have frameworks for categorising different types and levels of risk, guiding staff towards different responses accordingly. In healthcare, for example, activities such as surgery are tightly standardised and controlled, while innovation and research are deliberately structured to encourage experimentation, error and learning (Edmondson, 2019).

What might it look like if Whitehall differentiated its risk responses in a similar way - creating safe spaces for experimentation alongside domains where caution and control are non-negotiable?

Leadership behaviours. Studies highlight that leaders play a critical role in shaping attitudes to risk: signalling when it is safe to experiment, absorbing blame when things go wrong, and rewarding curiosity. Where these behaviours appear in Whitehall, they tend to be the product of a 'leadership lottery' rather than systematically cultivated.

What kinds of ministerial and senior civil service behaviours would be needed to model this in Whitehall - and how might we use the tools of performance appraisal, recruitment criteria or professional development to embed them across the system?

Responses to failure: other high-stakes industries (such as air traffic control or fire services) treat near-misses and small failures as valuable data points - a 'good catch' culture - for system improvement, rather than as occasions for blame.

What would it take for Whitehall to develop a stronger 'learning culture', where mistakes are surfaced, examined and built on - rather than buried or punished?

2. IN WHITEHALL, GETTING AHEAD OFTEN MEANS BEING A 'POLICY HERO'

One of the strongest cultural signals in any system is what it takes to get promoted. And if one looks at the most senior ranks in Whitehall - the Director Generals and Permanent Secretaries who run major government departments - those signals are loud and clear. With a small number of exceptions - operational leaders like Jo Farrar or former local authority chief executives like Tom Riordan - it is those who have cut their teeth in ministerially-facing, policy roles that rise to the top.

And when we talk about 'policy' in Whitehall, we mean the business of advising ministers to make decisions: corralling the evidence, designing the options, and helping them to weigh them up in terms of their costs and benefits, often political and presentational as much as fiscal. What the policy profession is less often concerned with - and it seems forever to be correcting for this (think of the recurring waves of 'delivery units', now back in vogue) - is the business of enacting those decisions, considering what they mean in terms of working practices, capabilities and culture. Ownership of this part of the equation is frequently diffuse, falling into a grey area between policy officials, their operational colleagues and local services. And while it is now routine for senior leaders to stress the importance of implementation, there remains something seductive about the earlier, upstream side of policy work that means delivery doesn't get the sustained attention it deserves.

Linking back to the risk-laden environment of Whitehall, this is not all that surprising. So much of politics is theatre, and ministers feel constantly in the spotlight, whether from the media or spectacle of Parliament. All of this draws their attention inescapably to the most visible, political parts of the job, rather than the less eye-catching business of frontline delivery. Inevitably - and understandably - ministers are grateful to those civil servants who can help them to perform these aspects of the job, and their patronage is an important prerequisite for elevation to the most senior positions. As one current senior civil servant put it, DGs and Permanent Secretaries often serve as a "safety blanket" for Ministers, looking 'up' rather than 'out' into the system they are meant to be transforming.

So what sorts of behaviours is Whitehall incentivising in this environment? And what is the impact upon this particular agenda, when government is trying to build public services that are preventative, integrated, innovative and people-centred? The archetype can be summarised as the 'policy hero':

- **Polished performers over doers with humility.** The work of a senior civil servant is often politics in a microcosm, centering on big set-piece meetings or artfully crafted pieces of advice. Impressing at that level often requires being confident, articulate and 'polished' (with all of the connotations of class and education that brings with it). It's hard to imagine a senior mandarin professing any level of uncertainty or ignorance on a subject in their brief. By contrast, the reform agenda demands the opposite qualities: a preparedness to experiment and be proven wrong; to be comfortable fronting the messy, even ugly realities of change; and to dedicate more energy to the frontline than the corridors of power. The impressions of a senior local government officer of their Whitehall counterparts speak volumes:

  "I think a lot of the people who are relatively senior people in Whitehall, they're smart people, they've always done well, they've always been in charge. You know? They've always been confident, and had that ability to go into a room and run that room. It's very hard to be wrong if you're that person. It's very hard to actually listen and take different views and not fear being judged."

- **Individual operators over collaborators.** Whitehall can hardly expect local services to integrate when its own departments remain firmly siloed. But this is not currently compatible

with the incentives for ministers and senior officials alike to exhibit individualistic, rather than collaborative, behaviours. Not all of this is self-serving; it often manifests instead as excessive departmentalism - protecting a minister's turf even when it undermines the wider interests of government or the public. There are rarely prizes - professional or political - for helping another department to succeed or to cash in on the financial returns from your department's efforts. As one former Permanent Secretary put it, if you want to reach the very top of the Whitehall chain, "the received culture has been to stab all the DG competitors in the back" - advice they wisely ignored, but which is nonetheless revealing about how collaboration is valued in Whitehall.

- **Short-term risk managers over system stewards.** As part of *Civil Unrest* - an analysis of interviews with 50 civil servants[10] - a former senior official lamented that, in performance assessments, the performance of his team mattered little 'if it meant you could be the one to ride in on a white horse and save the day'. He went on, 'there is sometimes this willingness to roll their eyes at what the system is doing, and fix themselves rather than asking: "why is the system not fixing this? Why does it require me to roll up my sleeves and get involved?". This points to the rewards that come from individual heroics and short-term fixes over the quieter, less glamorous work of system stewardship: building capability and resilience, preventing problems upstream, and enabling others - rather than yourself - to succeed.

As before, these are not deliberate choices or permanent personality traits of those in charge. Many of those who reach the top are simply 'playing the game', adopting the behaviours the system rewards rather than the leadership behaviours they might otherwise adopt. Several interviewees described having to perform a kind of double act - feeding the system what it wants while quietly working to nudge it in a better direction. As one put it, "you don't make it to the top by fighting the system… you kind of have to play the game and keep some of this stuff in the back of your mind."

But if this is not how many in Whitehall want to lead, and it's incompatible with many of its stated aims for the future of our public services (and many other domains besides), how could we change the rules of the game?

THE SEEDS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Changing what it takes to get ahead. Performance frameworks - used to determine promotions, recruitment and other forms of recognition - can be powerful tools in shifting behaviours. For example, under CEO Jack Welch's leadership of *General Electric*, managers were judged - quite simply - on not only how they hit their numbers, but on *how they helped someone else to hit their numbers.*

Of course, Whitehall has a performance framework - so-called *Success Profiles* - but it is all too easy, especially in hiring decisions at senior levels, for these criteria to be downplayed relative to other, more unwritten rules. As one former Permanent Secretary emphasised, "no-one gets asked about 'collaborating and partnering' [one of the Success Profiles competencies] an interview for a senior position."

How could we rewrite Whitehall's performance framework - and ensure its influence in hiring and promotion decisions - so that humility, collaboration and stewardship are the key to getting ahead?

10   Gandon, A. (2023) Civil Unrest: A Portrait of the Civil Service through Brexit, the pandemic and political turbulence. London: Re:State.

Ministerial modelling. Ministers will inevitably play a major role in shaping what behaviours are valued. Their democratic mandate demands that civil servants respond to the cues ministers give them about what does and doesn't matter.

If these ways of working are most compatible with what ministers want to deliver, how can politicians be persuaded to share this analysis and supported to model the behaviours that bring out the best in officials?

Power and change. People rarely change systems that have served them well. Leaders who have risen up the ranks through the current model of success are understandably predisposed to see it as effective and legitimate. But they are simultaneously those who hold the levers of change.

How do we persuade those already at the top of Whitehall that shifting the model of leadership is in their own interests as well as the system's?

3. SCALE AND SEPARATION DRIVE PEOPLE INTO TRIBES, LEAVING LITTLE SPACE FOR TRUST OR COLLABORATION

Getting to a place where Whitehall devolves, empowers and gives public services space to innovate relies enormously on trust. But that trust is hard to build when it requires government teams to place faith in local officials and frontline practitioners they do not know, cannot directly observe, and who are often working hundreds of miles away.

People in Whitehall – like in any human system – naturally sort others into 'ingroups' and 'outgroups'. This, like many of the tendencies described thus far, is a natural response to complexity, allowing us to navigate a world with too many people and activities to assess one by one. It also has its roots in our evolutionary drive to manage threat and ensure survival by sorting people into 'us' - deemed safe - and 'them' - deemed potentially dangerous.

Because of the way central government is organised, it is only natural that officials feel most affinity with those in their immediate policy area (for example, children's mental health), profession (policy), or department (the Department of Health and Social Care), with diminishing 'ingroupness' as those groups become larger and more abstract. These are the people they come into contact with every day, and who they expect to share the same objectives. Of course, there are plenty of reasons why officials might 'other' colleagues from the same department - for example, when competing for the same scarce resources - while, on the other hand, their sense of 'ingroupness' may strengthen when they stand against a common 'enemy', like another department or outside group.

By contrast, those wearing a different organisational badge – local authority officers or public service practitioners – are at significant risk of being seen as 'outgroup'. In the context of public service reform and a drive for central government officials to enter into collaborative, risk-sharing and learning relationships with these sorts of professionals, this is a problem. Whitehall's relationship with the frontline is often transactional, with policy changes handed down with little space for dialogue or joint problem-solving. As one current senior civil servant put it: "You can't just sit on either side of a fence lobbing regulations over the top."

The good news, however, is that there is a powerful antidote: relationships. Neuroscientific research shows that meaningful interaction - and especially face-to-face contact - between groups reduces prejudice and builds trust.[11] As a former senior official and civil society leader, now academic, explained: "we're human beings, and humans are relational, social creatures. So if you want a collaborative system, people have to get to know each other… And if you don't have the relational side, you default to competing camps". Rutger Bregman, in his powerful book *Humankind*, highlights that soldiers in the world wars were far less prepared to use violence that required up-close physical contact compared to shelling from a distance.[12] Enmity rarely survives the intimacy of proximity.

The question, then, is how Whitehall can redraw the boundaries of its 'ingroups' to encompass colleagues from other disciplines, institutions and locations – and how, across organisational and geographical divides, it can create or replicate the intimacy of in-person connection.

THE SEEDS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Building shared identity across institutions. Organisational psychology shows that when people are encouraged to see themselves as part of a larger, shared group identity, tribal boundaries can soften and collaboration improves. Other sectors have applied this by creating multi-disciplinary teams or by increasing porosity through secondments and exchanges that let people move more freely between organisations. In Whitehall, though, the barriers are not just psychological but practical – from rigid IT and security systems to the default habits of working in silos.

How might we foster shared identity between Whitehall, local government and frontline practitioners, and what would it take to make these modes of working routine across Whitehall?

4. THERE IS A STRONG DRIVE TOWARDS STANDARDISATION AND SIMPLICITY, BUT THE RIGHT SOLUTIONS ARE OFTEN UNEVEN, ADAPTIVE AND 'MESSY'

Our first barrier already explored how humans crave certainty, and experience its opposite as a threat equivalent to a predator. But there is one particular source of uncertainty in the Whitehall system that deserves more attention: complexity.

Whitehall is nothing if not complex: its remit spans everything from nuclear deterrence to nursery fees, and those inhabiting its systems collectively process and respond to a vast volume of information and activity on a daily basis. The interactions within and between different parts of the system - the impact of policing decisions on prison capacity, say, or welfare spending on demand in the NHS - are multiple and constant. Nor - no matter how much we might like them to - do these relationships have predictable, linear effects.

11   Scarlett, H. (2019) Neuroscience for Organizational Change: An Evidence-Based Practical Guide to Managing Change. 2nd edn. London: Kogan Page.
12   Bregman, R. (2020) Humankind: A Hopeful History. London: Bloomsbury.

This level and kind of complexity is overwhelming, and the brain reaches for heuristics as a means of coping: simplifying, standardising and routinising. We turn recurring tasks into habits so we don't have to think them through afresh each time. We seek clear categories or rules of thumb, even when reality is messier. And we 'chunk' problems up into smaller, more manageable units.

We see this phenomenon in the Treasury's approach to spending decisions about public services: rather than grappling with the government's total outlay at once, resources are divided into departmental pots, enabling spending teams - and later, the Chancellor - to negotiate in a simpler, singular interface. The very structuring of government can be understood in much the same way – a way of reducing the unmanageable complexity of governing a country into smaller, bounded tasks ('education', 'justice', 'defence'). Of course, this comes at a cost, obscuring the links between policy areas and making it harder to act on them, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities.

And we also see our intolerance of complexity through government's tendency toward uniformity. Whitehall often appears uncomfortable with the untidiness of local innovation. It has a long history of spotlighting a promising local project by 'lifting and shifting' it across the country as a national programme. The Troubled Families programme, for example, has its origins in Hilary Cottam's *Life* project in Swindon; Transforming Rehabilitation drew on lessons from the Peterborough Prison Social Impact Bond. Both were seized and impatiently scaled by national government - altering key aspects in the process - with much less success. Put simply, what works in one place - with its particular networks, leadership and energy - very often doesn't work in another.

In practice, genuine, sustainable public service reform can be an uneven, messy process, working with the grain of local people's agency and the contours of the institutions, capabilities and culture in a given place. As one former senior political advisor put it, "so much of what happens locally is harmed when it's homogenised". Accepting this also means reckoning with a powerful countervailing force: people's sense of fairness. 'Postcode lotteries' resonate with both the public and policy-makers as something to be avoided. But surely there are ways of ensuring services are equally good without insisting they are identical.

There are relatively mature bodies of thought on navigating complex systems, and psychological frameworks for helping workforces to better tolerate that complexity in practice. But these have not yet penetrated Whitehall to the extent that they might.

THE SEEDS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Building tolerance for complexity. Disciplines from systems thinking to adaptive management have established frameworks to equip workforces to navigate complexity. Organisational psychology has ready models for building resilience to the discomfort this brings up.

What would it take to build similar literacy around complexity in Whitehall – not just among specialists, but embedded in everyday policy and delivery? How might we structure activities differently to take account of this?

Embracing unevenness. Local variation does not have to mean inequity. The costs of national standardisation often outweigh the benefits of harnessing local energy and designing for context.

Can we develop a more sophisticated national conversation about fairness - one that allows for local difference while still guaranteeing high standards everywhere?

More intelligent data systems. 21st century data capabilities now make it possible to capture and share much richer, real-time evidence – from service user feedback to dynamic outcome measures – that are closer to the subtle realities of change in human systems. More mature information systems would also help Whitehall with its 'trust issues', moving away from overbearing and inefficient forms of governance.

What would it take to embed more sophisticated ways of collecting and interpreting data so oversight supports rather than stifles local innovation?

5. POLITICS IS IMPATIENT FOR QUICK, LEGIBLE RESULTS - BUT THE CHANGE WE NEED IS OFTEN SLOWER AND MORE DIFFICULT TO MEASURE

Our political culture is one of immediacy, and ever more so, as the media cycle accelerates and new, highly accessible forms of communicating with the public proliferate. As a result, the incentives are set for 'quick wins', privileging visible, tangible and straightforward outcomes that might capture public attention amidst narrower engagement windows and attention spans. A good example of this is the allure of numerical outputs, as in Boris Johnson's (oft-repeated) manifesto commitments from 2019: 40 new hospitals, 50 thousand more nurses and 20 thousand more police officers.

By contrast, the kinds of change this agenda seeks point in the opposite direction. Prevention is about things *not* happening - the absence of harm, crisis or intervention - compared to the generative acts of building hospitals or announcing new programmes. Integration requires actors to work together, sharing credit for successes and diluting the attribution claims that bolster individual reputations. People-centred services meanwhile demand a more relational way of working that resists quantification. It is perhaps no accident that older, New Public Management models have persisted so long: they readily 'feed the system' with metrics such as patients seen, minutes spent or treatments delivered. Attempts to capture relationships or 'user experience' - such as patient satisfaction scores - often flatten the multi-faceted nature of human encounters into a single plane, leaving much of the story untold.

Interviewees spoke about how accountability and scrutiny mechanisms reinforcing these tendencies, with bodies like the National Audit Office, Ofsted or Public Accounts Committee working in 'linear models of change' rather than allowing space for more complex theories of system transformation:

They would be saying: "tell me your inputs, tell me your outputs, what's your outcome, what's your timeline." And I would be saying, "what we're doing here is a massive experiment in a multi-billion pound system. It's complicated." And they would suggest performance metrics, and I would say, "Okay, let me take that back, and I'll do a regression analysis of those against [outcome metrics]", and you'd go back and say "there's absolutely

no correlation at all". Or they'd just suggest something that wasn't a performance metric at all, but an activity metric. If we start measuring the performance of the system using that, we will drive it in the wrong direction. But I had to fight hard to get away from that, and just sit in quite brutal meetings where they told me I didn't have a strategy."

The slower - or less measurable - nature of deeper reform makes impact harder to prove, and without proof, progress risks going unnoticed and being dismantled. The impatience of political culture - driven not least by the pace of our electoral cycle - also means proof needs to come fast. Or else, reforms must attract support from such a broad coalition - across practitioners, officials and politicians of all stripes - as to survive the lifespan of any single government. This is easier said than done in a system where the political instinct is to claim and badge initiatives anew, and to tear up the legacies of predecessors.

In this context, there is probably a two-fold game to be played. First, to translate the outcomes of authentic public service reform into the language of our politics, including its dialects, for example 'value for money' assessments and cost-benefit ratios in Treasury speak. And second, to develop forms of storytelling that are more compelling, more human and less patronising than the prevailing defaults. That may mean harnessing new forms of media, which privilege community messengers and lived experience over abstract statistics, and using them to show that change is both real and worth investing in.

THE SEEDS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Telling a better story: The kinds of reforms government now aspires to - prevention, integration, people-centredness - sit uneasily with politics' preference for quick, tangible and attributable wins. If we accept that these aspects of political culture are unlikely to change, then the task is to find more sophisticated ways of describing richer, more complex forms of change in ways that remain legible and compelling.

What would it take for Whitehall to evidence reform in ways that capture the intangible, relational and long-term - without losing political salience?

A FINAL WORD

Much of this paper has focused on why reform is hard - and many of the barriers described will feel like deep-seated and immutable features of our political system and culture. But it is worth reiterating: Whitehall is not such a special case. Diagnosing its culture as somehow uniquely intractable risks feeding a kind of exceptionalism that prevents us from taking action and learning from elsewhere.

We have only begun to scratch the surface, but already know there to be established theoretical and practical models from elsewhere, tested in other sectors, that could be applied to solve these problems. And ultimately, culture should not only be considered - as so often - as a brake on change: it can also be harnessed to help us hit the accelerator.

As we build the rest of the *Powering Public Service Reform* programme, we want to spend more time studying these frameworks and designing or adapting them for the Whitehall context. We want to stress-test the diagnosis in this paper, and start growing the seeds of solutions - including but not limited to those set out here - together with others beyond Demos.

So, please tell us: what have we missed? What have we misconstrued? And where else should this point us in the search for solutions? Join the conversation by responding to our posts on LinkedIn or Bluesky, or emailing **Anna Garrod** (anna.garrod@demos.co.uk) or **Amy Gandon** (amy.gandon@demos.co.uk).

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