

DEMOS

NORTHCOTE- TREVELYAN 2.0

RESTORING THE LEGITIMACY
OF THE STATE WITH A
BURNHAM-ROMEO PLAN

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party policy think tank. We work to upgrade democracy, to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen. Public services are where the wear and tear in that relationship is happening every day and our work on **Public Service Reform** focuses on how we can achieve more relational, preventative and effective public services to help build back trust that democracies can deliver with and for people.

This paper forms part of Demos's [*Powering Public Service Reform*](#) programme, which looks at how the centre of government, particularly Whitehall, needs to change to achieve that shift and improve the quality of public services at the front line.

It argues that the British state has a legitimacy problem. Government is remote, centralised and top-down; it values process, hierarchy and order over connection, relationship-building and complexity. Just as the Northcote-Trevelyan Report provided the foundation for the modern merit-based civil service, now is the time for Burnham-Romeo; a transformational plan to reimagine the centre of government, devolve power and liberate public services. This will require a shift away from a command and control approach to one that empowers and enables, to reset the relationship between citizen and state.

INTRODUCTION

THE CASE FOR NORTHCOTE-TREVELYAN 2.0

Northcote-Trevelyan was one of the foundational documents for the modern, impartial merit-based civil service. Published in 1853, it was a seminal moment in the history of the British state, one that fundamentally redefined how it was run, replacing the system where individuals were appointed by patronage with an independent bureaucracy where merit was the key determinant of influence and advancement. This approach suited an administrative state, one where the role of civil servants was to administer the functions of the state on behalf of the government, who ruled at the behest of its citizens. Characterised by hierarchy, rank and rules-based process, officials were expected to identify a problem and produce a policy solution. In the permanent civil service of this era, impartiality meant being 'uncorrupted' by politics, public opinion, or citizens' views but using the available evidence and 'neutral' judgement to come up with the 'right answer'. The state's relationship with its citizens was characterised by deference, and significant central control of the flow of information.

Since 1853 the state has changed beyond recognition; post-war, the expansion of welfare, housing, education, immigration control has made the government a repeated presence in people's lives. The role of the state expanded significantly from designing policy to running large-scale complex operational systems.

Governing has become increasingly complex, and in response so too have the apparatus of public administration. The civil service has changed, from 15,000 individuals responsible for administering the policies of government to 550,000, segmented into departments that usually reflect broad policy verticals, overseen by ministers working through a set of powerful Permanent Secretaries. Government now includes a large number of public bodies, expert committees, advisory boards, the respective roles and responsibilities of which can be difficult to understand even by those inside the system.

Citizens' expectations are different too. There was a massive expansion of the franchise, and the culture of deference has been replaced by an expectation that people should have a say in the decisions that affect them. People are no longer content for decisions to be made behind closed doors by high ranking officials or experts; they expect transparency, scrutiny and the availability of information. Despite the state's greater reach into people's lives, it feels increasingly distant from them - the shorthand descriptor 'Whitehall' conjuring up images of a grand and distant street in central London where decisions are made, removed from the services and individuals who are affected by them.

New Public Management (NPM), introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, sought to address the inefficiencies that had developed in the large, unwieldy and bureaucratic state, applying private

business models to public services. It treated citizens as customers, focusing on service quality and user choice, setting targets and measuring outputs.

But this model had clear limits. Its focus on a small number of priorities and measurable targets made it a powerful tool to drive specific performance improvements in one service, but was less equipped to address the complex, messy and multifaceted problems faced by our public services, and the individuals that use them. NPM is well suited to high-volume, standardised, transactional services, but it struggles where outcomes depend on a sustained relationship, professional judgement or coordination across multiple services.¹ Rigid and inflexible evaluation and accountability systems mean Whitehall struggles to accommodate services or interventions that do not conform to the easily measurable, short-term, output-focused logic NPM promotes.

GOVERNMENT TODAY REMAINS CHARACTERISED BY A TOP-DOWN CENTRE-LED APPROACH

In the functioning of the state today there is a fundamental mismatch; outcomes are experienced locally – in the care we receive in our local hospitals or the quality of our schools – but are directed nationally. Many services on the front line are commissioned, and in some cases, delivered directly by central government (for example, prisons and Jobcentres). Even where services are commissioned locally (for example, adult social care), they are often tightly constrained by national legislation, guidance and monitoring, limiting the agency of those on the front line.² Local government is exposed to the operational and democratic risks of service failure, but without the ability to affect the decisions that underpin their functioning. The centre remains responsible for national outcomes but without the direct levers to change delivery on the ground.

This central control also presents a barrier to better public services; services that are joined-up, integrated, preventative and relational and ultimately ‘liberated’.³ People are complex, multi-faceted, facing compounding or intersecting challenges, public services must be equipped to respond. Services must be integrated around individual needs, able to work together and alongside each other to address complex health, social and societal problems. Local government with its proximity to people, and its experience of frontline delivery can be stifled from delivering the joined up services and policy solutions by directions from siloed Whitehall departments, and fragmented and confusing public service delivery geographies. Strong central control also restricts the ability for place-based experimentalism, which is crucial to responding to the fact of complexity and inter-related social and economic forces in which public services operate. While there are pockets of good practice including the Cabinet Office’s Test, Learn and Grow programme, there remain barriers to a wider systemisation of this approach, and – with relatively small budgets – it is not operating at a scale that will holistically change the system.

These problems are compounded by the structure and culture of civil service that values policy, process and order over connection, relationship building, and acceptance of complexity. Systems that have rightfully been designed to manage large bureaucracies, to mitigate risk, and to ensure value for money have taken on a life of their own. The goals they now serve are their own: risk is minimised, assurance is obtained, and value for money is demonstrated – with each serving as ends in themselves rather than a means to achieve the broader goal of improving people’s lives. Whitehall’s accounting culture and institutional and political incentives create

1 Martin, J and Garner, A., Mode Shifting: Whitehall Reform that Liberates Public Services to Shift Between Transactional and Relational Delivery Modes. Demos. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/mode-shifting-whitehall-reform-that-liberates-public-services-to-shift-between-transactional-and-relational-delivery-modes/> [accessed 22/09/2026]

2 Glover, B. The Reform Dividend: Final Report. Demos, December 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/The-Reform-Dividend-Final-Report_Dec-2024.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

3 See Demos’s work on Liberated Public Services: Glover, B. Liberated Public Services: A New Vision for Citizens, Professionals and Policy Makers. Demos, May 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Taskforce-Vision-Paper_May.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

siloed working within departmental boundaries and reward short-term activity over long-term outcomes.

Demos’s own research has identified the barriers to public service reform: risk avoidance, the myth of the “policy hero” - polished performers who impress ministers, rather than collaborative leaders who prioritise delivery and system stewardship - siloed working, a tendency to design for simplicity rather than complexity, and a politics impatient for quick, legible results.⁴ Variation is treated as a deviation to be corrected rather than as evidence of local insight.⁵ The civil service way of conceiving of the problems we face is increasingly divorced from the complex realities of how they present themselves on the ground; and the way of solving them does not value the skills and approaches that we need to make progress.

The relationship between state and citizen requires a reset as substantial as the Northcote-Trevelyan moment, which treated citizens as beneficiaries of government. New public management shifted the relationship to make citizens customers of the government. The complexity of today’s system, the changing cultural norms, now demand a new shift under which citizens become partners of government.

Citizen as subject 1900s-1970s	Citizen as customer 1980s-20	Citizen as partner 2020s
• State-knows-best • Limited and unaccountable • Hierarchy	• Market-driven • Commissioning and targets • Managerial	• Place-based • Accountable for outcomes • Relational and empowering

THE NEW LEGITIMACY PROBLEM

Northcote and Trevelyan helped to solve the legitimacy problem of its time; to abolish recruitment based on patronage, and introduce a system based on merit. The government now faces a different legitimacy problem; that decisions affecting people’s everyday lives are made by a remote, centralised and small group of people, removed from the systems established to deliver them, and the citizens who experience the consequences of them. The bond between the government and the citizens it serves is weak, with generalist policy skills and impartial analysis prioritised over connection, relationship building and mutual understanding.

Ensuring the brightest and the best walk the corridors of Whitehall, while ever important, is no longer sufficient. Legitimacy doesn’t only depend on whether the state reaches the right decision, but on how those decisions are made and who gets to be part of the process. Government’s toughest challenges can’t be solved without citizens, communities and markets acting as genuine partners in shaping the result. It will require an approach to public services that is relational, preventative and liberating.⁶ Addressing this problem requires new skills, new ways of working, and a fundamental rethink of the very purpose of the civil service.

Now is the time for a Northcote-Trevelyan 2.0. The power of Northcote-Trevelyan was, in part, the partnership between a politician, and a civil servant. The combined reforming zeal of Burnham and Romeo offers a moment to fundamentally reset the relationship between state and citizen.

4 Gandon, A. and A. Garrod. The Human Handbrake. Demos, September 2025. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Human-Handbrake_Breifing_2025_Sept.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]
5 Martin, J. New Deal: Public Service Reform. Demos, June 2026. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/New-Deal_Public-Service-Reform_2026.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]
6 Glover, B. Liberated Public Services: A New Vision for Citizens, Professionals and Policy Makers. Demos, May 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/liberated-public-services-a-new-vision-for-citizens-professionals-and-policy-makers/> [accessed 22/09/2026]

In the newly appointed Antonia Romeo we have our modern-day Charles Trevelyan. Even before Burnham's arrival, a 'Fundamental Review of the Civil Service' had been announced, with a mandate to look at everything from workforce management to AI adoption to efficiencies. Enter Andy Burnham. In his first month as Prime Minister, he set out his vision for 'rewiring the state', committing to "surrendering power that for too long has been held in Westminster and Whitehall, and returning it to people and the places where they live, work and invest."⁷ He has set out ambitious plans for a new model of government, devolving new powers to strategic authorities, reforming funding arrangements, and laying the foundations for greater local control and a more joined up approach to public services by rationalising services boundaries.

The scale of this has not yet landed in Whitehall. The Prime Minister has conceptually linked the devolution settlement to wider constitutional reform, including a codified constitution, a statutory commitment to equivalent living standards (drawn from the German Basic Law), and reforms of the electoral system. These are immense structural changes that amount to a reimagination of where power derives and which institutions may exercise it, rather than simply an adjustment to how the central government administers.

Delivering on this ambition will require Whitehall, and the civil servants who animate it, to play a fundamentally different role in the administration of the state and of our public services. Whitehall's current posture towards the rest of the system is one of mandation and correction – it determines how services should be delivered, monitors compliance, and intervenes where practice departs from a rigid delivery designed far away from both those who will be delivering and those receiving the public service. To address the legitimacy problem and deliver devolution, the centre will need to reconceive its role, moving away from the centralised top-down model, to one that empowers, enables, and supports local partners and citizen engagement. It will require new skills, new cultures and new ways of working and thinking, working in partnership with citizens, communities and all tiers of government.

The government has a roadmap to enable the ambitions this moment demands. Its *Rewiring the State* cabinet statement sets the intention.⁸ The forthcoming Devolution White Paper provides the delivery plan for the Prime Minister's devolved state, and with it an opportunity to reset the role of local government alongside the new strategic authorities; the Future Civil Service programme could align the reform of the centre with it; and the 10-year plan could codify this for a generation with new constitutional support. Designed together, they present the opportunity for the Prime Minister to embed his vision for the future of the country.

In the next section, we set out the **six shifts** these reforming vehicles - that together could achieve the Burnham-Romeo reset - should seek, in order to reset the relationship between state and citizen.

⁷ Cabinet Office. *Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement*. HM Government, 31 July 2026. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement-html> [accessed 22/09/2026]

⁸ Cabinet Office. *Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement*. HM Government, 31 July 2026. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement> [accessed 22/09/2026]

THE SHIFTS WE NEED TO SEE IN WHITEHALL

TABLE 1
THE SHIFTS WE NEED TO SEE IN WHITEHALL

	FROM COMMAND AND CONTROL...	... TO ENABLING AND EMPOWERING
Leadership	Whitehall manages delivery against national targets and KPIs, correcting departures from a centrally designed model.	Whitehall sets direction, defines success and a genuine minimum floor, then lets others choose the route to it while encouraging innovation and shared learning.
Funding	Treasury control through short, siloed and heavily conditional funding pots, policed by audit and value-for-money assurance.	Flexible, multi-year settlements that leave real discretion.
Accountability	The local tier accounts upwards to Whitehall, through reporting against output measures.	The local tier accounts downwards to citizens, through local scrutiny with the skills to judge different delivery modes on their own terms.
Capability building	Policy capacity held in Whitehall, with thin local capability used to justify keeping it there.	Whitehall builds local capability and devolves further against readiness criteria co-designed with the places seeking greater agency, rather than set unilaterally by departments.
Collaboration	Hierarchical policy making – local government consulted as a stakeholder, decisions taken in Whitehall.	Collaborative approach to policy making based on ‘first among equals’. Policy reflects views of all tiers of government, and stakeholders; retained functions are designed with local government as a partner, not a consultee.
Coordination	Coordination is informal and case-by-case, or achieved by holding control at the centre.	The centre builds and maintains shared coordination infrastructure – protocols, data, convening – that runs through local institutions rather than above them, facilitating different parts of government, to address shared challenges, pool resources, and respond to events.

SHIFT 1

WHITEHALL NEEDS TO SHIFT TOWARDS LEADING FROM (MICRO)MANAGING

Essential to addressing the legitimacy problem is moving away from the top-down centre-led approach to government to an approach that empowers and enables local partners.

In establishing No10 North, this government has already sent a powerful signal that it wants to do things differently, but without wider changes it risks merely relocating the centre rather than fundamentally reforming it.

Devolution shouldn't mean that the centre is less important; politicians elected at national level should still be responsible for driving the change the public want to see across the country. But the way the centre does this will require a fundamental shift from managing to leading.

Rather than managing public services through a centralised plan, key performance indicators and targets, treating government like the private sector and citizens as customers, the central government should focus on leadership, setting a vision and definitions for success - but letting others bring about the change that is needed working in partnership with citizens and those that use services. For example, the centre should decide whether the goal of education is to reduce inequalities or promote academic excellence and how these trade offs should be made, but they should empower local governments to decide how to turn that goal into a reality. As Demos has previously recommended this could include setting national missions that are ambitious, long-term, cross cutting and outcome focused, and translating them into mission metrics to drive decisions on prioritisation and spending.⁹ The mixed legacy of Missions reflects poor implementation rather than a structural flaw in this model of system governance. The failure was not that government should not set a number of long-term, cross-cutting outcomes; it was that missions were announced without being structurally operationalised: they did not determine spending allocations, they were not reflected in departmental accountability, and they carried no consequence when they were largely pushed aside.

Leadership also means intervening when things go wrong. Minimum standards should be held that operate as intervention thresholds – set by the centre along with strategic authorities – to ensure a basic standard of public service delivery by the constituent local authorities. These should specify what citizens are entitled to receive, the conditions below which provision should not fall, and the circumstances in which central intervention is justified to avoid harm.

⁹ Glover B. Balancing Act (Paper 2). Demos, December 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Balancing-Act_Paper-2_Dec-2024.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

SHIFT 2

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S FUNDING APPROACH WILL NEED TO MOVE TO PROMOTE LOCAL AUTONOMY OVER TREASURY CONTROL

Value for Money culture runs deep in the civil service. Accounting processes are deeply embedded in how officials operate through Managing Money Guidance, Finance Functions, and the role of Permanent Secretaries as Accounting Officers. Officials must rightly be stewards of the public interest, treating public money with the care and attention it deserves, accountability frameworks have a clear role in public sector spending, but they can also act as barriers to good policy making and liberated public services:

- Short evaluation horizons prioritise those programmes that deliver immediate returns, incentivising short termist tactical measures over longer term strategic planning. They are unable to account for the benefits of investment that may accrue over different timescales or across different parts of the system.
- Siloed funding mechanisms which lead to siloed institutions and planning that created both inefficiencies and gaps in citizen support.
- Inflexible and highly conditional funding pots that remove the agency from those best able to gauge where funding can have the most impact.

Addressing the legitimacy problem means a fundamental shift in how the civil services thinks and accounts for money - it means trusting local leaders, local government and citizens to make the decisions on how best to deploy resources. Whitehall must shift away from strong central Treasury control and towards flexible, stable and longer term funding settlements for local government. We need a new approach to funding public services that enables local leaders to be able to identify the problems in their local area, problems that may span across services, and dedicate the necessary resources to tackling them. This must be combined with clear assessment and accountability mechanisms, but focused on outcomes, not simply compliance with a framework drawn in SW1. This is essential for unlocking a preventative and liberated approach to public services.

Funding arrangements should therefore be judged by whether they leave sufficient discretion to make devolution substantive. A multi-year but heavily ring-fenced grant may provide certainty without autonomy; a nominally devolved budget subject to detailed departmental approvals may relocate administration without relocating decision-making. Integrated Settlements already consolidate funding across housing, regeneration, transport, skills, employment support and other functions, with seven Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) receiving them from 2026–27.¹⁰

Demos has long advocated for 'Total Place+' funding; a single funding pot that enables joined-up spending on public services, given to Combined Authorities.¹¹ Due to the scale and flexible nature of Total Place+ budgets, which give local leaders the agency to identify their priorities, it would enable institutions to take a longer term, genuinely preventative approach. The Place Based Budgets programme, delivered jointly by the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), is working with five pilot areas to establish

¹⁰ Newman, J. and Kenny, M. Devolving English Government. Institute for Government and Bennett Institute for Public Policy, April 2023. Available at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/devolving-english-government.pdf> [accessed 22/09/2026]

¹¹ For more information see Glover, B. Total Place+: A Liberated Approach to Public Services (Paper 3). Demos, December 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Total-Place_Paper-3_Dec-2024.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

whether local partners operating through Mayoral Strategic Authorities can pool budgets, align governance and redesign services around particular cohorts. In doing so it revives the approach taken by Total Place. However realising the full benefits of this in practice will require a fuller account of how public money is already being spent within them. Currently, NHS, police, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), departmental and local authority spending is planned and reported through separate verticals, and no single body is able to set out what is spent in a given area. Moreover, this could be accompanied by broader system wide changes to accounting practices to provide greater transparency over preventative spending through the introduction of a category of Prevention Departmental Expenditure Limit (PDEL).¹² Such funding would not be ring-fenced as, if Whitehall sets how much of a place's budget may be spent on capital, resource, or prevention, then an ostensibly devolved funding settlement is really under arms length control.

The move to appoint Strategic Authority CEOs as Local Accounting Officers is a good first step in making this broader shift toward creating more financial responsibility at a local level¹³ but it risks sitting awkwardly alongside existing local financial governance, and the division of responsibility will need to be settled before it is extended. Moreover, it needs to be coupled with a genuine shift in how HM Treasury understands its own role in safeguarding the public purse and enabling effective public service delivery.

SHIFT 3

ACCOUNTABILITY MUST BE TO CITIZENS, NOT THE CENTRE

Under Whitehall's current model, regional and local authorities are expected to provide reams of paperwork, evidence and policy and evaluation to departments to account for money spent under various grants and pots. Under the top-down centre-led approach accountability flows up to the central government rather than outwards to citizens.

Addressing the legitimacy problem of the state and treating citizens as partners means devolving power, but it also means devolving accountability, ensuring there are robust mechanisms and systems in place for local people to scrutinise local decision making. But the mechanisms for accountability at a local level are weak. With new powers and financial responsibilities devolved, if the accountability mechanisms are not strengthened, we risk more opaque decision making, political bargaining and a greater risk of corruption or malpractice. This could further erode the already fragile trust the public have in local institutions.

Some welcome moves are being made already. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act (2026)¹⁴ creates Local Scrutiny Committees to replace combined authority overview and scrutiny, with a remit to examine mayoral decisions and actions, undertake inquiries, and report on the value for money of MSA spending.¹⁵ The recent *Rewiring the State*¹⁶ goes further, committing to strategic authority chief executives acting as Local Accounting

¹² Dodd, E and J Martin. Powering Prevention. Demos, June 2026. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Powering-Prevention_Report_June_2026.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

¹³ Cabinet Office. Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement. HM Government, 31 July 2026. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a6c7acf0ddb7e4831c62abd/REWIRING_THE_STATE_-_CABINET_STATEMENT.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

¹⁴ English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026. Available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2026/23> [accessed 22/09/2026]

¹⁵ National Audit Office. Devolution in England: Funding and Accountability (summary). NAO, 1 July 2026. Available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/devolution-in-england-funding-and-accountability-summary.pdf> [accessed 22/09/2026]

¹⁶ Cabinet Office. Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement. HM Government, 31 July 2026. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement-html> [accessed 22/09/2026]

Officers, streamlined outcomes frameworks, and a more concrete role for councils and MPs in local accountability.

The abolition of the Audit Commission left a deficit in comparative performance assessments between local institutions, identifying what was working, and making those lessons available to peers. Scrutiny committees examine one authority at a time; government departments see only their own vertical; there would be great value for local authorities to have a bespoke body that holds them to account on their performance that is holistic and is not defined by the centre.

That means it is governed by strategic and local authorities collectively, with its leadership and work programmes set with them, not commissioned by a department as an instrument of central oversight. Its primary output should be comparison and learning: what is being achieved, at what cost, under what conditions, and what other places can take from it. It should have the independence and access to report honestly where things are going wrong, and the standing for those findings to carry weight, but its accountability should run to the sector and to citizens rather than upward to ministers.

There should be a role for the public too. To greater involve the public in holding combined authorities to account, Demos has proposed a standing Citizens' Panel should be trailed in one mayoral combined authority to provide new local scrutiny.¹⁷

But perhaps the most fundamental shift must come in the form of Whitehall being willing to accept that devolution means that places will do things differently. That may mean different policy decisions, different approaches to service provisions and different outcomes. Ministers will need to resist the urge to step in, even when they don't agree with a local approach and trust in the ability of the people to provide ultimate accountability.

SHIFT 4

UK GOVERNMENT WILL NEED TO FOCUS ON BUILDING CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY OUTSIDE THE CENTRE

Historically, local capacity and capability have been used to rationalise the centralised Whitehall governing model. This only fuels a negative feedback loop: local authorities are hollowed out and their accountabilities absorbed by an ever-centralising Whitehall, which in turn deepens the sense that local government lacks the capability and capacity to deliver. Whitehall will need to shift from gatekeeper to enabler - supporting local government to build the capacity and capability to take on new powers. This means not just the capacity to deliver, but also the capability to make good decisions, informed by data, evidence and analysis. This is essential to the success of devolution, and its ability to deliver benefits on the ground.

The initial process of devolving powers and responsibilities from Whitehall to regional authorities will be enormously complex and will require grappling with hard choices. One of the toughest will be whether to redistribute existing Whitehall functions across regional institutions, or for the receiving institutions to stand up entirely new capabilities. Both approaches carry trade-offs of their own and complexities to navigate.

Transplanting Whitehall's existing functions, and workforces, risks carrying across the very flaws that made devolution so necessary in the first place. Standing up completely new capabilities within regional institutions sidesteps this risk, but at the cost of taking years to realise;

¹⁷ Glover, B. Balancing Act (Paper 2). Demos, December 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Balancing-Act_Paper-2_Dec-2024.pdf [accessed 22/09/2026]

particularly in those places starting from a lower base, or in areas that will struggle to attract the necessary human capital.

The government has announced a new programme of secondments between Mayoral Strategic Authorities and the civil service aiming to build capacity and capability, promote interchange and understanding of the different contexts in which each operates.¹⁸ This is welcome, but must not be a way to spread the culture of generalist supremacy to regional government, it must encourage civil servants to see themselves as part of the wider public service, gaining greater experience of the impact of decision making on citizens and front line workers, and new perspectives. New, empowered MSA workforces also present the opportunities to shift the approach to skills and talent in the workforce, rewarding innovation, connection and relational approaches to policy making and service delivery.

As well as building a workforce, the government must invest in the capability to enable MSAs to take an innovative and transformative approach to policy making. This includes investing in data, digital and design capabilities. Whitehall must resist the temptation to 'parachute in' with a rigid solution already in mind. It should prioritise instead convening the relevant actors, so the institution can set its own insights against existing best practice and identify what works best for its citizens and context. Whitehall remains well placed to connect struggling organisations with others across the country that have already built and deployed a given capability effectively. And, while there are exceptions in which Whitehall must require an authority to act, that requirement should be framed not as the imposition of a remedy by a more capable institution, but as support to help the organisation rebuild the capability it needs to return service quality to the minimum standard quickly.

The centre has to build capability within itself, as civil servants will be expected to work in ways that they have previously not been selected, trained, promoted or rewarded for. Holistic shifts in the role of the centre depends on substantial shifts in the nature of how civil servants approach and understand their work and their role within a devolved UK.

Empowerment is not produced by instruction: a department does not become enabled because a policy statement requires it to be, and officials do not begin working relationally because a framework tells them to. The behaviours the current system produces are rational responses to its incentives: officials who retain control are not being obstructive, they are avoiding the consequences that fall on those who delegate and are disappointed.

The senior civil service has been selected, since the time of Northcote-Trevelyan, for competence within a hierarchical system built on central control. Those promoted have demonstrated the abilities that system rewards. The new emerging model of the British state requires different capabilities from its central bureaucracy. The competences Whitehall has optimised for are instrumental: analysing a problem, specifying a solution, drafting advice, securing agreement, managing a process to a deadline. What the enabling role requires is relational: convening people who do not report to you, holding a purpose steady while others choose the route, negotiating between institutions with legitimate competing claims, and building the trust on which any of that depends. It also requires learning, as an approach that works in one place may not transfer to another; an official trained to identify the right answer and defend it is poorly equipped to work in conditions where the answer is place- and context-dependent. This demands unlearning as much as learning.

18 BBC News. Burnham to send high-performing civil servants to mayoral offices. BBC News. 21 August 2026. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm2gme5yqnqo> [accessed 22/09/2026]

SHIFT 5

WHITEHALL WILL NEED TO TREAT LOCAL LEADERS AS PARTNERS, NOT STAKEHOLDERS

While the broad ambition should be to devolve power wherever appropriate, there are many areas that should remain at the centre; national defence, redistribution across regions, immigration, certain tax decisions. Of those functions the centre does retain, it must change the way it makes decisions and develops policy to reflect the new make up of the state.

In an increasingly devolved world there will be an increasing number of intersections and interdependencies between national and regional competencies and UK-wide and local strategies. More than ever, effective national policy made by the UK government will require a thorough understanding of local strategies, and input from those who draft them. For example, developing a UK-wide economic growth strategy will require a deep understanding of the different local economic contexts and plans for growth. When negotiating international trade deals, the central government will need to ensure that it is in tune with the needs and priorities of local areas.

In this context, solving the legitimacy problems will require a fundamental change to the way Whitehall makes policy, one that places the views of local government, communities, and groups on par with their departmental colleagues. The government will need new mechanisms for information exchange and policy development at a national and local level, giving local leaders the opportunities to input into policy. Whitehall will also need to ensure it incentivises consideration of the local angle as integral to good policy making, and it will require political leadership that is willing to challenge group think and govern in the interests of the whole country.

As well as retaining certain policy areas, there are other areas where economies of scale mean it may make sense for the centre to act on behalf of a sub-national government. In some cases, this may mean the centre doing more and being more active. Devolution may sharpen the case for central action where fragmented purchasers face concentrated provider markets; devolving commissioning alone transfers a weaker bargaining position to smaller bodies.¹⁹ Similarly, the centre could play a more active role in providing support for digital transformation across the public sector. For example, a role for the digital centre, including the Government Digital Service to expand its remit, working with local government to provide the tools and expertise needed to effectively modernise our public services. Their approach will require a careful balancing act, providing central guidance and support while respecting local autonomy. Providing essential infrastructure, including universal platforms like [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) or the NHS app, to provide citizens with a seamless user experience unencumbered by administrative boundaries while also ensuring responsibilities and accountabilities are clear. This will require working closely with local authorities to understand what they need and want, not just deciding for them.

¹⁹ For example, the Competition and Markets Authority found that rising costs for children's social care could be attributed, at least in part, to fragmentation across the 206 purchasing authorities across England, Scotland, and Wales, which limited their ability to forecast, signal future need, and to procure effectively. Competition and Markets Authority. Children's social care market study: final report, para 28, 31–34, 52. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report> [accessed 22/09/2026]

SHIFT 6

DEVOLUTION WILL REQUIRE COORDINATION - THE CENTRE MUST BE EQUIPPED TO FACILITATE THIS

Central to solving the legitimacy problem is ensuring that local leaders can develop and implement the policies that are right for their area. The solutions to the problems we face should be tailored to local needs, contexts, and circumstances. This presents many opportunities - for innovation, experimentation and shared learnings - but it also presents risks - including risks of fragmentation, inequality or issues falling through the cracks.

Even in areas that are extensively devolved, there is still a role of the centre to manage coordination: ensuring that devolved institutions can work together, share information, and avoid acting at cross purposes, while preventing the fragmentation that decentralisation can produce if the connecting infrastructure is not built alongside the transfer of powers. Currently, this is where Whitehall frequently struggles as the default assumption is that the centre should retain control precisely because coordination is difficult; it is challenging to build coordination infrastructure that does not functionally lean into central control.

This coordination role is most important where the geography of a social or policy challenge does not align with the geography of governance. For example, 'County Lines' drug networks. They are structured to exploit the boundaries between local authority areas and police forces, routing supply through jurisdictions where coordinated disruption is harder to organise. No single local or combined authority can address this in isolation; likewise, a centralised response from Whitehall would prove ineffective in tackling what is ultimately a local/regional challenge. It is for this reason that the National Police Chiefs' Council, working closely with the Home Office has established the National County Lines Coordination Centre.²⁰ The centre must support coordination infrastructure – such as shared operational frameworks and joint protocols – that it facilitates and maintains, but that function through local institutions rather than above them.

There remains a role of the centre in ensuring high quality services across the country through supporting innovation, best practice and shared learning. Inspectorates and regulators sit on one of the richest sources of comparative information about how services are actually delivered, but that information is largely used to reach judgements about individual organisations rather than to generate learning across the system. In a more devolved state, where variation between places is intended rather than incidental, that function becomes more valuable: regulators are among the few bodies positioned to see the same problem being addressed in different ways across many places, and to say what is working. Realising this will require a shift in mindset and approach, from assurance as the primary purpose towards improvement, and from an inspection relationship premised on compliance towards one premised on shared learning. It will also require greater clarity about where that improvement function sits than has been achieved to date; the Office for Local Government was established in part to identify and share good practice and was closed within 18 months, its remit judged too broad and insufficiently defined.

Digital and data infrastructure will determine how far these coordination functions support devolution in practice. Comparison between places depends on evidence being generated in compatible forms, and common data standards, interoperable systems and shared evaluation methods are unlikely to emerge from 20 authorities working separately. Establishing them is a legitimate function of the centre. The same infrastructure, however, lowers the cost of central

²⁰ National Police Chiefs' Council. National County Lines Coordination Centre. Available at <https://www.npcc.police.uk/our-work/work-of-npcc-committees/Crime-Operations-coordination-committee/national-county-lines-co-ordination-centre/> [accessed 22/09/2026]

oversight: where departments can observe local performance continuously and at low marginal cost, the practical constraint that has historically limited the frequency of intervention, namely the expense and effort of collecting the information, no longer applies.

The centre should have a role in setting a framework for data sharing and evaluation so that evidence generated in one place can inform decisions elsewhere. Through supporting initiatives such as Test, Learn and Grow which encourage innovation across and between local and strategic authorities, treating devolution as a policy lab through which different approaches can be trialled and replicated if successful. The centre should therefore make evidence easier to generate, compare and access, and places should retain responsibility for interpreting it in context.

CONCLUSION

THE LEGITIMACY DIVIDEND

Just as in the nineteenth century, the government is facing a crisis of legitimacy. Over the last century the role of state has fundamentally changed, governing has become increasingly complex, and people want more of a say in the decisions that affect them. But the apparatus of government has not undergone an equivalent change; the civil service now feels remote, removed and disconnected from citizens.

Northcote-Trevelyan redefined the modern state, bringing order and meritocracy to our system of government. Now is the moment for Burnham-Romeo to embark on a similar transformation reorganising and reorienting the structures of government so that they focus on connection and partnership with the communities and citizens. In the nineteenth century, citizens were conceived of as beneficiaries of the state, New Public Management then treated citizens as customers, now the government must see citizens as partners.

As we set out in this paper, this will require six shifts.

The first from managing to leading, moving away from the model of command and control and focusing on setting its vision and defining success including minimum standards, enabling rather than directing.

The second; from fiscal control to local autonomy, from the culture of Treasury control where local government funding is inflexible and conditional, to a settlement that promotes local autonomy and enables joined up and preventative spending to multifaceted and complex societal problems.

The third shift means shifting local accountability to flow down to citizens, not up to the centre. This means strengthening local accountability mechanisms and building new ones so that local people can hold their leaders to account. Greater responsibility without accountability risks devolution undermines rather than enhances democratic legitimacy and trust.

Shift four means not just treating local governments as delivery vehicles but empowering them by building the capacity and capability to make their own decisions. In some areas this may mean central government providing essential infrastructure or pooling purchasing power to enable better, more effective public services.

Despite devolution, there are many areas where policy making will need to remain in Whitehall - but even in these, Whitehall cannot continue with business as usual. Shift number five requires Whitehall to shift from a hierarchical approach to decision making to a genuinely collaborative one. This means treating local governments as genuine partners, developing policy in concert with them, not simply treating them as stakeholders to be consulted.

Devolving power does come with risks of a fragmented system, to mitigate that risk the centre must be more active as a coordinator between different parts of government, enabling them

to address shared challenges and respond in a crisis and providing a platform to share learning and innovation.

The government is already embarking on an ambitious programme to change the way the UK is governed, devolving power away from the centre and *Rewiring the State*, reforming the functioning of the civil service through the Future Civil Service Programme, and considering the long-term future of the constitution through the 10-year plan. It must ensure that all these elements contribute to a single vision of the future of the state, that they are mutually reinforcing, and together are the vehicle for a Burnham-Romeo reset.

For a civil service that for so long has acted as a steward of policy making and delivery in England; there is no escaping that the shifts we describe will be a fundamental change to how the centre conceives of and performs its role. It may feel like an uncomfortable change; it will mean letting go of the strong financial control and accountability driven by a genuine desire to ensure value for money for the tax payer. It will mean things will go wrong, and institutions may fail. It will make it more difficult to drive change from the centre; the very nature of devolution means that democratically elected governments may make different choices. And it will make the policy making landscape more complex, making policy making harder and more multifaceted.

But with these challenges, this change in approach will also bring huge opportunities; an opportunity to fundamentally change the way we make decisions in this country, to bring power closer to the people, and to deliver preventative, relational and joined up public services. It will give officials new ways to experiment, innovate and collaborate; to break free of the well-established but often frustrating ways of working - to support and steward change on the ground in a way that has a real impact on people's lives and livelihoods.

Most importantly it will address the legitimacy problem of our time, **building trust in the state and safeguarding its ability to govern for generations to come.**

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