# EC0717\_n1\_minister and official

**The Minister and the Official: The Fulcrum of Whitehall Effectiveness**

**Note by Peter Owen**

1. The summary of the report is at Annex A.
2. The report puts forward six main conclusions on which we may wish to comment. They are as follows.
3. Working relationships between new ministers and senior officials could be strengthened by longer structured discussions, perhaps supported by a facilitator.
4. There should be honest discussions about priorities based on improved Single Departmental Plans.
5. The Government should bring forward concrete plans to address the loss of departmental expertise caused by excessive churn in senior posts and increased appointment of permanent secretaries from outside their departments.
6. Departments should be encouraged to work better with Functions; and Functions must be accountable for services provided to departments.
7. There should be greater clarity about the purpose of departmental boards and the role of non-executive directors.
8. PACAC will launch an inquiry into the need for an overall body to fill the gap left by the closure of the National School of Government

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ANNEX A

**Summary**

The relationship between ministers and their officials is the “fulcrum” of our system of government. To be effective, it is a relationship in each case that must quickly develop to one of strong mutual trust. In the absence of trust, this fulcrum can become a fault line or fracture point. Under these circumstances, honest conversations do not take place and this affects the atmosphere throughout the whole department. In the end, policy and delivery suffer.

The significance of the minister-official relationship, and the tensions that can arise within it, have long been recognised. Efforts to address this tension, such as the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan, have tended to focus most on how to make the Civil Service more responsive and more accountable to the ministers they serve. There is much less discussion about the part ministers should play in making minister-official relationships work better.

What happens in the period following a new minister or permanent secretary taking up their post tends to determine how the subsequent relationship develops. Induction for new ministers may be effective at introducing them to the pressing policy issues facing their department but they are given little in the way of preparation for the new role as leaders in their departments, nor is there any direct support given to help them to establish effective working relationships with their senior officials. New ministers and senior officials are immediately under significant pressure on taking up their appointment. It is so much easier to lay firm foundations to working relationships if time is given to longer and structured minister-official discussions. The purpose of these discussions would be to build understanding of each individual’s perspective and responsibilities, a shared view of priorities and ways of working. The building of trust could be supported and accelerated by an experienced facilitator.

Effective planning and prioritisation depends on the strength of the relationship between ministers and their officials. Ministers must be confident that the Civil Service can deliver policies on time and to budget. But officials need to be able to talk to their minister about resource constraints and about realistic timeframes for delivery. Too often, such realism is regarded as resistance or, because the trust is not there, officials feel the conversation is avoided altogether. The need for such honesty and openness about priorities is all the more acute since government has taken on the additional tasks arising from exiting the EU. Single Departmental Plans should be at the heart of these discussions. They have not so far delivered the promised link between the allocation of resources and delivery of priorities.

The rate of churn at the top of the Civil Service remains much too high. Many senior officials spend less than two years in post. It has also become far more common for permanent secretaries to be brought in from outside the department. Churn is also exacerbated by the concern of civil servants to progress their careers in the face of increased competition from external hires. These factors mean the most senior officials often lack the subject expertise and depth of experience in the department which their ministers are entitled to expect. The 1968 Fulton Committee lamented what it called the “cult of the generalist”, but the problem has become more serious. This undermines Civil Service effectiveness, as is widely acknowledged. The Government must bring forward concrete plans to address this.

Since the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan, there has been a strong focus on the development of cross-government ‘Functions’ (such as HR, legal, digital, finance, etc) which deliver common services to all departments. The development of Functions has been regarded in some quarters of government with the suspicion that they diminish the role and autonomy and accountability of departments. They are intended to support departments. Functions are enablers, not an alternative to departments. Departments need the confidence and incentives to work better with Functions whilst Functions must be accountable for the service they provide to departments.

Departmental boards, comprising ministers, officials and external non-executives, provide a forum where wider and more open conversations can take place about departmental management, priorities and resources. Non-executives can prevent boards becoming polarised between ministers and officials. Although the contribution of individual non-executives is widely acknowledged, the performance of boards in Whitehall is patchy. Too many meet only rarely and provide little value. Clarity about what boards are expected to provide and the roles of non-executives is required.

The effectiveness and resilience of Civil Service leaders depends upon their training and professional development. It is now widely accepted that the closure of the National School for Government has left a gap in their learning and development that subsequent provision has failed to fill. Some steps to address this, such as the Civil Service Leadership Academy and the Centre for Public Service Leadership, have been taken. But these and other new institutions will not provide the crucial anchoring role for the Civil Service that the National School for Government did. We intend to look at the possible creation of a new overall body to nurture future talent and leadership in a follow-on inquiry. The Civil Service needs its own institution, where Civil Service thinkers, educators and leaders have the space to reflect on how the Civil Service should be more mindful of itself, its challenges and its future, and which can transmit the values, attitudes and positive behaviours vital to the future strength of the Civil Service from generation to generation.