



# MAKING GOVERNMENT WORK:

## Five pillars of a modern, effective civil service

WITH LORD GUS O'DONNELL GCB



RICHARD JOHNSTONE | SIOBHAN BENITA | CHRIS PUNCH

A GLOBAL STUDY OF CIVIL SERVICE LEADERS | AUGUST 2024

## Contents

<b>Foreword: Lord Gus O’Donnell GCB .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Interview participants .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Notes and definitions.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Pillar 1: Strong leadership with mutual respect and alignment between ministers and senior officials .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Establish a clear understanding of political objectives and civil service stewardship .....	12
Implement better training for ministers and civil servants .....	14
Safeguard and reinforce the provision of impartial advice.....	17
Cultivate leaders who actively defend civil servants in public forums .....	18
<b>Pillar 2: A highly skilled, inclusive and thriving workforce.....</b>	<b>20</b>
Revamp recruitment practices to be more effective.....	20
Reduce reliance on consultants by building internal capabilities .....	22
Prioritise staff wellbeing and mental health support.....	24
Develop the next generation of leaders.....	25
<b>Pillar 3: An agile, digital and risk-taking culture focused on delivery .....</b>	<b>28</b>
Champion innovation and supporting risk taking .....	29
Secure the digital, data and technology infrastructure necessary for transformation.....	30
Lead the way with public sector AI utilisation .....	31
Design services with the customer in mind.....	34
<b>Pillar 4: Collaborative working structures that transcend organisational silos .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Empower a strong central authority to oversee and enforce collaborative efforts.....	38
Integrate political and official decision-making to streamline processes.....	39
Properly resource initiatives that facilitate cross-government working .....	40
Maintain a long-term focus to overcome the transient challenges of political cycles.....	42
<b>Pillar 5: A service that is trusted by its users and the public .....</b>	<b>46</b>
Build trust by showcasing success stories.....	47
Establish comprehensive strategies to tackle the spread of fake news .....	48

Maintain open and effective communication with all citizens to foster inclusion and transparency .....	50
Strengthen international alliances to bolster credibility and share best practices in civil service.....	51
<b>Conclusion: The Pillars of a Modern, Effective Civil Service .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Appendices: .....</b>	<b>56</b>
I - Methodology.....	56
II - Country profiles .....	57

## Foreword: Lord Gus O'Donnell GCB

As Cabinet secretary, I worked for three different prime ministers, including one who headed the first coalition government in the UK for 65 years. Regardless of political party or personal style, what always struck me as being key to the smooth running of government was having clarity from the PM and their ministers on what they wanted to deliver and, in turn, ministers respecting the advice of their officials and trusting them to deliver their priorities in a cost effective and legally compliant manner.

Difficulties arose when a relationship between ministers and officials broke down and when official advice was perceived – rightly or wrongly – to be unduly negative or resistant. Luckily, such difficulties were relatively rare during my time in office but that has changed. Criticism of civil servants is now considered fair game and often played out in the media.

In recent times the UK civil service, for example, has been victim to the “blob” narrative – a pejorative term used by ministers, journalists and others, to describe an alleged consensus-seeking, self-perpetuating elite within the public sector. Numerous senior officials have been publicly named and blamed for policy failures by the ministers they serve.

Looking to the USA, Donald Trump has committed to reinstating Schedule F through an executive order if he secures victory in the 2024 election. This would enable him to remove job protections for a significant number of impartial, federal employees, allowing for their possible dismissal and the appointment instead of Republican supporting officials and advisers.

I am also increasingly concerned that against the backdrop of rising populism and increasingly divisive politics, we are seeing weak leadership on vital issues of long-term importance. Climate change, for example, has moved from being an area of political consensus to one where net zero is being used as a political weapon for short-term gain in the latest culture war. Many of the leaders we interviewed, in Europe and elsewhere, raised concerns about the speed with which populist narratives could be shared on social media and the extent to which the language being used by some politicians was fuelling misinformation and division.

With so many urgent challenges facing governments around the world, it's crucial that ministers and civil servants can work together with mutual respect for, and understanding of, their respective roles and responsibilities.

We need to ask ourselves: how can civil service leaders respond to these changes in order to uphold institutions and policy pledges that are evidentially in the long-term public interest? This report explores some of the possible answers to that question,

including the role that technology and generative AI will play in making our civil servants more responsive, recruiting and retaining talent in a competitive labour market and ensuring evidence-based advice remains at the heart of a modern civil service.

I was delighted to be asked to work with Global Government Forum on this study. The role of Cabinet secretary and head of the civil service can be a lonely one – our only serving peers can be found abroad. In the words of Peter Ong, former head of civil service in Singapore: “No country or leader has a monopoly on wisdom, or all the answers to the governance challenges facing us” – and that is why this initiative is so important, to allow for these leaders to share their challenges and insights candidly to help each other.

Now, more than ever, we need to build a public service that can deliver for elected politicians and build capabilities that are in the long-term public interest.

**Lord Gus O’Donnell GCB**

*Former Cabinet secretary and head of the UK civil service*

*August 2024*



## Introduction

For over a decade, Global Government Forum has united the world's foremost public sector leaders at the annual Global Government Summit. Drawing on their successes as well as setbacks, the leaders at this annual event share candid concerns and explore practical and actionable solutions to the common public service challenges they are facing.

At the Summit in January 2023, Donna Cadogan, head of the Barbados Civil Service, highlighted the universal nature of many of the pressing issues that public sector leaders are grappling with, regardless of their nation's economic status. She vividly described many Cabinet secretaries as "batting in the dark", as they struggle to navigate the complexities of a modern civil service and she suggested that having more channels to share good practice and facilitate collaboration between the Summits would be beneficial.

Motivated by Donna's call to action, my Global Government Forum colleagues and I embarked on an ambitious project to identify the core attributes – the foundational pillars if you like – of an effective civil service. The urgency of this mission stems from a range of global factors, including military conflicts and shifting geopolitics, post-COVID economic recovery efforts, the transition to net zero, rising populism, shifting demographics and the emergence of transformative technologies like generative AI, all of which require robust government responses and stretch limited resources.

As a central part of this project, we interviewed twelve serving Cabinet secretaries around the world. These unique conversations helped us to pinpoint five key pillars of a successful, modern civil service, which we discuss below. The interviews also revealed areas where senior officials were having the most difficulties, including relationships with ministers, recruiting digital talent and maintaining public trust. We are extremely grateful to the former UK Cabinet secretary Lord Gus O'Donnell, who not only helped to structure the interviews but also spearheaded them himself.

What struck me most from our interviews was not just the sheer scale and complexity of the challenges facing our civil servants – as daunting as they are – but also the increasingly thorny task of serving the elected politicians of the day while also providing stewardship of the institutions that serve the long-term interests of the public. Gaining trust – of ministers and the public – was a key concern but it's clear that trust is hard won and easily lost in a world impatient for simple solutions and fuelled by misinformation. And while technology, especially generative AI, has the potential to rocket boost civil service productivity, it requires talent, pace and innovation that the public sector is currently struggling to embrace.

But what also stood out from the conversations with Cabinet secretaries was the desire to change, to rise to the challenges, to provide excellent support to ministers and the best possible services to the most vulnerable in society. We found shining examples of good practice everywhere. Our task over the coming months – to help Donna and her peers – is to harness even more examples and to provide further support and opportunities for transformation.

In addition to the interviews, this project draws insights from Global Government Forum's wider work with public sector leaders around the world, including summits, podcasts, conferences, research and more. The issues and recommendations made here will be the focus of further exploration over the coming months and will influence the focus of Global Government Forum's annual programme of work. It is therefore intended as a catalyst for dialogue and reflection within the civil service and wider public service community. We hope it will form the basis of new channels for the sharing of good practice and deeper collaboration at the very top of global public service.

The next phase of this work will bring together officials working in each of the key areas to help us develop a detailed guide of what good looks like. This will provide an expert resource for civil service leaders to help them to develop their own playbook, tailored to their national context.

If you would like to be part of this next stage of the research, please contact me on [s.benita@globalgovernmentforum.com](mailto:s.benita@globalgovernmentforum.com).

**Siobhan Benita**

*Executive adviser, Global Government Forum*

*August 2024*



## Interview participants

Quotes from the study's interviews are presented in this report in an anonymous format; images of participants throughout the pages of this report in no way indicate attribution of individuals to any of the quotes, and are for illustration only.

Thank you to the leaders interviewed for this study:

- **Glyn Davis**, secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, **Australia**
- **Donna Cadogan**, head of the public service, **Barbados**
- **John Hannaford**, clerk of the Privy Council and secretary to the Cabinet, **Canada**
- **Taimar Peterkop**, state secretary, **Estonia**
- **Henrik Haapajärvi**, former state secretary to the prime minister, **Finland**
- **Claire Landais**, secretary general of the government, **France**
- **Haryomo Dwi Putranto**, acting chair, Indonesian National Civil Service Agency, **Indonesia**
- **John Callinan**, secretary general of Department of Taoiseach and Government, **Ireland**
- **Folasade Yemi-Esan**, head of the civil service of the Federation (retired 14 August 2024), **Nigeria**
- **Leo Yip**, head of civil service and permanent secretary (Prime Minister's Office), **Singapore**
- **Simon Case**, Cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, **United Kingdom**
- **Dustin Brown**, deputy assistant director for management (at time of interview), Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, **United States**

Global Government Forum would also like to thank Michael Wernick, a former clerk of the Privy Council and secretary to Cabinet in the Government of Canada, for taking part in a pilot interview for this project.



## Notes and definitions

**Civil service:** our focus here is on national central government. In the UK this would be the civil service, in Canada, for example, the Federal Public Service. The terms civil service and public service are used interchangeably throughout.

**Head of public service, head of civil service, and Cabinet secretary roles:** our focus here is on the most senior civil servant in the country. Whereas there is a variation in role scope, this individual will normally be responsible for overseeing the operations of the public service (or civil service) and supporting the prime minister (or president) and Cabinet in the development and implementation of government policies and programmes. In the UK this role is a dual one of Cabinet secretary and head of the civil service. In Finland the participant in this study was formerly the politically appointed equivalent who carried out this role.

**Anonymity:** The participants of the interviews undertaken have been named in this report. However quotes from the study's interviews are presented in this report in an anonymous format. Images of participants throughout the pages of this report in no way indicate attribution of individuals to any of the quotes, and are for illustration only.

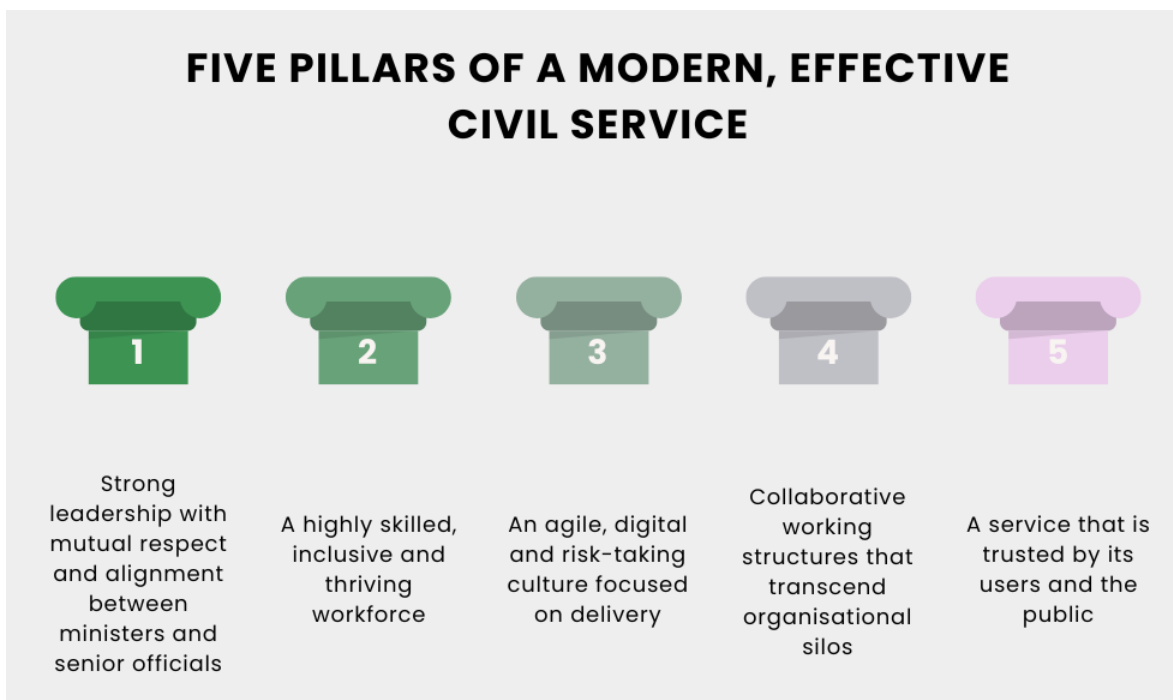
## Summary

Around the world countries are still dealing with the economic and social legacies of COVID. At the same time, limited public resources are under strain from ageing populations, the transition to net zero, military conflicts and cyber threats. In a year when over half the world's voting population will go to the polls, governments are grappling with shifting geopolitics and the rise of populism. All of these factors are set against the emergence of new technologies, including generative AI, which have the potential to fundamentally transform every aspect of society, but which also pose huge ethical, security and regulatory questions for the public sector.

For over a decade, Global Government Forum (GGF) has hosted the annual Global Government Summit, gathering civil service leaders under the Chatham House Rule to discuss key public service challenges and innovations.

Inspired by conversations at these events, GGF launched an ambitious study to identify the essential qualities – the foundational pillars – of an effective modern civil service. This initiative, guided by former UK Cabinet secretary Lord Gus O'Donnell, involved in-depth interviews with civil service leaders from 12 countries.

The learnings from those interviews, along with insights from GGF's other work with global civil service leaders, identify five core areas common to all civil services, whether they are already pioneering models of excellence or are in the earlier stages of government and service reform. Each of the five areas, or pillars, form the foundations of an effective civil service that can meet the significant challenges of our turbulent times.



## Pillar 1: Strong leadership with mutual respect and alignment between ministers and senior officials

Effective governance hinges on a harmonious relationship between ministers and officials, grounded in a shared vision and mutual respect for each other's roles. Yet, our discussions with leaders worldwide reveal the growing challenge of aligning the immediate demands of political agendas with the long-term stewardship entrusted to civil servants.

This requires a clear vision for government – and a partnership between politicians and officials on how to deliver it. This vision provides an ongoing unified purpose for political and civil service leaders to work towards, and should include an approach to the development of civil service capability – most frequently referred to by interviewees for this report as “stewardship”.

However, many of those interviewed for this report say that establishing such a shared vision is increasingly difficult. Key barriers include a lack of trust and understanding among ministers about the civil service's fundamental role, the rise of extreme or populist political movements that jeopardise established institutions and processes, and instances of public discord between ministers and top officials.

One leader said that “the biggest challenge, in my opinion, is the perception of the civil service by politicians”.

*“The biggest challenge, in my opinion, is the perception of the civil service by politicians.”*

This lack of trust makes agreeing, or robustly sticking to agreed priorities, difficult. Such dynamics erode top-tier leadership and precipitate both suboptimal government performance and significant stress.

So, what are the viable solutions?

Leaders from civil services across the world highlight the need for clear definitions of the priorities of government – and the civil service's stewardship role fostering a unified vision. Surprisingly however, across the world many ministers lack even basic training about the civil service's function, a gap that urgently needs addressing.

Our interviewees emphasise the necessity for leaders – both ministers and officials – to publicly support their teams against increasingly hostile attacks and to challenge the narrative from populist leaders that civil servants are part of a “deep state” opposing the public will.

#### Four areas that can help:

- Establish a clear understanding of political objectives and civil service stewardship
- Implement training programmes for new ministers and political advisers
- Safeguard and reinforce the provision of impartial advice
- Cultivate leaders who actively defend civil servants in public forums

## Establish a clear understanding of political objectives and civil service stewardship

Leaders interviewed in our study stressed that at the heart of effective civil service governance lies a clear, unified vision for government action.

However, crafting a vision that harmoniously integrates short-term political priorities with the long-term stewardship responsibilities of the civil service remains a formidable challenge. This task is complicated by what one official described as "cascading crises" — from geopolitical turmoil to climate change and rapid technological advancements.

"The polycrises is manifest on a day-to-day basis," noted one leader, emphasising the intricate and ongoing nature of modern governance challenges. Consequently, leadership requires a nuanced balance between addressing immediate crises and upholding long-term governmental responsibilities.

One interviewee, describing themselves as the "last standing bridge" between the political and administrative sectors, underscored the crucial nature of their role in ensuring government continuity.

"Undoubtedly the most difficult part of the job is where you have to make it work [between the two] because if you don't make it work, then you end up with a permanent split between the political and the official [parts of government]."

*"Undoubtedly the most difficult part of the job is where you have to make it work [between politicians and officials] because if you don't make it work, then you end up with a permanent split between the political and the official [parts of government]."*

In response to these challenges, leaders advocate for a dual-focus approach that encompassed both the immediate policy objectives of elected governments and a strategic plan to sustain and enhance civil service capabilities. "The short-term [priorities] and the long-term values are connected," one leader said, emphasising the importance of linking immediate actions with sustainable objectives. "If, through the long term, your public service isn't demonstrating its ability to achieve excellence... that politicians from all different backgrounds will trust,

and if the public services aren't recognised to be of high value, then that's where you get the impetus for change [from the model of an impartial civil service]."

This dual focus ensures immediate political goals are aligned with the enduring need for a robust, capable civil service, which is critical in navigating the challenging landscape of global governance today.

In Australia, a recent amendment to the Public Service Act has added stewardship to this list of public service values, which were: impartial, committed to service, accountable, respectful, and ethical. Stewardship value is defined as going "well beyond effective planning and resource management to ensure high performance and sustainability into the future".

In New Zealand, stewardship is defined as "a duty of care for a resource, which can include people, information, processes, assets and legislation". Other organisations, such as the OECD, the Partnership for Public Service think-tank in the US and the Institute for Government in the UK have also examined the importance of stewardship in the modern civil service.



*UK Cabinet secretary and head of the civil service Simon Case*

*"Candidly, I worry when we talk about vision that we reduce ourselves to slogans"*

Stewardship aims to gain political backing for improving the skills of civil servants, as well as establishing the public and civil service as focused on impartial delivery for government – whatever its political colour. It shifts the narrative around civil servants' roles, countering the view that they merely serve at the whim of government officials.

This is intended to create, as one leader described, a "different narrative around what public servants do" by removing the perception that they are "handmaidens of government".

Another emphasised "system stewardship": "We are stewards over the very system of governance that we are part of. To be good stewards of that system, we really ought to try very hard to have that long-term orientation.

"I know it's hard to do in some systems and some countries and in some governments... but it is critical to do that."

Another leader said: "Candidly, I worry when we talk about vision that we reduce ourselves to slogans", but added they had begun "a conversation around values and ethics".

This is focused on looking at how the principles of an impartial civil service apply in the current environment of geopolitical risks, the effects of climate change, and the pace of technological and AI development.

“We do think about our role vis à vis the political side. We are the non-partisan part of policy development and programme design. We should give the best advice we possibly can in that context, but then recognise that these are political decisions in most instances,” they said. “We need to respect the will of the system and implement accordingly, within confines of law and ethics.”

*“We are stewards over the very system of governance that we are part of. To be good stewards of that system, we really ought to try very hard to have that long-term orientation.”*

## Implement better training for ministers and civil servants

Effective public service systems rely heavily on the symbiotic relationships between ministers and civil service leaders. As such, implementing structured training programmes for new ministers and their political advisers can enhance these relationships, thereby improving government efficiency and trust.

Many of the leaders that we spoke to referred to a perception held by incoming ministers that the officials were inherently resistant to change, opposed to their policies or reluctant to take even measured risks. It was also true that some of our interviewees believed these perceptions weren't always unjustified. Indeed, some civil service leaders were as frustrated by their staff as by their ministers in this respect, including one who said civil servants, in particular, must understand “the motivations, the attitudes, the priorities” of different political masters.

In many cases, however, the ministerial perception of resistance appeared to stem from a lack of understanding of the basic responsibilities that civil servants hold, namely to provide a range of options for policy delivery, considering legal compliance, environmental and other impact assessments and, crucially, value for money. There was a risk that impartial advice, which highlighted the risks as well as potential benefits of policy objectives, was seen as overly negative and a sign that officials were attempting to block ministerial demands.

*“Ministers have the impression that the administration is rather conservative, or not totally loyal.”*

As well as the view of one leader quoted above that “the biggest challenge, in my opinion, is the perception of the civil service by politicians”, another agreed political leaders “don't see us as allies”, adding: “Ministers have the impression that the administration is rather conservative, or not totally loyal.”

Given this widespread concern, it was interesting that induction and training of new ministers and their advisers – to include a ‘101’ basics on the responsibilities of their supporting officials – was not widely practised. In the main, the leaders we spoke to said that induction and training were either very limited or non-existent and they acknowledged how useful such training would be. As one put it, ministers should be given support to understand the role of the civil service “to reduce the conflict between [heads of departments] and ministers”.

And this wasn’t limited to ministers. Tensions also exist between officials and the political advisers brought in by elected politicians, with one stating that political advisers were “encroaching on civil service policy space”.

*“Most [ministers] come in with very high expectations without understanding governance.”*

Officials are not without some blame for poor relationships however, as one of the senior officials we spoke to admitted: “Political advisers are often young and inexperienced, and administrators don’t show them much respect”. Another leader that we spoke to said that career officials could do more to support political appointees as well as look out to the long term, and that this would have a huge and positive impact on the quality of policymaking.

Training for political staff, so that they also had a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of civil servants and how they relate to them, would ease tensions in both directions. Better training for officials themselves was also mooted by one interviewee to ensure they are, in one leader’s phrase, “knowledgeable, courageous, and... not shy of explaining the civil service methods to the ministers”.

The primary goal of training programmes is to bridge knowledge gaps regarding governance and civil service operations. These programmes aim to cultivate a thorough understanding of government functions, setting realistic expectations and fostering respect for the procedural aspects of governance that are often overlooked. As one leader noted: “Most [ministers] come in with very high expectations without understanding governance,” highlighting the need for training that demystifies government operations to ensure leaders can effectively navigate their roles from day one.



*John Hannaford, clerk of the Privy Council and secretary to the Cabinet, Canada*

Implementing training programmes for new ministers and their advisers is supportive of effective governance, yet presents unique challenges. These programmes must be customised to fit the political and cultural context of each country, and should be ongoing to keep pace with the evolving landscape of governance. Ensuring the sessions are delivered by neutral parties is vital to maintain credibility and avoid perceptions of bias.

**Key components of ministerial training:**

- **Orientation on public service operations:** Introducing ministers to the intricacies of public service operations is crucial for building respect and empathy towards the bureaucratic processes and the people behind them.
- **Governance and legal frameworks:** Training should cover national legal and governance frameworks to ensure that ministers understand the boundaries and opportunities within which they operate, which is critical for maintaining the legality and integrity of government actions.
- **Crisis management and decision-making:** Equipping ministers with skills in crisis management and strategic decision-making enables them to act effectively under pressure and align their decisions with both short-term needs and long-term policy goals.
- **Communication skills:** Effective communication, both public and internal, is crucial. Training in clear, transparent communication can enhance public trust and internal government coherence.

Continual professional development is key, as it fosters a dynamic, adaptable governance system and builds a foundation of respect and understanding between ministers and civil servants. Effective training reduces conflicts and enhances governmental operations, making it indispensable for developing leaders capable of navigating modern governance complexities.

In the current absence of training in many jurisdictions, it falls to individual senior officials to try and build good relationships with their minister. As one of our interviewees explained: “There has been some pretty justified frustrations that have come our way, but the lesson is to build a one-to-one relationship with political officeholders to ensure there is both clarity about responsibilities, and trust.

“You have to make sure that you’ve got that direct relationship with the minister and are not passing through their third person on policy.”



### International examples of training initiatives:

- **Canada:** The Canadian School of Public Service offers comprehensive orientation programs focusing on governance, ethics, and the responsibilities of public office, preparing new ministers to navigate the complex landscape of government responsibilities.
- **United Kingdom:** The UK's Cabinet Office runs induction sessions that include briefings on the workings of the civil service and the legal framework governing their operations, helping ministers perform their roles effectively from the outset.
- **Australia:** The National Cabinet and Ministries Support Branch provides detailed briefings to new ministers, offering insights into departmental priorities and key personnel, supporting a seamless transition into their roles.

## Safeguard and reinforce the provision of impartial advice

Leaders we spoke to as part of this study raised significant challenges to the provision of impartial advice, including those from: political interference, where there are increasing instances of political agendas overshadowing expert advice threatening the foundational principles of many civil services worldwide; misinformation, where the rapid spread of incorrect or partial information in the digital age is undermining the credibility of factual, unbiased advice, influencing public opinion and political actions against sound policymaking; and public and media scrutiny - while accountability is vital, excessive scrutiny and scepticism, particularly from partisan media, can impede the ability of civil servants to offer frank and fearless advice.

One of the issues that emerged strongly from our interviews - and our wider work with public service leaders - is the need for senior officials to be more confident in their provision of objective advice. Simply put, leaders told us that some officials have lost the ability to effectively "speak truth to power". Some of this may stem from a concern - as we have mentioned previously - that they will be seen as overly cautious bureaucrats or - as we cover below - that they will be publicly portrayed as part of some anti-democratic elite "deep state". Whatever the reasons, many of the leaders we spoke to wanted their officials to get back to the basics of providing excellent and impartial policy advice, even if this meant delivering some difficult messages.

*"You have to make sure that you've got that direct relationship with the minister and are not passing through their third person on policy."*

Reiterating this message was vital, but the recent exponential stress and strain on public services has also created further distance from this core function of the public sector. One leader interviewed for this study pointed to many civil servants having joined during the COVID period, meaning that many did not receive a comprehensive induction. They say there will be a need to remind officials of their roles and responsibilities.

*Some officials have lost the ability to effectively “speak truth to power”*

A lack of experience of civil servants advising ministers can also be a factor in this erosion of the ability and willingness to speak truth to power. As one of our interviewees put it succinctly: “On the relationship between ministers and civil servants, I would give the civil service only 6.5 out of 10 – being able to tell a minister what you really think and not care about the consequences can only come with time and experience”.

## Cultivate leaders who actively defend civil servants in public forums

The surge in populist politics over the last decade has increasingly placed civil servants in the crosshairs. Politicians now frequently – and publicly – question official advice, and the rise of social media has exposed many officials to heightened personal abuse. One official interviewed recounted: “There had been anger and even attacks on social media against civil servants” during COVID-19, adding that “that was hard for some of them. And I know that some professionals left social media completely during that time. That’s a new challenge in a way that [individual] civil servants or professionals are being targeted on social media.” Another concurred, noting a troubling trend: “What’s changed – and I think this is happening increasingly around the world – is you see those attacks becoming more public, which is meaning that both the political and the administrative class are starting to take things into their own hands.”

*“What’s changed, and I think this is happening increasingly around the world, is you see those attacks becoming more public, which is meaning that both the political and the administrative class are starting to take things into their own hands.”*

In the UK, the dismissal of the Treasury’s permanent secretary by former prime minister Liz Truss exemplified the precariousness of merit-based civil service appointments. Similarly, in the US, there’s a push from senior Republicans to increase political appointees in the civil service, threatening the impartiality that underpins effective governance and stewardship.

Civil service chiefs are increasingly vigilant, with one stating: “I think we’ve done a pretty good job so far resisting what I call the creeping politicisation of the [civil service] that we’ve seen in other administrations,” yet admitting: “In my [civil service]

management committee it's a regular topic of concern that this creep is there all the time."

Some leaders face direct challenges from populist ministers distrustful of the civil service system. As one leader recounted: "They didn't trust the civil service, but they didn't have any government experience as well, so they didn't really manage to do any damage." The resilience of existing systems has, at times, shielded civil servants from capricious political winds, but the struggle continues.

*"I think we've done a pretty good job so far resisting what I call the creeping politicisation of the [civil service] that we've seen in other administrations"*

Several civil service heads we spoke to said politicisation of the merit-based service is something they proactively monitor, and some have had to act, as the most senior government official, to defend the impartiality of civil servants from external attacks.

One leader said they intervened to "draw a line around the language that was being used" to negatively describe civil servants.

"We've had some ministers being willing to go on the record and make attacks [on civil servants], and make a virtue of those attacks," this leader said. "The thing that I've found most difficult is coping with that. I certainly started off trying to deal with it all privately, but I went public in defence when I thought the time was right."

Officials also spoke about the importance of ministers defending civil servants when they come under attack in wider political debates.

*"We've had some ministers being willing to go on the record and make attacks [on public servants], and make a virtue of those attacks," this leader said. "The thing that I've found most difficult is coping with that."*

"It's really important that politicians defend the civil servants... Populists are quite often attacking [...] science-based decision-making, and that's something that people need to defend."

The role of head of civil service – the person at the interface of the political and the official – requires building a strong bond with prime ministers/heads of government to maintain trust and integrity, as one leader described: "It's not a sacred bond, but it's a deeply personal bond of support that you can give, and then you can give the next [political head of government] exactly the same support."

The role of these leaders as defenders of civil service principles is therefore increasingly fraught with difficulty if they are to maintain this bond while also standing up for the people and system they are responsible for.

The diplomatic skills required of leaders are therefore important.

## Pillar 2: A highly skilled, inclusive and thriving workforce

A highly skilled, inclusive and thriving workforce is crucial for the civil service to deliver exceptional public services. Our research highlighted some persistent barriers that undermine this goal.

Attracting and retaining top talent, particularly in emerging fields such as data, digital, and artificial intelligence, is a formidable challenge. Cumbersome recruitment processes, unconscious bias in hiring and promotions, and uncompetitive salaries compared to the private sector all hinder the civil service's ability to secure the best candidates. While the mission to impact societal well-being is compelling, it is insufficient when employees struggle with financial pressures, especially as many private sector entities now also champion social and environmental causes.

To forge a forward-looking civil service, it is vital to innovate in recruitment, foster greater mobility between sectors – including academia and social enterprises – and embrace more dynamic employment terms such as fixed-term contracts. Moreover, civil service leaders must be developing the next generation of leaders, and harnessing enthusiasm for mission-driven work to help lead more effective governments. This includes navigating the complexities of hybrid and flexible-working arrangements in a post-pandemic landscape.

### Four areas that can help:

- Revamp recruitment practices to be more effective
- Reduce reliance on consultants by building internal capabilities
- Prioritise staff well-being and mental health support
- Develop the next generation of leaders

### Revamp recruitment practices to be more effective

Governments around the world are facing what has been described as a 'war for talent'. A number of factors – including the fallout from the 'great resignation', a post-pandemic adjustment to flexible working, and tight public sector budgets – have combined to leave departments and agencies struggling to recruit the people they need.

The majority of civil service leaders say they face recruitment difficulties, in particular competing with private sector salaries for key skills such as digital.

"Salaries are an issue," said one. "We cannot compete, especially on top-level jobs. The main motivator is a chance to contribute to society, but it's not going that well."

Others agreed that they rely on people joining government who want to contribute to society, but added that even when governments find good applicants, they can lose them due to delays in the recruitment process.

*“Salaries are an issue,” said one. “We cannot compete, especially on top-level jobs.”*

One chief expressed frustration at how much slower government is to recruit than big companies like Google, which are often competing for the same tech talent.

*“If I interview for a job at Google this morning, and they like me, I can be working in the afternoon. But our systems are so rigid and slow – all driven by the need for fairness, transparency and accountability.”*

While these considerations are important, they said that “fundamental questions” need to be asked about recruitment policies.

“Even getting to the point where senior posts are approved and advertised takes months. Then the actual process of running the competition can take months. Even at more junior levels, we’re finding that by the time you get around to offering a candidate the job, many of them are already working somewhere else.”

Some public services have developed practices to tackle these issues. Among areas of best practice, some governments have created “talent teams”, which are separate from departmental human resource departments and which “do nothing other than recruitment”. This singular focus has helped to overcome recruitment barriers.

Another civil service has developed a proactive recruitment approach by creating a talent spotting team dedicated to finding senior civil servants. This team – led by an official with “a lot of private sector experience” – identifies and invites people to take

*“If I interview for a job at Google this morning, and they like me, I can be working in the afternoon. But our systems are so rigid and slow – all driven by the need for fairness, transparency and accountability.”*

part in competitions for top government jobs.

“I’ve even been calling up people and asking them to take part,” this leader said, as part of a “tailor-made approach” to hiring for hard-to-recruit roles.

Another approach being adopted by some countries is greater flexibility for people to move between the public, private and voluntary sectors throughout their careers.

“We have to think differently about the construct of careers, and about the partnerships we’re willing to form



*Leo Yip, the head of civil service and permanent secretary (Prime Minister's Office), Singapore*

with other organisations to get our people out – and their people in – for chunks of their career,” said one leader.

There can be difficulties with this approach – agreeing pay arrangements around secondment “remains a little bit complicated” – but this leader’s service is investing in developing new structures to “make sure that people don’t lose out by leaving us and going outside for secondments or vice versa”.

They added: “It’s not a new idea, we’re just trying to dust it off a bit and go back over some partnerships, both with commercial organisations and academia. If we can get it right, we should be able to scale it.”

Other governments have embraced such approaches too. In Singapore, the approach to public sector recruitment emphasises skill development and adaptability rather than competing with private sector salaries or promising job security. It includes a flexible career path allowing movements between agencies and specialisms, and a unique ‘revolving door’ policy encouraging employees to gain experience in the private sector and return enriched with new skills.

Other governments have developed approaches with a focus on recruitment, relocation and retention. Organisations such as the US government’s Department of Commerce have developed a comprehensive human capital strategy, from talent management to inclusion, and are using data and analytics to anticipate future needs and drive improvements.

These examples show that governments are becoming more proactive to attract and retain talent in the public sector amidst global competition.

There is, however, still more to be done. The leaders we spoke to were in agreement that civil services would be naïve to think that there isn’t a need for pay differentials across professions. Certain tech specialists – those in cybersecurity or AI, for example – are highly sought after and might therefore command higher pay.

## Reduce reliance on consultants by building internal capabilities

It has been normal practice for a long while – albeit with an ebb and flow in the scale of their use – for governments around the world to use consultants (and consultancies) to provide skills and boost capacity to meet public service pressures. But a surprising number of leaders we interviewed were concerned about how to use consultants in the right way.

Civil service leaders said that governments are “leveraging a lot with the private sector” – in particular around digitisation of public services, without structures in place for the

knowledge transfer that allows government to create a robust system it can sustainably run itself.

One leader said they found the use of consultants “a little bit surprising” when they took on the job, while another said their government had “lost a lot of the people we need to the consulting firms”.

This is causing them to worry about “how we rebuild our workforce” after people who had been trained by the civil service left to earn more elsewhere.

They added: “How do we get people who, in many cases, already have the values and expertise we need, back into the public sector?”

Another chief, whose government has expanded the use of consultants in the last five years, is worried about a lack of cohesion between permanent civil servants and those on temporary terms. “There is resistance by public officers because people who have not been through anything are coming in and telling us what to do.” As a result, this particular chief was developing terms of engagement that would govern the relationship between consultants and civil servants, as well as determining how consultants could be imbued with the values of stewardship to contribute to the overall purpose of government.

Other governments are also taking action on this issue. More than one administration has examined the development of in-house consultancy hubs to ease reliance on external consultants as part of the government’s cost-cutting plans. In Australia, for example, Australian Government Consulting (AGC) launched this year with the aim to [“reduce \[government’s\] over-reliance on external consultants”](#).

It is intended to provide “a new source of high-quality management consulting services for the Australian Public Service”, at “lower cost than external firms”, while the Australian government is also planning to impose a charge on departments that use consultants through an “additional external labour levy”.

Public services also need to build up professions around key skills – chief among them digital, but also including finance, HR and recruitment, procurement and commercial, and communications.

*“How do we get people who in many cases already have the values and expertise we need, back into the public sector?”*



*Taimar Peterkop, state secretary in Estonia and Folasade Yemi-Esan, head of the civil service of the federation in Nigeria speaking at Global Government Forum’s Leaders Forum event in 2024.*

For example, the US federal government's Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has this year published a new 'playbook' outlining actions that agencies can take to revamp HR practices and strategically plan their future workforces. Suggestions include greater use of data and artificial intelligence, more proactive recruitment methods, and an increased focus on career development.

Yet the effectiveness of such initiatives is still to be seen. In the UK, the unofficially named "Crown Consultancy" – an in-house consultancy arm of the UK government – was [scrapped less than two years after it was launched](#).

## Prioritise staff wellbeing and mental health support

The leaders we spoke to also highlighted that there is now an increased focus on staff wellbeing as part of their leadership responsibilities.

"Looking after the wellbeing of our people has risen to the top of our priorities," one official said, while another said that COVID-19 made the public service "a more empathetic organisation".

Many of our interviewees highlighted the potential for flexible working practices to help maintain engaged workforces, while other areas of support included greater understanding of mental health pressures and stress management in the workplace.

*"I discovered I was working with an exhausted cohort of people"*

"Mental health is something we need to better support, as with all other civil services," one leader said.

Another leader agreed, highlighting that when he took up his current post in government, "I discovered I was working with an exhausted cohort of people".

This affected the quality of work, they said, as the volume of work had outstripped capacity.

"They were exhausted, because they worked so hard and so effectively, some stunningly good work, but it showed we just didn't have enough people."

Wellbeing concerns have been underscored by Global Government Forum's own surveys of civil servants. A 2023 GGF survey of Canadian federal public servants found that [57% had experienced symptoms related to burnout within the last 12 months](#). The majority of public servants surveyed also valued flexibility in remote work, a greater focus on productivity rather than hours worked, and increased paid leave – all above increased pay. The survey also found concerns that managers do not understand the pressures staff face. The research found that less than half of all public servants think managers have a strong understanding of staff mental health and wellbeing and less than one-third of





Folasade Yemi-Esan, head of the civil service of the federation in Nigeria

respondents (29%) said that their organisation has a specific strategy in place for managing employee health and wellbeing.

One key to avoiding such an outcome is understanding the workloads civil servants are facing and being able to provide “underlying resilience” in government delivery by matching resources to these.

“We didn’t have bench depth so that somebody could step aside and take a break and be confident that the gap would be filled,” one official said.

Leaders acknowledged that the current pace of government means that, in the words of one leader,

“crisis mode becomes how everybody chooses to run everything”, which has a knock-on effect on wellbeing.

“I think that becomes really dangerous. The general principle of crisis management in any organisation is you have to delegate decisions as far down as you can, and only the strategic should be coming to the top. That’s becoming more and more difficult, even though you need to try and resist it. If you operate like that all the time, you have no personal resilience.”

At the [Global Government Summit 2024](#), another leader elaborated: “Electorates are weary, and even our own civil servants are tired, fatigued and [have] a certain sense of strain. But amidst all this, the world and the state of the world we find ourselves in, I think our job in the civil service supporting our political leadership is to offer and deliver hope.”

*“Mental health is something we need to better support, as with all other civil services”*

## Develop the next generation of leaders

A key factor that civil service leaders discussed was the changing workplace expectations of younger workers, and the need to focus on how to create the next generation of leaders.

One chief was explicit that this was part of their job. “I have realised my job is to create leaders in government. I’m like a startup organisation in the centre of government. I’ve created funding streams, I’ve created leadership development programmes [and] that’s where I get my inspiration.”

But many other leaders warned that changing expectations among younger workers is both an opportunity and a challenge.



Former UK Cabinet secretary and head of the civil service Lord Gus O'Donnell

One official said that younger people joining the civil service “see society with different lenses, and they've got hopes and aspirations in the service that are quite different from me when I was that age”.

The leadership challenge is how to change the system to meet these aspirations, this official added.

“I think their dreams and ambitions are quite different [and] just as the political leadership has got to make sure its fingers are on the pulse of the young, we have to do that in the civil service.”

Understanding younger generations and capitalising on their viewpoints will require current leaders to not be “a bunch of oldies trying to dig in... and keep a system running that [young people] don't want to be part of”.

“If we are able to draw the confidence of, firstly, our younger civil servants and secondly, our leadership... we can create something that is much more in tune with their generation. I see that as an opportunity.”

However, others said that, while younger generations are more driven by ideas around purpose and making a difference, ensuring impartiality requires civil service chiefs to re-emphasise the purpose of public service – and of stewardship – across the entire organisation.

One leader said this tension crystallises, again, in the use of the phrase “truth to power” in civil services.

“What that has been interpreted as, at least in some quarters, is: ‘I feel very strongly about something, and so therefore, that is truth that needs to be presented to the minister for their decision.’”

Some younger officials have joined government as advocates, this chief says, as opposed to joining as facilitators of government programmes.

“Dealing with that is one of the leadership challenges that we need to think through.”

“Ultimately, we are aggregators of wisdom, hopefully, but how do you aggregate that in a way that people feel they're making a contribution? There's a generational aspect which is real, and I'm finding quite fascinating.”

Governments around the world are looking at how they can develop policy that reflects the needs of future – as well as current – generations. [The United Nations has developed a policy document](#) calling for governments “to act in a way that preserves [future

*“If we are able to draw the confidence of, firstly, our younger civil servants and secondly, our leadership... we can create something that is much more in tune with their generation.”*

generations’] ability to effectively enjoy all human rights and determine their own needs in the future [that have] already been enshrined in countless international agreements and in the very concept of sustainable development”. In the UK, the devolved Welsh Government has created a Future Generations Commissioner to act as a “disruptor” to make government and policy makers think long-term. Similarly, now is the time for civil service leaders to emphasise thinking and considerations for how their actions will influence and empower the next generation of leaders.

## Pillar 3: An agile, digital and risk-taking culture focused on delivery

As we have detailed above, ministers often – perhaps unfairly – view officials as impediments to progress, but this critique isn't entirely unfounded. Traditional bureaucracy, siloed operations, and conventional methods do indeed often hinder swift decision-making and suppress innovation. The need for agility, underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic, is paramount as civil servants tackle formidable challenges ahead.

The leaders we interviewed are actively nurturing a more entrepreneurial culture across their governments. Initiatives range from establishing central units dedicated to experimenting with innovative approaches, to appointing 'innovation champions' within teams. These efforts are backed by essential resources – time, funding, and notably, the permission to fail.

However, the most transformative factor shaping the future of civil service work is technology, particularly technology such as large language models (LLMs) and artificial intelligence (AI), especially generative AI. Our research indicates that AI is set to revolutionise not only internal operations but also how services are delivered to the public. With the capability to automate mundane tasks and customise services to an unprecedented degree, AI promises to significantly enhance capacity and productivity.

Yet, embracing AI is not without its perils. It poses substantial ethical dilemmas, can perpetuate existing biases if misused, and is already being exploited by malicious actors to disrupt democratic processes. Therefore, it is crucial for a modern civil service to stay ahead of the curve, understanding how to harness AI responsibly and effectively. This involves not only embracing AI but also collaborating internationally to manage its impact wisely.

Importantly, the groundwork for any AI initiatives must be robust digital foundations – competent data management and secure, interoperable systems are prerequisites.

### Four areas that can help:

- Champion innovation and supporting risk-taking
- Secure the digital, data and technology infrastructure necessary for transformation
- Lead the way with in public sector AI utilisation
- Design services with the customer in mind

## Champion innovation and supporting risk taking

Many of the disruptive events over the last decade have demanded high levels of public spending while also depressing tax revenues – leaving public finances under pressure around the world.

All of the leaders we interviewed said their government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic showed how they could innovate and respond at pace. The pandemic response provided a platform for technological transformation to drive public service reform and provide a focus on delivering for the citizen.

Indeed, many civil service leaders say the pandemic must be “a point of departure” for improved service delivery demanded by citizens, who have now seen how government can move services online and make other improvements.

In particular, leaders highlight the need to be more confident, entrepreneurial and willing to take calculated risks.

“In the past two years, crisis readiness was our top priority,” one civil service chief said. “But we’re [now] pushing to develop an innovation culture in our civil service.”

This will mean moving away from a “command and control culture” in government to one that allows freedom of thinking and experimentation.

*“In the past two years, crisis readiness was our top priority ... But we’re [now] pushing to develop an innovation culture in our civil service.”*

Another interviewee agreed that their civil service “needs to become more comfortable taking more risks”, highlighting work around the COVID-19 pandemic response as a case where a more risk-taking approach was needed – and paid off.

Moves to create a more innovative and risk-taking culture are therefore compatible with civil service values, this leader argued.

“I don’t think there’s a contrast between taking risk and civil service values,” they said – but there is a need for objectivity and clarity around the extent of the risk. “[If] this is nothing more than a hunch”, then officials need to be clear about this.

How to drive innovation forward outside of a crisis like COVID-19 is therefore a key issue for governments.

More innovation and risk-taking can also address some of the (valid) ministerial concerns around lack of pace and traditional thinking.



*John Callinan, secretary general of Department of Taoiseach and Government, Ireland*

Leaders highlight a number of examples of how this could be achieved. Some civil services have “innovation champions” to promote new thinking. This could be an individual – one leader said there is a need for “a champion” with “tenacity, stickability and who sees the big picture” across government – or institutions within government, such as innovation labs or the development of ‘what works centres’, which run small experiments in government to overcome risk aversion.

One official said their innovation lab has helped to demonstrate “a completely different approach” to the design of public services, with outsiders coming into government to embed a “modern service design approach”.

The projects that are tackled by the lab are decided by a panel of departmental leaders, and it has been a “great success story” in providing the single institutional focus to get things done.

*The requirement is to “change the system as you operate it”.*

The requirement is, as one official put it, to look to “change the system as you operate it”.

Barriers to creating more innovative approaches in government include accountability and parliamentary oversight, where parliamentarians often don’t embrace the need for civil servants to take risks, and media scrutiny of public services.

The role of the leadership is therefore “to take the fall, to protect your organisation”, according to one service chief. “You have to preach that it’s important to try and it’s okay to fail – and then take the blame and go to the parliament and be the fall guy, but at the same time protect your organisation.”

## Secure the digital, data and technology infrastructure necessary for transformation

Governments can’t escape the comparison with digital services provided in the wider economy. One of the leaders we spoke to said: “Digital systems have to be really good, and ours are not.”

This official said antiquated, clunky systems make it difficult to provide more agile services to users and improve back-office services.

*“Digital systems have to be really good, and ours are not.”*

This is a common, recurring concern. During a [recent interview as part of GGF’s Government Transformed podcast series](#), former director-general of the UK’s government digital service and now executive adviser for Global Government Forum, Kevin Cunningham,

highlighted a common issue in digital service reform: superficial enhancements that do not address underlying inefficiencies.

Describing such efforts as merely putting "lipstick on a pig", Cunnington stressed that true digital transformation involves overhauling back-end processes, not just the user interface. This approach aims to significantly reduce transaction times and costs, improve decision-making, and increase the adaptability of IT systems.

Securing funding for transformative digital projects is another hurdle, particularly as the benefits of any overhaul are often not fully appreciated by elected officials. US federal chief information officer Clare Martorana and UK's deputy national statistician Alison Pritchard both cited cybersecurity risks as a persuasive factor for politicians to support legacy system overhauls at [the Global Government Digital Summit in 2022](#). Operational resilience and the ability to respond effectively to crises are also driving government investment in upgrading legacy systems.

These discussions underscore the necessity of not only advancing digital capabilities but also rethinking organisational structures and funding mechanisms to support a more resilient and responsive civil service. This holistic approach is essential for governments to meet current challenges and prepare for future demands effectively.

Yet, the legacy is not just the technology. With legacy tech comes legacy working methods, legacy skills, legacy processes – all designed to fit to the technology, creating a bird's nest built up over years of workarounds.

Data is another example. Data is vital to the delivery of more joined-up civil services, and will become even more vital to facilitate the effective use of AI across the public sector.

Yet, the systems and security of the way that data is held in government makes this a challenge. And, with the trust of citizens at risk, effective data treatment is as important to civil services as cybersecurity. For most governments, such fundamental reform can only come once this legacy has been unpicked, a mammoth task both logistically and financially. However, a business case built on improved services, and the need to improve cybersecurity and safeguard sensitive data can help to bring ministers and the public along on the journey.

## Lead the way with public sector AI utilisation

There is excitement among top leaders about the potential to deploy artificial intelligence to help improve services. "It is now a game changer" in the delivery of public services, one leader said, but "most of us are behind the curve" on deploying it.



*Kevin Cunnington, executive adviser, Global Government Forum, and former Director-General, UK Government Digital Service*

The leaders we spoke to were split in their appreciation of the scale of the issue, and that split was broadly mirrored by the digital maturity of their civil service. The realisation among those in more mature digital environments is that AI does not exist in isolation – it is a technology that will touch every function, profession and service within their remit.

[In a 2022 GGF survey of the digital skills of UK civil servants](#), one operational delivery civil servant summed up what governments need to do to make a difference with technology – help ensure communication between civil servants on the frontline and those involved in digital and transformation. “It’s really important to understand in principle what the tech does,” they said, adding: “I don’t need to know how to use it. I just need to know what it does, so I can say, ‘that would help me’.”

This will apply in deploying artificial intelligence, with governments needing to identify how and where it can be deployed.

*“We are trying to experiment [with] some artificial intelligence [use] for basic questions, and it’s impressive. So we have to find the fields where it’s useful and use it.”*

Some governments have developed a number of AI tools already being used by civil servants across the system. In the UK, for example, the government’s incubator for artificial intelligence (i.AI) unit has developed Redbox, a generative AI tool intended to help analyse documents and summarise them into tailored briefing. In Singapore, the government is working to adopt AI

to significantly improve public service delivery for our people and businesses. The applications developed include Pair Chat, a fast and secure version of ChatGPT for public officers, a Hansard analysis tool for researching past parliamentary queries (PQs) and drafting PQ replies, and Transcribe, a tool which transcribes meetings and creates meeting notes and follow-up actions, and can be used in classified settings. A public-facing tool in Singapore is Support GoWhere, a tool which recommends government schemes and services based on citizens circumstances and needs.

One of the civil service leaders interviewed for this report said there are impressive possibilities around the use of AI, but it is “difficult to organise our thinking” about it, and many other governments are in a similar position.

“We are trying to experiment [with] some artificial intelligence [use] for basic questions, and it’s impressive. So we have to find the fields where it’s useful and use it... [but] it’s very disorganised at the moment, and I’m a bit worried about that.”

Other leaders agree governments need to better organise their thinking on deploying AI.

In particular, leaders highlight the need to ensure that both the civil service – and wider public – have confidence in its use.

To tackle the first element, civil services are developing courses to teach government officials about the use of AI, with one leader highlighting the urgency of providing this to top officials to help them make the strategic decisions around its potential use. “We need



to develop this course for top-level civil servants on how you're going to adopt AI in your civil service, and we will start with it soon."

Governments will also need to explain and reassure the public about its potential use.

"I think we want to take a big bold step of doing something at scale, and also bring the public on board and say: 'You'll be better served,'" one leader said.

Of those we spoke to, some of the leaders' governments are particularly advanced in their thinking – Singapore is now on its second National AI Strategy or NAIS 2.0, while President Biden has released an executive order on the safe, secure, and trustworthy development and use of AI. However, the majority are still at the stage of establishing leadership across the public service system, especially on where AI oversight sits – be that centrally or with departments.

In addition to the executive order issued by President Biden, a follow up policy was then published by the OMB last year to guide how federal agencies use AI. It covers AI risk management and governance and outlines requirements for concrete safeguards and transparency measures. The policy isn't only about risk; it also highlights the opportunities for AI to address issues such as the climate crisis, public health and public safety and urges agencies to "responsibly experiment" with generative AI. Expanding the AI workforce is an additional priority.

*"I think we want to take a big bold step of doing something at scale, and bring the public on board."*

As US federal CIO Clare Martorana explained at [GGF's Innovation 2024 event](#), When it comes to AI, agencies are "all over the spectrum". Some have already been using AI for several years, while others are much further behind. There are also variations in the level of risk they are willing to accept or know how to manage.

Each federal agency must designate a chief AI officer, and these officers collaborate through a Chief AI Council, which is chaired by Martorana.

She says: "What we're doing through that structure of the chief AI officers is designing a governance system in the agency, so that it is not just a CIO's job to manage software that would be related to AI; it's everyone's job to manage the risk related to it."

This approach is intended to provide a broad feedback loop to ensure that AI use doesn't introduce bias into government processes, and to make sure its use is communicated transparently with the public.

"So that governance structure happens at an agency level and then it's happening at the higher level, through the Chief AI Officer Council," Martorana added.

This structure is also important for agility, she said: "I think that we're moving so quickly with AI that we are having to be much more nimble."

The modern civil service leader needs to quickly understand the scale of this new technology – and develop both AI policy and safeguarding regulations at the national level, and the use cases, and implementation challenges, for AI use within the civil service itself.

## Design services with the customer in mind

Governments around the world have aspirations to deliver first-class digital services, but legacy technology, financial constraint and resistance to change often stand in the way.

And greater innovation is needed in government because, as many officials highlight, civil services are facing increasing pressure from citizens due to the comparison with private sector services.

Faced with such challenges, many civil services are focusing on improving the digital experience of government's most-used services – and, in particular, those related to life events such as birth or retirement.

One leader said this is key to improving government. “My view is that you can't do it in the aggregate, you really have to look at a particular issue,” they commented.

This government has chosen to focus on improving interactions around events like the birth of a child, retirement, a financial shock, and emergency and natural disaster response.

“That's where we have to go – look at where opportunities exist. We're not going to change the overall structure anytime soon, but there are definite opportunities for stronger coordination, stronger data sharing, and better programme management.”

Another leader agreed with this approach, having initially approached digitisation in the wrong way by looking primarily at overhauling all government services. “We were looking to digitalise this ministry, digitalise the next, but it can't work that way – we have to look at the services that are demanded most and start working on those.”

[At a recent GGF event](#), Vigdís Jóhannsdóttir, chief marketing officer of Digital Iceland, listed three pillars her team currently focus on to improve public services. One of those is saving time – which she called “that most important thing [citizens and agencies] own” – and how this relates to services around significant life events, such as learning to drive, getting married, or planning a family.

“We prioritise our work through life events,” Jóhannsdóttir said, before explaining how this connects to the second pillar: “building trust through our projects”.

*“We're not going to change the overall structure anytime soon, but there are definite opportunities for stronger coordination.”*

“We work on being reliable and open. We are the drivers of change. What we create is not our private property, or the property of Digital Iceland, but is owned by all in Iceland: all agencies, all municipalities, all individuals.”

The third pillar centres on managing citizens’ expectations. Many services in Iceland are now fully digitised, but some still need bringing up to par. As such, the government is transparent about the limits of lagging services, and about what it is doing to make improvements. Jóhannsdóttir said that managing expectations requires “constant communication” from government, and she drew attention to the importance of the user in the decision-making process.

She also highlighted what she called Iceland’s “secret recipe for success” when it comes to providing digital public services. “We have the knowledge... consensus across all political parties [and] sufficient funds to be invested in digital services... and we have the mandate [for] decision making,” she said.

These ingredients remove the need for superfluous processes, and so have sped up the rate at which public services in Iceland have been digitalised in recent years.

“We don’t have a lot of time and we don’t want to stand in line... so just by simplifying things we hope to contribute to a better life [for citizens] in Iceland.”

In the US, federal customer experience – or CX – is the focus of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) – directing the federal government to improve the digital experience of customers. CX in the US is defined as “the public’s perceptions of and overall satisfaction with interactions with any government agency, product, or service. A customer is any individual, business, or organisation (such as a grantee or State, local, or Tribal entity) that interacts with an agency or programme.”

One way that was highlighted by interviewees to ensure that policy and services are designed with users in mind was expanding the use of human-centred design principles. One civil service leader highlighted this area as crucial with officials tasked with understanding the impact of government policies – and failures – on service users.

“I have people on my team who call up disaster survivors and document their stories and then they take those examples into meetings with them [with the aim of improving services],” they said.



*Donna Cadogan, head of the public service, Barbados*

“I don't think the centre of government has ever tried to hire these types of people before [but] that has transformed how we do business. It's so inspiring, and I think this is really where we need to be taking government.”

Such skills allow policy and delivery to be better shaped by the experiences of those who use them.

## Pillar 4: Collaborative working structures that transcend organisational silos

Creating more effective joined-up government is a long-standing ambition across the world. There was a major push for better collaboration at the turn of the millennium in many countries, driven by the delivery unit movement. However, nearly three decades later, this goal remains elusive, and was consistently highlighted in our interviews, webinars, and events as a critical area in need of improvement.

Despite its apparent simplicity, breaking down these silos has proven stubbornly complex. There have been glimpses of what's possible at scale – during the pandemic, for instance, ministers, officials, and experts from various policy areas collaborated effectively out of sheer necessity. Yet, in the absence of a crisis, old habits of siloed working persist. Civil services, in the main, continues to function through vertical structures, from budget allocations to policy advice and decision-making processes.

A modern civil service, however, needs to operate horizontally. Take climate action, for example; it cannot be tackled by a single department but requires coordinated policies and, crucially, funding across all government departments. Similarly, digital transformation transcends simply creating modern websites or online forms – it involves fundamental changes across policy areas in how government works, and how departments share information internally to enhance the citizen experience.

Governments around the world have developed strategies to improve integration, such as establishing dedicated units responsible for leading collaboration and transformation across departments. Many interviewees referred to the success of the Delivery Unit under New Labour in the UK as a prime example.

Other strategies include reform to funding and budget arrangements to discourage siloed operations, as well as creating more opportunities for ministers, officials, and for experts to work together effectively in collaborative decision-making models, such as the collaborative model of the UK's National Security Council.

### Four areas that can help:

- Empower a strong central authority to oversee and enforce collaborative efforts
- Integrate political and official decision-making to streamline processes
- Properly resource initiatives that facilitate cross-government working
- Maintain a long-term focus to overcome the transient challenges of political cycles

## Empower a strong central authority to oversee and enforce collaborative efforts

Following years of crisis, governments are working to rewire the structures of how the state tackles complex policy problems that cross departmental boundaries.

Traditionally, most governments examined in this report have used a “lead department model”, where, for example, the response to a health emergency is led by the health department, supported by the centre, or an environmental crisis response is led by the environment department

*“You need a controlling mind at the centre, which is drawing on expertise, bringing data in helping process, getting decisions... then firing back out and chasing down.”*

Many leaders agreed, however, that such an approach didn't really work in practice.

They highlighted how, during COVID for example, the health department could lead the health-related aspects, but wasn't well placed to coordinate the wider economic and social aspects of the pandemic. As one leader put it, “you need a quarterback who's calling the plays”.

They added: “You need a controlling mind at the centre, which is drawing on expertise, bringing data in, getting decisions out of [prime ministers/presidents] in consultation with political layers, and then chasing those down.”

Many officials agreed with one interviewee that recent years have shown the need for “a strong centre to cope with crisis”.

The aim of the centre of government, whether the prime minister's office or another coordinating function, another official said, is “to draw the threads together, but it isn't to do the job for other people”.

However, they also admitted that getting this balance right is difficult.

“That's where central agencies so often go awry, because they become too powerful, too dominating. So the best we can do is to use the centre of government to say: ‘our mission is to draw this together’.”

In one government's case, they have developed a process to inspire and ensure collaboration. “If you want to put something to cabinet, this is how you have to consult with other people, and you have to have done impact assessments, and you can't take it to cabinet until you've done the hard work of talking to your colleagues.”

*“That's where central agencies so often go awry, because they become too powerful, too dominating.”*

Another leader said that their civil service has changed its structures during the span of his career to inspire greater collaboration.

“We’ve come from a more devolved system. Perhaps 15 years ago, the power was all in the ministries, but we’ve realised over time, particularly in the last five to eight years, that you need a stronger centre.”

In this system, this work is carried out by a strategy unit, while there are also central capabilities around personnel, digitisation, and project management that are “built at, and deployed out of, the centre”.

In the next stage if this work, we will look to identify more examples of initiatives that have successfully facilitated effective cross government working.



*Leo Yip, head of civil service and permanent secretary (Prime Minister's Office), Singapore*

## Integrate political and official decision-making to streamline processes

Many officials say the COVID-19 pandemic proved the value of integrating official and political decision-making. Traditionally, cabinet committees that help integrate different arms of government contain ministers, with a separate sub-committee of officials from the departments responsible for going through the detail.

More governments, however, are now implementing a mixed committee approach, such as the model pioneered by Lord O’Donnell as UK Cabinet secretary through the creation of the National Security Council – a forum for collective discussion of the government’s objectives for national security.

During the pandemic, “you didn’t have time for officials to do a version and then ministers”, one leader highlighted. “We got everybody in the room. It meant that ministers were sitting in the room with the genuine experts so they could make sure it was a properly informed decision.”

Many other governments have similar systems to get official and political advisers working closer together than they would traditionally have done, to unlock greater join up.

*“The world of mixed committees is here to stay”*

“The world of mixed committees is here to stay, and now on most issues, we’re much more inclusive, allowing officials to be present and they end up being much more mixed conversations,” one official said.

In one example, which another civil service leader described as a “well established” system, ten cabinet committees exist and each committee brings together both ministers and officials to consider specific policy issues.

“They’re a mixture of the ministers themselves, the senior officials, and in many cases, the political advisers all working together. It’s a totally different rhythm, and the kinds of papers or issues that come to those meetings, and the papers by them are much more about teasing out the policy options.”

## Properly resource initiatives that facilitate cross-government working

Civil service leaders also highlight the need for processes to be put in place across government to allow departments to collaborate without requiring central oversight. In other words, they stressed the need for these collaboration structures to be fully resourced and supported.

One official we spoke to described this as “one of the most, if not the most, fundamental challenges facing government”.

“We have horizontal problems and we have vertical organisations,” they said. “The question I always like to ask is: whose job is it to wake up every day trying to resolve that fundamental disconnect?”

Governments often try to do this through working groups and committees run by the centre.

This can include delivery units, and many civil service leaders have experience of them.

Many agree that the terminology around “deliverology” is helpful to focus on challenges across government, but they also highlight such systems can simply shift resources to priorities, rather than institutionalising a way of working that improves collaboration.

One chief said the key is ensuring such units are properly funded.

“For years, we have tried to do that through working groups and committees and council and I think we need to, at some point, just acknowledge those are not sufficient,” the

*“We have horizontal problems and we have vertical organisations. The question I always like to ask is: whose job is it to wake up every day trying to resolve that fundamental disconnect?”*



official said. “You can't do it through a monthly meeting or a quarterly meeting, where people spend an hour or two talking and then everyone goes back to their silos of excellence.”

The key, in this official's experience, is to have full-time officials who are “responsible for the horizontal” – making the joining up between government departments someone's job.

The logical evolution of the delivery unit movement is to provide the resources to drive this system change.

“It is not just about the prime minister's priorities, it's about a system [and] you have got to have full-time people working on it.”

One of our interviewees highlighted that this is what the private sector does. “They have things like transformational management offices whose full-time job is to lead the transformation of a system. We don't, because the centre is so resource poor, [but] where I have done it, it's been successful. But you need to make the case and you need to be creative about how you get the resource.”

[Speaking at the Global Government Summit in 2020](#), New Zealand's deputy commissioner, Hannah Cameron, discussed how this government is using 'wellbeing budgets' that allocate funds based on strategic cross-departmental goals rather than traditional departmental allocations. Deploying this funding necessitates a new level of cooperation among ministers and department heads to prioritise and execute shared objectives.

Another official said they are examining a reform of appointing “a very senior official” to take ownership of cross-cutting policy issues. “I'm debating whether we should do something similar on the housing front, because there are these issues which intersect, and where government can be a challenge unless there's some degree of coordination.”

Similarly, in the UK, the incoming Labour government has named five missions as its priorities, with the development of cross-government missions boards intended to help deliver them.

The challenge for governments, therefore, is to implement collaborative strategies effectively, ensuring that they not only innovate but also maintain the flexibility to adapt to new challenges and opportunities as they arise. This will require a delicate balance of innovation, strategic budgeting, and the restructuring of accountability mechanisms to foster an environment where cross-departmental collaboration is not just possible but expected and supported at all levels of government.

Government finance decisions are also key to unlocking this transformation, with senior public servants at a range of Global Government Forum events highlighting that power follows the money, and treasuries own the money. Katherine Jones, who is currently the secretary of the Attorney-General's Department in the Australian Government, spoke to Global Government Forum in her previous role as deputy secretary of that country's ministry of finance about how it was [“adopting more of a stewardship approach”](#) –

matching the thoughts of senior leaders set out throughout the report. “We’re in the business of helping to support departments come up with different funding models,” Jones said at the 2020 Global Government Summit. “But the task of pulling together a national budget is incredibly complex: when you’re introducing alternative models for particular projects, how do you integrate that into the development of your budget?”

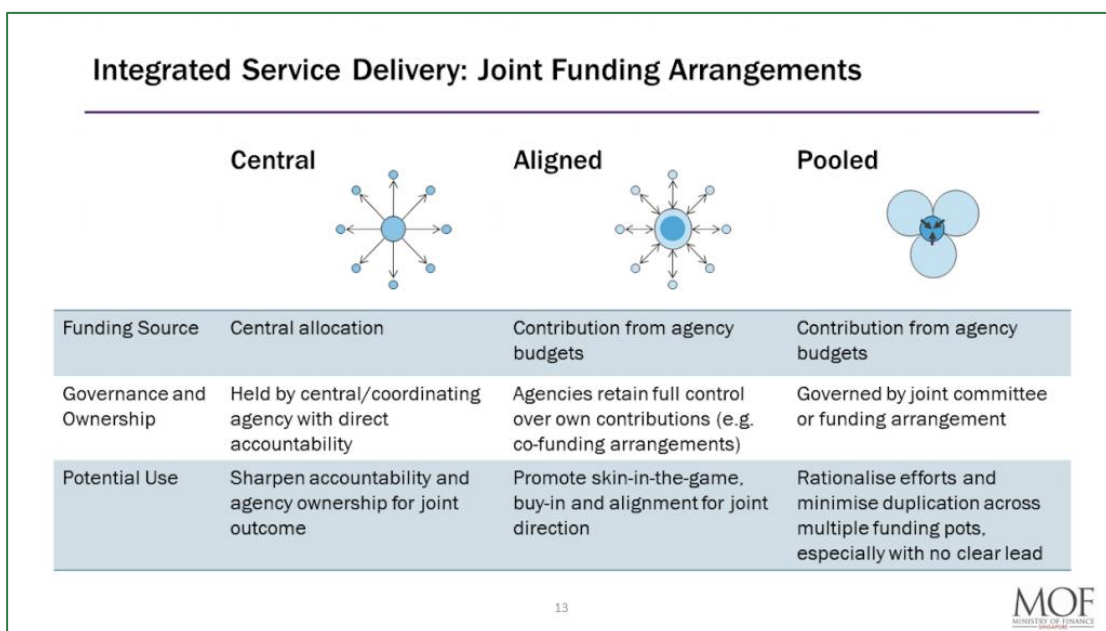
## Maintain a long-term focus to overcome the transient challenges of political cycles

The importance of joining up government is accentuated by the so-called megatrends of the 21st century, such as climate change, technological disruption, and demographic shifts such as ageing societies.

All the civil service leaders interviewed for this report are from countries that have committed to reaching net zero, but many mentioned how difficult it will be to deliver the sustained – and perhaps at times electorally unpopular – action required.

“It’s almost a war effort to mobilise an entire economy and an entire government around that long-term effort, and it’s really easy to lose interest or get bored with it,” said one chief. “It requires discipline that’s not often asked of government, but it’s going to be asked all around the world.”

Countries have taken different approaches on how to structure government to take forward this delivery. Some have formed a dedicated net zero department, others have created net zero authorities, while others still have created cross-government structures.



*Presentation slide on how different funding models can support cross-government working was shared by Tan Ching Yee, Permanent Secretary of Singapore’s Ministry of Finance at the 2020 Global Government Summit.*

One leader set out how the creation of a clean growth unit in the centre of government had added impetus to the net zero drive.

This was created because progress on climate change “wasn’t happening spontaneously”, so there is now an official responsible for identifying the top priorities to deliver net zero – and the stages to meet each.

Another revealed that they tried to run sustainability policy from the centre of government, but found that it was too big an issue to do so.

Although the initial impetus from the centre meant “we did in a few months what the ministry of environment couldn’t do for years”, the breadth of work eventually required the focus of its own department.

However, many leaders admit that these structures have not yet created systems that embed climate thinking into government – and in particular into the minds of political leaders.

“I think that we have a very huge problem with climate change and the way we integrate it into our public policy, and the way we convince our politicians that – despite the fact the catastrophe will come after their term, they have to cope with it now.”

Another leader agreed their country’s aim to get to net zero by 2050 is “hugely confronting for our system”.

“We do not have the expertise in-house to manage the complexity of that level of transition, which the economy has never had to do ever before.”

*“I think that we have a very huge problem with climate change and the way we integrate it into our public policy.”*

In an era marked by rapid changes and frequent disruptions, the necessity for public administrations to sustain a long-term focus is vital. The transient nature of political cycles often pressures governments to deliver quick fixes, which are rarely sustainable or comprehensive. This short-termism poses a significant risk, as it may lead to solutions that

fail to address the underlying causes of complex, systemic issues.

As Sir Alex Chisholm, [the former UK civil service chief operating officer](#), told GGF’s Innovation 2024 conference:

“We literally cannot continue like this. Citizens agree, and it’s a common problem for governments worldwide that trust in the state has fallen significantly.”

With governments under such pressure, Chisholm argued, the temptation is to react to immediate pressures and make short-term decisions – but only sustained investment and continuity in policymaking will generate the right outcomes. “In this restless decade,



*Dustin Brown, deputy assistant director for management, Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, United States (at time of interview)*

the risks of myopia are significant,” he said. “So long-term foresight and investment, while certainly desirable, is at present harder to come by, with difficult choices being made about regular spend let alone some of the bets necessary for deep innovation.”

Government resources are too quickly diverted to deal with symptoms, not causes, Chisholm suggested: “Where there are real pressing challenges which require urgent attention, it’s all too easy to spend too much time coping with them, rather than focusing on the need to change underlying approaches.”

*“So long-term foresight and investment, while certainly desirable, is at present harder to come by.”*

Many of the civil service leaders we spoke to agree with this sentiment and highlighted the need to build upon the work of government in the coronavirus pandemic – when it responded at pace to hitherto unknown pressures.

The rapid pace of media cycles and the urgency of political reactions frequently contrast with the slower, more deliberate pace required for effective long-term governance. Governments are often drawn into a reactive mode, prioritising immediate crises over strategic planning. However, this approach can undermine the potential for lasting solutions and inhibit the ability to tackle significant, long-term challenges effectively.

To counteract these tendencies, it is crucial for governments to commit to structural reforms and long-term goals. This commitment should extend beyond the immediacy of political terms and be embedded within the fabric of public administration. A focus on long-term stewardship and foresight is essential, though maintaining this focus amid fluctuating political pressures and public expectations presents its challenges, which emphasises the value of strong leadership highlighted earlier in this report

*“Where there are real pressing challenges which require urgent attention, it’s too easy to spend too much time coping with them, rather than the underlying approaches.”*

Governments should adopt entrepreneurial and experimental approaches to project development, allowing for small-scale investments to support innovation at the initial stages. Projects that demonstrate real promise can then be scaled up, ensuring that long-term investments are strategic and aligned with broader government objectives. This method ensures that innovation is not only fostered but

also pragmatically integrated into the public sector.

Moreover, a continuous investment in policy development is necessary to prevent the diversion of resources towards short-lived solutions. By prioritising long-term planning and execution, governments can achieve stable, effective outcomes that transcend political cycles and deliver substantial benefits to society.

Embracing long-term planning and structural reforms is essential for modern governance. By steadfastly focusing on these principles, governments can ensure stability, foster innovation, and enhance public well-being in an ever-changing global landscape. Again, the next phase of our work we will identify examples of good practice in long term planning that can be shared across our communities.

## Pillar 5: A service that is trusted by its users and the public

In the vast array of features defining a modern and effective civil service, trust stands paramount. Throughout numerous interviews, webinars, and other events we've hosted, the critical role of public trust in a functioning civil service has been consistently emphasised. However, maintaining this trust is increasingly challenging in today's digital age.

Several factors are eroding public trust. Advanced technologies like deepfake videos and audios can spread misinformation rapidly. Populist politicians, often backed by media with vested interests, portray civil servants as disconnected from the populace. Additionally, social media channels can amplify conspiracy theories and fake news globally in moments, further complicating the landscape.

Our research suggests several strategies to bolster public trust.

### **Four areas that can help:**

- Build trust by showcasing success stories and the positive outcomes of civil service initiatives
- Establish comprehensive strategies to tackle the spread of fake news
- Maintain open and effective communication with all citizens to foster inclusion and transparency
- Strengthen international alliances to bolster credibility and share best practices in civil service

## Build trust by showcasing success stories

Many leaders said that the key to building trust is effective government delivery. One civil service head highlighted that in national polling, around 6 in 10 of the population trust the service, but there is a clear differentiation between those who have had recent experience with government services – and those who haven't.

"If they haven't had any significant dealings with the public service, that figure drops, but if they have dealt with public service, it rises."

Several other leaders agreed that effective delivery is crucial to maintaining trust.

"You need to focus on trustworthiness, which I think is an important distinction," one leader said, while another highlighted "trust through effectiveness", with the public judging government on the delivery of services such as the issuance of passports and driving licenses.

In a similar vein, one leader highlighted that public trust increased following the government's response to COVID-19.

"We were able to increase the trust of the people in the civil servants [by showing] that, even though there are some challenges, government is still looking after their welfare."

In all our work, trust emerges as especially important in the development of digital services, as citizens need to be confident that their data and information will be kept safe.

One civil service chief spoke of an incident where data shared for scientific work had been shared with an "awkward organisation". As a result, citizens are now being given the chance to opt out of this population registry, which was not the desirable outcome.

"How can you make wise decisions when people are not taking part in services or don't allow government to use their data? This is an example of [how] trust can be destroyed."

We know from wider GGF work and events that recognising and showcasing the achievements of civil servants through national awards is a powerful tool for building trust between citizens and civil services. By highlighting success stories and the positive outcomes of civil service initiatives, awards not only honour individual and team accomplishments but also reinforce the value of civil service to society, so its little surprise that

*"How can you make wise decisions when people are not taking part in services or don't allow government to use their data?"*

several governments around the world have developed awards to enhance public trust and celebrate the dedication and innovation of their civil services.

By publicising these accolades and the stories behind them, governments not only acknowledge the hard work and success of their civil services but also play a crucial role in enhancing public perception and trust. Celebrating these achievements fosters a

greater connection between the public and their government, highlighting the tangible benefits of well-executed public initiatives and the dedicated individuals who make them possible. Through these awards, civil service organisations worldwide demonstrate their commitment to transparency, excellence, and public accountability.

## Establish comprehensive strategies to tackle the spread of fake news

Civil servants around the world are also grappling with the erosion of fact-based governance due to the rise of disinformation, with social media sites having led to the growth of influential misinformation and so-called fake news. As one official put it, "If we don't have a common fact base that we can rely on across the country, that creates huge risks across everything, and I think that is what we are at risk of losing."

*"If we don't have a common fact base that we can rely on across the country, that creates huge risks across everything, and I think that is what we are at risk of losing."*

Many civil service leaders highlighted the impact of the phenomenon of fake news as an increasing concern.

One civil service leader said fake news is a "real problem".

"We have a reasonably digital savvy population, and they are connected to everything that's floating around the internet and on social

media."

Another said that "we have seen a number of instances where misinformation is being used geopolitically".

To help tackle this problem, more than one official flagged the development of a counter-disinformation unit by the UK government as an idea they were looking to replicate.

This dedicated unit was first set up within the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in 2019 and it has since responded to periods of acute disinformation risk including COVID-19.

Following machinery of government changes in February this year, the unit sits with the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

*"We have seen a number of instances where misinformation is being used geopolitically".*

The team works with partners across government, civil society and in tandem with the regulatory approach through the Online Safety Bill and DSIT's Media Literacy Strategy.

Separately, a Rapid Response Unit was formed within the Cabinet Office, to combat the proliferation of 'fake news' and disinformation by sharing information across government



to help departments understand how their announcements were being reported on and received by the public and the media. However, the Rapid Response Unit, which was created in 2018, was disbanded in August 2022.

Singapore and Canada have adopted markedly different approaches to combating the spread of misinformation and managing the complexities of digital discourse.

In Singapore, the government has implemented the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), a legislative measure aimed at halting the dissemination of fake news. This law empowers ministers to direct online media platforms to correct or remove content deemed to be false, with severe penalties for non-compliance, including substantial fines and the possibility of imprisonment. This approach reflects Singapore's proactive stance on maintaining public order and governmental integrity, although it has raised significant concerns among human rights advocates. Critics argue that the law grants excessive power to the government, potentially stifling legitimate public discourse and criticism under the broad guise of combating misinformation.



*Henrik Haapajärvi, former state secretary to the prime minister, Finland*

Conversely, Canada is taking a different tack. Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau has previously called for digital platforms to counter disinformation, and in July 2024 the Government of Canada published the resource [‘Countering Disinformation: A Guidebook for Public Servants’](#).

Both approaches highlight the challenges governments face in navigating the digital landscape, balancing the need to prevent misinformation with the imperative to uphold free expression. This is a balance that is clear from our interviews – and from the UK’s abandonment of some measures that international peers were closely following as potential exemplars – that is difficult to strike.

The problem was encapsulated by Taimar Peterkop, secretary of state of Estonia, who as well as being interviewed for this report [spoke at 2023 Global Government Summit](#).

Estonia’s government runs a “strategic communications unit” to combat disinformation – identifying inaccurate information being spread by foreign actors, and coordinating communications responses across government. This has to be handled carefully. Peterkop explained that officials do not, for example, assess the accuracy of statements by Estonian politicians: “What we do is build knowledge in society: we brief journalists; we’ve founded courses in universities and schools on how to recognise fake news. The effort is there to have a resilient society.”

## Maintain open and effective communication with all citizens to foster inclusion and transparency

Civil servants are in the spotlight like never before. One reason for this is that advice senior officials gave to ministers in response to the coronavirus pandemic led to unprecedented lockdowns and other restrictions, putting their work under intense scrutiny.

In response to these new state powers as well as other concerns around globalisation or austerity, a new populism has flourished. Many of those interviewed for this project have seen populists either enter government or play a greater role in their national politics – at a time when, given the pressures mentioned throughout this report, it is of pivotal importance to maintain citizen trust in government.

“We’re talking about governments doing more things than they’ve ever done before – and net zero is going to mean even more – so we need trust in government to be high,” one official said.

Another leader said that “citizens’ trust over time has been eroded”, whereas others say trust has been maintained despite increasing political polarisation and populism.

Where national polling is undertaken, public trust in civil servants is often higher than in politicians, but it is at different levels in different countries. This topic was a focal point in a recent discussion as part of [GGF’s Government Transformed podcast on how governments can effectively deliver citizen-centric services](#). Eilidh McLaughlin of the Scottish Government’s Digital Citizen Unit emphasised that trust forms the cornerstone of user engagement with digital services. Without it, the potential benefits of digitalisation, such as increased efficiency and transparency, cannot be fully realised because citizens simply won’t participate.

The conversation underscored the critical role of inclusivity in building trust. McLaughlin pointed out that digital services often fail to consider the needs of all users, particularly those who are digitally excluded or have special needs. Addressing these oversights involves ensuring that service designs are accessible and responsive to the needs of every citizen, demonstrating a government’s commitment to all demographic groups.

Furthermore, the discussion touched on the significance of robust data protection and cybersecurity measures to prevent trust erosion. Transparency about data usage, clear communication during service interruptions, and prompt responses to data breaches are vital. McLaughlin highlighted the importance of regular communication with the public, even when there are no updates to report, to avoid the trust deterioration that can occur during periods of silence.

*“We’re talking about governments doing more things than they’ve ever done before – and net zero is going to mean even more – so we need trust in government to be high.”*

These discussions illuminated essential strategies for governments aiming to enhance the public's trust in digital services. By focusing on inclusivity, responsive design, integrated service delivery, and stringent data security, governments can foster a more trusting and engaged citizenry, essential for the successful adoption and effectiveness of digital government services



*Claire Landais, secretary general of the government, France*

Asked why there should be so much emphasis on trust in transformed services, Roseth said: "One word: uptake".

As McLaughlin explained, "if users don't trust the digital services, they're not going to use them", adding: "And if they don't use them, then neither the government nor the citizenry are going to get any of the benefits that digital services can entail – the greater efficiency, the greater transparency, the greater objectivity.

"Governments are often bounding headfirst into digital transformation and spending lots of money... but it's all for naught if the digital services are not going to be used. So if we see trust as a prerequisite to uptake, then trust is a prerequisite for getting value for money."

## Strengthen international alliances to bolster credibility and share best practices in civil service

One area where populism is directly impacting the work of many governments around the world is in international relations in the age of shifting geopolitics and polycrises.

The interviews for this report all took place following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but most were before the Hamas-Israel war.

Many leaders spoke about the impact of increasingly fraught global affairs.

"It's a complicated working environment right now, honestly," said one civil service head of the geopolitical environment. "It's as complicated as anything I've seen in my professional career, and that has pretty significant effects. We are a big diverse country, and a lot of the issues that are playing themselves out internationally have pretty profound echoes, even within the public service. That's something we are managing."

Other leaders also highlighted how they are having to grapple with the changing international order.

“The global situation is shifting significantly,” said one, who described dealing with this as “a preoccupation for government”.

*“It’s a complicated working environment right now, honestly.”*

The emergence of more populist governments in many countries means that many now face “tricky questions about our long-term alliances”.

“We’re worried, as everybody is, what the consequences would be if America goes

isolationist. So a big preoccupation is how we build those global links.”

This leader said there are questions around the stability of traditional alliances, but also that moves to a multipolar world would be “really tricky”. “It takes us into big questions about a huge uplift in our defence expenditure, with all the consequences for schools and hospitals and everything else we have to do.”

Other leaders agreed that global uncertainty has impacted their planning.

“When there’s a lot of conflict, the defence budget has to go up,” added one. “That means that there’s less resource available for other sectors of government, so there’s a constant balancing that has to be done. “What that has done for us is make us look at other sources of income and where we can boost budgets.”

Against this backdrop, strengthening international partnerships is more crucial than ever for civil services worldwide. This dynamic environment necessitates a robust strategy to not only maintain but also enhance the credibility and efficacy of government actions on the global stage.

Firstly, it is imperative for nations to actively engage in international forums and multilateral organisations to both share and adopt best practices in public administration. This collaborative approach can lead to innovative solutions to common challenges, such as digital transformation in public services, environmental sustainability, and crisis management. By

participating in these global exchanges, countries can leverage collective knowledge and experience, thereby enhancing their own administrative practices and policy responses.

*“We’re worried, as everybody is, what the consequences would be if America goes isolationist. So a big preoccupation is how we build those global links.”*



*Glyn Davis, secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australia*

Moreover, in response to the challenges posed by increasingly isolationist tendencies in some regions, countries should seek to diversify their international connections. Forming new alliances can mitigate the risks associated with over-reliance on traditional partnerships that may become unstable. This diversification strategy not only strengthens international standing but also ensures a more stable and reliable network of support in addressing global crises.

Investing in diplomatic capacities is another crucial strategy. Enhanced diplomatic efforts are essential for navigating the complex web of international relations and for advocating national interests effectively. Diplomacy can also play a pivotal role in conflict resolution and in fostering a global consensus on pressing issues like climate change and international security.

Additionally, civil services must adapt to the realities of increased defence spending due to ongoing conflicts and global instability. Strategic financial management becomes vital in this context. Governments need to innovate in revenue generation and budget allocation to ensure that essential public services remain funded and effective. Exploring alternative funding sources, efficient resource allocation, and cost-saving innovations are practical measures that can help balance the scales in public expenditure.

Strengthening international alliances while embracing a proactive, innovative approach to diplomacy and financial management will enable countries to navigate the complexities of modern geopolitics effectively. By doing so, they not only safeguard their own national interests but also contribute to global stability and development, ultimately enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of their civil services on the international stage.

## Conclusion: The Pillars of a Modern, Effective Civil Service

Over the last decade, the challenges facing civil servants have undergone profound transformations, shaped by the events and the ever-changing nature of the modern era. Those in senior positions find themselves navigating a landscape where traditional responsibilities intersect with unprecedented demands, changing relationships and new ways of working, requiring an agile and multifaceted approach to leadership. Developing and maintaining effective relationships with ministers is simultaneously more tricky and more important than ever in a world that demands quick results but also requires long-term planning and stewardship.

Social media has amplified the pace of change, placing unprecedented pressure on leaders to anticipate and respond to emerging challenges swiftly. As countries grapple with the social and economic impacts of global crises and conflicts, civil service leaders must help ministers to deliver political solutions at pace while also ensuring the resilience of public institutions and long-term health and welfare of their nations.

And while civil servants used to be the invisible advisers in the government machine, senior officials, in particular, are having to adapt to more criticism, increased transparency, and a realisation that in order to foster confidence and trust in government policies and institutions they need to manage a raft of new communication changes, championing excellence in public service delivery but also combating misinformation and fake news. All of this requires new skill sets and a shift in culture.

*The success of the civil service – and indeed civil services leaders – in the future will be determined by how well they are able to build their capabilities in the five pillars we have identified in this report.*

And last, by no means least, it is clear from all of GGF's work, including the exclusive interviews we conducted for this report, that digital literacy and technology awareness has emerged as the cornerstone of an effective, modern civil service. With rapid technological advancements driving change across sectors, civil service leaders must stay abreast of digital innovations to ensure that government services are relevant, responsive and

accessible to all citizens. With so many demands on limited public resources, it is unquestionable that digital transformation and the adoption of new technologies, including generative AI is vital to boost operational efficiency and improve the delivery of services to public.

The success of a civil service – and indeed civil service leaders – in the future will be determined by how well they are able to build their capabilities in the five pillars we have

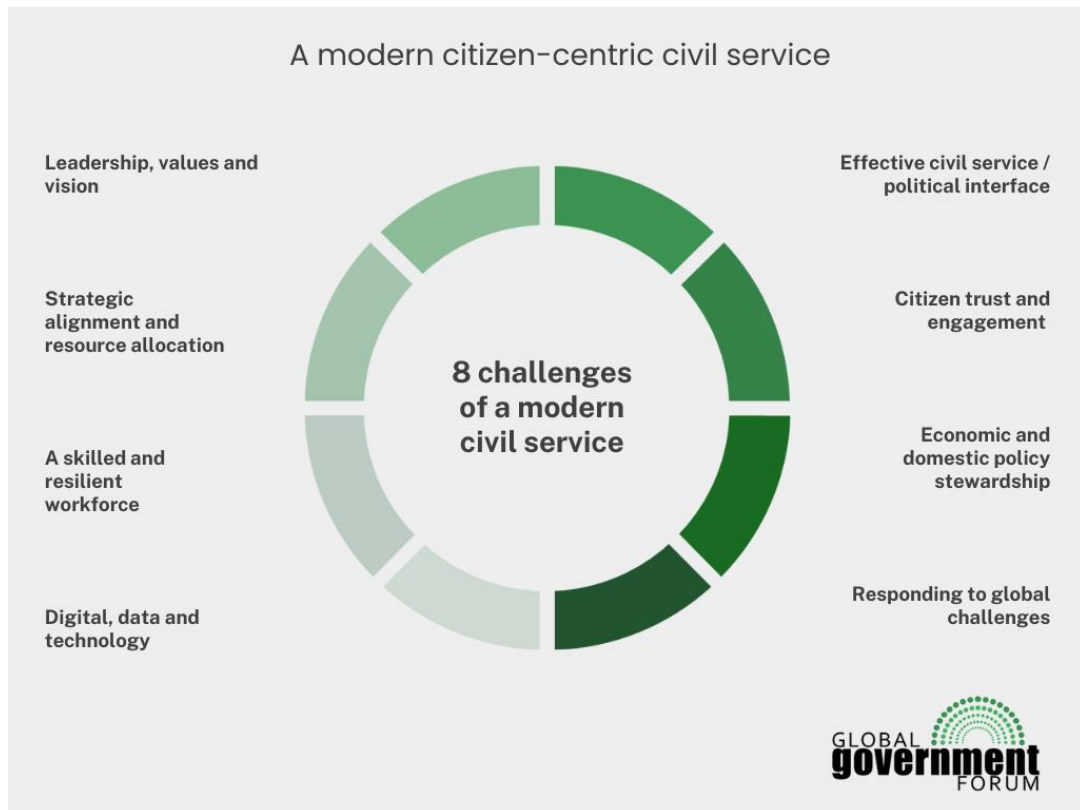
identified in this report. The GGF team will now turn its attention to identifying best practice in each of these five pillars. In the meantime, we invite civil service leaders to consider how well they are currently performing against each of the five pillars and where they perceive their biggest opportunities for growth to be.

If you would like to be part of this next stage of the research, please contact us on [s.benita@globalgovernmentforum.com](mailto:s.benita@globalgovernmentforum.com).

## Appendices:

### I – Methodology

Analysis from the last 10 years of Global Government Forum’s Global Government Summit (attended and co-curated by international heads of public services), highlights common challenges of a modern public service. These form the 8 Challenges Model that the study’s hypothesis was framed around. These were as follows:



Using a set of discussion prompts guided by these challenges, each interview aimed to piece together the definition of a modern public or civil service, and explore how governments are looking to address obstacles across each of these challenges. This process served to test and refine the 8 Challenges model from the viewpoint of top public service leaders.

Interviews were semi-structured using open questioning and discussion, and were led by Lord Gus O’Donnell, together with GGF’s executive adviser, Siobhan Benita, and were observed by executive editor, Richard Johnstone, and global research director, Chris Punch.

Interviews were carried out on the condition of anonymity of any material quoted.

The interviews were carried out virtually via MS Teams, between 22 August 2023 and 30 November 2023.



## II – Country profiles

GDP is based on World Bank Open Data for 2023.

### Australia

- **Population:** 26.6 million
- **GDP:** \$1.7 trillion USD
- **Government structure:** Australia is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The Commonwealth of Australia is comprised of the federal government, six state governments, and two territories.
- **Civil service:** The Australian Public Service (APS) is the federal civil service responsible for implementing national policies and delivering services. The APS operates under the Public Service Act 1999 and is overseen by the Australian Public Service Commission.

### Barbados

- **Population:** 282,000
- **GDP:** \$6.4 billion USD
- **Government structure:** Barbados is a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy, with a structure similar to the Westminster system.
- **Civil service:** The Barbados Public Service is responsible for the administration of government policy and public services. It is governed by the Public Service Act and the Public Service Commission.

### Canada

- **Population:** 40 million
- **GDP:** \$2.14 trillion USD
- **Government structure:** Canada is a federal parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy. The federal government is comprised of three branches: the executive, legislative, and judicial.
- **Civil service:** The Public Service of Canada, or the Canadian civil service, is managed by the Treasury Board Secretariat. It operates under the Public Service Employment Act and is overseen by the Public Service Commission of Canada.

## Estonia

- **Population:** 1.37 million
- **GDP:** \$40.7 billion USD
- **Government structure:** Estonia is a parliamentary republic. The government is divided into executive, legislative, and judicial branches.
- **Civil service:** The Estonian Civil Service is regulated by the Public Service Act. The Ministry of Finance oversees the strategic management of the civil service, which is focused on efficiency, transparency, and digital innovation.

## Finland

- **Population:** 5.6 million
- **GDP:** \$300 billion USD
- **Government structure:** Finland is a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system. The government is divided into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The President of the Republic acts as the head of state, while the Prime Minister is the head of government.
- **Civil service:** The Finnish Civil Service is known for its high level of efficiency and transparency. It operates under the Public Officials Act and is overseen by the Ministry of Finance. The civil service plays a crucial role in implementing government policies and ensuring effective public administration.

## France

- **Population:** 68 million
- **GDP:** \$3.0 trillion USD
- **Government structure:** France is a semi-presidential representative democratic republic. The government is divided into executive, legislative, and judicial branches.
- **Civil service:** The French Civil Service is a central part of the public administration, governed by the General Statute of the Civil Service. It includes central government, local government, and hospital civil servants.

## Indonesia

- **Population:** 277 million
- **GDP:** \$1.4 trillion USD
- **Government structure:** Indonesia is a presidential republic. The government consists of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.
- **Civil service:** The Indonesian Civil Service is managed by the National Civil Service Agency (BKN). It operates under the Civil Service Law, which aims to improve the professionalism and competence of civil servants.

## Ireland

- **Population:** 5.2 million
- **GDP:** \$545 billion USD
- **Government structure:** Ireland is a parliamentary democracy. The government is composed of the executive, legislature, and judiciary.
- **Civil service:** The Irish Civil Service is regulated by the Public Service Management Act and managed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It aims to provide efficient public administration and service delivery.

## Nigeria

- **Population:** 224 million
- **GDP:** \$362.8 billion USD
- **Government structure:** Nigeria is a federal republic with a presidential system. The government consists of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, with the President serving as both head of state and government. The country is divided into 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory.
- **Civil service:** The Nigerian Civil Service is structured to implement government policies and deliver public services at both federal and state levels. It operates under the framework of the Public Service Rules and is managed by the Federal Civil Service Commission. Reforms have been ongoing to improve efficiency and accountability within the service.

## Singapore

- **Population:** 5.9 million
- **GDP:** \$501 billion USD
- **Government structure:** Singapore is a parliamentary republic. The government is divided into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.
- **Civil service:** The Singapore Civil Service is managed by the Public Service Division of the Prime Minister's Office. It focuses on meritocracy, efficiency, and innovation in public administration.

## United Kingdom

- **Population:** 68 million
- **GDP:** \$3.3 trillion USD
- **Government structure:** The United Kingdom is a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy. The government is divided into the executive, legislature, and judiciary.
- **Civil service:** The UK Civil Service is governed by the Civil Service Code and overseen by the Civil Service Commission. It is responsible for implementing government policies and delivering public services.

## United States

- **Population:** 335 million
- **GDP:** \$27 trillion USD
- **Government structure:** The United States is a federal republic with a presidential system. The government is divided into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.
- **Civil service:** The US federal civil service is governed by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and managed by the Office of Personnel Management. It aims to ensure effective public administration and merit-based employment practices.

## Legal Notice

© Pendragon International Media Ltd 2024.

All rights reserved

The information contained with the document is given in good faith and is believed to be accurate, appropriate and reliable at the time it is given, but is provided without any warranty of accuracy, appropriateness or reliability.

The author does not accept any liability or responsibility for any loss suffered from the reader's use of the advice, recommendation, information, assistance or service, to the extent available by law.

Global Government Forum is part of Pendragon International Media Ltd

Registered address: The Old Vicarage, 10 Church Street, Rickmansworth, WD3 1BS, United Kingdom

Cover image by GarryKillian on Freepik

**[www.globalgovernmentforum.com](http://www.globalgovernmentforum.com)**

**[www.pendragonim.com](http://www.pendragonim.com)**