

EPI and edpol roundtable 14th October 2020

Civil Service reform and the challenge of evidence-based policy

Structured summary from discussion

Attendees:

David Laws - EPI (Chair), ex Minister	Jonathan Simons – Public First, ex SpAd
Hardip Begol - Woodward MAT, ex DfE	Sam Twiselton – SHU, consulted by DfE
Nick Brook – NAHT, ex DfE	David Weston – TDT, consulted by DfE
Dr Kate Chhatwal – Challenge Partners, ex DfE	Natalie Perera – EPI, ex DfE
Sam Freedman – Ark EPG, ex SpAd	Chris Paterson - DfE (observer)
Sarah Lewis - DfE	Patrick Wall - Edpol (observer)
Alastair Falk - FED (observer)	

The views and opinions below are unattributed quotes and paraphrasing of individual comments: they reflect the discussion and are not necessarily supported by all attendees. There should be no inference of unanimity. Further this was not meant to be a balanced assessment of DfE/Civil Service strengths and weaknesses, rather a focus on possible areas for improvement.

1. Civil Service/DfE: Potential areas for improvement

1.1 Support specialists

“We must move people around less often to develop expertise and insight”.

- It is in the power of the civil service to have less movement and to have more balanced teams, ones that include policy specialisation. Otherwise you have to go back and rethink things over and over again, there is a genuine issue about instability.
- The Civil Service is not set up to reward development of deep expertise. It is to support generalisation and moving around departments. There is no recognition of the value of building up expertise and diversity.

1.2 Still nurture cross-departmental management and experience

“People shouldn’t always stay in the same policy area because it’s important to know how the system joins up”.

- In education you need to know how local government works, how social service works, how social care works and understand the pressure on local authorities. There must be an understanding of that wider system to make good policy in schools.
- Opportunity Areas are an interesting study. A huge amount of learning has come out of it. Including the Civil Servants who had to engage proactively in detail -they have learnt a lot. They now have a more sophisticated understanding of the local context than previously. This highlights how Opportunity Areas should’ve been more cross discipline e.g. social services, housing, transport etc.

1.3 Build balanced teams

“There must be balance within teams”.

- We need to value people’s historical expertise and don’t see them as the old cynics. There must be sector expertise and the bright forward-looking people. We lean towards the latter too much.

- At the end of the Labour administration in the [XX Department] we lost most of the long-service civil servants to early exit. Balance was lost within teams, which tilted towards younger, inexperienced civil servants. We had lost much of the institutional memory to learn lessons from past experience.

1.4 Keep teams together

“Some team members know they will move on and the short-term thinking is damaging”.

- Usually, there is a project way of doing things – a small team focused on their benefits because that’s efficient for the team. The time limited nature and people coming in and out of teams means many people don’t feel accountable - because they’re thinking short term. If you “talk about longer than six months”, they know it won’t be them, it’ll be someone else..
- Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy has been done well and there is a lot of learning from it. Conceived from the beginning that it is a joined-up thing with lots of complex moving parts and that someone would be needed to hold the ring across the piece. [An experienced leader] has done this but it’s not sustainable. Longer term relationships like this can help those who are consulted to explain to others the constraints within the system. It needs to be more systematic and permanent.

1.5 Increase Diversity

“There is another perspective, and this is important when decisions affect very varied communities”.

- If [the Civil Service has] a Comprehensive intake, then it’s a homogenous Comprehensive. There is a lot of groupthink, particularly at senior management level - where a lot of the people come from a very similar background.
- There is insufficient understanding amongst ethnic groups about the importance of Civil Service and what it does, in order to promote it is an “approved” career option.
- When people with education experience were brought into the Civil Service they were often spat out because culturally they didn’t fit. Outside experts didn’t adapt to the Civil Service culture in ways of going about making policy, including the approval process.

1.6 Change the culture

“The application process to the Civil Service reflects the very strange culture -it is alien to people who don’t think the same way”.

- There should be a different way of bringing people into the civil service, that is, without going through the current application process and the psychometric tests. We lose talented and different thinkers because of the way we recruit - the people who don’t have the requisite competencies - whatever that might mean.
- There is a lot of emphasis on the Civil Service values and the Noland Principles. Gus O’Donnell brought out “the Four Ps” (pride, passion, pace, professionalism) but there is no interest in passion amongst the most successful people in the higher CS positions. The people who are passionate about an education agenda typically leave the Civil Service. There is something in the culture that works against them.
- [Contrary view: Civil Servants have to carry out the Ministers’ views, even if they disagree. Therefore, passion has to be kept in check]

1.7 Benefit from front-line experience

“People should be allowed to spend time in the education sector to get experience”.

- There should be more of an open door in and out of the DfE. Permeability in Scotland and the moving of expertise around the system at every level - this is evident in Ontario as well.

You could feel the impact of this overtime, there was more reality and realism in terms of the decision making.

- The Civil Service should work more with schools and colleges. There should be more opportunities for Civil Servants to work on the front line. England contrasts significantly with Scotland, where there is great permeability between the department and the sector, with a lot of movement around those. It might be easier because it's a smaller community. It's ensured a good connection between the policy makers and the sector.
- In Singapore there is fluidity between teachers and Civil Service.
- Having more teachers and having more people spending more time in schools would be a good thing and being a governor is helpful. There is a sense of disconnect.
- [Qualification: Recently, people with only two- or three-years teaching experience, while bringing a lot of value, can receive too much credence - though their experience might still be limited. This can create groupthink because they come from similar schools' background, probably from London and Teach First.]

1.8 Create larger ministerial offices

"The Ministerial Offices are under powered teams".

- Ministerial offices are constantly passing things down and don't spend the time thinking through issues. A larger Ministerial policy office acting with the Civil Service using policy expertise and knowledge could reduce the disconnect. [Contrary view: they have huge power to disempower policy teams, and can result in policy teams being less likely to do their jobs properly].

2 Policy making: Significant challenges

2.1 Politicians have insufficient time for meaningful policy development

"There is insufficient time to consider policy properly".

- This is a systemic issue partly because everything is driven by political imperative and the need to move quickly. Consultation that is about real engagement needs to be much earlier in the process.
- There is a small "c" consulting that goes on before policy is fixed. But there is only very limited space for this thinking.
- The CS is asked within a day or a week to come up with something that looks presentable to people. The politicians and DfE need to be engaging much earlier with people on the ground.
- If there is space, ask organisations outside of the DfE to work on policy questions. You need to know who the experts are to then incorporate their views.

2.2 Civil Servants (in the DfE) have insufficient time for policy development

"Don't underestimate how little time civil servants have for bottom up policy making".

- People are so busy delivering, it is not set up to function [for policy making].
- Civil service reform can't increase the time that is available for policy - because there's so much time spent on implementation
- Nobody in any government department thinks about what is needed and sends up an idea to the minister [Assumed reference to new ideas: Ed]
- Civil Servants primary purpose is to implement. Ministers don't say "go away and think about this and then tell me some things we can do". It's more "I think this is the best idea - now go away and tell me how to implement it". Until that changes there can't be any systemic change in the way policy is provided

- There is no protected time and Civil Servants are incredibly busy. Your job is not really to think about that. Rarely are Civil Servants asked to go away and think about something. You may vaguely have time coming back from a trip, in a taxi or sat in the bath - but your job is to manage the current system that we have.

2.3 Consultation takes place in an echo chamber

“Politicians are all looking to reconfirm bias”.

- There is an echo-chamber of a small number of individuals to confirm what ministers want to believe. Otherwise, you are an enemy of promise, you are part of the mediocrity, part of the blob.
- Consulting [by the DfE] is tokenistic - it's to listen to people who will agree with them. The DfE is not interested in finding out what they don't already know.
- The DfE is afraid to listen to views on the ground because they may contradict policy direction and there is no willingness to engage.
- Ministers increasingly decide who they engage with. Civil Servants are nervous about recommending a more diverse group who may know more on the topic.
- There is a cynicism about using focus groups. People roll their eyes at you because it's seen as a tick box exercise.
- Civil Servants are afraid to speak truth to power.
- Yes, it is up to Civil Servants to provide policy response. But unless the minister is receptive, it works against Civil Servants and can threaten their career [to speak truth to power]. Civil servants now shy away from giving contrary ideas. “We know civil servants who ended up leaving because the idea was not acceptable to ministers”

2.4 Consultation is used to smooth policy implementation

By the time the paper comes out for consultation the decisions have been made - they are only consulting now on the “how”, not the “what”. How will you make this work?

Policy officials ask how can we make this more palatable? What announcement will make it more effective?

External engagement could certainly be stronger. Consultation was seen as a “pain in the arse exercise”, that you have to go through.

Most policy development isn't done by civil servants rather is done by a very narrow group of people. You send down policy to make it look presentable.

2.5 Greater engagement is needed with the education sector

“The DfE does not engage with the education sector in any meaningful way”.

- This happened even with Labour, where there was great ideological alignment between politicians and “the blob”. But there were still issues in bringing the sector into the thought process at early stages.
- *Contrary view:* We do a lot more engaging with the sector than people realise, and we do it a lot more quietly. DfE officials are frequently out engaging with education organisations, Headteachers, MATs and local authorities but they don't talk about it much. It does feed into the policy development discussions.

2.6 The value of evidence cannot be agreed

“Evidence is contested - it's a social science”.

- The cycle of research and evaluation nowhere nearly aligns with the cycle of politics and the spending cycle - it's always been a problem.
- Evidence bases are contested -you can always cherry pick something to put in a White Paper - to back up your proposal. Evidence isn't a panacea.

- We can always find something to point to in the direction we want. The Civil Service has to present it as best they can. Political considerations will always override in certain circumstances.
- There isn't enough research that might not have an immediate benefit but will have a longer-term effect.
- We should be realistic about what evidence can achieve. XX drove the Civil Service to present evidence - whatever it said.
- There should be more post-evaluation of policy. I don't know whether my policies worked because they've not been evaluated. Can we force evaluation whether the minister wanted it or not?
- We have a deeply complex system and with DfE not having many leavers to manage in real time. It's very hard for the DfE to know what's going on - it's hard to know what's happening in real time. And you don't have evidence of formal evaluation. The question is what's happening today in 23,000 schools?

3 Policy making: opportunities for improvement?

3.1 Provide enough time for policy making

"There needs to be a belief in the engagement for consultation earlier on in the process".

- That is a massive cultural shift in the DfE.
- There needs to be a space in the early stage, so that civil service who are the experts can get asked about XX policy. What do you think about it? What might they say about it? But there isn't time to do that because it means taking somebody off something else which is important.
- Strategy units and Extended Ministerial offices are kind of set up to do this, but they don't really have the expertise.

3.2 The DfE should reach out for sector knowledge and understanding

"You have to pull the specialist knowledge into the system".

- There needs to be more people just outside of the Civil Service understanding how things work. [Major organisations don't know how to influence the DfE].
- It doesn't mean external people have all the policy answers, but they will know what goes on in their school and that's what you want. The Civil Service is getting better at that.
- There are a few people with the specialist knowledge that other people can lean on outside. An important consideration is whether the ecosystem around the DfE is cognisant of the need to feed in policy.

3.3 The sector should offer up knowledge and understanding

"There is a lack of policy-making capacity".

- External organisations can help time-poor policy officials by providing potential policy ideas 'to keep up their sleeve'. If you're asked to speak to a minister have your policy ideas ready. It's good if you've got a ready-made solution should your area fall under the Ministerial spotlight. Organisations outside of the civil service (such as unions, think-tanks, the College of Teaching, research bodies) regularly develop evidenced policy proposals, but how permeable is the department – do they accept ideas from elsewhere?
- It depends where the ideas are coming from. Are we part of the blob - it's treated with deep suspicion, are we trusted? The question of permeability is really important, at what point are

we engaging, at the very early stages of policy engagement, or earlier, here's an idea, seeding those ideas...

3.4 The specialist nature of policy development must be respected

"Policymaking is a discipline and it's a complicated thing to do".

- Just because you're a good teacher doesn't mean you're going to be a good policy maker.
- A lot of people don't have an understanding of how system thinking works. A lot of people aren't good at giving practical advice on what can be done. This is why a small number of people are consulted

3.5 Think at the system level and across departments

"The weakness in our policy making is a lack of systems thinking and radical change".

- Every government has tried to tackle disadvantage and generally feel they have not succeeded. The answer is not more tinkering but system thinking across departments - fewer things, but more radical things. And they need to be joined up across government.
- There is a need for greater use of empirical evidence in public policy making -both within departments and across sectors. People are incentivised to work in silos with their own budget.
- The central secretarial team operate in the centre but do not enable proper cross government working. This was evident in the 2010 spending review when the school budget was cut but didn't consider the impact of local authority budget cuts, health, welfare and housing cuts. It's an example of cross department working that generally needs improvement.
- We need to think big and this has to be cross sector. For example, poverty has to be addressed across health, justice, DWP, Treasury etc. You can't tell schools that they are responsible for all of this - Civil Service needs to create the connections between the different areas.