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DfE challenges

Partially attributed quotes from 30 discussions and interviews

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Content

The following is a compilation of partially attributed quotes from 30 edpol interviews and discussions, with current and ex-SpAds* and Civil Servants; expert educationalists**; academics; Think Tank members and current and ex-Members of Parliament. Discussions took place during August and September 2002

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* Ex and current SpAds and policy advisors are designated as “SpAds” **Experts are ex Civil Servants or Professionals who are regularly consulted

Systemic Civil Service issues are evident in the DfE (1)

Issue	Quote	Source
Policy by declaration	<p><i>Politicians are rewarded for announcing policy, then avoiding failure., not ensuring a policy is implemented properly</i></p> <p><i>The easiest things for Ministers to grasp are the large structural things</i></p> <p><i>Every minster wants to do their own thing and they want to do it quickly</i></p> <p><i>Minsters want security and promotion - therefore they want to be visibly contributing to the government's progress by announcing policies</i></p> <p><i>Most SofSs want the CS to do as they are told</i></p> <p><i>There is a view that the CS is there to resist, so new policy has to be driven through them. Politicians need to spend time bringing CS around to their views.</i></p>	Expert CS MP SpAd MP Expert
Institutional memory	<p><i>The DfE archive lists policies from 2002 onwards but no other information like views and how policy did or did not work.</i></p> <p><i>Institutional memory is a problem and why policies come forward again every 5 to 10 years</i></p> <p><i>Lack of institutional memory is the single most annoying thing about working in Whitehall</i></p> <p><i>SpAds are used to provide institutional memory but they will change as well</i></p> <p><i>Whitehall boundary changes are too frequent and cause huge disruption</i></p> <p><i>Departments have closed down their libraries</i></p> <p><i>Losing the Civil Service College at Sunningdale was a bad thing for knowledge and skills</i></p> <p><i>Its always valuable to have a few people around who are long in the tooth</i></p> <p><i>If we can have scientific advisors, why can't we have historical officers to say what has and hasn't worked?</i></p> <p><i>Part of the driver of change is lack of institutional memory</i></p>	exCS exCS SpAd SpAd SpAd SpAd SpAd SpAd SpAd MP
Not joined up	<p><i>Initiatives are not joined up within the DfE and between departments</i></p> <p><i>When cuts were made, a lack of joined up thinking led to disproportionate impact in certain areas</i></p> <p><i>Cross departmental planning is an issue and lots of people have tried without success to fix this</i></p> <p><i>Local government invests a lot in children and when budgets were cut, this was not taken into account</i></p> <p><i>Projects help speed but not coherence, too may are siloed and not joined up with each other</i></p> <p><i>Need to cut through with multi-disciplinary groups to improve coordination and understanding, but keep an eye on focus and deliverables</i></p> <p><i>The DfE and DoH have different regional definitions so at a policy and implementation level, its hard to even get a definition of place</i></p> <p><i>Permanent Secretaries should do more between departments and they should encourage more collaboration in the eco system, but first they should have clear cut priorities</i></p> <p><i>There is too much change and too many turf wars, too much fighting over who owns a policy</i></p>	exCS exCS SpAd SpAd Expert Expert Expert MP MP

Systemic Civil Service issues are evident in the DfE (2)

Issue	Quote	Source
Rotation	<i>It is evidently not true that the "skills of policy development" are all that matters</i>	SpAd
	<i>The people who stay put and are the receptacles of knowledge perform relatively poorly</i>	SpAd
	<i>The system is distorted because generalists are required for the most senior CS Perm Sec positions</i>	SpAd
	<i>Oliver Letwin's Guidance Policy required CSs to gain experience in other departments in order to progress but with little domain knowledge, CSs are unable to counter Ministerial initiatives. There must be more promotion within the department.</i>	Ac
	<i>A project with the University had had three different project officers</i>	Ac
	<i>The fast stream is moving even more quickly, changing department very six months</i>	SpAd
	<i>Its very difficult to build up expertise, if you want to get promoted, you have to move to where opportunities are</i>	exCS
	<i>The CS values people who have more diverse experiences in department and across departments</i>	exCS
	<i>If you build up expertise, the perception is that you have got stuck</i>	exCS
	<i>There is no understanding of the need for a mixture of people in the CS</i>	exCS
	<i>People don't have ownership long enough to see things through</i>	SpAd
	<i>Pay isn't enough to keep people in at a senior level therefore allow them to move departments</i>	SpAd
	<i>People are moved around constantly, no one is on the team from beginning to end</i>	Expert
<i>CS does not have a talent issue, its how talent is used - people are moved around too quickly taking knowledge with them; more pedestrian people are left behind. Its hard to stay in an area if you want to progress.</i>	Expert	
Real world experience	<i>Greater permeability [between DfE and the teaching world] would increase the power of dialogue</i>	exCS
	<i>The DfE values general skills over domain knowledge, there is no understanding of how long it takes to get to know specific areas in education</i>	exCS
	<i>There are gaps in subject matter knowledge and gaps in people who now how to do things as opposed to think things</i>	exCS
	<i>Deputy Directors should have deep expertise so that they can make high quality recommendations - Minsters could then trust officials</i>	exCS
	<i>It takes CSs six months to understand Initial Teacher Training - having the right background makes a huge difference</i>	Expert
Policy v delivery	<i>DfE is all policy people and no delivery</i>	exCS
	<i>Strategy and policy are respected far more than delivery</i>	exCS
	<i>Core teams are not involved in early stages of flagship problems, its SpAds, PAs, strategy teams, then a less capable team is left to implement. There is huge activity, until announcement then its left with a lower profile delivery team.</i>	Expert
Training	<i>There is a greater need to train CSs within their department, that is, how education really works. There used to be a computer system that held records of old policies and outcomes. It was last updated in 1996.</i>	Ac
	<i>We need a DfE who know policy making, but also know education and who have an education background</i>	MP

DfE advice: fast turnaround, favoured contacts and lacking front-line input

Issue	Quote	Source
Fast turnaround time for advice	<i>A consultation period with the University department takes place too quickly, with responses required in a matter of weeks</i>	Ac
	<i>The Treasury cycle means there is usually little time, Ministers are waiting for results</i>	exCS
	<i>The DfE is in constant procurement of research and services and the time scale is always too short</i>	exCS
	<i>Eyes glaze over if you talk about "two to three years time"</i>	Expert
	<i>Politicians stop listening when CS says that the time scales are unrealistic</i>	Expert
	<i>It's a fact of life - political decision making is always too quick</i>	SpAd
	<i>The Perm Sec took formal direction on XX because he said it would take longer</i>	SpAd
Favoured contacts	<i>DfE have limited connections with the sector and are quite unimaginative, they tend to go back to the same ones</i>	exCS
	<i>The DfE need to talk and consult more widely, but are afraid to because they won't like the opinions they receive. As a result, they stay with a small group.</i>	Expert
	<i>The 7th floor don't trust the CS so they go to their own experts - so they have bypassed the CS</i>	exCS
	<i>Education policy consultation is driven by a small group of people</i>	Expert
	<i>There is no formal process to gain expertise, some Ministers have working groups, individual CSs use their own networks; rese archers, unions, OFSTED and OFQUAL can all have influence; it is ad-hoc and not consistent</i>	SpAd
	<i>Ministers believe in a small group who are on their side, they are very selective in who they talk to. They think others will wreck initiatives by leaking and destroying progress</i>	Expert
Lack of front line contact	<i>CCs are keen and willing to learn from externals, but contact is episodic and not embedded</i>	exCS
	<i>DfE is not good at taking practical advice and listening to experience</i>	exCS
	<i>There is a need to know what happens in the classroom. Bring in users and practitioners as much as possible</i>	SpAd
	<i>There is a culture in CS that "people will come to us"</i>	SpAd
	<i>Its necessary to get out and visit schools because generally CSs don't have an idea about what it is like in different schools in different areas</i>	exCS
	<i>Stakeholder and advisory groups are needed to understand urban, rural and inner city areas; different LAs; differences in school leaders; the unions and sector bodies and so on</i>	exCS
	<i>Stakeholder and advisory groups are quite well used but sometimes genuinely, sometimes to pay lip service to consultation</i>	exCS
<i>Teachers in residence is on a small scale</i>	Expert	
<i>Very few people have worked in schools, there is little engagement with people doing on the ground work</i>	SpAd	

DfE research: difficult to obtain, mixed quality and political pressure

Issue	Quote	Source
Accessibility	<i>Most academic journals are being paywalls, the CS can't always get hold of these, or at least, not quickly enough. It might take two weeks to agree who's budget pays for a single report</i>	SpAd
	<i>There is no departmental function to get research reports</i>	SpAd
	<i>We need to make the academic contribution more relevant</i>	SpAd
Using research	<i>Evidence based reform should include stakeholder engagement - what are the challenges on the ground?</i>	Expert
	<i>If you don't have knowledge in the department, you do need to have it on tap.</i>	SpAd
	<i>The DfE commission a lot of research, but few people read it</i>	SpAd
	<i>Research cannot be used on its own, have to talk to practitioners as well</i>	MP
Poor consultation	<i>Consultation does not change anything substantially, its usually about finessing things</i>	Expert
	<i>CS consultation isn't systematic. Should take ideas out to users, test and modify. The User Centred Design Groups are driven by CS. They are superficial questions and responses, not really working with experts. Its an improvement, but does not work properly</i>	Expert
Overseas research	<i>Overseas evidence is critical but it can't just be lifted from one country to another</i>	SpAd
	<i>Evidence can be used very selectively, need to look at what was trying to be achieved within particular countries. You cannot import ideas and just drop them in</i>	MP
Long term planning	<i>There is not enough system thinking, given the many journeys available on school improvement</i>	MP
	<i>Results in education may take 10 years to really show - the policy cycle time is too short</i>	exCS
	<i>Manifesto writing engages people who don't know enough. There is a lack of institutional history and evidence at a macro level. Ideally people would go back to old CS and Ministers to discuss. Once the manifesto is written, it causes all sorts of problems.</i>	Expert
Political pressure	<i>CS can be marginalised if they speak truth to power</i>	MP
	<i>There is huge pressure on the Civil Service to bend and filter evidence, to retro fit evidence to support policy proposals</i>	Expert

The DfE has to navigate a challenging system and protect teacher motivation

Issue	Quote	Source
Inconsistencies in current system	<i>We have moved into a culture of control through process, forms and bureaucracy.... And bureaucracy always expands</i>	SpAd
	<i>We're hitting diminishing marginal returns with the amount of regulation and policy</i>	SpAd
	<i>Traditional accountability is hitting marginal returns - the system is not where anyone wants it to be</i>	SpAd
	<i>We need to go back to earned autonomy</i>	SpAd
There is a leadership deficit	<i>We bet the farm in 2010 on academies but there are not enough capable leaders</i>	SpAd
	<i>Autonomy requires great heads, but we don't have enough in the system</i>	ExCS
Damage to teacher motivation	<i>There is a drive towards uniformity, that pays little regards to mass mobilization and the consideration of recipients</i>	Ac
	<i>The "what" is easy, the "how" is important, but understanding the "who" and explaining the "why" is most important</i>	Expert
	<i>The form of implementation effects social aspects like behavioural incentives and this is not thought through. This is not generally recognised as an issue.</i>	SpAd
	<i>The first priority is to rebuild trust with the teaching professions</i>	SpAd
	<i>There is insufficient recognition of what is coming through [to teachers]</i>	SpAd
	<i>Motivation is now the largest issue - my position has shifted on this</i>	SpAd
	<i>There has been a loss of teacher individuality, we are becoming less creative</i>	MP
	<i>FE is characterised by high staff turnover and casualised labour, the Early Years is the same</i>	SpAd
<i>Empowerment is part of the rhetoric but politicians want to empower favourites. You can be empowered if you do what we want you to do</i>	Expert	