

Co-designing the future of learning & development in the Civil Service

A user-centred approach to transforming how civil servants build skills, knowledge and relationships

Policy Lab & Government Skills, August 2025



Navigating this report

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Annexes **Annex A and B**

Annex A: Methodology provides further detail on the research approach.

Annex B: Future L&D scenarios provides an overview of the future scenarios used during the co-design workshops.



Section 1

Introduction



This section outlines why we undertook this research, the rationale for using participatory methods and an overview of civil servants' perceptions of their learning.

Context and challenge question

Policy Lab, government’s cross-cutting innovation team, partnered with the Government Skills team in the Cabinet Office to understand civil servants’ perspectives on improving learning and development (L&D) in government. This work supports the development of a new L&D model which prioritises skills, knowledge and relationships. The central question was:

How can we design a user-centred Civil Service learning & development system?

The Government Skills team oversees L&D provision for 500,000 civil servants. The current system is reliant on a range of internal and external training providers with varying levels of service provision. The team is carrying out an ambitious transformation initiative to build an internally driven skills model to ensure that civil servants have the skills, knowledge and networks to drive meaningful change in government.

Co-designing the future vision of learning & development

Building on ethnographic research conducted by Policy Lab¹ in 2024, this project expanded the findings to sense-check key challenges and engage end users in the initial round of co-designing scalable, user-centred solutions for long-term skills development. At the same time, it provided an opportunity to test participatory methods to inform future engagement on the reform.

To achieve these aims, the project focused on two key stages:

Online ‘collective intelligence’ debate – Using the platform Pol.is, we facilitated a dynamic, evolving online discussion with 653 self-selected civil servants, recruited through diverse channels – one of the biggest debates of this kind within the UK government. Insights were gathered and analysed using advanced statistics and machine learning, and the data was used as the basis for co-design activities.

Co-design workshops – The second phase engaged 61 civil servants in two-hour workshops across London, Bristol and Manchester. A range of creative activities built upon the online debate’s insights, and helped participants turn them into suggestions for tangible solutions and future system visions.

Phase 1

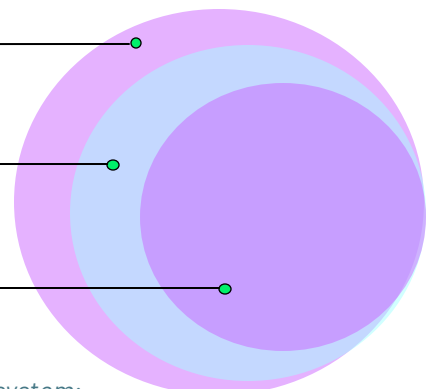
Online debate
653 participants

Phase 2

3 co-design workshops
61 participants

Phase 3

Synthesis and report writing



1. To read our last report see: Cabinet Office (2024). [Navigating the skills system: an ethnographic lens on learning and development within the Civil Service](#). GOV.UK.

Reading this report

This project combines a large-scale online debate with in-depth co-design workshops, which offers a rich and unique methodological framework for engaging civil servants in shaping the future of learning and development. This approach has distinct ways of interacting with participants, generating evidence and structuring outputs. It is therefore important to properly frame the findings.

Purpose of the report

This report offers a user-centred vision for what Civil Service learning and development could become.

Drawing on a combination of wide-scale engagement and in-depth dialogue, it brings forward ideas directly from civil servants about what's working, what could improve and how change might take shape.

The findings are not intended as a comprehensive evaluation of the current system. Instead, they provide some reflections on challenges, opportunities and actions that were shared by those who volunteered to participate in the project.

These insights are designed to inform decision-making, spark discussion and shape further work on L&D reform.

While the dataset is rich and could support further analysis - such as diving into specific areas of interest or mapping sentiment across different opinion groups or demographics - this report focuses on surfacing broad, overarching and practical insights that can inform decisions on priority areas and further development and testing of approaches.

Methodological context

The project combined a large-scale online debate with targeted co-design workshops, each designed to surface civil servants' experiences and ideas from different angles.

Participation in both stages was voluntary and open to all civil servants. Although clear recruitment criteria were used and no major gaps were identified in the final sample, the findings do not represent a statistically representative view of the entire Civil Service workforce.

The online debate produced a larger, predominantly quantitative dataset based on broad open questions, whilst the co-design workshops generated deeper qualitative insights, which were guided by prompts, designed to encourage lateral thinking and creative visioning. Not all participants contributed to every activity, and not every theme was explored by all groups. As such, the findings should be understood as indicative of wider patterns, rather than exhaustive or definitive.

More detail on the approach, can be found in **Section 3** and **Annex A**.

The case for co-designing the reform

For learning and development reform to be truly effective, it must be shaped by the people directly affected by it. In this project, we have engaged civil servants through participatory and user-centred digital and in-person methods to capture their lived experiences, thus ensuring that any future changes align with real workplace needs rather than top-down assumptions. The insights and learnings from the project highlight the importance of user-centred design in creating an accessible, engaging and impactful L&D system in the future.

Ensuring user-driven solutions

Traditional top-down approaches to L&D can feel disconnected from workplace realities and could make learning seem rigid and generic. Participatory methods, such as collective intelligence and co-design, empower civil servants to share their experiences and imagine solutions for L&D that are relevant, accessible and aligned with their aspirations and needs.

Adapting to evolving needs of the workforce

L&D reform increasingly has to account for factors such as new ways of working, cross-sector expertise and agile learning models. Participants emphasised barriers to learning outside of their profession, grade and department and felt that the most value comes from perspectives across these silos. They also wanted support tailoring their learning to organisational and personal needs.

Increasing engagement, motivation and trust

When people actively shape their learning experiences, they are more likely to invest in them. At the same time, the sense of co-ownership promotes greater transparency and trust. Many attendees valued being given the space to come up with ideas and contribute on the future system, with one reflecting:

"[I felt] like I had been able to contribute to improve learning provisions across the Civil Service ...this felt like a really impactful thing to be involved with."

- Manchester co-design workshop participant

The inclusive nature of participatory methods can bring together disparate groups within the Civil Service and promote processes that are based on collaboration and forward-thinking.

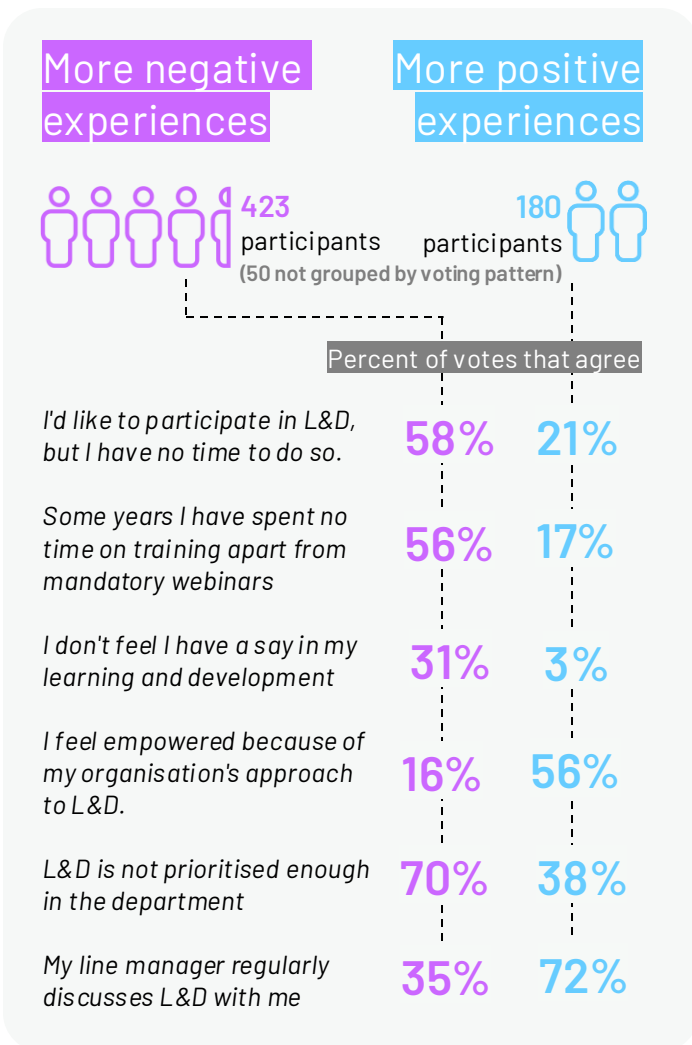
Portraits of learners in the Civil Service

Here we present a snapshot from the online debate, focusing on how learners perceive the current L&D offer and their aspirations for its future. The debate revealed two distinct opinion groups, reflecting notably different experiences within the existing L&D landscape. This section sets out these contrasting perspectives, alongside the common themes that emerged across both groups.

Two kinds of L&D experience

The first group, made up of about **two thirds of participants**, was much more likely to express negative experiences of L&D in contrast to the second group. For example, not being able to access learning and development beyond mandatory training. The second group, which made up just less than a **one third of**

participants were much more likely to express positive experiences of L&D across the board. They felt empowered by their organisation’s approach to L&D with the majority having regular conversations about L&D with their line managers. Very few in the second group reported that they didn’t have a say in their L&D in contrast to the first group where it was almost a third of those who voted. There were many other similar examples in the data which would merit a dedicated analysis.



Motivated learners

There were also areas of strong alignment across the groups, especially when it came to learner motivation. Both groups strongly agreed that they had an inquisitive mindset (both **84%** agreement) and that learning was meaningful for them (**74%** and **94%** respectively).

Almost all expressed interest in learning a range of things including outside of their role (**91%** and **94%**) and would need to learn new skills in the next five year due to the changing nature of work (**83%** and **75%**).

Overall, this portrait highlights a strong desire for learning and upskilling, but also unequal experiences regarding ownership of and access to learning and development opportunities.

Section 2

Themes & findings



This section presents the project's findings across six emerging themes, structured to reflect both the current state of the L&D system and user proposed solutions.

Challenges and opportunities in the current system

This page presents a brief overview of overarching feelings towards the current system, based on insights from the online debate. It serves as a diagnostic to highlight key systemic challenges and shared perceptions before zooming into specific areas for reform and proposed solutions.

Shared perceptions of the current system

Of the **653** civil servants who participated in the online debate, an overwhelming majority (**90–96%**) affirmed the fundamental importance of L&D. Nearly all (**95%**) of those who responded see L&D as a *shared responsibility [...] and agree that we should all engage in with intent*¹.

Despite a strong commitment to learning, participants also surfaced some frustration with the current L&D provision.

Many insights suggest that the existing offer does not fully support employees' day-to-day responsibilities or their longer-term career development, pointing to a need for more relevant, continuous and strategic learning opportunities.

For example, **62%** of people who voted felt that much of the L&D available was too generic to be directly applicable to their roles, while **55%** felt materials were [...] *out of date*.

The lack of strategic guidance is further evidenced by the fact that only **18%** of managers feel informed about the skills needed for the future of their department or the civil service as a whole.

The current Civil Service learning platform, intended as a central resource for L&D, was perceived by **66%** of voters to be *uninspiring and difficult to use*.

Just over half of civil servants who voted (**56%**) find mandatory training too long, rigid, and patronising, admitting to often skipping through poorly designed materials. And just under half (**43%**) revealed *in some years they have spent no time on training apart from mandatory webinars*.

On balance **50%** of voters felt that *mandatory training refreshes their knowledge in key areas of work*.

The debate surfaced strong enthusiasm for personalised and flexible learning. **91%** expressed the belief that learning should *awaken curiosity and passion [...]*, and a matching percentage want to be accountable and have a say in what they learn. This enthusiasm for self-directed learning is already reflected in the current system where only a fifth of respondents (**21%**) agree that they do not have a say in their learning.

The demand for individualisation extends to a desire for learning that caters to different communication methods and learning styles, with **63%** of voters feeling this is lacking in the current system.

In a similar vein, inclusivity is a priority for a high proportion of civil servants. Between **88% and 89%** of voters stressed the importance of ensuring L&D is accessible to part-time staff, disabled colleagues, and neurodiverse individuals.

1. Italics indicates direct quotes from statements or co-design, other statements may have been edited for clarity

Overview of themes

This section summarises a broad range of insights shared by civil servants about the current learning and development system as well as suggestions for the future.

The findings are drawn from two main sources:

- the **online collective intelligence debate**, which captured a wide range of reflections, suggestions and lived experiences relating to the current L&D system; and
- **in-person co-design workshops**, shaped by prompts developed from the initial debate insights, which guided participants to build on these reflections in an unconventional and innovative way. They enabled participants to collectively and creatively explore what should be kept, changed or added – along with how those changes could take shape in practice.

The findings are organised into **six themes**:

RELEVANT & APPLIED LEARNING



L&D should be hands-on, adaptable and directly relevant to workplace needs

ALIGNING INDIVIDUAL & STRATEGIC NEEDS



L&D should help civil servants grow while supporting government priorities

NETWORKS & KNOWLEDGE SHARING



L&D should extend beyond individual courses, promoting lasting connections and knowledge sharing

DYNAMIC LEARNING SPACES & DELIVERY MODES



L&D should give people space & opportunity to discover their ideal learning modes

NAVIGATING & ACCESSING THE SYSTEM



L&D should be clear, accessible and user-friendly so civil servants can easily locate and engage with it

CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING



L&D should be embedded into workplace culture and civil servants' careers

Each theme covers:

- a **summary of the challenges**, as articulated in the online debate and workshops;
- a set of **proposed solutions**, some frequently echoed across groups as well as more innovative suggestions from participants; and
- three **key participant-led recommendations**, distilled from user input. These are intended to help frame the core priorities and actions for future reform.

WHAT WE HEARD:

RELEVANT & APPLIED LEARNING

CURRENT SYSTEM

What participants shared

Across both the online debate and co-design, participants voiced concern that the current L&D system often lacks practical relevance. Many felt it does not sufficiently reflect the evolving needs of civil servants or support the application of learning in day-to-day work.

A recurring concern was the disconnect between theoretical learning and practical application—both in content design and post-course consolidation. In the online debate, **92%** agreed that practical experience helps learning genuinely sink in. Co-design participants reinforced this, sharing how interactive activities brought knowledge to life: *“It was some skills training first, and then it became quite interactive [...] probably one of the best experiences of immediately trying out the new skills.”*

Despite strong appetite for applied learning, many felt follow-up after training is lacking. **75%** called for all learning activities to include a plan for workplace consolidation, and **79%** said this is often overlooked.

Hands-on learning was also seen as vital for building soft skills like strategic thinking, collaboration and confidence. **89%** of online debate participants agreed these skills should be prioritised equally in the L&D offer. Beyond structured courses, **62%** felt the current L&D offer is too detached from real-world work. In workshops, participants explored embedded development opportunities—such as secondments, shadowing, coaching and mentoring. These approaches were viewed as more personalised and relevant. One participant, reflecting on coaching, said it put *“the onus on you to figure out what you need to do,”* describing this as *“empowering”* because *“it forces you to act rather than just wait to be taught.”*

FUTURE SYSTEM

What participants want to see

Stronger participatory learning – Leverage firsthand expertise and experimental ‘labs’ to ensure relevance for day-to-day jobs.

Practical application and consolidation – Reinforce learning with peer-to-peer engagement and apprenticeship-style models that combine theory and practice.

Recognise informal learning – Reflect on informal on-the-job learnings such as finding out about a new software feature or new ways of working.

“We used to do job shadowing because you could sit and learn on the job, and if you’re in a team that does this, you can learn so much more.” – **Manchester co-design participant**

FUTURE SYSTEM (cont.)

Quotes from co-design

Learning by doing – Expand hands-on approaches, including innovation hubs where people come together to work on real-world scenarios and the chance to experiment with new tools, to enable applied learning.

“Fully accredited learning only goes so far, it needs to be rooted in practical application” – **Bristol co-design participant**

“I recently attended a course on influencing and persuading, which was quite interactive and genuinely valuable. It emphasised that while having a common skill set is important, it's essential to have the opportunity to practise those skills in real scenarios.”

– **Manchester co-design participant**

Hybrid models – Blend formal training with real-world application and coaching to enhance impact.

EMERGING PARTICIPANT-LED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarised from participant suggestions

RELEVANT & APPLIED LEARNING

L&D should be hands-on, adaptable and directly relevant to workplace needs

- 1.1 **Combine learning with daily work** – Better recognise new skills learned on the job through periodic reflection and recording to ensure learning is continuous, relevant and recognises practice.
- 1.2 **Provide places to experiment** – Whether more applied, simulated scenarios embedded in courses or time allocated on-the-job for experimenting – safe spaces for development allows for consolidated learning which is relevant to roles.
- 1.3 **Strengthen real-world experience opportunities** – Expand secondments, shadowing and coaching to ensure long-term practical development beyond theoretical learning.

WHAT WE HEARD:

NETWORKS & KNOWLEDGE SHARING

CURRENT SYSTEM

What participants shared

Participants emphasised that relationships, networks and collaboration are crucial for professional development, especially within mission-based models shaping the Civil Service. Despite their importance, **92%** of online debate participants felt that current training doesn't adequately prepare civil servants for complex, cross-cutting missions, with **65%** calling for training to be used to establish networks across departments and peer groups.

Many expressed that without structured collaboration, civil servants struggle to access diverse expertise and unlock opportunities for innovation and knowledge-sharing across different parts of the system. As one participant put it: *"Every different part of government has something valuable to bring, our varied lived experiences are what enrich our learning."*

Peer exchange emerged as a particularly powerful development tool. Whether formal, via mentoring, coaching, shadowing and secondments, or informal – such as networking and collaborating – these experiences were described as transformative. One participant shared: *"The most crucial and helpful learning and development I've received is actually from being able to take part in events [...] hearing their experiences and talking to them and networking."*

While there was an agreement across the board that formal training provides valuable skills, **89%** of debate participants felt it doesn't nurture lasting professional connections. Many noted that without embedded peer networks or communities of practice, the impact of learning fades quickly and misses the potential of being applied effectively in day-to-day work. A co-design workshop participant reflected: *"By coming together and building networks we can really amplify what we learn."*

FUTURE SYSTEM

What participants want to see

Structured mentoring – Support organised mentoring, including reverse mentoring, possibly supported by AI for matching civil servants across government.

"I used to be a parish councillor, and those local community hubs taught me the value of sharing knowledge. I believe that by coming together – and building networks – we can really amplify what we learn." – **Manchester co-design participant**

"Mentoring is a shared responsibility... making peer learning a valued part of performance and progression." – **London co-design participant**

"The most crucial and helpful learning and development... is actually from being able to take part in events, making culture conferences... and networking... that's what's helped me most." – **Bristol co-design participant**

Communities of practice and action learning sets – Create post-training networks for supporting ongoing learning and experimentation.

FUTURE SYSTEM (cont.)

What participants want to see

Secondments & shadowing – Support secondment and placement opportunities and expand them beyond government for fresh perspectives.

"There needs to be a real understanding of the local workforce, what their needs are, so that the regional hubs are more relevant and inclusive." – **Manchester co-design participant**

"We're trying to join up with [consultancies]- doing talks with people interested in life sciences— so we're actively trying to do cross-sector events." – **London co-design participant**

Cross-departmental collaboration – Create training offers that reduce duplication and enhance cross-government knowledge-sharing.

Cross-sector learning – Partner with businesses, universities and international organisations to bring in external expertise.

EMERGING PARTICIPANT-LED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarised from participant suggestions

NETWORKS & KNOWLEDGE SHARING

L&D should extend beyond individual courses, promoting lasting connections and knowledge sharing

- 2.1 **Embed peer learning & mentoring** – Prioritise structured mentoring, expert guidance and role models to facilitate long-term collaboration.
- 2.2 **Establish peer networks and communities of practice** – Create structured spaces for ongoing mutual learning and cross-department engagement.
- 2.3 **Break silos with cross-government & cross-sector learning** – Expand secondments, job swaps and external placements both in the private sector and across the civil service to bring in diverse expertise and fresh perspectives and understand the needs of those in your delivery chain.

WHAT WE HEARD:

NAVIGATING & ACCESSING THE SYSTEM

CURRENT SYSTEM

What participants shared

Participants across the project shared that navigating the Civil Service L&D offer remains unnecessarily complex and disjointed. *"I think the system is a bit clunky and I think if that just had a bit of reworking, that could be better,"* said one participant.

Difficulty accessing learning across platforms and remembering multiple logins were frequent concerns (**83%**), with **71%** stating multi-platform access was inefficient. This issue was widely discussed in co-design workshops, where participants strongly favoured a single platform that helps learners navigate, access and engage with the learning offer from anywhere. One participant noted: *"We need a system that's accessible on any personal device [...] so that no matter what technology you have, you can get the learning you need."*

Many participants also called for personalised alerts for relevant opportunities (**78%**). However, there was hesitation about whether the

personalisation should be achieved with the help of AI. For example, only **48%** supported the use of AI assistants for navigation, with workshops consistently highlighting the importance of preserving human touchpoints in the learning process.

Access was seen as uneven across departments and working patterns. A single access point for L&D had **69%** support for improving fairness across departments, and **89%** in the online debate called for flexible scheduling and virtual options to better support part-time staff.

Line managers were recognised as important navigators in L&D journeys, but often viewed as barriers. **74%** of online participants said managers can block access to professional development, and roughly half (**49%**) weren't currently actively encouraged to take up learning offers. Hence, there was broad agreement in the workshops and the debate (**75%** agreement) that training pathways should not depend on individual manager approval.

FUTURE SYSTEM

What participants want to see

Centralised, intuitive platform – Create a single L&D hub with improved tagging, metadata and user ratings to enhance course selection and reduce duplication.

"It's so difficult to find what learning is relevant to you... we need something curated that pushes learning based on role and aspiration." – **London co-design participant**

"I think the single most important thing we could do is try to standardise the experience people have across departments." – **Bristol co-design participant**

Guided learning – Use AI, learning champions and career coaches to help civil servants find relevant training tailored to their needs.

FUTURE SYSTEM (cont.)

What participants want to see

More direct access to learning –

Provide personal training budgets and learning offers that don't require lengthy approval processes.

"When it gets busy... the first thing people ditch is learning... So there needs to be something in place to safeguard it, make it 'protected time' so it's not the first thing squeezed out." – **Bristol co-design participant**

Stronger managerial support – Equip line managers with tools to track learning, understand skills gaps and ensure they facilitate rather than hinder development.

Protected time for learning –

Safeguard dedicated L&D time to allow meaningful engagement without work pressures.

"No one gives me any time to do [learning]... you have to create a system where your line manager is accountable for you having done your five days." – **London co-design participant**

"People don't know what's available... I just don't think it's well known that you can justify [carving out time to do learning]. It's not accessible enough." – **Bristol co-design participant**

EMERGING PARTICIPANT-LED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarised from participant suggestions

NAVIGATING & ACCESSING THE SYSTEM

L&D should be clear, accessible and user-friendly so civil servants can easily locate and engage with it

- 3.1 **Develop an all-encompassing, user-friendly platform** – Create a centralised system with an emphasis on intuitive navigation, tagging and recommendations for easy access and more relevant training outcomes.
- 3.2 **Strive for increased inclusivity in access** – Ensure training opportunities are available across grades, locations and cater for different working patterns. Ensure alternative formats for neurodiverse individuals and those using assistive technology, leaving no civil servant behind.
- 3.3 **Reduce managerial gatekeeping** – Empower learners by minimising reliance on their line managers and providing direct access to development opportunities.

WHAT WE HEARD:

ALIGNING INDIVIDUAL & STRATEGIC NEEDS

CURRENT SYSTEM

What participants shared

Participants consistently emphasised that L&D should serve both individual aspirations and broader organisational goals. Yet many felt the current offer lacks clear guidance on in-demand skills and career pathways, making it hard to plan development with purpose. One workshop participant described it as *“a balance between reflecting what the department needs and supporting workforce transformation or management alongside what the individual needs.”*

In the online debate, **83%** agreed that identifying “critical civil service skills gaps” would help target learning more effectively, which was echoed in co-design workshops. One participant said: *“Your training must directly address what will help you do your job better and ultimately support our government’s objectives.”*

However, participants pointed out the importance of balancing strategic aims with personal aspirations. **87%** in the online debate agreed that learning should incorporate individual’s future aspirations, and **84%** wanted L&D to help identify career pathways based on skills and experience.

Line managers were seen as essential in bridging the individual and organisational aspects. **76%** of online participants felt their managers’ understanding of long-term vision was crucial for shaping relevant learning offers.

FUTURE SYSTEM

What participants want to see

Identifying learning gaps – Conduct transparent audits on high-demand skills to help civil servants shape learning that aligns with workplace needs.

Embedding future skills – Strengthen pathways for innovation, digital skills and adaptability to prepare staff for emerging challenges.

“One key risk is if we’re all just doing what we want at any point and it’s not actually aligned with the bigger, organisational goals or objectives. We’re all just sort of going off in our own directions.” – **London co-design participant**

Leveraging change managers – Involve leaders in L&D design to align learning with Civil Service reform.

FUTURE SYSTEM (cont.)

What participants want to see

Expanding beyond job proficiency –

Support upskilling and personal interests to enable broader expertise beyond current roles.

Structured learning tracking – Implement a cross-government system, such as learning passports, to recognise acquired skills for career progression.

“If I want to move into policy, I want the AI tool to tell me: you have these skills, you need to build these others.” – Bristol co-design participant

“There should be a skills framework... so if you want to go down this route, these are the three or four skills you need to prioritise... Makes it far easier for the line manager and the individual” – Bristol co-design

EMERGING PARTICIPANT-LED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarised from participant suggestions

ALIGNING INDIVIDUAL & STRATEGIC NEEDS

L&D should help civil servants grow while supporting government priorities

- 4.1 **Revamp mandatory training for real impact** – Shift from tick-box compliance to practical, skills-based learning, focusing on essential workplace competencies.
- 4.2 **Future-proof L&D** – Encourage a culture of innovation by promoting test-learn-iterate approaches to current challenges. This includes creating space to explore the use of emerging tools, such as AI to better understand modern and evolving practice.
- 4.3 **Broaden learning beyond job proficiency** – Expand upskilling and personal growth opportunities.

WHAT WE HEARD:

DYNAMIC LEARNING SPACES & DELIVERY MODES

CURRENT SYSTEM

What participants shared

Participants in both the online debate and co-design workshops highlighted the importance of varied and accessible learning formats, calling for an L&D offer that better reflects different preferences, contexts and working patterns.

A strong theme was dissatisfaction with passive online learning: **86%** of online participants felt that digital training relies too heavily on reading, with little opportunity for active engagement. For example, **91%** in the online debate agreed that being able to ask questions is key to meaningful learning. Many felt that in-person settings are better designed to support feedback, with **70%** calling for more face-to-face delivery. One workshop participant shared that *"there has to be an option for in-person interaction because that's where organic, real-life engagement happens."*

There was also a clear appetite for blended provision and more diverse sources of learning. **89%** in the online debate agreed that L&D should cater to different styles and preferences, with **77%** supporting a mix of internal and external delivery.

Participants across the board agreed that location of L&D is paramount. **78%** preferred facilitated learning outside the office to reduce distractions.

However, it was widely felt that the current provision is too often limited to London, with **29%** saying that travel could be a barrier. This was particularly evident in regional co-design workshops, where participants shared how they are expected to travel to London, sometimes for multiple days, to access training. Many mentioned co-design workshops as a positive example of how training could be organised regionally.

FUTURE SYSTEM

What participants want to see

Expand in-person training - Expand face-to-face options to ensure civil servants can benefit from interactive and discussion-led learning.

Experiment with delivery formats - Offer different delivery formats, such as bitesize learning, short workshops, immersive sessions and gamified experiences. This allows learners to engage at their own pace and in ways that suit their needs.

"Keep in-person... that's the big factor—we've gone virtual all the time and it doesn't work the same." - **London co-design participant**

"Whether it's a dedicated physical hub or an AI-powered digital learning platform, the delivery needs to be dynamic and flexible. We should be able to choose our own learning pace and even switch between online and in-person modes when necessary." - **Bristol co-design participant**

FUTURE SYSTEM (cont.)

What participants want to see

Optimise learning environments – Use dedicated learning venues to reduce workplace distractions.

Equitable access across regions – Expand regional hubs to ensure all civil servants can access high-quality face-to-face learning and benefit from collaboration and networking.

Provide different lenses on learning – Help learners build learning programs that solve actual problems or help with their career aspirations not just based on current job role.

“The difficulty in setting aside on learning hours is that nobody else is on a learning hour at that time. So what if within departments, like in Cabinet Office, they said, on a Thursday between 2 and 3 pm, it’s learning? You do not make any meetings with anyone. And it’s just department-wide.” – **Manchester co-design participant**

“I want it to be specific so I can say I’ve got to do a project on [X] and tell me what I need to know – AI tailoring based on more than just job title.” – **Manchester co-design participant**

EMERGING PARTICIPANT-LED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarised from participant suggestions

DYNAMIC LEARNING SPACES & DELIVERY MODES

L&D should give people space & opportunity to discover their ideal learning modes

- 5.1 **Expand access to face-to-face learning** – Increase regional in-person training, ensuring civil servants outside London can access interactive sessions.
- 5.2 **Diversify learning formats** – Experiment with bitesize sessions, gamification, immersive experiences and flexible learning programs that solve real problems.
- 5.3 **Create purposeful learning environments** – Use dedicated learning spaces, such as regional learning hubs or even just external venues to reduce workplace distractions, ensuring focus, collaboration and meaningful engagement.

WHAT WE HEARD:

CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING

CURRENT SYSTEM

What participants shared

Participants consistently reported that Civil Service L&D lacks sustained prioritisation, with learning often viewed as secondary to day-to-day responsibilities rather than a strategic investment in workforce development, with **83%** in the online debate feeling that it should carry equal importance to core tasks.

Engagement was seen as inconsistent across departments, in part due to limited leadership support. One workshop participant said: *"I think we need a commitment from senior civil servants level that we are a learning organisation"* and that, for example, leaders needed to make sure learners have time to learn. This was echoed in the online debate, where **77%** agreed that senior leaders should be trained in building positive learning culture.

Workshop participants often described learning culture as low and passive.

Several pointed out lack of learners' inclusion in the design of L&D content (**70% agreement**) and shared that there are lack of safe spaces for genuine experimentation and learning by trying. One workshop participant shared: *"If people feel there's too much pressure [...] going into learning, it's not safe to learn."*

The lack of motivation was also tied to recognition. **65%** felt that valuing learning more, through appraisals, applications and financial recognition, would support a stronger culture of development across the Civil Service.

Concerns over patchy training quality also surfaced. Participants highlighted weak evaluation systems and a lack of structured feedback or assessment. In the online debate, **89%** argued for stronger monitoring of effectiveness of learning programs.

FUTURE SYSTEM

What participants want to see

Leadership involvement – Leaders actively engage in training, discuss development and prioritise emotional intelligence.

Evaluation & impact tracking – Embed feedback loops and measurable assessments to ensure training meets business needs and improves job performance.

"Learning isn't a one-off event - it should be embedded into our daily work. You should always be learning, not just doing an annual course but building a culture where development is the norm." - **Manchester co-design participant**

"I want it [the learning platform] alongside me... not logging in separately... just want something I can integrate into my day-to-day." - **London co-design participant**

FUTURE SYSTEM (cont.)

What participants want to see

Improved induction – Provide pre-start training, streamlined onboarding and structured mentorship for new employees.

Accreditation & quality assurance – Implement industry-recognised accreditation, peer reviews and expert evaluations to ensure better quality assurance.

Recognition and incentives – Introduce clearer, more structured rewards to encourage participation beyond mandatory learning

"You need to keep that learning all the way through your career and in my experience many people do not." – **Manchester co-design participant**

"There's no recognition for L&D at the moment... Sometimes that means it can get put to the wayside. People don't value it enough for themselves." – **Bristol co-design participant**

EMERGING PARTICIPANT-LED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarised from participant suggestions

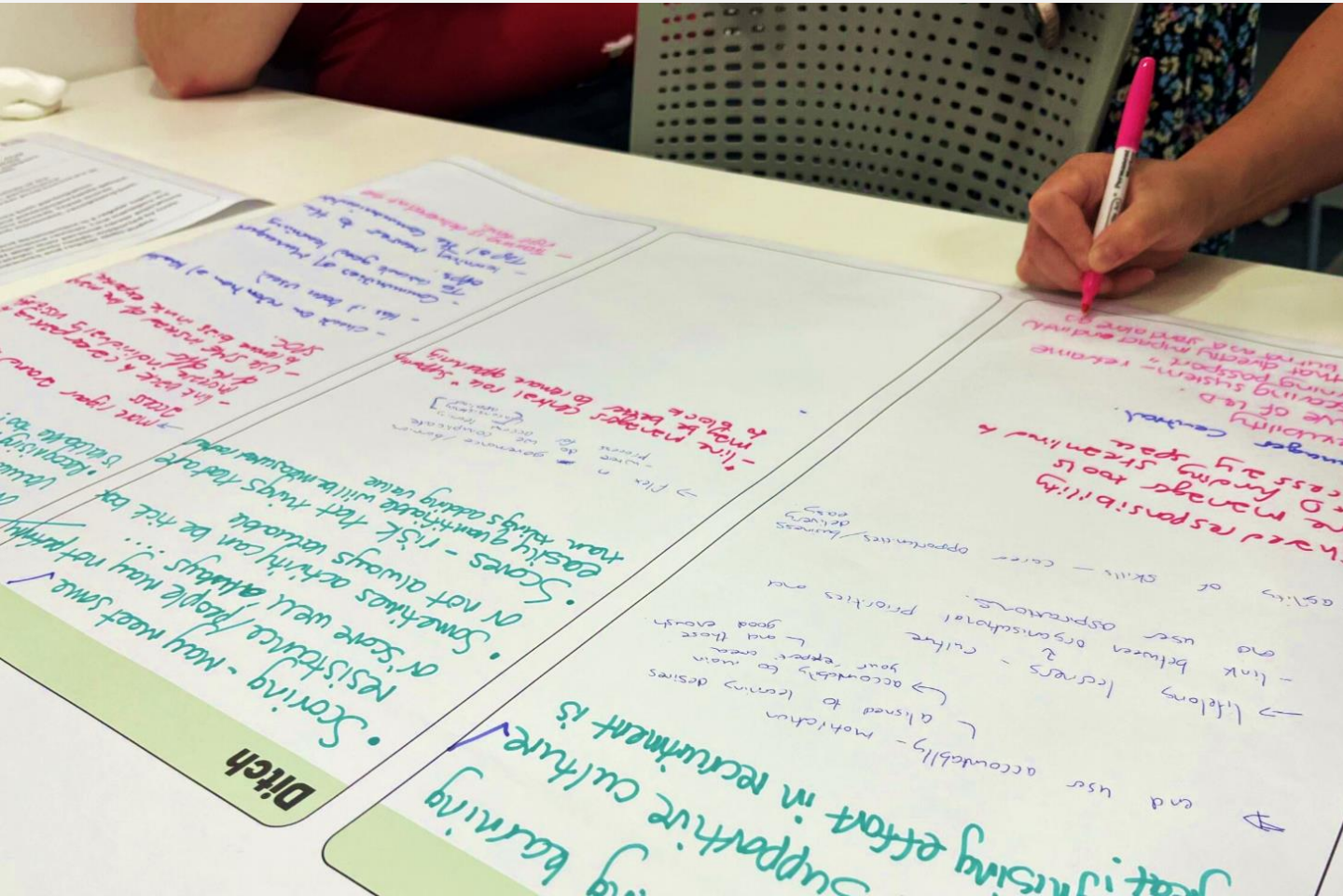
CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING

L&D should be embedded into workplace culture and civil servants' careers

- 6.1 **Promote senior learning champions** – Ensure leaders actively champion L&D, embedding professional development into workplace culture.
- 6.2 **Strengthen quality assurance** – Establish clear evaluation mechanisms, peer reviews and accreditation to ensure training is measurable and impactful.
- 6.3 **Motivate engagement through incentives** – Introduce performance-linked learning, career recognition and structured rewards to incentivise learning within current roles as well as future roles making L&D compelling for people regardless of professional ambitions.

Section 3

Methodology



This section explores the methodological approach, combining large-scale engagement through an online 'collective intelligence' debate with in-depth co-design workshops

From online debate to co-design

Overview of our method

This project combined large-scale digital engagement through an online debate with in-depth co-design workshops to explore Civil Service learning and development.

The online debate gathered broad perspectives from 653 civil servants, while three national co-design workshops facilitated deeper, participatory exploration with a total of 61 participants. By integrating insights from both methods, the approach ensured broad representation, iterative refinement and practical, user-centred outputs to inform potential future L&D reforms. For an extensive look at the methodology and a breakdown of who we spoke to please see **Annex A**.

1. Online debate

We launched an online debate to gather diverse perspectives and ideas from civil servants across the system.

2. Thematic analysis of participant statements

Contributions from the debate were analysed to identify key themes, challenges, and opportunities. Statements were categorised under five initial themes reflecting both structural and experiential aspects of the system.

3. Development of future scenarios

Based on the thematic analysis, we developed five, future-facing, fictitious scenarios to explore different possible directions for the Civil Service L&D system.

4. Scenario testing in co-design workshops

These scenarios were tested and further developed through a series of co-design workshops, where 61 participants engaged in creative activities to assess and refine them.

5. Final thematic analysis

We combined insights from the online debate and co-design workshops to undertake a thematic analysis, ensuring that all key insights were fully integrated into the final themes and conclusions presented in this report.

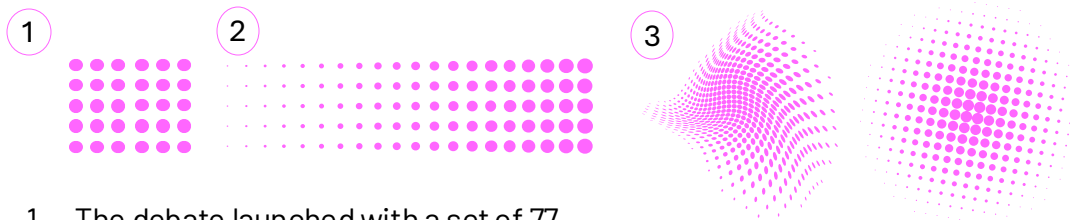


Image: A selection of prototypes for the five fictitious scenarios used in the workshops

1. Collective intelligence online debate

The process

In April 2025, we hosted a week-long online debate using Pol.is, a digital platform that gathers opinion through advanced analytics. The discussion generated valuable first-hand insights into challenges, aspirations, future ideas and points of consensus and disagreement.



1. The debate launched with a set of 77 seed statements, based on previous research and emerging policy options.
2. Participants could upvote, downvote or contribute an original statement, which created a dynamic discussion and allowed civil servants to shape the conversation by introducing new perspectives.
3. The debate was moderated by Policy Lab and the Cabinet Office.

Participants at a glance

Total participants: 653 civil servants

Department: 19 in total

Top department: Department for Work and Pensions (30%)

Top professions:

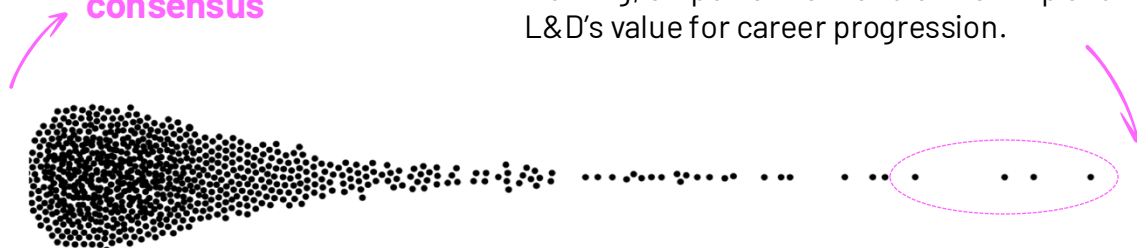
- Operational Delivery (28%)
- Human Resources (17%)
- Policy (13%)

653 CIVIL SERVANTS
129,588 VOTES CAST
1,766 ORIGINAL STATEMENTS ADDED

The results

On a whole, the debate was **not highly divisive, with lots of consensus**

Areas of division emerged around participants' firsthand experiences, including with managerial support, impact of mandatory training, empowerment and ownership and L&D's value for career progression.



Consensus statements

Divisive statements

2. Thematic analysis of participant statements

We analysed all 1,766 statements from the online debate, coding and grouping them into five initial themes. We paid special attention to statements with high levels of agreement, revealing strong consensus on shared priorities and challenges within the current Civil Service learning and development system.

3. Development of future scenarios

From the key themes and areas of consensus discovered in phase two, we developed five fictitious future L&D scenarios to explore different possible directions for the Civil Service learning and development system:

1. Local innovation and collaboration hubs
2. Radical trust and self-driven learning
3. Cutting-edge digital platform
4. Aligning ambition with organisational need
5. A centralised Civil Service university

These fictional scenarios were designed as provocations, based on insights gathered through the online debate. They helped us explore and test potential approaches to reforming L&D during the co-design workshops. See **Annex B** for details.

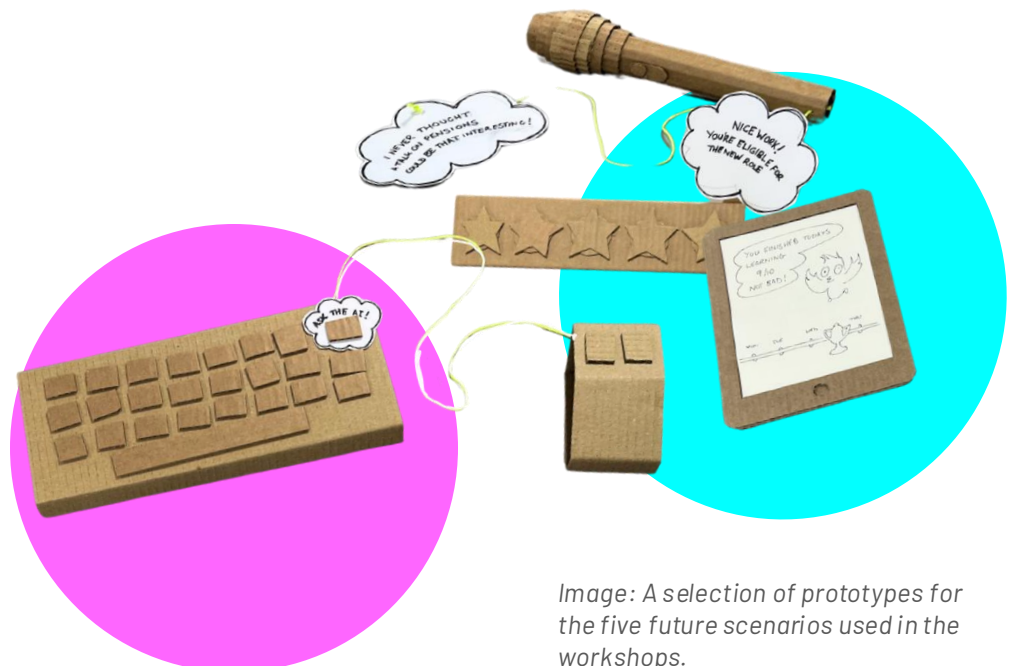


Image: A selection of prototypes for the five future scenarios used in the workshops.

4. Scenario testing in co-design workshops

In May 2025, we held three co-design workshops in London (28 participants), Bristol (11 participants) and Manchester (22 participants), engaging 61 participants from diverse backgrounds. The sessions were built on key co-design principles:

INCLUSIVE DESIGN: We ensured an inclusive approach by recruiting a diverse cohort of civil servants who were treated as equal partners in the co-design process.

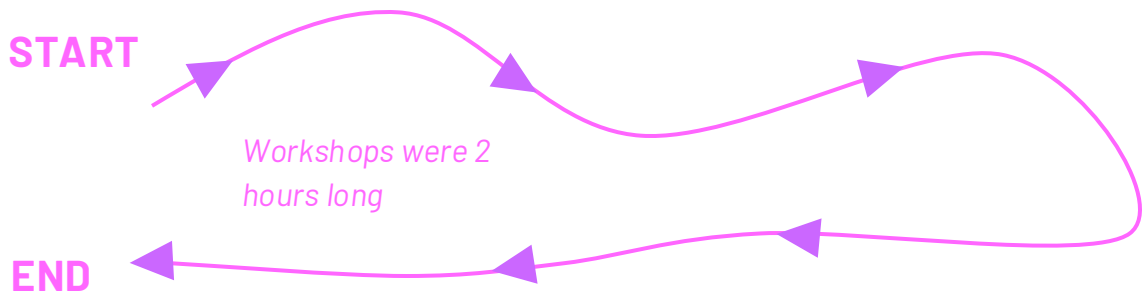
CREATIVE METHODS: Drawing from the online debate, participants engaged in interactive activities which helped to elicit different types of thinking and insights.

In the workshops, participating Civil Servants:

1. **Reflected** on past positive learning experiences using modelling clay.

2. **Explored** each future scenario in groups, deciding which elements to keep, ditch, or add.

3. **Chose** the scenario that resonated most with them and used Challenge Cards to consider inclusivity, priorities, and trade-offs.



6. **Shared** three key takeaways with the wider group in a feedback session.

5. **Used** scenario canvases to collaboratively design a detailed version of their preferred L&D model, covering benefits, risks, key features, and implementation steps.

4. **Mapped** their scenario along key spectrums (e.g. centralised vs local, structured vs flexible).

Participants at a glance

Total participants: 61 civil servants

Departments: 20 in total

Top department: Department for Work and Pensions (16)

Top professions:

- Operational Delivery: 15
- Human Resources: 8
- Policy Profession: 8



Image: A selection of prototypes for the five future scenarios used in the workshops

5. Strengths and limitations

The following table provides an overview of the key strengths and limitations of the methodology used in this project. It highlights how the methodological approach brought inclusion and creativity into an iterative engagement process, whilst also acknowledging areas that may require further attention or complementary evidence to build a fuller understanding of the subject.

Strengths	Limitations
<p>Depth & breadth: Combined online debate with co-design workshops for rich qualitative and quantitative evidence.</p>	<p>Self-selection bias: May reflect views of those who are more engaged/interested in L&D than the average civil servant.</p>
<p>Inclusive engagement: Prioritised diverse, underrepresented voices within the Civil Service.</p>	<p>Access barriers: Digital and logistical hurdles could limit participation for some.</p>
<p>Responsive design: Debate insights directly shaped workshop content in a highly iterative approach.</p>	<p>Geographic scope: Deeper regional input may be missing from locations beyond where workshops took place.</p>
<p>Creative methods: Used prototypes and participatory tools to spark imagination and lateral thinking.</p>	<p>Data complexity: The diverse sets of data required careful synthesis and research prioritisation, risking researcher bias.</p>
<p>Trust building: Civil servants were active collaborators in shaping the ideas, thus forging trust and ownership.</p>	<p>Subjective accounts: Insights are participants' personal perceptions, not objective facts.</p>
<p>Scalability: The online debate tested ideas at scale, while workshops allowed for detailed exploration, ensuring both national cross-government and local relevance.</p>	<p>Limited reach: 700 participants can't represent all Civil Service experiences.</p>
<p>Actionable outputs: Produced clear user-led recommendations and priority areas for future reform.</p>	<p>Engagement skew: Not all the data in the online debate had the same level of engagement, hence the results can be skewed.</p>
	<p>Risk of tokenism: Lack of follow-through could undermine trust created through co-design.</p>

Section 4

Looking ahead



This section has suggestions on how to utilise findings from the report going forward in designing the future of learning and development in the Civil Service.

Suggested next steps

It is important to consider how we can best utilise the findings captured in this report and the active database of over 1,200 participants who expressed interest in participating in the project. Their collective insights provide a strong foundation for driving meaningful action, ensuring that ongoing improvements in skills provision are truly user-centric.

Further development through prototyping and testing

The next step could include testing potential solutions in order to refine concrete ideas and explore how they could be implemented in practice. This might involve developing prototypes, mock-ups or design concepts of proposed initiatives, and inviting users to co-shape them through interactive tools and workshops. By actively engaging Civil Service learners throughout this process, the final solutions can better respond to real needs, helping to create a more dynamic and agile L&D system.

Further interrogation of key themes

Some of the six emerging themes identified in the report require further exploration for deeper context and to refine solutions. Additional interrogation could draw on ethnography, collective intelligence and co-design methodologies that have been previously used in this work, alongside other participatory methods designed to elicit deeper user insights and interrogate the 'how' and the 'why' in greater detail. This would ensure that key themes are thoroughly unpacked and that future initiatives remain grounded in user-centred insights with a diverse audience of civil servants.



Team

Brendan Arnold, Camilla Buchanan,
Lily McCraith, Pina Sadar, Nia Thomas

Thanks

We would like to thank participants who generously shared their time and experiences to co-create this project.

Many thanks also to those who supported recruitment and venue booking, including Cabinet Office in London, HMRC in Bristol and University of Manchester in Manchester.

For any further inquiries about this project or for future opportunities please get in touch.

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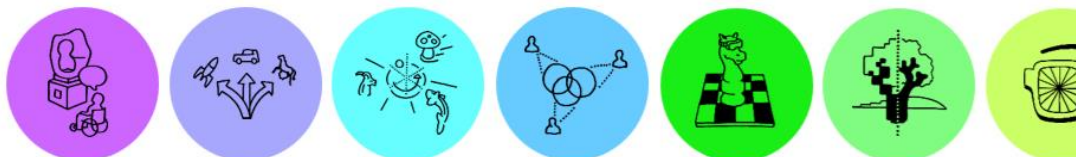
August 2025



Annex A: Methodology

An overview of methodological approaches
and project participants

Policy Lab & Government Skills, August 2025



From online debate to co-design

Recruitment and diversity of participants

To ensure broad representation, we initially recruited a diverse group of participants for the Collective Intelligence (CI) debate. This stage was open to all Civil Service employees, and we promoted it widely through multiple channels—such as staff networks, departmental communications, cross-government newsletters, and contacts from previous research projects. This open call resulted in nearly **1,400** expressions of interest, with **653** participants taking part in the online debate.

For the co-design workshops, we took a more selective approach. From those who had expressed interest in the CI debate, we invited a smaller group to participate in the workshop stage. These participants were hand-selected to ensure a balanced and representative mix of Civil Service employees.

We carefully considered factors like experience, grade, profession, gender, ethnicity, disability, and neurodiversity, as well as ensuring representation from underrepresented groups, such as lower Civil Service grades and individuals from regions outside London. Working closely with the Government Skills team, we developed recruitment criteria to ensure a diverse mix of voices.

As a result, **61** participants were invited to engage across the three co-design workshops, with the selection process closely aligned to our recruitment criteria to ensure diverse representation across the Civil Service workforce.

Category	CI DEBATE		CO-DESIGN WORKSHOPS	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Women	423	64.6%	36	59%
Men	222	33.9%	25	41%
Ethnic Minority <i>(All participants who identified as non-White British or non-White Irish, excluding those who selected "Unknown.")</i>	102	15.6%	21	34%
Disabled	96	15%	5	8%
Neurodiverse	129	20%	10	16%
Line Managers	281	43%	23	38%

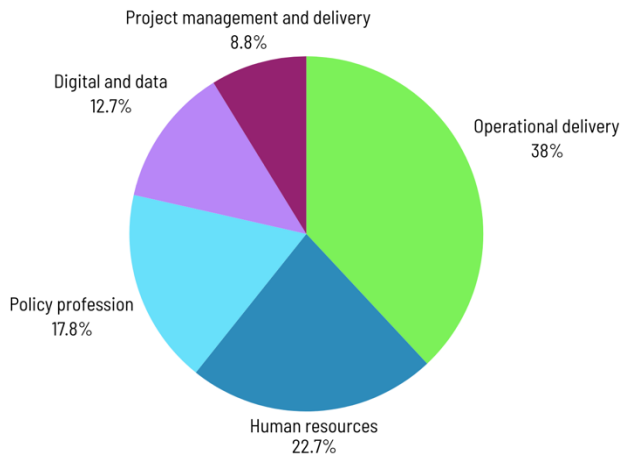
Table showing the distribution of Civil Service participants based on personal characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.) and if they had line manager duties.

From online debate to co-design

Details of who we engaged with

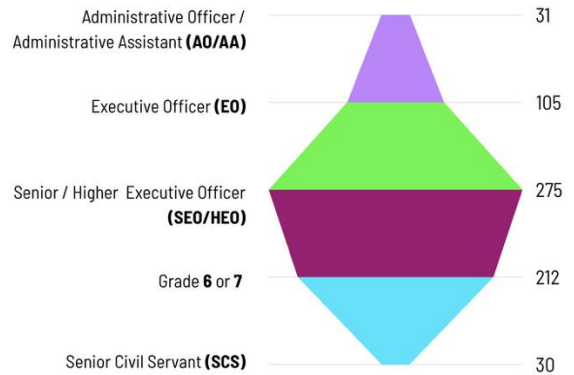
This page presents the breakdown of civil servants who participated in the project. The charts show the distribution of participants in the online debate, while the pink boxes highlight the composition of those selected for the co-design workshops.

Top 5 professions:



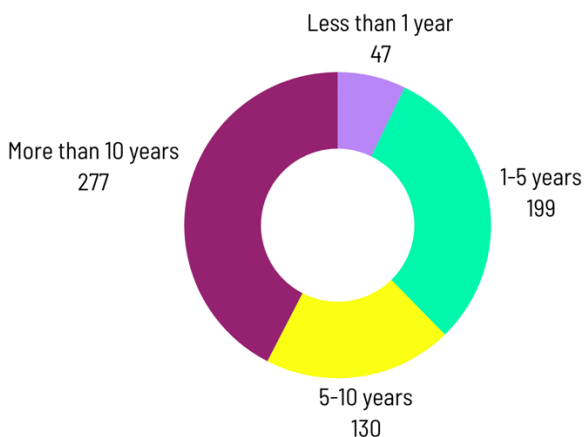
Operational Delivery: **15**
 Human Resources: **8**
 Policy Profession: **8**
 Digital & Data: **5**
 Project Management & Delivery: **3**

Grades:



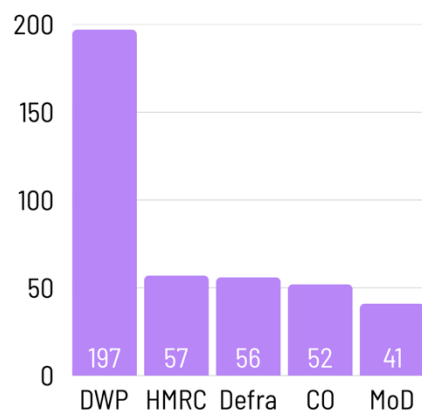
Administrative Officer/ Assistant (AO/AA): **5**
 Executive Officer (EO): **13**
 Senior Executive Officer/Higher Executive Officer (SEO/HEO): **25**
 Grade 6 or 7: **17**
 Senior Civil Servant: **1**

Years of experience in civil service:



Less than 1 year: **7**
 1-5 years: **27**
 5-10 years: **11**
 More than 10 years: **16**

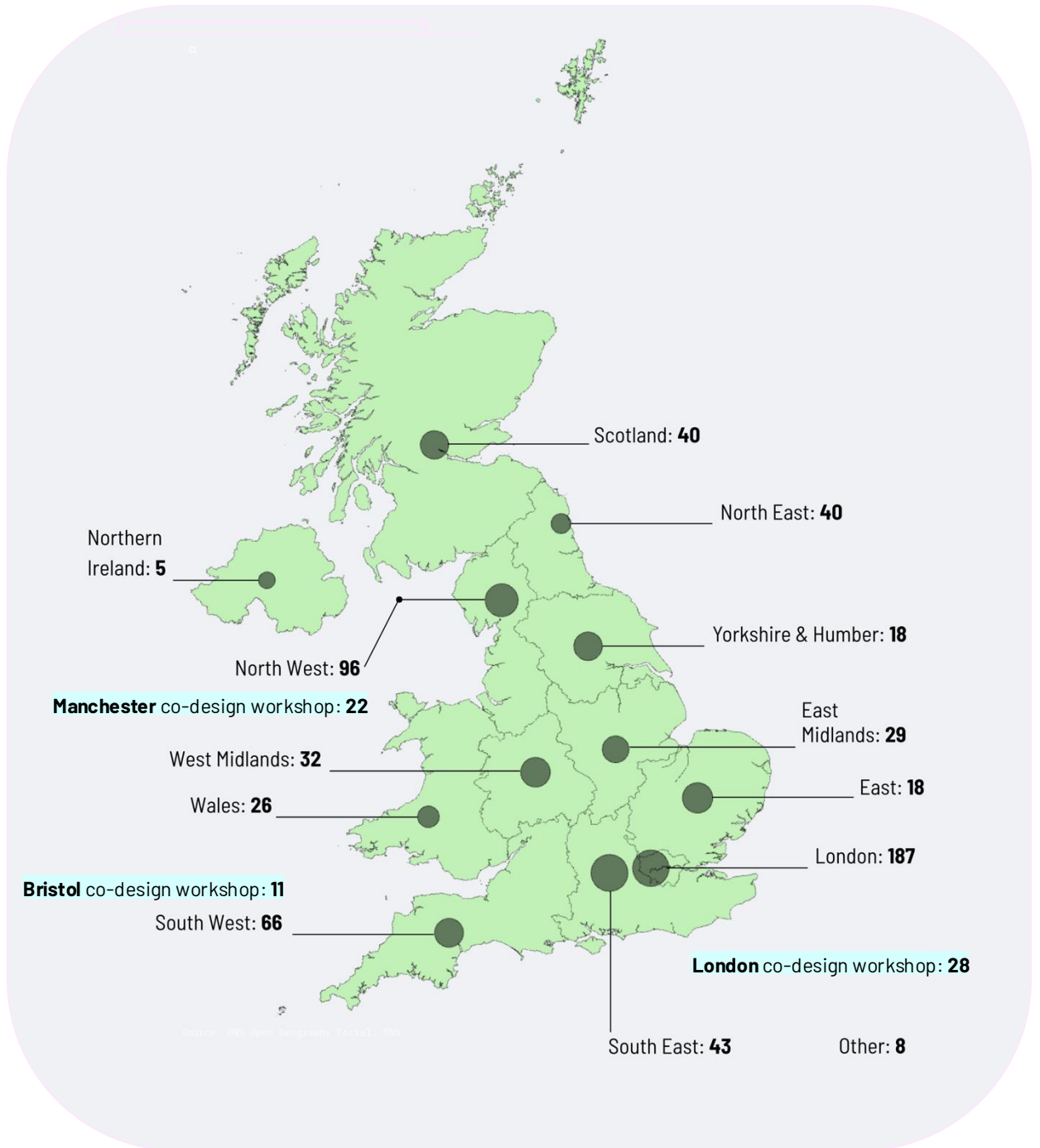
Top 5 departments:



Department for Work and Pensions: **16**
 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: **10**
 Home Office: **6**
 Department for Energy Security and Net Zero: **6**
 Cabinet Office: **5**

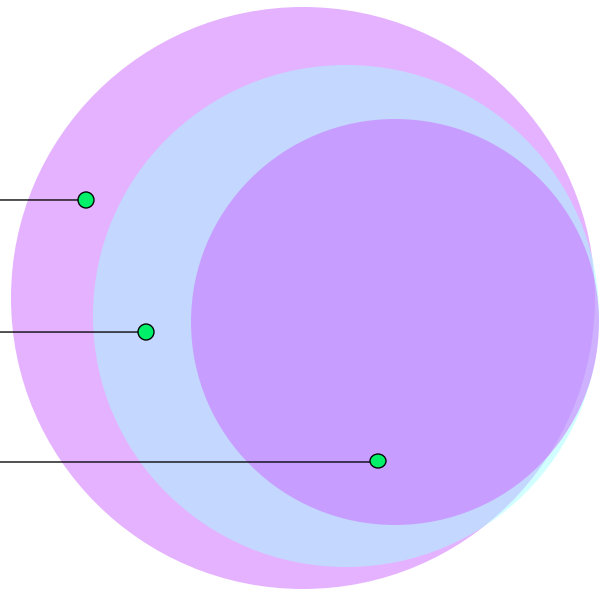
From online debate to co-design

Spread of participants across the UK



Map of the UK detailing the spread of online debate participants. The spread was reflected in co-design workshops where we had 28 civil servants attend a workshop in London, 11 in Bristol and 22 in Manchester.

- Phase 1** ●
Online debate
653 participants
- Phase 2** ●
3x co-design workshops
61 participants
- Phase 3** ●
Synthesis and report writing



Phase 1: Online debate

Format and platform

In April 2025, we hosted a week-long online debate titled **The Future of Civil Service Learning and Development**. The debate was conducted using **Pol.is**, a platform that enables participants to vote on statements and contribute their own, while using advanced statistical techniques—such as Principal Component Analysis and k-means clustering—to identify opinion groups. This interactive method allowed for an evolving conversation shaped directly by participants, who could upvote, downvote, or skip each statement.

Purpose

The debate served to:

- Sense-check findings from earlier ethnographic research (Spring 2024)
- Test how insights from other research apply across the Civil Service
- Identify consensus and divergence across different groups
- Provide a first-hand, user-led perspective on the current L&D system

The discussion began with seed statements informed by previous Cabinet Office research into L&D. As the debate progressed, participants added their own perspectives, helping to shape a broader dialogue.

All contributions were moderated by a joint team from Policy Lab and the Cabinet Office to ensure clarity and avoid duplication.

Participants and reach

- **Participants:** 653 civil servants
- **Expressions of Interest:** Nearly 1,400
- **Total Votes Cast:** 129,588
- **Original Statements Submitted:** 1,766

Participants represented a wide range of grades, professions, departments, locations, and lengths of service.

Phase 2: Co-design workshops

Purpose and design

In May 2025, we held three in-person co-design workshops in **London, Bristol, and Manchester**, involving **61 participants**.

The workshops built on key insights from the online debate and were designed using co-design principles—a participatory approach that treats end users as equal collaborators in shaping solutions.

The workshops aimed to:

- Explore civil servants' future visions for L&D
- Identify priorities and practical ideas for reform
- Capture both strengths and challenges in the current system

Selection

Unlike the open approach used for the online debate, participants for the co-design workshops were individually selected from those who had expressed interest in the workshop stage of the project. Selection aimed to ensure a representative mix across:

- Grade
- Profession
- Region
- Length of service
- Personal characteristics (gender, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity)

Workshop activities

Participants engaged in a series of creative and structured exercises:

1. Warm-up activity: Using modelling clay to reflect on positive past L&D experiences, surfacing values and associations
2. Main activity: Engaging with five fictional future L&D scenarios based on insights from the debate, illustrated with visuals and 3D tactile models. See **Annex B** for a detailed breakdown of each scenario.
 - Participants chose what to keep, ditch, or add
 - Then selected a preferred scenario to further refine in small groups

Recruitment criteria were developed in collaboration with the Government Skills team to ensure that the sample included the voices often excluded from decision-making (e.g. junior grades, underrepresented regions, and minority groups).



Annex A: Methodology

Analysis

Details of our analytical approach

The analytical approach was thematic, aimed at identifying broad trends, emerging priorities, and specific ideas that informed clear, user-led recommendations. It was not intended to be an exhaustive quantitative or qualitative analysis.

To support an iterative and inclusive co-design process for shaping the future L&D system, the analysis was conducted in three distinct stages.

Stage 1: Online debate analysis

In the first phase, we conducted a machine learning-led analysis of the online debate. This enabled us to examine areas of consensus and divergence, identify emerging opinion groups and explore variations in voting patterns. The platform also allowed us to analyse the data by demographic segments, providing insights into how different civil servants experience the current L&D system. For this project, we focused on identifying key themes, values and priorities, as well as capturing both recurring and novel ideas shared by participants. These insights directly informed the structure and content of the in-person workshops, ensuring iteration and a meaningful dialogue between the project phases.

A snapshot of the Collective Intelligence statements grouped by topic



Stage 2: Co-design workshop analysis

Following the in-person co-design workshops, we conducted thematic reviews of all materials, including canvasses, posters, notes and audio transcripts. The objective was to capture participants' ideas, priorities and participants' examples across the three events. This allowed us to build a rich picture of lived experiences and practical suggestions for change, surfacing both granular feedback and broader strategic insights.

Stage 3: Collaborative synthesis

The final phase involved a series of collaborative analysis sessions with the project team. Using the online platform Lucid Spark, we mapped all statements from the online debate alongside key insights from the three workshops, and clustered them into emerging trends. These sessions allowed the team to synthesise evidence and begin shaping clear themes, priority areas and actionable recommendations, which form the main part of this report.

Feedback

Engagement in the online debate and co-design workshops was overwhelmingly positive, with participants expressing strong enthusiasm for both the format and their ability to contribute meaningfully to shaping Civil Service L&D.

Some of the participants' feedback is captured in this section.

Online 'collective intelligence' debate

At the end of the online debate, we gathered metadata to assess participants' satisfaction with the process.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with **95%** stating they would recommend similar debates in the future. A significant majority, **81%**, felt that the debate provided them with an opportunity to engage in policymaking when they wouldn't normally be able to.

Additionally, **3 in 4** (75%) said the discussion introduced them to perspectives they had not previously considered and, importantly, **69%** expressed confidence that their participation would contribute to tangible policy outcomes, thus reinforcing the debate's value in shaping meaningful change.

Co-design workshops

"Just a quick email to say how much I enjoyed the session in Manchester. I can tell it was really great because I was amazed at how quick the time went. Really appreciated the format and felt the size of the groups was perfect for allowing everyone to participate in a meaningful way."

"It was a really great session. We loved the foam clay and meeting everyone was fantastic, Thank you for sharing this opportunity and hopefully I can attend any future workshops you do on relevant topics."

"I really enjoyed my time at the workshop, it felt more akin to private sector workshops and focus groups, I enjoyed having lots of activities to do and the chance to speak to people from all different areas. Would love to be involved in more!"

"[I appreciated] awareness of the innovative approaches which are being considered for the future of CS L&D. Also some great facilitation tools which I will be applying back in my 'day job'!"

"[I felt] like I had been able to contribute to improve learning provisions across the Civil Service. I'm passionate about learning and constantly seek to develop myself and others, so this felt like a really impactful thing to be involved with." – Co-design workshop participant

Annex B: Future L&D scenarios

Participants' reflections on five provocative fictional scenarios for a future L&D system

Policy Lab & Government Skills, August 2025



Scenario 1: Cutting edge all- encompassing digital platform

All training is delivered in-house via an advanced digital platform, supported by a real-time chatbot. Learners follow personalised learning pathway generated by AI, based on an assessment of their performance data, job role and career goals.



What participants liked

They liked flexible, digital delivery - including 24/7 access via an app, self-paced modules, and engaging features like Duolingo-style quizzes, podcasts, and visual workshops. They appreciated AI assessments that curated and tailored L&D offers to individuals beyond simple job titles and AI that ensured accurate, fact-based learning through summarised research articles. Additionally, they liked peer reviews and ratings, protected time for L&D and a clear link between performance and training - support which they felt enabled lifelong professional growth.

What participants disliked

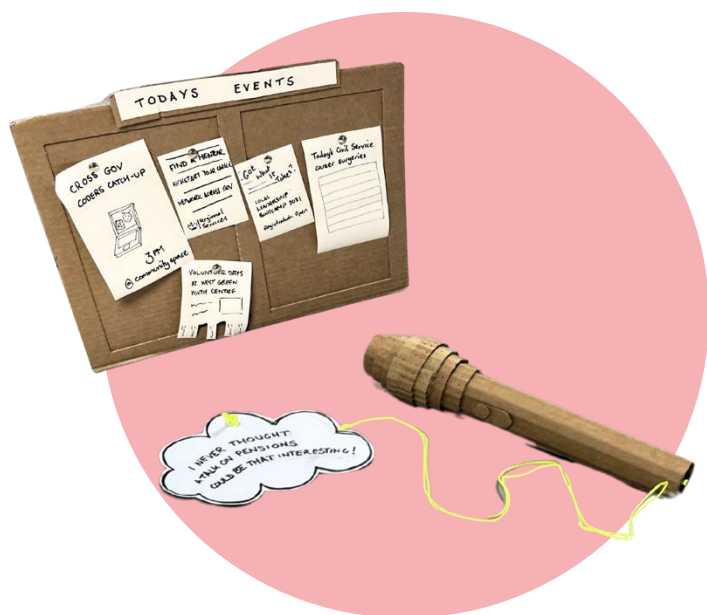
Workshop participants expressed reservations about replacing face-to-face learning with a fully digital, AI-driven model. They criticised relying solely on AI chatbots and 24/7 online systems, arguing this approach eliminates essential human interaction and removes protected development time. They were also wary of using AI for content creation, citing technological shortcomings and accountability issues, while cautioning that peer reviews risked bias and disengagement and that excessive gamification and tick-box exercises trivialised the learning experience.

What participants would add

Workshop participants recommended that the system be enhanced with more hands-on, practical experiences that extended beyond screen-based learning. They emphasised the need for group sessions and face-to-face interactions - providing dedicated, protected learning hours and department-specific learning opportunities that prioritise human interaction. Participants also suggested that users receive initial training on using the platform, with room for emergent L&D and experimentation. They favoured a diagnostic approach based on skill analysis rather than standard quizzes, and envisioned a model offering multiple learning styles, combined with human subject-matter experts and manager-led feedback.

Scenario 2: Local innovation and collaboration hubs

This L&D system is driven by experimentation and collaboration taking place across community centred regional hubs. These hubs are cross-government in-person spaces that promote peer cohorts, mission-led thinking and collaborative, place-based learning.



What participants liked

Workshop participants would keep features that promoted human connection and collaboration. They valued TED Talk-style presentations for their inspirational impact, alongside opportunities for job shadowing, mentoring and coaching that offered practical career advice and highlighted transferable skills. They appreciated a blended learning model that combined virtual content with in-person sessions, particularly via central regional hubs, to address real-world challenges. The inclusion of dedicated career advisors and a central portal previewing upcoming sessions was also seen as vital.

What participants disliked

Whilst welcoming the interactive nature of CS Live/TED-style talks, some participants noted that one event a year was insufficient for sustained engagement. They rejected models relying solely on face-to-face interactions and dedicated career advisors - approaches that fostered silos, imposed geographical restrictions (London participants commented about hubs being irrelevant for London-based staff), and required excessive time for travel and shadowing. They generally favoured blended/hybrid approaches. They also expressed concerns that fully integrating learning into the working day compromised training quality and depth.

What participants would add

Co-design participants urged more leadership commitment through dedicated learning time and spaces to drive a culture shift across departments. Participants favoured a hybrid model that combined virtual and in-person elements and integrated external partners like universities and local businesses for better cross-government collaboration. They proposed launching an app-based community of practice - with forums, accreditation, alumni networks, and awards - to maintain engagement. Additionally, they emphasised the need for personalised career development tools, such as diagnostic assessments, secondments, mentoring and improved scheduling, to promote long-term and impactful professional growth.

Scenario 3: Aligning ambition with organisational need

This system is based on shared responsibility: civil servants take charge of their own learning, while managers and the organisation provide the support and structure to align development with both personal goals and organisational needs.



What participants liked

Workshop participants would keep key elements that emphasised the human aspect of L&D. They valued regular encouragement from line managers during one-to-one sessions and a clear, fair scoring metric in performance reviews that reinforced individual accountability and career progression. Participants appreciated the essential role of managers in embedding learning within the organisational culture, ensuring that professional development remained a core practice. They also supported flexible, streamlined funding and improved management tools to enhance skills agility, while a revamped learning passport was seen as a compelling way to recognise diverse capabilities and foster lifelong growth.

What participants disliked

Participants expressed strong reservations about linking L&D metrics to promotions. They argued that overemphasis on quantifiable scores might encourage the wrong behaviours and dampen genuine passion for learning. Many were wary of relying too heavily on line managers for scoring, due to potential bias and the risk that managers might block rather than enable development. Participants also questioned whether adequate funding and training opportunities were available across departments and cautioned against reducing learning to tick-box exercises that prioritise easily measured activities over truly valuable ones.

What participants would add

Co-design participants recommended adding greater flexibility and personalisation to the L&D system. They suggested using predictive models to select effective learning options and embedding structured guidance in performance reviews. Emphasising a psychologically safe environment, they called for a balanced mix of discretionary and mandatory training tailored to different career stages. Participants also stressed the need for enhanced support and training for managers to guide staff development without bias, and recommended incorporating career coaches, shadowing and cross-department collaboration to ensure fairer access (in absence of relying solely on line managers). Robust evaluation methods and timely training delivery were seen as essential to better align learning with both organisational priorities and individual growth.

Scenario 4: Radical trust & self driven learning

In this future L&D model, civil servants take full ownership of their development, supported by a culture of radical trust.



What participants liked

Workshop participants supported retaining self-directed learning elements, emphasising personal L&D budgets and five self-managed learning days per year without formal approval. They valued a structured mentoring programmes - supported by L&D coaches and clear career guidance - to enhance both promotion and current role skill development. Participants also favoured secondments, pursuing 'passion projects' and leaders role modelling frameworks like 70/20/10 as key drivers of practical learning. Additionally, they endorsed a flexible, centralised offering that enabled cross-departmental and international placements, ensuring that mentoring, autonomy and actionable growth opportunities remained integral to a culture of continuous professional development.

What participants disliked

Participants criticised the perceived lack of expertise among L&D peers and were unsure about the value of international placements. Many found the allocation of five learning days too restrictive and objected to arbitrary cost limits for training. Participants also noted that the model placed too much emphasis on individual ownership without sufficient line management involvement, resulting in unclear learning priorities and a lack of central direction. Additionally, they felt that limited budgets, insufficient formal approval processes and a self-orientated approach could undermine the opportunity for cross-departmental skills development and practical learning application.

What participants would add

Co-design participants proposed enhancing this scenario with greater structure and accountability. They recommended curated learning pathways, individual plans and a learning passport to track progress and deliver tangible outcomes, while replacing fixed learning days with a flexible, credit-based "use or lose" system. They supported expanding job and cross-department shadowing, regulatory reviews and structured mentoring and coaching with clear incentives (e.g. getting time off to do it). Participants also called for robust feedback systems, team lead reviews and central planning aligned with long-term business goals.

Scenario 5: A centralised civil service university

The main driving force behind L&D is a dedicated Civil Service University. This flagship institution with international reputation offers modular courses, blending in-person, hands-on experience on campus and online formats, and awards prestigious professional qualifications accredited to a major partner university.



What participants liked

Workshop participants valued a credible, integrated L&D model that they saw as essential to their roles. They appreciated a common, cross-government approach featuring both online and in-person learning - such as a physical campus - to facilitate collaboration and boost staff morale. They liked that the system integrated existing qualifications, DEI initiatives and specialised L&D centres to create a non-tokenistic, supportive culture. Moreover, they endorsed personal accountability for learning, supported by clear manager engagement, flexible funding and structured yet adaptable tools like a reimagined learning passport that recognised diverse skills and contributed to career progression.

What participants disliked

Participants criticised the perceived traditional, exclusive and rigid nature of a university model, arguing that such a structure and scoring metrics would deter many - not least because not all civil servants learn in the same way. Many felt that applying such an approach to 500,000 civil servants risked reinforcing silos and prioritising measurable outcomes over genuine skill development. Moreover, the elite connotations and language around calling it a "university" were widely disliked.

What participants would add

Participants proposed introducing automatic qualification for on-the-job learning and forging partnerships with universities and other institutions, while providing travel support to access satellite campuses for greater inclusivity. They recommended accrediting teachers, incorporating apprenticeships (even for senior roles) and offering modular, bite-size content supplemented by guest speakers and continuing professional development opportunities. Participants also emphasised the importance of clear course previews, diverse cohort selection, robust evaluation mechanisms to track practical outcomes and retention and stronger support for line managers through dedicated L&D coaches and clear departmental input to align learning with career pathways.