

Government Skills: Priority Research Topics and Questions

1. Leadership, Management and Collective Capability

This theme focuses on strengthening the skills pipeline from entry-level management through to the most senior collective leadership groups.

- How can we define and measure the impact of high-quality line management on productivity, staff retention and wellbeing across the Civil Service and wider public sector?
 - What does the evidence tell us about whether there are distinct models of leadership and the extent to which they (and specific leadership behaviours) may be effective, including in driving system-wide reform and delivery against cross government priorities?
 - What organisational and cultural factors enable senior leaders to effectively lead digital and AI transformation beyond formal training? What are the key enablers for an effective culture of empowered teams and innovation (such as psychological safety, adaptive leadership) that support the embedding of new ways of working within the civil service?
 - How can leadership, management and induction programmes best embed public service values, such as candour and the Civil Service Code, within new Senior Civil Service and Director pathways?
 - What evidence-based interventions are most effective for supporting transitions between different levels of leadership and how can learning be tailored to the distinct capability requirements of each level?
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2. Strategic Skills and Curriculum Design

This theme addresses the development of a targeted curriculum and the underpinning frameworks needed for a productive and agile state.

- What are the most effective test-and-learn approaches for evaluating learning interventions and translating behavioural change into measurable policy or operational impact?
- How can we forecast, prioritise and scale provision for critical future skills (e.g. digital, data, AI, strategic thinking, complex delivery) across the Civil Service and wider public sector?
- How should the Civil Service Skills Taxonomy be embedded in digital platforms, recruitment, development conversations and career pathways to maximise value across the Civil Service and wider public sector?
- How can learning interventions be designed to maximise skill transfer and sustained behavioural change in public service settings?

- What systemic or structural barriers influence the uptake of learning interventions across different learner demographics and how can design ensure equitable reach and impact?
 - What is the evidence base for the effectiveness of specific learning interventions and their underlying mechanisms, such as Action Learning Sets (ALS) and coaching, within a civil service context, and what is effective in designing/delivering these mechanisms?
 - What is the role of organisational social capital (e.g. professional networks, communities of practice, and informal relationships) in driving critical outcomes such as cross-boundary collaboration and strengthening institutional memory in public service environments?
 - What is the evidence of best practice for effective curriculum design to maximise impact and value for money in public sector learning?
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3. Professional Pathways and Talent Pipeline

This theme focuses on strengthening the talent pipeline from external recruitment through to professional accreditation.

- What strategies are effective in attracting and retaining specialist expertise (e.g. digital, commercial) in competition with the private sector and what role do accreditation and professional development play?
 - What are the key drivers and barriers to professional mobility and how can entry schemes (e.g. apprenticeships, internships) enhance diversity, social mobility and career progression?
 - What does the evidence show about the long-term career outcomes and return on investment of Civil Service apprenticeships, internships and emerging talent schemes (such as the Fast Stream) compared to traditional graduate routes?
 - How do pay, reward and recognition structures interact with professional pathways to influence staff retention and career progression?
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4. Transformation and Delivery Infrastructure

This theme explores the organisational, digital and physical infrastructure needed to deliver the Government Skills vision and support the Future Operating Model.

- What international evidence exists on the organisational and funding models for high-performing, centralised government institutions responsible for skills and learning delivery?

- What factors (e.g. digital governance, organisational change) can support the implementation of new digital technologies to best drive adoption and sustained behavioural change in learning across departments?
 - What is the evidence-based role of regional hubs and physical campuses in complementing digital learning, particularly for leadership and security training?
 - How should the mix of in-house and commercial delivery be optimised to ensure efficiency, quality and consistency of curriculum content?
 - What evidence assessment methodologies enable government learning infrastructures to remain responsive to fast-evolving technological change?
 - What are the organisational and cultural enablers and barriers to successfully embed new learning delivery models at scale within large-scale organisations?
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5. Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Social Mobility

This theme addresses the cross-cutting need to ensure learning, pathways and leadership actively promote an inclusive Civil Service.

- What are the systemic barriers to career progression and development for underrepresented groups and what methods and data are most effective for identifying these barriers at different career stages?
 - How can professional pathways and targeted learning effectively mitigate systemic barriers to progression and development for underrepresented groups in the Civil Service?
 - How can learning interventions, particularly for managers and leaders, be designed and evaluated to improve fairness in key processes like recruitment, performance management and talent allocation?
 - What is the evidence on effective strategies for using career pathways and non-traditional entry routes (e.g. non-degree schemes) to enhance socio-economic diversity and social mobility across the Civil Service?
 - How must the design and delivery of large-scale digital learning platforms be adapted to ensure equitable access and engagement for users with diverse accessibility needs or digital literacy levels?
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6. Evidence, Impact, and Governance

This theme focuses on establishing the Centre for Skills Data and Evidence and maximising the effectiveness of academic challenge and evidence use.

- How can knowledge mobilisation and evidence translation mechanisms (e.g. briefing formats, workshops, embedded experts) be optimised to ensure evidence and academic insights are applied in policy and delivery decisions?
 - How can the CoE's challenge function be optimised to ensure evidence translation is effective?
 - How can methodologies for causal inference and rigorous quantitative evaluation (e.g. RCTs, quasi-experimental designs) be practically and ethically applied to measure the impact of Civil Service learning programmes and support the scaling up of effective programmes?
 - What are the most appropriate economic models and methods for assessing the causal impact of investment in learning on key outcomes such as productivity growth, operational efficiency and long-term public service value-for-money (VfM)?
 - What evidence base and methodologies can measure the impact of learning in the flow of work initiatives on individual and team performance, compared to formal, off-the-job training interventions?
 - Beyond formal training, what is the effectiveness of educational mechanisms for behaviour change (e.g. nudges, checklists, standardised metrics) for ensuring the transfer of learning into practice?
 - What methods and knowledge-exchange frameworks can enable Government Skills to stay at the frontier of research in relevant disciplines, and how can the impact of external academic expertise evidence and challenge be effectively evaluated?
 - What evidence-based foresight methodologies (such as trend impact analysis, scenario planning, or predictive modelling) are most effective for identifying long-term capability needs, and how can these be used to build a proactive evidence base that informs future learning and development?
 - How can rigorous qualitative and mixed-methods research (such as ethnography, observation and longitudinal case studies) be used to understand the relational and cultural factors that influence the effectiveness of learning and development within the Civil Service?
 - What research is needed to understand how theoretical findings (e.g. lab based or neuroimaging) from cognitive science can and should be embedded as an evidence based approach to learning and development delivery across government?
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