

Democratic Accountability and Governance PPC Sub-Committee

Process for appointing senior officials in the UK

Briefing Paper

Introduction

Two of the most senior civil servants within the UK government are the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service (currently Simon Case) and the Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service (currently Alex Chisholm).

This paper provides an overview of these roles and how they are appointed. It also includes an overview of the role and appointments process of permanent secretaries who are the most senior civil servants in a department.

Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service

The Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service is the Prime Minister's most senior policy advisor and is responsible for supporting all ministers in the running of government and providing professional leadership to the Civil Service¹.

Appointment Process

The [Institute for Government](#) explains that there is no standard process for appointing a cabinet secretary. Many former cabinet secretaries were appointed directly by the Prime Minister, sometimes on the recommendation of the outgoing cabinet secretary. In recent years, some cabinet secretary appointments have involved a slightly more formal process with the Prime Minister interviewing a range of candidates.

The appointment process is overseen by the first civil service commissioner, who is responsible for regulating civil service recruitment. As with any other civil service position, the cabinet secretary's appointment must be 'on merit on the basis of fair and open competition' according to the 2010 [Constitutional Reform and Governance Act](#) and should not be a political appointment.

Accountability

Under the principle of ministerial accountability, it is government ministers who are accountable to parliament for the actions of the government, including the officials working for them. As such, the cabinet secretary is effectively held to account via the ministers they work for, primarily the Prime Minister who is also Minister for the Civil Service.

But like other senior officials, the cabinet secretary does appear before parliamentary select committees in their own right to answer questions on their work.

Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service

The Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service leads the efficiency programme, working with permanent secretaries across government to put in place reforms. The Chief Operating Officer Chairs the Civil Service Board (responsible for the strategic leadership of the Civil Service) and supports the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service in performance-managing

¹ [UK Civil Service 'Our Governance'](#)

the other Whitehall permanent secretaries. The Chief Operating Officer is the permanent secretary for the Cabinet Office².

Permanent secretary

A permanent secretary is the most senior civil servant in a department. Permanent secretaries include government officials who head departments – there are other civil servants who are also on the same grade as permanent secretaries (i.e. senior ambassadors and heads of some non-ministerial departments).

Some departments have a second permanent secretary who are the second most senior official in a department and who also hold permanent secretary rank. The next grade down from permanent secretary is director general.

Permanent secretaries serve the Minister who leads their department. Their role includes:

- Policy adviser, particularly to their secretary of state
- Day to day management of the department and its budget
- Leadership of the department and oversight of its agencies and arm's length bodies
- Managing their senior team

If a permanent secretary does not agree with a decision where they feel public money will be inappropriately spent, they can seek a ['letter of direction'](#) which means that the minister instructs them to proceed.

Appointment process

The [Institute of Government](#) provides a helpful overview of how permanent secretaries are appointed:

Permanent secretaries are formally appointed by the Prime Minister. However, as mentioned earlier, the [Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010](#) requires that all such appointments must 'be on merit on the basis of fair and open competition', meaning that appointments should not be political choices. In practice the process is managed by officials with the views of ministers taken into account. Candidates who are deemed appointable ("over the line") are presented to the Prime Minister who takes the final choice from a list of those suitable for the job.

The first civil service commissioner, with support from senior permanent secretaries, the cabinet secretary and sometimes non-executive directors of departments manage the process. The [Civil Service Commission](#) oversees civil service recruitment and monitors appointments.

Appointments are usually expected to include an open competition where potential candidates can apply. These have often been 'internal' competition, meaning that only civil service candidates can apply, but more recent 'external' competitions have meant that people outside the civil service can also put their names forward.

Some permanent secretaries are appointed through 'managed moves', where a civil servant is moved into a vacancy of the same grade without any competition. The Senior Leadership Committee makes the decision about whether a vacancy should be filled by managed moves or competition. Managed moves should only be used when there is a business case for it, for

² [UK Civil Service 'Our Governance'](#)

example if it is urgent, if there is an obvious candidate or where there is a risk in losing a highly skilled candidate.

Accountability

In terms of accountability, many permanent secretaries are also 'accounting officers' for their departments. Therefore, they must account to Parliament for their organisation on four tests of 'regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility'. Permanent secretaries appear in front of the Public Accounts Commission to answer questions on their responsibilities.

Permanent secretaries will also be requested to appear in front of the select committee which oversee their department to answer questions on policy and management. But ministers are accountable to Parliament for policy decisions and the outcome of policy.

Permanent secretaries also answer to their ministers but are not directly managed by them. Permanent secretaries are line managed by the Cabinet Secretary, Head of the Civil Service (often a role held by the same person as the cabinet secretary) or Chief Executive of the Civil Service.

Principal Committee and Panel Officer

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