

Action plan to increase socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service

Nearly three out of four senior civil servants are from privileged backgrounds with those from disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes struggling to gain promotion, new research from the Social Mobility Commission shows today.

A comprehensive analysis of over 300,000 civil servants shows just 18% of the Senior Civil Service (SCS) come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 72% from privileged backgrounds. One in four of those in the current 6,000-strong Senior Civil Service went to independent school.

The research drawn from both the Civil Service People Survey 2019 and over 100 in-depth interviews with current staff provides a valuable insight into who gets on in Whitehall and how, highlighting obstacles to career progression on the way.

Based on these results the Commission has drawn up a detailed action plan for the Civil Service to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds have an easier route to the top.

“Civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the organisation and even if they do ‘get in’ they can struggle to ‘get on’,” said Steven Cooper, interim Co-Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. “I have been impressed by the level of transparency shown by the Civil Service in embarking on this joint project and sharing their previously unpublished data with us. The focus now should be on considering and swiftly implementing the action plan.”

Officials that get promoted from junior grades are more likely to have policy rather than operational posts, work in departments near the political centre of power like the Treasury and live in London. Only 12% of those working at the Treasury are from a low socio-economic background compared to 45% at the Department for Work and Pensions. Similarly, only 22% of civil servants in London are from working class backgrounds compared to 48% in the north-east.

The SMC report ‘Navigating the labyrinth’ by Sam Friedman, incoming Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, describes in detail “the behavioural code” to ensure promotion in the Civil Service. It suggests that those who do progress exhibit “a studied neutrality”. This is defined as having the right accent or “received pronunciation”, an emotionally detached and understated way of presenting oneself and an “intellectual approach” to culture and politics.

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds can be intimidated and alienated by this behavioural code, though many realise that the only way to get on is to adopt it. The complex journey to the top is described by interviewees as a “velvet drainpipe”.

“An important part of progressing through the labyrinth of the Civil Service is mastering the unwritten rules; what jobs to take, where to work, how to negotiate opportunities, and above all how to behave,” said Dr Friedman. “And strikingly it is those from privileged backgrounds who hold the upper hand in unpicking these hidden rules.”

The Commission’s comprehensive action plan to improve career progression in the Civil Service which it hopes will be adopted by employers throughout the country includes:

- reporting of socio-economic data within all departments – by location, gender, ethnicity, disability and LGBT
- using national benchmarks to assess progress with the aim of ensuring a representative Civil Service
- greater scrutiny of the SCS and five-year targets to increase representation from those from low socio-economic backgrounds

Other recommendations include introducing laws to ensure that socio-economic background is a protected characteristic and permanently adopting virtual working of Parliament to enable MPs and ministers, with Civil Service hubs, to be based outside London.

The Commission notes recent positive progress in some of these areas, including government’s plans to move more roles out of London, more senior civil servants and greater non-operational roles, such as policy making, outside of the capital.

Other key findings:

London has the least socio-economically diverse workforce compared to other regions, but the most opportunity for progression

- The London-based workforce is significantly less socio-economically diverse than the rest of the country – 66% are from high socio-economic backgrounds (SEB) compared to 41% in the north-east, and only 22% in London are from working class backgrounds compared to 48% in the north-east
- The three most socio-economically exclusive work regions are in the south of England, and two of the three most socio-economically diverse areas in the north of England
- There are far more top-grade posts located in London than elsewhere. While 20% of civil servants work in London, the capital is home to 66% of all SCS. In contrast, 12% of civil servants are based in the north-west but it houses only 3% of SCS

SCS has remained exclusive

- The composition of the SCS is roughly unchanged since 1967, the last time this data was collected. Then, 19% were from low socio-economic backgrounds and 67% from privileged backgrounds – although this finding should be read with caution, as it partly reflects the contraction of working-class jobs since the 1960s. See page 19-20

Some departments are more exclusive than others

- HM Treasury and the (formerly named) Department of Culture, Media and Sport are the most socio-economically exclusive departments (12% and 13% of staff were from low SEBs respectively.) Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue and Customs are the most inclusive departments (45% and 42% of staff were from low SEBs respectively)
- 26% of HM Treasury staff and 22% of the (formerly named) Foreign & Commonwealth Office staff (rising to 48% among FCO SCS) were privately educated, compared to just 5% in HMRC and 4% in the DWP

Civil servants from advantaged backgrounds often downplay their socio-economic privilege

- 1 in 4 civil servants who self-assess as coming from low SEBs actually had advantaged upbringings. The proportion of those misaligning increases at higher grades (29% at SCS versus 23% and 24% at executive officer and administrative assistant/officer levels)

Female civil servants from working class backgrounds are more likely than men from the same socio-economic bracket to believe their background will hamper their progression.

- There is little difference in the overall socio-economic composition of male and female civil servants, but low SEB women are more under-represented at senior grades. For instance, women in the SCS are more likely than men to be from high SEBs (73% compared to 71%)

Ethnic minorities in low socio-economic backgrounds face barriers getting into the civil service

- Except for those of Asian origin, civil servants from ethnic minorities are more likely to be from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. For example, 27% of Black African/African Caribbean AA/AOs are from low SEBs compared to 61% from high SEBs

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