



Sir Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service

1 December 2017, Institute for Government

The Public Chairs' Forum welcomed Sir Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service to hear the latest on the Civil Service's priorities and to give members the opportunity to engage in private discussion.



Sir Jeremy opened by describing the unprecedented challenges currently facing the country, including economic restraint, poor productivity levels, and issues of national security. In addition to matters such as the Grenfell Tower tragedy, public sector pay, and challenges facing the NHS. The Senior Civil Service has expanded to rise to these

challenges as well as the task of exiting the European Union. He highlighted that complex scenario planning was being undertaken across departments, in addition to work on the necessary Brexit legislation.

Sir Jeremy emphasised that, despite these challenges, there remains a clear focus on the Civil Service's strategic priorities of improving commercial capability, digitalisation and increasing diversity (particularly at senior levels), which will support public bodies. Progress has already been made strengthening commercial capability in central government, including rolling out rigorous assessment and development centres, which will be expanded to Arm's-Length Bodies (ALBs) in due course. Similarly, Sir Jeremy highlighted that the UK Civil Service is seen as a world leader in digitalisation and significant progress has been made increasing gender diversity in the Senior Civil Service in particular. However, Sir Jeremy recognised that there is more work to do to increase representation in the areas of disability, ethnicity and socio-economic

background. The launch of the new Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion strategy seeks both to increase representation of under-represented groups and to establish a more robust approach to inclusion, building a culture that attracts, retains and nurtures the best and most diverse talent.

A number of topics were raised during the Q&A discussion that followed:

- Preparation for all possible outcomes of Brexit is important - if public bodies do not feel that their departments are listening to their concerns, they should raise these with Sir Jeremy.
- The legislative programme for Brexit is vast and time-sensitive, so there will inevitably be less time for other domestic issues to be debated in the first years of this parliament. This means that domestic issues such as social care and education can be subjected to greater pre-legislative scrutiny, for example, through consultations. If public bodies identify matters that require legislation to improve their services, it is more likely that there will be room in the legislative programme in the final three years of the parliament. Alternatively, more private members' bills are being heard and therefore if an MP becomes interested in the matter, it is possible that it may be debated in parliament more swiftly.
- The Civil Service People Survey indicates that morale is high in many areas despite pressures, and whilst some staff are leaving, many excellent staff remain.
- Sir Jeremy recognised whilst some progress has been made, there is still some way to go with diversity in public appointments, noting that the Public Appointments Commissioner and Public Bodies Reform Team have a key role to play. Some members raised their concerns over the length of time taken to secure ministerial approval for some public appointments, with reports that it can still take more than six months to fill posts. There was a request for greater delegation to speed up the process. Sir Jeremy agreed to look again at this to try to ensure delays can be avoided in future.
- The fiscal climate remains tight although there have been some reductions in the previous level of controls. However, if public bodies identify a need to spend money in order to raise awareness about their work, then this should be raised. The Government Communications Service can provide support in this area.
- A concern was also raised about the delay in sign-off on the salaries of some executive positions. The pay of senior public figures is of serious public concern, however, there are some jobs that are so market facing that a higher salary is warranted. Sir Jeremy acknowledged that the delays caused by the approvals process are sometimes unacceptable.
- In addition to an improved approach to commercial transactions, a commercial culture should be developed, especially amongst more generalist staff to help ensure they get the best out of commercial directors. The Government Commercial Organisation can support public bodies in developing their commercial capacity.