

House of Commons  
Education Committee

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# Administration of the Department for Education

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**Oral Evidence**

***Wednesday 13 June 2012***

*Sir David Bell KCB, Vice-Chancellor, University of Reading, formerly Permanent Secretary, DfE (2006-2011) and Jon Coles, Group Chief Executive, UCST/ULT, formerly Director General, DfE (2008-2011) and Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education*

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# Oral evidence

## Taken before the Education Committee on Wednesday 13 June 2012

Members present:

Pat Glass (Chair)

Neil Carmichael  
Damian Hinds  
Charlotte Leslie

Ian Mearns  
Mr David Ward  
Craig Whittaker

*In the absence of the Chair, Pat Glass was called to the Chair*

### Examination of Witnesses

*Witnesses:* **Sir David Bell KCB**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Reading, formerly Permanent Secretary, DfE (2006–2011) and **Jon Coles**, Group Chief Executive, UCST/ULT, formerly Director General, DfE (2008–2011), gave evidence.

**Q1 Chair:** David and Jon, thank you for coming. We are very grateful. It is good to see you again. Can I start off by asking each of you, respectively, how the new jobs are going?

**Sir David Bell:** It is going extremely well. It is very busy. It is a pleasure to be back, although Jon and I were just remarking that it is the first Select Committee we have attended without very large and copious briefing notes in front of us. We are having a very good time. Thank you very much.

**Jon Coles:** Yes, I am enjoying it very much, thank you. I wanted to get back to frontline work with schools and dealing with the real frontline challenges of schooling, and it certainly is that. I am having a good time, rushing around the country. I cannot say that I have missed the Select Committee hugely, if I am honest, but it is good to be back.

**Chair:** Good.

**Sir David Bell:** I have, Madam Chairman; I have missed it terribly.

**Q2 Chair:** Can I just go straight to the hard questions, in a sense? If I took over as Chairman of this Committee today and four members resigned very quickly, the expression “mutual progression” would not spring to mind. Can you talk to us a little bit about what led to your decision to move? Did you jump or were you very gently pushed?

**Sir David Bell:** No, I jumped in the sense that I decided I wanted to go. After the election, I had almost done five years as Permanent Secretary, and although I enjoyed it I never really saw myself going on and doing the full Parliament. I told the Secretary of State that I was going to think in due course about moving on. I also said to him at the time that I thought it would be interesting to be around for the first part of the coalition Government; then the job opportunity came up and I left. I think what was really unfortunate—it was just a complete coincidence—was that a number of us had new opportunities at the same time. Despite some of the feverish press comment, it would have been a more credible story if we had all gone off to do nothing, but we all went off to do big, exciting, interesting jobs. I think that really does put

paid to the story that somehow there was a mass exodus from the DfE and all the senior officials have been pushed out by the Secretary of State. It is just not true.

**Q3 Chair:** Even though all four went at once—that was just a coincidence?

**Jon Coles:** I appreciate that it looks like there ought to be an interesting story here, but there isn't, really, unfortunately. I have, for myself, wanted to get back to doing something more frontline for some time. I had thought seriously about a couple of jobs over a period of time, really. This one came along and it was the right job. I had done four years in education. The reality is that the view of the Civil Service is that somebody in my position—as I was then, in education—ought to do four years and then move somewhere else. The view of the then Cabinet Secretary was, fundamentally, that you should move and go into a different Department if you want to progress in the Civil Service. That has never been my view, really. I have wanted to be in education, so I wanted to find the right next job in education. This was it, and it came up at that moment.

I slightly dispute that we all rushed off straight away. It wasn't really like that, was it? I was in the Department for more than 18 months after the election, and I think we probably all feel that it was not ideal that it turned out that we went at very similar times. I think that is not what we would have chosen, had it been a plan, but as it happened, those jobs all came up at that moment, so that is what happened.

**Chair:** A coincidence.

**Q4 Mr Ward:** It may not have been an interesting story, but it certainly was an interesting situation in which we had a new Secretary of State with quite a narrow range of life experiences, and the loss, within a short period of time, of some real experience of the national state education system. Do you think that has any impact at all in terms of the policy development over the first couple of years of the Government?

**Jon Coles:** I think we did a huge amount in those 18 months, when you think about it. We put through the

Academies Act before the first summer recess. We did a huge amount of policy development work leading up to what I think is a very major Education White Paper. We took through a second major piece of legislation to follow that through, and we were well into implementation. For example, today we have over 1,800 academies open across the country. That is a pretty substantial change and pace of change. I think we got on with delivering quite a lot quite quickly. We put policies in place very quickly; we got on with implementation quickly. In that sense I don't think it has affected any of that very much at all.

I remember when David Normington left the Department from being Permanent Secretary and went to the Home Office. I said to him, "We're sorry you are going; we will miss you." And he said to me, "The waters close over terribly fast." I think that is true. I think in a large organisation, if leaders do their jobs well, the next generation of people who can lead are there and coming through. They have come through and the Department continues to progress and implement policy.

**Sir David Bell:** Can I just pick up on that? I think it was to the credit of the Department and the Civil Service that there was no difficulty filling the posts temporarily. I think there is a huge strength in depth in the Department for Education. Of course, no organisation would like its most senior leaders to go but this would have been a far more serious situation if we did not have the calibre and quality of people to step up and take those roles.

In relation to the Secretary of State, actually, he came to the job probably as well prepared—if not better prepared—than many of his predecessors, for the simple reason that he had held the shadow role for a number of years. Most Secretaries of State who walk through the door will not know they are coming. One of the reasons we were able to move so quickly on implementation was because we had a very clear idea of what the Secretary of State wanted to do. I am extremely proud—as Jon is—that there was a big programme to implement and the Civil Service did that, and did it from day one.

**Q5 Neil Carmichael:** It is nice to see you both again, because I did enjoy that day when we came along to the Department when you were both in situ, so thank you for that.

First of all, I would like to make two general points. Jim Callaghan once famously noted that, "Graveyards are full of indispensable men." I think that completely endorses the point that Sir David has made about people coming into positions. I think that is something I would want to put on the record. Secondly, I think Jon's observation about wanting to remain in education is absolutely right and proper. Of course, though, it is important to get more crossover experience between Departments. There is a little known book, no doubt, but I think it is an important one, looking at what it was like in the Department for Education and Employment when it was first joined up, and how the cultures of the two Departments made effective decision-making and so forth almost impossible, at least for a lengthy period of time. When they were separated again—ultimately to the DWP—

there was a return to the old ways of that original Department for Employment. In other words, I think it is important that there is crossover between Departments, and I wondered whether either of you had any views about that.

**Sir David Bell:** I think it was a bit of a tension, because I, as the Committee will know, had an education background, and probably see myself as an educationalist first and a temporary civil servant second. Jon, it is very clear—just to reinforce what he has said—has always seen himself as an educationalist who happens to have been in the Civil Service. Our passion is for education. At the same time, both of us, I like to think, made a cross-Whitehall contribution. Jon had a very significant role on policy development. I was part of the Permanent Secretaries team and I actually got to do some very interesting other jobs. I think there is that kind of crossover.

I think the Civil Service, over the years, has wrestled with this tension of whether it wants specialists or generalists. The truth is that the vast majority of civil servants will be generalists, and I think our system requires that, but at the more senior levels at the very least it is good to have traffic in and out. Perhaps we illustrate that traffic in and out, but the Civil Service would be in a very weak position if it relied exclusively on outsiders. No organisation can afford to have large numbers of its senior people with no history in, or connection to, the business. That is a lesson you can see right across organisations.

**Jon Coles:** I agree with all of that. It is clearly important. As somebody who joined the then Department for Education and Employment not very long after that merger, what you describe was very evident. There were two very different cultures. I would say that over that period until 2001—whilst it was the Department for Education and Employment—you saw those cultures converge. There was a great deal of interchange between the education and employment sides, and I think a lot of benefit was gained from that interchange. The culture of the continuing Department for Education has really benefited from that period, because the two different organisations had great strengths.

I would say that, since then, there has been a great deal more interchange between Departments, and particularly, as David says, a great deal more cross-working, particularly at senior levels, such as some of things that Gus O'Donnell introduced: the top-200 idea of getting the top team across Whitehall together a lot more and working on key cross-Government priorities together has made a significant difference. I do think Chris Wormald, who you will talk to later, exemplifies the benefit you get from that. He has a background in education; he has experience in other Departments, including at the centre of Government. Bringing that to the job will be a huge strength.

I also think it is important that the Civil Service has serious interchange with the sectors with which it works. A strength of the Department for Education over recent years—at some times more than others—has been its ability and willingness to bring in very senior practitioners from outside and to have civil servants going outside, whether on secondment or

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permanently or for longer periods, so that there is a proper understanding of life in the education system in the Department, as well as learning from other Departments. I think both of those things are important.

**Q6 Neil Carmichael:** That dispels the ivory tower description that the Department has sometimes had in the past, and I think that is absolutely right. The move in a more involved direction is helpful. How does the relationship with BIS fit in with that description?

**Jon Coles:** This has been an interesting period, because of course when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister the decision was made to split the then Department for Education and Skills, and there was the creation of DIUS and, after that, the creation of BIS. My own view is that wherever you have an organisational boundary you have to work harder to make joins and connections than you would have to do if there were not an organisational boundary. Anybody who disputes that is not really living in the real world. I think that is the reality. The key question for governments—and, really, in the end it is a question for Prime Ministers—is about where they want the organisational boundaries to lie. You need some, and the question is about where they should be. At the time of the split in the Department for Education, I was responsible for 14 to 19-year olds, so I was right on the edge of that split and there is no doubt that we then had to work much harder to make connections across the Departmental boundary. There is no doubt about that at all. I think over time that has mostly been done effectively, but it is inevitable that you get policies that pull in slightly different directions. I don't mean particularly under this Government; under any government that is inevitably true.

**Q7 Chair:** Can I ask you about your staff survey? It shows a quite significant decrease in staff morale and in confidence in senior leadership. Does that concern you as a former Permanent Secretary, and to what do you attribute that?

**Sir David Bell:** I think you would be derelict in your duty if you were not concerned about staff attitudes. The staff survey was always really quite interesting in the Department for Education, because what you got was a strong sense of commitment to mission, if I can put it that way. People felt very aligned to the work that the Department was doing. To be fair, that crossed over administrations. I think people really did enjoy working in the Department, whatever it was called. I think there was turbulence in the aftermath of the election for a couple of reasons. Firstly, there was uncertainty; people were not absolutely clear where policy was going and how it was being developed. Secondly, of course, there was quite a substantial movement of staff within the Department. I make no apology for that, because it seems to me entirely reasonable that any Secretary of State would expect staff to be deployed behind his or her priorities. It was very clear that, as we were developing the academies programme, we needed—because of the nature of the work—many more staff to do that work than had been the case when the academies programme was much

smaller. I think there was quite a bit of turbulence. Some people were concerned; they felt that work they had been doing previously was not being valued. The truth is—as you would expect with a change of administration—that some policy areas were ended altogether. To give you a very specific example, the new Government decided it did not want to proceed with the ContactPoint children's database. A lot of colleagues in the Department had been working on that for about four or five years. I think as a matter of professional pride, people were thinking, "I am now not going to be doing that." I think there was all of that kind of uncertainty.

I think what would be interesting would be to see how the staff attitudes shift when we get a degree of greater stability, but, as I am sure my successor will point out, there is never really a quiet moment in a Department of State. You are always moving forward, particularly if you are with a Secretary of State and a ministerial team who mean business and want to get work done. There will always be that turbulence, but I was always very concerned about it and we spent quite a lot of time, as a senior leadership team, trying to understand it and trying to work better with staff. However, it is not something I could say I am proud of.

**Q8 Chair:** Do you think it is the natural result of change?

**Sir David Bell:** I think in essence it was. The vast majority of civil servants are committed, as they should be, to serving the Government of the day. They want to do that really well, but it was a very substantial change of focus as governments changed, and that is right; that is the way it should be. I think quite a lot of it was about the change.

**Q9 Chair:** As you were talking, I was just thinking that it might be useful to have a look, if we did staff surveys in 1997, to see if there was a similar dip in 1997.

**Jon Coles:** I am fairly sure there were no staff surveys in 1997, though I suspect you would find the same thing. What is difficult to appreciate from the outside is that there has been a degree of organisational change that would be unusual in any sector of the economy, because what happens at a change of government—inevitably, rightly and naturally—is that in some areas of policy you have been doing one thing and you immediately start doing the opposite of that thing. It is precisely the same staff who have been pursuing one policy who have the job of pursuing the opposite policy. Of course, it is not like that everywhere, because there is continuity of policy and there are some which change much less, but that is the first factor. That is very unusual in any organisation, that you get that degree of reversal of direction.

Secondly, everybody in the Civil Service understands that we are in a time of austerity and that must mean there will be reductions in the size of the Civil Service, changes to the way it works, and that these may not be capable of being predicted on day one. We knew at that point that, yes, there would be significant changes, and yes, there would be significant reductions in staff, but we had not yet reached the

point of knowing where they would be and how they would impact on individuals.

Thirdly, we are making a set of organisational changes—which have now largely been made—which are quite dramatic in terms of closing non-departmental public bodies, bringing into the Department new agencies and doing that all in really very short order. We have got this job of redirecting the organisation to do something quite different, making sure that the organisation is properly resourced to do that and managing the uncertainty for individuals that it inevitably creates.

As David said, it would be a dereliction of duty if you did not think, “I am seriously concerned about what staff are thinking at this time.” We should be flat out in trying to make sure that that is managed as well as possible for staff, and we should be reflective about whether there are things we could have done differently as a result of that and what we are to learn for next time.

All of these things are absolutely right, but there is a degree of change here that means that the fact that the staff survey results are overwhelmingly better on almost all indicators than the average across the Civil Service, despite that, shows that it is not a disaster.

**Q10 Craig Whittaker:** Sir David, can I just challenge you on something you said? You said earlier on that you guys hit the road running, basically, because Michael Gove had come from being the shadow Minister, and you said that he was very clear about what he expected. You have just described to us a series of turbulence and issues within the service and so on. Does that mean that senior management did not communicate what Michael Gove was very clear about?

**Sir David Bell:** I actually spent a lot of time communicating what the Secretary of State wanted. I think that was one of our earliest priorities. When you have a change of Secretary of State—never mind a change of government—you are trying to interpret the signals pretty quickly and trying to make sure the organisation understands what the priorities of the new Secretary of State are. I think we did that. I think what happened, as I explained, was that we quickly realised that we were going to have to shift very substantial numbers of staff to pick up the academies programme, because, if you recall, after the Academies Bill became an Act in the summer of 2010 we almost immediately moved to implementation. There were 32 academies opened on 1 September 2010, which, I have to say in passing, was an extraordinary feat. Then, over the next period, we were ramping that work up at pace. You could argue that we really clearly communicated what was happening by saying, “You are going to be moving from this job to that job.” Staff were left in absolutely no doubt what the Secretary of State’s priorities were, and sometimes we had to do that at fairly short order. I don’t think we didn’t communicate. I think, as Jon said, there was just a lot of turbulence that went with that change.

**Jon Coles:** Can I just say one other thing on this point as well? Coming in as a new Secretary of State who has also been in opposition, however much

preparation you have done, there is no chance that you could have thought about every single thing the Department does.

You have a team of three or four people around you—you know this much better than I do—in opposition, and that means you can get very clear on what your priorities are: “What are we doing about academies? What are we doing about free schools? What will we do about the national curriculum? What shall we do about adoption?” You can have a set of very clear priorities, but what exactly are you going to do about initial teacher training, about early professional development, about special educational needs, and about policy on the education of looked-after children? What is your policy, in detail, on vocational education for 14 to 16-year olds?

There is a huge list of things, and you cannot possibly, with the resources you have in opposition, establish what the answer is to every single question that every single person in the Department might want to know in order to be clear about their own personal position. That is just not a realistic expectation. You see what I am saying: you can be very clear about your priorities but that does not mean you can tell every single person working in the Department for Education what you would like them to do tomorrow.

**Q11 Ian Mearns:** Can I search this a little more? I am following on from the question Craig has just posed. You have talked about a great deal of uncertainty amongst staff, and that is represented in the results of the staff survey, with lower morale. Okay, perhaps it is not disastrous in overall Civil Service terms, but the thing is—and I think particularly from your perspective as Permanent Secretary, David—you have said to us that you knew what to expect with a new Secretary of State; he had been the shadow Minister, you knew what to expect, you hit the ground running, and you delivered a lot in 18 months. That is on one side of the equation, but on the other side of the equation is that, having done all of that and managing that process, you still have a huge amount of uncertainty amongst the staff. Is there not a question about how information and advice is passing down from the senior management of the Department into the Department about managing this change? Change is always unsettling for staff, no matter what setting it is in.

**Sir David Bell:** Yes. Partly, this builds on what Jon said. It was not as if policy in the areas that were not considered in detail prior to the election could then be built up a month or two afterwards. Actually, the nature of working in a Department of State is that you are building up, developing, refining and shaping policy as you go.

I think there is a trade-off here, frankly. You could come in as a new Secretary of State and you could say, “I am going to do things in a fairly low-key, quiet way.” Or you can say, “I have got the opportunity, as the Secretary of State, to make a set of changes, and I am going to move rapidly to do that.” I think there may be a price to pay, a bit, because you generate some turbulence and you generate some uncertainty. I absolutely accept that.

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From my point of view—in a sense now as an observer rather than as a participant—I would prefer Secretaries of State to come in, as the current Secretary of State’s predecessor did, and have a really clear policy agenda and drive it very hard. Whilst they may not necessarily like the comparison, the current Secretary of State and his predecessor were very similar in that regard; a huge amount of policy generation was done in a very short period of time. I would prefer that. It is one of the besetting sins of our system that Ministers do not really get a lot of time in power, notwithstanding the fact that there have not been many changes since the election. I prefer Secretaries of State to be dynamic and to push their programme forward, but I do accept that that might mean that you get more staff uncertainty and, perhaps, a dipping of morale.

**Jon Coles:** Can I say one additional thing about that that needs to be recognised as well? Some of the people who are answering the staff survey had been in the Department for a very short period of time. We had just closed all of the Government offices; we are in the process of closing the Training and Development Agency for Schools, the GTCE and the QCDA. Some staff from those organisations obviously then did not have a job. Others were coming into the Department, and some of those coming in to the Department were doing something very different from what they had done before. The turbulence is not for everybody, necessarily. A lot of people, as you see from the staff survey, are very clear about what their priorities are. Others are very newly arrived and were still in the process of being training and inducted into the Department. Again, I do not want to say there is nothing we should learn from that, because obviously there is, but this is not a stable group of people from one year to the next, necessarily.

**Q12 Ian Mearns:** You have all moved on and the Department still exists and Sanctuary Buildings has not tumbled to the ground, but notwithstanding what you said regarding your own and other colleagues’ departure from the Department being entirely coincidental, from the perspective of the edifice that is the Department, to misquote Oscar Wilde, to lose one board member might be regarded as a tad unfortunate but to lose four looks a little bit careless. From the perspective of the Government and the Department, is there an alternative explanation for losing four senior members 18 months in? From your perspective as well, David, as the Permanent Secretary, did you have any personal misgivings about handing over the mantle to Chris with so many empty chairs being handed on at the same time?

**Sir David Bell:** I was probably less concerned about Chris because I did not know that he was going to be my successor. To be fair—in a sense, this is probably a question only he can answer—we took a lot of care and attention, from the point in early October when we knew there was going to be quite a lot of turnover, to make these transitional arrangements as effective as possible.

To go back to a point I made earlier, we were very fortunate that we had a very good talent pool to choose from to fill temporary positions. My own

personal mantra on this had been that I did not want Tom Jeffery, who succeeded me temporarily, to say in the middle of January, “I wish David Bell had told me this or told me that.” I was really clear that I wanted everything sorted out before I departed, and I know it was likewise for Jon and Lesley, too. They were very clear about the nature of the transition.

Although we were leaving we had—and I still have—a huge affection for the Department for Education and its brilliant civil servants. The last thing I wanted to do was to walk out of the door and feel as if I had left behind chaos. We did work really, really hard. I think we were lucky in the sense that we had successors in the temporary positions that could come in. Certainly, from the outside, from what I could see, Tom Jeffery seemed to have done a terrific job in an acting capacity.

**Q13 Neil Carmichael:** What I wanted to talk about was how you think the changes of the Board have improved it or otherwise.

**Sir David Bell:** We are not there, so you might think it has been immediately improved because we have moved on.

**Q14 Neil Carmichael:** I am talking about structure.

**Sir David Bell:** Structures are an art, rather than a science, aren’t they? You construct a board the way you think it will work best. I think by the time we left it was working well, but Chris will talk, I am sure, about the future structure of the Board.

**Q15 Ian Mearns:** There has been a suggestion from one DfE civil servant reported in the press that Ministers are reluctant to take advice from their senior officials. Do you think roles changed significantly after the general election in 2010? Do you see a bigger role for SpAds now within this situation?

**Sir David Bell:** First of all, Jon and I sat in some extremely lively policy discussions with the Secretary of State and with other Ministers. I never felt that the Secretary of State was unresponsive or not interested in hearing advice. In fact, again like his predecessors, he wanted to tease out all the potential options to be considered. It is very easy for people, if I may say, to make anonymous comments, and not put their head above the parapet, and say what they really think. Actually, in the end, the Secretary of State and Ministers decide. Civil servants advise; Ministers decide. So, if some disaffected civil servant thinks, “I gave advice and it was not accepted by the Secretary of State,” that is good, in the sense that it is the Secretary of State that should determine the policy. What you would expect and want to see is that the Secretary of State, in coming to a decision, had considered all the advice that they were being given and were not cavalier.

As for special advisers, I have to say I cannot get excited about the issue of special advisers, having worked with quite a few. I think they are an important part of our system. I think they do, actually, act as a bulwark against excessive politicisation, which I would be strongly against—politicisation of the Civil Service. In the end, all advisers are very important

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and very powerful in lots of ways. They are only small in number compared to the Department as a whole.

**Q16 Ian Mearns:** You said before, David, that you think that you were fortunate in terms of having a pool of experience to fill posts temporarily around the time of your departure. Do you think, though, that there has been any potential damage because of the collective loss of knowledge, understanding and experience that all left at the same time?

**Sir David Bell:** If you think of the expertise and experience that was represented simply in terms of the number of years that we had been around and the various situations that we had seen, of course. I think most organisations would think there would be a temporary dip because you lose that, but I would not overstate the point. There were a huge number of other people around. If you look at, for example, the people that stepped up into the temporary positions, they had included civil servants with massive experience in the Department for Education and its predecessors. They also included civil servants that had massive experience elsewhere. So, as Jon said, quoting David Normington, the waters soon close over you.

**Q17 Ian Mearns:** Did you have, from your own perspective as the head of the professional service, any concerns about the apparent politicisation of the Board in terms of non-executive directors with clear political affiliations?

**Sir David Bell:** I should say on that that I personally think it would be a shame if people's political affiliations debarred them from taking on roles as non-executives in Government Departments, non-departmental public bodies or public agencies. To be honest, the non-executive directors were there to add a kind of challenge and to press hard on implementation, and I do not think it is unreasonable for the Government to expect that its non-executive directors will be broadly sympathetic to its policies. I do think there is a consequence, which perhaps has not yet been spelled out. It is only reasonable to expect that, when there is a change of government, those non-executive directors—all of them—should step down, because it may be a new government will have a different set of priorities. What I would not argue is that people with political affiliations should not be encouraged to serve, but I think the consequence is that, as governments change, those folk should step down and allow the new Secretary of State and the new Prime Minister to make new appointments.

**Q18 Ian Mearns:** In terms of the collective decision-making process within the Board and the fact that you have got people with open political affiliations, do you think that reduces the capacity to question and challenge and make sure that policy is actually going to be implemented correctly and it is the right policy in the first place?

**Sir David Bell:** It is important just to remember that we are talking about non-executives rather than executives, and I know from previous experience, as I am sure you will, that there is always a degree of

legitimate tension between the role of the non-executive and the role of the executive. That actually happens in all walks of life, so I think, in the end, non-executives do recognise that they are there to support, to challenge, to press. Actually, I think that the non-executives—and I am not just thinking of the two with identified political affiliations, but all four non-executives—were just very keen to press really, really hard on implementation. I think that is the way these new boards have been set up. They have been set up to give a strong challenge to implementation. What would be really damaging is if you had people with party affiliations who were on boards and then felt they had to sit there as uncritical cheerleaders, unable either to challenge the Secretary of State or the Ministers, or reluctant to challenge the executives. We got a lot of challenge, so I think, to that extent, it was working well.

**Q19 Ian Mearns:** I can understand the wish to push through policy and to make sure that implementation is done as swiftly as possible, but, from your perspective as head of the paid service, you must be aware also of the laws of unintended consequences, which often come quite some time afterwards, by pushing through so decisively.

**Sir David Bell:** Yes, and again it is a trade-off. If I might say, the shelf life of Ministers, as I suggested earlier, is quite short. If you are not careful, you can go slowly and be out the door having done nothing, and actually I think it is better for Ministers to show a degree of boldness. There are risks in doing things fast but my experience of the last two Secretaries of State in particular—I mention them simply because I worked longest with them and in a most intense way—is that boldness was better than sitting rather cautiously waiting for events to happen.

**Chair:** Thank you. I did let that section go on a little bit because I think it was a really interesting and useful section but I think we do need to move on now.

**Q20 Damian Hinds:** Thinking about the biggest changes and the biggest innovations that have happened since the change of government—free schools, a big expansion in the academies programme, the English Baccalaureate, whatever you want to name as you are thinking what the biggest things are—what do you think are the big learning points, particularly in terms of the implementation of them?

**Jon Coles:** There's a question. It is interesting, isn't it? Before the Secretary of State became the Secretary of State, he was very clear that he wanted to move very fast on academies and free schools, which meant that we knew exactly what he wanted to do, really, and had a piece of legislation for him, more or less ready to go, when he walked through the door, which was why we were able to get the Academies Act through Parliament before the summer recess at that pace. I think you see, in the response that we got from that, it created huge controversy for a period, but an awful lot of schools were waiting and raring to go, and we have 1,800 academies today, live and working. I do think one lesson is that, if you are very clear what you want to do and you move with pace and boldness, then you can shift things really quite fast, and



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particularly if you are tapping into energy that is there in the system. I think that has been effective and it has made a very, very significant impact out in the system.

**Q21 Damian Hinds:** What would you advise people to do differently, if anything?

**Jon Coles:** It is very easy, isn't it, with hindsight, to see things that you would tweak or do differently. If you look at the English Baccalaureate, for example, I think you see that it has created a very big shift in the system in terms of curriculum, and Ministers have always been clear that it is not going to become an accountability measure, and yet you see, right across the system, people have reacted to it as if it is an accountability measure. Some of that has been good, I have to say. There have been schools that have been doing far too much low-value qualification in Key Stage 4 for the good of the school's position in the league tables, rather than for the good of the children, and it is good to challenge that and to change it.

Some of what has happened, which I would not have predicted, is that you saw at that moment some schools move children in Year 10, and sometimes even in Year 11, off courses that they had already started, to get them on to English Baccalaureate programmes. I think that is quite wrong. I understand it in a way, but I think it is quite wrong, because it is wrong for the children concerned and affected. I must say I did not believe that schools and headteachers would do that, because I thought that schools would think, "Whatever it looks like for us, it is not right for these children and we will not do it." So, a learning point for me is just how over-responsive the system can be to pretty small incentive changes.

I think one of the things that we must do as an education system—one of the things I want us to do as a group that I am leading—is have the confidence in what we are doing to do the right thing for the children and focus on that, and then work out how to make sure the accountability measures look fine, having done the right thing for the children. So, I do think there is a job, and it is not just a job for Government, by any means, to build the confidence of the system and the confidence of leaders in schools to resist incentive structures.

**Q22 Damian Hinds:** That is interesting, because that is not what leaders in most organisations would complain about: implementing a change and it happening only more so.

**Jon Coles:** This is a really important thing for the education system. I think some of what the Secretary of State is trying to do in terms of getting leaders in schools to take more responsibility and ownership for what they do and for the system, and to try and get a more bottom-up sense into the system, for me that illustrated a degree of over-responsiveness to policy, which is unhelpful. What it has certainly done—there is no question about this—is in terms of its leverage as a policy, in terms of minimal change with maximum impact, I have never known another policy like it. All that has happened is the Government has put an extra column of figures in the performance tables. It has not said any consequences will flow from that and, right across the country, schools have changed their

curriculum. When I was teaching people policy across Government, I always used to talk to people about leverage and the issue that, in the Civil Service, it is very easy for people to think the things that you have put lots of effort into are big and important things. Actually, what you should be trying to achieve is low-effort things with high impact. That is what great policy-making is about.

**Q23 Damian Hinds:** The league tables certainly fall into that category.

**Jon Coles:** Yes.

**Q24 Damian Hinds:** That is an example of something, as I say, that happened, only more so. The flipside question is: what are the barriers or the hurdles to change in the education system?

**Jon Coles:** There are multiple barriers, I think. If you look at 20 years of education reform, then I think you would see some very big themes coming through, which are still with us today, very strongly. The question of the importance of the autonomy of the school in policy over the last generation and a half, really, and growing autonomy for school, being balanced with, sometimes, a need for serious support and intervention in schools that are struggling, and trying to get the balance between those two things right is hard—it just is hard.

Trying to get curriculum right: we have seen, this week, increased debates about curriculum. How do you have national standards that are challenging, rigorous and achievable with hard work and dedication, while giving teachers enough space to create the things that are right for children? That is a tension that has been with us for ever. How do you get leadership that is absolutely passionate about doing the right thing for the children in the schools, without it tipping over into doing things which are damaging to other schools? You need passionate, unreasonable leaders of schools, but not so unreasonable that they lose the focus. So, there are all those kinds of things, but the job of government, in a way, is to create a system with sufficient capacity to improve, and getting enough really great people into the teaching profession and getting them really well trained. If you had to pick one thing that would make the biggest difference, that is it.

**Q25 Damian Hinds:** But I guess that is a long-term flow-through.

**Jon Coles:** Yes, and there is always a risk, in the national debate about education, that people believe that it is a quick fix. There are some things which take longer.

**Q26 Mr Ward:** I am quite interested that your comments on boldness—and certainly in terms of dramatic changes there, which clearly have taken place in a short period of time—seem to be almost completely related to structural changes and not to teaching quality, teaching and learning, management or leadership within schools—those things that really impact upon achievement and attainment, as opposed to the structural, which are very, very visible, clear to see and associated with exciting change taking place.

I am a little concerned, really, that there is this emphasis on big, visible changes.

**Jon Coles:** I don't think the Secretary of State would ever articulate it in this way, but underpinning this there is a theory of change, and that is fundamentally that, if you want dramatic change in teaching and learning and significant improvement in teaching and learning, the most important thing is high-quality local leadership which is free to do the right things for the children in the school. Therefore, having teaching and learning programmes run from central Government is not nearly as powerful as empowering good local leaders to work with other schools, to support other schools and sometimes to take over other schools, but to lead change in teaching and learning within their own institution. The quality of teaching and learning and the quality of curriculum is determined much more by the actions of the leader than it is by a central Government intervention.

Obviously, that is a debatable proposition, and there will be probably different views in this room about whether that is right or wrong, but I don't think it is right to say that there is no thinking about teaching and learning. It is just that the thinking about where the improvements in teaching and learning need to come from is quite different under this Government than the last one. Some of the things that are being built on about peer-to-peer support, the use of National Leaders of Education, the idea of teaching schools that has been developed, and academy chains which are growing from individual successful schools, to some extent build on the previous Government's work, but are focused, in the end, on classroom practice. It is just that you are saying to headteachers that they need to lead that change, and not trying to influence it from the centre.

**Q27 Craig Whittaker:** Sir David, you said earlier on that you cannot get excited about SpAds, and I think you also said that they actually add value to the process, but does the furore over Michael Gove's private email account and that of his advisers not actually highlight that there is a huge mistrust between Ministers and civil servants? If that is the case, I suppose the next question is: did that contribute to you guys leaving? Finally on that section, can I just also ask you: does that not make civil servants become more policy deliverers rather than developers?

**Sir David Bell:** To answer the middle question first, no, it did not contribute to my leaving. To answer the last question next, I do not think it makes civil servants policy deliverers, if we imply that it is somehow a kind of second-order or less valuable task. I saw—and I am sure it continues to be the case—civil servants doing both policy and delivery; sitting round the table with the Secretary, with Ministers, actively debating, developing and promoting policy. There is no sense in which civil servants are out of that. If I might say, some of the suggestion around emails was that there was a kind of para-Government being conducted; that there was no way in which civil servants were contributing to policy debate and advice. That is just utter, utter nonsense. In a sense, I would have been the first to see that, because, if

policies had then emerged with no civil-servant input or discussion, we would have had a view on it.

It is entirely reasonable for political advisers to be thinking about policy and also to be thinking about the political implementation and presentation of policy. Special advisers have done that time immemorial and that is what they should do, so I think very strongly it is the case that civil servants were still part of that process.

**Q28 Craig Whittaker:** Why use a private email account? Why not use the system we already have in place?

**Jon Coles:** I will just say a word on this because they are by no means unique as special advisers in using private email accounts, in my experience. If, as government, you say to people, "You may not use government resources to conduct political business," then if they want to conduct political business, they are going to have to use some other way of communicating with one another. This is the bind we are in. I think most taxpayers would say, "We don't want politicians conducting party business at the taxpayer's expense," and would want there to be that distinction.

**Q29 Craig Whittaker:** Aren't they employed by the Government?

**Sir David Bell:** Can I come back to this? I think this is a really, really important point. The Department for Education, when I was there, took a very strict line the way Jon has described—a really strict line—in relation to what special advisers could and could not do and I continue to believe it was the right one. Some people have pushed back and said, "Of course, you cannot draw that sharp distinction between the political and the governmental, so this is just some kind of smokescreen to allow all of this private business." But to pick up Jon's point, what would taxpayers think if special advisers started to use government accounts for much more explicit political attacks—I don't mean personalised attacks, but just political attacks—on the opposition, which, in a sense, they would be entitled to do as political advisers? I think there would be a huge outcry about the misuse of government systems, but I think we have still got an unresolved question about where special advisers can conduct their business. Although there is a lot of attention on the current situation, this, we know, is not something that has been confined to this Government; there has always been this rather uneasy position of where special advisers conduct their business. Probably one major difference between now and, say, the arrival of the last Government in 1997 is the much greater use of electronic means of communication.

**Q30 Craig Whittaker:** Are you, therefore, saying that, as head of service, you were absolutely convinced and satisfied that special advisers were only using the private email accounts when they were discussing party politics?

**Sir David Bell:** In a sense, by definition, I could only know what I was told, which was, if somebody has got a private email account, they are using it for the purposes that they have chosen to use it as a private

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individual. If that includes using it for political business, that is consistent with what the DfE guidance has said: “We will not allow you to use government email accounts for political business.” But I come back to the point: how would I have known if private email accounts were being used to conduct government business? I would have known, presumably, if there had just been, out of the ether, policies that were being presented with no policy debate or no policy input from the Civil Service, and I have to say that was never, ever the case. I cannot think of any policies where civil servants were not there to present very vigorously their advice. I can think of policies where, obviously, Ministers would accept what civil servants have said, and I can think of policies where Ministers said, “Okay, that is fine, but we are going to do something else.” To go back to what I said earlier: entirely legitimate—they decide.

**Q31 Craig Whittaker:** Do you not agree, though, that the whole affair around the private email accounts has undermined the confidence between Ministers and the civil servants, if not just the perception that the general public have?

**Sir David Bell:** Maybe I am allowed to say this, now that I am out: it felt to me like the classic Whitehall village story, that people on the inside were getting completely obsessed over this issue. I found outside—and I suspect you would find outside—not a huge amount of interest, but even if it is a Whitehall village story, I do not think it has undermined confidence. I don’t know what has happened now, obviously; since I left, I have not kept in touch, quite legitimately, with this issue. However, still leaves unresolved where we are going to allow political special advisers to do their business and how there should be, and whether there should be, control or regulation around it. I think at the moment, it is a confusing mess.

**Q32 Craig Whittaker:** A final pithy question from me, which requires a pithy answer: what about the new powers around the boards and the ability to recommend the removal of Permanent Secretaries? Is that a good thing or a bad thing, or a step too far?

**Sir David Bell:** I think, if they are there to provide non-executive challenge, they should have the right to say if they think the Permanent Secretary is not performing to an adequate standard and then make a recommendation to that effect to the Cabinet Secretary and the Prime Minister, yes.

**Q33 Charlotte Leslie:** We do not have very much time, so I will be really brief. Just going back to some of the structural implications of the reforms that have taken place, I wanted to get the views of both of you on the implications for this Department: firstly, the change to the role of arm’s-length bodies and the reduction of them; the shift in the DfE from a four-site to, I think, a 12-site organisation; and, in our last visit to the Committee, we were told how some of the policies—particularly the academies policy—required more junior-level civil servants but there is a change in ratio to more senior civil servants. I wondered if you might be able to, in the two or three minutes we have, give a brief overview of those three things: the

arm’s-length body, multi-site and junior-senior civil servant ratio.

**Sir David Bell:** Shall I start with arm’s-length, and you do multi-site?

**Jon Coles:** Yes.

**Sir David Bell:** It is quite interesting. One of our non-executive directors did say to me, “I would have never taken on this kind of risk, collapsing 12 non-departmental public bodies into four agencies,” but I said, “Welcome to the Civil Service; that is what we do all the time,” and we did it, and the Department did it, and I hope the Committee would recognise that was quite a task. There is a risk, isn’t there, because, if you bring these powers to yourself more as Ministers in agencies, then you have very much brought in-house the risk that goes with it. But, to be fair to the Secretary of State, he had said before the election that he felt that it was legitimate for Ministers to carry that risk. I think that is the consequence and, in a sense, we will probably not see how that works out until we have the first flashpoint issue. I think rationalising down was a good idea, because we probably had allowed too many bodies to grow over the years. On multi-site, I suppose you just have to work a bit harder in getting out and about. There was already a rationalisation process that we had started to consider and it may be that the Department is still considering that. That might be part of what the future plan looks like.

**Jon Coles:** I think this, as a change, is quite profound to the Department, really. You could characterise the Department of the past as fundamentally London-centred, though on four sites. A great deal of the focus was policy-led. Senior people had to have serious contact with Ministers to be able to do their job and it forced the centre of gravity to be London. Now there is a move from policy to delivery. The vast majority of the Department’s staff now are outside London, and they are focused outwards. I think it is a very different organisation and quite a different management challenge. I think that is profoundly significant for the Department, and there is a lot that the Department can be proud of about the way they have managed the changes to this point, but the really difficult thinking is about how we get the benefits from having that integration of policy and delivery much more comprehensively within an organisation, and how we make sure that we are properly staffed and resourced for doing that work.

As it happens, the changes in relation to non-departmental public bodies have helped on precisely the point of junior staff coming in, because some of our non-departmental public bodies had a very different grade mix to the one that existed in head office, and that has meant that it has been possible to draw people in. I am six months out of date now, so I will not know how that has changed in the last six months, but that has been a good opportunity.

There are some real challenges. I think that the nature of the agencies needs to be different from one another. The National College for School Leadership needs to continue to be seen by head teachers as, in part, their college, and making that work as an executive agency is quite hard. That is a good challenge. I do not think it is an undoable one but you have got to really think

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that through, as against the Standards and Testing Agency, where, actually, it is very clearly a delivery function which the Department owns, but with a bit of the process—the setting of grade boundaries—which the Department must stay out of. We have written that into the chief executive's contract: fundamentally, you must die at the first ditch when the Department tries to interfere, if it ever does. So, we have got a range of interesting challenges there. Some of the teacher-training stuff is a very different sort of delivery-focused challenge, so getting the balance of that in those very different functions to work well is not simple. I have every confidence in Chris and my former colleagues to nail it.

**Sir David Bell:** Hear, hear.

**Chair:** Is that a good note on which to end?

**Charlotte Leslie:** Yes.

**Chair:** Thank you very much for coming. We wish you well in your future careers, and you are welcome back at any time.

**Q34 Mr Ward:** Before you go, what question do you think we should have asked you?

**Sir David Bell:** One I would know the answer to.

**Jon Coles:** You can take the man out of the Civil Service...

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### Examination of Witness

**Witness:** **Chris Wormald**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education, gave evidence.

**Chair:** Thank you for coming along, Chris. It is good to see you again.

**Q35 Craig Whittaker:** Good morning, Chris. You will remember a few weeks ago when we came to see you that you said you were spending your first two months listening and learning. Now the two months are over, what have you heard and what have you learned?

**Chris Wormald:** Yes, I will just say a bit about what I have found, which is very similar to what I said to you when you came to visit us in the Department. I do think I have inherited a strong and successful Department, and I agree with pretty much everything that Sir David and Jon said to this Committee about this Department. I have found a Department that is full of hardworking, committed, professional civil servants trying to do a good job—very similar to when I left the Department in 2005, but it was very nice to find the same. I have found a Department that has undergone change already of the type that was described in the previous evidence given to the Committee and, as you identified in those questions, some stresses that go with that level of change, both in terms of policy and in the organisation, very quickly, which present management challenges.

I have talked to a very large number of staff now. I have done my complete tour of the main sites of the Department. I have not quite got round all the smaller sites but I think I have now done 11 staff sessions with an average of 120 staff a time, so I have been face-to-face with somewhere around a third of the Department's staff so far. I have found that, while there are some strains of the types that you have heard about, generally I have found huge levels of commitment and very high morale.

There will be, because of continuing real-world change, the need for further changes in the Department, and, when you came in a couple of weeks ago, I outlined the three big areas I saw as being the things the Department would need to respond to going forward, and they remain my view: clearly, austerity and the need to meet stringent financial targets and save money for the taxpayer—that would be true across the public sector and would be true of this

Department, as with any other, and that will be a big feature of our lives; what was touched on right at the end of the previous session about the change to the nature of the Department that the arrival of agencies at the beginning of this financial year brings; and although, as was described, the bringing-in of the agencies into the Department has gone very well, that has left quite a series of questions and challenges about how the Department will operate going forward that we will have to address. A lot of them, I would have to say, are very positive challenges, but that will be very clearly on our agenda. Then we have the issue that was also touched on in the previous session about how the Department will go about managing, in the long term, the increasing numbers of academies and free schools in the system.

I have described them as the kinds of challenges you want to have. They are the challenges of success and they are the challenges of a Department remaining continually responsive to the real-world situation it finds itself in, but they are nevertheless leadership challenges. I am still finishing my listening and learning phase, but, over the summer and the autumn, we will be pulling all that thinking together and working out the right size, shape and mode of operation of the Department going through the summer and autumn, with the aim that we can pretty much then sketch out the plans for the rest of this Parliament.

The other thing I wanted to say straight away, leading on from what Jon and Sir David said, is that they left me a very good inheritance, and so, in particular, did the interim team that was in place when I arrived. One of the very first decisions that I took was that I was going to make no changes to those arrangements in the short term, partly due to the need for stability and to give me space to do the listening and learning I wanted to do, but partly because they are doing a very good job, and the Department, I found, was strong and stable and delivering for Ministers, and therefore, until I was clear exactly what changes I wanted to make, I would do nothing. In a way, that is the clearest answer to the question about the success of the interim team and the stability of the Department.

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**Q36 Craig Whittaker:** I just wanted to test out what priority you put on replenishing your Board with substantive Directors-General. When will this be done? Has the Director-General, Corporate Services post at the DfE been abolished?

**Chris Wormald:** We have not quite decided on the eventual structure, and we will be doing that over the summer and autumn, so I expect to reach the autumn with permanent appointments made to all of those posts. As I said, I decided not to do that straight away. At the moment, the corporate services functions of the Department are split between the three Policy Directors-General; there are some advantages to that system, actually. It means everyone in the senior team has to worry about not only their policy area but the corporate functioning of the Department, and, actually, that is quite a healthy thing for people to do. What I want to be doing and what we will be considering is: what is the right senior structure for the new type of Department that is created by the agencies having joined? That does bring, as was described previously, some rather different management and leadership challenges, and we probably will be wanting to restructure the senior responsibilities to deal with that. So, I think it is quite unlikely I would be recreating the previous corporate services role exactly as it was, which is the straight answer to your question, but we will take these decisions of a piece. As we look at what is the right size, shape and mode of operation, we will work out what is the ideal senior structure to service that.

**Q37 Mr Ward:** First of all, I was interested to hear what you said about the future need to look at the management arrangements for the academies and the free schools, and particularly important in my view is not so much the support for but the monitoring and challenge of those and the arrangements for that. It would have been nice for those to have been in place before the free schools and academies were expanded, but that is a personal view. Can I just ask you about the management boards, both across Whitehall and specifically within DfE? We talked about it before, and I know you were here and you heard the comments on that. What are the strengths of the new arrangements and the challenges that the boards face?

**Chris Wormald:** The first thing I should say is, in terms of the main Board and the introduction of non-executive directors, I have been a long-term supporter of that model. Indeed, when I was at Communities and Local Government, although we did not have Ministers on the Board, we did, actually, before the election, pioneer a Board with a lot more non-executive directors on it to bring challenge to the Department. As it happens, one of them was Bob Kerslake, then the chief executive of Sheffield and now the Head of the Home Civil Service, and he was one of our non-executive directors at CLG. I always thought that was a good model for the Civil Service, and then I was not heavily involved but partly involved, when I was in the Cabinet Office, with the setting-up of the new arrangements, so I think they have got a lot of strength to them, particularly in that they bring challenge into the Department in a very

constructive way and they give us access to expertise that we would not otherwise have.

In the case of DfE, I would pick out two particular things: we, like many Departments, have been shorter than we should have been on commercial skills, and our non-executive Board members, between them, bring considerable expertise in that area; and the second thing is the power of having an excellent serving headteacher on the decision-making bodies of the Department is huge—somebody whose challenges to us can be, “When I go back to my school tomorrow morning, this is how I will explain that to staff.” That has huge power to it, as well. So, I think it enhances the Department’s expertise quite considerably to have that model, and I am very much in favour of it.

In terms of boards in general, it is very important to note that what we have not done is create in Departments the equivalent of private-sector boards. Decision-making within Department—who ultimately takes decisions—remains where it always was, with Ministers accountable to Parliament. It is very important that that remains the case. Government decision-making a) does not work on the right timetable to work in a board system in that way, and b) of course it is the elected Government that has to take decisions, not some other body. So, the role of the Board is to help Ministers and me, as Permanent Secretary, set the direction of travel and the strategic, overall direction of strategy, while individual management and leadership decisions in relation to the Civil Service continue to be taken by me and my senior colleagues, and policy decisions are rightly taken by Ministers. So, the Board fits in to that sort of framework.

That Board is then supported by a number of sub-boards, in which the non-executive directors are also involved. My reflection on them is that it is basically the right structure. I wanted to make a few changes around the edges of them just to make it very clear which board is responsible to what, but I am retaining, basically, the structure that I inherited.

**Q38 Mr Ward:** You mentioned direction of travel. Is it a group or is it yet a team? Does it have a clear view on the direction of travel and speak with one voice?

**Chris Wormald:** From the meetings that I have seen so far, there is, as you would expect, robust debate. The overall direction of travel is reasonably well set and agreed in terms of the main policies the Department is pursuing, but debate within the Board and the sub-groups is robust, and that is what you would want. It is much more, as David and Jon described, focused on how policy should be implemented than it is on the base policy decisions. So, for example, we have been debating how the new entitlement for two-year-olds for early education should be implemented, and that is an area where, for example, the non-executive directors can bring considerable expertise to bear on how the markets with which we are working will operate, and we debate those sorts of issues. It is those sorts of issues that we tend to be debating, rather than the high-level policy ones.

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**Q39 Mr Ward:** If you were speaking on behalf of the Secretary of State, what would you say was the value of the Board? What is the value that he personally sees in that Board? What does it bring to him?

**Chris Wormald:** I suppose the first answer is that you would have to ask him. The second answer is that he puts considerable time into working with the Board, and that is a mark of the importance he attaches to it. From what I have observed, and it goes to, again, some of the questions you were debating with Sir David and Jon, he likes to hear the different opinions from different perspectives and the policy debate, and I think he would say that he finds those sorts of debates enriching to how he makes and formulates policy.

**Q40 Charlotte Leslie:** Moving on to what we discussed before the changes to the NDPBs and arm's-length agencies, has there been an assessment done of the functions that have been lost in the changeover, and if so, what has it found?

**Chris Wormald:** Sorry, I am not quite sure I understand the question. There are a variety of things that we have decided to stop doing, particularly around the organisations that have not been replaced; Becta would probably be the clearest example. So, there were a series of conscious decisions made about those sorts of things, but, in the changeover, the key functions of those organisations have transferred to the Department and are now our responsibility to deliver, so I do not think there have been any specific losses.

**Q41 Charlotte Leslie:** So, you are saying that the functions that were lost were functions that the Department had consciously decided it no longer needed to have work, and all other functions were then incorporated into the Department.

**Chris Wormald:** Yes. I am not aware of anything that we have lost, other than by conscious decision.

**Q42 Charlotte Leslie:** Turning to the GTCE, what rationale was there to abolish it, rather than give it more independence, like the Scottish model? Do you feel that there may be a time, under different circumstances, when a GTCE might be of use?

**Chris Wormald:** I will have to answer that question in terms of what I have heard rather than what I have specifically observed, because, of course, I was not there. The first thing to say: the Scots do have a different model and that is simply a product of devolution. One of the purposes of devolving power to Scotland and Wales was to allow difference with what was done in England—and there are, of course, quite a lot of people in Scotland now arguing for quite a lot of difference—so I don't see it as a problem that they have one model and we have a different model. The decision that was taken at the time—and I am sure there are arguments on both side of this debate—was that the GTCE was not being as effective as it could have been at fulfilling its responsibilities, and that it would be done better by those functions being directly accountable to Ministers. As I say, that decision can be debated, but it was a very, very clear

set of decisions both about those functions and the other things that were brought into the Department, as Sir David described. Ministers felt that they ought to be much more directly accountable for those measures. Yes, you could make a difference decision; they chose not to.

I think, behind that, and underpinning all of the arm's-length body reforms, there is a logic to saying, as your question rather replied, either things should be completely independent from Government and very clearly speak with their own voice, as in the case of Ofsted—or now Ofqual—or Ministers should be accountable for them. I think that is quite a clear distinction. You can argue whether things should be a different side of the line but that was the decision, as I understand it.

**Q43 Chair:** I think, Chris, the point is that many argue that the Scottish model is a better model, and certainly the teaching unions, for instance, would say that that was the case, so why deliberately go in the opposite direction?

**Chris Wormald:** As I say, a number of people argued the other way, and the decision that Ministers took can be debated.

**Q44 Chair:** What was the rationale? Given that it has this very good reputation in Scotland, what was the rationale behind taking a completely different direction?

**Chris Wormald:** Sorry, we are into areas that, as I say, happened quite a long time before I arrived, so it is quite difficult for me to comment on the arguments that went on.

**Q45 Chair:** Sorry to challenge you personally.

**Chris Wormald:** I have set out the arguments that were made, and I do appreciate that those arguments were debated and people would argue for a different decision, but, as I say, the decision Ministers made at the time—

**Q46 Chair:** So, we should have asked David Bell that question.

**Chris Wormald:** I don't want to say that, because that is rather too easy an answer to make.

**Q47 Charlotte Leslie:** Can I put an idea to you? I would be interested in your reaction to it. In some places, the view is held that the GTCE suffered from mission drift and tried to do too many things and be too many things to too many people, and it became irrevocably difficult under its current organisation to reform into something useful. The argument can be made that, if you look at a medical analogy, you have the GMC, which is responsible for accreditation and what the GTCE could have been doing. One of the issues with it is it did not have its sibling body, like, say, a Royal College in the medical world, which dealt with the standards of practice and excellence in, say, surgery, over which the GMC provides the structure and the accreditation. Do you think that the GTCE, or something analogous to that, would have had a more solid sense of mission and would not have suffered from what it did suffer if there was a similar kind of

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professional standards body that it would be responsible for accrediting, such as the Royal College?

**Chris Wormald:** It is slightly difficult to answer the hypothetical, but I think behind that is something that I do agree with. I think, if you look across the way that the education profession has developed in contrast to some other professions—as you say, the health professions—for one reason or another, as Jon touched on in some of his evidence, we have not seen the development of the peer-to-peer professional learning in education that we have seen in health. It is a bit of a platitude, but most good practice in health and among health professionals is not spread by government; it is spread by the pages of the *BMJ* and *The Lancet*, by the big teaching hospitals and by the consultancy system, whereas, in education, whether it is done by central Government or some other body, a lot of it has been guidance from the top.

Personally, I think there is a lot of strength in that health model, and one of the reasons why I think a number of the reforms that have been taking place—particularly, I think teaching schools are a very, very interesting one, which are beginning to replicate—is they are very powerful. I recognise your general point: if there was more of that culture within the education profession, then I think the GTCE probably would have found it easier. Whether that would make it work, I cannot comment on.

**Q48 Charlotte Leslie:** If, say, that peer-to-peer support mechanism or organisation/ body were to emerge from the profession—it would have to be from the profession—do you think there would be willingness and ability for the Department and the state to incorporate and move around that new presence on the educational landscape to make the most of that peer-to-peer support and its structural organisations?

**Chris Wormald:** Not in the immediate future. I think we have made the change we are going to make, and the priority now is to make it work. Clearly, what you describe is theoretically possible, but at the moment we have just made the changes that we have made and our focus ought to be to make them work to the best.

**Q49 Charlotte Leslie:** In terms of concrete figures about the budget and staffing impacts of the changes, is there an analysis that has been made within the Department of the impact of that on expenditure?

**Chris Wormald:** There has not been a formal evaluation of the ALB programme, although we have monitored it very carefully. I will not try and quote numbers at you right now; if I may, I will come back to you with figures.

**Q50 Charlotte Leslie:** That would be very good, if you could. Finally, if I may, Pat, before the general election the Conservative Party was very public in criticising some of the luxury of the Sanctuary Buildings, and there was talk of having a massage parlour. Have Ministers, since arriving in this building, been as vociferous to improve the efficiency of the building itself as they were when they were in opposition?

**Chris Wormald:** It is not a question I have looked at, I have to say. The Sanctuary Buildings is, of course, a nice building to work in.

**Charlotte Leslie:** It is a very nice building.

**Chris Wormald:** I don't think it was quite as luxurious as it was sometimes described, and, of course—and particularly in a period of austerity—we do have to look at how efficiently all our sites are used.

**Q51 Craig Whittaker:** Chris, the DfE has set itself targets around the types of people that it employs. For example, you are doing fantastically well on the 2013 targets for employing women, which targets 50%, and currently you are achieving 56%. On the other things, though, you are not doing too well at all. BME, for example, target of 8%, only achieving 4%; LGBT, 6% target, only achieving 3%; and those with disabilities, a target of 6%, doing much worse, only currently employing 2%. What are you going to do about it?

**Chris Wormald:** This is a challenge that we will have to step up to. The picture you paint is pretty common across Civil Service Departments: that we have done very well on gender diversity and not so well on the other things that you mentioned. The numbers on, as it were, the feeder grades to the SCS, when you look at the Grade 6s and 7s, are rather better, which is quite encouraging, because that is, of course, where the next generation of the SCS will come from. If we look at the very good model of how gender diversity was tackled, that is how it happened: the numbers built up from the bottom and have now reached the very top; there was a point where I think it was somewhere around 50% of all the Permanent Secretaries in main Departments were women, which is a complete transformation from previous decades. We will have to have the same relentless focus on the other issues that you mentioned.

I don't think there is any magic bullet or rocket science to it. It is all about doing the simple things well. It is about valuing people for their skills. It is about recognising the barriers that some people face and taking active steps in terms of how we develop people to address all the things that were in fact done to tackle gender diversity. So, I think we have got the models for how to do it.

**Q52 Craig Whittaker:** Are you suggesting positive discrimination?

**Chris Wormald:** No.

**Q53 Craig Whittaker:** What are you going to do differently to make it better?

**Chris Wormald:** If we take gender as the example, what was done was not positive discrimination. There were no quotas, and indeed such steps are not in line with the law. What was done was a considerable amount of encouragement, a lot of training and development, and a lot of focus—and this is very important to me and I have been talking about this as I have gone around the country—on the positive valuing of diversity as making the work of the Department better. I don't think, actually, it is just diversity in the senses we have just been describing; I find the geographical diversity of the Department and the skill-set diversity of the Department that we now

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have both very enriching as well. It is constantly re-emphasising the message that that diversity is not only rightly fair to individuals, but actually makes the Department better at its job because it has, through doing that, a better understanding of the public that it serves. As I say, there is no magic bullet to all these things. What gives me confidence is that we have systematically made progress through all those sorts of techniques on gender; we have not made as much progress on the others, but it does suggest to me that we do have the right model for how we will make progress.

**Q54 Craig Whittaker:** Your own 2013 targets for your own Department: are you going to hit them?

**Chris Wormald:** It is quite difficult for me to say, but we will certainly try.

**Q55 Craig Whittaker:** When the Committee went over to Sanctuary Buildings last year and we asked the question about reduction in staff numbers, it was said that there was a significant reduction in the lower grades across the board. I could be wrong, but I think it was Andrew Coles who said that, “We’ve got rid of the typing pool,” half tongue in cheek, half not, of course. Particularly around the academy programme, which has been a huge investment of time, are you convinced that you have got enough numbers at the right levels to deal with all the priorities that you need to deal with?

**Chris Wormald:** From what I have seen so far, I think the answer would be yes. The academy programme has, as was described before, expanded at a considerable rate and we have seen no evidence that that rate of expansion is being held back by lack of people to work on it. That gives me confidence that the numbers we have given about the numbers coming through are at a roughly constant number that we can continue and do that.

Can I come back on your previous point on gradings and then come back to something that Jon Coles said? With the new Department, with considerably more executive functions and spread around the country, that does change the nature of the Department quite a lot. Its previous incarnation, as Jon described it, was very much a strategy house. Those sorts of organisations do end up with comparatively more higher-level staff and comparatively fewer lower-level staff. We are not that sort of Department anymore, so, although that may have been the situation pre 1 April, I don’t think it would be a reflection of the Department now.

**Q56 Craig Whittaker:** Are you saying, therefore, that you do not have a problem with high-level staff—highly paid staff—dealing with lower tasks.

**Chris Wormald:** No, sorry, it is not quite that. The nature of the work that we now do in terms of implementation and the work done in the agencies is of a different type of strategy, which requires different types of staffing mix.

**Q57 Craig Whittaker:** Do you think the Department—and perhaps the wider Civil Service—has been guilty of over-promotion in the past, and is

hence one of the reasons why we have much fewer people at a lower level?

**Chris Wormald:** Not across the board, no. Of course, for the Civil Service as a whole, that would not be the picture at all. A comparatively small number of people work in Whitehall Departments in senior levels, and the vast majority of civil servants that you would find will be working in the Border Agency, working in job centres, etc. A Department that was like the DfE prior to the agencies—a mainly HQ function focused on strategy—tends to have a greater proportion of senior civil servants to junior civil servants than ones that have large executive functions. Although we have not become the DWP, we have moved towards that model of having more executive functions.

Behind your question, are there questions about the numbers of senior civil servants that the whole Civil Service has going forward right at a time of austerity and financial constraint? Yes, there are, just as there will be for all types of staff.

**Q58 Craig Whittaker:** Let me just ask you about the staff survey then, which has been mentioned a couple of times: 51% of staff said that they feel that the DfE, on the whole, is not managed well—that is presuming, of course, that 49% say it is, 51% say it is not. Similarly, when changes are made in the DfE, they are not usually for the better: 79% of staff said that was the case. What are you going to do about that?

**Chris Wormald:** The first thing to say is that what I have seen in the 10 weeks that I have been here matches pretty much exactly what you heard from Sir David and from Jon Coles. What I have not found is a low-morale organisation. As was said a couple of times, those same staff-survey results still have the DfE outperforming most Whitehall Departments, and I think, actually, David and Jon were a bit hard on themselves on that and ought to be taking more credit for the fact that they were part of leading an organisation that is towards the top end of Civil Service morale. That is not to say, as they said, that there are not some challenges going forward.

**Chair:** Doesn’t that demonstrate a degree of complacency within the Civil Service? For most private-sector organisations—and certainly organisations that I have worked in—if less than 80% of staff felt that we were not managing the Department well, that would be a real cause for concern. So, I accept that it is perhaps better than in the Civil Service, but if you refer that to the outside world, this is really quite worrying.

**Q59 Damian Hinds:** I am not sure that is right, Pat. I think we need to be careful with that. We need to know what the benchmark norm is. With staff surveys, when they are filled in anonymously, there is a certain number of people who will always complain about management, say the thing is not being run well, say that the bosses have the wrong priorities, too much power and people are not getting paid enough. I think there will be a benchmark norm for the sorts of questions that the Permanent Secretary has asked about but we don’t know what that number is.

**Chris Wormald:** All I am trying to say is that I don’t think it is a question to be complacent about, and the



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findings that Mr Whittaker quoted are, of course, things that we are going to want to deal with. But, as Jon said, we are not dealing with a disaster situation here, and, as I say, when I have been around and talked to quite a lot of staff, that is not the impression I have got either, which is not to say there are not some significant challenges to address.

There are two big pieces of context that have been touched on already: one is that there has been a significant amount of change, and that is destabilising for people and leads to some of those results; and, of course, like everywhere in the public sector—and we see this in the results—at a time of recruitment freezes, pay freezes and staff reductions, those are not the things that drive intense happiness. My conversations with staff have suggested that they understand why those things have to be done, they understand the Department's and the Government's financial circumstances and understand those changes, but nevertheless it would certainly be fair to say they would rather they were not happening.

Coming on to the question I really wanted to answer—what we will be doing going forward—this very much comes to the question that I touched on at the beginning about doing some thinking and quite a lot of communicating and consulting on the question of how we want the Department to be in the future and particularly post the agencies joining. I have to say what was striking me when I was reading those staff-survey results is that there was a big emphasis in them that came out, and has also come out in our conversations, about people wanting good communication, and, particularly now we are a multi-site organisation, that for me becomes a very, very pressing question going forward. Two aspects to that: as I go round, the question I am asked most frequently is, “How are you going to improve the video conferencing?” I say that not just as an example but because the answer to a lot of these things is around a lot of the very basic things about how the Department operates, so we will have a big focus on those.

Then the other thing I want to put a particular emphasis on will be the role of the senior Civil Service going forward as the corporate leadership of the organisation and as the people who communicate with the rest of staff. I think that is particularly important in a multisite environment. Then I think there is a particular emphasis that needs to be placed on me and my senior colleagues to be getting round and talking to a lot of people. I have found my tour of the sites and tour of the country hugely rewarding, and the feedback I get back, which I hope is not just being nice to the new Permanent Secretary, is that staff very much value that, too.

So, a little like my previous answer to you, I don't think there is any sort of silver bullet or rocket science to this; it is about doing the basic things of good management very, very well, but all in the context that I don't think we are dealing with a disaster here.

**Q60 Craig Whittaker:** As a previous general manager in a retail environment for 30 years prior, if I had got a staff survey in, in which 79% of my staff say that, when changes are made in my establishment, they are not usually for the better, I would be

incredibly concerned. I understand we don't have benchmarks, but 79% is a fairly clear miss.

**Chris Wormald:** Yes, I am not trying to give the impression that I am not concerned.

**Q61 Craig Whittaker:** Let me just ask you very quickly, because I am conscious of time now: what are you specifically going to do to address that? What do you have in place that allows those people to feed back into you and your senior managers what they are feeling and what they suggest?

**Chris Wormald:** This is one of the things we will be doing over the summer and the autumn, as we ask those questions I was describing about what sort of Department we want to be going forward. I want that to be a highly consultative process. I think senior managers need to be very visible in that process and we have to engage with our staff about them. I am sorry; I was not trying to give the impression that I was complacent about the level of those challenges. I was merely trying to say, as Jon and David did, that we need to see those in the context of what has been happening in the organisation.

**Q62 Ian Mearns:** A couple of weeks ago, we had the Secretary of State here. I will follow up on a previous question that I asked him about whether or not he thought the Department should do an impact assessment on benefit changes, in terms of their impact on children, their welfare and their educational prospects. He did not think it was the Department's remit to do that and, moreover, he added that he did not think such impact assessments were fit for purpose. Is that a picture that you recognise from your time working across the Civil Service, Chris?

**Chris Wormald:** I certainly agree with the first part: there is a very clear ministerial lead and Department that is responsible for the benefit changes, and they do do impact assessments. I have to say I have not discussed with the Secretary of State the wider question of impact assessments. My personal view would be that some of the ones I have seen are and some of the ones less so, and I think, as with almost everything else, the question is: how well you do them? With all these sorts of processes, where you are required to do something, sometimes they are done for form's sake, in order to be able to say that they have been done, and sometimes they are seriously impactful things, so I would put it down to the quality of the assessment that is done. I certainly think it is important that governments do proper assessments of what is going to happen as a result of their policies, whether that is always a formal impact assessment or whether it is by some other means. We should be constantly asking ourselves that question but asking ourselves it in the real-world context.

**Q63 Ian Mearns:** I have given you something to think about. If the Secretary of State does not think such impact assessments were necessarily fit for purpose, as the head of the paid service that is something you maybe want to think about looking at.

**Chris Wormald:** Yes, that is a fair challenge.

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**Q64 Ian Mearns:** How has your experience of working across Whitehall equipped you for the challenges of working effectively with other Departments, which is an inevitability of the DfE's remit?

**Chris Wormald:** Yes, I hope, because of my career history, I will have something to bring to the table on this. There was a very interesting debate earlier about the role of specialists and generalists within the Civil Service, and I am one of those people who have moved about. As you know, I spent 15 years in the Education Department, though I am not an educationalist in the way that Sir David is, but I hope I can bring at least a level of experience and background in policy. But, as you say, I have also worked in some other Departments, such as Communities and Local Government, where I was responsible for the local government side. Local Government is, of course, one of our key partners, and I would hope that my experience of working closely with local government will be valuable. Then, from Cabinet Office, I got to look across the whole of Government and, again, I hope that will give me a valuable perspective that I can add to my education background.

On the question of working across departmental boundaries, it is quite difficult. Organisations exist for a reason: to have a focus on a particular set of issues, and, as was described in the previous evidence, there is always a question about how you work properly across the organisational boundaries. Particularly from what I saw in local government, joining up happens best in local places. It happens when local professionals get together and conclude how they are going to deal with the real people who are in front of them. I saw a brilliant example in Wandsworth, that I visited recently, of their troubled families work, where you saw the police officer, the social worker, the educational psychologist all in the same team, all sitting in the same room, looking at the same issues and deciding how they would pool their expertise to do it. In terms of how government then works on cross-government working, if we have in our minds that what we are really trying to do is create the circumstances where those sorts of conversations can happen, and we go into all our conversations thinking that, then we will make progress.

I think, in what I have seen in the last 10 weeks, there are some quite good examples in DfE. I think the work that has just been done around special educational needs and particularly bringing the Health Department processes and Education Department processes together so that you look at the child rather than just what happens to them at school, is actually rather a good example of that happening. So, I think there are some good examples there.

**Q65 Neil Carmichael:** I really just wanted to probe this business about working with other Departments, because one of the constant comments I receive from the business world is that they do not feel interfaced with Education. I was just wondering if you perceived that as a problem and, if so, how the Department might work better with other Departments and other organisations to address that problem.

**Chris Wormald:** As I said earlier, I do think one of the things that the Civil Service has historically been short of, and we need to focus on being better at, is commercial skills and having more people within Government who have an understanding of how to work with business, whether it is in a formal contracting relationship or more generally. I think there are some straight skills questions to address, which are not related to the departmental boundaries. In terms of the actual working across Departments, we have got some quite interesting models that are seeking to address that. As you know, we have a joint Minister with BIS specifically to address that question. We have a joint unit around apprenticeships. Certainly, from what I have heard, apprenticeships is one of the areas where people have felt more engaged and involved, and we have managed to start from the question of, "How does a business work and, therefore, what might they need from us?" as opposed to, "Here are our systems. How are you going to work with them?" I think the more we can be operating in that sort of mindset, the better that question will be, but I do think there are some straight skills questions in what you say.

**Q66 Mr Ward:** I very much welcomed the opportunity to visit the Department. We have visited the Department twice now and, on our last visit, we heard of the importance of cross-government working, particularly on issues such as child protection. Why, then, has the Department lost the National Safeguarding Delivery Unit, which was designed to facilitate and ease such working, particularly in such an important area?

**Chris Wormald:** I was not involved in that particular decision, so I cannot comment on it specifically.

**Q67 Mr Ward:** Do you think it should be brought back?

**Chris Wormald:** As I say, I would not really like to comment. The key question is how, in that area, we work with the Department of Health, and the measures that we have been taking recently show that progress is being made, in some of the announcements this week, in fact. Generally, it is having the right working culture that makes the difference, rather than organisational things. Over time, there have been a number of cross-government units. Some of them, like the apprenticeships example that I gave earlier, have been very successful; others have not. There is no particular magic in that. As I say, I am not going to comment on the individual case because I don't know about it. I don't think the starting point that goes, "If we had a cross-government unit, suddenly this would be alright," is the right one, because, normally, the question, as I said at the beginning, is about how the local professionals work together on the ground and what we are doing to facilitate that, as opposed to how the central Government organises itself.

**Q68 Mr Ward:** Given that the Department has lost the National Safeguarding Delivery Unit, you do not want to comment on that in particular. Have you, therefore, got any concerns about the capacity of the

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Department to make sure that wheels do not fall off in such an important area as safeguarding children?

**Chris Wormald:** From what I have seen so far, the work on that area is very strong and has resulted in some very good policy. I think there are some big challenges about how we implement it, but, from my limited knowledge, I think the challenges and the capacity challenges are as much for the system as a whole, rather than the number of staff who happen to work on it within the Department. I think the key thing is having the right number of properly trained local professionals working on it.

**Q69 Mr Ward:** Given your obvious empathy for the work which is going on out there at the front line, by local government and local delivery, have you, therefore, got any significant concerns about the significantly differential approach in terms of the way in which cuts have impacted on local authorities up and down the country? Some authorities have had to take much greater cuts than other authorities and, therefore, that differential impact, in terms of how it is actually panning out in terms of the capacity to deliver on the ground, is really quite different in different places.

**Chris Wormald:** Local government has to take its own decisions, and it operates in a financial environment just like the rest of us. From the information I have seen, which, I would have to say, is not complete by any means, what local government has been tending to do in these areas is to protect services for the most vulnerable and has been cutting back on more universal services, which I am sure they don't particularly want to do but would seem to me to be exactly what you ought to be doing in a time of constrained financial resources.

Going back to what I saw in Wandsworth, I think it is very important. They were doing that because it was going to save them money, because there were identifiable families who were costing the state, one way or another, considerable sums of money, and if early intervention and cross-working between agencies could stave off those problems, everybody would save money. So, we should not be thinking that that way of working is necessarily expensive; I think it can be cheaper. Are local authorities going to have to take tough decisions? Like everybody else in the public sector, yes they are.

**Q70 Damian Hinds:** In all big organisations, a constant complaint that people have is that people at

head office don't really understand what life is like on the ground. How good is your Department at getting out and co-mingling and interacting with the front line, and what could be done to make that better?

**Chris Wormald:** I think you can never be good enough. This is one of the areas where the new construction of the Department with its agencies gives us a considerable opportunity to be much better, simply because we now have quite a lot of people whose day job is doing just that. So, if I were to take the example of the National College for School Leadership, it uses, to deliver its services, quite a lot of existing heads—people who are currently heads—and they part-time do things for the National College for School Leadership. That is a potentially huge source of, effectively, free advice for people who are interacting between the Department and the front line as part of what they do, who we can draw on, and you would find similar examples in various of the other agencies. I think, actually, the challenge you pose is exactly the right one, and we have got quite a big opportunity in the new Department to do that and bring with that that diversity of skill set that I was talking about.

I was very interested by Mr Carmichael's comments earlier about the merger of the Education and Employment Department, because I was one of the few people who were there at the time. I was indeed a Private Secretary to the Education Permanent Secretary on the day it happened, and we then had two Permanent Secretaries. The picture you paint is the right one, but the other thing it did was to bring in this remarkable new diversity of skill to the Department of people who had worked in job centres and knew how you dealt with a stroppy customer in a way that, if you worked in a strategy department, you did not know, and there was a huge benefit to that. We have got the possibility of that benefit, not on the same sort of scale, but again from bringing the agencies in, but it will take some management effort. It will not happen simply by existing in the same Department; we will have to be smart about using those new contacts that we have.

**Chair:** Thank you. I am sure we will hear from you many times in the future, Chris.

**Chris Wormald:** Thank you very much.

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