

Alex Chisholm speech at Civil Service Live 2020

Hello, I'm Alex and it's great that so many of you are here. ☐

With over 39,000 registered, if we were together in person we would need one of the larger football stadiums in the country – and I would be hearing not the echo of my own voice against the muted silence of an online audience, but the buzz of a vast crowd. ☐

I like to think that so many of you have registered to take part today because you think this is a special moment for all of us who serve the public. ☐

Because, like me, you have seen during the pandemic how much our fellow citizens have needed in support from all of us in public service. ☐

I am so pleased there are so many of you here, because it means that, like Sir Mark, I can thank you all, from the bottom of my heart, for what you do every day; and invite you to explore with me, ways we can do even better. ☐

It also means that in front of all of you, I can say on the record to Mark, from all of us: Thank you for your service, you have been a brilliant and brave leader, we salute you! ☐ Our work has never mattered more. ☐ In the Civil Service we work every day to improve the lives of people in this country. ☐

That has always been true but never more clearly or more importantly than during this crisis, where our collective actions have been essential to saving lives and livelihoods. ☐

The media talk about 'the government', as if there is some impersonal institution or machine – or Leviathan – that has all this control and influence in our lives. ☐

But we who work in government know it as a collection of individuals and teams – friends, colleagues, characters. ☐

And it is teams of civil servants who have helped perform the brilliant feats of the last 4 months as we have struggled with the virus:

- shielding over 2 million vulnerable people ☐
- protecting millions of jobs in the furlough scheme ☐
- preserving businesses and communities across the country with vital grants ☐
- distributing thousands of laptops to help schools deliver online education, and ☐
- dispensing benefits to help the many who badly needed financial help. ☐

All of this has required extraordinary ingenuity and effort from an army of

civil servants, from you – working your socks off. ☐

To give examples from just two departments:

- In that first, strange, period of lockdown, 35,000 DWP staff managed to ☐process over 1.8 million Universal Credit claims – six times the previous ☐number. ☐
- And HMRC colleagues, in just four weeks, and largely from their spare rooms, ☐designed, built, tested and launched the Job Retention Scheme; even while staging webinars for 40,000 worried taxpayers. ☐

And you have done all of this while living through the same pandemic as everybody else – threatened and in some cases infected by the virus, coping with lockdown, caring for loved ones. ☐

As I have talked with colleagues across the Service – people working in benefits offices, in the prison service, collecting tax, procuring equipment, advising ministers, running digital services – what I have heard, more than anything, is a mix of pride and wonder. ☐

Pride in what we have been able to do, to help manage the toughest public health crisis and the biggest economic shock we have faced in decades. ☐

But also wonder that we have been able to do this so quickly, and so inventively. ☐

We have built new hospitals in weeks, set up digital services for the vulnerable in days, established new grant schemes in hours, and learnt to process Universal Credit claims in minutes. ☐

This must give us all great hope – confidence even – that we can rise to the challenge that lies before us. ☐

And let's face it: it is some challenge. ☐

I remember the moment – twenty long months ago – when Mark as Cabinet Secretary addressed all of us Permanent Secretaries at the height of the Brexit frenzy, and told us solemnly that we all needed to make No Deal planning our Main Effort. ☐

And I remember how in March this year, as the full horror of the Coronavirus pandemic hit us, Mark again had to bring us together, and tell us that responding to this unprecedented threat must now be, for every department, the Main Effort. ☐

It is sobering to reflect that, even with all the progress we have made, we are still contending with the challenge of EU Exit, and with the response to Covid-19; and we cannot have two Main Efforts. ☐

Sobering also to reflect that the Manifesto on which the Government was elected included over 400 commitments, some of which – such as Levelling Up – require a reversal of trends that have run for decades, and others – such as Net Zero – a profound change in our systems for power, heating, transport,

housing and food. □

Much is needed from the Civil Service to deliver these mighty objectives. □

We shall have to blend all we've learned about teamwork from our can-do Covid response with what the Prime Minister calls the 'psychic energy' that has hummed through the nation over the last few months, and bottle it with the indefatigable zest of Captain Tom, who at the age of 100 has raised so many millions for charity by yomping round his garden. □

And to that formula add another refreshing ingredient for the Civil Service: a newly 'have-a-go' attitude to trying new stuff, without the fear of failure holding us back. □

Inventiveness and bold experimentation were championed by Michael Gove, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, in his recent speech at the Ditchley Foundation which highlighted key themes in Civil Service reform. It is, he said, 'common sense to take a method and try it' – and if it fails, 'admit it frankly and try another'. □

It's an idea that has found its time in the era of coronavirus, when the complexity and urgency of the response, and the need for sophisticated modeling and real-time data, has made a powerful case for more experimentation and innovation, and increased awareness of the value of data and of science. □

And it adds renewed weight to our need to tackle the other, frustrating, side of the Civil Service – where we get bogged down in costly, inefficient processes, and teams on the ground see problems only too clearly, but their proposed solutions go nowhere. □

The speed at which we had to scramble a response has underlined the merits of breaking down any barriers that stop us working together, of embracing new technology and of making sure all our people have had the necessary training and support to do the best possible job – even when having to operate 'at the edge of deliverability', as one of my most hard-pressed PermSec colleagues put it last week. □

Michael Gove and I are going to be talking about this at CS Live! tomorrow at 11.30am, when you have the chance to put questions to the two of us. He has invited us to help renew and even reinvent a Civil Service that can meet the expectations of our fellow citizens for brilliant public services. □

I'd like us to accept that challenge, and want you to join with me and thousands of other civil servants who have already begun to engage with the next chapter in Civil Service reform – a chapter whose title you have yourselves already chosen in the registration process for this event, when you voted overwhelmingly for 'Shaping Our Future'. □The change agenda – what does modernising the Civil Service mean? □

With Michael tomorrow, and in other sessions here, we'll be challenging ourselves at every stage: about the best and most effective ways to strengthen our structure and culture and method, so that we are ready and

able for the challenges we face today. □

I would draw out three key areas to ask you to focus on: innovation; data; and barriers to joint working. Recognising these in turn bring into play key issues of skills and training, IT systems, office locations – in sum, what our 21st century workplace should look and feel like. □

Do we have the people with the knowledge and skills to do their jobs well? Do we all value sufficiently the time and effort it takes to learn and practice new skills? □

Does the Civil Service truly reflect the people we serve? And make the most of all the talents available? □

How can we overcome the frustrations of antiquated IT systems, and do a better job of sharing data? □

Can we relearn how to set up major programmes, so that they reliably deliver on time and on budget and achieve

Big issues, which flow into countless smaller ones: why can't one Civil Service pass get you into any building? Why do we operate with incompatible video conferencing systems? Why is it sometimes easier to join as a new recruit from outside, than to transfer between two different departments?

This Civil Service reform programme must make colleagues feel their efforts are valued, their successes rewarded, their ambitions fulfilled. □

We are focusing on People and Place, and whether you have what you need to do your jobs. □

Because in so many ways, what's good for civil servants is also good for the country. □

Like our commitment to becoming less London-centric – so that you can make progress even if you're not wanting to be based in the South-East. This means more jobs becoming available in the regions; and our people being more closely rooted in local needs – social, economic, health-related – when they make decisions. □

With better defined paths to promotion and recognition, colleagues will no longer feel they must switch roles to secure a promotion and higher pay, instead building the deep knowledge and expertise that helps drive continuous improvement. □

And with redoubled awareness of our need to provide a fully diverse and inclusive working environment – where everybody can give of their best – we can be sure every government policy and action reflects the full range and diversity of thought, from people of every social, educational, and ethnic background. □

As the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion champion, I recognise that there is much good work happening to create the fully open, welcoming and

supportive work environment we want – as expressed in our core HR policies and practices, in the inspiring work of our staff networks, in a thousand daily actions to support colleagues and lend a hand, or make a stand. ☐

But there is also evidence of continuing prejudice, unacknowledged biases, and unequal opportunities. So we have much work to do, and must go faster and further to create a Great Place to Work for everyone. ☐

And by place, I mean not just your physical location. I also mean your place in your organisation, and on the career ladder. ☐

And whether you're in a good place mentally. Are you feeling stressed – or well supported? Overwhelmed – or suitably stretched? Unfocused – or purposeful? Daunted by the challenges we face – or excited? ☐

My wish is that you feel stretched and excited by your work, well supported by colleagues, pleased to be part of something bigger than any of us – our mission of public service. ☐Conclusion ☐

Thank you for listening to me. In a moment there will be a chance for you to ask some questions of me. Before that I would like to ask something of all of you. ☐

Please take the chance to reflect. Here today at CS Live! And when you are back to daily work. Think about where you are now, and where you'd like to be. Think about where we are now, and where you'd like us to be. Think what you might do to help build an even better Civil Service. ☐

Perhaps start talking to your manager or your team about doing things differently. Ask colleagues from other teams and agencies what works well for them. Get the ideas flowing – and importantly, please share them with us. We would love to hear from you. ☐

Let me end on a personal note. Many years ago – ok, decades ago – when I was starting out in the world of work, I met an inspiring leader. He had great responsibilities but was modest with it. His job, he said simply, was to help other people be successful. I remember that dictum so well and so often it has become like a part of me. ☐

It is what I said to myself when I applied to do the job I do now. And now that I have that job, it is what I offer to you: my promise to work for you, to help you be successful, to help us deliver for the public, to help us be truly A Brilliant Civil Service. ☐