

# Cabinet Office Stakeholder Research

Research Study Conducted for the  
Cabinet Office



August - October 2007

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# Summary of findings

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## Key messages

This report provides findings from research designed to measure perceptions of the Cabinet Office's performance among stakeholders in other government departments. The research consisted of an online survey and fourteen depth interviews. *The main findings of this research are the following:*

### **Overall views:**

- *attitudes are broadly favourable with widespread recognition that progress is being made and that the leadership has identified the right priorities;*
- *there are some areas of high performance (e.g. supporting Cabinet), but this is not consistent across all objectives;*
- *there is a need to identify a narrower range of key objectives and focus on these;*

### **Leadership & management of the Civil Service:**

- *good at developing strong, visible leaders across the service;*
- *continue to improve facilitation of talent management;*
- *need to do more to improve skills and capability across the Civil Service;*

### **Relationships with other government departments:**

- *recognition of the quality of staff at senior levels and ability to identify relevant expertise;*
- *need to continue to build relationships, especially through understanding departments' issues;*
- *need for greater clarity on the role of the Cabinet Office;*

### **Role at the centre:**

- *extremely effective at supporting Cabinet and its committees;*
- *need to do more to enable cross-departmental working;*
- *need to do more to define high level objectives/overarching view.*

## Methodology

This research used a combination of methodologies. Firstly, Ipsos MORI conducted 14 in-depth interviews, four with Permanent Secretaries and ten with Director Generals. These were conducted between August and October. Secondly, a selection of senior civil servants was invited to take part in an online survey. A census was taken of top 200 civil servants and a random selection of Directors. In total, 308 had the chance to participate. A total of 132 (43%) responded: 59 Grade 1 and 2 civil servants and 73 Grade 3 civil servants.

## Overall views of the Cabinet Office

Overall views of the Cabinet Office are more positive than negative, and there is a recognition that it has made progress in recent years. There is confidence that senior management in the Cabinet Office is making a difference, and that it has identified many of the key areas needing action. This is balanced by a sense that this progress needs to continue, and having identified these key areas, the Cabinet Office now needs to put its plans into action.

Key issues to look at going forward are the following:

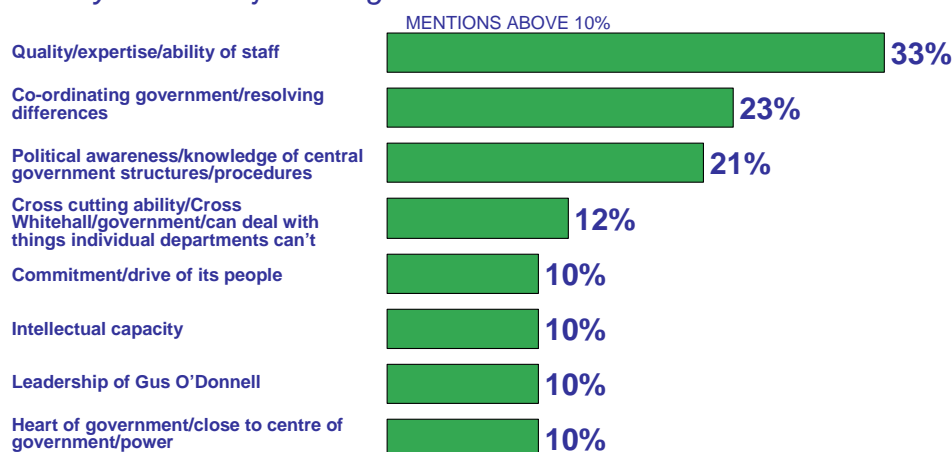
- clarity of role (including which are the corporate and policy issues where the Cabinet Office takes a lead), and delivering and making a visible impact on a small number of key objectives;
- enabling cross-departmental working through building collaborative relationships with key departments, and by clearly promoting the Government's overall priorities and encouraging departments to look beyond their immediate boundaries;
- continuing focus on improving skills and capability across the Civil Service. The creation of the Top 200 group is an early success here, but other important issues to look at include its corporate role managing the Civil Service, such as ensuring clear workforce policies. The Capability Reviews are seen as successful in terms of helping departments to identify areas for action, but so far there is low awareness of what the Cabinet Office has done to provide guidance on best practice in tackling some of the cross-cutting issues that have arisen and are common to many departments.

The Cabinet Office is valued for having expertise and an intelligent, capable staff. These strengths are echoed in the online survey, as the chart overleaf shows.

*'One of its strengths is its ability to pull together people from across government to address cross-cutting issues and policy ideas affecting several departments.'*

## Ipsos MORI Cabinet Office strengths

Q Thinking generally about the Cabinet Office, what would you say are its major strengths?

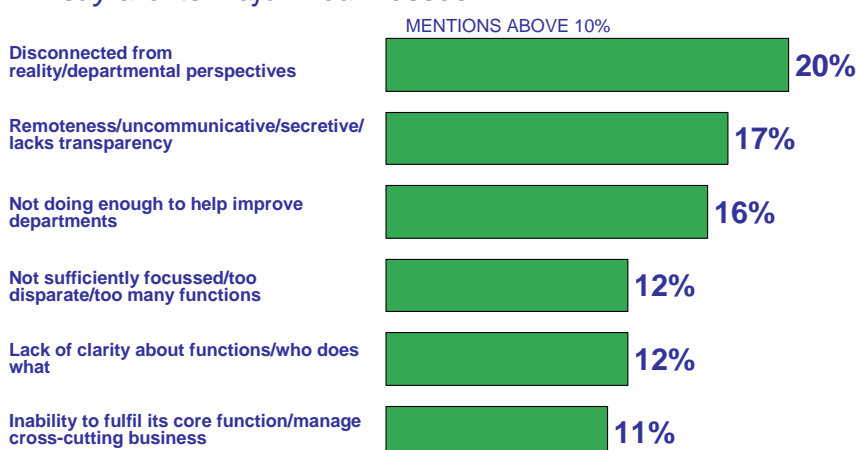


Base: All valid responses (73), 24<sup>th</sup> September – 15<sup>th</sup> October 2007

The weaknesses mentioned in the online survey focus on the Cabinet Office's relationships and work with other government departments, including feelings that it can be disconnected, remote, or not doing enough to help improve departments. Spontaneous responses on what the Cabinet Office should concentrate on to improve its performance moving forward suggest that it needs to improve its relationships with departments and clarify its functions.

## Ipsos MORI Cabinet Office weaknesses

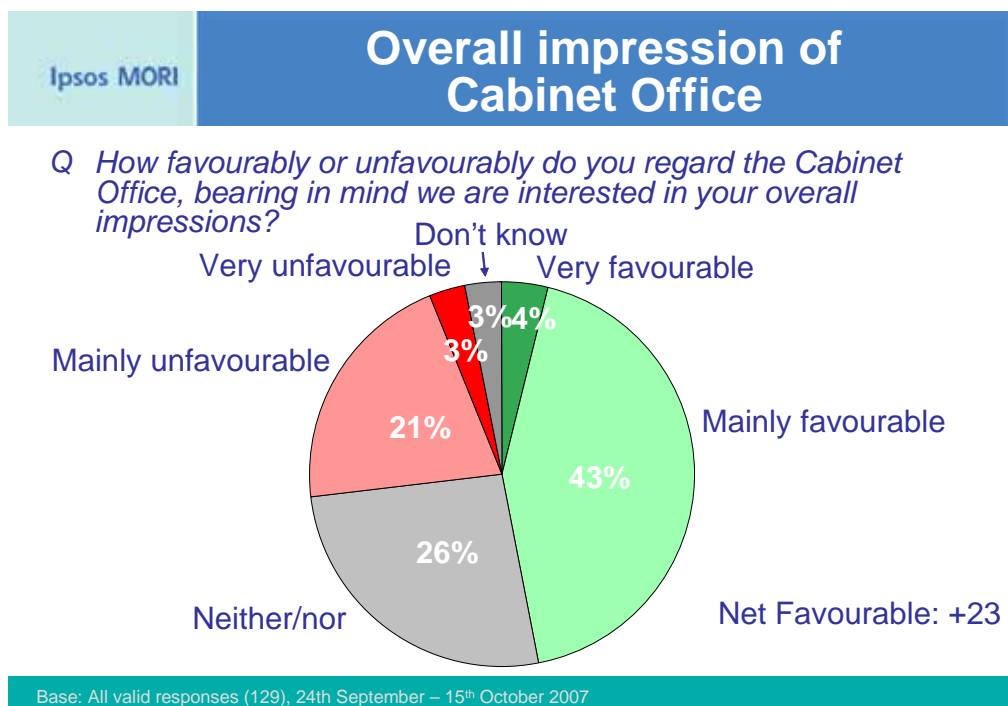
Q Thinking generally about the Cabinet Office, what would you say are its major weaknesses?



Base: All valid responses (76), 24<sup>th</sup> September – 15<sup>th</sup> October 2007

Most senior civil servants interviewed in depth give the Cabinet Office marks of around six out of ten for its performance. In the online survey, nearly half (47%)

say they have a favourable view of the Cabinet Office, while the rest are negative (24%) and neutral (26%). Those familiar with the Cabinet Office are more likely to be positive in their views.



Senior civil servants also feel that the Cabinet Office has made progress in recent years, but that this can be built on further. Half (48%) of those surveyed say the Cabinet Office's effectiveness has stayed the same in the past three years, while nearly three in ten (27%) say it has got better and one in ten (10%) say it has got worse. This finding echoes results from the depth interviews, where respondents are generally positive about the direction the Cabinet Office is taking, and are looking forward to seeing it lead to real improvements.

*'They are doing their best to make more coherent their very diverse tasks.'*

*'Their coordination role is moving in the right direction.'*

*'These Top 200 events and trying to create a cohesive leadership team and trying to spread knowledge and good practice around the place have gotten better...'*

The online survey also shows senior civil servants are largely split in their assessment of the Cabinet Office's performance against its overarching objective of making government work better. Similar proportions say the Cabinet Office is effective (47%) as ineffective (44%), with the majority in each category saying it is fairly effective or fairly ineffective. Some civil servants interviewed in depth view the Cabinet Office as able to identify the issues that need tackling, but perhaps not yet as effective as it could be in terms of providing solutions or change. Half

of senior civil servants surveyed, though, do not view change initiated by the Cabinet Office as well managed.

## Clarity of role, leadership style, and objectives

Broadly, interviews reveal a need for clarity from the Cabinet Office on a number of issues, including the role of the Cabinet Office at the centre of government and working with departments, its leadership style when managing the Civil Service, and the objectives it hopes to achieve.

### Role

Firstly, the Cabinet Office needs to clarify its role. Most though believe that the Cabinet Office recognises this uncertainty and is working towards defining itself in the centre of government. Many say that it has identified areas for improvement and has begun to act on them.

Many also acknowledge that the Cabinet Office's position at the centre of government means it is well placed to offer guidance, as shown in these opinions of where its strengths lie:

*'Its potential to join up thinking across Whitehall.'*

*'Excellent positioned to understand and disseminate the view from the centre.'*

### Leadership style

Secondly, many cite a need for clarity in managing the Civil Service. It is not always clear what is the role of the Cabinet Office and what is the role of the departments, and more direction from the Cabinet Office on this would be welcome. Related to this is the idea of clarity when the Cabinet Office is dealing with departments. Civil servants want to know exactly what mode of leadership the Cabinet Office is using – coordinating or communicating, telling or suggesting?

*'And it's not quite clear whether they are simply coordinators or actually in the end they have to make the final call on behalf of the centre.'*

### Objectives

Thirdly, the Cabinet Office needs to clearly define its objectives, and ensure that they are in areas where it has the ability to make a real impact. Many suggest the need to pare down objectives to a few high profile initiatives that then have an impact across Whitehall.

*'Decide where it can make a difference. This should be on matters of strategic importance.'*

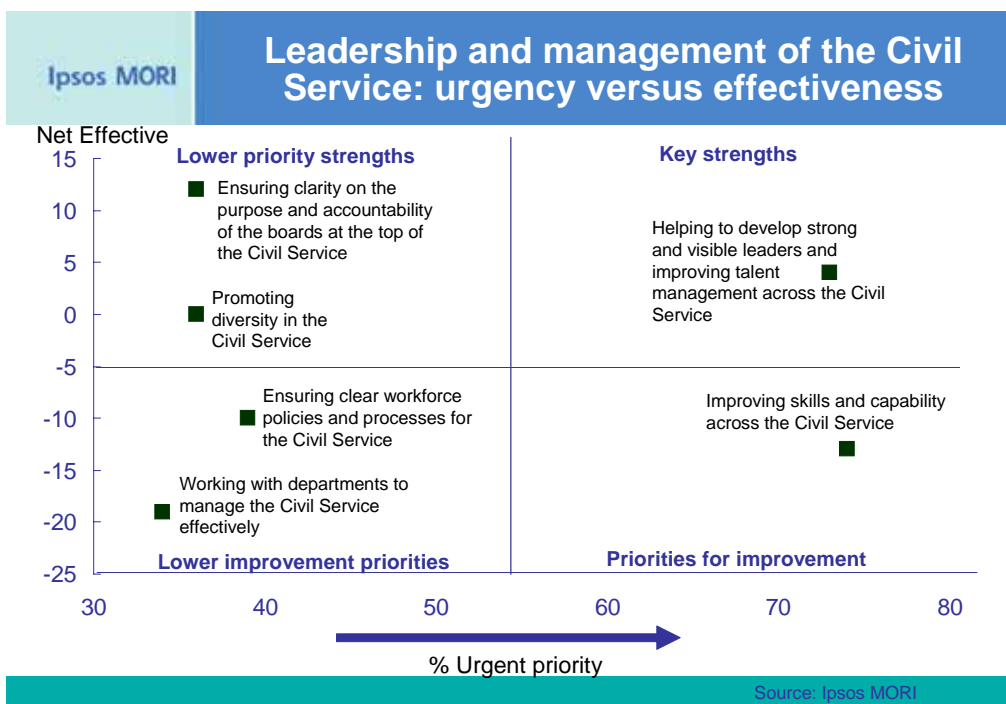
*'...first of all being clear what they're doing and focusing on a smaller number of things.'*

*'Narrowing its remit down to the few key tasks essential to the delivery of joined-up government.'*

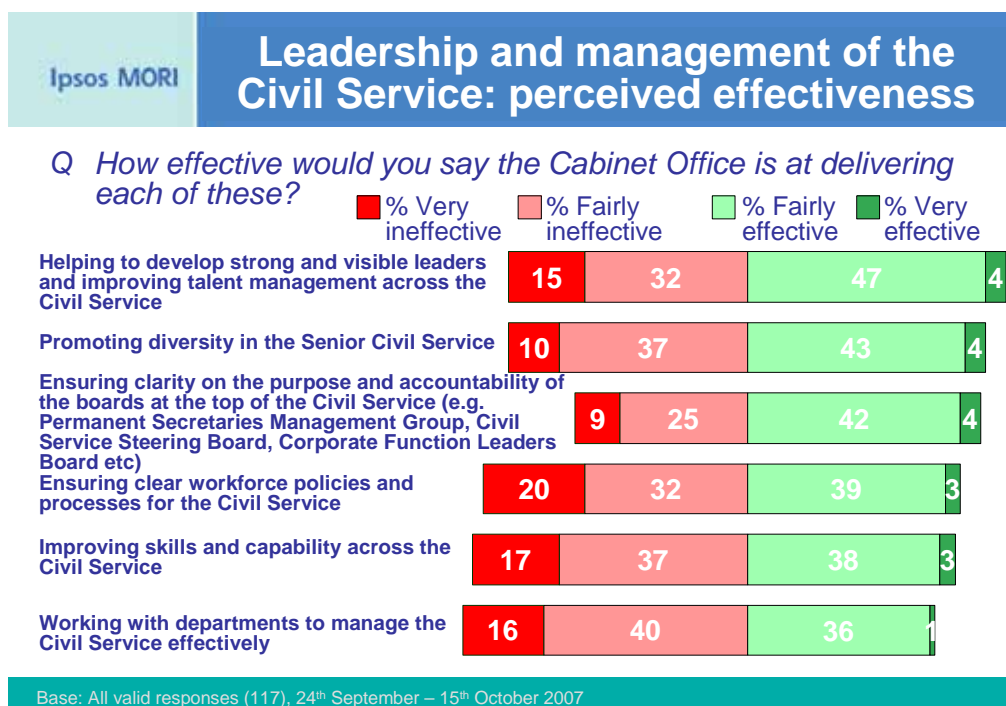
## Leadership and management of the Civil Service

The two most commonly mentioned priorities in terms of the Cabinet Office's management of the Civil Service are helping to develop strong and visible leaders and improving skills and capability across Whitehall. For example, the Top 200 is commonly mentioned by those interviewed as a positive step; the 100/0/0 initiative is also well received, although some mention the need for more 'flesh' on it, and some also appear to lack knowledge about these initiatives.

*'Developing people is the right priority, it's also one which the Civil Service has been traditionally not very good at and I think the Cabinet Office recognises that. I think anything which actually builds on that is a good thing.'*



Stakeholders are split on the Cabinet Office's effectiveness in promoting diversity, and see a need to work on improving the skills and capability across the Civil Service. While nearly half (47%) say there is clarity on the purpose of the boards at the top of the Civil Service, a third disagree, and a fifth don't know, suggesting a need for better communication on this.



Additionally, when it comes to working with departments to manage the Civil Service more effectively or ensuring clear workforce policies and processes, the Cabinet Office has the opportunity to improve. Many of those interviewed in depth express an interest in the Cabinet Office spreading good practice across Whitehall. They feel that the Cabinet Office has a reservoir of expertise that would enable departments to model their practice on other departments that have faced similar challenges well.

*'I think [the Cabinet Office has] a role based on maintenance of certain common standards, exchange of best practice and facilitation.'*

*'So clarity on what should be standard and what should not would be really good...'*

The Capability Reviews are well received, but some believe they have not seen progress on the issues that the reviews highlighted. They are divided on whether the Cabinet Office should be providing action plans for departments to enact or simply to review the efforts of departments.

*'I haven't seen the piece from Cabinet Office that says, there's three main models, experience from all of these reviews tells us this works better in these sorts of circumstances, I've seen the kind of summary of reviews, but not the next step in making recommendations.'*

*'Have they identified issues for the Civil Service in a way that has made a material difference? Well the positive story is, yes, I think the documents that have been published analysing the results of the Capability Reviews are really good, and I've encouraged my people*

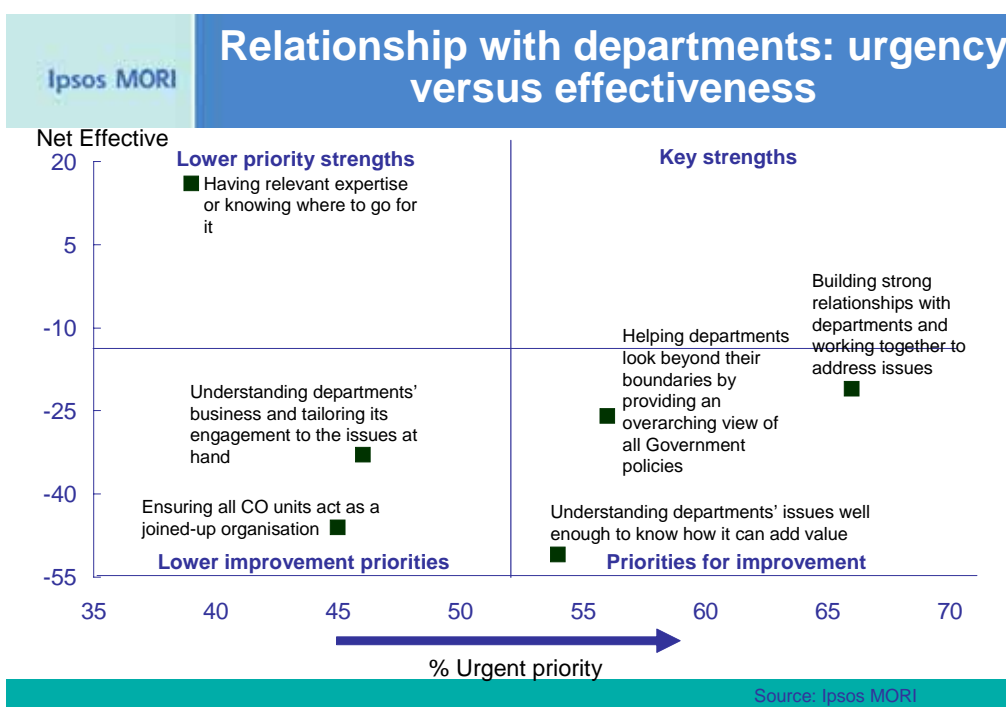
*here to read them and said, anyone who wants to understand the Cabinet Office view on how they want the Civil Service to develop, and that probably means anyone who wants to progress in the Civil Service, could benefit from reading these documents because they're very clear and insightful. And some of the themes, around leadership for example, have certainly been translated into themes at the top 200 events. So all that is good stuff and positive.'*

## Relationship with other government departments

There is a clear desire for the Cabinet Office to work more closely with other government departments; half do not think the Cabinet Office is effective at building strong relationships, while 67% think this is an urgent priority for improvement. Linked to the results about encouraging cross-departmental working, 56% also think that helping government departments look beyond their boundaries is an urgent priority.

*'Understanding better how departments operate, discussing with them what will help and taking notice of what is said.'*

*'They need to empower departments whilst promoting joined up behaviours around key priorities (a tough challenge).'*



Many of these issues will be addressed with the introduction of Sir Suma Chakrabarti's Compact intended to improve relationships with departments. In the meantime, some stakeholders give clear steer as to how they would like to see these relationships develop:

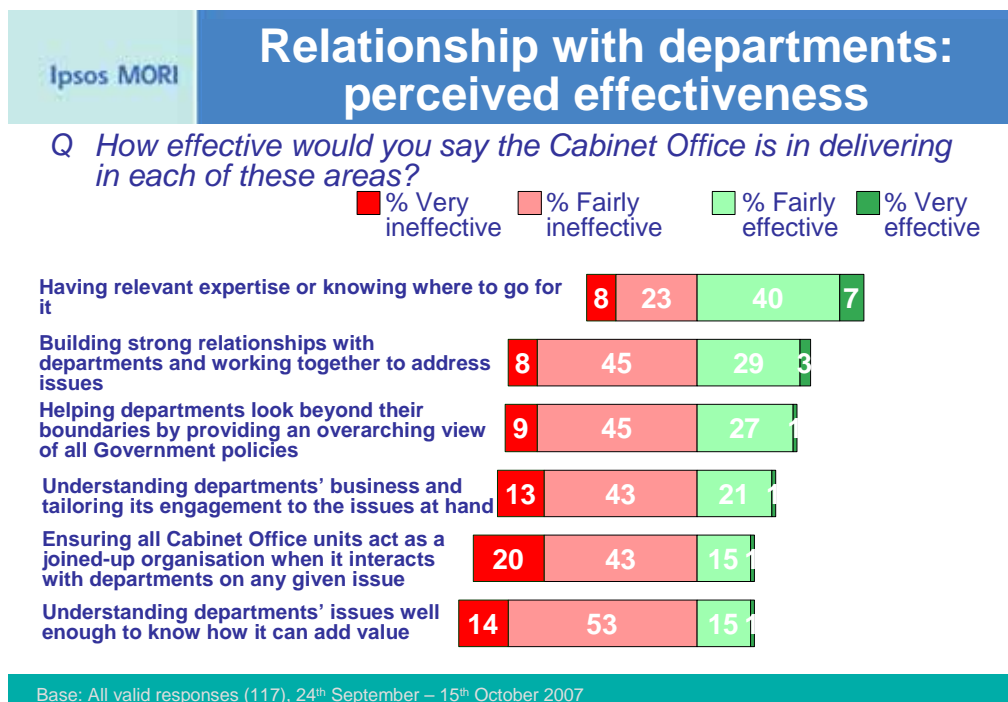
*'Support departments to deliver the Government's business - help prioritise in a complex environment'*

*'Should intervene with departments more to resolve interdepartmental conflicts, tackle difficult issues.'*

And others give credit where they already see relationships improving, in describing what they see as the Cabinet Office's strengths:

*'Its overview of policy issues that stretch across more than one Government department, its understanding of the differing positions held by different departments and its ability to find solutions that Ministers are prepared to endorse.'*

While on the whole the Cabinet Office is viewed as needing to strengthen its relationships with departments, it is recognised as being able to access relative expertise, whether it is in-house or outside. Indeed, the expertise of its staff is most commonly cited as the Cabinet Office's strength, mentioned spontaneously by one in three (33%) online participants.

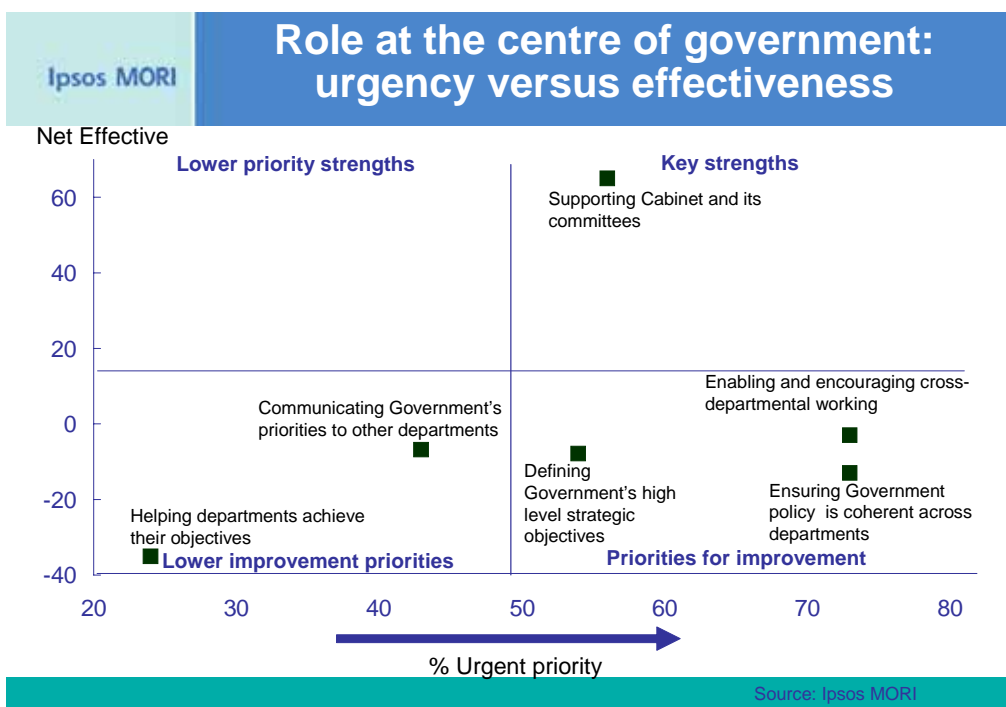


## Coordination of Government policies and cross-cutting issues

One important Cabinet Office role recognised by respondents is to coordinate Government policy across all departments, and some say they would like the Cabinet Office to take a bigger role in facilitating cooperation among departments which have differing views over policy implementation. This idea also comes out strongly in the online survey, where helping departments look beyond their boundaries by providing an overarching Government policy is identified as a priority, along with enabling and encouraging cross-departmental working and ensuring Government policy is coherent across all departments.

*'[The Cabinet Office needs to be more] visible and effective on promoting cross-departmental working'*

The interviews though show that these issues need to be handled with care; while there is a clear role for the Cabinet Office on cross-cutting issues and overall priorities, relationships with departments need to be handled sensitively in areas of their own policy competence.

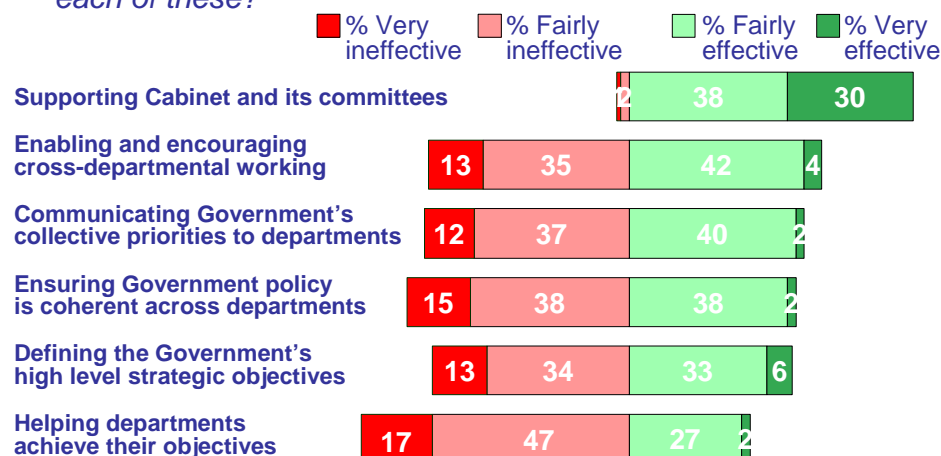


The Cabinet Office is viewed very positively in its role of supporting Cabinet and its committees, and the depth interviews also found a generally high level of appreciation for the way the recent transition was handled.

Ipsos MORI

## Role at the centre of government: perceived effectiveness

Q How effective would you say the Cabinet Office is at delivering each of these?



Base: All valid responses (122), 24<sup>th</sup> September – 15<sup>th</sup> October 2007

The Cabinet Office's performance in coordinating cross-cutting issues follows the pattern of high performance in some areas but not all. The Cabinet Office is viewed by most as effective at ensuring propriety in public life (75%), as well as national security (72%) and coordinating domestic, EU, overseas and defence policy (57%). However, the online survey results show that work is to be done on the Cabinet Office's management of public services reform in engaging citizens, putting customers' needs first, and promoting efficiency. Additionally, some are not as positive about its responsibility for tackling social exclusion and increasing community and voluntary engagement, but many also say they do not know about these areas of work.

Respondents are split on Cabinet Office performance in developing strategy and thinking on emerging issues and challenges. Some feel that the Cabinet Office could be more pro-active in its thinking, instead of reactive to established issues. However, in the online survey two in five (38%) civil servants identify the Cabinet Office as able to respond quickly to new priorities.

*'Often they've identified the right issues, they've done some interesting analysis to support it but then it's kind of getting traction on it is often difficult.'*

## Communication

One in three (35%) civil servants say they have contact with the Cabinet Office at least once a week. A quarter (27%) says they are in contact no more than once or twice a month, and 37% less often than this. Three quarters (76%) feel familiar with the Cabinet Office at least to some extent, and half (49%) see the Cabinet Office as approachable and accessible. Linked to this, and to the busy lives of senior civil servants, among those interviewed in depth few express a desire for more communication from the Cabinet Office. However, they do want effective

communication both around which cross-cutting issues the Cabinet Office is leading on, and where it is making a visible impact (ideally there will be a small, focussed number of these), and continuing information through events such as the Top 200 where it benefits them, such as support on leadership.

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# Appendices

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## A Guide to Statistical Reliability

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It should be remembered that a sample, not the entire population of Grades 1-3 civil servants took part in this survey. Therefore the figures obtained may not be exactly those if everyone had been interviewed (the “true” values). However, the variation between the sample results and the “true” values can be predicted from the knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which this prediction can be made is usually chosen to be 95% - that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the “true” value will fall within a specified range.

The table below illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the “95% confidence interval”.

For example, with the total sample size of 132 senior civil servants, where 50% give a particular answer, the chances are 19 in 20 that the “true” value (which would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed) will fall within the range of +/- 7.9 percentage points from the sample result; in fact the actual result is proportionately more likely to be closer to the centre (50%) than the extremes of the range (42.1% or 57.9%).

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Sample Size	Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels*		
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
	±	±	±
50	8.2	12.5	13.6
100	5.6	8.5	9.3
132	4.7	7.2	7.9

*Source: Ipsos MORI*

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\*At the 95% confidence level

When the results are compared between sub-groups different results may be obtained. The difference may be “real”, or it may occur by chance (because not everyone in the population has been interviewed). To test if the difference is a real one - i.e. if it is “statistically significant” - it is again necessary to know the total population, the sizes of the samples, the percentage giving a certain answer, and the degree of confidence chosen.

Sample Size	Differences required for significance at or near these levels*		
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
	$\pm$	$\pm$	$\pm$
50 vs. 50	11.5	17.6	19.2
59 vs. 73 (Top 200 vs. Grade 3)	10	15.3	16.7
75 vs. 75	9.3	14.1	15.4
100 vs. 100	7.9	12.0	13.1

*Source: Ipsos MORI*

\*At the 95% confidence level