

How can No 10 and the CO better support the PM in this next phase?

We spoke to 45+ people over 3 days: predominantly people working closely in No 10 and the CO secretariat but we also had some perspective from departments. We asked open questions about what the problems were and what could be better. This wasn't a perfect or comprehensive exercise. It was very striking how similar the problem diagnosis was whether we were talking to political advisers or civil servants who work either side of the link door. Also how frank and open they were (but with hardly any individual criticism) and how committed everyone was to sorting it out.

There were some universal themes:

1. PM meetings aren't working

There are far too many meetings: they are poorly structured and prepared; we are repeatedly having policy discussions about operational problems which is never going to resolve them (plus without the right expertise in the room); there isn't enough time to prepare good papers and have the necessary pre-meets and gather the right expertise. When that is done it is disregarded. There are too many people in the room and people aren't disciplined about their contributions. "Decisions are never final". "We are trying to do too much and nothing is focused" "We have a hundred actions and no plan" "The top two tiers of leadership spend all their time in the same meetings"

2. The culture isn't getting the best from people

Not working as one team between the CO & No 10 - not one team in the CO. Fights over ownership. "Lots of senior people negotiating with each other rather than doing stuff". Not sustainable. People are exhausted and stressed. Don't feel confident or empowered to take decisions (almost universal sense of powerlessness to direct or fix any of these problems). Trying to do too much so nothing is done well. "no one listens to anyone else". Views ignored. Bad behaviours from senior leaders tolerated. Too much politics (small p). "Elbowy". Focus on grip at expense of collective leadership. Too many people behaving as if they have been parachuted in to save the day. "Explosions of new people causing chaos". Divide between people in the office and at home. Incentives to hoard information not share. No 10 always at war with someone. Everyone wants to be in the room with the PM. Not enough trust. Lots of people¹ mentioned junior women being talked over or ignored. We need a modern culture of organised collaboration not superhero bunfight".

3. The Cabinet Office team is too big to be effective & roles and responsibilities in the CO and No 10 and between the two are not clear

Fallen out of shape. This has compounded some pre-existing problems about ways of working between CO secretariat teams and No 10. Too many CO senior leaders which means they can't take decisions without consulting others. Sense that Cabinet Office has lost its way in making the Whitehall machine work for No 10: not

¹ including those who had talked over junior women

synthesising departments or leveraging machine. Super-hero culture in CO has lead to CO believing it can fix all problems itself. No one we spoke to had a clear picture of who is doing what and who is supposed to be doing what. This is true for political and official advisors. "No 10 are flooding the system with unprioritised demands causing it to spasm" No 10 is strong but not pulling in the same direction: different competing agendas. Incentives to hoard information not share. No 10 always at war with someone. Everyone wants to be in the room with the PM. Not enough trust – leads to presenteeism and divide between people in office or at home. "we need some rules – everyone is all over the place".

4. The work isn't good enough

Unnecessarily short deadlines producing the same bad work repeatedly rather than taking proper time to prepare. Not clear who is calling out; scrutinising or refereeing discussions to get to a factual position. Sometimes it seems everyone knows something is wrong or not true but that's not brought to a head. "We need to call out bullshit or deceit when we see it". Senior team in No 10 and CO are always chasing the ball. Not clear what we are trying to achieve. Too narrow a field of vision. The quality of the individuals is good- but not excellent everywhere. The CO side should be stronger at working grades. Everyone is trying; people were kind, supportive and understanding about how difficult this all is. Want to make it better. "This can all be fixed given the quality of the people working on this". "The Government is working together in a way it has never before had to do before"

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have suggested some quick fixes; some structural changes and questions to think about.

Quick fixes

1. Agree our collective mission: what are the teams serving the PM trying to achieve?
2. Set out respective roles of No 10 Private Office; Policy Unit; Delivery team; CO secretariat; CO C-19 function; political team (who is covering what). Communicate this!
3. Commissions out of No 10 channelled by Private Office
4. Discipline around meetings (what for; when; time for producing proper papers; interrogated by whole team; everyone inputs). Stop having policy meetings about operational problems. Fewer people in meetings: include experts rather than multiple commentators/synthesizers ("far too many people operating at level one of the detail"). Make conscious choices about how we are spending people's time ("we are taking 30-40 of senior people who should be focussed on solving the problem and spending that in meetings")
5. Make conscious decisions about which tool to use for solving which problem (PM meeting; deep dive; desk work)

6. Abolish MIGs and use normal Cabinet governance where necessary (but CDL should still carry on having the meetings he's having if they're useful). Re-impose secretariat discipline of meetings being last resort (preference for exec decision making; then collective agreement if needed but by correspondence; then meeting if absolutely necessary and only if that meeting can take a decision that sticks).

Structural changes

6. Set up a new PM DU [Tom Shinnner to design - his team is this nascent function]
7. NHS futures Unit led by (Ed Whiting?) [cement improvements made during C-19 response and identify future opportunities for change: blueprint for rest of the Parliament]
8. C-19 executive in the CO with right resources (particularly strategic analytical capability) and leadership [Aus Commission model? Government Olympic Exec? External leader?]
9. Smaller & more focussed secretariat; clearer and more confident about its purpose. Streamline C-19 work into either of these.
10. Clear structure for non Covid work.

New cultural norms

10. More listening - and creating space for people to speak
11. Genuine sense of partnership & collective leadership (we will hang together - we have to be invested in each other's success and the success of the team)
12. Calling out bad behaviours: e.g. crowding the ball - showboating in meetings - belittling others contributions -
13. Direct & straightforward with each other: open about disagreement
14. Get some rest.
15. No one is too busy to lead well.