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## International approaches to civil service performance: What the UK can learn for its new National School of Government

By *Nada Kakabadse* on 27/01/2026 | Updated on 28/01/2026



Darren Jones announcing creation of National School of Government and Public Services. Photo: Institute for Government

**By professor Nada Kakabadse, Henley Business School**

The pressures on governments everywhere are unlike anything seen before. Technology is racing ahead while public expectations are soaring. Trust is fragile and demands being placed on civil servants, to deliver more, faster, and with greater agility, are rising even while budgets tighten.

Some countries have responded with bold, system-wide investments in leadership, capability and performance discipline. Australia, Canada, Singapore and South Korea have quietly built some of the most sophisticated public sector performance systems in the world.

The UK, by comparison, has been operating without a dedicated civil service institution for over a decade – a gap which has proven to difficult to ignore.

## **A bold new UK commitment: A School of Government**

In a significant and timely development, the government has just announced plans to establish a [new UK National School of Government and Public Services](#) to train senior civil servants, finally and directly addressing the long-standing capability gap.

Led by the chief secretary to the prime minister Darren Jones, the initiative will focus on strengthening leadership, policy-making, economics, data and artificial intelligence skills at the top of the civil service.

This announcement marks the first clear move towards rebuilding a dedicated institutional home for senior civil service development since the closure of the National School of Government in 2012. Its explicit aim is to restore in-house capability, reduce reliance on external consultants, and create greater consistency in leadership standards across Whitehall.

The school is expected to launch in 2026 and scale up over a three-year period as part of wider reforms to improve public sector effectiveness and value for money.

This shift brings the UK closer to other international models. High-performing systems in Singapore, Australia and Canada all anchor civil service performance, leadership development and cultural renewal within strong, central institutions.

If designed with sufficient authority, scope and long-term commitment, the UK's new School of Government has the potential to play a similar role, supporting continuous capability building, embedding behavioural standards, and aligning leadership development with national priorities rather than short-term reform cycles.

So what exactly are other nations doing differently, and how could a renewed UK school help address the challenges that governments face?

Innovation is a unique exhibition and conference that brings together government leaders from across the globe responsible for the transformation and acceleration of their public sector organisations and services.

Held on 24 & 25 March 2026 at Excel in London, the event will cover a range of topics of innovation including digital transformation, workforce, culture, mission-driven government, sustainability and much more.

[Find out more about the agenda, which covers central government, defence, security, cyber & resilience, and health, and register to attend here.](#)

## **A shared challenge – pressures increasing, systems lagging**

There is one common theme among modern public administrations and that is that the machinery of government hasn't managed to keep up with the world it serves.

Civil servants increasingly have to deal with accelerating political priorities, stretched resources, complex policy problems, and intensive scrutiny. However, leadership cultures, performance metrics, and organisational structures often remain extraordinarily slow moving.

The UK civil service enjoys an international reputation for professionalism and impartiality. And yet some familiar concerns persist: siloed working, risk-averse cultures, inconsistent management quality, and uneven performance systems.

Reform efforts have been ambitious, ranging from modernisation programmes through to digital transformation, but are not always consistently implemented.

Fortunately, the UK doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. Comparable countries have already developed models that integrate clarity, accountability, capability, and culture – all elements and indicators of high performance.

Read more: [UK announces civil service reforms to 'move fast and fix things'](#)

## **Australia: Clarity, support and early intervention**

Australia has spent the past decade professionalising performance management across its 150,000-strong public service workforce. Its model rests on three simple but powerful principles: Clear expectations, meaningful recognition, and early intervention if performance slips.

Agencies have to articulate what 'success' looks like in every role-measurable goal. Observable behaviours are connected to public service values, and alignment with agency and national priorities. It is more than a job description, it creates coherence.

Recognition is also transparent, distinguishing the great from the good. Stretch opportunities, development pathways, and visible reward programmes further serve to maintain credibility.

Most notably, managers are specifically trained to identify capability and wellbeing-based issues at the earliest stages possible. Managing underperformance is framed not as punishment, but as part of routine leadership.

For the UK, this points clearly to the need for better manager-training, particularly coaching, feedback, and early intervention, embedded within a rebuilt leadership curriculum delivered through a dedicated School.

Read more: [World's most senior civil servants share key challenges and opportunities](#)

## **Canada: Structure, behaviour and a quiet cultural shift**

Canada's approach to performance has been disciplined and highly structured.

Its yearly cadence-agreements, mid-year reviews, and year-end assessments are woven into digital tools at almost every level, ensuring predictability in line with expectations and feedback.

Where Canada particularly stands out is on the nation's senior leadership accountability. Its Senior Executive Performance Framework gives equal weight to behaviours and outcomes, and performance pay is tied to both, reinforcing not only what leaders deliver but how they deliver it.

In the years, Canada has introduced what observers have described as a 'quiet revolution', adding agility, better risk management and delivery discipline in the process, all without

sweeping structural upheaval.

Similar behavioural assessments, including full use of 360° feedback and cross-department moderation, would greatly strengthen the UK's senior civil service appraisal system.

Read more: [Details emerge of Canadian public service job cuts, as thousands receive layoff notices](#)

## **Singapore: Alignment, citizen focus and capability as strategy**

Singapore leads most international rankings for government effectiveness on a regular basis. Its success is derived from systemic alignment, relentless citizen focus, and deep investment in leadership capability.

Its cascading performance system links feature:

- National priorities (Singapore Public Sector Outcomes)
- Agency key performance indicators
- Individual goals linked to both

Personal development is deep-seated and built-in. A currently estimated potential informs leadership pipeline planning and, most crucially, citizen and business satisfaction are treated as strategic KPIs, and annual surveys feed directly into Singapore GovTech and agency performance measures.

Underpinning much of this has been significant investment in leadership development and digital capability through the Singapore Civil Service College, a core institution shaping culture, skills, and performance across the government.

The message for the UK appears to be straightforward: Match ambition with capability investment.

Read more: [Global Government Leaders' Forum puts international learning for civil servants centre stage](#)

## **South Korea: Evaluation, budgeting and accountability**

South Korea offers a different, but equally valuable model, which integrates rigorous evaluation with focused budget decisions.

The country's system includes:

- Annual ministry self-assessments
- External audits
- Programme evaluations using technical tools like cost-benefit analysis

Importantly, evaluation findings have a direct impact on funding and the programmes that aren't performing well have to improve or change their strategy.

The UK could learn from this and create a similar dynamic by tying programme-funding and renewal more systematically with the results of evaluation, while also preserving departmental flexibility in how they deliver.

## Key drivers of government performance

OECD research cuts across national models and identifies three consistent drivers of high performance. According to the OECD Insights on Culture, Leadership and Future-Fitness, these are:

- **Leadership matters more than structure**

1.

Behaviours like trust-building, inclusion, collaboration, and ethical stewardship are among those that strongly relate to performance and engagement.

- **Adaptability requires investment**

Future-fit workforces require mobility, continuous learning, and digital capability.

- **Innovation relies on psychological safety**

Countries with strong innovation cultures, such as Australia, Canada, and Singapore, treat psychological safety as a leadership expectation, not an optional extra.

## The essential focus for a new UK School of Government

One finding stands out for a new UK School of Government. High performing governments invest in a high-quality institutional home for their leadership, management and capability development.

Australia and Canada boast powerful academies. The Civil Service College is at the heart of success in Singapore. South Korea has an ecosystem for training and evaluation.

The UK used to have the National School of Government. Since its closure in 2012, capability-building has become fragmented and overly dependent on consultants.

A new School of Government could change all of this. It should work to:

- Provide all managers with compulsory leadership training
- Build behavioural and risk-leadership capability among the Senior Civil Service
- Strengthen digital literacy, AI governance, and data skills
- Create a shared culture across departments
- Develop future leaders with cross-government experience
- Serve as a hub for research, evaluation, and global best practices.

It should further anchor a reinvigorated performance-management system, aligning behaviours with needs and embedding cultural change.

Read more: [Exclusive Global Government Forum research reveals five pillars of a modern civil service](#)

## Looking ahead – eight priorities for a high-performing UK civil service

Drawing on global best practice, the UK should also set out priorities for the civil service. These elements, which reflect recommendations of Global Government Forum's Making Government Work report, should be:

1. Make performance a continuous, developmental practice, not an annual event
2. Introduce a combined behaviour-and-outcomes framework for senior leaders, including 360° feedback
3. Align national missions, departmental KPIs, and individual objectives in a clear cascade
4. Strengthen citizen-centred metrics using digital and frontline satisfaction data
5. Develop the capability of managers through a new Civil Service College offering coaching, feedback, and leadership skills
6. Link funding and programme renewal to evidence-based evaluation, as Korea does
7. Embed psychological safety into leadership expectations and encourage innovation
8. Establish the new School of Government as the anchor institution for leadership, management, and performance culture

Moving forward, the UK government would benefit by starting to introduce quarterly performance conversations across all departments, ensuring that feedback and course-correction become regular parts of organisational life.

In addition, it should implement a universal expectation-setting and behavioural framework that brings greater consistency to how civil servants are managed and supported.

A 'whole-of-government' KPI structure, clearly linked to national missions, would better align priorities from the centre down to individual objectives. Citizen satisfaction metrics should also be embedded within departmental reporting, so that public experience becomes a core measure of success.

To rebuild capability, the School of Government should deliver a coherent curriculum for leadership development and professional skills. Strengthening Senior Civil Service appraisals through 360° feedback and cross-government calibration would reinforce accountability and behavioural standards at the top.

Finally, programme funding and renewal should be tied in to independent evaluation, ensuring that spending follows evidence. A dedicated Performance and Capability Unit should be created to coordinate these reforms and sustain momentum over time.

Read more: [Innovation 2026 a 'groundbreaking gathering', says Cat Little in invite to civil servants](#)

**ing towards an adaptive and citizen-focused state**

The UK does not need to abandon its hallmark strengths of professionalism, impartiality, policy depth, and commitment to public service.

However, it does need to modernise how performance is defined, developed and rewarded.

Australia shows evidence of the effectiveness of clarity and early intervention. Canada demonstrates what behavioural accountability looks like. Singapore illustrates how alignment and investment in capability drives excellence. South Korea shows how evaluation improves delivery. The OECD shows what future-fit leadership requires.

By bringing these lessons together, and by restoring an institutional home for leadership development through a new School of Government, the UK can build a civil service ready for the realities of 21st century governance: More adaptive, innovative, and centred on the citizens it serves.

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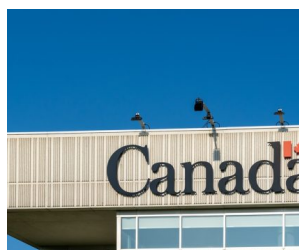


### About Nada Kakabadse

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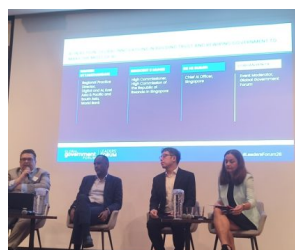
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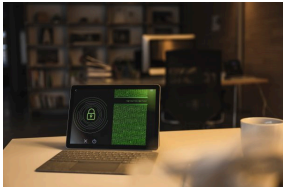
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