HOW TO TRAIN A SYSTEM
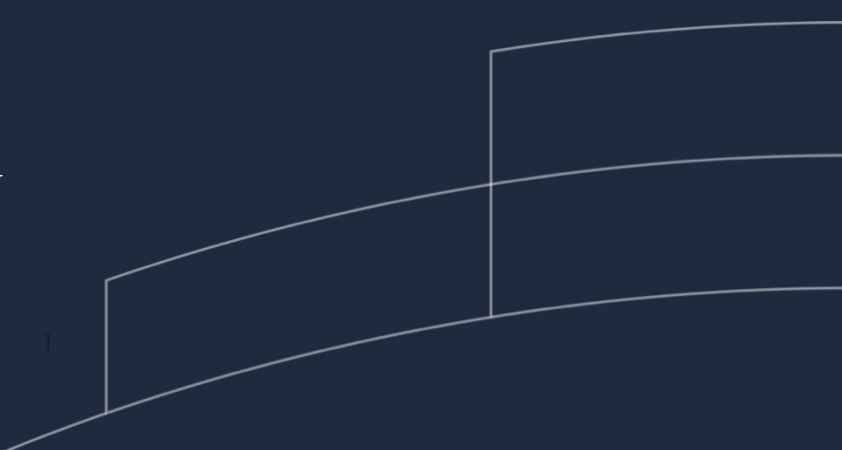
METHODS, ROUTINES AND INSTITUTIONS TO BUILD NATIONAL STRATEGIC CAPACITY

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Lucy Smith
Zainab K Agha
Sah Hee Lee

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The Fellowship Team

Lucy Smith is the 2024-25 Heywood Fellow. She is supported by a small team.

- **Lucy Smith** — Heywood Fellow. Lucy was previously Director General for Strategy at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for UK Governance Group at the Cabinet Office. She was Constitution Director and Principal Private Secretary to Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister.
- **Zainab Agha** — Visiting Practitioner. A Director in the Cabinet Office, Zainab has 20+ years' experience working in senior public policy and economist roles across the UK civil service and internationally including in Namibia, Ghana, Tanzania and Pakistan. Her most recent roles have focused on devolution and intergovernmental working.
- **Philip Bray** — Visiting Practitioner. Philip is a civil servant and has worked at six different UK government departments in roles ranging from digital delivery to international negotiations to legislation. He specialises in strategy and data-led delivery: most recently he was Deputy Chief of Staff at Defra and led the creation of the department's Delivery Unit
- **Benjamin Clayton** — Visiting Practitioner. A Deputy Director at the Ministry of Defence, Benjamin was previously a Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Chief of Staff at the British Government's National Infrastructure Commission.
- **Alex Downing** — Visiting Practitioner. Alex is a civil servant with policy and private office experience in the Cabinet Office and Department for Education. He was Head of Office to the Chief Executive of Government Communications and Senior Private Secretary to the Education Secretary. Before that, he worked in a range of DfE teams, primarily on schools and academies.
- **Marius Ostrowski** — ESRC Research Fellow. Dr Marius S. Ostrowski is a social scientist, modern historian, and policy thought leader. His work specialises in UK and European geostrategy, the role of skills in political economy, how to make democracies more resilient against social threats, and the ways society shapes how we think.

The Authors

Zainab Agha
Visiting Practitioner
Fellowship Team

Lucy Smith
Heywood
Fellow

Sam (Sah Hee) Lee
Research Assistant
Fellowship Team

HOW TO TRAIN A SYSTEM
METHODS, TOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS TO BUILD NATIONAL STRATEGIC CAPABILITY

In a nutshell

- The UK needs a new practice of national strategy-making which is rooted in inheritance, future-oriented, outward-facing, place-oriented, intelligent about uncertainty and open in approach. It also needs to be truly 'national' and hold meaning for central, devolved and local government and the relationships they hold with Parliament, businesses, the academic community and beyond.

- This national strategy practice must not be centralising but enable coherence, empowering institutions to act in alignment with each other in pursuit of national goals.

- To achieve this, we need to build system-wide capability to think, plan, and act strategically in sync, through shared spaces for learning and a common set of tools and techniques that create natural points of connection and enable dynamic collaboration across otherwise distinct institutional cultures. These should include:

  o The use of simulations and case studies to rehearse how multiple actors within the system can work together to confront big challenges of the state and follow through on big bets, including being able to make strategic pivots away from the status quo.

  o The use of foresight and backcasting to enable a focus on the future.

  o The use of multi-disciplinary, open teams during real-time implementation using techniques such as red-teaming, pre-mortems and alternative futures techniques to disrupt default thinking and surface blind spots.

  o The use of rapid-implementation reviews drawing on external expertise to rapidly diagnose and learn from failures and strengthen delivery.

- When embedded in a national strategy cycle, these tools and methods help individuals and teams across organisations connect their learning to shared goals — building a stronger, system-wide strategic culture.

- We need a new National School of Government with the responsibility and accountability to coordinate system learning, creating space for experimentation and reflection, investing in building common capabilities across all levels of government, business, academia, and civil society in service of a coherent national strategy.

Introduction

As argued in our paper *Long-Term, National Strategy: Designing a Contemporary Practice of National Strategy*, we need a new practice of national strategy-making which is rooted in inheritance, future-focused, outward-facing, place-oriented, intelligent about uncertainty, open, and 'national' in approach. This practice must become intrinsic to institutions and processes if it is to be successful at changing incentives and culture. But how does one embed strategic practice successfully across the UK in complex institutions and among multiple actors from different organisational cultures, power and incentive structures, and with a multiplicity of relationships? In this paper, we take a systems-wide view to ask: how can systems transform and evolve together at a sufficiently rapid pace to deliver strategic intent? And how can system learning, or 'training', become an intrinsic part of future strategic success?

In answering these questions, we are not attempting a full tour of the extensive academic literature on this topic. Nor are we trying to adjudicate between many theories of what works to deliver policy, institutional and cultural change. Instead, this paper reflects on how we can secure successful strategic action in a more ambiguous, competitive landscape of ideas. We start by setting out a description of the current challenges we see in system learning before offering a set of practical recommendations.

Current approaches to system learning

Operating at the intersection of politics, policy and public value, public sector organisations are tasked with addressing a nation's most pressing and intractable challenges. These 'wicked problems' are inherently complex, interconnected, and resistant to straightforward solutions.[1] Public institutions must balance multiple often conflicting objectives in seeking these solutions.[2] In the UK, the public sector is also not a single entity but a complex ecosystem of central, devolved and local government, public services, and delivery agencies — each responding to their own drivers and motivations.[3]

How the public sector should organise itself to respond effectively to these challenges is not a new question. It has been the focus of many successive reforms and approaches. Classical public administration theory supported early models of bureaucratic organisation, emphasising hierarchy, formal rules, and clear lines of authority as the basis for delivering public value in a stable and accountable manner. In contrast, New Public Management (NPM) emerged in the late 20th century, drawing on private-sector practices to promote decentralisation, performance measurement and market-based mechanisms. These frameworks have shaped how governments have been structured, how services have been delivered, and how success has been measured; as well as the concepts, methods and disciplines that are taught, either in formal structured learning, or through institutional doctrine, dissemination and shared practice. The limitations of both

approaches have led to a growing interest in newer, interdisciplinary, practice-informed perspectives.[4]

We add to this shift a very clear appetite for new approaches, emerging from multiple directions. Systems thinking has been adopted as a clear construct for taking a broader perspective to problems, actors and outcomes. Yet without a sufficient disciplinary 'idea' to challenge hierarchy as an organising principle, central government still tends to assume the mantle of 'systems leader', and to employ traditional techniques. There has been a far greater emphasis on institutions for public innovation (for example ARIA, a UK R&D funding agency to back scientific and technological breakthroughs), and approaches built on the primacy of technological transformation (Government Digital and the attendant changes in disciplinary techniques influencing action elsewhere such as 'agile' project management). The UK Government's 'Test, Learn and Grow' programme is a flagship commitment to non-hierarchical experimentation and collaborative innovation. All of these new approaches are focused on delivering public commitments, facing into wicked problems or grappling with rapidly emerging trends. However, without a clear strategic framework, it is difficult to navigate this growing landscape of different ideas about how the UK should govern and deliver transformative change.

Under the wider thesis of this project, the UK should form and refresh national strategy on a cyclical basis, enabling it to articulate its top challenges, objectives and 'big bets' — and cohere underlying tenets of national policy — in a single framework. We also posit that for national strategy to work as a guiding framework, it needs the alignment of many actors, not all of whom are subject to central control or share the same incentives and purpose, but whose efforts are crucial to success. The question then becomes: how does a country with an overarching strategic framework, involving multiple actors, enact rapid system-wide mobilisation and change? Examples might include the pivot towards a new 'big bet', or the adoption of a more radical solution to a long-term challenge. Can learning methodologies, implemented at scale, provide an answer to this question?

In this paper, our contention is that specifically designed, content-based and experiential learning methods can play a significant role in re-orientation, problem-solving, delivery acceleration and strategic alignment to deliver national strategy. These approaches should now be trialled and then potentially adopted at scale, as a key strategic capability of the state.

Key aspects of our approach

Our ambition for system learning is to enable institutions across the UK to act in alignment with national strategy and with each other, building capability across the whole system to think, plan, and act strategically. We want institutions to be able to solve problems together, guided by shared frameworks and capability rather than centralised instructions or solely 'hierarchical' approaches to policymaking. The tenets of our approach to 'training the system' are:

- **Experiential learning can provide a vital space for problem-solving.** Spaces in which multiple actors confront real-world challenges create natural points of connection and enable dynamic collaboration between different institutions each with their own norms and operating models. Through repetition over time, the shared 'practice' that evolves from entering these spaces will provide a powerful platform for shared diagnoses, the surfacing of disagreement, mutual understanding and co-ordinated thinking — overcoming traditional barriers.

- **Learning and adaptive methodologies democratise information and can recognise and amplify the agency of a multiplicity of actors, rather than distorting responsibility and skewing towards government.** Experiential learning, shared among multiple partners with their own agency can result in quicker adoption of lessons and more rapid pivots and improvements. Participants in simulations or crisis exercises are confronted by what they and their organisations need to do differently and can implement measures directly. This avoids the information or explanatory gap which arises when being instructed to adapt or implement new measures.

- **In an environment of increasingly complex decision-making, a greater facility to practise is needed.** The value of 'war-gaming' certain decisions is known and practised with varying frequency in different parts of government. The use of rehearsal environments — as well as structured challenge and dissent — should be more common, and the ability to participate in these spaces should, in particular, be made more available to those holding elected office.

- **We need a much more rapid way of learning from failure.** The business of government will always involve failure. In a more volatile, crisis-prone, rapidly changing world, arguably it might happen more. We need a much more active, more rapid method to understand and respond when this happens and to account to the public for this learning.

The rest of this paper sets out our practical recommendations — new capabilities required to deliver against these key tenets.

Four practical recommendations

Our approach to national strategy is ambitious: it aims to help the UK clearly identify its biggest challenges, surface choices, and not only formulate but also follow through on strategic decisions. To achieve this, we recommend bringing together organisations and officials from across the system to practise strategic delivery through repeat exercises. There are four methods we see as particularly important.

1. Regular use of simulations and case studies

Simulations are currently used in the public sector to train for emergency responses in situations with relatively high degrees of clarity around pace, urgency, and

outcomes.[5] Simulations are also used as a classroom method for training participants in key skills and approaches on a topic outside their day-to-day work, but emulating it in an important respect. It is a well-trodden approach for negotiations training, for example.

We have, however, come across few examples of simulations as an experiential method of exploring a particular policy challenge, outside of crisis response. Yet regular simulations on a wider range of topics and in a range of circumstances have the potential to bring together actors from across the system to:

- Practise strategic pivots in new and emerging areas (for instance, a defence or trade posture)

- Prepare for different future scenarios (for instance, the impact of AI and automation on the labour market, as shown in Box 1)

- Reframe responses to intractable problems (for instance, gaming through how decisions could be taken over time on adult social care)

Research shows that agents in high-pressure situations — like firefighters or military commanders — often make decisions by recognising patterns from past experience, a process called "recognition-primed decision-making".[6] Designing simulations that bring together actors from across different organisations can help build that same kind of intuition at a system level, helping teams practise making trade-offs under uncertainty, engage in strategic prioritisation, navigate stakeholder conflicts, test assumptions, and reframe goals. Our intention should be to leverage AI and other digital tools to make simulations more widely accessible and deployable over time.

Case studies can act as a complementary, flexible learning tool. Research finds that the case method — a specific interactive teaching approach that uses real-world scenarios to develop critical thinking and problem-solving — is successful not only in conveying substantive knowledge, but also in developing the "analytical, diagnostic, and decision-making competences" essential for real-world governance. [57] A much wider use of cases is a way for cross-sector, multidisciplinary teams to immerse themselves in scenarios, and practise working together to respond to challenges in a controlled learning environment. Used effectively, the case method can help build institutional muscle memory — enabling public leaders and teams to practise how to act together with intent in the real world. By engaging with complex, ambiguous scenarios, institutions can rehearse critical decision-making, surface assumptions, and strengthen collective judgment — all of which are essential for navigating high-stakes, real-time challenges.

A far greater capacity to identify and produce cases would also be a significant aid to institutional memory and learning. A codified way of producing these to teachable quality, enabling those involved to both record and reflect on what happened, would provide a valuable repository for institutions and their current and future staff. These case studies should be drawn from lived experience, serving as a way of both learning from and preserving institutional memory.

Box 1: Simulation example — AI and the labour market

Proposal: Run a simulation exercise exploring how governments might pivot in response to the long-term impacts of AI and automation on the labour market; and what kinds of policy and institutional shifts would be needed to meet employment, welfare, and economic goals in this new context.

Context: Set in the imagined future of 2040, participants are asked to step into a scenario where advances in AI and automation have significantly reshaped the structure of work: traditional employment models have been eroded, new forms of labour have emerged. The goal is to deliberately consider how governments can adapt to this future scenario, and what it would take to shift from today's systems to ones that are relevant in this future scenario to deliver policy objectives for employment, welfare, and growth.

Scope: The exercise will bring together civil servants and politicians from across levels of government (national, devolved, local), alongside invited experts from the AI industry, academia, business, and labour.

Mechanics: It unfolds in three main phases. First, participants are presented with a set of curated 'injects' — analysis and foresight briefings that include economic projections, emerging global trends, and stakeholder perspectives from affected industries, unions, and communities. Based on this, participants work in cross-functional teams to identify and develop a set of 'big bets' — major strategic shifts or policy pivots governments could begin pursuing today to shape or respond to the future labour market. Each team presents its strategy to a mock panel of decision makers who interrogate the assumptions, priorities, and political feasibility of each approach.

2. Foresight and backcasting

Foresight and backcasting are widely used in both public and private sectors to explore uncertainty and test strategic assumptions. We are particularly interested in their use not just to generate insights, but as structured spaces for multidisciplinary teams to work together, to imagine future contexts, assess how strategies might perform under different conditions, and align around common understandings of the future. Used well, these approaches provide a collaborative process for making sense of complexity. They help teams rehearse decisions, navigate ambiguity, and clarify the outcomes they want to pursue. Participating in scenario development or backcasting can build trust, stretch thinking, and foster a shared language around uncertainty — ultimately strengthening collective judgement.

The Singaporean public sector provides one example of how these tools can be institutionalised across government, embedding common foresight methods into day-to-day strategy work. In contrast, the example from Arup, an engineering consultancy, shows how storytelling and design-led foresight can bring complex futures to life. Both show how futures work, when institutionalised, can strengthen collective judgment and build long-term strategic capacity (see Box 2).

Box 2: Training for the future — insights from Singapore and Arup

Singapore's approach to integrating foresight across the public sector

Central to Singapore's efforts to embed a shared foresight toolkit across the public sector is the Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF). Housed within the Prime Minister's Office, this team drives long-term thinking and builds strategic foresight capabilities across government. CSF has developed a structured methodology known as SP+ (Scenario Planning Plus), a comprehensive suite of foresight tools including environmental scanning, scenario development, war-gaming, and backcasting. These tools are made widely accessible through structured training: FutureCraft workshops, a Strategic Futures Network for senior leaders, and a cross-agency Sandbox for experimentation and collaboration. Importantly, CSF-trained officers are rotated across ministries, helping to embed a common strategic mindset throughout the system. This shared infrastructure allows Singapore to embed foresight consistently through the organisation, fostering more joined-up government and a proactive strategic culture.

Arup's use of storytelling to bring foresight to life

Arup, a global design and engineering consultancy, employs a Total Design approach to work that prioritises holistic perspectives, including long-term thinking. One of the key ways the firm embeds this perspective into its projects is through a 35-person foresight team distributed across four global hubs. The mission of the team, which sits within Arup University, is to ensure work is future-proof, with a particular focus on human (and non-human) lived experiences — especially for projects whose lifespans extend decades beyond their creators. Acting as both an internal consultancy and an outward-facing partner, the foresight team blends analytical rigour with emotive storytelling. Arup employs a wide foresight toolkit including scenario planning, backcasting, wind-tunnelling, and horizon scanning across markets, technologies, and environmental trends. Their outputs range from speculative "Future of…" reports to highly participatory workshops, with futures literacy training tailored to audiences from engineers to policymakers. A hallmark of their method is design-led foresight, using visualisation, filmmaking, and immersive storytelling to bring scenarios to life: what they call 'inside-out worldbuilding'. This approach starts from human details and builds outward, making abstract futures tangible for decision-makers, actors and investors who need to engage emotionally, as well as intellectually, with possible futures.

3. Real-time learning and adaptation

In fast-paced policymaking environments, teams are often under pressure to act quickly, align early, and avoid disrupting the existing consensus. This can leave little room for questioning assumptions or changing course. Exposing mixed teams — including civil servants, delivery agencies, academics, businesses, civil society and even politicians — to underlying assumptions and implicit choices in real time can be a powerful learning tool. These teams can make use of structured techniques, which behavioural research shows can be useful even under pressure, to support better decision-making. Strategies like considering alternative hypotheses, using checklists, or 'red teaming' to challenge plans can help teams resist common biases like overconfidence or confirmation bias. For example, simply asking, "What could make this plan fail?" encourages structured counterfactual thinking and can

create space for reflection, even in the middle of implementation.[8] It its Module 1 report, the Covid Inquiry advocates the use of "external red teams" in the Civil Service to challenge thinking in preparing for and responding to civil emergencies.[9]

The use of mixed teams in live policy delivery can introduce a broader range of perspectives into decision-making and build the shared habits and trust needed for institutions to learn together over time. Box 3 shows an example of how Microsoft has embedded red teaming into its operations as a tool for both strategic challenge and learning.

> **Box 3: Microsoft's AI red teams**
>
> Since 2018, Microsoft has maintained dedicated AI red teams tasked with probing their systems for vulnerabilities — simulating the role of attackers or unintended users who might exploit AI in ways it was never designed for. These teams are deliberately configured: alongside security engineers, there are practitioners in neuroscience, bioweapons, ethics, and social psychology. Team members include people who have graduated from Ivy League universities, first-generation college students, individuals without formal degrees, veterans, and people who have been to prison. Team members also bring a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary perspectives with 95% fluent in more than one language and many holding native proficiency in non-English languages.[10] Together they simulate adversarial attacks on their AI systems to test vulnerabilities and identify security risks and ethical concerns.

4. Rapid post-implementation learning

The UK should have a much better, faster introspective system for extracting learning from experience, especially at points of stress or failure. Crises often present powerful opportunities to extract insight and drive improvement, but these lessons are too often delayed, siloed, or lost. Box 4 gives an example of the pace at which the US was able to assess and extract learning from its experience of Hurricane Katrina. That kind of quick-turn, high-impact learning should not be seen as exceptional, but the default approach.

The analytical function in the UK Civil Service has well-established processes in place to commission and carry out formal evaluations both on the impact of policies and the processes through which they are delivered. There is also a whole ecosystem of accountability bodies, academic institutions, and What Works Centres that regularly assess and comment on its ability to do so.
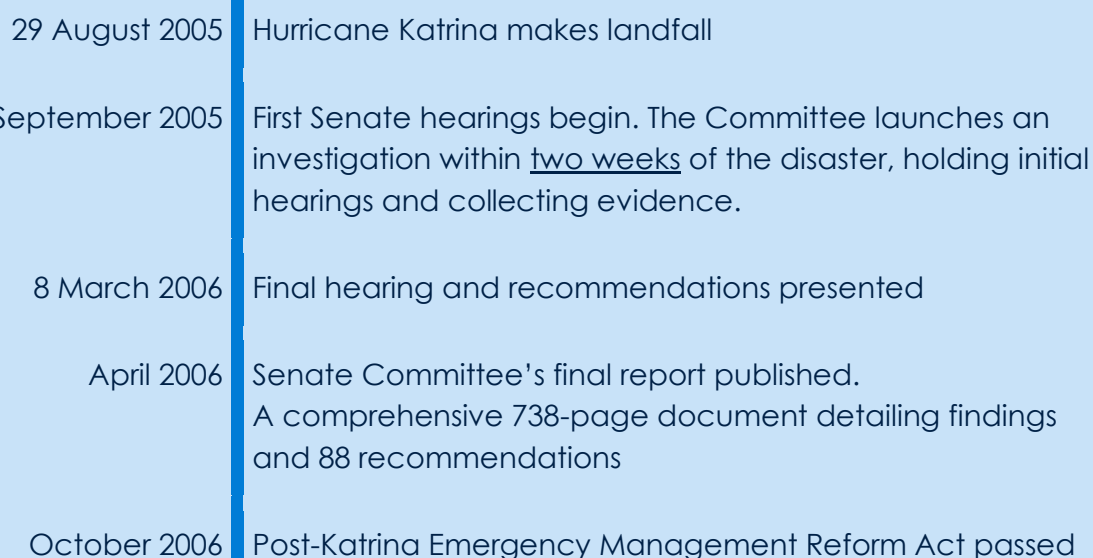
Rapid implementation reviews can complement these processes, creating valuable 'learning loops' while policy is still fresh in the system. For this to be effective, these reviews should be codified into the policy cycle, training practitioners in rapid review methods — drawing from different fields from data science to investigative journalism — and should sometimes be carried out by dedicated cross-sector, interdisciplinary taskforces that can be quickly deployed in moments of pressure. Bringing together people from different institutions, sectors, and disciplines to reflect jointly on implementation challenges can also reveal assumptions, mental models, and unspoken constraints that are harder to surface in siloed reviews. These

moments of collective reflection can strengthen relationships and build the trust needed to act in alignment over the long term.

Box 4: Hurricane Katrina — mobilising external expertise for rapid learning

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 — one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history — efforts to draw lessons began almost immediately. Within weeks, the US Senate's Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs convened hearings to examine the federal response, with the last hearing in March 2006 — less than seven months after Katrina — setting out improvements that needed to be made in emergency management and inter-agency coordination.[11]

These hearings drew on expertise from inside and outside government. Harvard Kennedy School, for example, moved swiftly to extract learning from the crisis and developed a detailed case study examining the decision-making, coordination failures, and leadership challenges faced during the disaster.[12] This case was rapidly integrated into teaching materials to support learning in crisis management, public leadership, and organisational response.

29 August 2005	Hurricane Katrina makes landfall
September 2005	First Senate hearings begin. The Committee launches an investigation within <u>two weeks</u> of the disaster, holding initial hearings and collecting evidence.
8 March 2006	Final hearing and recommendations presented
April 2006	Senate Committee's final report published. A comprehensive 738-page document detailing findings and 88 recommendations
October 2006	Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act passed

Building culture through strategy cycles

We recognise that methods alone are not enough to create a culture of strategic learning and that even the most carefully designed learning approach will fail to gain traction if cultural norms push behaviour towards short-termism and risk aversion. In this project, our proposition is that the UK adopts a repeatable national strategy process, refreshed every five years. Embedding and repeating learning methods within this kind of national strategy cycle can help shape the wider culture which in turn determines what is valued, and how people behave — including when no one is watching.[13]

When embedded within a repeatable national strategy process and tied to a clear national purpose, learning practices become more than one-off exercises. They start to reinforce a shared understanding of strategic goals and help shift cultural norms over time. In doing so, they provide individuals and teams — often operating across diverse organisations — with clarity about what their learning is for, how it connects to collective priorities, and why it matters. This sense of shared purpose builds legitimacy, supports long-term follow-through, and fosters collaboration beyond organisational boundaries.

Crucially, repeated strategy cycles can also anchor the right leadership behaviours. Their predictability and rhythm give leaders a mandate to prioritise long-term thinking, model curiosity, and make space for experimentation — reinforcing these behaviours over time, even amid short-term pressures. It also gives leaders across the system a shared language and direction, helping to align day-to-day decisions with long-term strategy. The private sector offers relevant parallels: at Netflix, for example, the company's annual "strategic bets" process reinforces a clear strategic direction and encourages employees to connect their own work and learning to the organisation's broader goals. Government operates in a different context, but the principle holds. A recurring national strategy process can do the same, aligning decision-making with long-term national outcomes and embedding learning as a core strategic capability and function, not an optional add-on.

> **Box 5: How Netflix's approach to strategy shapes its organisational culture**
>
> In 1997, Netflix was founded as a DVD rental-by-mail service. In 2000, the founders of Netflix saw the opportunity in using the internet to make movie rentals more convenient and by 2011 had taken a big pivot from DVDs to streaming, with the ambition to be the world's leading entertainment platform. They continued to pursue this ambition by investing in a deep understanding of their external environment, making bold decisions that moved the business beyond the status quo — such as creating original content and expanding into new regions — and continuously learning and improving based on real-time feedback. By the end of 2024, Netflix's subscriber base as a global streaming service had reached over 300 million, generating around $39 billion in annual revenue from operations in over 190 countries.
>
> This progress has been based on a deliberate approach to strategy. Each year, the company conducts a "strategic bets" exercise, centred on a detailed document shared across the organisation. This document includes an assessment of the external environment, Netflix's comparative advantages, and the major strategic bets it plans to pursue — along with the rationale behind each. This annual exercise is an opportunity to consciously deliberate future choices and strongly held assumptions.
>
> While the process is led by senior leadership, it is shared with the whole organisation as an open-source document creating space for input and constructive challenge. The narrative set from the strategic bets document is cascaded through the leadership and repeated in team meetings, ensuring all teams can connect their decisions to the organisation's strategic intent.
>
> This repetitive and transparent approach not only aligns the entire organisation around shared goals; it also reinforces Netflix's distinctive cultural norms, creating a wider culture where employees are expected to act like leaders, take

ownership of outcomes, operate with candour, and consistently deliver high performance.

National School of Government

System-wide learning does not happen by accident; it needs active, intentional planning and coordination.[14] Without it, learning remains siloed, missing the chance to build the shared mindset, networks and relationships that modern government demands; or too theoretical, based on generic and individual skills rather than focused on building collective muscle for the real challenges of today.

We need a National School of Government that can play its role as a core strategic capability of the state, with a clear mandate to lead, coordinate, and be accountable for system-level learning; to prepare for the future; and solve our biggest problems. International models such as France's *Institut National du Service Public (INSP),* offer some examples in their ambition to offer rigorous academic and practical training to civil servants to build the shared craft of government (see Box 6).

Alongside developing a curriculum for the future, such a National School of Government could also provide the following functions to support strategic capability and practice, reflecting our methodologies above:

- **Building and curating a repository of case studies, games and simulations**. This could be in response to commissions from government or non-government teams working on a particular problem or challenge. It could also respond to central commissions, or by designing larger-scale simulations on a periodic basis.

- **Focusing on future challenges**. This could include providing foresight tools and future-focused scenarios to enable multidisciplinary teams to explore options and choices. It could also convene periodic **symposia** — wider debates among politicians, business, government, and academia about potential responses to future challenges.

- **Developing the red team community and real-time review disciplines**, from multidisciplinary backgrounds and sectors. Strategy teams should be able to access a high-quality environment for testing their approaches with experts from multiple perspectives, in and outside government.

- **Expertise and a function ready to undertake rapid post-implementation learning.** It should be able to support government and Parliament in developing a new approach to rapid learning after the event and curating teams deployable in support of this learning. This may be via networks with experts in universities or the private sector, for example.

A National School of Government, with these functions as part of its make-up, can equip leaders and practitioners across the system with the skills, mindset, and tools needed to tackle the UK's most complex challenges and follow through on major

strategic priorities. To be truly effective, these capabilities should be open to actors beyond government and, in particular, open to elected officials.

> **Box 6: Learning from the French *Institut National du Service Public***
>
> Established in 2022 as part of a broader reform of the public administration, the INSP is France's dedicated institution for training senior civil servants. Based in Strasbourg, the INSP is tasked with preparing future leaders of the French state — senior officials who go onto serve in ministries, prefectures, and diplomatic posts, among other roles. It offers rigorous academic and practical training in public policy, law, economics, and international affairs, teaching a common core program across all. It also places emphasis on diversity, social mobility, and responsiveness to the needs of a changing modern society.
>
> The INSP was created to replace the *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), which had long symbolised France's technocratic elite. While ENA produced many of the country's most influential public figures, including presidents and prime ministers, it was also criticised for creating a closed, insular system that lacked social diversity and was perceived as disconnected from citizens. The INSP has been designed to address these criticisms — widening access, modernising the curriculum, and promoting a more inclusive and representative model of public service, better aligned with the democratic values and challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion and next steps

We think it is possible to *train a system* to think and act strategically as part of a national strategy process. We know this is an ambitious concept, not least because of the complexity of public policy challenges, the seriousness of the trade-offs involved, the number of institutions that need to play a part in the response, each with their own motivations and drivers; and the necessity of creating a culture with the discipline to follow through on big bets and the agility to pivot when circumstances change.

This shift cannot happen through a single tool or intervention. It requires a combination of learning approaches; reinforced through institutional practices and incentive structures, through which learning becomes a natural and embedded part of everyday work. The immediate next steps for this work should be:

1. The creation of an outward-facing '**National School of Government**' or similar model, with a clear mandate to develop the types of capability set out in this paper.

2. **Trialling a large-scale simulation exercise**, bringing together civil servants, politicians, academics and experts to rehearse a response to a long-term challenge or strategic pivot. Learning from this exercise should be replicated in other areas, building the evidence for regular repeat exercises

3. Trialling the use of multi-disciplinary, open teams to test delivery pathways during **live policy implementation** and for **rapid post-implementation learning**.

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