

PSA Annual Conference 2025

Title:

What Do Ministers Want From The Civil Service? A Delphi Method Study.

Abstract (300 words):

The Home Civil Service often faces criticism owing to its size, its capability, its (lack of) impartiality and the quality of the service it provides. Civil Servants are, themselves, often described as lazy, inflexible and boring, and the lack of a qualification prerequisite for most new entrants means anyone can join and advise ministers without any formal training – but what skills do officials advising ministers on policy need? There is very little research on the capability of government that centres on direct accounts from ministers; this paper presents a Delphi Method study that considers what ministers want from their officials. Delphi is a method that has been used extensively to consider what skills other professional groups ought to have for them to be effective, but never before has it been used with ministers (the preeminent consumers of policy advice) as the expert panel to determine what the policy advisory function should look like. My research shows that ministers across levels of seniority and policy areas share broadly similar views. In general terms, respondents placed more value on the personal qualities of officials than they do on the skills traditionally associated with policy capacity and whilst some of their wants do feature in the 2021 Policy Profession Standards, not all do.