

SELECT COMMITTEE WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Re:State's submission to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's Mission Government Inquiry

About Re:State (formerly Reform think tank)

Re:State is the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We believe that the State has a fundamental role to play in enabling individuals, families and communities to thrive. But our vision is one in which the State delivers only the services that it is best placed to deliver, within sound public finances, and where both decision-making and delivery is devolved to the most appropriate level. We are committed to driving systemic change that will deliver better outcomes for all.

We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach. This is reflected in our cross-party Advisory Board and our events programme which seeks to convene likeminded reformers from across the political spectrum.

Re:State is a registered charity, the *Re:State* Trust, charity no. 1103739.

About Re:State's 'Reimagining Whitehall' programme

Re:State's 'Reimagining Whitehall' programme is directly researching many of the key questions raised by the Committee in this inquiry.

This submission draws on evidence gathered from *Re:State's* paper *Mission control*, published in 2024.

This evidence submission sets out our key findings and insights, to help inform the Committee's approach to this vital issue.

What are the key components of mission government? What changes have been made to the operation of government to facilitate mission government and are these sufficient to successfully deliver it?

1. Mission government is defined by a focus on achieving things that are extraordinarily ambitious, helping communicate a sense of urgency to the system and incentivising people to trial new approaches and deliver at pace. Rather than trying to enhance the 'business-as-usual' activity of government, missions are a time-bound commitment to deliver outcomes that are unusually difficult and in some cases unprecedented.¹
2. Previous 'missions' have generally been concerned with radical improvements in public service performance and delivery, for example, eradicating child poverty within a generation, or achieving 'moonshot' scientific and technical breakthroughs, such as developing and producing a COVID-19 vaccine as quickly as possible. Very different approaches are required depending on the type of mission in question.
3. Missions should be **specific** and **credible**: i.e. it should be clear how the success of a mission will be assessed, and while the outcome of a mission should be stretching, it should be something that is possible to achieve.²
4. Missions should also be **focused**. Since they are resource-intensive, and have an unusually ambitious scope, government should also be sparing in how many it chooses to pursue at any one time: interviewees agreed that no more than "three to five" missions is an appropriate number to pursue simultaneously.³
5. A number of notable changes have already been made to facilitate mission-led government, relating to governance structures, how programmes are financed and to encourage experimental ways of working.
6. On governance, 'Mission Boards' (similar to Cabinet Subcommittees) have been established for each of the five missions – chaired by the respective lead Secretary of State – to support cross-departmental working and track progress against outcomes. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster attends these Mission Boards as Deputy Chair.⁴
7. There is also a lead Director General appointed as Senior Responsible Officer for each mission, though it is not clear who has been appointed to each of these posts.⁵
8. In the case of the Safer Streets Mission, the Director General appointed as SRO is also responsible for the Public Safety group in the Home Office, with a set of responsibilities ranging from emergency services delivery, to international law enforcement and cooperation, and work on modern slavery and human trafficking.

¹ Patrick King and Sean Eke, *Mission Control: A How-to Guide to Delivering Mission-Led Government* (Reform, 2024).

² King and Eke.

³ King and Eke.

⁴ Cabinet Office, 'List of Cabinet Committees and Their Membership', Webpage, 21 October 2024.

⁵ Ellie Reeves, 'Mission Boards: Senior Civil Servants' (UIN 6082, 4 October 2024).

Adding responsibility for mission delivery to these ‘business-as-usual’ requirements – rather than having them be led by a dedicated Director General – is a serious risk to the success of the mission and does not represent the level of commitment and drive needed for missions to be focused on as a continuous priority.

9. Finally, a Mission Delivery Unit has been established in Cabinet Office to lead on implementation across government and advise the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on delivery.
10. These governance changes are welcome enablers of mission government. Last year, *Re:State* recommended that a Missions Unit be established in the Treasury to drive forward missions and unblock barriers to progress, personally sponsored by the Prime Minister and led by a full-time Chief Executive, at permanent secretary level (based on the successful model of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, set up in 2001).⁶
11. The same report recommended that a Cabinet-level ‘Mission Board’ should be created and meet monthly to coordinate cross-government action on missions, chaired by the Prime Minister, with the Cabinet Secretary in attendance. However, it is not clear how often the Government’s Mission Boards meet, what performance measures are used in meetings, and whether, without the involvement of the Prime Minister and/or Chancellor, the Boards are sufficiently senior to unlock potential barriers to progress.
12. On financing, the Treasury has committed to prioritising missions as a key part of the 2025 Spending Review process, stating that departments should “work closely together to identify how their work contributes to the Government’s missions” and meet in “mission clusters” to “agree priorities and links”.⁷
13. Separately, the UKRI has set up a £25 million R&D ‘Missions Programme’ to fund targeted research and innovation aimed at solving problems unique to each mission.⁸ This closely aligns with the recommendation made by *Re:State* that the UKRI should orientate the activity of its research councils towards missions – to accelerate progress towards them and crowd in private sector R&D funding in these areas – based on the ‘mission-led’ approach to R&D funding adopted by innovation agencies in countries including Australia and Sweden.
14. To encourage new and experimental ways of working in support of missions, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has announced ‘test-and-learn’ teams – which bring together policy officials, digital and data staff and staff from local public services – to trial new approaches and arrive at their own solutions to complex challenges.⁹
15. In *Mission Control*, *Re:State* likewise argued that innovation missions should begin with a “testing phase” to identify a portfolio of potential solutions, and that

⁶ King and Eke, *Mission Control: A How-to Guide to Delivering Mission-Led Government*.

⁷ HM Treasury, ‘Chancellor: Every Pound Spent Will Deliver Plan for Change’, Webpage, Press Release, 12 December 2024.

⁸ James Coe, ‘UKRI Gets Mission Ready’, *WonkHE*, 13 March 2025.

⁹ Pat McFadden, *Pat McFadden Vows to Make the State ‘More like a Start up’ as He Deploys Reform Teams across Country*, 2024.

government should not specify a single solution to these missions (exemplified by the Vaccine Taskforce hedging its bets on different COVID vaccine candidates).¹⁰

Is enough being done to ensure consistent prioritisation of missions across departments?

16. It is not clear that missions are being sufficiently prioritised across departments. Successful delivery of missions requires a clear and credible strategy, relentless focus, and an ability to deprioritise other objectives. Yet the milestones outlined in the Plan for Change are largely a continuation of targets set by previous governments, and in some cases have little connection to, or are even in tension with, the ultimate aim of the mission.¹¹
17. For example, the health mission involves reducing preventable illness and cutting health inequalities, but the target outlined in the Plan for Change, to “end hospital backlogs”, risks investment continuing to flow towards acute providers that have limited involvement in addressing upstream causes of ill health and closing health inequalities. Meanwhile, a report by the Public Accounts Committee found in January that – compared to the scale of government’s health mission – senior officials lack “ideas, or the drive, to match the level of change required”.¹²
18. Likewise, the Plan for Change target to “put police back on the beat” by recruiting an additional 13,000 officers may have some impact on crime prevention and “making Britain’s streets safe” but is far from the most direct measure to attain this outcome.¹³ As the nature of crime changes and digital crime becomes more prevalent, crime prevention relies on a much wider set of reforms than expanding the frontline policing workforce: a high cost measure that could crowd out more effective interventions.
19. More generally, a tendency for government projects and programmes to attempt to optimise for many different objectives simultaneously – for example, using housebuilding to enhance biodiversity or procurement to achieve different kinds of social value – can militate against a focused, mission-oriented approach. Implicit, competing aims of this kind are a particular risk to the Government’s growth mission.

Is a change to the way money is allocated needed to ensure sufficient priority is given to the missions?

19. Interviewees told *Re:State* that the level of process involved in allocating money to programmes and policies in service of missions is a risk to successful delivery. In particular, for innovation-heavy missions to succeed, a more streamlined and agile approach to business case approval is needed.¹⁴

¹⁰ King and Eke, *Mission Control: A How-to Guide to Delivering Mission-Led Government*.

¹¹ HM Government, *Plan for Change: Milestones for Mission-Led Government*, 2024.

¹² HM Government.

¹³ HM Government.

¹⁴ King and Eke, *Mission Control: A How-to Guide to Delivering Mission-Led Government*.

20. Several pointed to the benefits of adopting the model used for ARIA – which has a single business case for the length of its spending programme. This would increase the flexibility of Mission SROs to identify and pursue innovations that are critical to missions succeeding and would better recognise the uncertainty inherent to pursuing things that are unusually ambitious in government.
21. The Delegated Authority Limit applied to mission budgets should be as expansive as necessary to promote innovation in uncertain and novel areas, with Treasury scrutiny frontloaded to the very earliest stages of mission planning and implementation.¹⁵

The Government has advocated a ‘test and learn’ approach to policy as part of its missions approach. What is being done to encourage this and what are the potential obstacles to its successful adoption?

22. The main way in which the Government has encouraged a ‘test and learn’ approach to policy is through the new Public Sector Reform and Innovation Fund, which was announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget. £100 million of this was allocated over the next three years to deliver projects in partnership with mayors and local leaders, with a focus on experimentation and learning.¹⁶
23. The first wave of these test and learn teams are due to have begun in early 2025. Teams in Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Essex have been tasked with tackling two challenges: how to reduce costs of temporary accommodation and how family hubs can increase the number of disadvantaged families that they reach.¹⁷
24. An acceptance of risk and tolerance of failure is infused into this approach. In a speech in December 2024 Pat McFadden, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, commented that the approach “needs an appetite for risk ... if we are terrified of failure we will never innovate and we’ll carry on doing what we’ve always done”.¹⁸
25. The intention, after this first wave, is to expand this approach to other parts of the country and set them bigger challenges. Other examples of this ‘test and learn’ approach exist across government. For example, NHS England’s neighbourhood health guidelines states that systems are now asked to “embrace the government’s ‘test and learn’ approach to enable continuous improvement in real-time and build on existing good practice such as the NHS IMPACT Improving Patient Care Together framework”.¹⁹ Liverpool City Region Combined Authority’s Office for Public Service Innovation commits to developing new tailored test and learn approaches. From April 2025 four new approaches to funding AI and digital projects are due to be tested.

¹⁵ King and Eke.

¹⁶ HM Treasury, *Autumn Budget 2024: Fixing the Foundations to Deliver Change*, 2024.

¹⁷ McFadden, *Pat McFadden Vows to Make the State ‘More like a Start up’ as He Deploys Reform Teams across Country*.

¹⁸ McFadden.

¹⁹ NHS England, ‘Neighbourhood Health Guidelines 2025/26’, Webpage, 29 January 2025.

26. This approach is the right one, but must nevertheless contend with a number of obstacles. Of primary concern is the need to ensure that successful approaches are scaled up. Within central government, previous *Re:State* work has suggested that “pilotitis” means that successful AI and digital project pilots are rarely scaled.²⁰ The lack of funding and the way this funding is allocated means that successful pilots are rarely deployed at the levels required to justify the initial investment in the pilot.
27. This problem of ensuring that scaling occurs effectively is likely to be particularly challenging for the ‘test and learn’ teams working in Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Essex. What works in these places may not so readily work in other areas of the country.
28. Another potential obstacle is ensuring that there is sufficient access not only to accurate and timely data but also to skilled people capable of analysing this data. Without this it will be challenging to learn what works and what does not.
29. Data quality and access issues may come about because data is missing key information points or recorded in different ways. For example in 2019 the National Audit Office found more than 20 different identifiers being used to identify individuals and businesses across ten government departments and agencies. And data and digital skills are often in short supply.²¹ While the Digital, Data and Technology profession within government has grown significantly over recent years, it struggles to compete with the private sector on pay. The NAO previously found that in 2023 37 per cent of government recruitment campaigns for digital roles are unsuccessful.²²

²⁰ Joe Hill and Sean Eke, *Getting the Machine Learning: Scaling AI in Public Services*, 2024.

²¹ National Audit Office, *Digital Transformation in Government: Addressing the Barriers to Efficiency*, 2023.

²² National Audit Office.