# Civil service diversity spending under scrutiny amid calls for efficiency and transparency



Significant expenditures on diversity initiatives within the UK civil service have ignited a contentious debate on the balance between inclusivity and fiscal responsibility. A recent Cabinet Office audit revealed that Whitehall allocated £27 million to various equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts in the last financial year. This figure includes £20 million in salaries for 380 EDI staff, whose average remuneration stands at £53,000, alongside an additional £7.1 million for activities such as training sessions and memberships in diversity organisations like Stonewall. Critics argue that such spending undermines the principle of neutrality within the civil service, suggesting that it distracts from core responsibilities to the public.

The report highlighted that 350 full-time EDI officers are embedded within government departments, while another 30 operate at the government level, promoting controversial topics such as gender identity perception and issues related to race and microaggressions. This focus on ideological alignment has prompted backlash from those who believe that it stifles dissenting viewpoints and creates an environment where critical discussions on gender and race can be silenced. Proponents, however, maintain that these efforts are vital for ensuring fair treatment of minority groups within the public sector.

In the backdrop of this discourse, the UK government is actively pursuing a strategy aimed at reducing civil service headcount by 10%, equating to approximately 50,000 jobs. This austerity measure aligns with a broader agenda to revisit public spending, especially at a time when costs need to be scrutinised more rigorously. Right-leaning think tanks like Policy Exchange have even advocated for further job cuts, suggesting a reduction of up to 80,000 roles to maximise efficiency in government operations. Concerns about a "bloated" bureaucratic staff have been echoed by individuals such as a former Treasury second permanent secretary, who noted that inefficiencies can lead to an administrative machinery that hampers effective public service delivery.

Interestingly, the context of diversity spending coincides with persistent gender pay gaps across several major departments. The Department of Health and Social Care, for instance, has seen its gender pay gap rise from 9.1% to 13.9%, raising alarm about the efficacy of existing diversity initiatives. Meanwhile, the civil service as a whole has seen a slight improvement in its median gender pay gap, decreasing to 8.5%—still above the national average. Increasing accountability is now demanded, with the government planning to enforce stricter reporting requirements to address these inequalities effectively. Insights from the Chartered Management Institute underscore the imperative of integrating gender pay efforts into overarching economic growth strategies.

The Cabinet Office's review of EDI spending, commissioned by the previous Conservative government, represents a significant step towards understanding how resources are allocated within the civil service. According to a recent speech by a key minister, there is a drive to transform public spending on EDI into a more transparent and accountable process. This includes halting all external EDI spending without ministerial approval, and consolidating EDI roles directly into human resources departments to ensure strategic alignment with statutory obligations.

Nevertheless, transitioning from a broad-brush approach to a more targeted, outcome-oriented strategy presents its own challenges. Critics argue that the latest diversity strategy lacks clear objectives and success metrics, making it difficult for departments to navigate their EDI requirements effectively. Although new initiatives, such as ensuring a higher proportion of senior civil servants are based outside London, are commendable, they will need rigorous oversight to ensure that progress is made.

As the civil service grapples with the dual challenges of promoting inclusivity while adhering to fiscal prudence, the outcome of these policies remains essential for the sustainability of public services. Balancing these demands will require thoughtful consideration of how best to utilise government resources, ensuring that efforts to create a diverse workforce do not come at the expense of efficiency and accountability.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2062339/fury-civil-service-diversity-audit-woke), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-to-civil-service-expansion-and-review-of-equality-and-diversity-spending-announced-in-productivity-drive)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2062339/fury-civil-service-diversity-audit-woke), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/63705c19-d453-4027-bf38-49498ca8a579), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/12/11/one-million-civil-service-days-year-wasted-equality-diversity/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-05-14/debates/24051433000007/CivilServiceEqualityDiversityAndInclusion), [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/11/wasteful-whitehall-diversity-inclusion-spending-at-an-end/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/63705c19-d453-4027-bf38-49498ca8a579), [[7]](https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-service-diversity-strategy-criticised-lack-targets-guidance-disability-gender-race)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/11/wasteful-whitehall-diversity-inclusion-spending-at-an-end/), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/12/11/one-million-civil-service-days-year-wasted-equality-diversity/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2062339/fury-civil-service-diversity-audit-woke> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/63705c19-d453-4027-bf38-49498ca8a579> - In 2024, several major Whitehall departments reported an increase in gender pay gaps despite an overall narrowing across the UK civil service. The Department of Health and Social Care saw the widest rise, with its gap growing from 9.1% in 2023 to 13.9%, followed by the Department for Education, which increased from 4.1% to 8.2%. These are the largest disparities since gender pay gap reporting was mandated in 2017. However, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office significantly reduced its gap to 2.7%. The median gender pay gap across the civil service decreased from 9.6% to 8.5%, still above the UK average of 7%. These enduring disparities are attributed to low female representation in senior roles and overrepresentation in junior positions. In March 2024, women made up 62% of the lowest-paid and 48% of the highest-paid roles in the civil service. Calls for enhanced accountability have intensified, with the government planning stricter reporting requirements. The Chartered Management Institute emphasized the importance of improving female representation in leadership and integrating gender pay efforts as core to economic growth. The Labour government under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has pledged reforms to enhance civil service efficiency and address inequality.
3. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-05-14/debates/24051433000007/CivilServiceEqualityDiversityAndInclusion> - The Government has a plan to deliver a brighter future for Britain, with long-term economic security and opportunity: where hard work is always rewarded; where ambition and aspiration are celebrated; where young people get the skills they need to succeed in life; where families are supported, where those who have worked hard all their lives have the dignity they deserve in retirement; and, with security at home and abroad. The Civil Service is crucial to the delivery of that plan. We want to cut waste and inefficiency so civil servants can better support our frontline services. In that light, this Government wishes to ensure that all public spending on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (‘EDI’) is proportionate, meeting all statutory requirements, and represents value for money. Last October, and re-affirmed by the Chancellor in the Autumn Statement, the Government commissioned a review of EDI expenditure across the Civil Service, to identify current spend on roles and activities, and to understand whether existing expenditure is effective and efficient.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-to-civil-service-expansion-and-review-of-equality-and-diversity-spending-announced-in-productivity-drive> - The Chancellor has today, 2 October 2023, announced an immediate cap on civil servant headcount across Whitehall to stop any further expansion, increase efficiencies and boost productivity. The Civil Service workforce has grown year on year since 2016, with headcount as of June 2023 around 488,000. While this has enabled an effective response to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, further unabated growth would not be fair to taxpayers or promote the efficiency they expect. A cap on headcount at its current level will be introduced with immediate effect – a decision that will help cut the cost of government and could save up to £1 billion by March 2025 compared to the current trajectory. The cap – which will be in place for the duration of the current Spending Review period – does not equate to a recruitment freeze, and current recruitment campaigns will remain ongoing.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/12/11/one-million-civil-service-days-year-wasted-equality-diversity/> - One million civil service days a year are wasted on equality and diversity training, a new report has found. Research by Conservative Way Forward, a Tory think tank, says this costs the taxpayer an estimated £150 million a year. It includes 24 days a year spent by the Intellectual Property Office on the “respect at work board game” and almost 1,500 staff days spent by the London Fire Brigade on equality training. The report reveals that public sector organisations employ 10,000 members of staff to deal with issues focused on equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI). These roles set the taxpayer back £427 million a year and the average EDI employee receives an annual salary of £42,000, compared to the average nurse’s salary of £34,000, the report claims. It says British taxpayers face the highest tax burden since the Second World War, but millions are spent on “damaging and politically motivated activities”. The think tank’s research is based on an audit of government accounts and Freedom of Information requests to 6,000 public bodies, covering spending on EDI initiatives in government, arms-length organisations and contractors, including the company building the HS2 rail link.
6. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/11/wasteful-whitehall-diversity-inclusion-spending-at-an-end/> - Like all Conservatives, I want the public to pay less tax. And so all tax receipts collected must be used efficiently, in a way that benefits the taxpayer and improves public services. Given the crucial role it plays in delivering that, we need to stop the back door politicisation of the Civil Service, which diverts time and resources away from that focus on the public. We have too often seen them distracted by fashionable hobby horses, especially when it comes to issues like equality and diversity. That is what I will be addressing in a speech in Westminster tomorrow; to ensure we take a common sense approach to how government operates. Particularly how we approach ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’ (EDI) to ensure what takes place benefits the public and does not become a pointless job creation scheme for the politically correct. The public sector is diverse. House of Commons research shows over a quarter of the staff across the NHS in England are from minority ethnic backgrounds. We know too that while ability is spread across the country, that has not always been the case when it comes to opportunity. That’s why we’ve already moved over 18,000 roles out of London, including to new offices across the UK. Diversity in the civil service should never just be measured in terms of race and sex; it should also be about background and differences of opinion – and, above all, merit. However, some managers instead spend millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on advice from so-called equality professionals. Where is the common sense in that? Is this really what we should be spending people’s hard-earned taxes on? It’s a major concern of mine because this work takes up a huge amount of staff time. Indeed, we have some employees in the public sector whose only role is to ensure that departments are meeting diversity targets. Time and money which should be spent on the core purpose of the public sector – delivering for the public – is being wasted on woke hobby horses. Most of these kinds of EDI programmes – especially when delivered by private companies or campaigning organisations – are not transparent, and their benefits unproven. If we can’t prove their worth, then they don’t pass the public interest test. So I’m determined to stop it. It’s also a major concern for the Chancellor, which is why he previously announced a review on public sector spending on EDI schemes throughout the public sector. This was unprecedented in government: an audit of how many staff are actively working on EDI and asking Departments to account for how this work supports our priorities. As such, I will announce that, following this review, new guidance will cease all external EDI spending across the Civil Service unless it is specifically signed off and cleared by Ministers. There will be no more spending on campaign organisations or unproven programmes delivered by external ‘experts’. In the future, we will have accountability and transparency, focusing on delivering opportunity for all, not political ideology. Second, I will be meeting with the top outliers of external EDI spend across our Arms-Length Bodies asking them to account for this spending and how it is actually supporting their service to their customers: the public. In future there will be no more dedicated (or standalone) EDI jobs in the Civil Service outside of HR. No more staff dedicating 100% of their time to EDI work. All EDI roles within the Civil Service will be consolidated into their department’s HR teams, and Ministers and their Permanent Secretaries will ensure that these teams are focused on their statutory obligations around EDI – the things we are legally required to do which have a proven benefit, not unproven diversity work which has no basis in law. I’m pleased that we are getting a grip on this EDI spending, because the public sector serves the public, not itself.
7. <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-service-diversity-strategy-criticised-lack-targets-guidance-disability-gender-race> - The broad-brush approach to equality set out in the latest civil service diversity and inclusion strategy has left departments without targets or guidance to improve ethnicity, disability and gender representation, the Institute for Government has said. The think tank's new report, A Crossroads for Diversity and Inclusion in the Civil Service, welcomes the Cabinet Office’s decision to place greater emphasis on socio-economic background, geographic location and professional background of civil servants. But the IfG said the latest strategy’s new, more general, definition of workforce diversity was not specific enough about objectives and success criteria, while previous headline targets for new minority ethnic and disabled entrants to the civil service had been ended early. According to the report, February’s strategy states that the civil service will “use positive action where needed… to ensure the broadest range of diversity is achieved”, but does not do enough to explain what that means in practice, making it hard for decision-makers to be held to account. “The new strategy sets out just two clear targets for workforce diversity: ensuring 50% of senior civil servants are based outside London by 2030, and recruiting 1,000 prison leavers by the end of 2023,” the report says.