# Whitehall’s £27 million diversity spend faces scrutiny amid calls for civil service cuts



A recent audit revealing that Whitehall allocated £27 million to diversity initiatives in a single year has sparked outraged discussions regarding the misplaced priorities of the UK civil service. The Civil Service Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Expenditure Review uncovered that the 380 staff members devoted to EDI roles across various government departments have collectively cost the taxpayer £20 million in salaries. Such a substantial financial commitment raises critical questions about the value of such spending, especially with essential public services like healthcare in dire need of funds.

This audit, the first comprehensive assessment of its kind, was conducted by the Cabinet Office, yet it starkly illustrates the government’s inclination towards excessive bureaucratic measures. An additional £7.1 million was squandered on EDI-related activities, including dubious training sessions and partnerships with organisations like Stonewall. Despite the purported goal of improving representation, it appears a growing number of civil servants are dedicating as much as half their working hours to these networks—time that could be far better spent on their core responsibilities.

This release comes at a time when the Labour government aims to cut the civil service workforce by 10%, amounting to roughly 50,000 jobs. Right-leaning think tanks have been calling for further reductions, suggesting a drastic trim of up to 80,000 roles overall, especially in HR and senior policy capacities. Former civil service executives have voiced concerns about bureaucratic bloat, urging a fundamental reevaluation of efficiency that transcends ideological preferences regarding the size of government.

While recent statistics indicate the overall gender pay gap within the civil service has decreased, alarming rises in specific departments, particularly the Department of Health and Social Care, expose ongoing inequalities. This inconsistency underscores a failure to address core issues, with the average civil service pay gap still lingering above the national average. As the new Labour administration attempts to tackle these disparities and enhance operational efficiency, it's evident that accountability remains crucial—yet there’s a suspicious lack of substantive action.

The discourse around EDI expenditures is only muddied by findings from the Inclusion at Work Panel, which exposed the lack of evidence underpinning many civil service initiatives. The Cabinet Office’s recent directive mandating ministerial approval for any external EDI spending is a token gesture at best. Calls for reform are increasingly urgent, urging that diversity strategies must set clear targets and actionable plans, rather than vague commitments that fail to translate into real-world impact.

As public scrutiny intensifies over the role of diversity initiatives within the civil service, the ongoing review of EDI spending presents a critical opportunity to reassess the focus on inclusion against the pressing need for accountability and financial responsibility in public service operations. The current administration must not shy away from making tough choices that prioritise the needs of all citizens over failed ideological commitments.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## 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 UK government conducted a review of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) expenditure across 95 civil service organisations for the 2022-23 financial year, revealing a total spend of £27.1 million. The review found that this level of spending did not represent value for money. The Inclusion at Work Panel's report from March 2024 highlighted that many employers are implementing EDI initiatives without an evidence base and are unaware of their impact. In response, the Cabinet Office published the 'Civil Service EDI Expenditure Guidance', which includes an end to all external spending on EDI activity unless authorised by Ministers. Additionally, centralised EDI guidance for departments and arm’s length bodies will be provided, and EDI learning will be regulated through the civil service learning framework unless authorised by Ministers through the spend control.
4. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/12/11/one-million-civil-service-days-year-wasted-equality-diversity/> - A report by Conservative Way Forward, a Tory think tank, found that one million civil service days are wasted annually on equality and diversity training, costing taxpayers an estimated £150 million each year. The report highlights specific instances, such as 24 days spent by the Intellectual Property Office on the 'respect at work board game' and nearly 1,500 staff days spent by the London Fire Brigade on equality training. The research indicates that public sector organisations employ 10,000 staff members focused on equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI), with an average annual salary of £42,000, compared to the average nurse’s salary of £34,000. The report suggests that despite the highest tax burden since World War II, millions of pounds are being spent on 'damaging and politically motivated activities'. The findings are 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.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-to-civil-service-expansion-and-review-of-equality-and-diversity-spending-announced-in-productivity-drive> - On 2 October 2023, the Chancellor announced an immediate cap on civil servant headcount across Whitehall to halt further expansion, increase efficiencies, and boost productivity. The Civil Service workforce had grown year on year since 2016, with a headcount of approximately 488,000 as of June 2023. The cap aims to save up to £1 billion by March 2025 compared to the current trajectory. The government also plans to review equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) spending in the Civil Service to ensure it represents value for money for taxpayers. This includes writing to over 100 organisations in the Civil Service to confirm how many staff work on EDI and how that work supports government priorities.
6. <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-service-diversity-strategy-criticised-lack-targets-guidance-disability-gender-race> - The Institute for Government (IfG) has criticised the latest civil service diversity and inclusion strategy for lacking specific targets and guidance to improve representation of ethnicity, disability, and gender. The strategy's broad approach has left departments without clear objectives and success criteria. Previous headline targets for minority ethnic and disabled entrants to the civil service were ended early. The IfG report highlights that the new strategy sets out just two clear targets: ensuring 50% of senior civil servants are based outside London by 2030 and recruiting 1,000 prison leavers by the end of 2023. The IfG calls for the Cabinet Office to explicitly set out departments’ roles in developing practical plans and targets within the framework of the new D&I strategy and to recognise where work still needs to be done on protected characteristics.
7. <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-service-grows-again-and-gets-more-diverse> - The UK civil service has grown for the seventh consecutive year, with 487,665 full-time equivalent officials as of 31 March 2023, up from 478,090 the previous year. This growth occurred amid the highest departures from the civil service since 2011-12, with 46,080 people leaving and 56,760 joining in 2022-23. Diversity indicators have also reached record highs, with 15.8% of civil servants now having a declared disability, up from 14.0% in 2022. The proportion of civil servants from ethnic minority backgrounds has increased to 15.4%, up from 15.0% in 2022. The percentage of civil servants identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other (LGBO) has risen to 6.4%, up from 6.1% in 2022. Women now make up 54.6% of the civil service, a 0.1 percentage point uptick on 2022, with significant increases in representation at senior levels. The median and mean gender pay gaps have also reduced, with the median gender pay gap decreasing from 9.6% in 2022 to 8.5% in 2023.