

Industry insight – Government and public administration

In a nutshell

Government and public administration cover three broad areas:

- central government and the [Civil Service](#);
- regional and devolved government;
- local government.

The main role of government departments and their agencies is to implement government policy and to advise ministers. They are funded by parliament and work with local authorities, non-departmental public bodies, and other government-sponsored organisations.

Although national policy is set by central government, local authorities are responsible for all day-to-day services and local matters. They are funded by government grants, council tax and business rates.

The sector is a popular graduate career choice, traditionally providing a variety of careers and the knowledge that jobs make a real impact on the communities and regions they cover.

The public sector as a whole currently faces widespread cuts, job losses and cost-saving measures. The general aim is to reduce the size of the sector. However, some opportunities still exist for graduate employment, although competition is fierce.

What kind of work can I do?

Within central government and the civil service opportunities include:

- operational delivery, providing services to the public ranging from social security issues and employment to criminal justice services and education;
- policy delivery, focusing on research, analysis and the development of government policy;
- corporate services such as HR, finance and IT;
- programme and project management.

Roles include:

- [Civil Service administrator](#)
- [Civil Service fast streamer](#)
- [Diplomatic Services operational officer](#)
- [Government social research officer](#)
- [Tax inspector](#)

Regional and devolved government offer similar opportunities in accordance with their jurisdiction.

Local government has a direct influence on people's lives. Areas of work covered include:

- offering advice, support and information;
- working in social work or with vulnerable people;
- working in housing, surveying or architecture;
- managing leisure or recreational facilities;
- looking after the local environment;
- drafting policies and overseeing their implementation.

There is a diverse range of jobs available, including:

- [Community development worker](#)
- [Housing manager/officer](#)
- [Local government officer](#)
- [Museum education officer](#)
- [Social worker](#)
- [Tourism officer](#)
- [Trading standards officer](#)
- [Waste management officer](#)

See [Local Government Careers](#) for more options.

What's it like working in this sector?

At the end of 2011, public sector employment accounted for 20.4 per cent of total employment in the UK. There were 5.942 million people employed in the public sector, split as follows:

- local government - 2.683 million;
- central government (including the NHS) - 2.764 million;
- public corporations - 495,000.

Out of this total, 470,000 were employed in the civil service (*Quarterly Public Sector Employment Survey*, Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2011).

The public sector as a whole is currently facing cut backs and job losses. Compared with the same period a year ago, private sector employment has increased by 226,000, while public sector employment has decreased by 270,000. The largest decrease was in local government, followed by the civil service.

In May 2010, the government announced a civil service-wide recruitment freeze. The freeze was extended in 2011 and is subject to on-going review. It has led to lower levels of recruitment than was the case previously and this situation is likely to continue for the next few years. Exemptions include 'frontline' and 'business critical' posts.

In central government, the four largest departments - the [Department for Work and Pensions \(DWP\)](#), [HM Revenue & Customs \(HMRC\)](#), the [Ministry of Justice \(UK\)](#) and the [Ministry of Defence \(MoD\)](#) - employ almost three-quarters of all permanent civil service staff.

Diversity

- Although there are currently more women than men working in the civil service, women are still under-represented at senior civil service level. Women make up the majority of the part-time work force.
- Currently, just over 9% of civil service employees come from an ethnic minority background. However, at senior civil service level, this is only 5%.
- Forty per cent of people working in the public sector in 2011 had a degree or equivalent.
- Latest figures from the [Local Government Association \(LGA\)](#) show that around three quarters of the local government workforce is female, except in shire districts where just over half the workforce is female.
- Around 8% of the local government workforce comes from an ethnic minority background.
- Over 15 % of the local government workforce is Disability Discrimination Act disabled or work-limiting disabled (*Local Government Workforce Demographics 2010*).

Pay and working conditions

- The median gross weekly pay of full-time employees in the public sector was £554 in 2011 (*Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE)*, ONS, 2012).
- The median gross annual salary for civil service employees was £23,760, excluding overtime or one-off bonuses (*Civil Service Statistics*, 2011).
- Starting salaries on the [Civil Service Fast Stream](#) usually range from £25,000 - £27,000 per annum. Once promoted (usually about four or five years) it is possible to earn in excess of £45,000.
- Hours tend to be well regulated and many employers operate flexi-time systems and offer generous holidays. Part-time work, job shares and career breaks are often possible, depending on the nature of the work, providing a good work-life balance.
- Changes to pensions are taking place to public sector pensions and, amongst other changes, employee contributions will increase. The current civil service pension scheme is being reformed with a move to a new career average scheme from April 2015.

Location of jobs

Opportunities exist throughout the UK, and vary by region. London has the largest number of public sector employees followed by the North West, the South East and Scotland. However, Northern Ireland, Wales, the North East and Scotland have the highest proportion of their workforce employed in the public sector. The East of England, the South East, London, the East Midlands, the South West and the West Midlands have the lowest proportion (*Quarterly Public Sector Employment Survey*, ONS, 2011.)

There are opportunities to work in the institutions and agencies of the [European Union \(EU\)](#) as part of the European civil service.

Entry and progression

How do I find a job?

Jobs in the civil service are advertised on the [Civil Service Jobs](#) website.

Some government departments offer their own graduate schemes, including:

- [Defence Engineering and Science Group \(DESG\)](#);
- [HM Revenue & Customs \(HMRC\)](#);
- [HM Treasury](#).

Details on schemes are available on departmental websites. Closing dates can be very early so do your research well in advance.

There is a civil service recruitment freeze currently in place, which is likely to last for some time. There are some exceptions to this freeze, so keep checking for updates.

The civil service runs the [Civil Service Fast Stream](#), a talent management programme for graduates who have the potential to become the future leaders of the civil service. It provides the opportunity to build up a wide range of experience in a short time through a series of placements or postings.

The [Graduate Fast Stream](#) is open to graduates with a minimum 2:2 in any discipline. It is subdivided into four options offering different career opportunities:

- Central Departments;
- Diplomatic Service;
- Houses of Parliament;
- Science and Engineering.

There also five separate Fast Stream schemes designed for specialists:

- Analytical Fast Stream - for economists, statisticians, social researchers and operational researchers;
- HR Fast Stream;
- Technology in Business Fast Stream;
- European Fast Stream - for graduates wanting a career in the EU institutions in Brussels;
- Northern Ireland Fast Stream.

Some posts in the civil service are available only to UK nationals, but most are open to Commonwealth Citizens or European Economic Area (EEA) nationals. See the civil service website for full details on entry requirements.

Government posts may also be advertised in the national press and on the [Jobcentre Plus](#) website.

Regional government

The [Scottish Government](#) advertises jobs in central government (and in the public sector in Scotland) on [s1jobs](#). It also has vacancies on [Work for Scotland](#).

Jobs in the [Welsh Government](#) and the [National Assembly for Wales](#) are advertised on their websites. The Welsh Government also takes part in the civil service Fast Stream.

See the [Northern Ireland Civil Service Recruitment](#) website for government jobs in Northern Ireland.

The regional governments also advertise vacancies in the national and local press and on the [Jobcentre Plus](#) website.

Local government

The [National Graduate Development Programme \(NGDP\)](#) is a graduate management development scheme for local government throughout England and Wales. The two-year programme consists of a series of placements in a local council covering strategy, front-line service and support. Recruitment is on an annual basis and consists of an application form, assessment centre and local authority interview. The programme is open to graduates with (or predicted) a 2:1 in any discipline who are eligible to work in the UK without a permit.

Some local councils run their own graduate scheme. Visit the website of the council you are interested in to explore the options.

Sources of vacancies include:

- [Local Government Jobs](#)
- [Jobcentre Plus](#)
- [jobsgopublic](#)
- Local authorities' own websites and vacancy listings - see the [Directory of Local Councils](#) for a list.
- [myjobscotland](#)
- [Opportunities: The Public Sector Recruitment Weekly sector1](#)
- Relevant professional journals and websites.
- Local, regional and national press, particularly [The Guardian](#) on Wednesdays.

What skills do I need?

Skills required will depend on the specific job in question. However, most jobs require skills in:

- communication and persuasion;
- teamwork;
- analytical and problem solving;
- time management and working to deadlines;
- attention to detail;
- planning and organisation.

When applying for graduate schemes you should also have the ability to:

- make and take responsibility for evidence-based decisions;
- be proactive and act on initiative;
- handle pressure;
- lead and motivate others;
- make an impact;
- motivate yourself and seek out opportunities for personal learning and development.

A flexible and innovative approach to work is also required.

You can develop these skills and attributes through societies and sports activities, as well as through volunteering and placement opportunities.

Where can I find work experience?

Opportunities to undertake work experience are provided by individual government departments. As well as offering placements, some departments also provide one-day visits to get a feel for working in the civil service. Sandwich placements are also available in some departments for undergraduate students and students on some Masters courses. Visit individual departments for details. Work experience and internships in central government are also advertised on [Civil Service Jobs](#).

The civil service also runs the [Civil Service Fast Stream Summer Diversity Internship Programme](#) aimed at talented ethnic minority undergraduates and graduates, and students/graduates from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds. It provides a training work placement lasting six to nine weeks within a range of government departments.

It is possible to obtain work experience in local government through speculative applications and networking. Make sure your CV is well-written and targeted at the department you are interested in working for. Contact the council's human resources department to find out whether they run any work placement/shadowing schemes. It may also be possible to obtain part-time work. See [Local Government Jobs](#) for current opportunities.

Work experience in voluntary organisations or other public sector organisations will also provide you with invaluable skills for a career in government and public administration. Any work experience in a relevant field or with a similar client group will also help, e.g. in an architects' firm if you want to work in a local authority planning office.

Is postgraduate study useful?

- This depends on the job. For more specialised positions, a postgraduate qualification may be a requirement or provide an advantage.
- Membership of a professional body is a requirement for some specialised roles (e.g. surveyor for a local council), and continued membership depends on completing a certain amount of professional training and continuing professional development (CPD). This can include further study.
- Further study is generally supported if it is related to your current role. Some government departments and local authorities offer financial support and/or study leave.

How can my career develop?

In general, central government departments and larger local authorities offer more opportunities for progression within the department due to their size.

Career progression in the civil service takes the form of a grading structure. Promotion is based on merit and is dependent upon how an individual performs in a particular role.

Graduates on the [Civil Service Fast Stream](#) are assigned to a specific government department, where they are based during their time in the Fast Stream. The department is responsible for organising training and development. Responsibility comes quickly in the

form of a mixture of formal training courses and on-the-job learning. Although there is no set time in which a Fast Streamer should gain promotion, typically it takes four years to progress to the next grade. The most senior grades of the civil service consist of 30% ex-fast streamers. See the Fast Stream website for examples of career paths taken by fast streamers.

In local government, career progression depends on the type of job. For example, specialised roles such as surveyor may have a more defined career path than some other career areas. Membership of a relevant professional body is vital for career development in some roles and provides a distinct career path. See [Local Government Careers](#) for details on career prospects for a range of jobs.

Local authorities sometimes advertise positions for internal candidates only, and this trend has increased following cutbacks and the need for staff redeployment. You may have to consider looking for work in a less advanced role within your chosen department with a view to applying for future internal positions.

Typical employers

Big players

Central government includes all administrative departments of government and other central agencies and non-departmental public bodies. It also includes HM Forces, the National Health Service (NHS) and Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service. Within education, Academies are classified to central government.

The departments employing the largest number of staff are:

- [Department for Work and Pensions \(DWP\)](#);
- [HM Revenue & Customs \(HMRC\)](#);
- [Ministry of Justice \(UK\)](#);
- [Ministry of Defence \(MoD\)](#).

Public corporations are companies or quasi-corporations controlled by government. Examples include Royal Mail and London Underground Ltd.

Executive agencies are public institutions that deliver government services. Agencies include:

- [The Highways Agency \(HA\)](#) - executive agency of the Department for Transport (DfT);
- [HM Courts & Tribunals Service](#) - executive agency of the Ministry of Justice;
- [National Offender Management Service \(NOMS\)](#) - executive agency of the Ministry of Justice;
- [UK Border Agency](#) - executive agency of the Home Office.

Recent changes to the structure of the DWP have meant that JobCentre Plus has ceased to have formal executive agency status.

Non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) work independently of, but are accountable to, ministers. They are not staffed by civil servants. There are two main types:

- Executive NDPBs, such as the [Environment Agency \(EA\)](#), carry out executive, administrative, commercial or regulatory functions within a government framework.
- Advisory NDPBs, such as the [Low Pay Commission \(LPC\)](#), are set up by ministers to advise them and their departments on particular issues.

See the [A-Z of Central Government](#) for a list of central government departments, executive agencies and NDPBs.

Regional and devolved government

- The [Welsh Government](#) is the devolved government for Wales, supported by civil servants who work on devolved areas including health, education and the environment. The [National Assembly for Wales](#) is the democratically elected body representing the interests of Wales and its people and holding the Welsh government to account.
- The [Scottish Government](#) is responsible for most of the issues of day-to-day concern to the people of Scotland. These include health, education, justice, rural affairs, housing and transport. The [Scotland Office](#) represents Scottish interests in the UK government.
- The [Northern Ireland Assembly](#) is the devolved legislature for Northern Ireland. Responsibilities include education and environment. The [Northern Ireland Office](#) is responsible for overseeing the devolution settlement and representing interests at UK government level.

Local government

Local government includes types of public administration that only cover a locality and any bodies controlled and mainly financed by them. It includes police forces and their civilian staff. Local education authorities are part of local government, as are voluntary aided schools, county schools and foundation schools. Councils can provide services directly or arrange for others to do so, mainly from the voluntary or private sector.

Most of England is split into two levels of local government: a county council and a district council. County councils cover large areas and provide most public services, whereas district councils cover smaller areas and provide more local services. Most large towns and cities, however, have just one level of local government called unitary authorities, responsible for all local services.

Scotland has a unitary system with one level of local government. Local councils do exist in Northern Ireland, but most services are carried out by other organisations.

Town and parish councils exist in some parts of England (community councils in Wales). They cover small areas and have responsibility for services such as allotments, public toilets, and local halls and community centres.

See the [Directory of Local Councils](#) for a list of local councils. The [Convention of Scottish Local Authorities \(COSLA\)](#) has details of Scottish councils and information on local government in Scotland. See also the [Northern Ireland Local Government Association](#) and [Welsh Local Government Association](#), representing council members in Northern Ireland and Wales respectively.

Self-employment

Self-employment on a consultant basis is possible in certain cases for experienced professionals who possess specialist expertise.

Opportunities abroad

There are opportunities to work in the institutions and agencies of the [European Union \(EU\)](#) as part of the European civil service. Civil servants are divided into two groups:

- Administrators (AD) - involved in drafting policies and implementing EU law, analysing and advising;
- Assistants (AST) - undertake a supporting role (for example, secretarial, administrative, financial, communication, policy development and implementation).

Graduate opportunities are available in areas such as administration, law, finance, economics, communication and science.

Recruitment takes the form of a 'competition'. These are advertised on the [European Personnel Selection Office \(EPSO\)](#) website. The selection procedures involve competency-based assessments.

Key competencies sought include:

- analysis and problem solving;
- communicating;
- delivering quality and results;
- learning and development;
- prioritising and organising;
- resilience;
- working with others.

Candidates must also meet specific requirements relating to qualifications and professional experience.

Candidates need to submit an online application form. Selection involves two stages - for most jobs, this will involve computer-based testing in individual EU countries and an assessment centre in Brussels. Candidates must be a citizen of a Member State of the EU (see [Countries of the European Union](#)) and have thorough knowledge of one of the official languages of the EU and satisfactory knowledge of a second.

Successful candidates are placed on a 'reserve list', a database from which [EU Institutions](#) can select staff. The majority of staff are based in Brussels or Luxembourg, and competition for places is fierce.

Opportunities also exist for young university graduates to join one of the EU trainee programmes, which last three to five months. Trainees have the opportunity to develop their skills and qualities and to enhance their knowledge of the EU. These are offered by The European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, the Court of Justice, the Social and Economic Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Ombudsman. See the individual websites for application and programme details.

For those with experience, opportunities also exist with organisations such as the [United Nations \(UN\)](#) the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) and the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#).

European fast stream

The [European Fast Stream \(EFS\)](#) is targeted at graduates whose aim is to work permanently for one of the EU institutions and become a European civil servant. The EFS provides training and experience to help improve your chances of passing the EU selection process. Limited places are available and candidates must have or be predicted at least a 2:2 degree, as well as French or German to at least A-level (A - C) standard.

Diplomatic Service

Those applying to the [Graduate Fast Stream](#) can choose to apply for the [Diplomatic Service](#). Following two years spent in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's main buildings in Whitehall, you will then go abroad for a three or four year posting, working in one of over 200 embassies, high commissions or consulates.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

The [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) is the government department responsible for promoting British interests overseas and supporting British citizens and businesses around the world. The FCO has a global network of offices in over 170 countries. Local offices recruit both generalist (e.g. administrative and policy posts) and specialist staff (e.g. economists or legal advisers).

Department for International Development (DFID)

The [Department for International Development \(DFID\)](#) is part of the UK government managing Britain's aid to poorer countries and working to eradicate extreme poverty. As well as headquarters in London and East Kilbride, DFID has offices in around 27 countries across Africa and Asia and provides aid to around 90 countries. Career areas include health, social development and education advisers. General UK-based vacancies may lead to overseas opportunities.

Will my qualifications be recognised?

UK qualifications are recognised, although specific requirements will vary according to the position advertised.

Future trends

The public sector faces a challenging time as the government attempts to reduce the UK budgetary deficit. Government and public administration employment is likely to change considerably over the next few years.

Shrinking of the public sector

The [Office for Budget Responsibility](#) has estimated that over 700,000 central and local government jobs will be lost in the public sector by the end of the current parliament (2010 - 2015), and 880,000 by 2017. This equates to more than one in seven public sector jobs, and means that in the future the public sector will account for one in six jobs in the UK economy (down from one in five before the recession). Job cuts have been particularly severe in local government and the civil service. This may result in fewer opportunities in some government roles and increased competition for jobs. Current service functions may also change or merge with others, and staff may need to adopt more flexible roles.

Graduates should look carefully at what opportunities still exist. Jobs within a similar field, or work with a similar client group, will allow you to gain experience and increase your chances of securing a job. Many public sector roles are changing and will require multi-skilled staff able to meet the wider demands of the department, not just the specific job.

Regional public sector pay

The government is looking to end national pay rates for some public sector jobs when the current pay freeze ends. Its aim is to bring pay into line with regional private sector salaries, creating different pay rates for staff around the country. This would give government departments the option to move to regional pay structures for civil servants. This is likely to mean that public sector workers will have their pay frozen in many parts of the country.

Privatisation of public sector jobs

Some roles within the public sector are being outsourced to the private sector and in the future there is likely to be an increase in service provision from other agencies in the voluntary and private sector. This is likely to have an impact on the number and type of jobs available in central and local government.

Big Society

The [Big Society](#) aims to put power in the hands of local people by transferring it from Whitehall to local communities. The Office for Civil Society, which is part of the Cabinet Office, is working across government departments in England to turn this concept into practical policies.

The Big Society agenda covers three main areas:

- **Community empowerment:** allowing local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their community;
- **Opening up public services:** enabling charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to provide services;
- **Social action:** encouraging people to play a more active part in society through a number of initiatives.

As part of this aim, the [Big Society Network](#) supports charities, social entrepreneurs and businesses to deliver social impact.

The roll out of the Big Society will impact on the public sector and is likely to change the relationship between government and the communities it serves.

Jargon buster

- **BIS** - Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
- **COSLA** - Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is the representative voice of Scottish local government and also acts as the employers' association on behalf of all Scottish councils.
- **DECC** - Department of Energy and Climate Change.
- **DESG** - Defence Engineering and Science Group. A community of professional engineers and scientists who work within the MoD civil service to equip and support the UK Armed Forces.
- **Defra** - Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
- **DFID** - Department for International Development.
- **DH** - Department of Health.
- **DWP** - Department for Work and Pensions.
- **EPSO** - European Personnel Selection Office. First point of contact for anyone wanting to work in the European Union (EU).
- **EU** - European Union. An economic and political partnership between 27 European countries. See [Countries of the European Union](#) for a full list of member states.
- **Fast Stream** - the civil service's accelerated training and development programme.
- **FCO** - Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Government department responsible for promoting British interests overseas.
- **GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters)** - intelligence and security organisation that works closely with the UK's other intelligence agencies.
- **Government executive agencies** - public institutions that deliver government services.
- **Government departments** - these are usually headed by a minister and they are responsible for devising policies and ensuring that they are implemented.
- **HA** - Highways Agency. Executive agency of the Department for Transport (DfT), responsible for operating, maintaining and improving the strategic road network in England.
- **HMRC** - HM Revenue & Customs.
- **IMF** - International Monetary Fund. Organisation of 187 countries, working to secure financial stability and economic growth.
- **LGA** - Local Government Association. Represents council members in England and Wales.
- **MoD** - Ministry of Defence.
- **National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP)** - a two-year national graduate development programme for local government, covering England and Wales.
- **NDPBs (advisory)** - advisory non-departmental public body. Set up by ministers to advise them and their departments on particular issues.
- **NDPB (executive)** - executive non-departmental public body. Carries out executive, administrative, commercial or regulatory functions within a government framework.
- **Single-tier local government** - a single local authority (unitary authority, metropolitan council, or London borough council) responsible for providing all services for an area. Some areas in England follow this system and all areas in Scotland and Wales are governed this way.
- **Two-tier local government** - local service provision is divided between a county council and a district council. The former providing county-wide services, e.g. education, and the latter providing more localised services, e.g. recycling collection.
- **UKBA** - UK Border Agency. An agency of the Home Office and one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the UK.

- **UN** - United Nations. An international organisation committed to maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights.
- **WHO** - World Health Organisation. The directing and coordinating authority for health within the UN system.

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