

Reforming the culture

Katherine Hutchinson and Tommy Newell report from the key speeches at this year's FDA Annual Delegate Conference.



“We believe that what we do will do good in the lives of others”

Former First Minister of Wales Mark Drakeford emphasised the importance of a “sense of public service” to motivate good government. Drakeford told conference:

“The people who work in our public services, including the civil service, are motivated because we believe that what we do, will do good in the lives of others... You can’t bottle that, and you can’t reduce it to a set of key performance indicators or targets... but if you neglect it, or if you devalue it then in my view we will have sacrificed the key thing that lies at the heart of what makes our public services the huge force for good that we know they can be.”

Drakeford gave the Welsh Government putting social partnership arrangements on a statutory footing as an example of good government, facilitating common ground between government, trade unions and private sector employers to deliver for the public. The former First Minister

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emphasised the importance of unions having a guaranteed place at the table, citing the Welsh Government’s Wellbeing of Future Generations Act which requires ministers to consider the impact their decisions have on future generations. One of the indicators used in these assessments is whether a decision positively impacts the number of people who belong to a trade union.

The former First Minister discussed current issues such as conflicts over hybrid working arrangements in the civil service, saying that in Welsh government it was recognised that “remote working is one of the few positive things that we learned to

do during the COVID pandemic”, a position which had been consolidated through the social partnership arrangement.

Drakeford highlighted the low staff turnover rates in the Welsh civil service, which he says provides the stability needed to increase institutional memory and create a learning culture for staff to develop their expertise, in turn making long-term planning and projects more viable. He criticised “arbitrary targets” that he sees being applied by ministers in the central UK government at a time when demands on civil servants are growing.

Looking to the future, Drakeford was optimistic, saying he hoped a new government post-General Election would bring a “badly needed reset” of a number of relationships, including between UK government and their civil servants, and the UK government and devolved governments.

The former First Minister said that the last 25 years of devolved governance in Scotland and Wales has been broadly successful, and that the Welsh civil service has remained a member of the UK home civil service out of “choice, not obligation”, with the positives continuing to outweigh the negatives. This is, however, despite the instability over the past five years, a period in government which he described as an “aberration”.

Drakeford sees diversity as the key to shaping a strong civil service for the future, and that “challenging hierarchies” is needed to facilitate this. He argued that the biggest challenge to this “lies in reforming the culture that we inherit”, in which there have been failures to see the value in “different types of experiences”.



“The civil service should be smaller, better paid and more skilled”

Delegates were also joined by Civil Service Chief Operating Officer Cat Little, who was appointed to the role in February this year.

In her speech, she stressed that the civil service’s “relationship with unions matters more than ever”, telling FDA members that “we have an exciting opportunity to make bold changes”.

Little tackled the issue of pay, acknowledging that “in the very very short term it is going to be particularly challenging”, but offered some insight into what she thought the future could hold: “I think the civil service should be smaller, better paid and more skilled... There are reasons to be cheerful and optimistic. I really do believe there’s an opportunity to set out our strategy... we need to look broadly and boldly.”

The Chief Operating Officer was also “realistic” about civil service morale, saying it “is very mixed” at the moment.

“You only need to talk to civil servants who say ‘I’ve been through quite a lot but I’m still proud’,” she said. “To be proud of the civil service

you’ve got to be confident in what we’re achieving. We’re quite humble and not ones to shout about our achievements. I’m encouraging, with my ministers, to say something positive about what we’ve achieved - in our weekly meetings we start with [this].”

When asked a question from the audience regarding public attacks on civil servants, she said that “it isn’t pleasant to read and when you don’t have a voice” but encouraged fellow civil servants “to focus on the truth and the facts”.

“The civil service is delivering very difficult things time and time again,” she added. “We all thrive on delivering complex things and delivering for the British people and the government. We’ve done it during some of the biggest challenges that have been faced and I’m incredibly confident that we’ll continue to do so in the future.”

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Photo credit: Graham Martin

"No more trashing the brand"

FDA General Secretary Dave Penman criticised the Conservative government's "top down, evidence-free micromanagement" of the civil service.

Addressing ministerial attacks from the then-UK government on the civil service, Penman held up the front page of a recent edition of the Evening Standard with the headline "Why are civil servants so lazy?". This headline resulted from an opinion piece offered to the paper by then-Minister for the Cabinet Office John Glen. "What message does that send to civil servants working on average an extra day a week in unpaid overtime?," the General Secretary asked delegates.

Penman called on the government post-General Election to "give the civil service the stability it craves. Clear objectives with the right resources and, crucially, the freedom to manage them. Fair reward to recruit, retain and motivate committed public servants. Then rightly, hold the civil service to account for the outcomes it committed to delivering – but no more micromanaging and no more trashing the brand".

To highlight the instability of recent years he pointed out that "in under a

decade we've had an entire football team of Ministers for the Cabinet Office who could, of course, have played the 11 Secretaries of State for education from the same period".

In Sir Keir Starmer's first week as Prime Minister, he recorded a video message to civil servants stating: "You have my confidence, my support and importantly, my respect" and said his government would provide "a different way of working: one of openness, of collaboration and transparency in everything we do".

While Penman said Sir Keir's "warm words" were "welcome and reassuring", he added that the government has "big challenges to overcome, on public sector pay and ensuring ministers are held to a high standard".

On the FDA's judicial review of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and

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Immigration) Act 2024, Penman stated that "we have no choice but to ask the courts for clarity... when members in the Home Office ask us if they're being asked to break the Civil Service Code, they deserve an answer."

He explained to delegates: "You don't work in the Home Office and not realise that's the day job, regardless of the political persuasion of the government. But they rightly expect to know, without a shadow of doubt, whether they're being asked to break the Civil Service Code. Ambiguity is not acceptable and so our action is to bring clarity for those members."

Penman continued: "It is not, as is being painted by some, a political act... It is not a choice we welcome, but we will not walk away from our members."

The General Secretary reiterated this after receiving of the outcome of the judicial review in July, which was denied. While acknowledging that this was "of course disappointing", he added that "no government should ever put the civil service in this position. We are grateful to the court for bringing clarity... as well as establishing the principles around breaches of international law and civil servants' obligations to uphold it."



“Modern, pragmatic, politically independent but fearless”

National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) General Secretary Paul Whiteman spoke to FDA members following the close of business at this year’s ADC.

“The NAHT and the FDA have much in common. Both leadership unions, both modern, pragmatic, politically independent but fearless,” he opened.

Whiteman “wholeheartedly” commended the FDA for submitting its application for judicial review relating to the relationship of the Civil Service Code with the UK government’s Safety of Rwanda Act, telling delegates that the collective power of the union “should mean that no government will have the confidence to compel civil servants to break the Civil Service Code”.

Turning his attention to then-Education Secretary Gillian Keegan, he added that “no Secretary of State should ever have the confidence to suggest to an audience of public servants that they should punch another public servant if they are unhappy with them”.

This was in reference to comments made by Keegan at the ASCL conference in March this year, in which she said that she “would probably have punched” Ofsted inspectors involved in a school inspection.

“Suggestions of violence in that context, even if intended as humorous, have no place in the public discourse,” Whiteman added. “That remark

demeaned the office of the Secretary of State, but more worryingly exposed an attitude towards public servants that we must not tolerate.”

Arguing for a more collaborative approach, the NAHT leader said “it is our duty to make the case that the inspection debate should not be polarised”.

“Our starting point has to be that all agree inspection is necessary, that it is carried out by hard working public servants,” he explained. “Those on the receiving end are hardworking public servants too who want to continuously improve schools. So, united around that premise, we have to agree that no public servant should be vilified for undertaking their tasks, but that no public servant should be harmed in the discharge of those duties.”

He posed two questions to FDA delegates: “How do we, the FDA and the NAHT, work together to achieve a settlement for the inspector and inspected that is worthy of our members? How do we make sure that government stands up to its duty to support inspection, so as to avoid harm and recrimination?”

Finishing on a positive vision for the future of school inspections, he encouraged the FDA to “work together to grow the number of interested members across our unions” so that, through our communities, we can “achieve an understanding of what is needed and what is possible”.



What is the Annual Delegate Conference and how can I take part next year?

The Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) is a yearly event that gives our members a unique opportunity to discuss and vote on policies for the union.

Policies agreed by the ADC determine the work of the FDA for the following year, giving delegates a direct influence on the priorities of the union and how it can improve the working lives of members. The conference is also accompanied by a week of webinars and sessions for members.

In addition to shaping union policy, the ADC is also a great opportunity to network with other members of the FDA as well as being able to hear from - and question - expert speakers.

Guest speakers in recent years have ranged from First Civil Service Commissioner Gisela Stuart, Guardian Political Editor Pippa Crerar and The Times’ Matt Chorley, all of whom have also taken part in lively discussions with attendees.

Delegates are selected to attend the ADC through their FDA branch, so if you’re interested in attending you should speak to your local Branch Secretary or Convenor for more information.