

National policy and government

Working in national policy and government offers variety, new challenges, and opportunities to do something that has a big impact on the public. This page concentrates on the sector in the UK, but much of the advice can be extended to careers across the world.

A career in this sector appeals to those interested in making a social or legislative impact in their home country – working for a political party or think tank or becoming a civil servant at local or national level.

There are currently almost half a million people in the UK Civil Service, working in 250+ departments, services, agencies. Local government is an even bigger employer in the UK, with 1.2 million staff in over 350 local authorities.

Civil servants are officially apolitical, informing and implementing policies of elected representatives. Graduates may also work directly for elected representatives as advisers, researchers and assistants, which can be an effective route into a political career. You could even stand for election as a councillor or MP.

Think tanks are more concerned with policy than politics, but are sometimes aligned with a particular position on the political spectrum. They seek to influence public policy and debate through their research, the media, and via direct contact with politicians and organisations. For more about think tanks see the 'International Policy and Development' section in this Guide.



Getting in and entry points

The Civil Service primarily recruits graduates through its 'Fast Stream' – in fact 15 'streams' ranging from Policy, Houses of Parliament, Science and Engineering, to Analytics, or Project Management and the Government Economic Service. The deadline for this falls in early Michaelmas term.

Fast Streamers usually gain experience in more than one government department and in more than one part of the UK and can have opportunities for secondment into the private sector, charities, and other public sector organisations.

Some departments and agencies also run separate direct recruitment schemes, including the Economic Service, Government Legal Profession, HM Treasury, the FCA, ONS, Security Services and GCHQ. Also look out for graduate programmes offered by the Bank of England, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), OfGEM and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl).

Individual, graduate-level vacancies in departments will be advertised on the Civil Service website as they arise. Other routes include temping and short-term project roles.

Internships are not generally offered, apart from the Summer Internship Programme (deadline in October) and Early Internship Programme. Some specialist programmes also advertise internships from January to March. For example, Government Economic Service, Communications, and Operational Research.

In local councils, the Local Government Association runs a two-year graduate scheme: The National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP). This programme aims to provide local government

with high calibre managers, training graduates through a series of placements within councils. Participants can gain experience in policy and strategy, customer-facing roles, and finance and operational positions. Since 2002, over 1,000 graduates have completed the programme, and many now hold influential managerial and policy roles. Direct entry positions can be found on council websites.

The website www.w4MP.org is the primary jobs board for positions working with MPs, political parties and campaigning organisations. There are also internships, and speculative applications can also work, but many are London-based and may be unpaid.

Extra-curricular ideas

- Stand for your JCR/MCR committee or the Oxford SU executive – or get involved in Oxford SU's campaigns.
- Enter debate competitions in societies or the Oxford Union to sharpen your communication skills.
- Get involved with your local political party or student society branches and politics-related student societies.
- Join [The Oxford Strategy Challenge \(TOSCA\)](#): Oxford City Council is a frequent client.
- Get involved with student societies and volunteering through OxHub.

Next steps

www.careers.ox.ac.uk/government-public-services

www.careers.ox.ac.uk/think-tanks



Alumni profile

Estelle Hlustik-Smith

What: I am based in Cambridgeshire County Council on the NGDP for Local Government: a two-year scheme with different placements every six months within your council. Alongside gaining practical experience, with graduates from councils across the country, you work towards a Level Seven qualification in Leadership and Management. I have completed placements across Adult Social Care, Central Policy Teams and Waste Management. Through varied projects I have developed a range of skills, including strategy creation, project management, behavioural change and community engagement.

Why: Approaching the end of my degree, I was still unsure what I wanted to focus my career on, but I knew that I wanted to be making a positive impact. Local government has broad responsibilities from leading renewable energy projects to supporting refugee arrivals, so I knew I could keep my options open. The NGDP at Cambridgeshire County Council allows graduates to have a lot of influence on where their placements are based, which enabled me to explore different career directions. From this, I have developed an interest working in waste management, creating services which support our residents to get the most out of the planet's limited resources. I know I am not really helping the stereotype, but I promise that councils do more than bins! I have been given responsibility to lead on projects, developing the skills and experience to accelerate my career in the public sector. I have secured a new role where I will be helping to translate the ambitious national policy changes for the waste sector into reality at the local context.

Tips/advice: You select your preferred council in the NGDP application process. Recognise that not all councils are the same, each have diverse residents, different responsibilities, priorities, cultures, challenges, opportunities and ways of organising the NGDP scheme. Understanding this will help you to excel in the final interview and help ensure you make a decision aligned with what is important to you.



Position

National Graduate Development Programme, Cambridgeshire County Council.

Background

BA Geography, St Anne's College, 2021.

Alumni profile

Imogen Resnick

What: My team designs policy, develops campaigns, and funds relevant services across London to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls; I lead a range of portfolios including stalking, women's public safety, and harmful practices against women such as female genital mutilation. It's challenging and rewarding work that makes a big impact across London – it's a really exciting time to work in the public sector.

How: After graduating from Oxford I entered local government on the National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP), which was brilliant for developing professional skills in a structured, supportive environment. On the NGDP, I rotated across different council departments and placements, working with politicians, senior leaders, and citizens. I saw how varied the work of local government is as well as the challenges people face in their lives and how government can help (or hinder!).

Experience and skills: Horizon scanning is a key skill – always being on the look-out for emerging trends, campaigns or developments in legislation that could impact your policy area. Strong communication skills are essential – writing reports and briefings concisely, delivering persuasive presentations, and knowing how to adapt for different audiences. Technical abilities like data analysis are useful, but it's the 'soft skills' like influencing, collaboration, and project management that get you in the door and help build a long-lasting career.

Top tips: Help yourself by building up your CV with as much life experience as possible. Try and gain as many transferable skills as you can through work experience, volunteering, or getting involved in a university society. Also, figure out what your skills are, what you need to improve, your values, interests and – importantly – what you're not interested in. I undertook an invaluable leadership course which helped me reflect on what factors motivate me in a career; Oxford has a wealth of similar opportunities.



Position

Policy and Commissioning Manager, London Mayor's Office.

Background

MSc Modern Middle Eastern Studies, St Antony's College, 2019.

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