Competency Frameworks for Career Development in Government

Enabling portable skills, purposeful careers and stronger capability across departments

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The central conclusion

Government should treat every department as both a developer and a beneficiary of public service talent. Competency frameworks make this possible by giving individuals ownership of their growth, helping line managers hold better conversations and allowing capability to move without becoming invisible.

This paper is for	It will help them
Civil Service and departmental leaders	Build capability while supporting healthy movement across government
Profession, workforce and talent leaders	Create portable career pathways and evidence-based talent decisions
Line managers	Structure practical development conversations and follow through
Civil servants	Understand strengths, choose goals and build evidence for future roles

Executive summary

A career development system should do more than advertise vacancies or provide a catalogue of courses. It should help people understand what they can do now, what future roles require, which experiences will close the gap and how their capability can contribute across organisational boundaries. A well-designed competency framework supplies the common language for that system.

This matters particularly in government. People move between roles, departments, professions and locations, while departments must retain enough expertise and institutional memory to deliver. The Civil Service People Plan describes a collective vision for career pathways and stronger management capability.[1] Competency frameworks convert that ambition into repeatable practice.

The recommended approach has five parts:

1. Define role and career expectations through transparent technical and behavioural competencies.
2. Give individuals access to their own capability evidence and responsibility for meaningful development choices.
3. Equip line managers to hold structured conversations that connect aspiration, evidence, opportunity and delivery need.
4. Recognise skills across departmental and professional boundaries so movement strengthens government capability.
5. Measure whether development leads to stronger evidence, broader experience, internal mobility, retention and workforce resilience.

A concise definition

A career development competency framework is a structured description of the knowledge, skills, behaviours and experience required in current and future roles, supported by proficiency levels and evidence expectations that enable reflection, conversation, development and movement.

The policy choice

A department can treat talent as	Or it can treat talent as
A resource to retain at all costs	A capability to develop, use and circulate responsibly
A list of high-potential individuals	The potential and evidence of the whole workforce
A local asset visible only in one system	Portable capability that benefits departments and government
A succession discussion held behind closed doors	A transparent development dialogue with individual agency

Why career development needs a competency framework

Career development often fails at the point where aspiration must become action. An employee may want to progress, and a manager may want to help, but neither has a shared definition of the destination or a reliable way to identify the most valuable next experience. Generic objectives such as build confidence or develop leadership rarely solve this problem.

Without a framework	With a framework
Career advice depends heavily on the manager	The employee and manager use the same role and proficiency expectations
Learning is selected by interest or availability	Development is chosen against an evidenced capability gap or aspiration
Existing strengths are hard to articulate	Strengths are described through recognised competencies and evidence
Movement can erase context and development history	Portable profiles preserve relevant capability and agreed goals
Talent decisions rely on visibility and reputation	Decisions can draw on broader structured evidence
Departments cannot see the return on development	Actions and capability change can be followed over time

Frameworks create career line of sight

A useful framework connects four questions: What does my current role require? What can I demonstrate? What future options are available? What development will make the greatest difference? Career frameworks published by UK government professions already use this logic. The HR Career Framework, for example, supports people to map skills and interests, set goals and identify professional development opportunities.[2]

Competence is broader than course completion

Development includes learning, but competence is demonstrated in practice. Stretch assignments, coaching, mentoring, shadowing, project work, communities of practice, professional accreditation and formal learning can all contribute. The framework should help the individual choose the right mechanism and later capture evidence of changed capability.

Time in role, movement and continuity

There is no single reliable average time in post for the whole Civil Service. In June 2026 the government confirmed that average time in post for grades below the Senior Civil Service is not held centrally.[3] That limitation is important: departments should avoid using an unsupported universal tenure figure when designing career policy.

Available evidence nevertheless shows that movement is material. Institute for Government analysis has repeatedly highlighted rapid movement, particularly at senior levels, and the cost of excessive churn to expertise, productivity and institutional memory.[4][5] Movement between departments can also broaden experience and transfer useful capability. The goal should not be to prevent movement, but to distinguish healthy mobility from avoidable churn and manage both with better evidence.

The career development response

Workforce reality	Framework response
People may leave a role before long-term development is complete	Use smaller evidence-based development goals that remain portable
A new manager may inherit little context	Preserve the role profile, evidence, discussion and agreed actions
A department may invest in someone who later moves	Recognise that it may later receive developed talent from elsewhere
Frequent movement can weaken specialist depth	Show technical depth pathways alongside promotion and generalist routes
People move for pay, grade, exposure or opportunity	Make lateral growth and capability building visible and valued
Incoming staff use different language for similar skills	Map local roles to common profession and cross-government standards

Do not confuse tenure with capability

Time served can create opportunities to learn but does not itself prove competence. Equally, a recent arrival may bring strong transferable capability that a department does not yet recognise. Career development should use evidence, context and proficiency expectations rather than tenure as a proxy.

Government as a talent ecosystem

Civil servants work for individual departments, but their skills also contribute to the capability of government as a whole. The People Plan commitment to career pathways, secondments and workforce flow reflects this wider system.[1] Government professions provide another cross-organisational layer: current guidance states that every civil servant should be a member of at least one government profession.[6]

The talent enabler principle

A talent enabler develops people for useful work, even when the next opportunity may sit elsewhere. This does not mean accepting unmanaged loss. It means creating enough transparency to balance individual ambition, departmental delivery and government-wide capability.

Level	Talent enabler responsibility
Government	Set common language, interoperability and fair principles for mobility and development
Profession	Define credible pathways, standards, learning and communities across departments
Department	Develop capability, plan succession and release or attract talent responsibly
Business unit	Create experiences, mentoring and deployment opportunities tied to delivery
Line manager	Recognise strengths, challenge evidence, open networks and support agreed movement
Individual	Own reflection, evidence, goals, action and honest career choices

A reciprocal model

Departments should expect talent to enter and leave. The fair test is not whether every developed person stays, but whether the department creates more capability than it consumes, captures critical knowledge, fills roles faster and remains attractive to capable people. A reputation for developing and releasing talent can improve recruitment, engagement and access to cross-government networks.

Benefits when talent enters a department

Incoming employees bring capability, but departments often recognise only their previous job title, grade or qualification. A common competency language makes the transfer more precise and reduces the time needed to understand what the person can contribute.

Benefit	How the framework enables it
Faster onboarding	Compare prior evidence with the new role profile and focus induction on genuine gaps
Better deployment	Match demonstrated strengths to work rather than relying only on the recruited post
Recognition of transferable skills	Map equivalent competencies across professions, departments and sectors
Targeted development	Avoid repeating learning already evidenced and prioritise contextual knowledge
Stronger workforce intelligence	Update the departmental capability picture as people arrive
Inclusion	Give entrants a transparent way to demonstrate capability beyond informal networks

The first development conversation

Within the first weeks, the manager and employee should review the role profile, discuss previous evidence, identify context-specific gaps and agree how capability will be demonstrated in the new environment. This makes onboarding an evidence and deployment process, not only an administrative induction.

Avoid the blank-slate problem

A person should not have to rebuild their professional identity each time they move. Portable records should retain competency titles, proficiency definitions, dates, evidence summaries, qualifications and development history, while allowing the receiving department to apply its own role context and assurance requirements.

Benefits when talent leaves a department

Departures create immediate cost and risk, but they can also generate value through alumni networks, cross-government relationships and the later return of more experienced people. A competency-based approach helps the department protect continuity without obstructing careers.

Department need	Practical response
Protect critical delivery	Identify capability concentration and succession risk before notice is given
Transfer knowledge	Link handover to the competencies, decisions, relationships and evidence the role requires
Create successors	Use team profiles to identify ready-now and development candidates
Learn from movement	Record whether the person moved for growth, pay, management, profession or location
Maintain relationships	Invite leavers into relevant professional and alumni communities where appropriate
Improve attraction	Publish credible examples of people whose careers were developed by the department

Development is not lost when a person moves

A narrow departmental view treats investment as wasted if the employee leaves. A government-wide view recognises continuing public value when capability moves to another department or arm's length body. Even where a person leaves public service, the department retains improved delivery during their tenure, stronger colleagues and evidence about which development works. It may also gain future applicants, partners or returners.

Manage the genuine risks

- Identify roles where movement would create unsafe or unacceptable capability gaps.
- Use succession and knowledge transfer plans for scarce or highly contextual expertise.
- Address avoidable causes of departure rather than restricting development or mobility.
- Do not use competency data to label ambitious employees as retention risks.
- Track net capability flow across critical areas, not simply headcount gained and lost.

Empowered individuals

Empowerment requires more than access to a learning catalogue. Individuals need understandable standards, visibility of possible roles, control of their evidence and a practical route from reflection to action. The framework should support agency without shifting all responsibility for opportunity onto the employee.

The individual career cycle

Stage	Individual action	Organisational support
Understand	Review current role, future options and proficiency expectations	Provide clear profiles, pathways and examples
Evidence	Record relevant examples, outcomes, feedback and qualifications	Accept proportionate evidence and reduce duplicate entry
Reflect	Identify strengths, interests, gaps and constraints	Provide prompts, accessibility and time
Discuss	Share aspirations and challenge assumptions with the manager	Create psychologically safe structured conversations
Act	Choose a small number of meaningful goals and actions	Provide experiences, learning, networks and resources
Review	Update evidence and decide what to continue, change or stop	Recognise progress and refresh opportunities

Choice with realism

A framework should expand informed choice, not imply that every aspiration can be met immediately. Development conversations need to address readiness, opportunity, location, working patterns, competition and organisational need. The individual should leave with clarity about what they can influence and what depends on wider conditions.

Equity and visibility

Transparent pathways and evidence criteria can reduce dependence on sponsorship and informal knowledge. They do not remove bias automatically. Departments should examine whether different groups receive comparable feedback, development actions, stretch opportunities, manager support and progression after similar capability evidence.

Structured development conversations

The quality of the conversation determines whether the framework becomes useful or bureaucratic. Government guidance for the Operational Delivery Profession explicitly links skills frameworks to personal development conversations, team development and career planning.[7][8] The Civil Service Line Management Standards also place clear expectations on managers to develop people, communicate well and create the conditions for performance.[9]

A six-part conversation

Step	Core question	Useful output
1 Purpose	What matters to you and what does the team need?	A shared reason for the discussion
2 Evidence	What can you demonstrate and how current is the evidence?	Agreed strengths and confidence level
3 Direction	Which future roles, experiences or deeper expertise interest you?	One or two realistic career hypotheses
4 Gap	What is the most important difference between now and the destination?	Prioritised competency or experience gaps
5 Action	What work, learning, relationship or exposure will close the gap?	Owned actions, support and dates
6 Review	What evidence will show progress and when will we revisit it?	Measures and a review point

Separate three kinds of discussion

Conversation	Primary focus	Risk if confused
Performance	Delivery and behaviour in the current period	Development becomes a judgement on past performance only
Development	Growth in capability and experience	Honest gaps feel unsafe if directly tied to reward
Career	Direction, options, readiness and opportunity	Aspiration is treated as a promise or succession decision

The line manager role

Managers are not expected to know every career route or provide every opportunity. Their role is to help the person interpret evidence, connect development to work, challenge narrow assumptions and open access to people and opportunities. The Civil Service People Plan identifies stronger line management as an important enabler of capability and employee experience.[1]

What good managers do

- Prepare by reviewing the role profile, previous actions and relevant evidence.
- Ask about strengths, interests and constraints before proposing a solution.
- Distinguish an observed capability gap from personal style preference.
- Create development through real work as well as formal learning.
- Use their network to find mentors, projects, shadowing and cross-team opportunities.
- Record specific commitments and revisit them at the agreed time.
- Support appropriate movement even when it creates a local resourcing challenge.
- Escalate systemic barriers rather than repeatedly asking the individual to work around them.

Manager enablement

Managers need	The organisation should provide
Confidence in the framework	Short practice-based briefing and accessible role-specific guidance
Consistent interpretation	Evidence examples, calibration and profession support
Knowledge of opportunities	Visible projects, mentors, learning pathways, vacancies and communities
Time and permission	Protected conversation time and development expectations in manager objectives
Help with difficult cases	Escalation routes for disagreement, inclusion, wellbeing and performance boundaries
Feedback on impact	Simple insight showing actions, progress and employee experience

From development plan to development evidence

Development plans often become lists of courses and dates. A competency framework improves their quality by connecting every goal to a capability outcome and requiring a practical sign of progress. The plan becomes a hypothesis about how capability will change, not an administrative record of activity.

A strong development goal

Component	Example
Target capability	Stakeholder engagement at practitioner level
Reason	Required for the next role and a current programme need
Current evidence	Supports routine internal meetings but has limited external negotiation experience
Action	Lead engagement for one contested workstream with coaching and observation
Support	Named sponsor, monthly coaching and access to stakeholder map
Evidence of progress	Engagement plan, observed meetings, feedback, decisions and reflective summary
Review	Midpoint after six weeks and final review after twelve weeks

Use the whole development mix

Method	Best used for
Experience	Applying capability in real conditions and producing evidence
Exposure	Understanding different contexts, professions, leaders and career routes
Education	Building foundational knowledge, concepts, methods or accreditation
Coaching	Improving judgement, confidence, habits and reflection
Mentoring	Learning from wider experience and navigating a profession or system
Community	Sharing practice, maintaining currency and building portable networks

Keep plans selective

Most individuals benefit from a small number of priorities. A useful plan identifies one or two meaningful capability goals, the work through which they will be developed, the support required and the evidence expected. Large plans diffuse effort and make follow-through less likely.

Portable capability across government

Portability does not require every department to use identical roles. It requires enough common structure to recognise equivalent capability and enough local flexibility to describe context. Government profession frameworks, Success Profiles and shared skills taxonomies can provide reference points, while departments retain role-specific requirements.

The portability model

Layer	Purpose	Example

Layer	Purpose	Example
Cross-government	Common behaviours, universal skills and core data definitions	Success Profiles and shared skills taxonomy
Profession	Technical standards, levels, pathways and development	Project Delivery, Digital and Data, HR, Property or Analysis frameworks
Department	Mission context policy systems and local assurance	Department-specific role profiles and evidence
Role	The capability combination required for a particular job	Current and target role profile
Individual	Evidence, interests, aspirations and development record	Portable capability profile and plan

Minimum portable record

- Competency and framework identifier with version.
- Proficiency level definition and date reviewed.
- Evidence summary source and confidence or approval status.
- Relevant qualifications, accreditations and expiry dates.
- Completed and active development goals and actions.
- Individual visibility preferences and appropriate data access controls.

Interoperability is partly governance

Technical integration helps, but portability depends on agreement about meaning. Departments need rules for mapping frameworks, accepting prior evidence, refreshing outdated assessments and resolving differences in proficiency scales. A common title alone does not prove equivalence.

A departmental operating model

Activity	Individual	Line manager	Profession or talent team
Role profile	Understands expectations	Confirms relevance to actual work	Defines and governs standards
Reflection	Records evidence, interests and aspirations	Creates time and encourages honesty	Provides guidance and accessible tools
Conversation	Brings evidence and choices	Challenges, supports and agrees priorities	Provides calibration, escalation and pathways
Development	Completes actions and captures learning	Creates work opportunities and removes barriers	Curates learning, mentoring and cross-government options
Movement	Makes informed applications and handovers	Supports readiness and continuity	Enables talent matching, succession and portability
Review	Updates evidence and feedback	Checks progress and quality	Measures outcomes, equity and framework health

Governance decisions

- Which profession and cross-government frameworks provide the authoritative source.
- Who owns role profiles, mappings, proficiency levels and changes.
- What evidence is proportionate for development, mobility, succession and assurance.
- What information follows the person and what remains within the originating department.
- How individuals correct, challenge or add context to capability information.
- How talent movement risks and benefits are reviewed at departmental and cross-government levels.

Technology should reduce friction

A digital platform should help people compare current and future roles, capture evidence once, create focused plans, find relevant development and carry an intelligible profile between teams. It should not turn a career conversation into form completion or expose personal aspirations more widely than the agreed purpose requires.

Measuring value

The objective is not the completion of profiles or development plans. It is better capability, fairer opportunity, more useful movement and stronger delivery. Measures should follow the pathway from participation to action and then to workforce outcomes.

Level	Example measures
Access	Role profile coverage, framework accessibility and employee understanding
Conversation quality	Employee usefulness, manager confidence, evidence quality and action specificity
Development action	Experience, learning, mentoring and project actions started and completed
Capability growth	New evidence, changed proficiency, reduced priority gaps and accreditation
Career movement	Lateral moves, promotions, profession changes, secondments and time to effective deployment
Department outcomes	Time to fill critical roles, succession coverage, retention, onboarding speed and capability risk
System outcomes	Cross-department mobility, skills reuse, professional depth and net capability flow
Equity and trust	Differences by group, access to opportunity, data confidence and correction issues

A balanced view of retention

Retention is useful when people remain engaged, productive and able to deepen valuable expertise. It is not an absolute good if people stay because pathways are unclear or movement is blocked. Track regretted loss, critical capability loss and reasons for movement alongside overall turnover.

Questions for leaders

- Can we see which capabilities are growing and which are becoming fragile?
- Are people gaining evidence through work or mainly completing courses?
- Do managers create comparable access to development opportunities?
- Can incoming staff reuse credible evidence without unnecessary reassessment?
- Do departing staff leave successors, knowledge and stronger networks?
- Are we a net developer of talent for our department and for government?

A twelve-month implementation plan

Period	Priority actions	Decision point
Months 1 to 2	Agree purpose, sponsorship and career use cases; map existing profession frameworks, pathways and systems; listen to employees and managers	Confirm scope, standards and success measures
Months 3 to 4	Create role profiles and mappings; design portable evidence and data rules; build conversation guide and manager support	Approve pilot and safeguards
Months 5 to 7	Pilot with entrants, established staff, movers and managers; test real development conversations and actions	Revise based on quality, burden, trust and equity
Months 8 to 9	Connect development opportunities, learning, mentoring and vacancies; publish early career stories and manager examples	Approve controlled scale
Months 10 to 12	Expand by profession or business area; track capability change, mobility and departmental impact; strengthen communities and governance	Set next-year priorities and interoperability plan

The first ninety days

1. Name the career and workforce decisions the framework must improve.
2. Choose representative roles and map them to existing government profession standards.
3. Define what an individual owns and what the manager, profession and department own.
4. Create a six-part conversation guide and test it with real manager-employee pairs.
5. Agree portable evidence, privacy, access, retention and correction rules.
6. Identify real development opportunities through work, mentoring, learning and mobility.
7. Set measures for conversation quality, action, capability growth, movement and equity.

Publishing career success stories

Career stories help people see routes that job families and diagrams cannot fully explain. They also show managers what practical support looks like. Stories should include lateral development, deeper expertise, cross-department moves, temporary assignments and people who chose to remain and grow, not only promotions.

A credible story structure

Element	Prompt
Starting point	What role, capability and career question did the person begin with?
Framework insight	What strength, gap or transferable skill became clearer?
Conversation	How did the manager challenge, support or connect the person?
Development	Which work, learning, mentor or movement created new evidence?
Outcome	What changed for the person, team, department or wider government?
Lesson	What can others copy and what conditions or limitations mattered?

Editorial safeguards

- Use informed consent and offer anonymised or team-level alternatives.
- Do not imply that one route is the expected definition of success.
- Represent different grades, professions, backgrounds, locations and working patterns.
- Credit the individual, manager and wider support without creating hero narratives.
- State practical evidence and limitations rather than making unsupported causal claims.
- Link each story to the relevant framework, career pathway and available opportunity.

Digital enablement and the role of Comaea

A capability platform can connect career development components that are often fragmented across documents, learning systems, vacancy platforms and local spreadsheets. The platform should give the individual a coherent view while giving managers and leaders only the information appropriate to their role.

Need	Enabling capability
Career clarity	Current and future role comparison with transparent proficiency expectations
Personal ownership	Individual profile, evidence, interests, goals and development plan
Manager structure	Guided conversations, agreed actions, reviews and follow-up
Opportunity matching	Links to learning, mentors, projects, roles and professional pathways
Portability	Framework mapping, evidence history, qualifications and controlled data transfer
Talent intelligence	Aggregated capability gaps, strengths, succession and mobility insight
Governance	Permissions, version control, audit trail and framework ownership

Comaea can provide this capability assurance and development layer while complementing HR, recruitment and learning systems. Departments retain ownership of their frameworks, pathways, data rules and talent decisions. The technology supports a consistent experience without replacing professional standards, managerial judgement or individual agency.

Readiness check

Ready to scale when	Pause and correct when
People can explain how the framework supports their career	The exercise is described mainly as data collection
Managers can hold the conversation and create real opportunities	Plans rely almost entirely on self-directed courses
Incoming evidence can be understood and appropriately reused	Every move restarts assessment from a blank slate
Movement data informs succession, knowledge transfer and attraction	Retention is judged only by whether people leave
Benefits and access are visible across workforce groups	Opportunity continues to depend mainly on informal networks

Frequently asked questions

Why are competency frameworks important for career development?

They translate broad aspiration into visible role expectations, evidence, gaps and development actions. They also create a shared language that can travel across managers, teams, professions and departments.

What is the average time a civil servant spends in a role?

There is no authoritative Civil Service-wide figure for grades below the Senior Civil Service because average time in post is not held centrally. Evidence shows significant movement and particularly rapid senior turnover, but departments should analyse their own roles, grades and professions rather than applying one average.

Should departments develop people who may leave?

Yes. Departments benefit from stronger contribution while people are present, a better reputation for development, wider networks and talent arriving from elsewhere. Genuine continuity risks should be managed through succession, knowledge transfer and targeted retention.

Does a competency framework restrict career choice?

It should do the opposite. A good framework makes more routes visible and helps people understand what each requires. It becomes restrictive only when profiles are overly rigid, evidence routes are narrow or ratings are treated as permanent labels.

Who owns an individual development plan?

The individual should own the goals and evidence. The manager agrees support and creates opportunities, while the organisation provides frameworks, pathways, resources and fair access. Ownership does not mean the individual carries the whole burden.

How often should development conversations take place?

Use a meaningful annual or career planning conversation supported by shorter check-ins when work, evidence, aspirations or opportunities change. The action cycle matters more than a fixed frequency.

How can competency evidence move between departments?

Use common identifiers and definitions, mapped profession frameworks, evidence summaries, dates and approval status. The receiving department should recognise relevant prior evidence while applying proportionate checks for its own context and risk.

How should success be measured?

Measure conversation quality, development action, capability growth, access to opportunity, movement, onboarding, succession, critical skill risk, equity and trust. Profile or plan completion alone is not evidence of career development.

Conclusion

Competency frameworks give government a practical way to connect individual careers with collective capability. They provide the structure needed to recognise current strengths, make future roles understandable, improve development conversations and preserve evidence as people move.

The strongest model treats departments as talent enablers within a wider public service ecosystem. Each department develops people for its own delivery while accepting that some will move, some will arrive and some will deepen their expertise in place. Shared profession standards and portable capability evidence allow that movement to create value instead of repeatedly resetting careers.

Key recommendations

1. Use competency frameworks as the common language for roles, careers, development and mobility.
2. Avoid unsupported assumptions about average tenure and use local workforce evidence.
3. Give individuals control of clear portable capability and development records.
4. Equip line managers with a structured conversation and real opportunity routes.
5. Recognise talent entering and leaving as part of a reciprocal government system.
6. Protect specialist depth, succession and institutional memory without blocking healthy movement.
7. Measure capability growth, opportunity, movement and equity rather than plan completion alone.

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About Comaea

Comaea helps organisations understand, evidence and develop workforce capability. Its platform connects role and competency frameworks, assessment, career pathways, development planning, succession and capability intelligence while allowing each organisation to retain control of its standards and operating model.

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