GETTING INTO THE CIVIL SERVICE FAST STREAM

A GUIDE BY EXISTING FAST STREAMERS

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INTRODUCTION

So, you've decided to apply to the Civil Service Fast Stream. Allow me to offer my congratulations on an excellent decision, and I'm not just saying that because I made the same one a year ago. The CS Fast Stream consistently ranks in the top ten of The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers and offers a genuine opportunity to work at the heart of UK government and in the midst of the departments that shape our lives on a daily basis; defining the UKs interaction with and perception to both the UK public and the world at large. I don't know the specifics of your motivation, however I'd wager that the CS Fast Stream will be well placed to address it whatever it is. If a social conscience is at the heart of your decision then you will find plenty of satisfaction in the CS Fast Stream, where your efforts directly work towards the betterment of people's lives; not only in the UK but also overseas. If you're looking for first-rate professional experience then the broad range of skills and abilities that the CS Fast Stream fosters, through targeted placements and tailored training programmes, will certainly provide what you're looking for. You'll also be letting yourself in for a challenge, but not one without ample support and nurturing along the way. And if you're something of a social butterfly then you'll find plenty of opportunities to get involved with other Fast Streamers and the Civil Service in general. This might be through voluntary work; sports fixtures; mentoring and workshops or good old fashioned nights in the pub. There are always activities to get involved with,

throughout London and at a national level. In fact, it's one such opportunity that leads me to be writing this guide to you right now: it's known as The Fund.

Who is this guide for?

If you had no intention of applying to the Civil Service Fast Stream / don't know what the Civil Service Fast Stream is / hate donating to charity; then I'm sorry, I've wasted your time and you've wasted your money (no refunds!). If you are the converse of the above, however, then congratulations, this is your guide. As mentioned previously, all of the contributors to this guide, on how to get into the Fast Stream, are current CS Fast Streamers from the September 2014 intake. We all applied around September 2013 and partook in the assessments mentioned between September 2013 and May 2014. We come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and have drawn on this diversity in the production of this guide. This means that our memories on preparation and the assessments themselves are very fresh indeed and as bang up to date as you're going to find outside of the top secret offices of CS Resourcing. We know how hard it is to find information and advice on Fast Stream assessment, and how disordered the advice that *is* out there can be. We know that it's often interspersed with out of date material and that it regularly doesn't go into depth about specific exercises and challenges. This guide is the antidote to those ills – it's a central source of information that has been broken down into easily accessible and eminently readable chunks, by exercise and stage of the process. It's full of natural goodness and will promote a glossy coat and healthy teeth. You've made the right choice buying it, really you have.

So how should I read it?

Well, the contents page is a good start. As you'll see, we've set out our advice by specific exercise in line with the actual order of events that you'll undertake throughout the process. If you're comfortable with the online verbal and numerical reasoning tests but think you might struggle with leadership, for example, then feel free to skip right to the advice on the Leadership Exercise. Likewise, if you just want a general picture of how the assessment centre will play out then skim through that section in isolation the day before you go in. Generally, I'd suggest that it would be useful to read through the guide in entirety as there is a general ethos and focus to all the assessment exercises that you'll undertake (underpinned by the competency framework); however this guide has intentionally been designed to allow quick access to specific information on particular areas and so if that's the way you work – by all means, use it as you will.

I sincerely hope that this guide is of use to you in your application, and once again: thank you for supporting the work of our charity through your purchase. Please do tell your friends about the guide and I hope you enjoy what's ahead!

What is the Fund?

The Fund is the first year corporate challenge that all new Fast Streamers are tasked with for the first six months of the programme. During our induction week (which was only in September 2014!) we were split into groups of thirteen and shown an extremely snazzy video, which detailed what was expected of us over the next six months. We were to, as a group, allocate a cause and then a specific charity, for which we were to generate as much fundraised income and as many voluntary hours as possible. To do this, we were to put our colossal business brains together in order to come up with a strategy and a structure in order to facilitate our approach to our chosen charity; our agreed fundraising methodology; some actual fundraising and volunteering; and a record of our achievements in a suitably boastable format. One such idea was this guide book. Wouldn't it be useful (and brilliant), we thought, if there were a Kindle guide on how to give yourself the best chance of getting into the Civil Service Fast Stream? Wouldn't it be better if it was written by Fast Streamers themselves? Wouldn't it be the best, though, if those Fast Streamers were brand new and had only started on last year's intake?! After much deliberation, we confirmed that the answers to each of those questions were 'yes', 'absolutely', and 'yes' again. Since this guide is being written as part of The Fund, all proceeds from sale will go to our chosen charity. The charity themselves have asked not to be named here in, however I can let you know that they're a national charity focussed on literacy education for those who need it and do fantastic work promoting literacy throughout the UK, helping thousands of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their literacy standards and giving them the opportunity to avoid a difficult life at school, in work and in the community. Every penny of profit from your purchase of this guide has gone to helping that cause. Well done you. I must point out, by the way, that despite all being current Civil Service Fast Streamers, this guide is written completely distinct from the Civil Service Fast Stream itself. We're not endorsed by them or the Civil Service in general (or anyone else for that matter) and neither is our work on this book. Everything you're reading is drawn directly out of our heads as private, normal, common-in-garden folk. In a nutshell: remember, this is an unofficial guide.

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ONLINE TESTS

The first trial you'll come up against beyond the initial basic registration on the website (which, as an initial watermark, should not have qualified as a challenge) are the online tests. There are three of these to complete, and you will need to have scored highly enough on each if you are to qualify for the next stage in the process. Pass and fail marks are defined against the scores of all applicants to the Fast Stream within each individual preference (Generalist, Commercial, Digital and Technology etc.). This means that you may need to wait a while after completion for a sufficient number of applicant's scores to have been collected. The three tests for completion are: the Verbal Reasoning Test; the Numerical Reasoning Test; and the Fast Stream Competency Questionnaire. Each of these are addressed in turn below. It's worth noting that the Fast Stream Candidate Portal (the website you're using to apply) does provide access to practice Verbal and Numerical Reasoning Tests. Use these! They're of the same format as the actual tests, they don't impact on your final score and they'll give you a bit of a picture on whether you're ready to take the actual test or if a little more practice is needed.

Verbal Reasoning Test

Some people think that Verbal Reasoning Tests are down purely to natural ability and that you'll just need to accept your limitations with them. Others (particularly the people who sell guides on how to beat them) think otherwise. The truth, I feel, is a bit of both. The idea behind Verbal Reasoning Tests

is that the information included in the passage can logically (that is to say: with mathematical certitude) entail only one of the (usually) four statements available. There are occasions where you may find that you disagree whether a particular question achieves that aim; there certainly have been questions like this for me. However, in the majority of cases, the rule above does apply.

Example

"All swans are white and England has swans" with options *"1. The swans in England are white"*, *"2. The swans in England are black"*, *"3. Some of the swans in England are white"*, and *"4. Some of the swans in England are black"*, Option 1 will be the correct answer.

Note that the original passage isn't true – not all swans are white, however this is another facet to the Verbal Reasoning Test: no external knowledge is either required or allowed. You'll only ever need to know what's in the initial passage and you can take it as gospel (for the sake of the question). In essence, all Verbal Reasoning questions are simply more complicated versions of the previous example.

You will need to draw inferences, sometimes from multiple statements in combination (*"Mary is taller than John"* / *"John is taller than Ben"* / *"Mary, John and Ben are the only people in the room"* – *Who is the tallest person in the room?*) but the basic structure remains the same throughout.

As you'd imagine, therefore, some people are naturally better at that sort of thing than others; and those people are very lucky indeed. That's not to say that there aren't measures you can take to improve your odds. Try these:

1. Practice!

   It's a fairly obvious point but practicing does improve your chances. Through getting used to the structure of the questions; naturally picking up on the right approach and reading explanations on where you went wrong on particular examples, your abilities very likely will improve and your final score will reap the rewards. There are several free online Verbal Reasoning tests to get your head around and printed guides are also available for purchase if you feel that you need the extra support. You might want to work through a couple of short practice tests before beginning the actual test as, in my experience, this does seem to help get you in the right frame of mind.

2. Read the answers before you read the passage.

   Not everyone will find this approach useful but it's definitely worth trying out in one of your practice runs. The vast majority of the time the answer to the individual question won't

require you to read the entirety of the text; it'll be hidden away in one or two lines. If you know beforehand that you're looking for how many people work in the videogame industry in the UK, for example, it'll make that information jump out at you while you read through the text. This can be useful in avoiding becoming overwhelmed by a lot of information without knowing where to focus (a useful tip to remember in the policy exercise later on!).

3. Use your time and check your answers.

   It seems an obvious point but in practice, the elation of getting through the test and being able to deactivate your brain can sometimes tempt you to submit early. Don't do this! Go back and check your answers. If you've been canny then you'll have marked / remembered the ones that you weren't sure of. If not, skim through them all. You may surprise yourself how quickly an error arises where you had previously been certain of your answers' veracity. Having completed the test you'll now have more time to think. Read your chosen answer, and the alternatives, and then dash through the passage to the relevant one or two sentences. Don't second-guess yourself if you're not sure and your answer seems the best bet, but if you find slip-ups – correct them!

4. Trust your gut.

   The final point is this: don't get hung up on questions that you're not sure of. Most of the time you'll be able to bookmark a question so that you can return to it later. If you find yourself rereading a passage over and over, without the correct statement jumping out at you then skip it and move on to the next one. Remember, each question will only win you one point and you'll lose none for not answering/answering incorrectly. In the time you spend wondering over one question, that you may not have a confident answer to, you may be able to input three confident answers to the following questions; and you'll always be able to return to the troublesome answer at the end. Don't forget that if the time runs out and you have unanswered questions, they'll be locked in as incorrect. If that includes three or four that you could have breezed through in the time that you were wondering about one tricky one, then that's poor time management and you'll be kicking yourself. If you do find yourself with time left over at the end and you're still unable to surmount those particularly challenging questions, then fill them in with your best bet answer (or a random one if you really have no idea). Even with a complete guess you'll have given yourself a 25% chance of getting them right!

Numerical Reasoning Test

As with Verbal Reasoning, inevitably there are some people who will naturally find numerical reasoning a lot easier than others. However, unlike Verbal Reasoning, there's a lot more solid preparation that can be done to even the odds.

Numerical Reasoning Tests ultimately boil down to two things: *1. 'How quickly can you interpret information in a graph/chart/table?'* and *2. 'How well do you know how to apply various formulae (percentages/fractions/averages etc.)?'* Generally speaking, unless you're applying for a mathematically related position, you won't need to know any formulae that you won't have definitely come across in school during your GCSE.

In order to address the first of the two aforementioned questions, the answer is again practice. Get used to reading them in online practice Numerical Reasoning tests and note them in the world around you (from a mobile phone tariff options table to the quantity of nutrients on a cereal box). The graphs, charts and tables in numerical reasoning tests always include all the information you'll need to find the answer, and generally are relatively self-explanatory and easily read if you take your time.

In answer to the second, it's simply a matter of learning and memorising the correct procedure. You'll need to know how to work out percentages, how to work out fractions, how to work out averages and how to work out percentage increases and decreases. You'll also need to be able to convert those percentages / fractions / increases and decreases into actual figures using the information in the table. You'll find ample explanation of how to do each of these online. Once you know the methodology – use it, as much as you can, until it's ingrained. Remember that for the Numerical Reasoning tests you'll undertake for the CS Fast Stream, you're allowed to use a calculator so no mental arithmetic is required. Nevertheless, you may find it useful to pick up a scientific calculator and learn how to use it effectively. Good models allow you to scroll back through previous calculations and often have built in functionality for percentages/fractions etc. It's not a necessity however and you will be able to complete all the questions with a standard calculator. Beyond that general advice, try the following:

1. Make sure you write everything down!

    Note taking will help you when it comes to Numerical Reasoning, even if you don't end up using the figures that you've written down. If whatever calculation you're doing requires you to figure out what percentage (1435 + 224) is of (1445 + 895) then write down the answers to each as you calculate them. If you find yourself in need of either figure later on (which you may: future questions may draw on the same information) then you'll have it to hand.

Likewise, if you make mistakes then you'll be able to skip through the formulaic process a lot faster if you've noted the results of some of the steps down; saving you valuable seconds. Basically it goes back to that old mathematics pedagogical adage, "Show your working!"

2. Read everything carefully.

If you misread a figure, or fail to notice that you're dealing in thousands as opposed to hundreds, then your entire calculation may be thrown off and you might need to start again. That's something you don't have time for. Read headers in tables carefully – it's often the case that one column is dealing in millions (m) while the other is dealing in thousands (t). You'll need to factor these in when making your calculations. Likewise, you may find some graphs deal in individual months where others deal in quarters and some, years. If your question relates to a change between 2013 and 2014 then the points on a graph that need to be compared will differ depending on the timescales being used. These may seem like obvious points, however it's at the heart of most mistakes – the few seconds saved by skim reading the information included will be lost many times over, if you find yourself having to start again because of a lack of attention to detail.

3. Read the answers beforehand.

As with Verbal Reasoning, it can be useful to glimpse the question and answer options prior to examining the table/graph/chart itself in detail. Questions generally will not require you to use the entirety of the table/graph/chart presented. Rather, they will refer to particular areas – the forecast for May and June 2013, or the increase in calls taken between 5pm and 6pm on Mondays for example. Knowing what it is that you'll need to report back on as you look through the table/graph/chart can be invaluable in keeping your mind focussed; and indeed in helping you understand what you're looking at.

4. Use time wisely.

Finally, again as with Verbal Reasoning, time is of the essence with these tests and you're better off speedily answering questions you find easier than you are deliberating over questions that you find difficult (and may end up with the wrong answer to anyway). You are always free to return to the troublesome questions later on should time permit, and you will not be marked down for an unanswered/incorrectly answered question.

Fast Stream Competency Questionnaire

The Fast Stream Competency Questionnaire is composed of a number of statements that you rank in order of how much you agree, or disagree, with each. There's not a lot of advice that I can give you in terms of the FS Competency Questionnaire since it's specifically designed to assess whether you have the right mentality to work and fit within the Fast Stream and the Civil Service at large. You should answer the questions honestly and try not to overthink your responses. Often you'll find a number of the statements could apply to you. In such cases, try to choose the option that first caught your eye and move on. Since the FS Competency Questionnaire is measuring you against the competencies in the Competency Framework, it would be wise to have researched that beforehand (starting with the chapter in this guide book), however you should not attempt to tailor your answers to what you imagine the Civil Service want you to say. First of all, you may be wrong in your assumptions of what CS are looking for; and second, even if you do succeed in passing the test, through deception you may find that by misrepresenting yourself, you don't enjoy the career that you find yourself in later down the line.

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THE COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

Odds are on that you are already familiar with (or at least aware of) competency based interviews and competency based examples. These are particularly relevant to the Fast Stream recruitment process and are addressed later in detail in the relevant parts of this guide. The Civil Service differs slightly from many other employers when it comes to competencies.

Firstly, it has a central definitive document that outlines the behaviours expected from every civil servant and secondly, this definitive document applies to everyone in the civil service from the entry-level right through to Permanent Secretaries! Everyone in the civil service has to be able to demonstrate evidence of how they have developed the skills and behaviours needed in relation to their grade and this definitive guide. That's what this section is all about!

In the Civil Service, people are assessed according to whether the behaviours that they display meet a range of competencies identified in the Competency Framework. The Competency Framework is the best source document for this within the Civil Service. Here's a current link for the framework on the Gov.uk website - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-competency-framework.

The framework is used in the design of both recruitment practice and on-going employee performance reviews. You will therefore become very familiar with the competencies if/when you do start working on the Civil Service Fast Stream. It is particularly important for you (as a prospective Fast Streamer) to read up on the framework and become familiar with it beforehand since, as with most things in the Civil Service, it underpins how the Fast Stream application process has been designed. It outlines the standards that you will have to meet in order to successfully get through the process. Quite simply, you're taking a risk by going in without having read it.

All of the exercises that you will undertake over the course of the application process, bar the online numerical and verbal reasoning tests, have been designed to give you the opportunity to demonstrate the competencies in the competency framework. They don't always do so in an artificial way, however. Much of the time, the examiners will be looking for you to exhibit natural behaviour, with a view to assessing whether the competencies they require come to you ordinarily. On that basis, don't focus too much on trying to remember the intricacies of the framework. Rather, try to get a general idea of the overarching spirit of what each competency is about and keep these in the back of your mind throughout the application process. If you don't want to read into the Competency Framework in too much detail then that is fine and entirely your choice! The titles of the competencies themselves will be enough to give you a basic feel for what each is looking for.

One of the central issues that people struggle with when it comes to the Competency Framework is the sheer volume of information included and how difficult it can be to pick out the relevant parts. To put it mildly, avoiding becoming overwhelmed can be something of a challenge! Each account is quite long and encompasses the full spectrum of what is required at every grade within the Civil Service. Unsurprisingly, that incorporates a very broad range of skills and abilities. A new Fast Streamer enters the Civil Service at Higher Executive Officer (HEO) Development level, so focussing your reading on HEO/SEO standards can be a good start. Beyond that, in what follows, I have boiled down each competency into a brief bite size summary that should be relatively easy to keep in mind throughout the rest of the guide. Over the course of this guide book, we will aim to show you how each of the ten competencies are tested throughout the assessment procedure and at each exercise individually. We'll look to advise you on the kind of things that you can do, and should not do, in order to make sure you that tick all the boxes and get that super-awesome job within the Fast Stream that you've been dreaming of since you were knee-high (right?). Onto the competencies:

Seeing the Big Picture

You don't work in a tiny little box. Essentially, you need to take into account the wider implications of the work that you do, as well as wider environmental factors that may affect your work's effectiveness. This is all about being clear as to why you are doing something and how it fits in with the wider public service and departmental objectives. Taking into account social sensitivities, political, economic and environmental issues and being aware of diversity concerns is essential.

Changing and Improving

Don't stand still. Constantly seek to improve yourself and get feedback. If you see something that could be improved, instead of talking about it, do something about it. You should also be the sort of person that encourages others to do the same.

Making Effective Decisions

Make sure that you are making decisions that are based on sound objective evidence and knowledge. Analyse evidence, evaluate options and consider direct and indirect impacts and risks. Don't work off your gut, but be decisive!

Leading and Communicating

Lead by example and speak with clarity, conviction and enthusiasm. Bring others with you through effective persuasion. Support others and keep things positive and progressive.

Collaborating and Partnering

Be able to get on with people but also be professional about it. Professional relationships are vitally important in the Civil Service and are often necessary to get things done quickly. Equally important are relationships with external stakeholders (people outside of the Civil Service). It helps to think about things from the other's perspective and pre-empt issues that may arise.

Building Capability for all

This ties in with **Changing and Improving**. Ensure that you are continuously developing yourself; identifying strengths and weaknesses and addressing them appropriately. In addition to this, as a future leader, you should encourage and assist others in doing the same for themselves.

Achieving Commercial Outcomes

This is about having financial and commercial awareness in whatever you're doing. Think about the long and short-term impacts of your decisions, as well as how they might stimulate further economic growth/profit. Be sensible with money but not so frugal so that you can't achieve identified strategic aims. Decisions should provide added value for the citizen without costing them more than necessary.

Delivering Value for Money

This is very similar to the previous competency but has a clear differentiating focus on value for money. Can you develop and follow a clear financial plan, while remaining within the bounds of existing procedures and processes? There's an abundance of spend control in the Civil Service and so this is an important skill to have in order to avoid unnecessary setbacks. Base your decisions on good quality evidence and keep a record of the decision making process.

Managing a Quality Service

Make sure that what you are doing is conducive to making the service fit for purpose, of a high quality and suitably efficient. You should have considered the potential political, social and economic impacts of your work and have included considerations for relevant stakeholders. A good tip here would be to develop an awareness of existing project management techniques (look up Prince2 and Agile project management). You won't need to know the details of these, however a general awareness of their differing approaches will help you.

Delivering at Pace

This will be tested constantly throughout the selection process. Can you work to, and more importantly, deliver within tight deadlines and ensure an excellent standard of work? If challenges arise, can you approach them sensibly but at speed? Emphasise prioritisation of your work, keeping things ordered and recorded, and helping others to stay focussed and on track.

That's essentially it. As mentioned, these competencies will come up a lot throughout this guide book and throughout the selection process (and the rest of your Civil Service career) generally. Use them well, keep them in mind, and very best of luck!

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E-TRAY

Having successfully completed the Verbal and Numerical Reasoning tests, you will proceed to the E-Tray exercise, which you can complete on any compatible computer (most moderately new PCs and laptops won't have any problem with this). The E-Tray is split into two parts: the E-Tray inbox exercise and a subsequent written exercise. Each is timed and together cannot exceed two and a half hours completion time. In preparing for these, make sure that you set aside the requisite time without interruptions, as you can't pause the test once it's started. You will also want to check that the software works on your computer in advance (you may need to download a different internet browser if not. The application facility will prompt you if this is required). Note that you can test this using the practice E-Tray on the Fast Stream website (https://www.gov.uk/civil-service-fast-stream-how-to-apply). You will definitely want to complete the practice E-Tray exercise either way, as it is by far the best preparation available for this particular part of the assessment. The practice test is essentially a shorter version of the inbox exercise and functions identically to the actual E-Tray. Upon completion, the practice exercise will take you through each answer, one by one, and explain the rationale behind the scoring in each case. The insights that this provides cannot be overstated and may surprise you. By pointing out how a poor response could lead to public panic on account of a badly worded press release, or lose you the backing of a vital stakeholder due to a confused

departmental message, the practice E-Tray exercise gives you an invaluable awareness of what to look out for when completing the real assessment.

E-Tray Inbox Exercise

The E-Tray Inbox basically tests your ability to skim through a large amount of information, pick out key details and make quick but sound decisions based on it. Some questions will be based on fact, and will require you to rely on the information given in the documentation to draw the correct conclusion, and some questions are designed to test how you would respond to a given situation.

You will be given a set amount of time, usually 10-15 minutes, to review a series of documents in various folders (make sure you open all of the folders! It's easy to let some go unnoticed until it's too late). This is followed by up to 50 minutes where you will have access to an email inbox, though the documents will still be available throughout the whole E-Tray exercise. At the beginning of the fifty minutes, a number of emails will already be there in waiting, while the rest will arrive throughout the course of the remaining time. There will be around 24 emails in total, and you can respond to them in any order you like, though some will lead to timed follow-up emails so I wouldn't leave any for too long. For each email you will be asked to choose the most *and* the least appropriate response out of four possible options – so essentially you could see this as a multiple choice test. The incoming emails may contain new information, so you should alter your responses accordingly.

The task will use a plausible government issue, for example responding to a health epidemic, or planning disaster relief, or aid interventions in a foreign country, and so on. You will act as a member of a team working on the issue, with people reporting to you, and people you report to. The documents provided are usually split into three main areas: 1) background information on the issue or area, 2) information about your team, and 3) news clippings on the issue.

The key things to watch out for are as follows:

1. **Be economical with your reading time.**
   You will never get through all the documents available in the time provided, so it is a better idea to make sure that you click through each and skim read everything available, initially. When an email refers to a specific fact, you will have a much better idea of where to find it having done this; saving you clicking through every document to hand while you should be responding to emails. Make a note of numbers and figures, as a number of emails will always offer incorrect figures as options. Having '4.4 million cows' jotted down would've saved me a lot of time when asked whether it was 4.4 or 44 million, or whether it was cows or horses! It seems daft but that's the sort of thing that you could be asked.

2. **Consistency is good… sometimes**

   You should take a consistent approach to your responses, as this will help you make your decisions faster rather than wavering on each email. However, the test is also designed to test your responsiveness to new information, and one email will often test a response you have made previously. After new information has been introduced, do not be afraid to make a new decision if that is what you believe to be most appropriate.

3. **Leave your team chart up in the background**

   It's not that useful to try to commit your organisational chart to memory during the read-through, but once the emails start coming in from 'Tanya' or 'Mark', it's much easier to quickly refer to this chart and understand the context of the email. Various 'characters' from the test are also likely to display differing personality traits (e.g. impatience, or slight aggression) and you should pick up on these as quickly as possible, responding as appropriate.

4. **Time is of the essence**

   Many people run out of time and so are forced to make snap decisions at the end. You can try to avoid this by making sure you've answered roughly 8 emails every 15 minutes. If you find you've gotten through emails more quickly than you expected then use the time to go over some of the documents that you've realised were more important than you thought – usually these are the news articles.

There's no specific 'trick' to get through the E-Tray, so the best way to improve your chances are to avoid the pitfalls of becoming confused by the information as a result of not reading enough, or being crippled by indecision in your responses by not taking a line. Both of these will lose you time overall and must be avoided.

Written Exercise

The written exercise is not actually taken into account until you get through to the Assessment Centre, however it makes up a significant part of your score at FSAC and therefore must be taken seriously. The task is based on the same information and scenario as the inbox exercise. You will be asked to respond to a specific request from your manager to make a particular suggestion on a related topic. For example, in a health scenario you may be asked to suggest ways to communicate a message, or in a development scenario you could be asked to propose a framework of industries

that a country could explore developing. The premise will usually be very broad and encourage you to develop innovative but structured responses.

Like all others, this exercise is based on the competency framework, focusing on 'Seeing the Bigger Picture'/'Changing and Improving' where you should show that you are taking many considerations and wider issues into account (e.g. short and long term views, risks, stakeholders, funding), 'Making Effective Decisions' where you justify your recommendations using a wide range of the available information, and 'Leading and Communicating', which measures your ability to structure your answers appropriately.

Getting the structure right is very important, and you should divide your key recommendations into titled sections, with a brief introduction and summary included. The tone is also important – it should be formal and concise. Make a clear recommendation in the leading sentence, supported by your reasoning, and then show all the considerations for each point (e.g. expected challenges, timescales, funding).

Numerical data is vital here so don't neglect it. After spending such a long time reading through documents and responding to emails, you will feel fairly confident of the source material by the time you start the written exercise. As a result, the temptation is there to simply write in continuous prose, mostly from memory. The hard quantitative data is important, however, and will be needed to support whatever your recommendations are. If you don't use it then the examiners will not consider your case properly backed up, which will undoubtedly lose you points. Financial information is particularly important for the 'Delivering Value for Money' competency.

Remember this section is timed and you are likely to be writing right down to the wire. On that basis, it may be wise to set out your key recommendations from the offset and to top and tail your letter with *"Dear X"* and *"Regards, Your name"*. That way, if you run out of time, you'll still have a coherent response. It's also worth starting to write as soon as the exercise begins. Work through each section in turn as opposed to trying to develop an overarching picture before getting anything on paper. If time does run out, the more you've recorded: the better. The examiners can only score what they have in front of them.

You'll be pretty exhausted by the time you've completed the two and a half hours. However it's generally quite enjoyable and interesting work, and you'll hopefully go away quite proud of yourself. Make up a cup of tea and relax, you've earned it.

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FSAC – INTRODUCTION

If you've made it to the Fast Stream Assessment Centre then well done, you've already done a great (and statistically improbable) job. Although – and not to scare you or anything, but – this is where it starts getting interesting. If you're a normal human being then you'll agree that the E-Tray exercise you previously completed (detailed in the last chapter) was tough and probably left you in need of a dark room to lie down in. The FSAC is a series of similarly gruelling challenges that, if you're anything like me, will leave you pretty mentally exhausted by the end of it; although I dare say there'll be a little exhilaration in there too. In hindsight, each of the tasks you work through is quite a lot of fun and the sort of thing that you'll probably enjoy if you want to work in the Civil Service Fast Stream. (You wouldn't have found me saying that on the day though.) In conjunction with this book, you may find it useful to read through the official Civil Service FSAC guide available here: https://candidate.faststream.gov.uk/FastStream2014/cqtmaps/Downloads/FSACCandidateGuide.pdf. Note that this guide is for 2014, but much will still be relevant.

In brief, the FSAC is a one day event that measures you against the competency framework through the following exercises, each of which we'll detail and advise on in this guide book. Note that not all competencies are being tested in all exercises:

1. The E-Tray Written Exercise (this is the one you completed at home, you won't be doing another one at the FSAC!)

2. The Leadership Exercise

3. The Policy Recommendation Exercise

4. The Group Exercise

5. The Interview

The order in which you undertake these exercises will vary person-by-person, however you will definitely complete them all. As an addendum, each of these exercises is assessed in isolation and should be treated as such by you, the candidate. If you have struggled with one, that will have no bearing on your score for another. Use this to address shortfalls throughout the day.

On the day, you'll arrive at 100 Parliament Street (remember, it's the side entrance on King Charles Street, not the main front entrance where HMRC are located). You should be dressed in business wear and be wearing your standard issue bowler hat (ok, we're kidding about the hat). After you've spoken to reception and gone through the security door you'll be brought in to a break room where you'll find other terrified candidates waiting to undertake the FSAC alongside you. Have a chat, get some tea and relax – the staff on hand will do everything they can to make you feel comfortable and will look after you throughout the day. You'll have the opportunity to speak to existing Fast Streamers and possibly some senior civil servants, depending on who's coming in to talk to you on the day. You can store your belongings in the lockers provided (no mobile phones etc. are allowed in to the assessment exercises) and you'll be able to return to the break room between exercises to wind down. All of this will be detailed for you when you arrive so don't overthink it now. Note that there may be people applying for other streams at the same assessment centre with you. All streams undertake the same exercises and you may find yourself working alongside these people for years to come, so take the opportunity to chat about your preparations and how you've found the process so far. You'll probably also want to tell them how useful you found this guide and please don't feel at all concerned about mentioning (as loudly as you want) what a distinct advantage it's afforded you.

In terms of preparation – if you feel more comfortable having an understanding of the parliamentary process and a knowledge of current departmental activity, then, by all means, research to your heart's content before arriving. I have heard talk of candidates drawing on examples of government practice from decades ago in their exercises and if that is something that you would consider well suited to your style then read up in any areas you anticipate being relevant. Note, however, that none of that is strictly necessary. You are only being assessed against the criteria in the competency framework and the assessors will only be looking for evidence of how well you have either: been able to demonstrate those competencies in the past, or might be able to demonstrate them in the

future. You will not be assessed on your knowledge of the civil service, nor of government, nor of history, nor of 80s B-sides. Only your experience and skills will be factored in by the assessors. It's a fair assumption that a suitable candidate for the Civil Service Fast Stream will be interested in current affairs and the world around them. If you're successful, you will be working with the government and will interact with parliament. Any research that you do or have done, therefore, will certainly not go to waste.

As a final note, before delving into each exercise in detail, as well as the assessed score that you receive from the examiners, you will be asked to write a brief report on your own performance after each exercise. This follows the same formula every time and will essentially tell you which competencies were being tested in the preceding exercise before asking which one you felt you excelled with, which you felt you may have fallen short with, and why for each. You may find this difficult to complete on some occasions if you felt that you'd done an excellent/terrible job on a particular exercise. Just give it your best, honest, shot. If there is only one small detail to which you can find fault with your performance; focus on that in your write up and choose the right competency that it falls under. Conversely, if you feel you've made a catastrophic mess of everything, try to reference specifics in your write up. The examiners are looking to assess your self-awareness and ability to measure your own development against the competencies. If they felt that you'd neglected Value for Money, for example, and you've demonstrated that you were aware of that flaw – it will work in your favour. If you can reference the particular calculation that you should have done but didn't then all the better.

That's it for now – here proceeding will be an account of each exercise in turn. Good luck and I'll see you on the other side.

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FSAC - GROUP EXERCISE

The Group Exercise was the first that I was tasked with at the FSAC, and as an ice-breaker it's hard to beat. If it's not your first exercise then don't worry, the format will be identical no matter when in the day you undertake it. Although the exercise differs every year, and so your experience will differ from mine to a degree, the flavour typically remains the same annually. At a general level, it plays out as follows.

You will be assigned to a group of five to six candidates but initially seated on your own in silence (which is a slightly disconcerting start to a group exercise). You'll then be presented with some documents detailing a fictitious scenario and some detail around the particulars of the situation, including tables of numerical information. You will also be presented with several proposals/projects that relate to the aforementioned situation. So, for example, if the scenario were that the government wanted to showcase British technology; the proposals may include a new rail network or the development of a space programme or driverless cars or new military technology, and so on. Note that each of those proposals will have differing impacts – some will have a greater environmental message while others might promote education, for example. Here-in lies the Group exercise. After being given a short amount of time to go through all the material, you will then be assigned to a particular department or advocacy group. You will also be told which of the proposals your department/advocacy group would most like, and which would be the second choice. So, for

example, if you were representing the Department of Education; you might advocate a new school programme most and a programme improving reading in the local community second. You will similarly be told which proposal your department would least like, and which second least (something that doesn't contribute to education at all is likely to not be the most attractive option for the Department of Education). Having been given your department/advocacy group and your preferences for and against, you are then brought together in a round table exercise with the rest of your group. No chairperson is appointed and all members of the group are expected to contribute. You are given a set amount of time that you as a group are to monitor yourselves (a stopwatch is provided), and the discussion begins. Needless to say, other members of the group are advocating for different departments and some will be backing proposals that your department opposes.

The examiners are looking to see evidence of the majority of the competencies in the Group Exercise. In particular, they'll be looking for evidence of: 'Seeing the Big Picture', 'Making Effective Decisions', 'Changing and Improving', 'Leading and Communicating', 'Collaborating and Partnering', 'Building Capability for All', 'Achieving Commercial Outcomes' and 'Delivering Value for Money'. In essence, they want to see you advocate your position well, with a clear and logical argument, but without lacking flexibility or the ability to communicate effectively with others in the group. You will need to balance these two competing demands throughout the exercise and should also take the following advice into account.

1. This isn't The Apprentice!

   I don't know whether the contestants on The Apprentice really are as arrogant as they present themselves or if it's just for show but whatever the case, you definitely don't want to replicate that sort of behaviour in the group exercise. Stamping your feet and attempting to dominate the group will not demonstrate good communication skills and will give the impression that you are an inflexible thinker. It is also likely to generate resistance from other group members, which will in turn make a final agreement less likely. The specific brief is that all group members are to contribute equally. Along those lines, take the opportunity to encourage discussion and to ask open ended questions of other group members. Structure the debate along logical lines and try to keep it moving forward and on track. Make connections with other group members and feed off their arguments to fuel your own; but crucially be willing to give ground to a point if it helps the group progress.

2. …But don't be a Wallflower.

Of course, the other side of the coin is to sit back and say very little, allowing others to dominate the conversation and pushing your position into inconsequentiality. It is as important to avoid this error as it is to avoid appearing domineering; most obviously so because if your contribution is minimal, there will be little ultimately for the examiners to assess. It is important to demonstrate that you have formulated a reasonable approach to your position and that you can articulate this clearly and succinctly. You must also be able to demonstrate that you've understood cost implications and other impacts, not only of your option but also of other group members. Speak up and ensure your input is recognised and don't rise to it if others try to shut you down – this will reflect worse on them than it does you.

3. Focus your pre-reading.

During your solo reading before beginning the round table, you may be hard pressed for time in examining all the material provided. While you will need an overview of everything, it is your favoured proposal that you must speak on in most depth and so it is wise to spend the bulk of your time ensuring that you have a complete understanding of that area. Remember that you are permitted to take all documentation with you and so highlighting text and figures will suffice in lieu of copying everything down. Moreover, other members of the group will present their own favoured proposals during your round table discussion, at which point you will be able to compare their claims with the documentation to hand as opposed to having to try to record it all previously. It's always good practice when receiving reams of information to initially skim through everything to ensure that there is not something hidden at the back that will dictate what is pertinent earlier on. Once you know what's available, you should be able to pick out comfortably what you will need to study.

4. Be willing to change your mind.

Everyone in the group has been given a first and second choice proposal, and unsurprisingly, these don't all match up. The outcome of this is that the group's conclusion is going to be a bitter pill for someone around the table to swallow. Someone will find themselves in a group that ends up advocating for the position that they were told their department didn't want at all. If it comes to it that that's you, don't pack up your things and leave, you haven't blown the process. Remember – the examiners are looking to see how well you have demonstrated the competencies in the competency framework; you don't really work for the Department of Education (yet)! If a degree of flexibility from you will progress the group, and perhaps get your second favourite proposal into your group's second choice spot, then you may be wise

to accept that and move on. Done correctly, your martyrdom will demonstrate 'Changing and Improving', 'Leading and Communicating' and 'Collaborating and Learning' in a way that doesn't come across so clearly from the guy who has just insisted that he's not talking to anyone unless they opt for his position. Even without your proposal being chosen by the group, you are still able to influence opinion in favour of your Department's aims. Can you shift the agenda slightly so that your Department could benefit in some way? Your willingness to concede one point may act as leverage on others. Your innovation and adaptability will pay dividends for your examination.

5. Don't talk for the sake of talking.

    Time is very tight in the group exercise and if you take turns explaining your positions (as my group did) then that's not going to leave a lot of time at all to actually discuss options. Don't feel that you need to constantly be speaking in order to have the examiners notice you. A well placed word or two will have far more impact than a continuous and confusing gabble with no real substance. You'll also get a reputation with your group mates as someone who monopolises time which may lead to them paying you less attention. Be economical with what you say and make sure that it progresses the discussion and works to persuade others.

6. It's not a competition.

    Tying the previous points together, try always to remember that you're not being assessed on whether your position gets taken forward by the group. Rather, the examiners are looking to see how well you can persuade others and ensure that the group works effectively and rationally together. Remember- the aim of the game here is consensus, and you should be facilitating this not blocking it. You'll achieve that by facilitating discussion and asking appropriate questions, as well as making others feel comfortable and encouraging them to want to work alongside you. Speaking respectfully and listening to others' responses will contribute to that end. There's nothing to say that you can't score higher than everyone else in the group even with your proposal at the bottom of the pile in the agreed conclusion. And likewise, you can still completely shoot yourself in the foot despite the group going with the proposal you were advocating!

After you have completed your discussion, you'll be tasked with writing up your group's conclusion (whether or not you came to a final agreement). You will also be asked which proposal you now personally advocate and whether you changed your mind. Your responses will be compared with the

assessors' observations, but so long as your account is logical and includes all necessary information, along the lines of your previous round table discussion, you'll be fine.

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FSAC - THE POLICY RECOMMENDATION EXERCISE

This task is designed to stretch you in a number of ways. It tests how well you can work under tight time pressure (Delivering at Pace), while keeping an eye on detail and making well thought out decisions that deliver defined objectives (Making Effective Decisions). It also examines your ability to balance costs against delivering a good quality service for citizens (Achieving Commercial Outcomes; Delivering Value for Money). The particular competency in focus may vary slightly depending on how the task is designed. What I'm giving you here is an insider view on the general format as well as some tips and tricks on how to make sure that you stay on track; avoiding common mistakes and picking up some 'easy marks' along the way. It would be prudent not to spend too much time on this task thinking about how what you write pertains to the various competencies you think are being tested. Rather, focus on remaining reasonable; thorough and detailed throughout.

From the offset, you will be given a large document cache and a background summary on what you need to do. In accompaniment to all this material will be a number of proposed policies, which you are expected to weigh up with a view to deciding which policy you think should be taken forward by your department, whatever that may be. This should be in line with departmental goals and the information to hand. This will be framed within the stated intentions of your Minister and the Government for the next few years. Bear in mind that you shouldn't introduce any new information

here outside of the information pack as this is a fictional government you are working in and may differ wildly from the current political and economic climate.

The information pack is vast and includes reams of information around the subject area. It will include clippings from experts, focus groups, members of the public, MPs, think-tanks, other civil servants, other government departments… well, you get the idea. There is a lot included here and part of what you are being tested on is your ability to pick out the relevant highlights. The challenge is in ensuring that you can balance this quick pace with developing a well-rounded argument that doesn't leave anything out. You will need to use a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information to support your case and must be able to accurately demonstrate how it supports your argument. Finally, you should demonstrate that you have evaluated the pros and cons of your decision and how it compares with other policy options available. Sounds easy, right?!

A note on time

Time is extremely tight in the Policy Recommendation exercise and you will not have enough of it to read all documentation provided in full. As mentioned before, you're being assessed on your ability to pick out highlights and to produce an accurate and reasonable case at speed. Read the details of the exercise and the governmental and departmental priorities and make sure that you keep these in mind throughout. Follow this up with a scan over the policy options and then a glance through the remaining documentation (in particular the numerical data). At this point, start your writing! Don't aim for a full overview before you get to work; start the work as soon as you can and then return to your documentation throughout. You will see other people around you start almost as soon as they have sat down (while others will linger longer). Don't let the pace of others affect you. Allow yourself the time to form a very early impression of which policy you prefer and why, and then put pen to paper (or cursor to word document…) as soon as you can. Take my word for it - you're better off writing, reading and amending as you go through than you are holding back.

To start you off, have a think about the economic benefits of choosing one policy over another and how this might bring about trade-offs. Money is a very important factor and you should bear in mind the short and long term implications of funding structures. You'll also want to think about stakeholder involvement and how you have incorporated different groups' views into your decision making process. Remember as well to consider, in a fair amount of detail, the counter-proposal on

offer and why you are not recommending it. This exercise is your opportunity to demonstrate your ability to make a balanced decision, not simply a persuasive account of one policy.

Make sure that you retain focus on the structure of the document. The civil service handles a number of policy submissions (what you're being tested on here) and these often follow a common structure:

- Open your policy recommendation with very brief pleasantries and an account of what it is that you set out to do here. Mention your department, that you're writing in relation to a particular aim, and that you're going to assess a number of policy options. This should be brief and simply act as a header to your recommendation.
- After your introduction, clearly state the policy options in a list format and then announce which you are going to be supporting.
- It is at this point that the assessable 'meat' of your exercise comes in. You will now go on to compare and contrast the policy options available, accounting for your preference for one over the other. Clear headers and subtitles are vital for helping the reader to understand what you are comparing and why. Use headings that clearly show the criteria that you are comparing (environmental impact; value for money etc.) Note that the brief at the beginning of the information pack may give the main criteria that you are expected to address in your evaluation. Make sure that you clearly refer to these throughout and keep everything relevant! In each section, refer to the relevant information included in your document cache. If you're referring to public reception, you'll want to refer to your focus group results and press clippings; while environmental impact is going to have to include CO2 output and impact on the countryside (of course, these particulars might not be appropriate to your exercise).
- Upon completion, provide a conclusion, summarising the points made in your comparison and reiterating your support for your chosen policy.

The Policy Recommendation exercise is tough, mentally exhausting and frantic, however you'll go away surprised at your own capabilities and proud of yourself for getting to the end! Follow these tips, stay calm and you'll be fine!

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FSAC - LEADERSHIP EXERCISE

The leadership exercise will begin with you reading the details of a scenario. The circumstances detailed therein will require the efforts of a working group, for which you are to be the leader. Information will be provided on the details of the scenario, the details of the people in your team, and the specific requirements that you are expected to fulfil. You will be given roughly half an hour to consider the scenario, formulate your plan, and prepare a 10 minute presentation on how you will put it into practice. At the end of this period, you will go into a different room with an assessor to whom you will deliver your presentation as if they were your line manager. The examiner will then spend the remaining 20 minutes challenging your plan and asking you questions around it.

The good news is that this, of all the exercises, is the one in which you are least pressed for time. Apart from making sure your presentation isn't too short or too long, the assessor controls the pace. The assessor is also likely to tease out things they're looking for through questions, so you don't need to worry about covering every tiny detail in the presentation. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't think of everything you can; a solid performance will have taken all aspects into consideration, and you will be able to produce a consistent line when prompted. Just don't worry about covering every possible segue as the examiner will draw you down any path that they feel is important.

The Leadership Exercise is designed to assess whether you can consider multiple, sometimes divergent, factors when strategising ('Seeing the Bigger Picture', and 'Changing and Improving'). As such, you should aim to demonstrate a consideration for both high-level strategy (key drivers, aims) and low-level detail (barriers to delivery, timescales, and varying options for solving issues). 'Leading and Communicating' is tested through your clear and concise account of a plan focused around key issues, and this will be further examined via your responses to questions which should demonstrate your understanding of the intricate details and your ability to think on your feet in response to what the examiner points out or queries. 'Collaborating and Partnering' and 'Building Capability for All' are tested by asking you to consider the relationships and development needs of your team, and 'Managing a Quality Service/Delivering at Pace' are assessed through your overarching strategy and justifications that should show you have taken risks into consideration and are responsive to key stakeholders' views.

Do…

- Get into the role. It might feel awkward pretending to be a manager, but confidence is key in delivering a convincing message. The examiner will play their role too as your line manager, which should ease the situation.

- Get into details. Without dwelling too long on any one, talking about details demonstrates thorough critical analysis which is what they're after.

- Think about development needs of your team members, but also consider needs of the team as a whole and include these in your plan.

- Draw a timeline, or map out your team – you should be able to take these in with you and help you make your points.

- Be ready to change your mind. The examiner will pick holes in your plan and try to point out areas you've overlooked. If you can't justify your actions, adapt and explain your new approach. Don't let this dishearten you – the examiner will do this whatever your plan entails!

- To clear and concise in your communication, don't waffle around a subject, and make sure there is a structure to your presentation – cover each area in turn rather than jumping back and forth.

Don't…

- Only think about one aspect, e.g. staffing issues. Remember the aim will always be to deliver a project or service, and staffing is only one consideration. Also consider timescales, budget, wider departmental strategy, stakeholders.

- Be afraid to change your strategy during the questions or if the assessor introduces additional information. Obviously don't be flaky but if discussion shows that another option is preferable, don't be afraid to change your mind.

- Worry if you're presentation is too short. The examiner will probe you on details and you should still be able to demonstrate an understanding of the information to hand.

- Try to play a role. You don't have to act 'like a manager', since you're bound to end up playing a caricature. Just be yourself – the examiner will neither know nor care whether or not you've managed in the past.

- Freak out and run out of the room.

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FSAC - INTERVIEW

So we come at last to the dreaded interview. Although, the thing is, the interview shouldn't be scary at all as it's actually just your opportunity to show off and talk about yourself! The examiners will be looking to assess you against all the competencies in the competency framework and so it's vital that you have something to say about each (more on that later). The format is that of a standard competency based interview. 'Tell me about a time when you've done X' or 'How can you demonstrate Y?' Do your research online for examples of competency based questions at interviews; they all follow a broadly similar format pertaining to your experience doing something, and how you dealt with challenges that arose at the time. A good mnemonic to keep in mind is STAR: Situation, Task, Account/Action, Result. You can address any competency question using that framework and it really will help you keep your answers focussed and on-point. So, when asked to 'tell me about a time when you demonstrated X' (where X is some competency, like 'leadership'), your response should be along the lines of: *"well Mr. Big shot examiner [– don't say that part!], the situation was that S. We needed to do T in order to achieve R. On that basis, I did A. The result was that R went off without a hitch and within budget/timeframe etc."* As you can see, it's A there that really matters – i.e. the Account part of STAR. What was it that **you** did that led to a positive result and that demonstrates the competency that the examiner is looking for? You'll need to make sure that what you mention in the Account is actually your own work, as opposed to that of the group at large, or

someone else's. There's nothing that the examiner can learn about your abilities when all he/she knows is that you were part of a winning team. As a rule of thumb, try to be conscious of how often you're saying 'I' as opposed to 'we'. Needless to say, it should predominantly be the former.

Continuous Professional Development

As a brief side note, before I get on to the particulars, it's worth noting that the Civil Service has a strong culture of continuous professional development. By this I mean that you are encouraged to seek feedback as often as possible and to use it to identify how you can improve your work. The intention is to provide you with the insights needed to set yourself reachable objectives and to use these as benchmarks against which to measure your progress. It is important for you to understand this cultural characteristic of the Civil Service as your suitability for this way of working will be strongly considered during the interview. If you can talk about a time when you've sought feedback and adjusted your behaviour as a result of it (ideally with positive results!) then you'll have given yourself a nice edge to any competency example.

Competency Questions

As with all the exercises at the FSAC, the only thing that you're being examined against is the competency framework. When I was called up for the interview I had already prepared a handful of competency examples that I knew really well and was confident that I could talk through in depth. These examples covered multiple branches of the competency framework and I had taken the time to practice my wording in order to ensure that each competency was clearly marked out and demonstrable through a clear narrative. What happened in practice was that the interviewers asked me a broad range of questions and encouraged me to use a number of examples in order to provide evidence for the competencies that they were considering. Time is short and so the interviewers won't be asking you one question per competency; they'll be expecting a number of them to be demonstrable at once. In order to draw this out, they will press you and ask questions around your responses. Listen carefully to the wording that they use in these follow up questions as they'll often be trying to help you get your answer back on track and in line with what they're reaching for. If you're asked to explain how you managed to ensure that the catering team had the orders through in time to prepare for the wedding you were planning, for example, then you should know that you're really being asked to demonstrate how you are at 'Delivering at Pace'! Oh and trust me, even

at 40 minutes, the interview will go very quickly. You need to make sure that all competencies are covered.

What if you can't think of anything to say?

This can happen for one of two reasons. Either you genuinely don't have any experience that would suitably answer the question or you're really nervous and feeling the pressure a bit. That's fine. For the latter, pour yourself a glass of water before you start the interview. You can then use it as a prop by taking a sip to give yourself time to think and slow the pace. If you're not quite sure what the interviewer is looking for then ask them to repeat the question or, if need be, to elaborate. Conversely, if it's the former, and you feel that you don't have the relevant experience to respond; don't worry. Remember that the examiners aren't necessarily looking for an account of an international merger that you've pulled together; they're just as happy with an example from the charity fun run you organised with your friends at university. If you truly have no examples even close to the competency that the examiner is looking for then explain that; while you haven't been in a specific situation where it was needed, you feel the best approach would be to do XYZ. If it's a question about bringing people together; explain how you would communicate with all the people involved, how you'd keep everyone up to date, how you'd deal with conflict etc. While you might not have an overarching example to run through, you should find that you're able to draw on specific smaller cases to back up those particular theoretical ideas.

What if you don't get a good vibe from your assessor?

It's natural for us to seek some sort of feedback when answering questions like these. It can feel very personal to give intimate accounts and a cold response to your exposition on how you climbed Kilimanjaro with the flu can be somewhat off-putting. Try to remember that the Fast Stream assessors have undergone a good amount of training in order to ensure that they don't give anything away (positive or negative) about your answers. That's not to say that they're going to drill you, or retain a monotonous tone throughout the interview, on the contrary they'll be polite and mildly encouraging. But that's all they'll be. Try to suppress your desire for feedback (remember, that's a good thing usually!) and get on with answering the questions as well as you can. It might be agonising, but I'm afraid you won't know what the assessors thought of you until you read your report in a few weeks' time!

What you don't need to know

As mentioned ad infinitum throughout this guide book, the only thing that the examiners are assessing you against is the competency framework. You can be a currently serving Permanent Secretary with a forty year career in the Civil Service, but from the Fast Stream examiner's perspective, you're on the same level playing field as a new graduate (although I'm guessing you'd have some pretty smokin' hot interview answers in that case). The upshot of this is that work experience is **not** a necessity. While some work experience can be useful in giving you something to draw on in the other exercises, the examiners will not in any way alter their view of you just because you have or haven't worked before. Indeed, since the examiners don't have access to your application material, they don't even know one way or another! As evidence of that fact, a number of new graduates made it through this year with me and are happily sweating away at all their new responsibilities just like the rest of us! The other important upshot that comes out of the singular focus on the competency framework is that you will not be expected to have any previous knowledge of the government, the civil service or any current affairs at the interview. You will not be asked what you know about one department or another, or vetted on how well you understand the parliamentary process. As mentioned previously – being the sort of person who is interested in the Fast Stream, you will likely already be somewhat up to date on current affairs and fairly opinionated on politics – whatever the case, you won't need to know anything like that for the FSAC interview. They only want to talk about you.

Final Tips

Be keen and enthusiastic

You want this job and you should show it. I'm not saying stand on the chair and proclaim to all your lifelong commitment to public service and duty, but enthusiasm is generally good.

Don't be negative

This might seem obvious but it's worth noting that you shouldn't be negative about old employers, colleagues and bosses. If your example involves proactively changing the way things were being done, then make sure you phrase it properly. Nothing seems more unprofessional than a moan and the blame-game (even if they're justified!).

Ask questions!

At the end of the interview, time permitting, you'll be asked if you have any questions. For the sake of Pete, ask some! Make sure they're relevant (don't ask where the examiner got his beautiful tie)

and to the point. Whatever you do though: don't leave the examiners hanging. Asking questions demonstrates your genuine interest in the role and allows you to have a little more of a free flowing conversation, which can be a relief after all the one-way traffic that's been coming from you over the past forty minutes. It's a nice way to close everything off and will provide you with some valuable information to take away. Plan six or seven questions beforehand (some may be answered earlier) and ask two or three when given the chance.

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THE FINAL SELECTION BOARD

The final hurdle

For the lucky Generalists, the FSAC is their final stage in the selection process and they'll be happily sitting back with a Sangria and their feet up by this point. For the specialist streams, however, there remains the dreaded Final Selection Board. Having passed the FSAC, the FSB exists as a final sift of candidates in order to ensure that they are well suited to joining their particular specialism. As of the date of writing, the schemes that hold an FSB are as follows:

- Diplomatic Service
- Houses of Parliament
- Science and Engineering
- Digital and Technology
- European
- Government Communication Service

The preparation that you will need to undertake for the FSB will be specific to your scheme and the general procedure will be detailed in the FSAC Candidate Guide (that will be signposted to you by CS Resourcing), however there are some similarities across the board. It is outside the remit of this

guide to give an in depth account of what will happen at each of the different FSBs. Instead we've aimed to provide you with a few overarching points that should help no matter which FSB you will be taking. If you are truly serious about applying for these schemes and have got to this stage, then you really should be clear by now as to why you this particular area is of interest. The FSBs are designed to assess that understanding alongside your general aptitude. Many of the skills that you have drawn on at FSAC will also be needed again, including:

- Evaluating options based on evidence;
- Working under time pressure;
- Seeing the bigger picture.

Broadly, beyond the considerations that you've undertaken for FSAC, there are two major extras areas to consider for the FSB.

Why this specialism?

Be clear about why you want to join that particular stream and be able to provide some evidence to back up your interest. By this stage you will have already demonstrated that you have an interest in public service and everything that goes with it. This stage exists to assess your interest and aptitude for one particular area. Think about what experiences and skills you have and how these fit closely with the specialism to which you are applying. These don't need to be anything extreme. If you're applying to the Digital and Technology stream, have you ever installed RAM (or built a computer)? Are you generally the 'go-to' tech solution person in your office/family? What is it about the digital world that you think is exciting and that you want to be part of? If it's the Diplomatic Service to which you're applying, have you travelled a lot? Which particular cultures are you deeply interested in and why? For communications, are you a social media aficionado? Did you manage to spread the word on a charity fundraising event you ran through clever marketing? These are the sorts of questions to ask yourself. Remember that it's competency and genuine interest that the examiners are looking for, not an existing track record of in-depth experience.

Do your research!

At the FSAC, any knowledge of current affairs and government practice was strictly optional; it was suitability against the competency framework alone that was being assessed. The FSB is different and functions a lot more like a standard interview. You will be expected to have researched the government's involvement in your particular specialism in detail. To this end, make sure that you are

up to date with the news, both domestic and international, as well as current political issues. Needless to say, pay particular attention to areas related to your specialism, both in Government and the private/third/public sectors. It might seem obvious but make sure that you can confidently and coherently describe these things, as well as the various factors that may influence them. Note that you may be asked about a time when the Government could have done something in a better way and so researching examples of this (and how it happened) will also be essential. You may be asked about the impact of the decisions that were made and where these might have been misguided. You'll also be asked how you would have done things differently. Also try to be absolutely clear on any current Government and Civil Service strategies and initiatives that will have an impact on future policy. Be clear about what a change of Government might mean in these areas too, as for the 2015 intake, your FSBs will be very close to a general election.

Activities around the interview will vary by stream, however they should not stray far from those undertaken at FSAC. The FSB will also be shorter than FSAC and you should draw confidence from the fact you are one of the select few who has made it this far.

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WHAT NEXT?

Well done for getting this far! Whether you were successful in your application or not, there are lots of things to consider for life after the application process. Read on to find out more…

Better luck next time?

If you didn't make it this time, it's not the end of the road. Firstly, whatever stage you made it to, the Fast Stream is extremely competitive, with up to 30,000 applications in a year for anywhere between 300 and 800 appointments across the various streams, depending on the resourcing requirements at the time – that's up to one successful application in a hundred. It may be helpful to consider the following options:

Try again next year

There is nothing stopping you applying year after year, and in fact, a large proportion of current fast streamers weren't successful on their first attempt. Call it practice. Remember as you go through the application process that you may end up going through it again so make sure you keep a note of what you found difficult or surprising, and think of what you could work on to improve if you were to reapply. The fast stream intake numbers also change each year, so it may just be that this year was a particularly difficult and popular year. The report(s) that you get back from the FSAC (and FSB if you're a specialist applicant) can be invaluable in your performance during your second and

subsequent applications. These are detailed accounts of your performance in every exercise, produced by the examiners who assessed you on the day. They will discuss what you've done well, what you could have improved on, and what needs a lot of work alongside a score that will make clear what has cost you your place on the scheme. Use these to up your game next time round as they're the only source of genuinely tailored information that you will have.

Explore different routes into government

The fast stream is not the only way to work in government. At the graduate level, some departments run their own graduate scheme (e.g. Department for International Development or HM Treasury), and many also offer internships. Otherwise, you will also be able to register on Civil Service jobs for a 'direct entry' role into any position advertised publicly. You will find these routes listed here: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service/about/recruitment.

Internships may also be advertised via http://graduatetalentpool.direct.gov.uk/. Fast Stream applicants who were unsuccessful but performed well at the Assessment Centre are occasionally offered officer roles within departments. This is rare, but worth bearing in mind as a possible outcome.

Build wider experience

In truth, a majority of fast streamers have come to the Civil Service with some prior experience in the world of work, be it from the private or third sector, elsewhere in public services, or another government role. Experience in the wider world brings valuable insight that will not only help your application or serve as an asset to the Civil Service. As someone who applied to the fast stream unsuccessfully before graduating, I am glad of the experience I gained working in the not-for-profit sector which not only gave me important insight into industry, but also got me just a little more used to working life.

Were you successful?

Congratulations, and welcome to the Fast Stream! Now you have a few months to enjoy your success before any sense of responsibility sets in. In this time you'll have to go through security and clearance checks, which involve getting multiple forms sent off. This may take some time, particularly for some departments (Home Office, Defence, and Foreign & Commonwealth Office) but once these are successfully completed, you're in!

In this time, there are a number of things you could do to prepare for your first posting in the Civil Service:

Find out about the Fast Stream

In the first weeks you will be inundated with information. You can reduce the sheer volume of completely fresh data by finding out what you can in advance of your induction. Unfortunately a lot of information is decided and disclosed quite late in the process, but the website is a good start, along with your contract. An incoming fast streamers Facebook group will inevitably also be set up which is a good forum for raising questions. The fast stream may also assign you a buddy, who may not be from your department but will be able to field questions on fast stream life in general.

Swot up on government

People arrive at the fast stream with a variety of exposure or knowledge of Government – so do not be put off if things like parliamentary questions and box notes are straight over your head, as you won't be the only one. There are however a few things that you can do in order to ensure that your learning curve is slightly more moderate:

- Sort out your who's who: knowing who's in cabinet is a good start, particularly as many people in the civil service love a good name drop. In particular, find out who the ministers are in your department when you find out your posting. You may come across them in the lift and not want to do anything too embarrassing.
- Parliamentary procedure: This may be explained during induction, but it is quite complex, so take your time to understand it while you have the time.
- Find out what important bills have gone through parliament in the last year; this will give you a sense of what the government's agenda is and help you make sense of how your role may fit in (or not).
- Once you know your posting, find out about your department and what it does. Even something as simple as noting down acronyms will be valuable in making the first few weeks slightly less overwhelming.

Don't worry though – after the frantic pace of the FSAC and the immense headache that you'll be left with, the Civil Service team do all they can to make your transition into Government as comfortable as possible. Everything will be signposted when you start and you won't be expected to know anything beyond the obvious. Use this time to relax and look forward to your new career – you've earned it.

See you in the office!

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