



Fourth Meeting of the High-Level Reflection Group on the Future of the Commission's Civil Service

8 April 2026, Brussels

Meeting minutes

Main objectives of the meeting

The purpose of the fourth meeting was to explore themes relevant to the ongoing large-scale review: strategic foresight, portfolio management, leadership, and simplification and artificial intelligence (AI).

The meeting was organised around four sessions based on these themes, each combining short presentations, drawing on external expertise and practical case studies, followed by an open discussion among the group members.

Strategic Foresight

Thomas Hemmelgarn from the Joint Research Centre and Daniela Tidten from the Secretariat-General joined for the first session, presenting the Commission's existing strategic foresight capabilities and their application in policy making.

The presenters highlighted some key drivers emerging from their work including geopolitics, AI and institutional capacity, as well as the role of trust and democracy in the information environment. They stressed that these drivers do not stand alone but interact and reinforce each other.

Members welcomed the insights and recognised the importance of further embedding innovative methods such as strategic foresight at scale. There was also strong alignment on the need for more integrated policy making and the potential of portfolio approaches to support a more collaborative way of working with a strong sense of directionality. During the discussion, members noted the challenge of balancing competing objectives and flagged the importance of making trade-offs explicit, to help reduce the risk of a siloed approach. To drive change, members stressed several factors to keep in mind, including the importance of a strong Commission-wide identity, aligning budget allocation with priorities and alignment of system-wide incentives.

Portfolio Management

Darja Isaksson gave a presentation on her experience embedding portfolioⁱ management at VINNOVA, the Swedish innovation agency.

Darja's presentation provided the members with a real-life example of what the shift toward portfolios looks like in an organisation and how it can deliver impact through greater strategic alignment, enhanced collaboration and providing a system-wide view on challenges. During the discussion, Darja shared her experience in more detail, flagging that the system-wide nature of the change can require strong strategic rationale from top management, while the operational detail of implementation can emerge bottom-up. She also highlighted the role this approach can play in

supporting better strategic alignment by treating re-prioritisation as a continuous process and supporting a whole-of-VINNOVA perspective across the organisation.

The discussion that followed explored in more detail the enablers for portfolio-based approaches, including strong communication from leadership, the types of training and skills required, the role of AI tools in facilitating transparency and the importance of shared organisational goals and objectives. The fundamental challenge of scale was also acknowledged and whether a step-by-step approach would be more feasible in the Commission context. Finally, the relationship between task forces and portfolios was explored, with it being suggested that task forces represent the operational mechanism while portfolios represent the strategic agreement on content and purpose.

Leadership

Theresa Twachtmann gave a presentation on future leadership, which included a presentation of two case studies across the German public service. Theresa highlighted that, from her experience, leadership transformation requires a systemic approach and flagged four core competencies as being particularly critical for future-readiness: adaptive leadership; system leadership across organisational silos; people-centred and empowering leadership; and strategic prioritisation.

The discussion which followed touched upon a variety of issues relevant in the Commission context. Two key opportunities facing the Commission were highlighted - the strong demand from staff for the Commission to change its ways of working and the significant number of retirements and departures expected in the coming years. They also reiterated the importance of investing in the leadership pipeline based on explicitly defined qualities and highlighted the important role psychological safety can play in supporting an appropriate risk management culture. The different incentives that could be used to drive desired behaviour were also explored including recognition through structured feedback processes, new challenges and visibility, and roles with delivery responsibility.

Simplification and AI

Darja Isaksson gave a presentation on AI transformation, followed by a presentation from Maria Schack Vindum on the Digital Taskforce in Denmark.

During the discussion, the concept of agentic AI and its potential for use in public service was explored. This was followed by a discussion on impact and the need to redesign work, as demand for services will increase as capability grows. The members also discussed the critical importance of having human oversight in AI-assisted decision-making, exploring the concept of adopting a human-on-the-loop approach while also acknowledging how this might impact the skills and capabilities needed. Other key issues raised during the discussion included ways to embed simplification as a continuous process rather than a one-off project, the need for a comprehensive data map to know what data exists and where and the importance of adopting a systemic approach to AI integration, which considers the broader picture of governance, HR and legal frameworks.

Next steps

The Chair confirmed the next meeting is scheduled for 3 June and will include an update on the large-scale review process and benchmarking, as well as an initial identification of the main themes for the report.

List of participants

Chair: Catherine Day.

Members: Mirosława Boryczka, Marco Daglio, Luukas Ilves, Darja Isaksson, Luis Romero Requena, Giorgios Pitsilis, Maria Schack Vindum, Theresa Twachtmann.

European Commission: Stephen Quest, Pascal Leardini, Paul McAleavey, Lauren O'Hanlon, Thomas Hemmelgarn (Joint Research Centre), Daniela Tidten (Secretariat-General) and the Workstream Leaders for Leadership, Anna Jarosz-Friis, Innovation and AI, Saâd Kadhi and Simplification, Jörgen Gren.

ⁱ In this context portfolio management means working across an organisation by topic or outcomes rather than within pre-defined sectors.