

UK's Chief of Staff Morgan McSweeney Confirmed as Highest-Paid Special Adviser

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The Cabinet Office has revealed that Morgan McSweeney, chief of staff to Prime Minister Keir Starmer, is currently the highest-paid special adviser in the UK government, earning between £155,000 and £159,999. This places him above all other advisers, including those in senior political roles across Whitehall.

McSweeney assumed the role of Downing Street Chief of Staff in October 2024, taking over from Sue Gray. He previously served as Starmer's head of political strategy and campaign director before entering government. His salary places him in pay band PB4, a bracket that typically ranges from £102,000 to £145,000, yet McSweeney is the only adviser currently listed in a newly created upper pay band of £155,000 to £159,999.

Under the Cabinet Office's pay disclosure system, all special advisers earning more than £76,000 are publicly listed in £5,000 increments. McSweeney's salary significantly exceeds that of many of his colleagues, prompting renewed scrutiny over the cost of political staffing at the heart of government.

His predecessor, Sue Gray, widely known for leading the Partygate investigation, was reportedly paid £170,000 in her role, surpassing Starmer's official salary of £166,786. Gray's compensation package sparked internal and public controversy, with many questioning the appropriateness of a special adviser receiving a higher salary than the prime minister. She later stepped down under pressure amid criticism over her influence and remuneration.

Critics argue that such pay levels, especially in publicly funded advisory roles, risk damaging the integrity of government appointments. One insider remarked that Gray's salary created tension within Downing Street, particularly among advisers who had taken pay cuts to join the administration from the opposition.

From a center-right perspective, competitive salaries may be necessary to attract experienced advisers to senior roles, especially in an

increasingly complex political environment. However, transparency and consistency in how these salaries are set is essential. Public trust hinges on clear justification for compensation and an assurance that appointments are made on merit, not proximity to power.

The total cost of special advisers for the 2024–25 fiscal year reached £9.5 million, including £3.1 million in severance payments for outgoing staff. While advisory roles are critical in shaping government policy, the figures highlight the growing burden on taxpayers and the need for firm accountability at the top.