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Civil service, 2020

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The work of the civil service during 2020 was dominated by the February general election and subsequent government formation and, of course, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

New government and department reshuffles

A new government was formed on 27 June, 140 days after the February general election, with the appointment of Fianna Fáil's Micheál Martin, TD, as Taoiseach. The coalition government marks the first time that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have participated in the same government. The Green Party joins them in coalition.

As can be expected with any new administration, a number of changes were made to government departments, with one entirely new department being created. There are now eighteen departments, with a number of ministers having responsibility for more than one department. Table 1 provides a list of all current departments and a summary of main changes.

Covid-19

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic was undoubtedly the dominant issue for the civil service in 2020. The sectoral reviews in this issue will detail the responses with regard to health, education, local government and political developments. The public health response

Table 1: Government departments and senior ministers, December 2020, and summary of changes from previous administration

<i>Government departments (December 2020)</i>	<i>Senior minister (December 2020)</i>	<i>Changes from previous administration</i>	<i>Summary of changes</i>
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Charlie McConalogue (FF)	Retained	
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Roderic O’Gorman (GP)	Renamed and new functions added	A number of new functions have transferred to the department from the Department of Justice and Equality under the broad areas of equality, integration and disability; previously known as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Department of Defence	Simon Coveney (FG)	Retained	
Department of Education	Norma Foley (FF)	Renamed and functions transferred	Functions transferred from the former Department of Education and Skills to the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Leo Varadkar, Tánaiste (FG)	Renamed and new functions added	Trade functions transferred from the former Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Table 1: Government departments and senior ministers, December 2020, and summary of changes from previous administration (Contd.)

<i>Government departments (December 2020)</i>	<i>Senior minister (December 2020)</i>	<i>Changes from previous administration</i>	<i>Summary of changes</i>
Department of Finance	Paschal Donohoe (FG)	Retained	
Department of Foreign Affairs	Simon Coveney (FG)	Renamed and functions transferred	Trade functions transferred to Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation and Science	Simon Harris (FG)	New department	New department established, taking functions from the former Department of Education and Skills, renamed the Department of Education
Department of Health	Stephen Donnelly (FF)	Retained	
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Darragh O'Brien (FF)	Renamed and new functions added	Heritage function transferred from the former Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Department of Justice	Helen McEntee (FG)	Renamed	The department was renamed, with functions of the former Department of Justice and Equality transferring to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Table 1: Government departments and senior ministers, December 2020, and summary of changes from previous administration (Contd.)

<i>Government departments (December 2020)</i>	<i>Senior minister (December 2020)</i>	<i>Changes from previous administration</i>	<i>Summary of changes</i>
Department of Public Expenditure and Reform	Michael McGrath (FF)	Retained	
Department of Rural and Community Development	Heather Humphreys (FG)	Retained and new functions added	The former Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Rural and Community Development had functions reassigned into the Department of Rural and Community Development and the renamed Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
Department of Social Protection	Heather Humphreys (FG)	Renamed	Formerly named the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications	Eamon Ryan (GP)	Renamed	Formerly named the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment
Department of the Taoiseach	Micheál Martin, An Taoiseach (FF)	Retained	

Table 1: Government departments and senior ministers, December 2020, and summary of changes from previous administration (Contd.)

<i>Government departments (December 2020)</i>	<i>Senior minister (December 2020)</i>	<i>Changes from previous administration</i>	<i>Summary of changes</i>
Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Catherine Martin (GP)	Renamed and new functions added	The former Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Rural and Community Development had functions reassigned into the Department of Rural and Community Development and the renamed Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
Department of Transport	Eamon Ryan (GP)	Renamed and functions transferred	Tourism and sport transferred to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Note: FF = Fianna Fáil; FG = Fine Gael; GP = Green Party.

was led by the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive. However, given the unprecedented social and economic impact of the pandemic, the response required a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach. The civil service, as the machinery behind government, has been a key driver and implementer of the response.

For the civil service, the immediate response to the pandemic from March 2020 brought about significant changes to working arrangements for most. Business continuity was an early priority in order to continue to deliver essential services, as outlined in the government's initial *National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19*, published on 16 March.

The Department of the Taoiseach, along with the Department of Health and others, has played a key coordinating role in the policy response to Covid-19. The Department of the Taoiseach convenes the senior officials' grouping and subgroups which have been put in place to drive implementation of the government's *Plan for Living with Covid-19*, published in September 2020, and support preparations for the Cabinet Committee on Covid-19 and the Covid-19 Oversight Group.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) produced a number of guidance and FAQ documents in relation to working arrangements and temporary assignments across the public service between early March and year end. Early iterations of these guidance documents focused on leave arrangements for those needing to isolate, quarantine or take sick leave due to Covid-19.

Flexible working arrangements were quickly introduced to facilitate working from home to the maximum extent feasible. Temporary assignments were also a key feature of the early response, with civil servants assigned to essential roles. As early as 16 March, 800 civil and public servants were reallocated to contact tracing and other roles to support the health service. The number of civil servants working remotely has fluctuated throughout the year in line with public health guidance; a survey completed in autumn 2020 showed the extent of remote working throughout 2020 (see below).

In a November interview in *Eolas* magazine, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform Michael McGrath, TD, said that one positive consequence of the Covid-19 crisis is a renewed sense of appreciation of what really matters and of the imperative to have good public services, adding that he envisages 'we will have a larger state coming out of the pandemic' ('Recovery and reform', 2020).

Comparatively, Ireland ranks below average in a number of indicators relating to general government employment and expenditure, which are commonly used indicators to measure the size of the public service (see Boyle, 2020b, for an overview of public sector trends).

The public's appetite for information from the government soared in the period from January to May, with a 760 per cent increase in visits to the gov.ie website compared to the whole of 2019; there were 52.6 million page views during January–May. Digitalisation has been a priority for public service reform for a number of years now, and this year has emphasised the importance of having online options available in order to maintain service delivery. Another key indicator, identified in the *Our Public Service 2020: Selected Indicators and Trends* report (DPER, 2020b), is the significant increase in the number 'MyGovId' accounts created up to May 2020 – a 40 per cent growth from quarter four 2019.¹

One example of the role of the civil service in the Covid-19 response is the administering and payment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). This new temporary payment was introduced in mid March to provide payment to those who became unemployed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The then Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection noted that the number of applicants received in the first two weeks equated to a nineteen-month claim load. What was initially set out to be a six-week temporary measure is now expected to be in place until March 2021. As of 5 January 2021, over €5 billion in total has been paid out in PUP, with 351,400 receiving the payment in the previous week.

Remote working during Covid-19

A survey to capture the experience of civil servants who transitioned to remote working took place in the autumn, under the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey initiative. This survey has gained the highest response rate of surveys conducted to date, with 26,822 civil servants (65 per cent of the workforce) responding. The results of the survey provide an evidence base for future policy decisions regarding

¹ MyGovID is a secure online identity verification service undertaken by the Department of Social Protection on behalf of state bodies providing public services online. It provides streamlined access to multiple public services, including Revenue, SUSI, NDLS, MyWelfare, Voter.ie, JobsIreland.ie, the National Childcare Scheme, and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine.

working arrangements, well-being needs and workplace supports (DPER, 2020a).

The shift to remote working has been extraordinary, with 75 per cent of respondents reporting that they were working remotely at the time of the survey. Eighty-one per cent of respondents had never worked remotely before the pandemic. Civil servants indicated a strong preference for a blended approach to remote working in the future (i.e. a mix of home and office). In terms of connectivity, 72 per cent reported receiving regular contact from their organisation while working remotely.

Some challenges were also highlighted as a result of the survey, including the level of well-being supports, the regional differences, and differences in the experience across grades; civil servants at lower grades felt less connected with their organisation and it is noted that the ‘current hierarchical structure of the civil service may pose challenges for effective communication across all grades’.

The survey report provides comparisons to national and international evidence, noting that overall results compare sympathetically, indicating ‘the experiences, resilience and drive of staff are part of a more global phenomenon’.

Staffing and recruitment

Employment in the civil service continued to increase in 2020, with 43,632 whole-time equivalent staff employed at end of quarter three 2020. This represents a small proportion, just under 2 per cent, of the overall workforce in Ireland (Boyle, 2020b).

Trends in the civil service workforce

New research published in October (Mahon & Brassill, 2020) provides an analysis of the civil service workforce, as well as new joiner and temporary clerical officers (TCO) usage trends. Some selected trends are highlighted below:

- The age distribution of the civil service is higher than that of the general Irish labour force. The proportion of the civil service workforce over the age of fifty-four is 28 per cent, compared to 17 per cent for the general workforce, while the proportion of the workforce aged under thirty-five is 16 per cent for the civil service and 34 per cent for the Irish labour force.

- The age at which new entrants join the civil service has been increasing since the financial crisis. Approximately two-thirds of all joiners were aged between seventeen and thirty-four during 2006–8. By contrast, during 2017–19 two-thirds were aged between twenty-five and forty-four.
- There has been a steady increase in the total hours of TCOs since 2009, with increases seen across all months of the year, not just the traditional summer period.
- Women accounted for 59 per cent of the civil service in 2020. Between 2006–8 and 2017–19 the biggest changes in gender balance were at the administrative officer (male: from 45 per cent to 50 per cent), principal officer (female: from 33 per cent to 41 per cent) and senior management grades (female: from 33 per cent to 46 per cent).

Top-level recruitment

Recruitment to the highest levels in the civil service (assistant secretary level and above) is overseen by the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC). The most recent annual report from TLAC contains information on developments and trends relating to 2019. TLAC processed twenty-four posts in 2019 (seventeen general and seven specialised posts). The average total posts processed each year between 2012 and 2017 was twenty-six.

Recent years have seen something of a downward trend in the numbers applying for TLAC posts. In 2018 there were twenty-three applications on average for each post. Over the previous seven years, the average had been twenty-nine. In 2019 there were 629 applicants for twenty-four posts, an average of twenty-six per post. This represents a slight rise on the previous year but it remains below the eight-year average.

Out of seven specialised posts, five recommendations were made by TLAC. One successful candidate declined a specialist post after recommendation. In comparison, recommendations were made for all seventeen general service posts, again with just one candidate declining the position.

In terms of gender balance, there was a shift in trends compared to the previous year in relation to specialised posts. In 2018 all five recommendations for specialised posts were women, while in 2019 all five were male. For general service posts, 53 per cent (nine) were men and 47 per cent (eight) were female. TLAC comments on the overall deviation in gender balance compared to previous years, noting it as

‘problematic’ and something that, while possibly representing a ‘temporary, one-off’, must bear attention (TLAC, 2020).

Diversity of the applicant pool is another area monitored by TLAC. It is noted that no data are available on ethnicity, nationality or other forms of diversity, and that it is essential these data are collected in future and measures are considered that will serve to bring an appropriate number of persons of ethnic diversity to senior positions.

Applicants from within the civil and public service continue to dominate both the applicant pool and appointments made. Of those recommended for appointment in regard to the twenty-four posts processed in 2019, twelve came from within the hiring department or one of its agencies, six from other departments within the civil service, and three from outside the civil service. In three cases no appointment was made. There is a higher percentage of private sector applicants recommended for specialised posts (24 per cent compared to just 6 per cent for general posts), which may reflect the need for different skills, capacity and experience for specialised posts. Boyle (2020a) notes that open recruitment and employment of senior managers from outside the public service has benefits and is likely to continue, though it also brings challenges:

Whilst having benefits and bringing about a more diverse and specialised skills base, this will bring its own challenges. In countries such as the UK and the US, which has promoted open recruitment and employment of senior managers from outside the public service for a number of years, there have been issues around higher levels of turnover and difficulties for some outsiders in adjusting to the organisational culture and practice of the public service and in identifying with a public service ethos. What is needed is an appropriate balance between specialists and generalists, outsiders and insiders. (Boyle, 2020a, pp. 17–18).

Job churn in the civil service

A new report under the Spending Review initiative was published in September looking at job churn across the public service between 2006 and 2018 (Gambi & Brassill, 2020). The report provides a comparative perspective of the dynamics on job churn and its components in the public service and the civil service, through analysis of a job-churn data set from the Central Statistics Office. Some key findings in relation to the civil service in particular are:

- Job movement in both the civil service and the public service was consistently lower than in the private sector in all cases throughout 2006–18.
- Job movement was higher in strong economic times and lower in the economic downturn across all sectors – hence it can be observed that job churn has been pro-cyclical.
- Civil service job churn rates reached or exceeded public service rates in the strong economic years of 2008, 2017 and 2018.
- Job stayer rates were greater in both the public service and the civil service than in the private sector throughout 2006–18.
- Civil servants tended to remain within the ‘wider public service’ when leaving their jobs throughout the whole period (2007–18), and a smaller share of civil servants than public servants exited to the private sector.

New public service agreement

In December a new public service agreement was negotiated between government and the public service unions. It will be considered by union members in early 2021. The terms of the proposed agreement have a pay bill cost of €906 million spread over three budgetary years. In announcing the details of the agreement, Minister McGrath acknowledged how the public service stepped up to the challenge of Covid-19 and demonstrated a ‘world-class response’.

The agreement is weighted toward those on lower incomes, with phased pay adjustments to commence later in 2021. For the first time, a separate mechanism has been introduced to address sectoral issues. A separate review process is also included to address issues of additional working hours from the 2013 Haddington Road Agreement, with a €150 million fund established for this purpose.

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