Administration, vol. 70, no. 1 (2022), pp. 17–29
doi: 10.2478/admin-2022-0002

Civil service, 2021

Cáit Ní Chorcora

Institute of Public Administration, Ireland

The work of the civil service was again dominated by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Related initiatives included a further shift towards digital public services, the report on the 2020 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey, and the advancement of a blended working policy framework and a health and well-being framework for the civil service.

Other developments included publication of the final progress report on *Our Public Service 2020* (OPS2020) – the government’s framework for development and innovation in the public service. This was followed by the publication of the *Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy* and the *Civil Service Renewal 2024 Action Plan*. There was also an update on gender diversity on state boards and several spending review papers were published in the area of pay and pensions policy.

The final phases of the Civil Service Mobility scheme went live, and the scheme is now open to over 30,000 civil servants in the general service stream to apply for permanent moves to other organisations within their current location along with chosen geographical moves. A new secondment policy was also launched to support the mobility scheme for temporary moves to fill vacancies concurrent with time-bound projects/placements.

Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy

Civil Service Renewal 2030 is a ten-year strategy of reform for the civil service that was launched by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Taoiseach in May (Department of Public Expenditure

and Reform (DPER), 2021g). It was developed on a collaborative basis with departments and offices, and has been informed by expertise from across the civil service.

This strategy outlines a collective commitment to achieve an innovative, professional and agile civil service for the Irish public through excellence in service delivery and strategic policy development. It has four stated guiding principles:

1. the public at the centre of everything the civil service does;
2. strong leadership and a positive workplace culture which embodies integrity, equality and independence, and embraces openness, honesty and innovation;
3. focus on delivering measurable and tangible outcomes for society;
4. alignment with the public service.

The Civil Service Management Board will provide strategic oversight of the delivery of this strategy and the Civil Service Renewal Programme Management Office will guide its implementation. This strategy will be implemented through a series of three-year action plans. The first of these, *Civil Service Renewal 2024* (DPER, 2021f), was published in December 2021.

These action plans will detail specific goals and initiatives which will progress each of the strategic priorities. Progress and implementation of the action plans will be monitored and evaluated using progress reports and robust project management methodologies.

This strategy will build on the successful initiatives delivered by the first civil service renewal plan, while identifying areas for improvement and opportunities to reimagine aspects of the systems currently in place. The strategy is centred on three core themes:

1. evidence-informed policy and services;
2. digital first and embedding innovation;
3. workforce, workplace and organisation of the future.

Specific stated outcomes and strategic priorities have been identified under each theme. These are described along with the specific actions in the action plan.

Key developments under the Building Momentum Agreement

In December 2020 a new public service pay agreement for 2021–2, *Building Momentum*, was published by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC, 2021). In May 2021 an associated action plan was

published (DPER, 2021b). The action plan is centred on implementing four strategic priorities:

1. improving access to services and increased flexibility in our resourcing model to deliver better services:
 - amending/extending opening arrangements;
 - a reassignment and temporary assignment policy and scheme;
 - position management for professional/technical grades;
 - mobility;
 - secondment;
 - a national apprenticeship plan;
2. the potential for technology to transform service delivery:
 - shared and common services;
 - embracing new and emerging technology;
3. flexibility and strengthening capacity:
 - flexible working;
 - accommodation;
 - organisational reviews;
 - professionalisation;
4. business/operational/policy changes leading to internal efficiencies:
 - standardisation;
 - redesign of policies.

An independent body was also established in May to examine issues arising in addressing the additional working hours for public servants provided for under the *Haddington Road Agreement* in 2013. The review group is chaired by Kieran Mulvey, former director general of the WRC, and was tasked with bringing forward recommendations to government.

The new agreement also provides for two new key governance structures charged with dealing with problems, issues of interpretation and major disputes – the Public Service Agreement Group and the Tripartite Implementation Body. The government appointed Kevin Duffy, former Chair of the Labour Court, as chair of these bodies.

The first of three progress reports on this action plan was produced in August 2021 (DPER, 2021c), outlining achievements to date under each of the stated actions in the plan. The second progress report will be published shortly, with the third, and final, report due in September 2022.

Final progress report on OPS2020

In April DPER launched the *Our Public Service 2020 Final Progress Report* (DPER, 2021i). OPS2020 is built on three pillars:

1. delivering for our public;
2. innovating for our future;
3. developing our people and organisations.

As well as new initiatives, the OPS2020 framework extends many reforms already in place or in development within the public service. It provides for a strengthened and innovative governance structure, led by a Public Service Leadership Board with representation at secretary general/CEO level from across the public service. This board is tasked with providing overall leadership of, and commitment to, ongoing public service development and innovation.

The period covered by this progress report covers the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, which has transformed the environment in which the public service operates and presented unprecedented challenges. Notable developments include:

- publication of the new overarching public service innovation strategy, *Making Innovation Real*, together with a range of other initiatives aimed at ensuring a more innovative public service;
- publication of a *Public Service Project Management Handbook*;
- development of a Statement of Principles for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service.

A range of case studies under each of OPS2020's pillars illustrate how the principles of the framework are carried into practice on the ground by public service bodies (a number relate to the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic). The case study themes include:

- a new simplified application process for unemployed support during the Covid-19 pandemic and development of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment;
- the new eProbate online service for Revenue and the Courts Service (Probate Office);
- a new geographic information system (GIS) app developed by local authorities for data collection and reporting on extreme events related to climate change.

Preparations for the successor framework to OPS2020 were progressed in 2021, including identifying learnings from the public service response to Covid-19, which will inform the design of the next phase of reform.

Report on the 2020 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey

In May the report on the full results from the 2020 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey was published (DPER, 2021d). This survey was conducted in September 2020 and was the third in a series of three surveys – the previous two being conducted in 2015 and 2017 – to measure staff perception on a number of themes, including employee engagement, commitment to the organisation, well-being and coping with change.

This most recent survey achieved the highest response rate to date, with 26,822 civil servants (65 per cent of the workforce) responding (a 26-point increase on the 2015 survey).

Overall, the results of the 2020 survey will inform the development of future policies and initiatives with respect to employee well-being and workplace supports.

Key findings of the 2020 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey report

Positive findings:

- Despite the challenges of Covid-19 (50 per cent of the civil service were working remotely at the time of the survey), staff reported feeling the same levels of competence as in 2017 (79 per cent).
- The innovative climate, at 55 per cent, is no longer in the top five most challenging results and has improved ten points since 2015.
- The overall theme score for citizen impact has improved again, increasing to 73 per cent in 2020. Feelings of making a positive difference to citizens' lives and awareness of how their work benefits the public have both experienced significant increases. The widely publicised continuity of service delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic may have contributed to this positive increase.
- Staff are becoming more positive about senior leadership in their organisation (59 per cent in 2020 compared to 55 per cent in 2017).
- Although the overall theme score for social support from colleagues at work has slightly regressed (71 per cent in 2020 compared with 72 per cent in 2017), this remains one of the more positive results in the survey. The slight decrease is most likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which could potentially hamper relationship building.

Challenging findings:

- The involvement climate, at 41 per cent, remains the most challenging result from the 2020 survey. Only a minority of civil servants feel openly involved in decision-making in their organisation.
- The majority of staff continue to feel that the public does not value the work of the civil service. However, this finding stands in contrast to the results of the 2019 Civil Service Customer Service Survey and previous iterations, which have consistently shown that citizens are highly satisfied with the work of the civil service.
- Only 42 per cent of staff believe that they will have the opportunity to be promoted if they perform well, while only 36 per cent of staff believe that their department has a clear and fair promotion process. More experienced staff are less positive about the transparency of the promotion process while senior managers are generally more positive than those at lower grades.
- Only 20 per cent of respondents agreed that poor performance is effectively addressed throughout their department, with just 46 per cent agreeing that people in their department are held accountable for achieving goals and meeting expectations.

Managing the Covid-19 pandemic

Move towards digital

The MyGovID digital identity service (www.mygovid.ie), a joint initiative by DPER and the Department of Social Protection, passed 1 million verified accounts at the start of 2021, meaning the uptake doubled in less than one year. The MyGovID eID service enables access to many high-value digital public services.

During 2021 further enhancements were made to the EU Digital Covid Certificate, including the issuance of new versions to those who received a booster vaccine.

In February DPER announced a new service, entitled the Digital Postbox (www.digitalpostbox.ie). This service is now available and ready for public bodies to begin integrating their services. It will allow individuals to receive correspondence from government bodies securely and efficiently online, reducing costs and paper waste.

Also in February the department launched the Public Service Data Catalogue (datacatalogue.gov.ie), which will provide citizens with greater transparency around the data held by the public service. It provides information on over 1,100 key data sets across almost

100 public bodies. Data sets catalogued include personal data, business data and data critical to business decisions or service delivery. The catalogue provides citizens with plain-English descriptive information about data sets, including their purpose, their coverage and whether they include any personal or sensitive personal data.

Guidance for the public service employers on working arrangements during Covid-19

During 2021 DPER worked with leaders and unions across the Irish public service to deal with emerging issues in response to Covid-19 workforce challenges. The department produced a *Guidance and FAQs* document (currently on version 20), providing practical advice and guidance to employers across the civil and public service on all working matters related to Covid-19.

Developments on blended working strategy post Covid-19

In January the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2021) published the *Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy*. In July DPER and the Civil Service Management Board published a policy statement on blended working in the civil service (DPER, 2021a). This aimed to provide broad strategic direction to individual organisations in the civil service as they consider the development of their own tailored policies on ‘blended working’, in line with the national strategy. The policy statement has been informed by the experience of remote working and maintaining service delivery and civil service operations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

During 2021 DPER were progressing the blended working policy framework that will facilitate a consistent approach to blended working arrangements across the civil service. Engagement has commenced on this framework with employee representative bodies. Once the framework is finalised, individual departments/offices will then complete and progressively roll out their long-term blended working policies and implementation plans.

Health and well-being framework for the civil service

In September DPER launched the first *Civil Service Health and Wellbeing Framework* (DPER, 2021e). This commitment was made under the 2020 programme for government.

The framework has been co-designed by the central Human Resources Policy Division of the department as well as the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service and twelve civil service departments and offices. The framework aims to provide human resources managers across the civil service with an enhanced understanding of the breadth of considerations that need to be taken into account when seeking to effect positive health and well-being outcomes for civil servants. It outlines the key components of a healthy workplace across five dimensions and nineteen associated themes. These dimensions and themes are informed by the *WHO Healthy Workplace and Framework Model* (Burton, 2010) and the OECD's *Guidelines on Measuring the Quality of the Working Environment* (2017). They include examples of workplace initiatives and activities that civil service departments and offices can put in place to support and enable the health and well-being of their workforce.

The framework also identifies a number of performance indicators that will enable departments and offices to identify key health and well-being challenges in their organisations, and to evaluate the success of measures introduced to address these challenges.

Civil service learning and development

All training for the civil service provided by OneLearning and the Senior Public Service Team continued to be delivered remotely during 2021. OneLearning completed an extensive training-needs analysis across the entire civil service to identify the next generation of training required to meet identified future skills needs, for delivery from 2022. A suite of leadership training courses has also been developed by OneLearning with the goal of strengthening civil service leadership capacity at all levels. In addition, a number of bespoke support and development initiatives for the most senior civil service leaders were delivered virtually by the Senior Public Service Team based in DPER.

Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and update on gender diversity

In July the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform updated the government on progress to strengthen gender diversity on state boards across the Irish public sector. This is a commitment of government and is also important to enhance the effectiveness of state boards, bringing different views and experiences to the decisions being brought to the board.

By June over 50 per cent of all state boards met the goal of having at least 40 per cent of both male and female members. At an aggregate level, females made up 45 per cent of all members of state boards. In 2020 a total of 54 per cent of all appointments made to state boards were female, and the figure for the first quarter of 2021 was 51.5 per cent.

The *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies: Annex on Gender Balance, Diversity and Inclusion*, published in September 2020 (DPER, 2021h), sets out a range of new procedures in relation to gender balance in board appointments. A comprehensive report from the board to the minister should now detail:

- the gender balance of appointments made to the state board in the previous year;
- where the board stands vis-à-vis the 40 per cent gender balance requirements and measures being taken to address where the 40 per cent requirements are not met;
- key elements of the board's approach to promoting gender balance diversity and inclusion, and progress being made in this area, including the approach being pursued to promote gender balance and diversity in board membership.

DPER Spending Review papers 2021 – Pay and pensions policy

Evaluation of industrial relations expertise in the civil service

The paper by Quinn (2021) assesses whether it is considered that there is a deficit of industrial relations (IR) expertise amongst staff working in the human resources units in civil service departments. It also reviews whether any deficit is impacting negatively on management's ability to engage effectively with union officials within the civil service IR processes and procedures.

The paper noted that the role of the human resources unit has evolved greatly over time and that IR is recognised as a key and challenging activity of the HR function. The report finds that while there is significant IR expertise in the civil service, there are opportunities for further development of expertise in this area. Recommendations made include the continued professionalisation of IR recruitment, enhancing learning and development, and providing more opportunities for knowledge/information-sharing and networking in this area.

Lifetime cost of new entrants to the civil service in the context of projected retirements over the next ten years

The paper by Pender & Chambers (2021) analyses the lifetime costs associated with recruitment of new entrant employees to the civil service and projects new entrant numbers and costs over the coming decade.

The paper finds that the estimated lifetime costs associated with recruitment to the civil service ranges from €2.36 million to €4.05 million. It provides a projection of new entrant numbers to the civil service over the coming decade, allowing for projected retirements and an assumed growth in the workforce. The paper also sets out the costs associated with projected new entrant numbers in year one of recruitment, using the lifetime costs.

The costs associated with new entrant employees represent a significant and long-term element of expenditure for the Exchequer. The report highlights the importance of managing new entrant numbers to ensure a public service pay and pensions bill that delivers continued value for money.

Review of professional added years

The paper by Finn (2021) looks at professional added years (PAYs) – additional years of notional pensionable service added to the actual service of civil and public servants in professional, technical and specialist grades.

The paper finds that PAY awards are difficult to justify in the current broader pensions policy and expenditure sustainability context. While the annual cash cost may be comparatively low, small PAY awards have long-term capital costs over the life of a pension. In addition, processing PAY applications can be administratively complex. The paper recommends enhanced recording and retention of PAY data and an ongoing periodic assessment of the long-term cost of PAYs.

Top Level Appointments Committee – Recruitment 2020

The annual report for 2020 from the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC) to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (TLAC, 2021) summarises the notable statistics from the year relating to recruitment to senior civil service positions:

- Of the candidates who applied for TLAC posts in 2020, 73 per cent were male and 27 per cent were female.

- In 2020 a total of 45 per cent of applicants for specialist posts were male and 55 per cent were female. In 2019 a total of 79 per cent of applicants were male and 21 per cent were female.
- Of the candidates shortlisted for preliminary interview in 2020, a total of 66 per cent were male and 34 per cent were female. Of the candidates sent forward for final interview in 2020, a total of 57 per cent were male and 43 per cent were female.
- In each year from 2013 to 2018 the numbers and proportion of females recommended for appointment had increased and the numbers and proportion of males had reduced.
- In 2020 the TLAC made twenty recommendations for appointment. Thirteen (or 59 per cent) were female and seven (or 41 per cent) were male. This figure reverses the trend for 2019, when 62 per cent of all recommendations were male and 38 per cent were female.
- It is noteworthy that although males outnumber females at application stage in a ratio of almost 3:1, each stage of the process sees a greater proportion of females going forward to the next level. As the figures above show, when it came to recommendations for appointment in 2020, females outnumbered males in a ratio of almost 2:1.
- Notably, there are no available data on ethnicity, nationality or other forms of diversity.
- A total of 51 per cent of all TLAC applicants came from the private sector. The civil service provided 29 per cent of applicants and 20 per cent came from the wider public service. However, civil servants comprised 100 per cent of those recommended for appointment.

Public Sector Trends report, 2021

In December the Institute of Public Administration published its annual review of trends in the Irish public service (Boyle, 2021), now in its twelfth year. The intention is to help inform the debate on Ireland's public sector and public administration, and its role in Irish society. Using data gathered from a number of sources, the report presents information on (i) the size and cost of the public sector, (ii) the quality of public administration (including efficiency and performance), and (iii) levels of trust and confidence in public administration, in a simple but rigorous manner.

The size, cost and inputs of the public sector

- Average government spending per person was €20,716 per head in 2020. This was up significantly from 2019, reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The public sector accounts for about 15 per cent of the labour force. This is towards the lower end of European levels.
- Spending on public service pay and pensions has increased each year since 2014. Spending stood at €23.5 billion in 2021.
- Ireland has by far the highest share of general government expenditure allocated at national level in the OECD in 2020, with just over 90 per cent of expenditure undertaken by central government.

The quality and efficiency of public administration

- Nearly two-thirds of the public, and just under half of business users, see the civil service as efficient.
- The provision of public services in Ireland rates less well than in many European countries. Just under half of all people surveyed say that the provision of public services was good.
- E-government in Ireland overall performs slightly above the European average, with some variances depending on the benchmark used.

Trust, satisfaction and confidence in public administration

- Trust in public administration in Ireland is a little above the European average. Ireland is one of the few countries where reported levels of trust in public administration did not fall significantly between spring 2020 and spring 2021, largely due to the response to the Covid-19 crisis.
- A total of 85 per cent of those surveyed were either very or fairly satisfied with the service received from the civil service in 2019.

References

- Boyle, R. (2021). *Public sector trends* [State of the public service series, report no 27]. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Burton, J. (2010). *WHO healthy workplace and framework model*. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/occupational_health/healthy_workplace_framework.pdf [3 February 2022].
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. (2021). *Making remote work: National remote work strategy*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021a). *Blended working in the civil service*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021b). *Building momentum civil service action plan*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021c). *Building momentum civil service action plan – Progress report August 2021*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2021d). *Civil service employee engagement survey 2020*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021e). *Civil service health and wellbeing framework*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021f). *Civil service renewal 2024 action plan*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021g). *Civil service renewal 2030 strategy: 'Building on our strengths'*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021h). *Code of practice for the governance of state bodies: Annex on gender balance, diversity and inclusion*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (2021i). *Our public service 2020 final progress report*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Finn, G. (2021). *Spending review 2021. Spending review on civil and public service professional added years schemes*. Dublin: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
- OECD. (2017). *OECD guidelines on measuring the quality of the working environment*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264278240-en>
- Pender, J., & Chambers Á. (2021). *Spending review 2021: Costs associated with new entrant employees to the civil service*. Dublin: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
- Quinn, N. (2021). *Spending review 2021: Evaluation of industrial relations expertise in the civil service*. Dublin: Civil Service Industrial Relations Unit, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
- Top Level Appointments Committee. (2021). *Ninth report to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform from the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC): 2020 developments and trends*. Dublin: Top Level Appointments Committee.
- Workplace Relations Commission. (2021). *Building momentum: A new public service agreement, 2021–2022*. Dublin: Workplace Relations Commission.