

Our Public Service 2020 and implementation of the NPF

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Introduction

Public service reform has been at the heart of meeting the challenges of austerity in Ireland over the past decade. It is generally acknowledged that achieving the recent stabilisation of the economy could not have occurred without the efforts of many public servants to change their working processes and the way they deliver public services. Such changes were given direction within two, now completed, public service reform plans and while these have achieved much, it is also important to note that a recent review of such efforts by the OECD calls for further focus on how services are delivered across the public service. The operational environment for Ireland's public administration is continuing to change at an increasing rate and, in many respects, it is the relative success of the economy that now presents an even greater challenge to the need to provide effective and efficient public services across the entire public arena.

The Department for Public Expenditure and Reform, just prior to last Christmas, published the latest programme for reform to 2020. It clearly states that on-going reform efforts must be underpinned by an overriding policy framework for all aspects of the public service. Therefore reform is not just thematic or sectoral based in areas such as local government, health, etc., but must be seen as applying to all of government. In addition, the new plan puts public service reform into a context which is no longer about simply seeking cost savings but is about having a clear focus on sustaining our growing economy whilst our population becomes older.

Prior to publication of the reform programme the Government also published the National Planning Framework 2040 and the National Development Plan 2027. Much emphasis was placed on the alignment of both the NPF and the NDP suggesting that, arguably, for the first time national development would be underpinned by a clear spatial perspective. The NPF sets out a framework that will underpin population growth of up to 1 million people with approximately half in the 5 main cities. The Plan sets out 10 national strategic outcomes such as:

Strategic Outcome 1: Compact growth: This outcome aims to secure the sustainable growth of more compact urban and rural settlements supported by jobs, houses, services and amenities, rather than continued sprawl and unplanned, uneconomic growth. The NDP supports delivery of this outcome

through the allocation of some €11.6 billion (bn) to social housing, primarily located in compact urban locations along with some €2bn being assigned to a new Urban Regeneration and Development Fund.

Strategic Outcome 2: Enhanced regional accessibility: A total of €7.3bn has been allocated to this strategic outcome with major investment to be delivered on key Inter-urban roads including, among others, the M20 Cork to Limerick, the N6 Galway City Ring Road and the N28 Cork to Ringaskiddy port facility.

Strategic Outcome 3: Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities: A new Rural Regeneration and Development Fund has been established to invest an additional €1 billion to enable towns, villages and outlying rural areas to grow sustainably and support delivery of the strategic objectives of the NPF. The fund will provide the opportunity for co-funding of suitable investment projects in towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas. Furthermore, regional and local roads will benefit from an estimated €4.5 billion investment under the NDP.

Strategic Outcome 4: Sustainable Mobility: A total of €8.6 bn has been allocated to public transport projects to enable compact growth in urban areas and facilitate achievement of climate action objectives. Major projects include:

- Metro Link, a light rail system from Swords via Dublin Airport to Sandyford (€3 bn)
- DART expansion (€2 bn)
- BusConnects projects in Dublin (€2 bn), Galway and Cork (€200 million each).

Strategic Outcome 6: High-quality international connectivity: Some €3.8 bn has been allocated to development of the state airports/ports including a new runway for Dublin Airport by 2021, and continued Exchequer support for regional airports such as Ireland West Airport Knock, Waterford Airport, Donegal Airport and Kerry Airport. Ports projects include Alexander Basin Redevelopment Project at Dublin Port, redevelopment of existing port facilities at Ringaskiddy, and capacity extension works at Shannon-Foynes Port.

Strategic Outcome 9: Sustainable Management of Water and other Environmental Resources:

Some €8.5 bn will be invested by Irish Water over the period to 2027. Some of the water and waste water projects to be progressed across the country include:

- Eastern and Midlands Water Supply Project (estimated cost €1.2 - €1.3 bn)

- Vartry Water Supply Scheme (€150 million), designed to ensure a safe and sustainable water supply for the north Wicklow and south Dublin area
- Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant (€190 million), which will provide further capacity to support development in the Greater Dublin Region
- Cork Lower Harbour Main Drainage Project (€55 million), which is important in terms of protecting the environment, facilitating economic development and providing for a growing population.

In essence this level of spending envisaged in the NDP to 2027 and, doubtless to be followed by another similar programme from 2027 acknowledges the key challenge confronting Ireland over the coming decades and highlighted and central to the NPF; that of meeting the increasing needs of population growth alongside a rapidly ageing population.

Responsibility for delivery will primarily fall to the public services of the State across local and national government as well as supporting state bodies and state owned companies. The project planning necessary to give effect to the above expenditures are of an order not previously attempted in the State. It is no surprise therefore, that the challenges of population growth, ageing etc., are central to the thinking now set out in "Our Public Service 2020". There is a clear acknowledgement that continuous reform will be necessary to enable delivery of the strategic direction envisaged within the NPF and the very high spending set out in the NDP. Why would this be the case? It is a simple reality that successful delivery of both rests upon the capacity of the policy process from local to national levels as well as the project management capabilities of the public service to deliver on the objectives of both. So the public service reform programme is a critical aspect for delivery of a growing, sustainable country which is future proofed against the ever impressing external influences of both international policy developments as well as the unstable influences of the international socio-economic environment.

The Public Service Reform Programme

Our Public Service 2020, published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform notes that there are now over 315,000 public servants – teachers, medical staff, soldiers and sailors, policy makers and administrators to mention a few – that are central to the delivery of effective public services which are critical to the nation’s wellbeing.

These are distributed across the public service as follows (Sept 2017):

Civil Service	38,483
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Defence	9,604
Education	103,274
Health	109,338
Justice	13,793
Local Government	27,406
State Bodies	12,989

Since 2011, reforms in the public service have been guided by two, now complete, public service reform plans. The Government's first *Public Service Reform Plan 2011-2013* essentially focused, given the prevailing economic conditions, on managing costs and delivery of efficiency improvements across the public service.

The second plan covered the period 2014-2016. It retained a focus on efficiency but, rather than taking a simplistic view of reducing costs it becomes more nuanced, developing the link between the design and delivery of public services and the objectives that had to be achieved to ensure better policy outcomes. At the end of 2016 almost 90% of the 227 actions in that plan had been either achieved or were on target.

Despite public perception of the performance of the public service in Ireland, on-going reviews and international benchmarking suggests a public service which is:

- 1st in the EU as the most professional and least politicised public service;
- 6th for the quality of public administration; and
- 5th for perceptions that Government decisions are implemented effectively

That solid performance by international standards, however, will not be enough given the many challenges the state has to confront over the coming years. Ageing of the workforce and the population generally, alongside increased in-migration and continuing high birth rates, means that there is no scope for resting on success. The scale of growth clearly suggests that the public service will have to grow at levels not previously seen and this growth cannot be restricted to solely education, health and justice, albeit that they will naturally given the changing demographic factors confronting the State, continue to be keep growth areas in both expenditure and employment numbers for the foreseeable future.

Taking a relatively simple approach to having a sense of what these numbers could look like, all other things being equal, it is not inconceivable to think of a public service with around 100,000 more people by 2040. Is it realistic to think that, as has happened in the past such numbers are simply employed on an ad hoc basis with limited forethought to need, role and performance?

In addition, the rate of automation and robotic developments, globalisation, climate change, among other internal and external influences, means that Ireland's public servants will need to be to the forefront of changes in work practices and advances in service expectations if Irish society is to benefit positively from technological and other driven changes to our working lives. What impact could influences have on the organisation of our public services?

As the second round of reforms were completed the OECD was commissioned to undertake an independent review of the reforms to date. The Review was highly complementary of the efforts taken in Ireland, but went on to recommend that, in the changing environment public services across the globe now face, more work needs to be delivered to enable the country address the many challenges ahead of Irish society in the coming decade. The OECD Review identified the following key areas of focus for the future:

1. focus on the outcomes of reform
2. embed an evidence and data-driven approach linking expenditure and reform
3. strengthen governance arrangements to widen ownership of the reform framework and better define the roles of the centre and the sectors in achieving reform
4. drive public service innovation

The Public Service Reform Plan to 2020 acknowledges these challenges and sets out a practical programme for application across the complete public service in advancing the transition towards a public service which is equipped for change. No small ask as at the heart of such change comes the need to address the diverse cultures of the public service, not to mention the capacity to think ahead, to be pro-active rather than being reactive, to use evidence to address possible scenarios rather than the application of policy development to address, at times, long past legacies.

In moving to meet this multi-dimensional shift in the public service operational environment, the plan sets out a framework based upon a more strategic and integrated approach to reform. In such a shifting context, reforms have to underpin the creation of an ever more agile and innovative public service and so the plan proposes actions which will support

- moving to a more outcomes-driven focus to ensure results for the public

- increasing collaboration across the public service
- developing a more evidence-driven and responsive approach

Six high-level outcomes are identified in the 2020 Plan to measure success for the whole public service over the longer term. This is an important move as one of the consistent bugbears of public service reforms has been the impact of a relative short-term focus of the political process, thanks to 18 month electoral cycles. This is not just the case in Ireland, but generally across the OECD. Public service transformation is an on-going, long-term transition process which necessarily needs a long-term focus so the creation of such a focus under the 2020 Plan has to be seen as welcome advance in thinking.

This thinking, when set alongside the publication of Public Service Performance Reporting, will at last move the Irish approach to public service re-configuration into the sort of norms which would be expected generally across the OECD, but especially on mainland Europe. Associated with this shift in thinking has come the establishment of a Public Service Reform Evaluation Unit, a long missing yet critical aspect of how we can appraise public service change and the resulting impact. Furthermore, the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), the introduction of Public Spending Code and initiation of the Spending Review process has now positioned the State to have a comprehensive understanding of not just day to day expenditure and policy appraisal but also to finally and genuinely incorporate future based thinking into policy development, one of the most critical features of a fit-for-purpose public policy framework which is itself critical to implementation of a national planning framework and the spending associated with implementation.

2017 Spending Review

Extraordinary as it may sound, it is really only in the past years that the State has delivered upon comprehensive reviews of public spending, thus providing those interested with access to a robust evaluation of many spending programmes. Over time this will allow policymakers to develop a reality-based understanding of the impacts of public spending and while this will challenge many agencies and arms-length delivery bodies in how they manage public money, it is something that is a normal feature of public monies management in other public services. After all, should the citizens of Ireland know what is being done with their taxes and whether those spending the money are meeting their performance requirements in a transparent manner?

The 2017 spending review has contributed to developing the new public service reform plan. The review highlighted common themes which should now be at the heart of a continued change process in the public service. These include the expectation that:

- The objectives of public sector supported schemes and programmes and the rationale for them must be clear
- Data gaps need to be identified so data for performance indicators and metrics can be gathered in future
- Need to assess sustainability of expenditure and how effectiveness and efficiency can be improved

Policy must be flexible and able to respond to changing economic and social circumstance

- Co-ordination of cross-cutting policies must be effective

As a result of the above thinking 3 pillars have been developed to underpin the overall framework for public service reform in the next 3 years and thereafter:

1) Delivering for Our Public

Public service reform efforts will continue to seek delivery of better and more cost-effective services to the public. The Plan envisages that this can be achieved by using new technology and better data to reduce costs, while maintaining quality by involving the public in the design and delivery of services, improving communication and engagement with the public, and also improving service quality and accessibility.

2) Innovating for Our Future

Actions here acknowledge the complexity of the public service environment and the pace to which such complexity is expanding. Technological innovations, the challenge of environmental changes, geopolitical shifts, changing demographic patterns and other external factors are all shaping the economy and society and will do so to a greater extent in the future. As such there is now a need for actions which can be delivered within a short, medium and long term context.

3) Developing Our People and Organisations

The Plan identifies the necessity of having agile and robust public service organisations at the core of service delivery in the State. This means having public servants with the skills, alongside the capacity,

competence and confidence to be effective and equipped to meet the huge pace of change which will confront them in their future roles. The diverse organisation of the public service, often operating with different strategic goals and individual policies and practices, is challenging and difficult for the political process to manage and lead. Nonetheless, given the complexity of change, there has to be a willingness to learn from one another and to share best practice and experiences.

18 headline actions are set out under the 3 pillars. These are set out here.

Our Public Service 2020: Headline Actions

Delivering for Our Public 	1	Accelerate digital delivery of services
	2	Improve services for our customers
	3	Make services more accessible to all
	4	Significantly improve communications and engagement with the public
	5	Drive efficiency and effectiveness

Innovating for our Future 	6	Promote a culture of innovation in the public service
	7	Optimise the use of data
	8	Build strategic planning capability
	9	Strengthen whole-of-government collaboration
	10	Embed programme and project management
	11	Embed a culture of evidence and evaluation

Developing Our People and Organisations 	12	Embed strategic human resource management in the public service
	13	Mainstream strategic workforce planning in the public service
	14	Continuous and responsive professional development
	15	Strengthen performance management
	16	Promote equality, diversity and inclusion
	17	Increase employee engagement
	18	Review public service culture and values

Each action in turn includes specific tasks so, for example, the acceleration of digital delivery of services includes:

- development of a Digital Service Gateway ('one-stop-shop' for digital services), using appropriate consultation across government and with other stakeholders, including the public and/or their representatives
- reporting information on existing digital services and planned services
- exploring the potential for assisted digital services to be carried out by trusted third parties, for example, libraries and post offices, where requested and authorised by the citizen
- working with the Civil Service Management Board and the Minister of State for eGovernment to continually improve awareness of Government digital services
- continuing to work with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to enhance identity verification across the public service and to increase the uptake of MyGovID to bring safe and secure online government services to our people and to expand the range of public services available online
- working with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and other public service bodies on a unique identifier for business to enable improved interaction with Government
- progressing legislation to promote and encourage data sharing between public bodies through the Data Sharing and Governance

The Plan is underpinned by a comprehensive regime of actions and tasks which if delivered will have a very real impact on just to those working within the public service – but more importantly, the citizens and residents of the State along with those investing and visiting the State.

In addition, and usefully from a local government perspective, is the role envisaged for developing whole of government approaches to service delivery. There is now a recognition that it is not just policies coming out under the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government which impact upon local government, for example, but policies in health, transport, Economic Development, etc. The impact of horizontal policies therefore is as critical as the impact of thematic or sector driven needs. The creation of sustainable local communities and the capacity for local-based whole-of-government responses is now a central feature of the local authority in its leadership role at local level. The State therefore has to move beyond its siloed perspectives and approaches to policy development. The potential for a positive range of developments based upon current and future local government reforms is clearly enumerated within the Plan and, arguably for the first time in

the history of the State achievable if fully embraced by line departments in particular. Action 9 under the whole of government collaboration context, for example, among other actions envisages:

- supporting the new Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) structures as the primary vehicle for collaboration between all national public service providers at local level. For example, LCDCs and the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP) provide a governance, planning and evidence-based framework for the co-ordination and management of local funding including EU-supported community-led local development funding from 2020-2027
- gaining better insights into how a range of public services are delivered at local level including better and more consistent data for baselining and benefits realisation
- working with the Local Government sector, a range of government departments and state agencies to document the full extent of services delivered locally, with a view to evaluating the impact of public services in defined geographic areas

The Reform Delivery Office in the Department will play a central coordination role but there is a clear recognition that all parts of the public service will necessarily have to be involved, building upon experience to date, to ensure that the many tasks outlined in the plan can be delivered within the relatively short time frame envisaged.

Conclusions

This new Plan marks a change in approach to the re-configuration of the public services in Ireland. Reassuringly it has been prepared with a clear understanding of the demands of both the NPF and the NDP. The increasing demands placed by both policy initiatives, not to mention having to address the cliff that is the age profile of the public service, is without parallel in the history of the State. That noted there is no real choice but to be pro-active in our approach to public service change. The pace of change now confronting the public service is so considerable that it is now an absolute imperative that the future of our public service is one which is equipped to address the many and increasing range of challenges that will confront all parts of the service over the life of the National Planning Framework. This means there is a clear need to have in place substantive training and skills building processes which can enable public services to deliver on expectations. It means having in place agile matching processes between available skills and citizen needs, resourced properly, with the necessary flexibility for decision-making and accountability. The sheer range of what is envisaged is hugely demanding and yet necessary if the pain of the past decade, and the achievements of getting our public services to where they now stand is to mean anything.

More importantly, in a country of increasing diversity, ageing and ever more demanding of quality public services, it seems to this observer that there is little choice but to embrace the ideas set out in this plan, see to it that its thinking is fully embedded into the business planning of all parts of the public sector and, critically, that political support across different parties is sustained, not just for the immediate future but for the long term.