

# **CAPABILITY REVIEW**

## **DEPARTMENT OF RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**26<sup>th</sup> June, 2020**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Rural and Community Development was established in June 2017 with the role of promoting rural and community development and supporting vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland.

Although less than three years old, the Department exhibits many best practice traits of long-established, high-performing organisations. The engagement ethos of senior management and the high morale of staff speak of a Department that is doing many things right, and for the right reasons.

Management and staff enjoy a high standing and command high respect amongst their peers and stakeholders. Their consultations are exemplary and their contributions are valued, whether on Department-specific issues or matters of wider Government policy. Although challenges exist in a number of important areas, the Department can draw on its many strengths when implementing the challenging change programme set out in this Review.

The Department showed ambition, imagination and innovation when developing its suite of new strategies; it is developing a culture of openness and innovation; it is authoritative and knowledgeable on all areas of its remit; it has gone out of its way to understand the realities of delivery at community level; and perhaps above all it is respected for the work done by management and staff, and the manner in which it is done.

Within the Department, there are examples of strong leadership and high quality delivery in the areas of workforce planning, learning and development, relationships with delivery agents, and the stewardship of budgets and financial allocations.

### DEPARTMENTAL STRENGTHS

The Department, although new and small, has considerable strengths for delivering on its business remit and meeting the challenges ahead:

1. **Strong leadership:** Senior management leads well and is highly respected, internally by staff and externally by stakeholders, including across the government system and amongst local delivery entities at community level.
2. **Effective engagement:** Strong engagement with staff and stakeholders alike is a noticeable feature of managerial practice. This is particularly evident in engagements with staff on HR-related matters and with stakeholders when developing policy, strategies and programmes and implementing schemes.
3. **Influencing strategic direction:** Conscious and consistent efforts are made to ensure that the Department's voice is heard centrally at Government, across Departments, and throughout the local government sector, especially in bringing community-based perspectives to bear in policy formulation and delivery. In parallel with that, officials engage constructively and authoritatively in the deliberative processes of other public bodies.
4. **Policy development:** For a very young Department, it has a highly impressive record at developing policies and strategies, some of which are ground-breaking and many of them are dealing with challenging multi-faceted areas of public policy such as local and community development, social

enterprise, rural development and volunteering. Achieving synergies between such policies at community level will be both challenging and necessary.

5. **Policymaking innovation:** A striking feature of recently concluded policies and strategies is the variety of approaches used in their preparation. Clearly, rigorous assessment and self-challenge were applied to their design. Across the different models applied, many features of best practice are evident, especially exemplary stakeholder engagement.
6. **Business planning and strategic alignment:** Business plans are developed in a highly collaborative manner, all staff are afforded opportunities to contribute, and an appropriate fit is evident between the high-level *Statement of Strategy* and the more granular plans of individual business units. Additionally, appropriate steps are taken to ensure strategic alignment is achieved between the Department's policies and priorities on the one hand and national policy frameworks and the corporate plans of its four agencies on the other.
7. **Respect for research:** Although the Department has a considerable distance to go in developing a fully-functioning research model, the enabling steps already taken are strategic and promising, especially the establishment of a Research and Evaluation Unit, the preparation of a draft Programme of Evaluations, and the engagement of the ESRI in a three-year research agreement. Similarly important is the high respect for research on the part of many senior managers, evident for example by their engagement of academics when preparing the social enterprise strategy and obtaining community-based contributions for the volunteering strategy.
8. **Good delivery record:** Stakeholders perceive the Department as strong on delivery. Although the delivery model is quite extended, the Department can rely on strong agencies and healthy relations with local and community organisations to play their roles in implementation.
9. **Staff management and development:** The HR Unit, which is building professional capability, is highly regarded, and an effective business partnering model is in place. Strong policies and strategies guide everyday delivery, particularly the HR strategy which contains clear and ambitious goals, workforce planning which is underpinned by considerable engagement with managers, and performance management which links in appropriately with both business and staff development needs. The Management Board places a clear premium on embedding leadership into Principal Officers' responsibilities.
10. **High morale:** The strengths of the Department are clearly visible to staff, and that is reflected in the high morale evident throughout the organisation in both Dublin and Ballina. Staff like where they work, feel their work is valuable and valued, and want to contribute to the development and delivery of future plans.

#### AREAS REQUIRING ATTENTION

The Department's mission is about the sustainable development of urban and rural communities and not just about administering schemes and disbursing money. There are notable opportunities for it to build on its considerable strengths and to realise new benefits when developing policy, managing delivery and overseeing organisational change. By grasping those opportunities, significant value-added can be achieved, with the benefits extending well beyond the Department to the public at large. There are a few areas which require attention and follow-up:

1. **Engaging on strategic change:** The Senior Management Team (SMT), which is comprised of the Management Board and all Principal Officers, is not supporting the Board as it could and should. It needs to regain its strategic focus and re-energise itself. That can be achieved if Principal Officers contribute more to the preparation of the SMT's agenda and prepare strategic oriented papers for discussion of both a national policy and organisational nature. The areas requiring attention as set out in this Executive Summary provide a fertile ground for new agenda items.
2. **Reviewing delivery:** The Department's delivery model for implementing its strategies, programmes and schemes is complex. It comprises other Departments, a range of state agencies, 31 local authorities and an extended community-based delivery structure of Local Development Companies (LDCs), Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), and Public Participation Networks (PPNs), as well as delivery of some schemes by the Department itself. Although the model delivers reasonably well for the Department, the optimal role for LCDCs is in need of particular attention and assessment. That work should be set within wider deliberations on how overall delivery is managed covering, in particular, work under way and planned on the rationalization of schemes, the development of performance impact indicators, and the promotion of an evaluation culture across the Department's divisions and business units.
3. **Rationalising schemes:** Senior management and stakeholders have a strong shared view on the need for schemes to be streamlined. In practice, that would mean reducing their number, removing overlaps, simplifying the end-to-end processes, and increasing their impacts.

Senior management favours a programmatic approach whereby funding would be based on area plans rather than project-driven allocations and would be aimed at specified impacts on citizens and communities. In consultation with relevant stakeholders, the Department should oversee a programme of reform aimed at rationalising those schemes within its remit and at developing replacement delivery models. Notwithstanding the complexities involved, this matter should be accorded special priority.

4. **Strengthening evaluation capacity:** An overriding goal should be the development of evaluation as a feature of organisational culture and embedding it in business practices around planning, monitoring and reviewing. Although the Department has laid some of the foundation stones of an evaluation model, a considerable body of work still remains to be done.

Critical next steps include: (a) agreement on the suite of principal indicators to measure the impacts of strategies, programmes and schemes; (b) preparation of a plan for developing a data infrastructure model that would both facilitate the effective ongoing monitoring of programmes and provide critical data feeds into their eventual evaluation; and (c) implementation of measures to ensure that the provision of high quality data would become more uniform across the local government sector. While these three steps will be challenging to deliver, they carry the potential of truly transformative change in the way core departmental business is done and they offer the prospect of very significant downstream benefits.

5. **Communicating impacts:** Although a small Department, there are many moving parts to its business model. The policies and strategies are new and ambitious, the programmes and schemes are many and impactful. Communicating to the public on the material differences that these measures, collectively and individually, are making to communities – urban and rural – is a challenging and yet necessary task. The Department needs to communicate such impacts by (a)

developing and managing a multi-dimensional communications strategy that connects at the local level, and (b) incrementally strengthening organisational capacity for measuring and monitoring impacts, particularly on disadvantaged communities both rural and urban.

6. **Transforming data management:** In order to enable and underpin a new strategic orientation towards an evaluation culture, a robust data management model needs to be put in place. That in turn must be informed and guided by a well-developed data management policy. The starting point should be the end point of where the Department needs to be in order to monitor activity, review performance and assess options with ease and confidence. The current state does not deliver on those aims. As a result, undertaking critical analysis is much more cumbersome, restrictive and labour intensive than it ought to be.
7. **Transforming ICT:** While ICT service support is generally satisfactory, the technology to aid the efficient delivery of recently concluded strategies is not in place. Similarly the systems for managing schemes are under-developed, fragmented and excessively paper-based, although those schemes administered by Pobal on the Department's behalf are processed using world class technology and data infrastructure. Critically, the Department needs to develop a strategic ICT capacity and capability to plan and prescribe a new ICT state. That will be needed for guiding deliberations by the Management Board on the most appropriate delivery model(s) for strategies, programmes and schemes to be pursued over the medium to longer term.

Business needs must drive the strategic ICT decisions – in particular, the proposed rationalisation of schemes to a programmatic model, the need for technology solutions to support the delivery of new policies and strategies, and the requirement for digitised solutions to include back-end supporting databases so that the Department would have a functioning data infrastructure for planning, monitoring and evaluation purposes.

8. **Managing risk:** It is particularly important that the Department remains fully focused on its Business Continuity, Corporate Governance and Risk Management roles. It should therefore continue to assess business delivery in the context of the ongoing remote working regime in place as part of the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, keep its Corporate Governance Framework document under regular review and remain vigilant to strategic and business risks, including on ensuring that the Department's four agencies have appropriate systems and processes in place to do likewise.

## CONCLUSION

Implementing the recommendations contained in this Review, while building on progress to-date, will present both challenges and opportunities for the Department. Although data, processes and ICT will have to form critical elements, so too will a continued focus on building people management capacity, staff development and business-related consultations, internally across business units and externally with agencies and stakeholders.

The ultimate goal of becoming the strategic driver and leader of community development and social inclusion across Government is well worth pursuing, as the successful delivery of the Department's ambitious strategies and the planned reform of its broad ranging schemes have the potential to achieve long-lasting impacts, especially at community level and amongst the most marginalised in our society.

## INTRODUCTION

### DEPARTMENTAL OVERVIEW

The Department of Rural and Community Development was established following a decision announced by the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, to Dáil Éireann on 14 June 2017, and an amendment to the Ministers and Secretaries Acts of 1924 to 2013, passed by the Oireachtas on 19 July 2017. The Rural Development and Regional Affairs functions of the former Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Community functions (including libraries) of the former Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government were transferred to the new Department. In addition, oversight of the Charities Regulator was transferred from the Department of Justice and Equality.

### FUNCTIONS AND PRIORITIES

The mission of the Department is *“to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland”*.

The co-ordination of rural and community policy is a Government priority that involves work undertaken by a large number of Departments and state agencies. A key function of the Department is the co-ordination of responses to the needs of rural Ireland and local communities, and the development of policies designed to advance their economic and social well-being. The Department is responsible for a mix of related policy initiatives and actions. Its *Statement of Strategy 2017 – 2020* sets out the mission and goals and provides the framework for policy development and implementation by progressing the following strategic goals:

- a) Working across Government to advance the economic and social development of rural areas in order to enhance the quality of life for people who live in rural Ireland.
- b) Contributing to enhanced regional development, with a view to strengthening the potential of all regions to contribute to economic recovery.
- c) Supporting local communities to develop, empowering them to identify their needs and aspirations and providing them with the opportunities, skills and confidence to influence, shape and participate in decision-making processes which affect them.
- d) Supporting the Community, Voluntary and Charity Sector to strengthen its capacity to contribute to civil society and support the growth and development of philanthropy.

### DEPARTMENTAL STRUCTURE

There are two Ministers assigned to the Department; Minister for Rural and Community Development, Michael Ring, TD and Minister of State for Community Development, Natural Resources and Digital Development, Sean Canney, TD.

The Department has two offices, a headquarters in Dublin and a regional office in Ballina, Co Mayo. It has a total of 160<sup>1</sup> staff (77 staff in Dublin, 76 staff in Ballina, and 7 regionally based Inspectors). It is supported in its work by four agencies under its aegis: Pobal, Water Safety Ireland, the Charities Regulator, and the Western Development Commission.

The Department is organised into three Divisions, each headed by an Assistant Secretary. A brief overview of the work of each of them is detailed below – see *Appendix 3 for business units by Division*.

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<sup>1</sup> There are an additional 36 DRCD employees currently assigned to the Charities Regulator.

### Rural Development and Regional Affairs

This Division is comprised of four units: the Rural Programmes and Policies Unit, the LEADER Policy and Operations Unit, the Rural Strategy and Social Enterprise Unit, and the Regional Development and Innovation Unit. The Division promotes and facilitates long-term sustainable economic and social progress in rural parts of Ireland through a coordinated approach across government.

### Community Development

This Division encompasses three units: the Community and Voluntary Supports and Programmes Unit, the Social Inclusion and Communities Unit, and the Libraries Development and Community Policy Unit. The goal of the Division is to promote and support the development of vibrant, sustainable and inclusive communities in both urban and rural areas, through implementing a coherent policy framework and strategy which supports the community and voluntary sector.

### Corporate and Strategic Affairs

This Division is comprised of four units: Organisational Development and Human Resources, Finance and Evaluation, Inspection and Compliance Unit, and Corporate Support and the Rural Fund. It is responsible for leading and growing the Department's strategic policy development capacity, inspection and compliance function, administration of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, enhancing policy co-ordination and corporate strategy, and managing corporate functions including finance, ICT and HR.

### OVERVIEW OF FUNDING PROGRAMMES

The *Revised Estimates 2020*, provides for a gross budget of €308.25 million, comprising €158.25 million in current funding and €150 million in capital funding, and the Department delivers funding support across the following three programmes:

#### Rural Development Investment Programme - €149.7m

This includes:

- Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)
- LEADER Programme
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme
- Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure scheme (ORIS)
- Local Improvement Scheme (LIS)
- CLÁR Programme

#### Community Funding Programmes - €153.9m

This includes:

- Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)
- Community Services Programme (CSP)
- Community Enhancement Programme
- PEACE IV
- Public library funding
- Dormant Accounts Fund

#### Charities Regulator - €4.61m

## PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

Action 20 of the *Civil Service Renewal Plan* provides for the implementation of a programme of organisational reviews, the purpose being:

*‘To embed a culture of regular and objective assessments of the capacity and capability of each Department to achieve its objectives and take the necessary action to close any gaps.’*

Having consulted with the sponsoring Secretaries General and the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB), the Department of Rural and Community Development was selected for this review. Similar exercises were completed previously in respect of 1) Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2) Courts Service, 3) Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, 4) Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and 5) Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this review followed that used for the five previous reviews conducted as part of the Capability Review Programme. It also took account of the report of the Effectiveness and Renewal Group for the Department of Justice and Equality (*Ó’ Riordáin report*) and subsequent implementation updates.

This review was guided by a comprehensive standards-based methodology template, comprising four overarching filters: Leadership, Policy and Strategy, Delivery, and Organisational Capability.



### SCOPE

As with the five previous organisational capability reviews, this review was concerned solely with the Department’s capability to deliver on its mission statement and did not involve any assessment of its policies, strategies, programmes or schemes in terms of outputs or impacts.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference agreed for this review are:

*“To review the organisational capability of the Department of Community and Rural Development to deliver on its mission as set out in its Statement of Strategy, 2017 – 2020.”*

## GOVERNANCE

A review team based in the Reform and Delivery Office of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) carried out the review. The team was comprised of Dave Hanley, Gerry Cribbin and Ivan Farmer from DPER and Jennifer Billings as the Departmental Liaison Officer (DLO). The DLO provided vital support and assistance, scheduled and attended interviews and workshops, provided research support and participated in the drafting of the final report.

The team reported to an External Peer Review Panel whose role was ‘to review, validate, edit and finalise the report prepared by the team’. The panel comprised:

- Niamh O’ Donoghue, former Secretary General, Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection,
- Pat McLoughlin, CEO, Alzheimer’s Society of Ireland, and
- Michael Malone, former Chief Executive, Kildare County Council.

The programme of reviews is overseen by a steering group of three sponsoring Secretaries General from the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB): Seán Ó Foghlú, Department of Education and Skills; Mark Griffin, Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment; and Maurice Quinn, Department of Defence.

## REVIEW PROCESS

The evidence gathering phase took place between December 2019 and March 2020 inclusive and involved interviews and workshops aimed at assessing the capability of the Department from internal and external perspectives:

### Table of engagements

Category	Number of Engagements	Number of Participants
Minister	1	1
Management Board (incl. Secretary General)	4	4
Heads of Function	2	2
Principal Officers	10	10
Assistant Principal Workshops	2	17
Combined Administrative Officer and Higher Executive Officer Workshops	2	29
Executive Office Workshops	2	23
Clerical Officer Workshops	2	25
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>111</b>
External Stakeholders	18	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>132</b>

## 1. LEADERSHIP

### STRUCTURE OF THIS CHAPTER

Module 1 of the methodology template for the capability review programme relates to LEADERSHIP.

In this chapter, the leadership capability of senior management, comprising the Management Board and the Principal Officer cohort, is assessed in the following way:

**Section 1.1 – Leadership by senior management:** The leadership of the Management Board and its engagement with staff and the agencies under the aegis of the Department. Also examined is the Board’s relationship with the Principal Officer cohort and other staff networks.

**Section 1.2 – Internal cross-divisional working:** The extent to which the individual Assistant Secretaries, their divisions and the constituent business units collaborate with one another.

**Section 1.3 – Cross- sector and cross-government working:** The degree to which the Department leads, influences and collaborates across government.

**Section 1.4 – Communications:** The capability of the Department to communicate effectively, internally from management to staff and externally to stakeholders and the public.

### 1.1 LEADERSHIP BY SENIOR MANAGEMENT

The Department’s senior management comprises two tiers – the Management Board and a cohort of 11 Principal Officers.

#### 1.1.1 LEADERSHIP BY THE MANAGEMENT BOARD

The Department’s Management Board comprises four members: the Secretary General and three Assistant Secretaries who lead on the functional areas of Rural Development and Regional Affairs, Community Development, and Corporate Affairs and Strategic Development. The Board meets weekly and there is regular attendance by managers on specific issues, mainly at Principal Officer or Assistant Principal Officer level. The following are the main features of the Board’s operations:

- a) **Collegiality:** A widely regarded benefit of the small Board is the strong collegiality evident amongst members, with each Assistant Secretary being aware of not just their own areas of responsibility but also those of colleagues along with their own responsibilities for departmental corporate matters. There is a strong sense amongst senior managers that collegiality at Board level is quite strong, supported by a shared visible vision for the Department.
- b) **Strategic v corporate deliberations:** The Management Board makes a conscious effort to effectively balance the time spent on strategic issues as against routine operational matters. Issues are categorised as either for information, decision required or matter for discussion.

Notably, its Corporate Governance Framework, which was published in 2018, and an agreed Terms of Reference for the Board clarify those issues which are appropriate for it to deliberate upon and those which are not. A schedule for policy- and strategy-related deliberations is now in place which means in practice that all major issues come before the Board at least once a year for strategic consideration. As a general rule, day-to-day corporate concerns are kept off the agenda insofar as reasonable. Only staffing issues relating to strategic workforce planning and recruitment campaigns tend to feature.

- c) **Decision-making:** The Board is widely considered to be effective at decision-making. Not only does it strike a good balance between strategic and operational deliberations, it also tends to make decisions in a clear and timely manner.
- d) **Engagement with Principal Officers – general:** Given the small size of the Department, engagement between the four Management Board members and the eleven Principal Officers is not a challenge. Attendance by them at Board meetings is regular and all report high quality engagement on both policy issues and strategic corporate matters, such as the development of the Department’s HR/People Strategy.
- e) **Engagement with Principal Officers – Senior Management Team (SMT):** The SMT consists of the Management Board and all Principal Officers. It meets every six weeks, with engagements mainly taking the form of updates on the main organisational and strategic issues.

While there is general support among senior managers for the concept, there is a broad acceptance that the SMT, as it currently operates, has lost its original strategic focus and has become too focused on updates relating to the Department’s corporate agenda and operational updates from Principal Officers. As a result the level and quality of engagement has somewhat deteriorated, as has the SMT’s overall effectiveness.

There is also general agreement, including among Principal Officers themselves, that they need to take more responsibility and ownership of the agenda (all of them currently are free to propose items for the SMT agenda). However, there is no consensus as to whether that should extend to the establishment of a separate standalone Principal Officer Network.

- f) **Visibility and engagement with staff generally:** Senior management is very visible to the generality of staff, and the quality of their engagement is considered to be excellent. In addition to the regular attendance by Principal Officers at meetings of the Management Board, staff across all grades in each business unit present to the Board on their business plan as part of the annual business planning process. Staff strongly believe that they are actively encouraged to participate in such discussions.

The Board also frequently visits the Department’s offices in Ballina thereby ensuring a high level of regular visibility with staff – a measure that is viewed very positively by those based there.

In addition, a management-led series of Town Hall meetings (‘Staff Away Days’) has taken place, including one to discuss outputs of an internal staff survey undertaken in late 2018. These engagements provided all staff with opportunities to input into the Department’s strategic development. There is now a very noticeable and strong sense of a cohesive departmental identity amongst staff and overall morale is very high.

The proactive approach to staff engagement by senior management has been evident from the outset of the Department’s establishment when members of the Board met face-to-face with staff in both Dublin and Ballina to set out their vision for the organisation and to allay any fears or apprehensions which the staff may have had (all of whom would have been transferred in from bigger Departments) – *see also section 1.1.2 following on the Staff Engagement Forum.*

- g) **Communications:** Clear differences are evident within the Department in relation to the extent of staff awareness of issues discussed and decided upon by the Management Board, with some staff being fully briefed and others receiving little or no feedback. This appears to be reflective of

the different procedures adopted by individual Assistant Secretaries in terms of debriefing their senior managers in the aftermath of a Board meeting. There was evident frustration among some staff on this issue.

### 1.1.2 LEADERSHIP BY THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT GENERALLY

Outside of the Management Board, the calibre of the Department's Principal Officer cohort was raised over the course of evidence gathering, especially the extent to which they and Board members engage with the Department's stakeholder base.

- a) **Calibre of Principal Officer and Assistant Principal cohorts:** There is a good mix of experienced and newly promoted staff amongst the Department's Principal Officer cohort of eleven. Internally and externally, they are regarded very favourably, in terms of both their accessibility and their understanding and grasp of their roles and responsibilities.

Regarding the Assistant Principal grade, the relative inexperience of some of them was raised and there is an acknowledged need to invest in their development as managers and leaders.

- b) **External engagement:** From the perspective of external engagement, both across Government and among key stakeholders, senior management is considered to be very accessible and the Department is well-regarded. The vast majority of external interviewees were very positive regarding the professionalism and expertise of senior managers. Many of them remarked on the substantial improvements in accessibility and engagement on matters relating to rural and community development since the Department's establishment in 2017, including the willingness of individual senior managers to attend external meetings with stakeholders. However, there are a number of areas where the Department might wish to focus some attention.

Currently, the Department has governance responsibility for four separate – and quite distinctive – agencies: the Charities Regulator, Water Safety Ireland, Pobal and the Western Development Commission. A bilateral relationship with the Assistant Secretary, augmented by individual business units, are the principal means by which engagement is undertaken. While all four agencies reported no difficulty in bilateral engagement at any level, they commented that there is no opportunity at present to meet with the full Management Board. It was also felt that an annual gathering of all four agencies with the Department's senior managers would be beneficial.

Outside of these particular entities, some of the wider stakeholder group also raised the desirability of more frequent engagement with the Board. This was particularly noticeable among the important stakeholder group of local authorities and the County and City Management Association (CCMA).

- c) **Staff Engagement Forum:** The Department has established a Staff Engagement Forum, membership of which is open to all staff, irrespective of grade or location, and is representative of each business Unit. Meetings are held every six weeks, video conferencing is used and there is a rotating chairperson. It has looked at initiatives such as a Gender Action Plan and an Innovation Charter, and is planning to examine the area of climate change in the near future.

Despite widespread knowledge among staff of the Forum's existence, there was a disappointing level of awareness regarding its work and output. There were also some concerns expressed that the Forum is becoming primarily a vehicle for raising complaints about day-to-day matters. Although there is an expectation that individual members communicate updates on the Forum's work back to their Units, this does not appear to be happening in all areas.

### ***Findings: Leadership by Senior Management***

**F1.1 Board – strategic orientation:** The Management Board has a shared vision of the strategic priorities and long term objectives of the Department, and it operates in a strategic, inclusive and decisive manner.

**F1.2 Board – delivery reorientation:** As set out later in chapters 2 and 3, the Department has performed strongly in developing policy and strategy and while delivery is done reasonably well within existing arrangements, those arrangements are in need of significant reform. That is necessary to enable the Department to deliver efficiently and effectively on: (a) the ambition of its new policies and strategies, (b) the changes planned and proposed to its suite of schemes, and (c) the structural reforms already initiated to underpin stronger measurement of delivery, especially the impacts of policies and programmes. Taken together, delivery of that change agenda will have implications for the conduct of business at Management Board level.

**F1.3 Board – engagement:** There is frequent and positive engagement between the Management Board and the Principal Officer cohort.

**F1.4 Board – communications:** The different approaches adopted by individual Assistant Secretaries in relation to debriefing on Management Board discussions is resulting in knowledge and awareness gaps among some Principal Officers.

**F1.5 SMT – focus:** The Senior Management Team (SMT) is seen as a useful forum but has somewhat lost its original strategic focus in recent times and consequently is not as effective as it could be.

**F1.6 Senior Management – engagement:** The general view among staff is that the level and quality of engagement with senior management is far better than that experienced in previous Departments. There are however question marks regarding the overall role and impact of the Staff Engagement Forum.

**F1.7 External engagement:** The Department’s external engagement with both its own agencies and its wider stakeholder group is seen as a particular strength. However, there are gaps in engagement between the Management Board and senior management of the Department’s four agencies.

### ***Recommendations***

**R1.1 Role of the Management Board:** The Management Board, having led and developed major strategic change of a policy nature, now needs to rebalance its deliberations more towards strategic change of a delivery nature, especially in reforming its diffuse delivery model, deepening interdepartmental cooperation, and building a base for measuring the impacts of programmes and schemes.

**R1.2 Role of the Senior Management Team (SMT):** There is scope to improve the overall effectiveness of the SMT, especially in challenging the status quo and in supporting the Management Board as an enabler of change. The Principal Officers need to take a more proactive role in shaping the SMT’s agenda and they must also reflect upon the extent to which they are currently self-directing in terms of taking the lead on some organisational issues and challenges.

**R1.3 Communications from Staff Engagement Forum:** Given the lack of awareness on the part of many staff regarding the work and output of the Forum, it should undertake a quick review of its

communications channels and structures so as to ensure all staff have timely access to its operations and output.

**R1.4 Board's engagement with agencies:** The Board should meet formally with senior management from each of the Department's four agencies at least once a year and should further consider how it might enhance the already strong bilateral relationships that exist. This would be specifically aimed at ensuring greater shared understanding across the agencies of the Department's strategic priorities and at improving mutual awareness of key issues and challenges.

## 1.2 INTERNAL CROSS-DIVISIONAL WORKING

Staff spoke very positively of a culture of collegiality. A Dublin-based headquarters and a regionally-based office can often lead to perceptions among provincial staff of a "them and us" bias, but that is not at all evident with this Department.

### 1.2.1 COLLABORATION ACROSS BUSINESS AREAS

Since its establishment, the Department's standard approach to policy development and business operations is based on good consultation and collaboration across senior management. The key issues which emerged are as follows:

- a) **Internal cooperation:** The general view among staff is that there is good cooperation across business units, although there is scope for further improvement between the two distinct rural and community divisions. Again, the Department's small size offers a distinct advantage when trying to improve inter-divisional cooperation.
- b) **Cross-divisional teams:** There are some very good examples of where the Department consciously established a cross-divisional team model to undertake the development and/or the delivery of a defined task.

For the First Call under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), 280 applications for funding were received and the assessment of them was done by a multi-disciplinary team drawn from different divisions and units. This was an important task which needed to be completed quickly and the general consensus is that the model worked very well.

Cross-divisional teams have been established on an *ad hoc* basis under each Assistant Secretary to address the strategic themes relating to the development of the *Research and Evaluation Programme*, the *Rural Development Policy 2020-2025* and *The Implementation Challenge* which is a project on how to implement the various policies which were then in progress (C&V, Social Enterprise and Volunteering strategies) in a coordinated and integrated way.

Aside from discrete business remits, the general lack of collaborative teams is more related to capacity constraints than to any unwillingness to cooperate.

- c) **Knowledge sharing:** In response to perceived gaps in knowledge sharing between the various business units, the Department has put in place a programme of "lunch & learn" sessions aimed at keeping staff informed about business developments. The reaction to this initiative has been very positive.
- d) **Staff networks:** On the desirability of having staff networks by grade, there was a mixed response. There was no unanimity amongst staff on the benefits of standalone networks in any of the

grades. Indeed, many staff questioned the need for them in the first place and pointed to time constraints involved in running them.<sup>2</sup>

### **Finding**

**F1.7 Cross-divisional working:** The general culture is that managers and business units try to pull in the same direction. A conscious effort is made to engage colleagues and to make use of their skills and knowledge. Where appropriate and possible, the Department has shown a readiness to collaborate in a more formal and structured way through cross-divisional teams.

## **1.3 CROSS-SECTOR AND CROSS-GOVERNMENT WORKING**

As a new and small Department, senior management were faced with an immediate challenge of establishing a clear corporate identity and getting the organisation's voice heard both across Government and the much broader range of stakeholders. This was particularly important as much of its statutory remit had previously resided in a number of different Departments. The principal issues arising in those respects are as follows:

- a) **Identity and impact:** The particular need to create and foster a unique identity for the Department was cited by all staff as a priority for senior management. Stakeholders believe that the Department is starting to make a real impact across Government and has gained a good profile through the active participation of Assistant Secretaries and Principal Officers in various senior officials' groups. Furthermore, it is increasingly being asked by other Departments to participate in working groups on policy matters on which it does not lead.

Challenges remain though in ensuring that the Department is in a position to both influence wider policy and get sufficient support and understanding for its own policies from other Departments.

- b) **Membership of Cabinet Committees and Senior Officials' Groups (SOGs):** The Department is represented on a number of Cabinet Committees and associated SOGs as follows:
- i. Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure by virtue primarily of the Department's interest in the National Planning Framework
  - ii. Cabinet Committee on the Economy
  - iii. Cabinet Committee on Climate Change
  - iv. Cabinet Committee on Social Policy
  - v. Cabinet Committee on Brexit Planning, and
  - vi. *Project Ireland 2040* Delivery Board on which the Secretary General participates.

The Department's attendance, participation and engagement at these committees is considered excellent. That involves at times the production of specialist reports – for example, a number of papers on rural broadband for the Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure. These set out the practicalities involved in enhancing mobile telephone coverage and the remedial measures that are possible. On broadband, it identified the blockages and barriers that exist and proposed a series of steps to improve the situation.

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<sup>2</sup> See section 1.1.1 regarding Principal Officers and their interaction with the Management Board through the SMT.

- c) **Mobile phone coverage and broadband.** The Mobile Phone and Broadband Task Force (which comprises representatives from the commercial telecommunications companies and local authority officials) is chaired by the Minister of State with responsibility for Community Development, Natural Resources and Digital Development. It is co-managed by the Department and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, and the two Departments agree collectively on how the Task Force should operate. It meets quarterly, the relevant Principal Officers and staff meet beforehand, and an end-of-year progress report is prepared and submitted to the Oireachtas Committee.
- d) **Official-level cross-government engagement:** Outside of formal engagement structures, the Department is involved in a range of important deliberative processes across the government system – for example, with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government on community-based delivery by organisations operating under the aegis of and/or reporting to local authorities, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the LEADER programme, the Department of Justice and Equality on community policing and issues pertaining to migrants and direct provision, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). The Department also chairs the Interdepartmental Group on Social Inclusion on which most Departments are represented.
- e) **Specialist initiatives:** In the case of the *Just Transition for Workers and the Midlands* initiative following the ESB announcement on closing its two peat-powered generating plants at Shannonbridge and Lanesboro, the Department of the Taoiseach sought out the Department’s participation on this initiative to which officials make valued contributions to deliberations.

Furthermore, and as outlined later in chapter 3, section 3.1.5, the Department has the lead role for the development and implementation of the €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). This involves significant interaction and engagement with a wide range of other Government Departments, with the RRDF being regarded as a “game changer” in that it brings a significant financial leverage to the Department’s relationships with a number of other Departments.

### 1.3.1 WIDER STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In addition to managing the critical cross-government relationships, the Department is obliged to engage with a multiplicity of diverse bodies and agencies across the wider public sector as well as among the rural and community and voluntary sectors. In several instances, these organisations are deeply involved in delivering schemes and programmes on the Department’s behalf (this is dealt with in detail in Chapter 3). The principal engagement-related issues which arose over evidence gathering are as follows:

- a) **Impact:** Many stakeholders regard the Department very positively in terms of the quality of its engagement, interaction and expertise. They believe that it is making a difference through a raised profile for its sectors across Government and the quality of its recent policy outputs. Many stakeholders commented positively on the fact that senior managers frequently go out and get on-the-ground exposure to the actual delivery of services. Again, this is seen as a significant improvement on past practices.
- b) **Relationship with local government:** The relationship with the local government sector is a critical one given the extent to which delivery of many of the Department’s schemes and programmes is

dependent on individual local authorities and committees of them (the specifics of the complex delivery model are discussed in detail in Chapter 3). Consequently, there are strong bilateral relationships at all levels and the Department's officials invest significant time in developing and managing them. There is also a well-established relationship with the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) on the national libraries strategy (Chapter 2 for more details) and the CCMA for a senior-level engagement on a wide range of policy matters.

The CCMA, while acknowledging the ease of access to individual senior managers, did express a desire to have more frequent engagement with the Department's Management Board than the current arrangement of one meeting per annum. The Department's engagements on the Economic, Enterprise and Cultural Sub-committee (quarterly meeting) and the Libraries Development Committee of the CCMA are considered satisfactory.

- c) **Challenges:** The importance of the Department exerting influence across Government was raised on a number of occasions and was seen by some as a particular challenge given its small size relative to other more established Departments.

Some concerns were also voiced that the Department is not exerting enough pressure to have proper rural proofing of national policy proposals undertaken. The issue of the impacts of a carbon tax on rural dwellers was cited as an example.

Notwithstanding the ongoing challenges, the strong sense from the evidence is that cross-departmental engagement is an area that the Department manages well.

#### ***Findings: Cross sector and cross-government working***

**F1.8 Cross-government working:** Since the establishment of the Department, a very significant effort has been made by senior managers to create a clear profile for the organisation. While the Department acknowledges that this remains work-in-progress, nonetheless it has been quite successful in getting its strategic and policy priorities onto the wider Government agenda.

**F1.9 Stakeholder engagement:** There has been a very noticeable improvement in the quality and impacts of the Department's engagement with its stakeholder cohort, with most acknowledging that the current model and structure are far superior to what went before. There is also a conscious practice now for all staff and in particular senior managers to get out of the confines of the Department and engage with stakeholders so as to get on-the-ground exposure to actual delivery.

**F1.10 Engagement with local government:** The relationship with the local government sector is critical and is managed at a number of different levels within the Department.

**F1.11 Impact across government:** While acknowledging the very positive impact that the Department has had, some stakeholders remain concerned that further work is needed within broader Government structures to ensure a fuller understanding of the needs and priorities of the sectors which the Department serves.

#### ***Recommendations***

**R1.5 Exerting influence:** The very positive work which has taken place on exerting appropriate influence at a cross-departmental level needs to be continued.

**R1.6 Local government relationships:** Given the criticality of the relationships with the local government sector, the Department should devote more time to reflecting with the sector on

relationships and engagement structures, particularly given the delivery complexities outlined later in Chapter 3.

**R1.7 Stakeholder engagement:** There remains a need for the Department to continue its close engagement across its broad stakeholder cohort so as to ensure full and mutual understanding of respective positions in relation to national policy on a range of issues relevant to the sectors under its remit.

## 1.4 COMMUNICATIONS

Given the Department's diverse remit and the public importance attaching to its policy areas, communications is a particularly important element of day-to-day business. In line with common practice, the Department has established a Strategic Communications Unit, headed up by an externally-recruited specialist.

### 1.4.1 COMMUNICATIONS UNIT

The reaction of senior managers and staff to the Communications Unit is universally positive. In their view, it very responsive, gives high quality value-added to media content and provides effective assistance to business units on organising events and related communications. It has also produced a Communications Guidelines Handbook in order to promote a cohesive approach to communications protocols across the Department. In addition, each business unit has a communications officer who updates an intranet-based communications calendar on developments and plans. Generally, this approach works reasonably well.

The 'Rural Opportunities' campaign and the 'Helping Hands' initiative were aimed at promoting the Department's schemes and public engagement on them. They were driven and managed in-house and represent some recent examples of well-managed communications campaigns. Staff in the Unit have been upskilled to varying extents across a range of communications competencies, from the use of social media to more strategic issues.

### 1.4.2 COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

At the conclusion of this Review, the Department finalised a communications strategy dealing with both internal and external communications. Following internal discussions at the SMT, it was signed off by the Management Board towards end-June 2020. In addition, the Department is committed to completing a stakeholder engagement strategy aimed at mapping the stakeholder base and setting out clear terms around engagement and reporting.

### 1.4.3 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

The majority view is that, overall, the quality of internal communications is reasonably good. A proactive and responsive Communications Unit is certainly contributing to that, as are the Department's small size and the relatively easy access to senior managers. A further contributory factor is the strong and visible priority that senior management give to regular staff engagement.

Along with an intranet, a monthly newsletter is produced by the Communications Unit, based on material provided by the business units. Again, there is broad positivity towards this and it is seen as a useful way of learning about wider departmental issues. As much of the content is retrospective, some staff commented that it would be helpful if it was more forward-looking.

One of the most common areas of weakness in internal communications relates to the frequency and format of team meetings. This has been a feature in all of the organisational capability reviews carried

out to-date. The situation in this Department is more positive, much of which can be attributed to the clear policy on staff meetings enunciated by the Secretary General and Management Board.

Additionally, Principal Officers and Assistant Principals can expect to be questioned as part of the annual business planning process as to the regularity of their section staff meetings. Consequently there is little evidence of staff at executive and clerical level claiming not to be informed about developments and plans in their business unit specifically and the Department generally. For the small number of regionally dispersed Inspectors in the Department's Inspection and Compliance Unit, there is a quarterly formal meeting with their Ballina-based Principal Officer.

While the Management Board correctly believes that there is room for greater consistency in the regularity of meetings across the Department, there is nonetheless a quite positive story to tell on progress to-date.

#### 1.4.4 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

There is broad acceptance internally that the Department's key message needs to focus more on the medium- to long-term impacts and added-value of its policies and programmes on communities nationwide and less on the administration of grants and the disbursement of funding. This view was strongly echoed by stakeholders.

The Department often struggles to get traction in the media where interest in positive developments or events can often be low. An exception is the provincial press where it regularly gets positive coverage. A concern though is that much of it relates only to funding announcements. The evidence gathering raised a number of issues of note:

- a) **Local level engagement:** As referenced earlier, there has been a marked increase in the level and regularity of Departmental officials engaging directly with stakeholders and local communities. This practice is helping to improve overall understanding and awareness of the Department's work and to promote how its policies can impact positively on communities, both urban and rural.

For example, the Department ran six 'Helping Hands' roadshow sessions in provincial and rural locations in 2019 on completing application forms, on where to go for assistance under the various schemes, and on the eligibility criteria that apply to them. The sessions involved the Department, Pobal, local authorities and stakeholders. The Department has also recently funded a national communications campaign on services provided by libraries. There have been very positive reactions to these and similar initiatives.

- b) **Social media:** There has been a deliberate move away from the traditional press release-type approach to communications and the promotion of events, with the Department focusing very much on the use of social media platforms. Videos now tend to be produced when possible, with Twitter Feeds being used to highlight or flag them. For instance, the 'Rural Opportunities' campaign was heavily dependent on the use of social media and included videos showcasing best practice case studies. The Communications Unit has also produced ten "showcase" videos of case studies highlighting the impacts of the Department's work.
- c) **Stakeholders' views:** Stakeholders' views on communications largely reflect those from within the Department, especially the imperative to focus on long term strategic issues and not merely on funding announcements and photo opportunities. Stakeholders readily acknowledge the very good work being done by the Department and the scale of the challenge it faces in comprehensively promoting its strategic role in helping to sustain rural and urban communities.

There was also praise for the manner in which social media platforms are being embraced and the readiness of senior managers and staff to engage directly with communities at local level.

In the broader context of the OCR process, the issue of the Department's long-term future and configuration featured regularly. While ultimately these are political decisions, the Department needs to continually reflect on how best to raise its profile and promote the impacts of its policies and programmes. Specifically in relation to the Department's rural development role, views were expressed about the need and desirability of creating a separate narrative from that of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine so that it is clear where the respective policy lines exist. In the view of some stakeholders, that is not always obvious at present. It was suggested that the Department needs to continue to be central to any discussions on the future of rural Ireland and to act as a counter-balance to the frequently articulated narrative that rural Ireland is dying.

### ***Findings: Communications***

**F1.12 Communications Unit:** The establishment of this Unit has been a very positive development. There is a high level of interaction between it and business units in providing – largely through the use of technology and social media – a more sophisticated and targeted service than traditionally had been the case.

**F1.13 Communications strategy:** A communications strategy, encompassing both a stakeholder engagement strategy, has just been completed.

**F1.14 Internal communications:** Such communications are generally quite good, and staff were overwhelmingly positive about them. Senior management continues to prioritise the importance of a consistent approach to team meetings and overall staff engagement.

**F1.15 External communications:** The focus of external communications are not sufficiently aimed yet at promoting the Department's strategic role, particularly the long term economic and social impacts of its policies and programmes.

**F1.16 Community engagement:** The willingness of staff to visit local communities and engage directly with local groups and individuals is helping to increase understanding of the Department's wider role.

### ***Recommendations***

**R1.8 Communications strategy:** The Department should ensure that all staff, irrespective of grade, are made fully aware of the content of the recently concluded communications strategy. A mechanism to monitor and review implementation should also be put in place.

**R1.9 External communications:** The Department should reflect on whether current approaches to external communications are sufficient given the nature of the challenges that, by common consensus, exist. The policy of direct engagement by staff with local communities should be promoted as a means of increasing and improving understanding of the Department's role and the impacts that its policies can make.

## 2. POLICY AND STRATEGY

### STRUCTURE OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter examines module 2 of the methodology template which relates to POLICY AND STRATEGY and is focused on the following themes:

**Section 2.1, New policies and strategies:** A summary of the main new policies, strategies and programmes developed since 2017.

**Sections 2.2 and 2.3, Policymaking strengths and challenges:** The Department's policymaking strengths, including examples of processes with features of best practice, and a synopsis of policymaking challenges requiring attention.

**Section 2.4, Business planning:** An overview of business planning and the degree to which consultation and collaboration feature in the process.

**Section 2.5: Strategic alignment:** An examination of how well the Department's strategies align with those of both its agencies and the wider government system.

**Sections 2.6 and 2.7: Appraisal, evaluation and research as a business tool:** An assessment of appraisal and evaluation capacity, the degree to which they feature in organisational culture, and the extent to which research features in business planning and delivery.

### 2.1 NEW POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Although only in existence since 2017, the Department has initiated some new policies and led the preparation of a number of new strategies, operational programmes and legislative initiatives, some of which are far-reaching and deal with complex and challenging social development issues. In that regard, a particularly important context for strategic change was provided by the *Framework Policy for Local and Community Development*, which dates from 2015. This policy document was critical for the development of subsequent community-related strategies and programmes.

The principal areas of strategic change since 2017 are as follows:

- a) **Rural Development Policy, 2020 - 2025 (draft completed in December 2019):** Building on the progress made under its predecessor, this policy, which is awaiting approval by Government, aims to improve the lives of those living and working in rural communities by means of a broad range of actions relating to economic and social development.
- b) **Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (November 2018):** This Fund (RRDF) aims 'to support job creation in rural areas, address de-population of rural communities and support improvements in our towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas.' It provides for €1 billion to be invested in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027, with initial funding of €315 million allocated on a phased basis over the period 2019 to 2022.
- c) **National Social Enterprise Policy (July 2019):** The Department initiated and led the production of the first such policy, *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019 – 2022*. This document sets out a series of 26 commitments across three objectives around building awareness of social enterprise, growing and strengthening such enterprise, and achieving better policy alignment.
- d) **C&V Strategy (August 2019):** The *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, 2019 – 2024* strategy ('C&V strategy') built on the earlier *Framework Policy for Local and Community*

*Development* which had set out national priorities and a framework for a cross-government approach to improving engagement between national and local government and local communities in the planning, delivery and evaluation of policies and interventions that affect them. The C&V Strategy includes a long-term vision, sets a general direction of travel for policy in relation to community development, local development and the community and voluntary sector to end-2024, and prescribes a suite of actions to be implemented over that period.

- e) **National Volunteering Strategy (in progress)**: Work on this strategy commenced in 2019 and was subject to a public consultation exercise which concluded at end-January 2020. The purpose of the proposed strategy is *‘to recognise, support and promote the unique value and contribution of volunteers to the society ... [and] ... to put the best possible supports and infrastructure in place so that volunteers and volunteer bodies continue to prosper and that the volunteering needs of present and future generations will be met.’* It is intended to submit the final strategy to Government shortly.
- f) **Charities Bill (in progress)**: The background is that the basis for current policy on the regulation of the charities sector is a 2002 policy paper and although the *Charities Act, 2009* updated elements of the policy framework, a number of sections in that Act have never been commenced. In recognition of that gap, the Department and the Charities Regulator have drafted the General Scheme for the *Charities (Amendment) Bill*. The Heads of a Bill are nearly ready for submission to Government.
- g) **Library strategy (June 2018)**: The ambitious five year library strategy, *Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities*, aims to develop public library services over a five-year period to end-2022, with a particular focus on improving access, use and visibility of the services.
- h) **Other strategy-related work**: The Department oversees the management and administration of a range of grants-oriented programmes and schemes and although its role is predominantly operational in nature, there is an increasing recognition of the need for a strategic approach to be adopted, particularly around the rationalisation of schemes (see chapter 3, section 3.5.1) and a programmatic approach to evaluations (see chapter 2, section 2.5.2).

## 2.2 POLICYMAKING CAPACITY

Development of the Department’s new policies, strategies and programmes involved the application of some novel processes and features of best practice as follows – *details at Appendix 1*.

### 2.2.1 POLICYMAKING STRENGTHS

- a) **Governance and peer review**: In some cases, Cabinet Committees, supported by senior officials groups, provided guidance on scope, assessments of progress and sign-off on well-advanced draft papers before formal submission to Government – for example, the Cabinet Committee on the Economy in respect of the *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland, 2019 – 2022* and the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy in respect of the C&V and Library strategies.

With some other strategies, formal peer review was adopted. For example, the penultimate draft of the National Volunteering Strategy was peer reviewed by a team comprised of those internal managers who previously had overseen the development of the C&V strategy, a senior manager with Irish Aid, and the Chief Executive of Volunteering Ireland.

- b) **Collaboration with central government:** Development of the RRDF provides a good example of such collaboration. Senior management worked closely with their counterparts in relevant government Departments including the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure conformity with the objectives of *Project Ireland 2040*, to develop common standards in the applications process, and to provide for appropriate review mechanisms.
- c) **Collaboration across government:** Preparation of all the new strategies and policies involved close co-operation with other Departments and public bodies. In that respect, a particularly novel approach was applied when developing the draft *Rural Development Policy, 2020 – 2025*.

The Department met bilaterally with relevant Departments asking them to describe those aspects of their policies and programmes which impact on rural Ireland and to make suggestions on how the proposed policy could give value-added and impetus to them. It then worked up the inputs and refined them in light of its own objectives and perspectives. This iterative process continued until a final draft was signed off by a senior officials' group.

- d) **Stakeholder engagement:** The Department has been quite exemplary in its efforts to engage with stakeholders when countenancing and planning strategic change:
  - i. **Library strategy:** There was considerable external engagement, especially with the local government sector, including the 31 library authorities. Library users were consulted by means of face-to-face focus groups which were held in a number of local authority areas.
  - ii. **National Social Enterprise Policy:** Undertaking the research underpinning this new policy involved public consultations (both on-line and face-to-face), site visits and formal meetings convened by the Department, at which senior management demonstrated professionalism and an openness to take account of opinions. There was particularly strong consultation with community and voluntary organisations at both the research and drafting phases and they were able to bring their deep experience of social enterprise to bear throughout the process.
  - iii. **C&V strategy:** Development of the strategy commenced in 2016 with a national forum of some 200 stakeholders which involved presentations by keynote speakers and thematic workshops aimed at reaching agreed responses to a series of pre-set questions. Later, an internal cross-section team examined all the feedback and prepared a paper as a basis for further discussion with a specially-convened advisory group. The strategy was developed as a co-production between the Department and a cross-sectoral group consisting of key stakeholders – representatives of the local development, community development and community and voluntary sectors, local authorities and government departments.
  - iv. **National Volunteering Strategy:** All key stakeholders, including Volunteering Ireland and its member organisations, were called to a special conference at which the model for developing a new strategy was discussed. Subsequently, a 'Calls for Input' paper, which set out 40 questions for answer, was issued to stakeholders and remained open for two months. Over 150 responses were received.
  - v. **Rural Development Policy, 2020 – 2025:** Some 500 interested people and stakeholders were consulted at 12 public events around the country and a follow-up on-line survey attracted some 1,700 responses.

vi. **RRDF**: Six regional roadshows were used to get feedback from potential applicants on the applications process and the eligibility criteria for funding and such feedback was subsequently factored into the design of the Fund.

e) **Respect for research**: In addition to the use of stakeholder engagement as a source of research for policy development purposes, the Department has demonstrated a strong respect for academic research, with a good example provided by the *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019 - 2022*.

A core input was the research report, *Social Enterprise in Ireland*, the first draft of which was prepared by the Social Finance Foundation. The research included benchmark analysis to assess the situations in other European countries, particularly from a best practice perspective. Informed as well by a broad spectrum of stakeholder inputs, the research established the 'as is' state and reached determinations on future needs and required actions.

f) **Implementation mechanisms**: The Department's policies and strategies have oversight and delivery mechanisms built into their design. A special emphasis is given to working in partnership with stakeholders, public bodies, and community and voluntary organisations (both national and local) in the delivery of policies, strategies and programmes.

g) **Policymaking skillsets**: There is a strong consensus amongst stakeholders that the Department has strong skills and capability to develop policy. In their view, that is helped significantly by the on-the-ground exposure of senior managers who make a special effort to understand perspectives and challenges at local and community levels.

An important consideration though is that the Department's policymaking capacity extends beyond its own staff. It has shown itself willing to draw on the expertise and granular knowledge of delivery agencies like Pobal, national C&V organisations such as 'The Wheel', and local level implementation bodies like local authorities. For such reasons, the Department has a good understanding of the sectors within which it operates, and of the challenges they face.

h) **Specialist skillsets**: Some managers believe that the Department should bolster its economics and legal capacity. Although having recruited an economist from the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), who is engaged predominantly on evaluation-related work, some are of the view however that additional capacity is warranted for two purposes:

- i. **Local level planning** – for example, assisting with the development and oversight of the Local Economic and Community Plans developed by the LCDCs; and
- ii. **Business unit advice** – for instance, providing expertise to business units when developing new policies and assessing policy options.

Given the size of the Department and the developed state of its policies, external procurement of economics support on a needs basis may be the most appropriate option.

Regarding legal capacity, some perceive a competency gap across grades in preparing legislation and progressing it through the Houses of the Oireachtas. This has been addressed to some extent by the procurement of a tailored legislative process course, which commenced in December 2019.

## 2.2.2 POLICYMAKING CHALLENGES

Against the backdrop of a strong policymaking record over a relatively short period, four shortcomings emerged over the course of evidence gathering:

a) **Reliance on few:** Due to the Department's small size, there is a reliance on a small number of people when developing policy and strategy. Some senior managers though contest this view and point to examples involving multidisciplinary approaches involving both staff and stakeholders. Overall, it does appear that the Department is somewhat stretched with regard to critical analysis capacity.

b) **Data management:** The management and usage of data is significantly underdeveloped as a business tool for both evidence-based policymaking and delivery purposes.

The data infrastructure is highly fragmented in terms of categorisation practices, processes and systems and is not capable of yielding cross-programme information in an agile and user-friendly way. A mitigating factor though is that Pobal, which manages and administers a number of programmes and schemes on behalf of the Department, uses state-of-the art technology and data management models

c) **Insufficient impact measurement:** A consequence of the Department's underdeveloped data management systems is the weak linkage between evaluation and impact measurement on the one hand and policy development on the other. While steps are being taken to address this matter, assessing the impacts of programmes and schemes and feeding such information into future policy formulation and refinement is one of the most challenging issues facing the Department – *see section 2.5.2 for further details.*

### **Findings: Policymaking capacity**

**F2.1 Impressive policymaking record:** The Department has an impressive record in the development of new policy and strategy. New policy ground has been broken in areas like social enterprise, and other innovations are planned.

**F2.2 Best practice models:** Many features of best practice are evident across a variety of approaches to policymaking. Stakeholder engagement is exemplary, research is respected, feedback is heeded, and there is a striking willingness to change course in response to new evidence.

**F2.3 Strong policymaking skills:** Stakeholders have a high opinion of the Department's policymaking skills and leadership capability. Unavoidably there is a heavy reliance on a small number of staff to undertake this work.

**F2.4 Data weakness:** A significantly underdeveloped data infrastructure across the Department hampers critical analysis and makes such work much more cumbersome than it ought to be, particularly when seeking to use quantitative data across programmes and schemes for measuring impacts and assessing policy options.

**F2.5 Legislative skills:** There is a perceived competency gap across grades in preparing legislation and progressing it through the Houses of the Oireachtas.

### **Recommendation**

**R2.1 Legislative training:** The Department should explore with OneLearning<sup>3</sup> the feasibility of developing and administering a training programme on the preparation, progression and enactment of legislation to supplement existing training in this area.

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<sup>3</sup> Civil Service Learning and Development Centre

*Recommendations on data management and impact measurement are set out in section 2.5.2, recommendations R2.2 to R2.5 and section 4.6, recommendations R4.13 to R4.16*

## 2.3 BUSINESS PLANNING

The *Statement of Strategy, 2017 – 2020* sets out a vision for the Department along with a series of goals and supporting enablers. The main policy basis for the strategy are provided by *Project Ireland 2040 (National Planning Framework and National Development Plan 2018-2027)*, the *Action Plan for Rural Development* and the *Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland*.

The Department, in its *Statement of Strategy*, sets out four strategic goals to be pursued:

- a) Work across Government to advance the economic and social development of rural areas in order to enhance the quality of life for people who live in rural Ireland.
- b) Contribute to enhanced regional development, with a view to strengthening the potential of all regions to contribute to economic recovery.
- c) Support local communities to develop, empowering them to identify their needs and aspirations and providing them with the opportunities, skills and confidence to influence, shape and participate in decision-making processes which affect them.
- d) Support the Community, Voluntary and Charity Sector to strengthen its capacity to contribute to civil society and support the growth and development of philanthropy.

Supporting these goals are a series of enablers on strengthening policymaking; improving service delivery; increased monitoring, evaluation and research; enhanced engagement; and building and developing the organisation. Senior management consulted well with line managers and staff when developing the strategy.

Regarding the constituent business plans of individual business units, the Management Board and Principal Officers lead and drive the process. The plans are prepared collectively with staff, the full staff complement of a business unit presents on its plan to the Board, regular meetings at business unit level are the norm, and there are biannual reviews.

### *Finding*

**F2.6 Strong business planning:** Business planning is a departmental strong point. The *Statement of Strategy* and constituent business plans are developed in a highly collaborative way, and staff at all grades are afforded opportunities to contribute.

## 2.4 STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

With regard to strategic alignment, there are three key considerations:

- a) The extent to which national policy frameworks are factored into the development of new policies and strategies;
- b) The degree to which there is conformity between the corporate plans of the Department's four agencies with the Department's own Statement of Strategy; and
- c) The extent to which the Department aligns its work with that of other Government Departments.

Regarding a), the Department is diligent in incorporating contextual strategies, like the National Planning Framework, into both its own Statement of Strategy and its sector-specific strategies. Where appropriate, such strategies are expressly referenced in the objectives and actions that support delivery of the Department's strategic goals.

In relation to b), appropriate steps are taken to ensure alignment between the strategic plans of the Department's agencies and those of the Department itself. The governance arrangements set out in chapter 3, section 3.6.1 are the primary means by which that goal is pursued. The Statement of Strategy is also used in some instances to strengthen bilateral relationships and improve delivery capacity – for example, one objective is to 'strengthen the role of the Western Development Commission in contributing to regional and national policy objectives.'

Regarding c), the Department works to ensure that strategy-related inputs from other Departments are factored into its own policies and strategic plans – for example, goals on rural broadband in the National Broadband Plan are reflected in both the draft *Rural Development Policy 2020 – 2025* and the five year public libraries strategy.

### **Finding**

**F2.7 Strategic alignment:** Appropriate steps are taken to ensure that strategic alignment is achieved, on the one hand, between the Department's policies and priorities and, on the other hand, the corporate plans of its four agencies, national policy frameworks, and the strategies of other Government Departments.

## **2.5 APPRAISAL AND EVALUATION**

As the Department's Research and Evaluation Unit comprises one economist, there is a heavy reliance on line business units and external support in undertaking quantitative-oriented research, and planning for related measurement inputs. Nonetheless, the Department is well positioned to plug the gaps in current capacity, especially as senior managers have a deep comprehension of research and measurement as business tools, coupled with a clear openness to build external research partnerships.

### **2.5.1 APPRAISAL CAPABILITY**

The Department's appraisal function has seven distinguishing characteristics as follows:

- a) **Thresholds:** The Department does not need to have appraisal capacity as comprehended by the Public Spending Code as the great majority of individual projects fall well below the prescribed thresholds, although that situation could possibly change in some instances if a programmatic approach to the delivery of schemes on a thematic basis were introduced.
- b) **Qualitative outputs:** As each scheme has its own funding criteria and the intended benefits tend to be quite intangible, assessments of proposals tend to be qualitative in nature.
- c) **Appraisals by Pobal:** For a number of schemes, Pobal performs the appraisal role – for example, with the LEADER programme it manages both the selection and review processes and conducts financial verification checks – *details in chapter 3, section 3.1.5.*
- d) **Appraisals by LGMA:** For capital investments in public libraries, the Department receives applications for funding from local authorities which are sent onto the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) for review. It assesses the applications, provides opinions, and makes recommendations to the Department which then makes the funding decisions.

- e) **Appraisals by Department:** For some programmes and schemes, the Department appraises funding applications itself – for example, under its various rural development schemes. A central element of the process involves assessments around the degree of conformity between an application and the programme’s or scheme’s pre-set objectives and criteria.
- f) **Appraisal experience and training:** The managers and staff who assess bids for funding are experienced in undertaking such work. Training for new entrants is primarily on-the-job and a number of them, along with long-serving staff, also attended a series of training workshops recently on Regulatory Impact Assessments which were very highly regarded.
- g) **Appraisals by Department and independent Board:** With the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), a combination of the line business unit and an independent Board adjudicates on applications as follows:

#### 2.5.1A RRDF APPRAISAL PROCESS

The RRDF was established to ‘provide investment to support rural renewal, strengthen and build resilience in rural communities and assist in the regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas.’ As part of *Project Ireland 2040*, the Government committed €1 billion for the RRDF over the period 2019 to 2027 and initial funding of €315 million has been allocated on a phased basis over the period 2019 to 2022.<sup>4</sup> The process for appraising applications has the following four features:

- a) **Application assistance process:** As part of the Call for Applications process, information sessions are held around the country with potential applicants who usually have some five months to prepare bids.
- b) **Preliminary assessment:** The Team administering the RRDF undertakes a preliminary assessment of applications and marks each of them by reference to pre-set criteria. The applications (69 for the Second Call) are then ranked and organised into three categories (top tier, middle tier, bottom tier) for consideration by the Project Advisory Board.
- c) **Project Advisory Board:** This Board, which is chaired by the Department, comprises representatives from a number of relevant Government Departments, local authorities and external experts. As it sees fit, it can make changes to the categories proposed by the Department. The observations and advice of the Board members form the basis for a report to the Minister on recommended projects, following which the Minister makes the final decisions.
- d) **Published criteria:** The Board, in reaching a final determination on an application, must satisfy itself that the proposed project ‘aligns with *Project Ireland 2040*, the overall objectives of the RRDF, and the requirement to achieve balanced regional development.’ The criteria for funding and associated scores are published with each Call.

Overall engagement with potential applicants is strong and the feedback given is constructive. The procedures are governed by a process manual.

#### **Findings: Appraisal**

**F2.8 Appraisal capacity:** The Department operates a hybrid model for undertaking appraisals involving internal line business units for some programmes and schemes, and external entities such

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<sup>4</sup> Under the First Call for Applications, which closed in September 2018, a total of 84 projects with a funding allocation of €86 million were supported. A Second Call closed in August 2019. The funding allocation for 2020 is €78 million.

as Pobal and the LGMA for others. The model is regarded as working satisfactorily, with appropriate checks and balances in place.

**F2.9 Appraisal of RRDF applications:** The controls built into the selection process are strong, as is stakeholder engagement.

### 2.5.2 EVALUATION CAPABILITY

The Department's capacity and culture for undertaking evaluations are at the early stages of development, with the following elements being particularly noteworthy:

- a) **Research and Evaluation Unit (REU):** Established in 2019, the REU comprises an economist recruited under the IGEES programme.<sup>5</sup> Its central role is to evaluate the Department's programmes. It also provides an advisory service to line business units on research-related matters and, as required, prepares assessments on the management and use of data.
- b) **Evaluation Sub-group:** This sub-group, which is chaired by the Assistant Secretary of Corporate Division and reports to the Management Board, is a forum for sharing knowledge, and is used to get buy-in to research from the wider Department.
- c) **Board commitment to measurement:** The Board is keenly interested in the development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for implementation purposes, especially on measuring the impacts of the various programmes and schemes. This aim is expressly referenced in the Department's Statement of Strategy and, to that end, the Department commissioned the ESRI to assist with the development of appropriate best practice indicators which will be finalized in 2020 – *see (g) below*. At present, a range of KPIs for programmes including LEADER, SICAP, CSP and PPNs are provided annually for the Revised Estimates and the DPER Public Service Performance Report.
- d) **Programme of Evaluations:** A draft programme of evaluations, which covers the three-year period 2020 to 2022, is in preparation, with the Management Board due to decide shortly on the final version. As part of that work, the Evaluation Sub-group canvassed internally on the priorities to be pursued.
- e) **Programmatic approach:** The Department plans to adopt a programmatic approach to the evaluation of its schemes into the future. In practice, this will mean that schemes will be evaluated in aggregated form under eight themes such as 'Programme for Rural Development', 'Programme for Community Development' and 'Programme for Capital Investment'. The programmatic evaluations will follow the model set out in the Public Spending Code by reference to rationale, efficiency and effectiveness. A consequence of the new approach will be the need for more staff to familiarise themselves with the requirements of the Code and to become upskilled in its application.
- f) **Focused Policy Assessments (FPAs):** Pending the establishment of the programmatic approach and its incorporation into business practice, individual schemes and projects will be evaluated by means of Focused Policy Assessments (FPAs). Such assessments are usually designed to answer specific questions relating to policy configuration and delivery, especially those of a cross-cutting nature, and can involve the use of one or more evaluation criteria.

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<sup>5</sup> The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), which was established in 2012, is an integrated cross-Government service to enhance the role of economics and value for money analysis in public policy making

- g) **ESRI – research agreement:** A three-year research framework agreement with the ESRI commenced towards end-2019 and ultimately will comprise three or four research projects. The process is overseen by a steering group which meets quarterly subject to deliverables. The focus of current discussions is on the priorities to be pursued. From the ESRI's perspective, three criteria must be met: (a) the project must have research value; (b) it must have publication value; and (c) it must meet the needs of the Department.
- h) **ESRI – data assessment and benchmarking:** A key element of the ESRI's work is a macro overview of the types of metrics and supporting data needed, including assessments of what can be used from existing datasets. An essential requirement is that the metrics should reflect or map onto the objectives of each of the Department's eight programme areas. Within that context, the ESRI is examining some international best practices for monitoring and evaluating programmes and activities similar to those administered by the Department.
- i) **Data infrastructure:** With a few exceptions, categorisation practices, data management processes and ICT solutions are underdeveloped across the Department's business units, and the grants-related data from local authorities is of mixed quality.
- j) **ESRI advice on data infrastructure:** As part of its work, the ESRI will be advising on the data infrastructure which the Department will need to put in place in order to facilitate ongoing monitoring and enable evaluations, including value-for-money studies, to be conducted with relative ease into the future. Its experience over the past five years on interrogating Pobal's datasets will be especially beneficial, as the quality of its data and the supporting data infrastructures are both very good.
- k) **Future evaluation capacity:** There is a strong consensus that the Department should not only continue to have its own evaluation capacity but that it should be strengthened.

### **Findings: Evaluation**

**F2.10 Evaluation capacity:** The Department is at the early stages of developing an evaluation model and culture. The establishment of the Research and Evaluation Unit, the preparation of a draft Programme of Evaluations, and the engagement of the ESRI in a three-year research agreement are all constructive and important initial steps.

**F2.11 Programmatic approach:** The planned reorientation towards evaluating programmes rather than individual schemes is prudent given their number, diversity and varying scales. The work under way with the ESRI on developing performance metrics that would be attuned to each programme and take account of appropriate international benchmarks are positive steps forward.

**F2.12 Measurement of impacts:** Assessing the impacts of programmes, and validating them, is one of the biggest challenges to be faced. Particularly critical will be the data infrastructure ultimately proposed to facilitate ongoing monitoring and enable evaluations to be conducted with relative ease.

**F2.13 Underdeveloped data infrastructure:** While Pobal's data management models are of high standard, the Department's own data infrastructure for ongoing monitoring and eventual feeds into evaluation is not yet in place, although work with the ESRI on addressing that situation has commenced. Critical enablers for efficient measurement by the Department into the future will be standardised categorisation practices, effective data management processes and appropriate ICT solutions in each business unit for everyday monitoring purposes.

**F2.14 Local government data:** The quality of grants-related data from local authorities is mixed and is generating processing overheads for the Department in terms of validation, time and cost.

### **Recommendations**

**R2.2 Programme of Evaluations:** The Department should conclude the work which is well advanced on developing a Programme of Evaluations and which will reflect the reorientation towards the evaluation of programmes rather than individual schemes.

**R2.3 Impact measurement:** Taking account of the work undertaken by the ESRI, the Department should agree on the suite of indicators needed to measure the critical impacts of its programmes and schemes.

**R2.4 Data infrastructure:** The Department – in consultation with stakeholders including Pobal – should prepare a plan for developing a data infrastructure model that would both facilitate the effective ongoing monitoring of programmes and provide critical data feeds into their evaluation. Particular attention would need to be given to standardised categorisation practices and efficient data management processes.

**R2.5 Local government data quality:** The Department, in consultation with the LGMA, should explore how the provision of high quality data could be made more uniform across the local government sector. Factors to be considered include streamlining data requests, standardising datasets and strengthening quality assurance processes.

**Further recommendations on data are set out in chapter 4, section 4.6.2, recommendations R4.13 to R4.16**

## **2.6 RESEARCH AS A BUSINESS TOOL**

For operational programmes with significant EU funding such as SICAP and LEADER, continuous administrative assessment is built into delivery, and those two programmes are subject to ongoing review in terms of inputs, outputs and, to an evolving extent, outcomes as well. Delivery under the SICAP provides particularly useful pointers as the Department considers the features of a best practice measurement model for the generality of its programmes and schemes:

- a) **Research as an instrument of change:** With the first iteration of the SICAP, the LCDCs had a particular concern that there was an excessive focus on the numbers progressing to job activation and insufficient targeting of those in persistent cycles of unemployment and poverty. When developing the second iteration, the Department responded by convening workshops with interested parties, which were facilitated independently. It listened to the concerns expressed by: (a) removing the job activation criteria for the extremely marginalised core of people in persistent unemployment; and (b) then developing the ‘My Journey’ tool which maps an individual’s progress out of persistent unemployment.
- b) **‘My Journey’ tool and measuring impacts:** The ‘My Journey’ tool is positioned to become an important instrument for measuring the most pertinent outcomes under the SICAP. For example, it gathers data on the number of participants who are happily active in society. In this way, a whole well-being approach to measuring impacts is being put in place which is appropriate as the SICAP was never intended to be about job progression alone.

- c) **On-the-ground exposure:** When developing the second iteration of the SICAP, the Department – in the opinion of stakeholders – was very strong at reaching out to those groups of people who are most distant from the workforce.
- d) **Partnership research:** Pobal administers the SICAP on behalf of the Department. At its instigation, the ESRI has been undertaking research on the programme for the past five years involving, for example, a formal evaluation of pre-employment supports which has just been concluded. This partnership approach to research benefits the Department, Pobal, the ESRI and other bodies like the DEASP and the LCDCs.

Along with the SICAP, there are also positive experiences from other programmes and schemes which can inform departmental thinking on the best way forward:<sup>6</sup>

- a) **Evidential groundwork:** Applicants for funding under the RRDF are required to specify in their applications the process by which the proposed project would be evaluated, and in this way the groundwork is being prepared for a future evaluation.
- b) **Quantitative and qualitative:** A combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators will be considered for measuring outputs under the draft *Rural Development Policy, 2020 – 2025*.
- c) **Mapping delivery onto evaluation:** The LEADER Unit has built up considerable competence in programme measurement and in incorporating that need systemically into automated delivery. Valuable insights for measuring and evaluating other programmes could thus be gained from examining that delivery model and the preparations for an upcoming evaluation.
- d) **Review of Pobal:** A Periodic Critical Review of Pobal commenced in February 2020. This review provides the Department with an opportunity to explore how its proposed programmatic approach to evaluations might harmonise with future service delivery by Pobal.

### **Findings: Research as a business tool**

**F2.15 On-the-ground research:** When developing the second iteration of the SICAP, the Department listened to the concerns expressed by local delivery agents and programme participants. This on-the-ground exposure and engagement was critical to improving the programme, and developing new means and metrics to assess its impacts.

**F2.16 Societal impacts:** The ‘My Journey’ tool demonstrates innovation in measuring the impacts of a programme on individuals and communities, and points to new possibilities for how such measurement might be done in respect of other programmes and schemes.

**F2.17 Research partnerships:** The ESRI’s research programme with the Department represents a logical extension of the programme already in place between the ESRI and Pobal. In this way, the Department is looking outwardly to strengthen its research base.

**F2.18 Experience:** The Department can draw readily from a variety of sources when developing best practice for conducting evaluations and promoting an evaluation culture – e.g. its experience with various forms of *ex post* reviews, and the measurement practices already in place for some schemes.

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<sup>6</sup> See also status report at Appendix 2

***Recommendation***

**R2.6 Knowledge management:** The Department, perhaps through the Evaluation Sub-group, should collate its diverse experiences and practices relating to the preparation and undertaking of *ex post* reviews. Knowledge sharing amongst managers on challenges and best practice would help considerably with the development of programmatic approaches to future evaluations.

## 3. DELIVERY

### STRUCTURE OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter examines module 3 of the methodology template relating to DELIVERY as follows:

**Section 3.1, Delivery of schemes:** The delivery model in place differentiating between national and local level bodies.

**Section 3.2, Implementation of strategies:** The challenges involved in implementing the suite of new strategies developed by the Department.

**Section 3.3, Progressing special initiatives:** The progress being made on progressing special initiatives for which the Department has lead responsibility.

**Section 3.4, Delivery strengths and challenges:** The Department's strengths for delivery of its policies, strategies, programmes and schemes, along with the challenges to be addressed.

**Section 3.5, Rationalisation and innovation:** The steps taken and needed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery by streamlining the current suite of rural and community schemes, and the degree to which a culture of openness and innovation is promoted and fostered.

**Section 3.6, Governance:** The structures and features of governance, and the oversight and liaison arrangements in place with agencies and local entities in delivering programmes and schemes and implementing policies and strategies.

**Section 3.7, Risk management and audit function:** The policies and structures around risk management and the effectiveness of the audit function and inspections' regime.

### 3.1 DELIVERY OF SCHEMES

The Department administers some rural development schemes itself as well as relying heavily on a network of local-level entities, operating mostly within the local government system, to deliver programmes and schemes in its behalf. Other Government Departments and non-governmental organisations also play roles, as well as being centrally involved in the implementation of the Department's policies and strategies.

#### 3.1.1 RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEADER PROGRAMMES

The Department processes one of its major grant-oriented schemes itself, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), and administers the LEADER programme in a shared delivery arrangement involving the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Pobal and the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs).

It also processes a number of other schemes, including the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS), the CLÁR programme and the Walks Scheme. Applications are assessed in-house and proposals prepared for the Minister's approval. The TidyTowns competition is also administered directly by the Department.

#### 3.1.2 DELIVERY MODEL: LOCAL ENTITIES

The Department depends heavily on the following locally-based entities for delivery purposes:

- a) **31 local authorities**, with the County and City Management Association (CCMA) and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) working to achieve cohesion across the sector.

- b) 49 Local Development Companies (LDCs) which assist communities and disadvantaged persons/groups in the areas of personal development, social exclusion and social enterprise.<sup>7</sup>
- c) 33 Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are statutory committees of local authorities, established under the *Local Government Act, 2014*. They work to match local community needs with the Department's various programmes by bringing together local authority members and officials, state agencies and NGOs into direct contact with LCDC members.<sup>8</sup> They have oversight and management responsibility for some of the principal programmes, particularly the SICAP and LEADER.<sup>9</sup> They comprise between 15 and 21 members depending on council size and local circumstances.

In October 2017, the Department commenced a review of the LCDCs which was published in July 2019. The review sought to assess their strategic and operational development in the three years since they were established and to identify opportunities for strengthening and supporting them into the future. It highlighted a range of challenges and findings relating to governance and structure, strategic effectiveness, participation and engagement, and administrative support and development.

- d) 31 Public Participation Networks (PPNs) which provide local community groups with a structure for formal engagement with local authorities.

### 3.1.3 DELIVERY MODEL FOR SCHEMES: POBAL AND LOCAL LEVEL ENTITIES

Pobal is one of the Department's four agencies and is also a provider of services on its behalf. It administers and manages Government and EU funding for a range of public bodies.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the LEADER programme (*see section 3.1.5 following*), the following are the principal programmes and schemes administered by Pobal and LCDCs on behalf of the Department:

- a) **SICAP (Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme)**: The SICAP aims to address high and persistent levels of deprivation and social exclusion through targeted locally-led interventions. The programme is managed by the LCDCs with support from local authorities<sup>11</sup> and Pobal.
- b) **CSP (Community Services Programme)**: Pobal manages the CSP which supports jobs in community businesses that deliver services and create employment for people from disadvantaged groups.<sup>12</sup>
- c) **SSNO (Scheme to Support National Organisations)**: The SSNO provides multi-annual funding towards meeting the core costs of national organisations in the C&V sector. Pobal's management

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<sup>7</sup> Altogether, LDCs deliver programmes and projects on behalf of all Government Departments totalling some €330 million per annum although that amount varies from year to year.

<sup>8</sup> LCDCs support a number of Departments in the delivery of services – for example, the SICAP for the Department of Rural and Community Development, the resettlement of refugees for the Department of Justice and Equality, the 'Healthy Ireland' programme for the Department of Health, and various initiatives under the auspices of Creative Ireland for the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

<sup>9</sup> LCDCs have managed investment of some €148 million through SICAP since 2015, while LCDC-led Local Action Groups have approved some 2,000 LEADER projects valued at almost €71m. They also deliver large elements of the Healthy Ireland Fund, with almost €6 million invested in health and well-being actions since 2017.

<sup>10</sup> It manages, funds and provides support under 25 programmes in the areas of Social Inclusion and Equality, Inclusive Employment and Enterprise, and Early Learning and Care, involving the processing of payments totalling some €1 billion per annum to national, local and community organisations

<sup>11</sup> Programme actions are delivered by Programme Implementers across 51 Lots. The ESF contribution is €60 million

<sup>12</sup> The CSP provides supports to: (i) community halls and facilities; (ii) services to local communities; and (iii) community enterprises providing employment to marginalised groups e.g. travelling community

of the scheme involves the appraisal of applications, the management of contracts and finance, and the provision of grantee supports.

- d) **SAS (Seniors Alert Scheme)**: The objective of this scheme is to encourage community support for vulnerable older people by providing them with personal monitored alarms. Pobal manages the scheme including the procurement, applications, and payments aspects.
- e) **Dormant Accounts Fund**: The *Dormant Accounts Act, 2012* provides for a disbursement scheme which, through a series of action plans, allocates funding to organisations delivering programmes or projects on behalf of people who are economically, socially or educationally disadvantaged, and people with a disability. The Department has lead responsibility for oversight of the processes by which sponsoring Departments disburse funding, including the overall administration of the Fund, the development of disbursement schemes and action plans, and the preparation of annual reports on expenditure. Pobal is responsible for disbursements of some €2 million under the Fund for the Social Enterprise measure.
- f) **Town and Village Renewal Scheme**: The Department has lead responsibility for this scheme which is administered by local authorities. Pobal has provided administrative support relating to the logging and initial screening of applications.
- g) **Tidy Towns Grant Scheme**: Since 2017, this scheme has provided tidy towns groups with small grant support for activities aimed at enhancing and improving the appearance of local areas, villages and towns. The grants scheme, which is complementary to the long-standing Supervalu-sponsored TidyTown competition managed by the Department, has been administered by Pobal on its behalf.
- h) **RRDF projects**: Delivery of RRDF projects on the ground is by those who have been successful in a competitive process, usually local authorities or state bodies. In line with contractual arrangements, payments are made on milestone delivery. The RRDF Unit, complemented by inspections by the Department's Inspection and Compliance Unit, oversees delivery.

### 3.1.4 DELIVERY MODEL FOR SCHEMES: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Feedback was obtained on the quality of service provided by Pobal and the effectiveness of locally-based bodies in supporting delivery of the Department's programmes and schemes. Notably in the latter respect, the Department is particularly dependent on local authorities, NGOs and community groups.<sup>13</sup> The evidence points to both strengths and shortcomings in delivery:

#### *Strengths*

- a) **Service provided by Pobal**: Managers and staff rate the quality of service very highly, the supporting ICT systems are state-of-the-art, the data infrastructure is strong, and regular reports are provided on schemes by reference to inputs, outputs, target groups and costs.
- b) **Strong local delivery**: The delivery chain involving local authorities, LDCs, LCDCs and PPNs, even if cumbersome, works reasonably well, especially in administering the LEADER programme and managing the SICAP.

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<sup>13</sup> Roles are also played by Pobal, the Western Development Commission, the Department of Employment and Social Protection, and Enterprise Ireland, amongst others

- c) **LCDCs – improving:** Many local authorities are now giving LCDCs good support and, as a result, they are operating better now than they had been. As for the Department, its engagement is generally strong with entities like the ILDN.<sup>14</sup>
- d) **PPNs – valuable local inputs:** The work programmes of many PPNs are fruitful and impactful at community level. They also make valuable contributions to the design of national policies and community-based initiatives<sup>15</sup>.

### Challenges

- a) **Local authorities – cohesion problematic:** As local authorities are statutorily-based independent entities, it can often be difficult to achieve cohesion in delivery and communications, even though the CCMA and LGMA perform co-ordinating roles for the local government sector as a whole.
- b) **LCDCs – mixed competencies:** While some LCDCs are strong and competent, others are less so and their overall delivery record is mixed. Although the LCDCs are committees of local authorities, there is some confusion over their most appropriate role in social inclusion and community development. There also appears to be a lack of awareness among some Departments about how they can plug into the LCDCs to help with local level delivery. The previously-referenced review published in 2019 by the Department acknowledges these challenges.

### Findings: Delivery model

**F3.1 Strong delivery:** Although a myriad of State agencies, local authorities and community-based bodies are involved in the delivery of the Department’s policies and programmes, this extended delivery chain delivers in a reasonably effective way.

**F3.2 Delivery by Pobal:** The bilateral relationship is professional and strong. The Department has a well-developed view on the services sought and Pobal delivers high quality product.

**F3.3 Role of LCDCs:** Reflecting a finding reached separately in the *Review of Local Community Development Committees*, there is confusion over the most appropriate role for LCDCs in the areas of social inclusion and community development, and there is a general lack of awareness amongst Departments on how LCDCs might assist them with local level delivery.

### Recommendation

**R3.1 LCDC mapping exercise:** In order to optimise their contribution to planning and delivery at community level, the Department – in collaboration with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government – should undertake a mapping exercise comprising the following elements:

- a) ‘As is’ state of:
  - a. the inputs and outputs of LCDCs
  - b. their relationships with local authorities
  - c. areas of value-added and overlap between the work of LCDCs and local authorities
- b) ‘Go to’ state in terms of:
  - a. desirable value-added for delivery from the perspective of central government
  - b. desirable value-added for delivery from the perspective of local government
  - c. gap analysis on the capacity of LCDCs to deliver on b)a and b)b above

<sup>14</sup>There was also a networking day in November 2019 for the LCDCs which focused primarily on delivery and capacity issues

<sup>15</sup> For example, Wicklow PPN made 30 plus submissions to various consultation exercises in 2019, both national and local

### 3.1.5 DELIVERY MODEL FOR SCHEMES: RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEADER PROGRAMMES

As already noted in section 3.1.1, the Department processes one of its major grant-oriented schemes itself, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), and administers the LEADER programme in a shared delivery arrangement.

- a) **RRDF:** As part of *Project Ireland 2040*, the Government has committed €1 billion for the RRDF over the period 2019 to 2027 and initial funding of €315 million has been allocated on a phased basis over the years 2019 to 2022.<sup>16</sup> A Project Advisory Board oversees the assessment of applications for funding and, on that basis, makes recommendations to the Minister for decision – *details set out previously in chapter 2, section 2.5.1.*

Regarding delivery, the Department relies heavily on local authorities. Details of expenditure relative to profile are inputted quarterly onto the NDP Project Tracker.<sup>17</sup> If a project is of an infrastructure nature, money drawdowns are typically linked to delivery milestones and in the case of Category One projects (i.e. those over €0.5 million), inspections by the Inspection and Compliance Unit form part of the process. ‘Decision gates’ are also built into the design whereby implementation is reviewed at appropriate intervals.

- b) **Delivery of LEADER:** The €250 million EU-led LEADER programme provides rural communities with resources to promote local development. Grant aid is awarded to projects in three thematic areas: (i) Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation; (ii) Social Inclusion, and (iii) Rural Environment. The delivery model is quite extended, stretching from central government to local communities:
- i. **DAFM:** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) has an overarching policy and management role arising from the fact that LEADER is part of the Rural Development Programme which it leads and manages.
  - ii. **DRCD:** The Department of Rural and Community Development has delegated responsibility for implementation, even though the DAFM retains the lead role on engagement at EU level, including for national negotiations on a successor programme.
  - iii. **Pobal:** It administers payments and supports the Department by: (i) conducting financial verification checks; (ii) undertaking performance monitoring and data quality checks; and (iii) developing, rolling out and supporting the LEADER ICT system.
  - iv. **LAGs:** Local Action Groups (LAGs)<sup>18</sup> are tasked with selecting and approving support for local-level projects which must be aligned with a Local Development Strategy.<sup>19</sup>
  - v. **LDCs:** The LDCs and their representative body, the ILDN, are responsible for actual delivery amounting to €250 million over the seven years to end-2019.

Over the course of evidence gathering, a number of delivery-related issues were raised:

- a) **Strong delivery record:** The Department manages the LEADER programme well and is delivering above the set targets.

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<sup>16</sup> Under the First Call for Applications, which closed in September 2018, 84 projects with a funding allocation of €86 million were supported. A Second Call closed in August 2019. The funding allocation for 2020 is €78 million

<sup>17</sup> The tracker is managed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

<sup>18</sup> All but three of the Local Action Groups are LCDCs

<sup>19</sup> The Department, local authorities and LDCs are all involved in building the capacity of the LAGs

- b) **Effective support:** There has been very good support from both the Department and Pobal on improving access to LEADER and in engaging with communities in that respect.
- c) **Strong inspection regime:** The programme is heavily inspected and regulated, thereby ensuring that actual expenditure matches onto stated aims.
- d) **State-of-the-art ICT tool:** A highly effective ICT application has been developed recently for administering the programme – see *chapter 4, section 4.5.2 for details*.

The principal criticism aired relates to the complexity of the LEADER application process. In the view of some stakeholders, this factor and its associated reporting burden are deterring some potentially eligible applicants from submitting applications for funding.<sup>20</sup>

### **Findings: RRDF and LEADER**

**F3.4 Administration of the RRDF:** Although the Department manages the RRDF well, the manual nature of the end-to-end process is an area in need of attention.

**F3.5 Administration of LEADER:** The Department’s management of the delivery aspects of the LEADER programme is regarded very favourably by its principal stakeholders, although attention was drawn to the complexity of the applications process.

### **Recommendations**

**R3.2 RRDF – digitisation:** The Department should develop a business case for digitising the administration of the RRDF and, on that basis, decide whether a new ICT solution is warranted.

**R3.3 LEADER - simplification:** The Department – in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine – should explore whether there is scope to simplify the application and reporting processes for the successor programme in accordance with EU rules.

## **3.2 IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIES**

As already noted in chapter 2, section 2.1, the Department has produced a number of new ambitious strategies. The principal delivery challenges are as follows:

- a) **National Social Enterprise Policy, 2019 – 2022:** Delivery of the 26 policy measures is being monitored by a National Social Enterprise Policy Implementation Group. The group, which is advisory, comprises relevant Government Departments, other public bodies and social enterprise stakeholders. Deliverables, milestones and timelines are built into annual programmes of work. Four notable delivery challenges arise:
  - i. **Ownership:** There has been pushback from Departments regarding who should lead on the delivery of particular measures, especially those of a cross-government nature.
  - ii. **Community capacity:** Some doubts were expressed externally regarding the capacity of some community-based organisations to deliver on-the-ground.
  - iii. **Metrics:** While the strategy has clear deliverables and timelines, an agreed set of performance metrics has yet to be developed, although the Irish Research Council is funding a post-doctoral student to develop a suite of them.

<sup>20</sup> It was further asserted that LEADER is delivered in a lot simpler ways in most other EU countries than in Ireland, although it was beyond the remit of the Review Team to test this claim

- b) **C&V strategy:** The multi-disciplinary team, which oversaw the development of the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities* strategy ('C&V strategy'), has morphed into an oversight implementation group that includes C&V stakeholders. The group will set out a work plan for each year, issue annual progress reports, and provide periodic reports to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion. Two particular delivery challenges arise:
- i. **Influencing:** The Department will have to influence other Government Departments, public bodies and C&V organisations to deliver, and
  - ii. **Local level roles:** It is not yet clear what precise roles are envisaged for bodies like the LCDCs and what particular supports might be needed by them.
- c) **Volunteering strategy:** This five-year strategy, which is currently in draft form, has oversight and review mechanisms built into it. Because of similarities with the C&V strategy, it will likely face a comparable set of delivery challenges. Additionally, it provides that the Department, in cooperation with Volunteering Ireland, will establish eight new volunteer centres which amounts to an entirely new departure.<sup>21</sup>
- d) **Rural Development Policy 2020 – 2025:** This five-year draft policy proposes delivery milestones and oversight arrangements. It is planned at present that implementation will be overseen by a high level group of Secretaries General, supported by an implementation group of officials and stakeholders.

From a delivery perspective, the large number of delivery agents involved will present challenges, although the rigorous implementation of the outgoing *Action Plan for Rural Development* should act as a source of confidence.

- e) **Public libraries strategy:** Lead responsibility for implementing the five-year public libraries strategy, *Our Public Libraries, 2018 – 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities*, rests with the Head of the Library Development Division in the LGMA.

The Department plays a supporting role – it decides on the capital spending, provides the funding for delivery, and ensures that money is expended as agreed. It also has a role in developing standards and benchmarks, as well as the funding criteria for capital projects such as new libraries, re-fits and specialist digital resources.

The Library Development Committee, which includes representation from the Department, prepares a report for the LGMA Board on plans, delivery and governance matters and meets with it three times a year. There is also considerable informal engagement with Departmental officials who engage well and are responsive. Overall delivery is regarded as strong.

### **Findings: Implementation of strategies**

**F3.6 Delivery challenge:** A major delivery challenge facing the Department is that much of its rural and community development agenda is under the control of other public bodies, mostly locally based. Its resolve and ability to influence delivery, at both central government and local levels, will be strongly tested over coming years.

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<sup>21</sup> The Department has already examined some equivalent situations in other jurisdictions such as Scotland and Northern Ireland, and has met with senior managers from there to learn from their experiences

**F3.7 Delivery of social enterprise, C&V and volunteering strategies:** Implementation groups are either in place or planned for each of the three strategies on social enterprise, C&V sector and volunteering, although it is too soon yet to report on progress. The C&V sector intends to be centrally involved in delivery and wants priorities across the strategies to be agreed.

**F3.8 Public libraries strategy:** While the LGMA leads on implementation, the Department plays a critical supportive role, and overall delivery is characterised by strong collaboration.

### **Recommendation**

**R3.4 Delivery priorities for social enterprise, C&V and volunteering strategies:** On conclusion of the volunteering strategy, the Department, in consultation with C&V stakeholders, should develop an agreed set of priorities for delivery over the next two years under the social enterprise, C&V and volunteering strategies which altogether have 68 recommendations. Bearing in mind the challenges that lie ahead, a work plan is needed to identify those priorities and choreograph them across the three strategies.

*See chapter 4, section 4.5.2, R4.11 for recommendation on technology to support delivery*

## **3.3 PROGRESSING SPECIAL INITIATIVES**

The Department has lead responsibility for progressing a number of special initiatives, notably the Atlantic Economic Corridor and the improvement of rural broadband and mobile phone coverage.

a) **Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC):** This initiative is aimed at joining up economic corridors along the western seaboard from Donegal to Kerry (plus Roscommon). While there is no standalone policy paper in place, the initiative does feature in *Project Ireland 2040*.

The Minister of State chairs a Task Force that is charged with overseeing implementation, and the Western Development Commission (WDC) exercises a coordination role.<sup>22</sup>

Having undertaken an assessment of performance and delivery options, the Department and the WDC have put in place a time-lined work plan. The focus now is on tangible outputs relating to specific projects that would bring about value-added for the region. For example, a project is under way on mapping duct infrastructure and assessing its state, thereby assisting with the installation of telecommunications and broadband infrastructure.

A consideration arises in that the AEC has no dedicated funding line and does not feature in the Regional Economic and Spatial Plans under the National Planning Framework. Thus the Department will have to work particularly hard to maintain momentum and ensure delivery.

b) **Rural broadband and mobile telephone coverage:** The Department works closely with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment on various issues related to rural broadband and mobile connectivity, including the ongoing delivery of the National Broadband Plan. The Mobile Phone and Broadband Task Force, which is chaired by the Department (at Minister of State level), has produced a number of delivery-related reports for the Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure and has identified new actions to be pursued.

The Department also supports part of the annual cost of Broadband Officers employed by local authorities, has prepared best practice guidance for these roles, and holds quarterly meetings with

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<sup>22</sup> Coordination involves relevant Departments, local authorities, other public bodies, educational interests and Chambers of Commerce. There is also an AEC Officer in each of the ten relevant local authorities.

them. In addition, there are periodic meetings between the Minister of State and the CEOs and Directors of Services from local authorities, as well as liaison arrangements.

Furthermore, the Department formally engages with Telecommunications Industry Ireland, IBEC's representative body for the industry. That relationship is considered very positive.

### **Findings: Special initiatives**

**F3.9 Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC):** With greater clarity having been brought to bear on the purpose and plans for the AEC, the Department – along with the WDC – will need to work closely with the ten affected local authorities to maintain momentum.

**F3.10 Rural broadband and mobile telephone coverage:** The Department is playing a very positive role in the ongoing initiatives aimed at improving broadband and mobile connectivity in rural Ireland.

## **3.4 DELIVERY STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES**

The Department can draw upon some considerable strengths as it seeks to address some challenges with delivery.

### **3.4.1 DELIVERY STRENGTHS**

Looking across its full suite of policies, strategies, programmes and schemes, the Department has some notable strengths in ensuring efficient and effective delivery in line with intended aims:

- a) **Strong track record:** Stakeholders perceive the Department as strong on delivery and does its best given the number of programmes it leads and the associated limitations.
- b) **High respect:** The high respect for the Department's policymaking capability across Government and amongst NGOs should yield a collateral benefit for delivery.
- c) **Highly competent agencies:** The Department can rely on strong agencies to implement, or assist with implementing, policies and programmes.
- d) **Effective engagement with local networks:** It has built up good relationships with local and community bodies extending from local authorities, LDCs, LCDCs, PPNs and NGOs like The Wheel and Irish Rural Link.
- e) **On-the-ground exposure:** As the Department is physically distant from the services it supports, senior managers have been making a major effort to get on-the-ground exposure.
- f) **Delivery mechanisms in policy design:** Delivery requirements are built into the design of strategies. Thus, managers, staff, agencies and stakeholders tend to be clear on the actions, timeframes, responsible owners and oversight structures to ensure implementation.

### **3.4.2 DELIVERY CHALLENGES**

The Department faces a number of obstacles in realising the ambition of its various strategies, and in improving its delivery of programmes and schemes:

- a) **Experience:** Many Principal Officers and Assistant Principals have been either recently promoted into their current grades or been newly recruited into the Civil Service. While that can yield benefits in terms of innovation and freshness, senior management are cognizant of the challenges it presents, given especially that the implementation of ambitious new strategies will require experience in influencing, monitoring, measuring and governing.

- b) **Pace:** The ambition, complexity and diversity of recently completed strategies need to be considered within the context of a Department that is new and small. That will likely give rise to challenges around the pace of delivery – what is feasible vis-à-vis what is desirable.
- c) **Complexity:** While some strategies, programmes and schemes are readily amendable to measurement, others are not, thus presenting challenges in articulating their impacts.
- d) **Extended delivery model:** The Department’s delivery chain presents an oversight challenge as it comprise 31 local authorities and an elaborate structure of LDCs, LCDCs and PPNs operating in various ways under their aegis – *see also previous section 3.1.1.*<sup>23</sup>

**Findings: Delivery strengths and challenges**

**F3.11 Considerable strengths for delivery:** The Department has some notable strengths to ensure delivery of its policies and programmes. Those strengths revolve critically around effective relationships with central government, state agencies, local authorities, non-governmental organisations and a broad spectrum of local and community organisations.

**F3.12 On-the-ground exposure:** Officials, both when developing policies and assessing the practicalities of implementation, make special efforts to engage widely with local interests and get on-the-ground exposure to actual delivery. That orientation will be a major asset for implementation.

**F3.13 Pace of delivery:** While delivery requirements are built into the design of new strategies, the totality of ambition will present challenges, especially around the pace at which progress can realistically be made.

**Recommendations**

**R3.5 Work programme for paced delivery:** Given the ambition of its suite of recently concluded strategies, the Department should develop a work programme that encompasses them all, sets out the priorities to be addressed, and prescribes phased implementation timelines.

**R3.6 CCMA role in delivery of work programme:** The work programme at R3.5 above should be remitted to the CCMA for coordination across the various delivery agents encompassing local authorities, LDCs, LCDCs and PPNs.

**3.5 RATIONALISATION AND INNOVATION**

This section examines the steps taken and needed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery by streamlining the suite of rural and community schemes, and the degree to which the Department promotes and fosters a culture of openness and innovation.

**3.5.1 RATIONALISATION OF PROGRAMMES AND SCHEMES**

Over the course of evidence gathering, frequent reference was made to overlaps between various schemes, both rural and community – for example:

- a) The RRDF overlaps with elements of LEADER in terms of eligibility thresholds for certain large-scale projects<sup>24</sup> and with the Regional Development Fund administered by Enterprise Ireland.

<sup>23</sup> Roles are also played by Pobal, the Western Development Commission, the Department of Employment and Social Protection, and Enterprise Ireland, amongst others

<sup>24</sup> The RRDF is aimed at large-scale projects and so too is LEADER which operates to a maximum grant of €250,000, with average grant awards ranging between €50,000 and €150,000

- b) The Town and Village scheme duplicates aspects of LEADER, and there is a lack of synergy between them, and
- c) The Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) has overlaps with similar schemes.

Such views echo comments made separately during the nationwide public consultations on the development of the *Rural Development Policy 2020-2025*.

#### *Rationalisation – steps taken*

The Department and stakeholders alike recognise and accept the need for rationalisation, and positive initial steps have already been taken:

- a) **Goal in Statement of Strategy:** Rationalisation of schemes is one of the goals in the Department’s Statement of Strategy.
- b) **Reference in NDP:** A text is included in the NDP (*Project Ireland 2040*) on the need to streamline and integrate schemes.
- c) **Merger of some schemes:** The RAPID and the Community Facilities Scheme were merged to form the Community Enhancement Programme.
- d) **Amalgamation of sub-heads:** A number of sub-heads for individual rural-based schemes have been amalgamated into a single expenditure category, ‘Rural Investment Programme’, in the current Revised Estimates Volume.
- e) **Analysis of Pobal’s charging model:** There is common ground between the Department and Pobal that there is potential for economies of scale to be achieved if different schemes were bundled together for processing. As a first step, Pobal – at the Department’s request – has provided the Management Board with granular information on costs charged for services delivered, following which there was good bilateral engagement on the scope for change.

#### *Rationalisation – delivery challenges*

In pursuing its aim to rationalise schemes, two key issues need to be factored into deliberations:

- a) **Overlaps:** Describing and quantifying the nature and scale of overlaps as a prelude to rationalisation will be essential. At present, some of them are clear whereas in other instances the commonalities may be comprehended in only a generalised way. The application of Eircodes to projects funded under individual schemes should help identify not just funding overlaps but also fairness in the spread of grant allocations.
- b) **Programmatic approach:** Senior management has indicated a preference for delivery into the future to be based on a programmatic approach underpinned by area plans, including master plans prepared by local authorities in consultation with local communities.

#### **Findings: Rationalisation of schemes**

**F3.14 Need for rationalisation:** The Department’s senior management and its stakeholders have a strong shared view on the need for schemes to be streamlined by reducing their number, removing overlaps, simplifying the end-to-end processes and increasing their impacts. In those respects, some positive initial steps have already been undertaken, and there is potential for further value-added to be achieved by implementing in parallel Recommendation R3.1 on the most appropriate role for LCDCs in service delivery.

**F3.15 Orientation of rationalisation:** Senior management favour a programmatic approach to rationalisation whereby funding would be based on area plans rather than project-driven allocations and would be aimed at specified impacts on citizens and communities.

**F3.16 Complexity of rationalisation:** The rationalisation of rural and community schemes would be a major undertaking and involve identifying overlaps, assessing delivery models, streamlining processes and reorienting implementation towards a strategic programmatic approach.

**F3.17 Potential for economies of scale:** If the Department were to bundle Pobal's administration of a programme, scheme or fund with other interventions, efficiencies on unit service costs could be achieved, thereby bringing about an overall saving for the Department.

### **Recommendations**

**R3.7 Rationalisation of schemes:** In consultation with relevant stakeholders, the Department should oversee a programme of reform aimed at rationalising those schemes within its remit and at developing replacement delivery models.

**R3.8 Potential for savings:** The Department should engage strategically with Pobal on the potential for cost savings by bundling schemes together for processing purposes and amalgamating similar schemes.

**R3.9 Best practice management:** Given the number of schemes and their complexity, the rationalisation programme would need to be guided by best practice in programme management and be undertaken by an appropriately resourced team with the necessary expertise.

### **3.5.2 INNOVATION AND OPENNESS TO CHANGE**

Openness to change and new thinking and the propensity towards innovation were explored over the course of evidence gathering, and the thrust of the evidence is as follows:

- a) **Culture of openness:** The Department is open to new thinking and ideas, and that is fostered from the top. The Management Board is forward looking, and is receptive to the prospect of change and to critically reviewing the way business is planned and service delivered.
- b) **Staff comfortable with questioning:** Staff feel that they are encouraged to question, are given opportunities to put forward new ideas, and general engagement with them is strong.

On giving effect to the culture of openness, the following examples illustrate good practice:

- a) **'Helping Hands' initiative:** This initiative involved the Department and Pobal participating in nationwide roadshows which were targeted at community groups to inform them of the various programmes and schemes in place, and the eligibility and application processes involved. The reaction from stakeholders was very positive.
- b) **Digital Innovation Programme:** This programme supports local projects that encourage digital development, with four out of the 26 projects supported so far having won innovation awards.
- c) **My Journey 'Distance Travelled' tool:** The Department and Pobal collaborated over two years as part of the SICAP on developing this tool which sets out the journey from unemployment to employment by measuring the soft skills relevant to employment, education, training and personal development. The tool also enables the aggregation of relevant local information so as to target interventions at a local level.

A matter requiring some attention though is the balance between strategic and operational innovation. As demonstrated in chapter 2, section 2.1, the Department has been especially inventive in developing new policies and strategies but, as already shown in this chapter, it is a considerable distance away from best practice in the ways that its strategies, programmes and schemes are delivered. As a first step however, a pilot Business Process Improvement (BPI) demonstration project is being undertaken at present in the Rural Programmes and Policies Unit to map, review and systemise processes, which may serve as a model for wider deployment across business units.

**Findings: Innovation and openness to change**

**F3.18 Open to new thinking:** Openness to change and new thinking is a notable feature of departmental culture. The tone is set by senior management assisted perhaps by a mix of the Department's size, external recruitment and a relatively young staff age profile.

**F3.19 Pursuit of innovation:** While innovative in the formulation of policy and strategy, the Department still has a considerable distance to go in terms of operational innovation, especially in relation to processes, data management and ICT solutions. Senior management are cognisant of this reality and are taking steps to bring about improvement.

*See chapter 4, section 4.5.2, R4.11 for recommendation on digitised solutions*

## 3.6 GOVERNANCE

The Department's Corporate Governance Framework, which was reviewed in 2020, sets out the details of policies and procedures relating to the governance of the Department including compliance, procurement, Freedom of Information, Irish language, risk and audit.

The primary focus of this section is the effectiveness of the Department's governance arrangements in respect of its agencies and delivery agents.

### 3.6.1 GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR DEPARTMENT'S AGENCIES

Four agencies operate under the aegis of the Department – Pobal, the Western Development Commission, the Charities Regulator, and Water Safety Ireland.

The Department's Corporate Governance Framework sets out the arrangements governing its relationships with these agencies. A Performance Delivery Agreement is negotiated with each of them annually and signed off at senior management level. That arrangement is augmented by structured quarterly meetings with the relevant senior officials and regular ongoing interaction on day-to-day operational issues.

Generally, the liaison processes between the Department and its agencies are regarded favourably, as are the usefulness of governance arrangements, the accessibility of senior management, and the quality of engagement. However, as already set out in chapter 1, section 1.1.2, there is scope for improvement on meetings with the Board. Furthermore, a number of administrative weaknesses were identified in some agencies and this points to potential risk for them, as well as the Department.

**Finding**

**F3.20 Governance of agencies:** While there are internal checks in place to ensure consistency in the application of governance and the agencies regard current arrangements as useful and effective, there are however administrative weaknesses that could lead to significant business risk. Senior management however are regarded as accessible and supportive.

## **Recommendation**

**R3.10 Review of governance arrangements:** The Department should undertake a review of its existing agency governance arrangements to ensure consistent oversight of Performance Delivery Agreements, the strategic alignment of agencies with the Department's goals, and appropriate account is taken of risk which, in turn, has implications for staff training on governance.

### **3.6.2 GOVERNANCE OF POBAL**

As Pobal is an agency of the Department and an administrator of multiple services on its behalf,<sup>25</sup> there is a special onus to ensure that governance is effective and appropriate while, at the same time, takes account of the unique requirements of individual schemes. The Department exercises governance through a number of means:

- a) **Framework Agreement:** There is a five-year overarching Framework Agreement in place, and the Agreement is reviewed annually.
- b) **Scheme-specific PDAs:** Underneath the Framework Agreement are a number of scheme specific agreements or PDAs with individual business units for the delivery of specified services. In each case, the actual services and reporting arrangements are dependent on the content of the PDA and the agreed Programme of Work underpinning it.
- c) **Delivery reports:** Every service, which Pobal is requested by the Department to deliver, has defined outputs, timeframes and reporting requirements. That involves regular reports by scheme relating primarily to inputs, outputs, target groups and costs.
- d) **Liaison and review meetings:** The Chair and CEO of Pobal meet the Secretary General once a year and with the Assistant Secretary on the Community Development side twice-yearly. There is also more frequent engagement with Principal Officers and Assistant Principals on specific programmes and schemes.

Senior management in both the Department and Pobal believe that the bilateral relationship is open, constructive and collaborative, and that governance arrangements are effective and proportionate.

## **Finding**

**F3.21 Governance of Pobal:** The Department's governance of Pobal is strong. Business needs drive the various work programmes which in turn determine the content of scheme-specific delivery agreements. An overarching multi-annual oversight arrangement is in place along with an annual review mechanism.

### **3.6.3 GOVERNANCE OF LOCAL DELIVERY ENTITIES**

Governance of locally-based entities is done in a layered manner reflecting the different roles and responsibilities of organisations.

- a) **Local government sector:** As the Minister does not have lead political responsibility for local authorities and the Secretary General is not the Accounting Officer for the local government sector, the Department has to rely heavily on engagement and collaboration with the CCMA and LGMA to ensure coherence in delivery and consistency in governance across the multiple and varied delivery bodies within the sector.

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<sup>25</sup> Some 80% of Pobal's work is on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the remaining 20% being accounted for by the DCRD, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice and Equality

Although a number of specific Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are in place between the Department and the local government sector, there is no SLA for the sector as a whole. In that respect though, the CCMA has indicated a willingness to maintain an open mind on the development of an overarching SLA between the LGMA and the Department.

Additionally, the Minister and Management Board meet with the CCMA every year and the Board meets with the Economic, Enterprise and Cultural Sub-committee of the CCMA quarterly. There is also a lot of day-to-day collaboration on a scheme-by-scheme and unit-by-unit basis.

- b) **Local Development Companies (LDCs):** Engagements between senior management and the LDCs are frequent and positive, liaison meetings are regular, and bilateral relations are strong.

Because LDCs are independent companies, the reporting relationship to the Department is primarily through those programmes for which they are responsible for delivering. The Department is assisted by the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) which liaises with funders on behalf of all LDCs, provides group procurement services, and shares best practice.

- c) **Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs):** The governance of each LCDC rests with the individual local authority and overall accountability at central government level is with the Department.<sup>26</sup> It funds the staff of the LCDCs, all of whom are local authority employees.

Notably, their day-to-day business originates in a variety of Departments and public bodies, and the reporting lines are specific to each of them. Although there is no central governance unit into which they report, formal engagement arrangements are nonetheless in place, principally the Network of Directors of Community Enterprises and the Regional Networks of Chief Officers which meet with relevant senior managers from the Department every quarter.

Separately, a *Review of Local Community Development Committees*, which was published in July 2019, produced a number of findings and recommendations relating to the governance and overall effectiveness of LCDCs which are echoed in the evidence gathered by this capability review. While the bilateral relationships with the Department are strong, there is a general acceptance – internally and externally – that governance needs to be strengthened.

- d) **Public Participation Networks (PPNs):** An overarching National Advisory Group, which is chaired by the Department, sets a work programme for delivery by PPNs at local level. Although the Department does not direct either that programme or the work plan of any individual PPN, it monitors and evaluates their activities. Regarding the drawdown of funding, a number of conditions must first be met before the Department will release the first of two tranches of funding to a PPN during a calendar year:

- i. **MoU and SLA:** A MoU and SLA between the PPN and the local authority must be in place and signed by both parties. The work plan and budget are included within the SLA.
- ii. **Joint annual report:** The local authority and PPN must jointly complete an annual report for submission to the Department.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Notably, accountability does not rest with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, even though a LCDC is a committee of a local authority under the *Local Government Reform Act, 2014*

<sup>27</sup> Both Financial and Reporting Templates must be completed and signed by both the PPN and the local authority prior to submission to the Department

- iii. **Mid- and end-year reports from beneficiaries:** Beneficiaries must provide mid-year and end-of-year reports before the Department will assess and decide upon applications for the subsequent year.

Some other governance arrangements are also in place: a PPN Social Inclusion Forum, which examines strategic and delivery gaps, and a *PPN User Guide* which the Department prepared with a view to improving governance and providing greater clarity on roles and responsibilities.

#### **Findings: Governance of local delivery entities**

**F3.22 Local government relationships:** The Department is building its relationships and credibility incrementally with the local government sector and progress has been impressive. There is scope to build on that by deepening engagement between the Management Board and the CCMA.

**F3.23 Governance of local-level delivery entities:** While the governance arrangements with LDCs provide clarity on roles and the engagement practices with PPNs are effective, the governance of LCDCs is not yet applied consistently across all of them.

#### **Recommendations**

**R3.11 Engagement with CCMA:** Building on its strong relationships with the local government sector, the Department should explore with the CCMA the scope for greater collaboration.

**R3.12 Governance of LCDCs:** The Department, perhaps in consultation with the CCMA, should implement a time-bound plan for implementation of the recommendations in the *Review of Local Community Development Committees*.

### **3.7 RISK MANAGEMENT AND AUDIT FUNCTION**

In this section, the policies and structures relating to risk management, audit and inspections are examined.

#### **3.7.1 RISK MANAGEMENT MODEL**

The Department's risk management model comprises the following principal features:

- a) **Policies and procedures:** A series of risk management policies and procedures were developed shortly after the Department's establishment, and a Risk Management Framework was put in place.
- b) **Risk Management Committee:** The Risk Management Committee approves the risk policies and procedures to be followed. It is chaired by the Secretary General and consists of the Management Board and the Heads of the Finance Unit and the Inspections and Compliance Unit, along with the Internal Auditor who attends in an observer capacity.
- c) **Corporate Risk Register:** The Register distinguishes between corporate and strategic risks, and categorises them appropriately, and the Risk Management Committee reviews the Register every quarter.
- d) **Divisional Risk Registers:** Each Assistant Secretary, in conjunction with their Principal Officers, is required to prepare a Divisional Risk Register. If a risk is above a certain value score, then it is added to the Corporate Risk Register and considered by the Risk Management Committee.
- e) **Business Unit Risk Registers:** As part of the business planning process, each individual business unit has to produce a Risk Register at the beginning of the year. The relevant Assistant Secretary

assesses the draft register and, subject to any agreed changes, the PO presents on it to the Risk Management Committee who will query and challenge as it considers fit. Principal Officers are further required to review their business unit's Risk Register each month by reference to the Corporate Risk Register.

- f) **Risk Officer:** The Department's Risk Officer, who also holds a number of key corporate roles, engages regularly with individual Principal Officers on the Risk Registers for their individual business units and with the Assistant Secretary, Corporate Division, on a quarterly basis.
- g) **Risk awareness:** All staff are provided with an opportunity to contribute to the business planning process and constituent risk management element. While staff awareness is reasonably good, there is scope for improvement as risk is not yet sufficiently integrated into day-to-day planning and work.

There is a strong consensus amongst management and staff that risk management is taken seriously, the risk model works well, and there are appropriate linkages with business planning.

One area that requires some attention relates to concerns expressed by senior managers that an appropriate balance has yet to be struck in the identification and mitigation of strategic risks vis-à-vis corporate risks. The model at present would appear to favour the identification of high-level cross-cutting corporate risks from business units rather than strategic risks facing the Department as a whole. Helpfully, both the Risk Management Committee and the Audit Committee have been deliberating on this matter, as has the Management Board.

#### **Findings: Risk management**

**F3.24 Risk management model:** The Department's risk management model has many features of good practice and is integrated well into business planning. It is unclear as to what role the Department plays in ensuring robust risk policies and practices are in place in each of its four agencies.

**F3.25 Strategic risk vis-à-vis corporate risk:** A correct balance has not yet been achieved between strategic and corporate risks, and this is recognised at senior management levels.

#### **Recommendation**

**R3.13 Review of strategic risks:** The Department should review what adjustments are needed to its risk management model in order that the main strategic risks facing the organisation would more readily emerge. In that respect, a particular focus on business continuity is needed, given the largescale remote working regime in place since March 2020. An external peer review process might usefully form part of the exercise.

**R3.14 Agency risks:** As part of its ongoing corporate governance and risk management roles, the Department should ensure that robust best practice policies are in place in each of its four agencies, and the Management Board, in conjunction with each agency, should review these policies every year.

#### **3.7.2 AUDIT FUNCTION**

The Department's audit function comprises the following elements:

- a) **Audit Committee:** This Committee was put in place shortly after the establishment of the Department. It is chaired by the former Secretary General of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, and is comprised mostly of non-executive members, including some

external representatives. A Charter outlines the Committee's role, membership and function, and typically it meets four or five times a year.

- b) **Internal Auditor:** The Internal Auditor engages quite extensively with managers on risk-related matters, regularly attends meetings of the Management Board, and reports directly to the Secretary General on the audit, assurance and compliance arrangements prescribed in the Department's Corporate Governance Framework.<sup>28</sup>
- c) **Review of Risk Register:** At the end of each month, the Audit Committee reviews the Risk Register at a macro level and satisfies itself as to whether any new risk should be added or existing one removed, subject to approval by the Risk Management Committee.
- d) **Follow-up to audit reports:** Recommendations made in internal audit reports are acted upon, and the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) has not produced any findings of note relating to the Department.<sup>29</sup>
- e) **LEADER – accreditation:** LEADER is subject to an accreditation standard and has to be audited, on both its financial aspects and its strategic alignment. Furthermore, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has its own in-house Accreditation Review Group.
- f) **Local Government Audit Service:** The Department provides detailed expenditure information to the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) and the Local Government Audit Service (LGAS) on departmental funding to local government each year. The LGAS plays a role in ensuring probity of expenditure from the Department's budget, as a substantial proportion of its grant-related spending is processed by local authorities and agents of them – €160.52 million in 2019. Additionally, many of the LGAS's staff complement of 37 are based full-time in local authorities and have direct access to their financial systems and data.

### **Finding**

**F3.26 Audit:** This works very satisfactorily, with appropriate structures and processes in place.

#### **3.7.3 INSPECTIONS AND COMPLIANCE**

The Inspection and Compliance Unit is a key contributor to risk management and compliance in the Department. In 2019, the Board agreed on a new strategy for the Unit and to expand its role to include inspections beyond the LEADER programme and selected rural schemes – *see (b) below*.

While this capability review did not extend to a specific assessment of the Department's inspection function and its management of risk relating to individual schemes, a number of issues nonetheless did emerge which have a bearing on risk management:

- a) **Inspection and Compliance Unit (ICU):** The Department operates an inspection regime to ensure that financial allocations are spent in accordance with prescribed terms. It has in place an Inspection and Compliance Unit (ICU) which comprises six field inspectors, headed by a Principal Officer.
- b) **Inspection activity:** While the ICU focuses its activities mainly on the LEADER programme, a wider programme for inspections of the Department's programmes is now adopted and this includes the RRDF, Local Improvement Scheme (LIS), rural schemes and library projects. The inspections

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<sup>28</sup> As already noted, the Internal Auditor attends meetings of the Risk Management Committee in an observer capacity

<sup>29</sup> The C&AG in his Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2018 made five findings in respect of the Department – three medium level and two low level

deal with financial oversight, physical delivery of projects, and pre-payment eligibility in line with a risk framework.

- c) **Internal overlap checks:** Recipients of financial support under a departmental scheme are required to state in writing that they are not receiving payments under different schemes for the same or similar project or service. In addition, checks are carried out internally to ensure that there are no overlap payments between schemes.<sup>30</sup>

Looking ahead, the Department has been reflecting on how arrangements might be improved:

- a) **Consultations on new model:** There has been a lot of engagement between the ICU and line business units on developing a new inspection regime, particularly in the context of strengthening risk mitigation.
- b) **Plans for increased inspections:** The ICU continues to expand its inspection activity for LEADER and the nationally funded rural schemes, while also expanding inspection activity to cover more of the Department's publicly funded programmes. They include projects under the RRDF, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, and the Libraries small capital investment programme. Additional resources are committed to support this enhanced compliance role for the ICU.

### **Findings: Inspections**

**F3.27 Inspections determined by scale:** The Department's inspection regime is now much broader than scrutinising the LEADER programme and large infrastructure projects under the RRDF. Some smaller scale projects under a number of other schemes are also inspected by reference to a risk framework.

**F3.28 Increased inspections planned:** Senior management has been consulting internally on expanding the current inspection function in terms of thresholds, the number of schemes covered, and the capacity of the Inspection and Compliance Unit.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, there is an express statement on the grant approval form for the Town and Village scheme that the Department will recoup fully wherever a double payment with any other scheme occurs

## 4. ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY

### STRUCTURE OF THIS CHAPTER

The fourth and final module of the methodology template for the capability review programme relates to ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY. This chapter is structured as follows:

**Section 4.1 – Mission, culture and values:** The policies and practices to promote clarity of mission and strategic objectives, as well as high standards of ethical behaviour.

**Section 4.2 – HR function, policy and strategy:** Operation of the HR Unit and the development of a HR Strategy.

**Section 4.3 – Staff planning and development:** An examination of the extent to which workforce and succession planning is undertaken as well as staff mobility, performance management and learning and development.

**Section 4.4 – Corporate capability in finance:** The effectiveness of the finance function.

**Section 4.5 – Corporate capability in ICT:** The extent to which ICT supports business planning and delivery.

**Section 4.6 – Data and records management:** Policies and practices on data and records management, aimed in particular at supporting evidence-based policy and strong service delivery.

### 4.1 MISSION, CULTURE AND VALUES

One of the first priorities for the newly-established Department in mid-2017 was the development of its first Statement of Strategy, which sets out a mission as follows:

*“... to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland.”*

It was envisaged that the successful delivery of this mission would involve a mix of policy initiatives and actions to improve the economic development of both rural and urban areas and to address gaps in meeting the social needs of those areas. This was to be underpinned by the implementation of two key policy documents:

- a) The *Action Plan for Rural Development* which focuses on the economic and social development of rural Ireland and the regions, and
- b) The *Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland* which sets out national priorities and a framework for a cross-government approach to enhancing engagement with local communities in the planning, delivery and evaluation of policies and interventions that affect them.

The Statement of Strategy also outlines the Department’s values by reference to the Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour, the Code of Ethics, the Dignity at Work Policy, the Civil Service Renewal Plan and the Public Service Plan, *Our Public Service 2020*.

#### 4.1.1 DEPARTMENTAL STAFF SURVEY 2018

Morale in the Department is noticeably high with a very visible sense of a strong organisational identity among all staff. They expressed a clear preference for the current configuration of the

Department over previous structures and felt that the senior management team has been successful in forging a strong and effective process of staff engagement.

In late 2018, the Department undertook its own internal staff survey. The results were very positive and reflected the efforts and importance attached by senior management to regular and meaningful staff engagement. Over 74% of respondents feel that their manager provides them with valuable feedback on performance while the same number feel encouraged to put forward new ideas. There were similar high scores on the provision of challenging work and identification with the Department's goals. There has been structured follow up to this survey through town hall meetings and workshops.

### **Finding**

**F4.1 Staff survey results:** The results of the 2018 internal staff survey reflect the positive staff reaction to the extensive staff engagement undertaken by senior management. Morale within the Department is very high and there is strong evidence of a clear *esprit de corps* among staff.

## **4.2 HR FUNCTION, POLICY AND STRATEGY**

This section of the Report covers the area of the operations of the HR Unit, including the business partnering model in place as well as the development of the Department's HR strategy.

### **4.2.1 HR FUNCTION**

The HR Unit is accessible and responsive, and staff are aware of who the HR staff are. Given its small size, the Unit tends to deal with a wide range of issues. There is also a HR Mailbox that can be used to contact the unit.

**Professional operation:** As a means of professionalising the function, the Department is encouraging current HR staff to specialise in this area. It has rolled out bespoke training and provides funding to support the attainment of professional HR qualifications through the civil service refund of fees scheme.<sup>31</sup>

The HR Unit has secured a recruitment licence through the Commission for Public Service Appointments which enables it to carry out its own recruitment should it wish. The Department is also one of four organisations that took part in Phase 1 of a pilot scheme with the Strategic HR Section in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to develop a new HR operating model for the Civil Service.

**Business partnering:** HR Business Partnering operates through the HR Manager who facilitates one-to-one discussions. This dialogue, which is frequent and constructive, takes place primarily through Principal Officers. Given the small size of the Department and the existing workload, it is not considered practical to expect other HR staff to get involved (in bigger Departments this role would tend to be the responsibility of staff below the grade of HR manager).

**External demands:** Delays in transition to full corporate independence of one of the Department's agencies is having a significant impact on the capacity of the HR Unit to focus on its core deliverables.

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<sup>31</sup>Additionally, if HR staff wish to be exempt from general internal mobility, that can be facilitated as the Department wishes to make maximum use of the significant training investments made.

It is imperative that the Department takes the necessary steps to ensure that these external demands on its scarce HR resources will be reduced quickly and ultimately eliminated.

#### 4.2.2 HR STRATEGY

In June 2019 the Department formally launched its HR Strategy, *Our People Strategy, 2019 – 2021*. This document involved a very comprehensive process of engagement with staff throughout the organisation as well as strong leadership from the Management Board. The strategy identifies three overarching priorities:

- An employer of choice
- Building the future workforce
- Growing leaders and people managers

It articulates the Department's values and shared beliefs including the promotion of a positive working environment, the value placed in staff communication and engagement, and the organisation's passion for high performance standards in the workplace.

The strategy also makes clear that the HR Unit is a strategic business partner by building employee and organisational capacity to support the delivery of departmental goals through the implementation of key actions in each priority area.

The staff response to both the engagement process and the strategy itself was universally positive with many highlighting the focus being put on the promotion of health and wellbeing.

The challenge now for the Department is to ensure implementation of the strategy's various objectives over its lifetime. There are indicative timelines set out for the completion of individual tasks and projects, and the HR Unit reports on progress on a six monthly basis to the Management Board.

#### **Findings: HR function**

**F4.2 HR Unit:** The HR Unit, though small, is highly regarded in terms of its responsiveness and accessibility. It has a clear strategic focus in the support it provides to the Management Board and business units, which involves the use of an effective business partnering model. However, the Unit is facing challenges on its already limited resources as a result of ongoing demands on its time in respect of the administration of HR activities on behalf of one of its agencies, which is currently undergoing transition to full corporate independence.

**F4.3 Professional capability:** The Department is working towards creating a professional HR capability and has put in place mechanisms to encourage and facilitate staff who wish to move in that career direction.

**F4.4 HR strategy:** This strategy commands widespread support from staff and contains clear and ambitious goals aimed at ensuring that the Department can deliver on its goals and is a rewarding and positive place to work.

#### **Recommendation**

**R4.1 Workload of the HR Unit:** The Department should take the necessary steps to reduce and eliminate the external demands being placed on the Unit. Such a development would allow the HR Unit to focus on the delivery of its own strategic and business priorities.

## 4.3 STAFF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

This section is focused on the areas of strategic workforce planning, succession planning, staff mobility performance management and Learning & Development.

### 4.3.1 WORKFORCE PLANNING

In line with the objective contained in the HR strategy of building a workforce for the future, the Department actively engages with Principal Officers (through the HR Manager) on issues pertaining to strategic workforce planning. The response from them was very positive, with most feeling that the exercise is worthwhile and that they have a real input into the process.

Principal Officers are required to complete templates on staffing needs which are then submitted to the Management Board, following which each Assistant Secretary engages with their Principal Officers on the agreed outputs. When that process is completed, the HR Unit prepares an aggregate plan for consideration and approval by the Board, although some Principal Officers did remark on a certain lack of visibility in relation to final decisions.

There are some divergent views at senior levels on the extent to which the workforce planning process is leading to “hard decisions” on staff allocations that are based solely on business priorities. Nonetheless, the Management Board and the Principal Officer cohort, supported by the HR Unit, have a system of engagement in place aimed at identifying key resource gaps, which is enabling an evidence-based approach to be taken.

### 4.3.2 SUCCESSION PLANNING

The age profile in the Department is considerably lower than in all other organisations reviewed to-date under the OCR programme. Consequently, the organisational challenges and risks arising from a potential “retirement cliff” do not arise in this case. However, there is a need to ensure that key skills are identified and mechanisms are in place to achieve seamless continuity of delivery in the event of either planned or unanticipated staff departures. Key areas like Finance and HR are particularly important in this respect.

Aside from the LEADER programme, which requires careful documentation of processes and procedures arising from EU-driven compliance obligations, there is little evidence of a consistent approach to knowledge management and job documentation in other areas. The pilot BPI project currently underway in the Rural Programmes and Policies Unit will be a significant step forward in addressing this issue. This pilot may serve as a model for deployment to other business areas and the review of the effectiveness of the pilot should be given high priority.

### 4.3.3 SKILLS AUDIT

As part of the delivery of its HR Strategy, the Department intends to undertake a comprehensive audit of staff skills which will inform workforce planning and future mobility decisions.

### 4.3.4 STAFF MOBILITY

An internal staff mobility policy is in place and appears to have the support of staff. Under the scheme, a number of transfers at PO level were completed in late 2019 and these are considered to have benefitted both the officers concerned and the Department.

### 4.3.5 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The Management Board takes a keen interest in the leadership aspects of managers’ roles and will give that matter special emphasis in its engagement with staff as part of the annual business planning

process from 2020 onwards. The Board is also focussed on ensuring that all staff engage with the formal Performance Management Development System (PMDS) process and that the required face-to-face meetings between managers at all levels and their direct-reports actually take place. The majority of staff confirmed an awareness of this objective.

Regarding engagement on performance management, which is an area that has traditionally been a weakness across the Civil Service, the evidence shows that the Department is actually quite good in this respect. It would thus appear that the importance attached by the Board to the people management part of leaders' roles is paying dividends. However, work remains on ensuring that this approach becomes the norm for all staff as it is still the case that much of the positive behaviour is down to individual attitude rather than a full adherence to Departmental policy. Additionally, there is a minority of staff who feel that the process is still being implemented largely by rote, thus necessitating continued visible leadership from the top.

#### 4.3.6 LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT (L&D)

The Department supports an active L&D programme and has been on the Civil Service's *OneLearning* shared platform since late 2019. There is good openness and engagement by managers and staff with the L&D function, which has good buy-in and support.

There is a solid focus on linking staff training to business needs, with good examples given of specific requirements from business units having been delivered when sought. Individual training needs are identified in the first instance through the PMDS process and, as with performance management, the Management Board remains engaged in ensuring that senior managers understand the importance attached to learning and development. An active "Lunch & Learn" programme is also in place.

As already outlined, fostering of a high performance culture and nurturing leadership at all levels are identified as especially important in the Department's HR Strategy. As part of the delivery of that ambition, the roll-out of a Leadership Development Programme for Principal Officers has been identified as a priority action for 2020.

Furthermore, the Department operates a mentoring programme for new entrants and for newly-promoted staff. The feedback from those involved was very positive. An induction programme for new entrants is also in operation and while those who took part were happy with the content, some concerns were expressed regarding frequency. The Department now holds the courses at three-monthly intervals.

#### *Findings: Planning and resourcing staff*

**F4.5 Workforce planning:** Direct engagement between the HR Manager and the Principal Officer cohort is enabling good two-way communication on workforce planning. There are some senior staff who believe that the evidence base is still not informing final decisions on resource allocation to the extent necessary.

**F4.6 Performance management:** The Management Board continues to invest considerable time in ensuring that the people management aspect of managers' jobs is taken seriously and this is reflected in the degree to which staff awareness and engagement is evident. In turn, the Principal Officer cohort have close working relationships with all their staff, not just direct reports.

**F4.7 Learning and Development:** The Department has a good track record in supporting staff development. It strikes a good balance between linking that goal to business needs while also

acknowledging individual staff members' preferences where possible. It is noted that while participants are asked to provide initial feedback on the quality of training courses, there is no evaluation on the efficiency and effectiveness of training investment.

**F4.8 Mentoring and induction:** The Department's mentoring programme is well regarded as is the induction training on offer.

### **Recommendations**

**R4.2 Workforce planning:** The established engagement process involving the Principal Officers and the HR Manager should continue as a means of involving all senior managers in the workforce planning process. However, for the future, there should be the fullest possible transparency at Management Board level regarding agreed business priorities and how corresponding decisions on staff allocation are made.

**R4.3 Succession planning:** The Department should give priority to ensuring that the skills audit outlined in its HR Strategy is undertaken as soon as possible so as to better inform future staff deployment decisions. In tandem with that, some consideration needs to be given to embedding wider knowledge management practices, thus helping to mitigate risks arising from staff churn.

**R4.4 Performance management:** The excellent leadership shown by the Management Board in highlighting the responsibility of individual senior managers for their staff should be continued. In particular, both the annual business planning process and the performance management of Principal Officers should be used as a means of embedding this policy into the wider Department.

**R4.5 Learning & Development:** in line with the action proposed in its *People Strategy*, the Department should consider undertaking an evaluation to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of its Learning & Development programme to ensure its investment is bringing about the anticipated improvements in overall departmental capability and value-for-money outcomes.

## **4.4 CORPORATE CAPABILITY IN FINANCE**

The Department faced a number of significant challenges following its establishment in mid-2017, not least the fact that it had no Vote, no budget and no staff with any experience of running a finance function. As a result, the Finance Unit had to be put together very quickly and many of the staff assigned to it did not have any experience in finance.

**Professional service:** Over recent times, the Department has incrementally developed a highly-professional and well-regarded function that is actively supporting the delivery of business objectives. The Unit's staff have backgrounds in Finance and Accounts, including a professional Grade I accountant, and its functions involve the development and application of finance-related policies and procedures, including on procurement.

In the view of business units, the Finance function is strong on providing up-to-date data on expenditure and financial profiles and rarely is there any difficulty in obtaining such reports.

**Expenditure controls:** There are monthly meetings with the Minister on programme spends. Expenditure is split on a rough 50:50 basis between current and capital with the Rural Development and Regional Affairs Programme consisting mostly of capital expenditure and the Community Development Programme mostly of current. Virtually all of the allocation was expended in 2019, including 98% of Capex.

The Vote Control Section in DPER has confirmed that the relationship with the Department is excellent and that the regular financial reports on spending profiles and variances are always of high quality.

**Paper-based systems:** A Service Level Agreement is in place with the Financial Shared Service (FSS) operated by the Department of Justice and Equality in Killarney. The invoicing system though, which involves some 5,000 invoices per annum, is heavily manually-based, with physical copies being sent through the postal system to Killarney for payment as scanned copies are not accepted.

This system, which is not efficient and carries some obvious risks (particularly in relation to lost items through the post), is meant to be a temporary arrangement pending the establishment of the civil service's planned new Financial Management Shared Service (FMSS). However, because of lengthy delays in that project and ongoing uncertainty in relation to delivery time, the Department is likely to be obliged to continue with the current arrangement for a much lengthier period than originally anticipated. While not satisfactory, there is little the Department can do about it.

**Oracle system:** The Oracle system used by Killarney is due to go out of support in 2020 although the FSS has secured a one-year extension. All in all, the Department has 38 user licenses. A drawback with current arrangements is that Departmental Principal Officers cannot access Oracle directly themselves in order to obtain financial reports and data but must instead go through the Finance Unit which has read-only access.

**LEADER – DRCD and DAFM roles:** In the case of payments under the EU LEADER programme, the Department administers the payments on its own behalf and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine undertakes the audit function.

#### **Findings: Finance function**

**F4.9 Finance Function:** Having started with no Vote, budget, financial management system, or trained and experienced personnel, the Department has built up an effective and well-regarded finance function.

**F4.10 FMSS project:** The unfortunate delays in designing and rolling out the planned new Financial Management Shared Service is having operational impacts on the Department which are leading to significant frustration among staff. However, this situation is entirely outside the control of the Department. The current arrangements with Killarney are generally working well.

## **4.5 ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY IN ICT**

The Department's ICT capability is assessed in this section by reference to new development and service support.

### **4.5.1 ICT SERVICE SUPPORT**

The Department uses a service delivery model for day-to-day ICT support which comprises the following key elements:

- a) **SLA with the OGCIO:** The Department has a SLA with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) for the provision of a package of specified ICT services covering desktop support, a cyber-security service and a suite of BTS solutions that are specific to the Civil Service such as eDocs (for records management) and ePQs (for Parliamentary Questions). The SLA is renewed every year and quarterly meetings are held to discuss and review issues.

- b) **Local liaison support:** Liaison officers are in place who provide core day-to-day support relating to desktop applications, printers and video conferencing.

Four issues arose over the course of evidence gathering:

- a) **Reliability of service:** Network and connectivity-related problems arise quite frequently with the media applications such as Skype.
- b) **Quality of OGCI0 support:** While the OGCI0 is delivering within the terms of the SLA, it is problematic to secure services outside of this arrangement. Overall though the level of support is considered satisfactory notwithstanding a few reservations on helpdesk turnaround times.
- c) **Absence of local technical support:** While the support provided by liaison officers is regarded favourably, there are concerns over the lack of formal technical competency in the Department, especially in Ballina.<sup>32</sup> Notably, there is the possibility of putting in place a form of shared service with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's office in Ballina when that Department's transition to an OGCI0 service is completed in 2020.
- d) **Website access:** Access to websites is frequently blocked, including those of some of the Department's agencies and stakeholders. Lifting a restriction necessitates a request to the OGCI0 by either a PO or Assistant Secretary. The problem is compounded in that permission to access a site is specific to the individual requester and does not become generalised across the Department as a whole.

#### **Findings: ICT support**

**F4.15 Service support:** The ICT service support provided by the OGCI0 and augmented by local liaison officers is generally satisfactory, although there is some frustration, particularly in Ballina, on the responsiveness and timeliness of technical support for problems with hardware peripherals like hand-held devices.

**F4.16 Network and connectivity issues:** Access problems relating to speed and reliability may indicate a deficiency in the Department's network and connectivity related infrastructure, and should be explored.

**F4.17 Website access:** The OGCI0 operates a highly restrictive practice regarding access to websites, including of some public bodies with which the Department engages regularly.

#### **Recommendations**

**R4.6 Technical support:** On completion of the transition by the DHPLG's Ballina office to an OGCI0 service, the Department should explore with both it and the OGCI0 how local ICT technical support in Ballina could be made more responsive to the benefit of the two Departments.

**R4.7 Technical inspection:** The Department should initiate a technical examination of the reasons for the problems being encountered with the speed and reliability of certain ICT solutions, especially the video conferencing application.

**R4.8 Website access:** The Department and the OGCI0 should agree on a list of websites to which regular access is needed and for which access restrictions should be lifted.

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<sup>32</sup> By way of example, a manager had to visit the OGCI0 seven times to try and get a Tablet fixed

#### 4.5.2 NEW ICT DEVELOPMENT

The Department does not have its own ICT Unit and relies on external providers for new ICT development. The lack of capacity to undertake such work and the underdeveloped nature of the ICT state are a source of concern amongst senior managers who believe that, generally across the Department, the technology to support planning and delivery is neither modern nor efficient.

In assessing the capability that might be needed for new ICT development, a number of factors would need to be considered:

- a) **Manual solutions:** The Department has few digitised solutions in place. Instead there is a heavy reliance on standalone locally-based solutions in spreadsheet and paper-based forms, and thus there is no systemic interoperability between related areas of work – for example, on rural grants.
- b) **Service delivery by Pobal:** As covered in detail in chapter 3, section 3.1.3, Pobal manages and/or administers a large proportion of the Department’s programmes and schemes, including the SICAP, and the LEADER IT system. It uses state-of-the art technology, operates a highly developed data infrastructure, and has extensive experience in administering all functions associated with managing programmes and schemes, including procurement, appraisal, grant payments, and financial and non-financial reporting. Service delivery is highly regarded by the management and staff alike.
- c) **Business Process Improvement (BPI):** In recognition of the ICT development challenges across the rural schemes, the Department, assisted by the IPA, has embarked on a pilot BPI Demonstration Project in the Rural Policy and Schemes Unit. The aim is to inform thinking on how the operation might be streamlined from an end-to-end process viewpoint. It is planned that the exercise would be replicated for other schemes and business areas.
- d) **Rationalisation of schemes:** Any proposed rationalisation of schemes would provide a critical context for the direction of strategic ICT change. This would be particularly so if schemes were refashioned from an individual basis to a programmatic model organised into thematic categories – *see chapter 3, section 3.5.1*. The proposed delivery model would be similarly important, whether provided in-house, outsourced to a provider like Pobal, partnered with another Department, or a hybrid of such options.
- e) **Implementing of new policies and strategies:** The technology supporting delivery of the Department’s recently concluded policies and strategies is underdeveloped.<sup>33</sup>
- f) **Data and digitisation:** The critical strategic need to remedy weaknesses in data management and infrastructure would need to be at the core of deliberations on the digitisation of services. Thus digitised solutions should not be confined to just the on-line submission and processing of funding applications but should also include back-end supporting databases within which GIS capability would fit. Such capability would be necessary to facilitate the easy organisation, retrieval, analysis and presentation of data for planning, monitoring and evaluative purposes.
- g) **Good model from LEADER:** The Grants Management System for administering the LEADER programme provides useful pointers for the future. Developed on a phased basis over three years, the system is managed in its entirety by Pobal. It has bespoke end-to-end functionality and

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<sup>33</sup>An exception is the public libraries strategy, the implementation of which will be managed not by the Department but by the LGMA

although having features that could be replicated for other schemes like the RRDF, the EU-based obligations and accreditations attaching to it make it unsuitable for other processes to be tagged on. Nonetheless, the system, both its development and features, should be considered when developing any new solutions. Similarly the Charities' Regulator operates a good on-line system that might provide further guidance.

- h) **In-house ICT development capacity:** The Department's in-house capacity for new ICT development is very limited. It has just one manager at Assistant Principal grade whose responsibilities are spread across a range of functions, encompassing digitisation, accommodation and part of the RRDF, as well as involvement in the 'proof of concept' BPI Demonstration project.
- i) **ICT strategy:** While the Department does not have an ICT strategy, work has been under way for some time on developing one.
- j) **Civil Service wide problem:** New ICT development is a challenge across the Civil Service and at its core are two polar opposite factors:
  - i. **Generalisation:** Some development needs, such as the digitisation of grant schemes, are common to a number of Departments, thus pointing to a Civil Service-wide approach as one delivery option; and
  - ii. **Specialisation:** Each Department has unique parts of business that necessitate bespoke solutions, thus pointing to in-house development and outsourcing as delivery options, both of which would require local management expertise and business process support.

Against that background and the fact that the OGCIO does not manage the delivery of new ICT projects, the Department would need to be cognisant of wider ICT developments across the Civil Service and indeed, in some instances, in individual Government Departments so that partnering options might be explored.

#### **Findings: Strategic ICT planning and development**

**F4.11 Underdeveloped and fragmented ICT state:** The technology to efficiently support delivery of the Department's recently concluded strategies is not in place. Similarly the current ICT state for administering schemes is under-developed and fragmented, although schemes administered by Pobal on the Department's behalf are processed using state-of-the-art technology and data infrastructure.

**F4.12 Strategic ICT:** The Department does not have the strategic ICT capacity and capability at present to plan and prescribe a new ICT state, especially for guiding deliberations by the Management Board on the most appropriate delivery model(s) to be pursued over the medium to longer term.

**F4.13 First steps:** Senior management has taken initial steps towards a strategic orientation for ICT. Preparatory work on an ICT strategy has been undertaken, a proof of concept BPI Demonstration project has been done, a high-end system for administering the complex LEADER programme has been developed, and an on-line portal for managing applications under the RRDF has been put in place.

**F4.14 Business driving ICT agenda:** Business needs must drive strategic ICT decisions – in particular, the proposed rationalisation of schemes to a programmatic model, the need for technology solutions to support the delivery of new policies and strategies, and the requirement for digitised solutions to

include back-end supporting databases so that the Department would have a functioning data infrastructure for planning, monitoring and evaluation purposes.

### **Recommendations**

**R4.9 Strategic ICT competency:** The Department should develop its own strategic ICT competency so that the future ICT state would be appropriately conceptualised, articulated, planned and managed in terms of architecture, design and solutions.

**R4.10 Future business model:** As business needs should drive ICT development, the Management Board should design a business model to underpin the future ICT state. The model should incorporate the proposed reconfiguration of schemes onto a programmatic basis, the delivery model(s) to be used, the work undertaken and planned on business process improvements, the delivery mechanisms for recently concluded strategies, and the principal data required to support planning, monitoring and evaluation into the future

**R4.11 Digitised solutions:** Based on the business model, the Department as a priority should prepare a plan to accelerate the development of digital platforms with supporting databases for service delivery purposes, ideally within the context of a standardised model across the government system. Such a plan is critical to bringing operational innovation onto a par with that evident in the development of policy and strategy.

**R4.12 ICT strategy:** The Department should complete the work already commenced on an ICT strategy which should include the above three recommendations as central features.

## **4.6 DATA AND RECORDS MANAGEMENT**

This Section examines policies and procedures relating to the Department's approach to Data Management including the use of data for policymaking and evaluation purposes. It also looks at policies in relation to records management.

### **4.6.1 DATA MANAGEMENT BY DEPARTMENT**

The Department does not yet have a data management policy and senior management acknowledges that, currently, it is not in a position to fully exploit its datasets for policymaking, monitoring and evaluation purposes. The principal features of the current state are as follows – *see chapter 2, section 2.5.2 for further details.*

- a) **Inconsistent practices:** The general management of data is inconsistent and varies between units and schemes, with many standalone paper-based processes in place. For example, the Rural Schemes Unit is largely paper-based, as is the data collection exercise on the Local Improvement Scheme. In contrast, larger programmes like LEADER and SICAP have well developed ICT-based systems in place.
- b) **Underdeveloped data infrastructure:** The necessary data infrastructure to facilitate planning, ongoing monitoring and eventual feeds into evaluation are not in place. Categorisation practices, data management processes and ICT solutions are underdeveloped across business units, and the grants-related data from local authorities is of mixed quality.
- c) **Fragmented schematic approach:** The number and diversity of schemes administered by the Department and the variety of entities involved in delivery render efficient and effective data management very difficult. Senior management recognises this constraint and accepts that the

rationalisation of schemes and the adoption of a programmatic approach are essential prerequisites to developing a modern and fit-for-purpose data management model.

- d) **ESRI research agreement:** A three-year research framework agreement with the ESRI commenced towards end-2019 and ultimately will comprise three or four research projects. A key element of the work is a macro overview of the types of metrics and supporting data needed, including assessments of what can be used from existing datasets. The ESRI is also examining some international best practices for monitoring and evaluating programmes and activities similar to those administered by the Department.
- e) **Data management by Pobal:** This agency plays a core part in administering and delivering many of the Department's policies, programmes and schemes. From a data management perspective, it uses state-of-the art technology, data management practices are very strong, the data infrastructure is highly developed, and reporting is comprehensive and responsive – see *chapter 3, sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4*.
- f) **GIS capability:** The Review Team encountered conflicting opinions regarding the desirability and necessity for the Department to have its own GIS capability.

Many Principal Officers think it important that the Department should develop or acquire skills in this area. Particular attention was drawn to the benefits that would be derived from the use of unique identifiers: (a) assessing the impacts of schemes on various socio-economic groups, (b) assisting in monitoring schemes and identifying the extent of overlaps between them, and (c) supporting the Department's communications to the public on the impacts of schemes. A number of external stakeholders strongly endorsed or echoed such views.

As a counter to those arguments, other interviewees – including some senior managers – pointed to the current capability elsewhere in the system and suggested that rather than reinventing the wheel, it might be best to piggyback on existing systems and skillsets led by other public bodies, such as Pobal and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

- g) **Data protection:** A Data Protection Officer is in place to oversee the Department's statutory obligations relation to data protection, especially by reference to GDPR legislation.

#### 4.6.2 DATA MANAGEMENT ACROSS GOVERNMENT

While not an issue that the Department on its own can influence materially, a number of stakeholders referred to the benefits that would ensue from rationalising the way in which data is collected and managed across the government system. For example, it was pointed out that there is a need for an agreed data definitional set across government on community development covering in particular social inclusion, health and education.

In a related vein, it was suggested that the Department's datasets would be significantly enriched from an analytical perspective if more administrative data links across governmental datasets in anonymised form were made, especially in terms of the statistically rich datasets in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

The Department is represented on the CSO's National Data Infrastructure Champions' Group. As part of its work, this Group has been assessing opportunities for improved coverage of PPSNs and Eircodes in administrative systems and processes. A factor raised in that regard though is that access to CSO datasets is getting more and more restrictive owing to GDPR considerations.

### 4.6.3 RECORDS MANAGEMENT

At the time of finalising this Review, the Department had issued a draft Records Management Policy to all staff for consultation, with the intention of finalising it by the end of Quarter 2, 2020. This follows the work of a cross-divisional Records Management Co-ordinators' Group, tasked with examining existing practices and procedures. The challenge will then be to ensure that staff awareness and adherence with the ultimate policy and its various provisions would remain high.

#### *Findings: Data management*

**F4.18 Data management policy:** The Department has no data management policy and the consequential fragmented nature of how it approaches data management is impeding policymaking, delivery and evaluation. Additionally, it does not have a record of the nature and number of datasets it possesses.

**F4.19 Pobal's datasets:** As part of the Performance Delivery Agreements in place, the Department has access to the high-quality datasets from Pobal and can also access data held by its other agencies.

**F4.20 Cross-government data management:** While there are some structures in place to help develop national data infrastructure and an improved collaborative approach to data sharing, there are also a number of significant barriers that are preventing further development. This is not an issue that the Department itself can resolve but it can be part of the necessary dialogue to improve the current situation.

**F4.21 GIS capability:** There is a strong case for the Department to have GIS capability, either as part of its own development in terms of enhanced ICT and data management capability or in partnership with another public sector body.

#### *Recommendations*

**R4.13 Data management policy:** The Department should give priority to developing a comprehensive data management policy. In tandem with that, it should compile a full inventory of the number, nature and purposes of the datasets it holds. The internal structures and systems needed, such as the ICT necessary to support the data management policy, should also be included in this project.

**R4.14 Data access:** The Department should clearly establish with Pobal (and its other agencies) what, if any, impediments exist on access to their datasets. Where such impediments are found to be unwarranted, PDAs should be renegotiated to facilitate improved data sharing.

**R4.15 Cross-government engagement:** The Department should proactively promote a greater dialogue across Government aimed at reducing or eliminating any non-statutory barriers to greater sharing of statistics and data.

**R4.16 GIS capability:** As part of a suite of measures necessary to develop capability across ICT, evaluation and data management, the Department should develop a GIS competency to enhance its ability to access and evaluate essential data at an appropriately granular level.

**R4.17 Records management:** In rolling out a new records management policy, the Department should give due consideration to ensuring high levels of staff awareness of the policy and their individual obligations in relation to same.

## Appendix 1: Processes used in developing new policies, strategies and programmes

The Department has developed a number of new policies, strategies, programmes and legislative initiatives relating to rural and community development and to the remit of some of its agencies. The approaches used in the preparation of the various frameworks are set out below.

- a) **Rural Development Policy, 2020 – 2025:** Development of this policy, which is currently in draft form, had a number of engagement features, particularly of a cross-government and public consultation nature:
  - i. **Senior Officials' Group:** This group, on which several Government Departments were represented, provided high-level guidance in terms of both processes and drafts.
  - ii. **Public consultations:** Some 500 interested people and stakeholders were consulted at 12 public events around the country and a follow-up on-line survey attracted some 1,700 responses.
  - iii. **Bilateral departmental engagements:** The Department met bilaterally with relevant Departments asking them to describe those aspects of their policies and programmes which impact on rural Ireland and to make suggestions on how the proposed new Rural Development Policy could give value-added and impetus to them. The Department then worked up the inputs and refined them in light of its own objectives and perspectives. This iterative process continued until agreed texts were finalised, culminating in the final draft being signed off by the Senior Official's Group in early 2020.
- i) **Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF):** When developing the RRDF, senior management worked closely with their counterparts in relevant Departments including the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure conformity with the objectives of *Project Ireland 2040*, to develop common standards in the applications process, and to provide for appropriate review mechanisms.

The Department also used a series of roadshows to get feedback from potential applicants on both the applications process and the criteria for funding.

- b) **National Social Enterprise Policy:** The development of this policy document has a number of notable characteristics:
  - i. **Research report:** A core input was the research report, *Social Enterprise in Ireland*, the first draft of which was prepared by the Social Finance Foundation. Informed by a broad spectrum of stakeholder inputs, the research established the 'as is' state and reached determinations on future needs, which formed the basis for proposals.
  - ii. **Benchmark analysis:** The research included benchmark analysis to assess the situations in other European countries, particularly from a best practice perspective.
  - iii. **Senior management engagement:** Undertaking the research involved public consultations (both on-line and face-to-face), site visits and formal meetings convened by the Department and at which senior management participated.
  - iv. **C&V engagement:** There was strong consultation with community and voluntary organisations.

- v. **Internal collaboration:** There was good collaboration between relevant business units. A conscious effort was made to engage colleagues, avail of their perspectives, and make use of their skills and knowledge.
  - vi. **Leadership:** Once the draft research report was finalised, the Department took ownership of the process and, in the view of stakeholders, led very well on moving matters forward towards a conclusion.
  - vii. **Balanced inputs:** The ultimate policy document, *National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019 – 2022*, is regarded as reflecting fairly the thrust of the various inputs, including the academic contribution provided by the Social Finance Foundation. While account was taken of the situations in other countries, the ultimate positions and recommendations in the document were attuned to the unique circumstances of Ireland.
- c) **C&V strategy:** The development of the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities* strategy ('C&V strategy') is notable in a number of respects:
- i. **Extensive consultation:** Development of the strategy commenced with a national forum of some 200 stakeholders which involved presentations by keynote speakers and thematic workshops aimed at reaching agreed responses to a series of pre-set questions. Later, an internal cross-section team examined all the feedback and prepared a paper as a basis for further discussion with a specially-convened advisory group.
  - ii. **Two-stage drafting:** A draft document was prepared in consultation with an advisory group of key stakeholders which included the Department, other government departments, community and voluntary organisations, and local authorities. This was followed by a public consultation exercise. While there was a downside in that production took a long time, there was also an upside in that the ultimately strategy was widely welcomed across the C&V sector.
  - iii. **Leadership:** The strategy is widely regarded as a product of very positive and inclusive consultations. The resultant policy had to be proofed and endorsed across government and the Department is regarded as having performed very strongly in that respect.
- d) **Volunteering strategy:** Work on this strategy, which originated in the last Programme for Government, started in 2019 and involved a number of key steps:
- i. **Convention of stakeholders:** All key stakeholders, including Volunteering Ireland and its member organisations, were called to a special conference at which the model for developing a new strategy was discussed.
  - ii. **'Calls for Input' paper:** This paper, which set out 40 questions for answer, was issued to stakeholders and remained open for two months. Over 150 responses were received and then assessed from technical and completion viewpoints.
  - iii. **Thematic aggregation:** The responses to the various questions across all the submissions were assessed and aggregated by theme. A document was then prepared and submitted to the Minister of State, and included suggestions for membership of a special Advisory Group which he would chair.

- iv. **Draft for Advisory Group:** A drafting sub-group prepared an outline of the strategy for consideration and approval by the Advisory Group and, near end-2019, it had a first draft strategy ready for its consideration.
- v. **Peer review:** The draft strategy, which covers a five-year period, was peer reviewed by internal managers who had overseen the development of the C&V strategy, by a senior manager on the Ireland Aid Programme, and by the Chief Executive of Volunteering Ireland.
- vi. **Public consultation:** The draft strategy was opened to a public consultation exercise which concluded at end-January 2020. It is intended to submit the final strategy to government shortly.

As an indicator of the Department's outreach when developing the strategy, some 90 submissions were provided by Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and other community-based groups alone. In the opinion of stakeholders, the Department engaged very strongly throughout and have managed the process very well.

- e) **Library strategy:** Development of the five year libraries' strategy, *Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities*, has a number of distinguishing attributes:
  - i. **Benchmark analysis:** The strategy has its origins in good research, with particular attention having been given to current trends and best practice in public libraries abroad.
  - ii. **Stakeholder engagement:** There was considerable external engagement, especially with the local government sector, including with the 31 library authorities.
  - iii. **User involvement:** Library users were engaged by means of face-to-face focus groups which were held in a number of local authority areas.
- f) **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP):** The current programme was developed by the Department in conjunction with Pobal, the Local Development Companies (LDCs), and the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs). Notably they and some other stakeholders spoke positively of the Department's willingness to adjust elements of the SICAP in the light of feedback and new evidence.
- g) **Charities Bill:** The Department in conjunction with the Charities Regulator drafted a General Scheme for the *Charities (Amendment) Bill* and it is hoped that the Heads of a Bill will be ready for submission to Government soon.

## Appendix 2: Status report on *ex post* reviews

Quite a number of the Department's programmes, schemes and delivery agencies have either undergone some form of *ex post* review in the recent past or are in the process of planning for one in the near future. Regarding the Department's strategies, nearly all of them are too new to have been evaluated yet.

- a) **Action Plan for Rural Development, 2017 – 2019:** There was strong reporting on outputs under the outgoing Action Plan and they were used as the basis for the publication of a Final Progress Report on the Plan.

The Department consulted with academia in relation to developing impact indicators for the Action Plan. While a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators for measuring outputs was considered, the development of a methodology and model for measuring impacts was seen as a complex and lengthy process.

- b) **Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF):** The groundwork for evaluating the RRDF is being laid by the requirement on applicants to specify in their applications the process by which the proposed project would be evaluated. The evaluation plan is a key determinant in the selection process and when deciding on an appropriate yardstick, relevant state bodies are consulted – for example, with Fáilte Ireland in the case of a local tourism project. Encouragingly, for the purposes of a future evaluation, performance metrics have already been sought on the first major project completed in 2019 under the RRDF.
- c) **Community Services Programme (CSP):** A review of the CSP is well advanced and is aimed at informing the development of a successor programme in 2021.
- d) **Local Improvement Scheme (LIS):** A Spending Review was conducted of the LIS to improve understanding of the schemes and inform its future operation.
- e) **Pobal:** Following on a Periodic Critical Review in 2014, a second such review of Pobal commenced in February 2020.
- f) **Charities Regulator:** An independent evaluation of the Charities Regulator was undertaken in 2019 and is being considered at present by its Board.
- g) **Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs):** A major review of the LCDCs was published in July 2019.
- h) **Review of other schemes:** Reviews of the Clár Programme, the Walks Scheme and the Rural Economic Development Zone (REDZ) scheme have all either commenced or gone to tender.

Interviewees, internally and externally, identified the following programmes, schemes and funds as needing evaluations or some form of *ex post* reviews to be undertaken. Obviously, the planned reorientation of future evaluations towards a programmatic approach rather than an individual scheme basis will be a critical consideration.

- a) **LEADER programme:** While ongoing monitoring is very strong with a broad set of performance metrics in place, there will be a need to evaluate the entire current programme, for which the Department will likely need to seek advice on how best to go about that exercise.
- b) **Dormant Accounts' Fund:** This Fund, which is comprised of some €300 million in total, has never been the subject of an evaluation, although the C&AG undertook an audit review some years ago.

Pobal manages and administers the Fund and as part of that work, it captures a lot of input and output data that could very usefully feed into an evaluation exercise.

- c) **Town and Village scheme:** The Department has not had the capacity to date to establish what works best and why with the Town and Village scheme, and similarly with the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme. Such research would yield insights that could be fed into future policymaking.
- d) **Senior Alerts Scheme (SAS):** The value-for-money and effectiveness of the scheme have never been evaluated. It had been intended to review it in 2020 but on closer scrutiny, the overlaps with housing and Sláintecare made it too complex for the Department to undertake on its own.
- e) **Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNOs):** This scheme, which involves some €5 million expenditure per annum, is not earmarked for evaluation.
- f) **Public libraries' infrastructure:** One of the targets in the library strategy is the creation of 100 'My Open Library' sites by the end of 2022; there are 15 at present. The 'My Open Library' service offers extended opening hours to *library* members on a self-service basis outside normal opening hours, from 8am to 10pm, seven days a week. The Department plans to evaluate the impacts of the 15 sites launched to date.

## **Appendix 3: Business Units in each Division**

### **Rural Development and Regional Affairs Division**

Rural Strategy and Social Enterprise

Rural Programmes and Policies

LEADER Policy and Operations

Regional Development and Innovation

### **Community Development Division**

Social Inclusion and Communities

Community and Voluntary Supports and Programmes

Libraries Development and Community Policy

### **Corporate and Strategic Development Division**

Finance and Evaluation

Corporate Support and Rural Fund

Inspection and Compliance

Organisational Development and Human Resources and Corporate Policy

## Appendix 4: List of Recommendations

### CHAPTER 1: LEADERSHIP

**R1.1 Role of the Management Board:** The Management Board, having led and developed major strategic change of a policy nature, now needs to rebalance its deliberations more towards strategic change of a delivery nature, especially in reforming its diffuse delivery model, deepening interdepartmental cooperation, and building a base for measuring the impacts of programmes and schemes.

**R1.2 Role of the Senior Management Team (SMT):** There is scope to improve the overall effectiveness of the SMT, especially in challenging the status quo and in supporting the Management Board as an enabler of change. The Principal Officers need to take a more proactive role in shaping the SMT's agenda and they must also reflect upon the extent to which they are currently self-directing in terms of taking the lead on some organisational issues and challenges.

**R1.3 Communications from Staff Engagement Forum:** Given the lack of awareness on the part of many staff regarding the work and output of the Forum, it should undertake a quick review of its communications channels and structures so as to ensure all staff have timely access to its operations and output.

**R1.4 Board's engagement with agencies:** The Board should consider how it might enhance the already strong bilateral relationship that exists between the Department and its four agencies. This would be specifically aimed at ensuring greater shared understanding across the agencies of the Department's strategic priorities and at improving mutual awareness of key issues and challenges.

**R1.5 Exerting influence:** The very positive work which has taken place on exerting appropriate influence at a cross-departmental level needs to be continued.

**R1.6 Local government relationships:** Given the criticality of the relationships with the local government sector, the Department should devote more time to reflecting with the sector on relationships and engagement structures, particularly given the delivery complexities outlined in Chapter 3.

**R1.7 Stakeholder engagement:** There remains a need for the Department to continue its close engagement across its broad stakeholder cohort so as to ensure full and mutual understanding of respective positions in relation to national policy on a range of issues relevant to the sectors under its remit.

**R1.8 Communications strategy:** The Department should ensure that all staff, irrespective of grade, are made fully aware of the content of the recently concluded communications strategy. A mechanism to monitor and review implementation should also be put in place.

**R1.9 External communications:** The Department should reflect on whether current approaches to external communications are sufficient given the nature of the challenges that, by common consensus, exist. The policy of direct engagement by staff with local communities should be promoted as a means of increasing and improving understanding of the Department's role and the impacts that its policies can make.

## CHAPTER 2: STRATEGY

**R2.1 Legislative training:** The Department should explore with OneLearning<sup>34</sup> the feasibility of developing and administering a training programme on the preparation, progression and enactment of legislation to supplement existing training in this area.

**R2.2 Programme of Evaluations:** The Department should conclude the work which is well advanced on developing a Programme of Evaluations and which will reflect the reorientation towards the evaluation of programmes rather than individual schemes.

**R2.3 Impact measurement:** Taking account of the work undertaken by the ESRI, the Department should agree on the suite of indicators needed to measure the critical impacts of its programmes and schemes.

**R2.4 Data infrastructure:** The Department – in consultation with stakeholders including Pobal – should prepare a plan for developing a data infrastructure model that would both facilitate the effective ongoing monitoring of programmes and provide critical data feeds into their evaluation. Particular attention would need to be given to standardised categorisation practices and efficient data management processes.

**R2.5 Local government data quality:** The Department, in consultation with the LGMA, should explore how the provision of high quality data could be made more uniform across the local government sector. Factors to be considered include streamlining data requests, standardising datasets and strengthening quality assurance processes.

**R2.6 Knowledge management:** The Department, perhaps through the Evaluation Sub-group, should collate its diverse experiences and practices relating to the preparation and undertaking of *ex post* reviews. Knowledge sharing amongst managers on challenges and best practice would help considerably with the development of programmatic approaches to future evaluations.

## CHAPTER 3: DELIVERY

**R3.1 LCDC mapping exercise:** In order to optimise their contribution to planning and delivery at community level, the Department – in collaboration with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government – should undertake a mapping exercise comprising the following elements:

- a) 'As is' state of:
  - a. the inputs and outputs of LCDCs
  - b. their relationships with local authorities
  - c. areas of value-added and overlap between the work of LCDCs and local authorities
- b) 'Go to' state in terms of:
  - a. desirable value-added for delivery from the perspective of central government
  - b. desirable value-added for delivery from the perspective of local government
  - c. gap analysis on the capacity of LCDCs to deliver on b)a and b)b above

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<sup>34</sup> Civil Service Learning and Development Centre

**R3.2 RRDF – digitisation:** The Department should develop a business case for digitising the administration of the RRDF and, on that basis, decide whether a new ICT solution is warranted.

**R3.3 LEADER - simplification:** The Department – in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine – should explore whether there is scope to simplify the application and reporting processes for the successor programme in accordance with EU rules.

**R3.4 Delivery priorities for social enterprise, C&V and volunteering strategies:** On conclusion of the volunteering strategy, the Department, in consultation with C&V stakeholders should develop an agreed set of priorities for delivery over the next two years under the social enterprise, C&V and volunteering strategies which altogether have 68 recommendations. Bearing in mind the challenges that lie ahead, a work plan is needed to identify those priorities and choreograph them across the three strategies.

**R3.5 Work programme for paced delivery:** Given the ambition of its suite of recently concluded strategies, the Department should develop a work programme that encompasses them all, sets out the priorities to be addressed, and prescribes phased implementation timelines.

**R3.6 CCMA role in delivery of work programme:** The work programme at R3.5 above should be remitted to the CCMA for coordination across the various delivery agents encompassing local authorities, LDCs, LCDCs and PPNS.

**R3.7 Rationalisation of schemes:** In consultation with relevant stakeholders, the Department should oversee a programme of reform aimed at rationalising those schemes within its remit and at developing replacement delivery models.

**R3.8 Potential for savings:** The Department should engage strategically with Pobal on the potential for cost savings by bundling schemes together for processing purposes and amalgamating similar schemes.

**R3.9 Best practice management:** Given the number of schemes and their complexity, the rationalisation programme would need to be guided by best practice in programme management and be undertaken by an appropriately resourced team with the necessary expertise.

**R3.10 Review of governance arrangements:** The Department should undertake a review of its existing agency governance arrangements to ensure consistent oversight of Performance Delivery Agreements, strategic alignment of agencies with the Department’s goals, and appropriate account is taken of risk which, in turn, has implications for staff training on governance.

**R3.11 Engagement with CCMA:** Building on its strong relationships with the local government sector, the Department should explore with the CCMA the scope for greater collaboration.

**R3.12 Governance of LCDCs:** The Department, perhaps in consultation with the CCMA, should implement a time-bound plan for implementation of the recommendations in the *Review of Local Community Development Committees*.

**R3.13 Review of strategic risks:** The Department should review what adjustments are needed to its risk management model in order that the main strategic risks facing the organisation would more readily emerge. In that respect, a particular focus on business continuity is needed, given the largescale remote working regime in place since March 2020. An external peer review process might usefully form part of the exercise.

**R3.14 Agency risks:** As part of its ongoing corporate governance and risk management roles, the Department should ensure that robust best practice policies are in place in each of its four agencies, and the Management Board, in conjunction with each agency, should review these policies every year.

#### CHAPTER 4: ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY

**R4.1 Workload of the HR Unit:** The Department should take the necessary steps to reduce and eliminate the external demands being placed on the Unit. Such a development would allow the HR Unit to focus on the delivery of its own strategic and business priorities.

**R4.2 Workforce planning:** The established engagement process involving the Principal Officers and the HR Manager should continue as a means of involving all senior managers in the workforce planning process. However, for the future, there should be the fullest possible transparency at Management Board level regarding agreed business priorities and how corresponding decisions on staff allocation are made.

**R4.3 Succession planning:** The Department should give priority to ensuring that the skills audit outlined in its HR strategy is undertaken as soon as possible so as to better inform future staff deployment decisions. In tandem with that, some consideration needs to be given to embedding wider knowledge management practices, thus helping to mitigate risks arising from staff churn.

**R4.4 Performance management:** The excellent leadership shown by the Management Board in highlighting the responsibility of individual senior managers for their staff should be continued. In particular, both the annual business planning process and the performance management of Principal Officers should be used as a means of embedding this policy into the wider Department.

**R4.5 Learning & Development:** in line with the action proposed in its *People Strategy*, the Department should consider undertaking an evaluation to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of its Learning & Development programme to ensure its investment is bringing about the anticipated improvements in overall departmental capability and value-for-money outcomes.

**R4.6 Technical support:** On completion of the transition by the DHPLG's Ballina office to an OGCI service, the Department should explore with both it and the OGCI how local ICT technical support in Ballina could be made more responsive to the benefit of the two Departments.

**R4.7 Technical inspection:** The Department should initiate a technical examination of the reasons for the problems being encountered with the speed and reliability of certain ICT solutions, especially the video conferencing application.

**R4.8 Website access:** The Department and the OGCI should agree on a list of websites to which regular access is needed and for which access restrictions should be lifted.

**R4.9 Strategic ICT competency:** The Department should develop its own strategic ICT competency so that the future ICT state would be appropriately conceptualised, articulated, planned and managed in terms of architecture, design and solutions.

**R4.10 Future business model:** As business needs should drive ICT development, the Management Board should design a business model to underpin the future ICT state. The model should incorporate the proposed reconfiguration of schemes onto a programmatic basis, the delivery model(s) to be used, the work undertaken and planned on business process improvements, the delivery mechanisms

for recently concluded strategies, and the principal data required to support planning, monitoring and evaluation into the future

**R4.11 Digitised solutions:** Based on the business model, the Department as a priority should prepare a plan to accelerate the development of digital platforms with supporting databases for service delivery purposes, ideally within the context of a standardised model across the government system. Such a plan is critical to bringing operational innovation onto a par with that evident in the development of policy and strategy.

**R4.12 ICT strategy:** The Department should complete the work already commenced on an ICT strategy which should include the above three recommendations as central features.

**R4.13 Data management policy:** The Department should give priority to developing a comprehensive data management policy. In tandem with that, it should compile a full inventory of the number, nature and purposes of the datasets it holds. The internal structures and systems needed, such as the ICT necessary to support the data management policy, should also be included in this project.

**R4.14 Data access:** The Department should clearly establish with Pobal (and its other agencies) what, if any, impediments exist on access to their datasets. Where such impediments are found to be unwarranted, PDAs should be renegotiated to facilitate improved data sharing.

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**R4.17 Records management:** In rolling out a new records management policy, the Department should give due consideration to ensuring high levels of staff awareness of the policy and their individual obligations in relation to same.