



An Roinn Caiteachais  
Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe  
Department of Public  
Expenditure and Reform

# DPER Culture Review

Review and Next Steps  
April 2021



Department of Public Expenditure and Reform  
[gov.ie](http://gov.ie)

# Introduction

We, at DPER, have an affirmed desire to be best in class. In order to achieve this, it is essential that the culture of the Department acts as an enabler to how we work. To build on the strong culture that already exists within the Department we undertook this culture review as part of our 2020 Internal Audit Plan to gain insight into staff and external perspectives on what it feels like to work in and with DPER with a view to bolstering our strengths and identifying areas for improvement. An internal project review team, composed of members from both Internal Audit and the Human Resources Strategy Unit, was established to lead out on this work. We also set up a Steering Committee consisting of both internal and external members to oversee the work. PwC was appointed to provide subject matter expertise and independent 3rd party oversight to the process.



## Principles underpinning our approach

For this review, culture is defined as the “*self-sustaining pattern of behaviour that determines how things are done*”. By their nature organisation cultures change little and slowly. Consequently, our approach has focused on stepping back and understanding our current culture, its strengths and challenges and then on identifying and embedding a small number of behaviours, known as the Critical Few behaviours, that will help us to evolve.

These Critical Few behaviours were designed by the DPER Management Board and a newly established Culture Working Group\*. By focusing our attention on a small number of critical behaviours, we believe we can ensure that every individual in DPER can take action and contribute to our culture. Rather than merely talking about concepts such as collaboration or inclusion, we want these to be a part of our everyday behaviour.



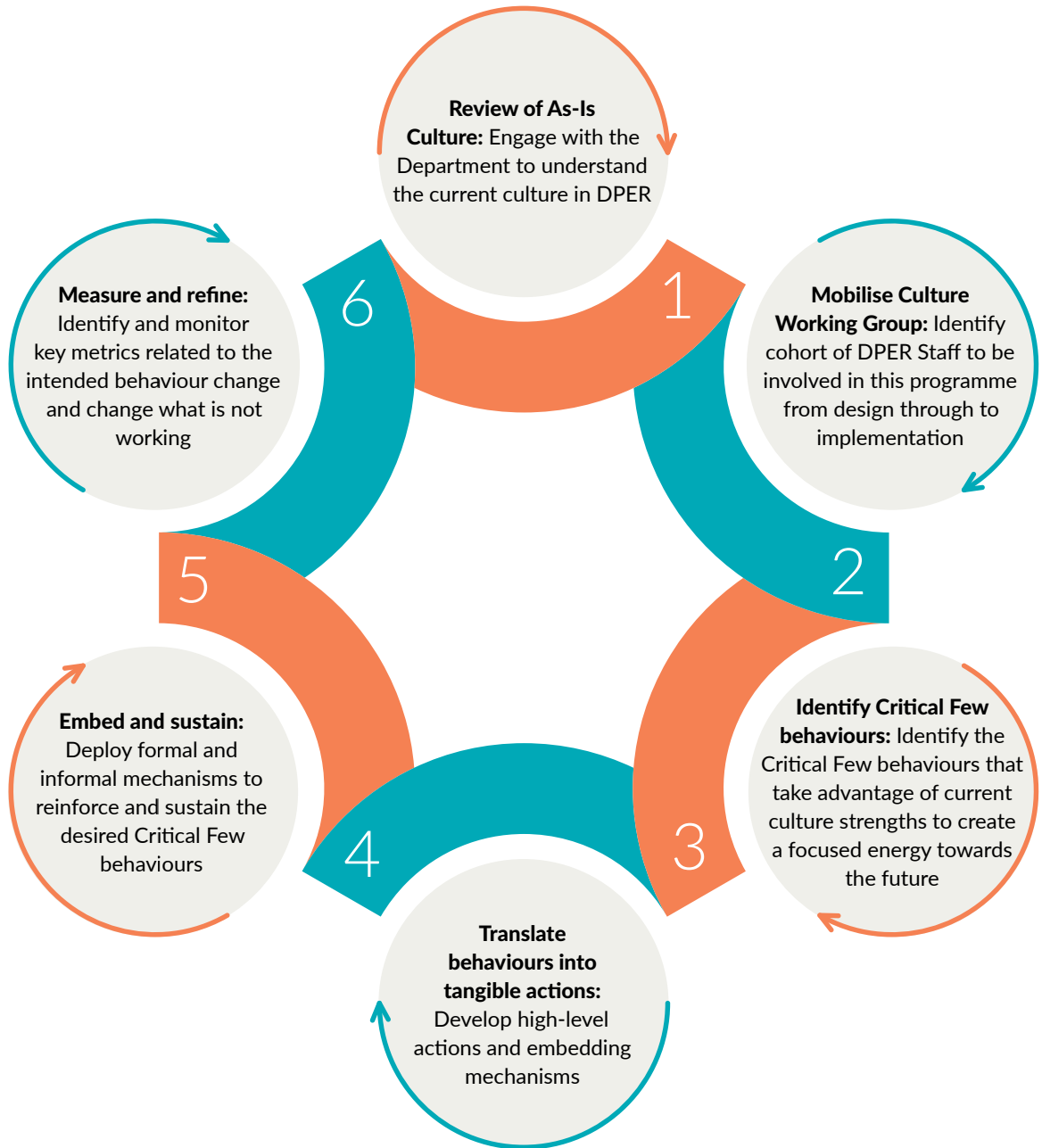
## A note of thanks

The Department would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in the process, including members of the Department and all external stakeholders who gave their time to date. We are extremely grateful for the engagement dedicated by all to this review.

\*The Culture Working Group is a cross-grade group of staff identified from across the various divisions of the Department, with a mix of tenure and background. They worked and will continue to work in tandem with the Management Board and play a critical role in the culture programme going forward.

# Our Approach to Culture

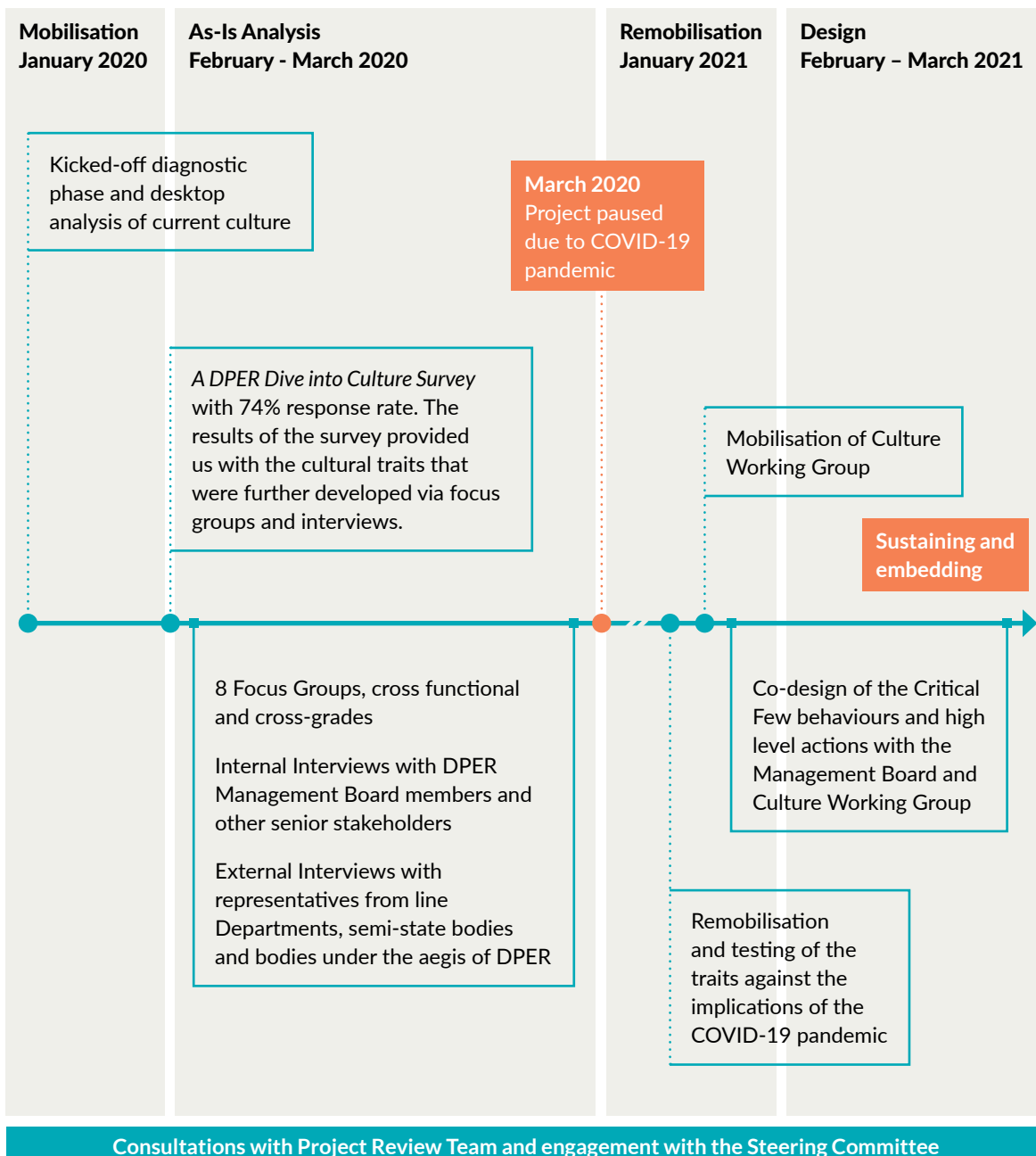
The diagram below illustrates the approach used to conduct this culture review and the specific steps and work undertaken. It emphasises the importance of engaging all layers of the Department in the As-Is analysis in order to build momentum, leveraging the power of the existing culture and of the Culture Working Group. The focus on identifying and embedding the Critical Few behaviours ensures that as many DPER colleagues as possible quickly replicate the behaviours that will make a real difference to the Department.



# Timeline of Activities

The culture review commenced in January 2020 with the analysis of the 'As-Is' or current culture at DPER via *A DPER Dive into Culture Survey*, focus group discussions, and interviews with both internal and external stakeholders. The primary aim of this phase of work was to gain a deep insight into the Department's current culture across all divisions, culminating in the articulation of the cultural traits that make up DPER (outlined overleaf).

Due to restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this work was paused in March 2020 and reconvened in January 2021. At this time, the opportunity was taken to re-validate the cultural traits and to consider how the culture responded to the unprecedented change posed by the pandemic. From February 2021, the identification of the Critical Few behaviours took place, working with the Culture Working Group and Management Board in co-designing the high level actions to embed these behaviours.






# DPER Cultural Traits

The cultural traits identified during the As-Is analysis phase provide clarity on the strengths of the current culture in DPER and highlight the aspects of the culture that may hinder, more than help, the Department. Cultural traits, by their very nature, are neutral and neither 'good' nor 'bad' and each neutral trait has positive and negative manifestations. Six traits were identified in DPER.

As we moved into the design phase, these cultural traits provided clarity on strengths we need to leverage, recognising the positive base from which the Department is starting from, and the challenges to be mitigated against.

While culture can typically take a long time to evolve, a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can often have a disruptive effect on culture in both positive and negative ways.

As such, an exercise was undertaken when the review re-commenced in January 2021 to explore how the traits were manifested during the pandemic. The overall consensus was that all of the traits are still applicable and relevant.

		
<p>There is a real collegiate atmosphere at a team level. However, at times colleagues don't always understand what people outside their immediate team and/or division do. This can hinder collaboration and the ability of the Department to present a united front to stakeholders.</p> <p><b>How this trait showed up during pandemic remote working:</b></p> <p>The Department rallied together as the pandemic unfolded with evidence of silos being broken down in some areas, though still prevalent in others. However, a natural by-product of the remote working environment was that informal channels were removed therefore diminishing opportunities for ad hoc information sharing.</p>	<p>There is strong leadership across the Department providing direction within divisions and teams. Individual styles can cause variability in approach and behaviours.</p> <p><b>How this trait showed up during pandemic remote working:</b></p> <p>The experience for colleagues was shaped by the different leaders within the divisions. Across the Department, a positive tone was set from the top with authentic concern for individual care and wellbeing.</p>	<p>Staff in DPER are willing, able and trusted to make decisions and routinely strive to achieve positive outcomes for the Department.</p> <p>However, there can be individual caution in adopting new approaches to problem solving. Occasionally, grade can overshadow expertise in decision making.</p> <p><b>How this trait showed up during pandemic remote working:</b></p> <p>Remote working led to greater empowerment founded on trust and autonomy. Such proven capability to deliver has provided the opportunity to examine future ways of working across the Department.</p>

# DP&R Cultural Traits

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A professional Department built around an appreciation for expertise and challenge with recognition that this needs to be underpinned by confidence to speak up. However, there is a perception that the more generalist view or experience is not valued as greatly as specialist skills.

**How this trait showed up during pandemic remote working:**

COVID-19 and its implications were an unknown. All forms of specialist skills were valued and generalist organisational management experience was given equal merit.

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Strong precedent and policy focus guides staff in the execution of their roles. However, external scrutiny of decisions taken by the Department can drive caution and inhibit innovation and change.

**How this trait showed up during pandemic remote working:**

The Department remained risk averse however the pandemic required greater speed of decision making. Consequently, there is a fear that decisions taken in good faith, if proven to have unintended consequences, may lead to unfair scrutiny down the line.

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There is a focus on evidenced based decision making, enabling objectivity and consistency in the Department's approach to problem solving. Longer term planning and innovation can be compromised by the annual budgetary cycle.

**How this trait showed up during pandemic remote working:**

The extent to which this trait became more or less pronounced varied by division. Ultimately, the annual budgetary cycle still continues to shape the Department's approach.



# Identifying the Critical Few Behaviours

As outlined on page 4, following the identification and validation of the cultural traits, the next step was to identify the Critical Few behaviours for the Department.

The identification of the Critical Few must align to DPER's strategic ambition and values. It is also imperative that they build on the strengths and mitigate the challenges of the current culture, thereby supporting the Department to accelerate the delivery of its strategy.

Through a rigorous process to ensure these requirements, opportunities and challenges were fully understood and calibrated, consensus was reached by the Management Board on the Critical Few behaviours, outlined below, that will be the most impactful for DPER.

To note these are the Critical Few behaviours for now – once these behaviours are embedded and habitual in the Department, or if there is a significant shift in DPER's strategy, new behaviours can be identified and energies can be redirected to spreading these.



# Turning Behaviours into Tangible Actions

Whilst the Management Board played a lead role in identifying the Critical Few behaviours, when rolling out the behaviours it is vital to ensure that the process includes colleagues from all grades and across divisions to drive culture evolution and behaviour change efforts. To this end, the Culture Working Group worked hand in hand with the Management

Board to co-develop the actions that will be taken to embed the behaviours. They were engaged throughout February and March of 2021 for all stages of the design phase, ensuring that the behaviours and actions had fingerprints from staff across the Department and therefore will be of relevance to all grades, divisions and layers.



## Management Board Role going forward

The Management Board will work to finalise the detailed design of the actions with the Culture Working Group and will support the roll-out of the behaviours across the Department. However, perhaps their most important role as the programme moves to implementation, is in their visible commitment to the culture evolution of DPER. It is imperative that they have a vision of what the cultural shift will bring and be able to show this across the Department. They will 'walk the talk' and demonstrate the Critical Few behaviours explicitly - making visible, concrete, noticeable changes to signal the turning of the dial of culture.

**By utilising a top down and bottom up approach we are ensuring that all behaviours can be role modelled by senior leadership and also via peer to peer interactions**

The role of the Culture Working Group will be to work with the Management Board to finalise the detailed design of the actions to embed the behaviours. As the actions are implemented, this group will seek and provide feedback, ensuring that the actions are refined in real time and relevant to all parts of the Department. Perhaps most importantly, they will play a pivotal role in both the role modelling of the behaviours in their interactions and in supporting the roll-out of the actions in their division as they are launched across the Department.

## Culture Working Group Role going forward







Measure the impact of behaviours and refine based on feedback



Establish a Governance & Project structure to implement the actions that will help to embed the behaviours



Work with the Culture Working Group and the Management Board to design in further detail the actions to embed the behaviours



Share Department wide communications to drive involvement at all layers

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## Culture in Action Next Steps

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Having identified the Critical Few behaviours, the focus now moves to embedding these behaviours across the Department.

The responsibility for this lies with each and every colleague across the Department. In order for all DPER colleagues to be set up for success, the next steps for this review are outlined above.

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