Shaping the Future of Work in the Civil Service in Ireland: Enriching Involvement, Innovation, Performance, and Citizen Impact

Executive Summary
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

The inaugural Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey (CSEES) was launched in 2015 as a key aspect under the Civil Service Renewal Plan. The survey was repeated in 2017. Over 21,300 civil servants completed the 2017 CSEES, a 17% increase on 2015. The results of the survey are very positive overall with 22 of the 24 themes measured improving from 2015 to 2017. Although the results were largely positive, the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB) adopted a proactive approach regarding the four most challenging areas: involvement climate (38%), innovative climate (49%), performance management (48%), and perceptions of the public (38%).

## Positive Results – Top 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>2017 Percentage</th>
<th>2015 Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Engagement</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Change</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Most Challenging Results – Top 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>2017 Percentage</th>
<th>2015 Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement Climate</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Perception of the Civil Service</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Pay</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Standards</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative Climate</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ranking of the 2017 Most Challenging themes differ from 2015. As such, the 2015 and 2017 Most Challenging themes cannot be compared side by side in the table above.
Overall, levels of employee engagement remain largely stable and at a reasonable level, at 72%. Despite some evidence of positive employee experiences, more in-depth analysis points to different experiences at different grades, where senior civil servants typically report more positive experiences of working within the Civil Service. While the results of the survey have been positive, the CSMB wished to further analyse its findings around grade differences, particularly in the following four areas:

- **Involvement Climate**: the extent to which employees feel that communication is effective, that they are kept abreast of developments, that they are listened to and that they feel part of the decision-making process;
- **Innovative Climate**: the extent to which employees feel that new ideas are readily accepted, that there is openness to new ways of working and that the organisation supports creativity;
- **Performance Management**: the degree to which the management of performance, underperformance and the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) is effective;
- **Public Perception**: how civil servants feel they are valued and perceived by the general public.

The quantitative analysis suggests that a linear relationship exists between grade and many of the survey variables such that the higher the grade, the better the perception of these four areas.

The following findings arose over the course of the research: the current hierarchical grade structure is not compatible with the current or future needs of the Civil Service; the Performance Management Development System (PMDS) is not delivering on objectives; a weak culture of involvement is present at all grades; the ICT system does not support modern working requirements; an innovation culture is not supported in the Civil Service; and civil servants continue to feel highly engaged in their work. These findings are further detailed throughout the report.

It is important to bear in mind that these findings are focused on the four most challenging areas that came out of the 2017 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey.

These findings led to the overall conclusion of the report, that the dominant culture within the Civil Service at present is one of ‘conflict avoidance’. This was evidenced in the findings by the following: an avoidance to communicate with and involve staff in decision-making; a reticence to welcome or embrace new ideas that might challenge ‘how things are done’; and a reluctance to deal with underperformance across all grades. There was also an awareness that this underlying culture was stifling progress and was feeding into the public perception of the Civil Service. The findings demonstrate that these avoidance behaviours are deep-seated and learned – particularly among longer-serving civil servants – and that among this cohort at least, changing them will require significant effort.

Further information: The findings of the 2017 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey were positive, with increases evident across 22 of the 24 themes. This research expressly focuses on a number of the most challenging areas highlighted in the survey including: Involvement Climate; Innovative Climate; Performance Management; and Public Perception. There areas displayed significant differences of perceptions between grades across these themes in both the 2015 and 2017 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey, and the Civil Service Management Board wished to further understand perceptions of staff in these challenging areas.
## Overall Findings and Key Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Detail</th>
<th>Key Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current hierarchical grade structure not compatible with current or future needs</td>
<td>The current hierarchical structure of the Civil Service poses challenges for effective communication across grades; inhibits innovation; acts as a demotivator and is a hindrance to meeting challenges and optimising the potential talent of its current and future employees.</td>
<td>Undertake further analysis to investigate the appropriateness of the current hierarchical grade structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Management Development System (PMDS) not delivering on objectives</td>
<td>The current PMDS system is viewed in a negative light; a binary system that is viewed as a box ticking exercise that fails in its objectives to increase performance and support career development. Further analysis is required to clarify if the PMDS process itself is fundamentally flawed or whether the problem lies with how it is utilised as a management tool.</td>
<td>Investigate whether PMDS is fundamentally flawed or is being under utilised as a performance management tool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak culture of involvement at all Grades</td>
<td>Employees at all grades voiced concerns with the level and quality of communication in their organisation. Lower grades feel particularly excluded from organisational knowledge and decision-making. A risk averse culture coupled with over involvement at Senior level can potentially curtail agile decision making.</td>
<td>Create a blueprint for internal communications that can be implemented throughout the Civil Service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT system does not support modern working requirements</td>
<td>ICT resources that support innovation are fundamental and yet deficiencies that reduce productivity and creativity were very apparent. An audit of the digital infrastructure is an essential starting point.</td>
<td>Invest in an IT system that can deliver the current needs of the organisation and is future proofed to successfully deliver online solutions to customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation Culture is not supported in the Civil Service</td>
<td>Innovation is misunderstood within the Civil Service. A new definition of the scope of innovation and an ambitious vision is required and this must be widely communicated and championed by senior management.</td>
<td>Continue to progress a wide range of initiatives which will further develop a culture of innovation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Servants continue to feel highly engaged</td>
<td>Despite the challenges outlined above, the qualitative analysis shows that civil servants have a strong sense of connection with their work. Staff also have a feel that their work has value, meaning and purpose. This finding is bolstered by the large increase in participation in the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey from 2015 to 2017 (39% vs. 56%).</td>
<td>Continue to hold Civil Service Employee Engagement Surveys and support all Departments/Offices to respond to the issues highlighted by staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Findings

Involvement Climate

Involvement climate was one of the two lowest scoring variables in the 2017 CSEES. The results indicated low levels of involvement, comprising participation and communication, across all responses but this was particularly acute within the lower civil servant grades. Involvement climate, at 38%, is the most challenging result in the CSEES Report and indicated that only a minority of civil servants feel that they are involved in decision-making in their organisation. Lower levels of involvement at lower grades is tentatively interpreted in the report as being impacted by the strong hierarchical culture within the Civil Service and it was this that the qualitative follow up research set out to investigate.

Overall, perceptions of involvement are more negative among lower grades. These grades identify the ‘rigid hierarchy’ as an impediment to authentic involvement at this level. In general, lower grades are less informed and are less likely to feel that their voice can have an impact. However, it is critical to point out that this is very much dependent on leaders and managers.

Summary: Grade perspectives – Involvement Climate

PO+

I would have thought, say, for instance, when people are asked their views about things or if they give their views, sometimes there have been occasions where those views have been just dismissed and I think that's not very healthy.

AP

There isn't so much of a deference thing going on or anything like that to the grades. People are very good at sharing ideas and coming forward with ideas but similarly, if something needs to be done, that they will have done it as well, and there is a good two-way street between the senior level of the division I am in and the next level down.

CO

Everything was vocal in my previous job, so we could speak out, we could just ask or you could just say what you wanted and I miss that... [difference with private sector].

HEO

I think there's a lot of silos within this department... so I think it can be difficult for people to all belong, feel that they belong to the one department.

EO

I have a positive expectation and outlook on being involved, but then my expectations often are not realised, so I get involved in a project with the idea that there will be certain results but that may not happen down the line, and that disappoints me sometimes.
Innovative Climate

The 2017 CSEES demonstrates that, across most grades, perceptions of the climate of innovation in the Civil Service are slightly more positive in 2017 compared to 2015. Perceptions of innovation among the lower grades are slightly less positive compared to higher grades. There is also a one-percentage decline in the index score for the ‘PO and above’ grade category in 2017 compared to 2015. The overall index score for innovative climate in 2017 is quite low at 49%.

The findings suggest the existence of a ‘hybrid culture’ in terms of the innovative climate across the Civil Service. This is evidenced by the clear contrast in views with regard to openness to new ideas, both within and across the departments and sections. The findings also suggest that the vision or goals for innovation across the Civil Service are not clearly articulated.

Summary: Grade perspectives – Innovative Climate

**CO**

There is a lot of paperwork that is unnecessary, a lot of duplication that doesn’t need to be duplicated. So if something comes into your email... There is no need for that really and there is a lot of resistance to change in the way things are done.

**EO**

And I would go to meetings that normally people at my grade wouldn’t go to or I would get to do a lot of stuff above my grade which is brilliant and my management are so supportive and I think that they are kind of trying to help me to move on and progress... which is fantastic but I can tell that it ruffles feathers and people aren’t necessarily always that impressed by the “go on” of me or whatever they would say.

**HEO**

I feel it’s a bit dated. Maybe we could get better, better and more innovative with how we work. I suppose lots of things like that and ways of using technology maybe to be more effective and maybe cut out mundane tasks, and as well as actually thinking about remote working and that. You know I see that there is a kind of reluctance to embrace these sorts of things, we’re a small bit old fashioned.

**PO+**

I’d be saying that you know we end up hurting ourselves... we still try to provide a quality public service but internally I think we’re kind of sniping at each other... because we’re encouraged to innovate, to look at maybe new ways of delivering services that transcend some of those traditional boundaries, and I don’t think we’ve a mechanism to, to overcome some of these boundaries yet.

**AP**

I thought the age profile was very different to where I came from, and there was a lot of older experienced people who were very set in the way they do things... it’s kind of strange... and they know each other a very long time and you are kind of going, “Do we have to do it like this?” and they are looking at you going, “Well, of course we can. We have done it like this and it’s working”.

**AO**

... I have only had two managers in my time here and they had very different styles... Certainly, with my second manager, I felt more included in the actual decisions that we made.
When parsing the findings on Performance Management, it is important to differentiate between responses that relate to perceptions of the effective management of performance and those that relate to poor performance or underperformance. In regard to accountability, only around half of respondents perceived that individuals were held accountable for achieving goals and meeting expectations or that senior managers were held accountable for achieving results. Only about a third of respondents considered that poor performance was effectively addressed, but this shows a significant increase in such views between the 2015 and 2017 surveys. While approximately two thirds of individuals felt that the department had high performance standards, just less than half considered that the department was measuring performance in order to ensure that staff are achieving results.

The issue of performance appears to be of much more concern to those in lower level positions (HEO and below) and it is possibly the case that it is at these levels that managers are encountering problems of underperformance that make managing it particularly difficult.

**Summary of views on performance management across the various grades**

**HEO**
I suppose what I see missing is there is no opportunity for growth. There is no, “This is what you are going to achieve. This is your stretch goal... people should be able, if they want to, have... the opportunity to request a project that will give them the opportunity for growth, the opportunity for promotion, the opportunity for transfer and mobility.

**PO+**
In the last couple of years... they have started to marry performance ultimately to discipline... Many moons ago, somebody said to me, “If you want to find out if anybody is any good, ask yourself would you pay them the money they are on out of your pocket to do what they do?” And it has been the finest yardstick I have ever had.

**AP**
Why is the government important? Why is the public sector important?... Obviously it is important, but you just have to communicate it constantly as to why it’s important.

**CO**
Getting them interested in what the job sort of contributes to, in a wider sense, to the public and to the country and to the world.

**AO**
Making staff feel maybe more ownership of the things that are going on, there is a deeper piece that needs to be done there.
Public Perception

Public perception scores have increased slightly since 2015 indicating that employees have slightly improved on their perceptions of feelings of appreciation, value and respect by the public for their work. However, the 2017 survey results still revealed low levels of public perception at 38%. While this result is low across most grades, this is particularly the case at lower grades.

For some, there is a sense of resignation about the public perception of the Civil Service, while for others there is a greater sense of frustration. Much of this frustration is due to the perceived lack of understanding among the general public about the work that civil servants do, as well as dissatisfaction that more is not done to better publicise its work or for senior management to more robustly defend negative stories in the media.

Summary of views on public perception across the various grades

**CO**

You would wish that people here would actually go out ... see what life is like and how people have to struggle and then they want millions of forms filled in.

**PO+**

The reality is we are a very good public service. It doesn’t mean there isn’t room for improvement or there isn’t problems. My view is people who interact with the service find it to be a good, respectful service.

**EO**

We are really poor at selling what we are doing and helping the public to understand what it is we are actually at all day and I think that’s a big part of the public perception.

**AP**

I hear all the time how busy the Civil Service is and people kind of nearly start laughing. They’re like "sure you are". I think people don’t really know the work that we do.
Suggested responses to the findings of the research

**Involvement Climate**

**Short Term**

Create a blueprint for internal communications that is implemented across all departments. The blueprint should cover top down and bottom up communications. (Significant work related to Civil Service communications has been undertaken, for example; multiple Town Hall events have been held throughout the country; the 2015 and 2017 Civil Service Employee Engagement Surveys have been collected and the related organisational Action Plans have been implemented; the Civil Service Employee Engagement forum was established in September 2018 and work is ongoing; the Civil Service Renewal Newsletter is issued quarterly; departmental lunch and learn sessions are ongoing; the Our Public Service 2020 website has been launched; and the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards are held annually)

**Medium Term**

Reorientate and re-emphasise on the importance of a holistic induction and orientation process. Departments to hold inductions frequently throughout the year emphasising both ‘One Civil Service’ and departmental-specific aspects.

**Long Term**

Periodically review levels of involvement climate via employee engagement surveys to ensure a culture of involvement is being fostered across the Civil Service

**Innovative Climate**

**Short Term**

Develop guidelines to support the development of an innovation strategy or innovation pillar in existing strategies in public service organisations.

Define the competencies and capabilities required for innovation in an innovation competency framework.

Integrate innovation into a vision of the public service leader of the future.

Prioritise key systemic barriers to innovation (e.g. current procurement process and risk management) and develop mechanisms to overcome the barriers (Fund established 2019, Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards, Interdepartmental Innovation recognition ceremonies)

**Medium Term**

Create and cultivate an innovation network to encourage and facilitate knowledge sharing on innovation. (Civil Service/Public Service Innovation Network was established. Our Public Service 2020 website launched in October 2019.)

**Long Term**

Invest in IT solutions that can radically accelerate a culture of innovation.

Exploit technological opportunities to further develop innovation in the Civil Service

**Performance Management**

**Short Term**

Investigate the current performance management system and identify elements which are not effective.

Further analyse the barriers to using the current system as a means of identifying underperformance in the Civil Service. (People Strategy 2017 - 2020: Continue to support the objective of the People Strategy for the Civil Service to ‘Build, Support and Value Managers as People Developers’)

**Medium Term**

Following on from the initiatives outlined above consider the impacts and findings on the future enhancement of the Performance Management system.

Link performance reviews to promotion and role change opportunities. (People Strategy 2017-2020)

**Public Perception**

**Short Term**

Identify a formal mechanism to capture and disseminate ‘good news’ and initiatives that are having a positive impact.

**Medium Term**

Pursue skills matching to ensure public facing posts are staffed with officials with the requisite skills and training to deliver an effective service. (One Learning platform delivered, OPS2020 Quality Customer Service Network established and developing)

**Long Term**

Enhance digital communications through digital platforms to reach the wider public. (Public Service ICT Strategy)

(Content in italics indicates initiatives currently underway related to this area)
Appendix 1: Study Sample

The Civil Service Renewal Programme Management Office endeavoured to ensure a study sample that was not only geographically representative but was also representative of both operational and policy Departments and organisations. 125 officials took part in 16 focus groups and 29 officials participated in one-to-one interviews, with both processes facilitated by the DCU researchers.

A full breakdown of interviews as well as partaking Departments and geographic locations can be seen below at Figures 1 & 2.

Figure 1. Breakdown of one-to-one interviews and Focus Groups

29 one-to-one interviews with the following grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director/PO and ASG</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEO</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EO/CO, SVO and Industrial</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO, SVO and Industrial</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16 (125 participants in total)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director/PO and ASG</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEO</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EO/CO, SVO and Industrial</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO, SVO and Industrial</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Partaking Departments/Offices and Geographic Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Social Protection and Employment Affairs</td>
<td>Cork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Justice and Equality</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation</td>
<td>Sligo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment</td>
<td>Trim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Statistics Office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Public Works</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Life in the Civil Service

Civil Service Grade Statistics (CO)

- Average Age: 45

Civil Service Grade Statistics (EO)

- Average Age: 47

Civil Service Grade Statistics (HEO)

- Average Age: 49

Civil Service Grade Statistics (AO)

- Average Age: 42

Civil Service Grade Statistics (AP)

- Average Age: 47

Civil Service Grade Statistics (PO+)

- Average Age: 52
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very much indebted to a number of people who facilitated the interviews and focus groups that have shaped the essence of our findings and recommendations. In particular, we would like to thanks the Civil Service Renewal Programme Management Office for their efforts in co-ordinating this project and to the Central Statistics Office for facilitating access to the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey data.

We extend our sincere thanks to the following for facilitating the data collection in their departments:

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- Sorcha Loughnane, Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment
- Gabby McAvey, Máire Ní Chonhghaile, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
- Edel Hennessey, Gráinne McDonnell, Office of Public Works
- Susan Glover, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
- Catherine O’Byrne, Harry Lester, Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation

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Edel Conway
Yseult Freeney
Natasha McDowell