

Transforming public services

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Abstract

The public service works to provide frontline and vital services to meet the needs of the people of Ireland. Working on behalf of the government in a diverse range of organisations, public servants play an established role in the economic and social life of this country. The public service has grown and evolved to take advantage of opportunities, address new challenges, and meet the changing needs and expectations of the people of Ireland. Since 2011, the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, has led a dedicated programme for reform and transformation, used its role and functions to enhance governance, build capacity and delivery effectively, working with the full range of public service bodies to build a more unified and agile public service. In 2023, the department published *Better Public Services*, a strategy that lays out the current framework and programme of transformation up to 2030, which is delivering tangible outcomes in improved public services, living standards and infrastructure in Ireland.

Keywords: Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, governance, Ireland, national development plan, public services, transformation, trust.

Introduction

The public service works to provide frontline and vital services to meet the needs of the people of Ireland from health to social protection and transport. Working on behalf of the government in a diverse range of organisations, public servants play an established role in the economic and social life of this country. Despite the diversity of roles, a set of

shared public service values are at the core of our collective work and shared mission, including respect, fairness, equality and impartiality.

The environment in which the public service works has seen immense change in recent times. Ireland's economic growth, supporting the highest level of employment in the history of the state, has enabled significant investment in public services, income supports and infrastructure. In 2025, almost €120 billion is scheduled to be invested (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPENDR), 2024a). The public service now comprises approximately 400,000 staff delivering a wide range of services to meet the needs of a diverse and growing population, a relatively small proportion of the labour force compared to other European countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021).

As well as serving the changing needs of the population, the public service has been required to adapt to large-scale changes in the national and international environments, from the global financial crisis, to Brexit, to COVID-19, to the conflict in Ukraine, to the cost-of-living crisis. The agility that has been demonstrated by the public service in recent years has its roots in an openness to change that was born out of the reforms that followed the global financial crisis.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was established during the global financial crisis with an express mandate to drive change. Renamed the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in 2022, DPENDR has driven public service reform since then, but what ensured the success of this programme, and its lasting legacy, was the development of new structures of collaboration and exchange across the whole of the public service.

Across the Irish public service there has been a demonstrated resilience, and a remarkable appetite to grasp the opportunity to deliver change. New ways of service delivery have been identified, major disruption to public service delivery has been avoided, rapid digitalisation has taken place and working practices have changed. The public service has shown exceptional levels of collaboration, inventiveness and organisational agility, improving services on an ongoing basis, and delivering at scale during times of crisis. Recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the breadth of important services provided across the public service and the important role that government supports perform for society and the economy.

Looking ahead, emerging trends, opportunities and challenges suggest that the role of the public service in meeting the needs of the people of Ireland is likely to continue to be essential for the foreseeable future.

Rapid change in our environment brings uncertainty, and the potential for both opportunities and challenges, including:

- the need to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of our changing climate, and the potential for economic growth through a green transition;
- the implications of our growing, ageing and more diverse population;
- the opportunities presented by the rapid development of technology, including artificial intelligence;
- a shifting international order in which Ireland's values of openness and multilateralism may be less widely shared, and where international cooperation is more important than ever;
- the increasing expectations of the public for higher quality and more integrated public services.

These trends present a complex picture, however it seems clear that the public will continue to look to the public service for solutions, and that in meeting the needs of the public, a new type of public service is called for. These are substantial challenges that are cross-cutting in nature and require more cohesive approaches to be developed, where the service user is at the centre.

Old approaches of finding solutions that fit the processes of existing institutional structures will not meet the needs of the future. Instead, the *Better Public Services* strategy (DPENDR, 2023) lays out the shared framework for the next stage of public service transformation, providing a common direction for public services bodies, with an emphasis on outcomes and sufficient flexibility to adapt to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. A forward-looking, innovative and agile public service, working together on behalf of the government, will deliver public services to meet the needs of the public by consistently putting it at the centre.

Through all of the changes and potential disruptions, the Irish public service will continue to be guided by shared values and a shared vision of delivering better public services for the people of Ireland. Commitments to these values are made in the statements of strategy of all government departments and agencies.

This article offers an overview of the move from public service reform to public service transformation. It considers, in the next section, the history of public service reform since the establishment of DPENDR. Next it describes the current strategy, *Better Public Services*, and notes the change in emphasis from reform to transformation. The work of DPENDR in delivering transformational outcomes is subsequently set out and the alignment on shared outcomes across all of the department's functions is considered. The penultimate section demonstrates the outcomes that are being achieved, including Ireland's remarkable performance across a number of international indicators. And in the final section, the paper considers the future and paints a picture of how a future Ireland will experience transformed provision of public services, living standards and infrastructure.

Reform to date

Establishment of Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform

Since its creation in 2011, the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform has been at the heart of the state's drive to deliver a public service that is modern, outcome-focused and fit for the future to meet the needs and improve the lives of people in Ireland.

In the establishment of the department, explicit responsibility was provided for the dual functions of public expenditure management and reform of public services, as one of the significant whole-of-government responses to addressing the challenges of the financial crisis. There were two aspects to these new roles. In the first instance, there was an immediate pressure to reduce the costs of the public service in order to meet Ireland's obligations as part of the economic adjustment programme agreed with the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank financial aid programme (the Troika programme). In addition, there was now an opportunity to implement public service reform and structural changes that otherwise might have lacked the impetus for delivery.

Structurally, the new department took on its mandate for reform by incorporating existing functions relating to public expenditure management, public sector pay and pensions from the Department of Finance. In addition, the department also incorporated the Reform section that had previously existed in the Department of the Taoiseach (Watt & Perkins, 2020).

The reform mandate of the new department was set out in the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2011 and included modernising and developing the public service for the efficient and effective provision of services and the promotion of value for money.

Public service reform plan 2011

Once established, developing and implementing a programme of public service reform was a key priority. The first key output of reform efforts was the inaugural public service plan published in late 2011 (DPENDR, 2011).

The economic and fiscal context within which the reform of the public service was taking place heavily influenced this first plan. Ireland had entered into the Troika programme in late 2010, with significant commitments in respect of public financial sustainability, structural reforms and banking reforms. The *Public service reform plan* of 2011 set out a clear position that future economic growth would only come from a solid and sustainable fiscal position, and that far-reaching public service reform would be central to this.

This first public service plan set out five commitments to change:

- (i) Placing customer service at the core of everything we do;
- (ii) Maximising new and innovative service delivery channels;
- (iii) Radically reducing our costs to drive better value for money;
- (iv) Leading, organising and working in new ways; and
- (v) Strong focus on implementation and delivery. (DPENDR, 2011, p. 3).

In setting out these commitments, the foundations for the public service reform that continue today were set, with the plan identifying objectives for a modern public service that would continually improve and deliver services faster, better and more cost-effectively and which put innovation, flexibility and the delivery of streamlined services at the heart of public service.

The plan identified key initiatives and areas of focus for the delivery of initiatives that have been introduced over the past decade and continue to develop and evolve today:

- implementation of shared services models for HR [human resources], payroll, pensions, etc.;
- evaluation of new business models for the delivery of non-core services;

- reform of public procurement processes and property rationalisation; and
- reducing costs, addressing duplication and eliminating waste to support job creation. (ibid.).

To underpin the successful delivery of the reform objectives, the plan contained a detailed set of actions and a timeframe for delivery, with annual progress reports developed (see e.g. DPENDR, 2014).

Productivity improvements were introduced as key elements of the Croke Park and Haddington Road agreements, alongside changes to pay and staff numbers. This integrated approach to driving change represents an early example of the department using all of the levers at its disposal to drive a transformation agenda.

Some of the key achievements of this first reform plan included structural changes to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service. Reforms introduced during this period included the development of a number of new government services, including:

- establishing shared governance structures inclusive of a civil service management board and a Public Service Leadership Board;
- development of the Office of Government Procurement and shared services for civil service HR, pensions and payroll;
- strengthening of institutional capacity through a programme of organisational capability reviews;
- introduction of the public services card, paving the way for more integrated public service provision;
- introduction of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), strengthening the role of economic and policy analysis;
- expanding the role of the Ombudsman, undertaking reform of freedom of information, introducing the regulation of lobbying activity, and the development of protections for whistle-blowers.

Public service reform plan 2014

By 2014, with the economic and fiscal situation for Ireland having significantly strengthened, the development and introduction of a new public service reform plan was timely. The plan reflected this changed environment, with a greater external focus, setting the ambitious goal of a public service that would have positive outcomes for all stakeholders, including citizens, businesses and public servants themselves.

Initiatives under this plan included:

- The appointment of a Government Chief Information Officer, not only to provide leadership in this critical area, but to spearhead the delivery of shared information and communications technology (ICT) services, underlined by the publication of a *Public service ICT strategy* (DPENDR, 2015).
- The development of JobPath, which provides for a more engaged approach to employment activation for people experiencing long-term unemployment. This approach was supported by the opening of Intreo centres as one-stop shops for jobseekers.
- The development of the local enterprise office network as the local first-stop shop for new entrepreneurs and existing microenterprise and small business owners.

Reflecting the emphasis on a dynamic reform programme and a focus on continuous improvement, the OECD was invited by the Irish Government to review the public service reform programme of 2014–6, and develop recommendations for future plans. A key finding of this report (OECD, 2017) was that, while the plan identified the need to strengthen service quality and citizen focus, there was still a strong emphasis on achieving cost reductions and efficiencies through its cross-cutting actions. The review further found that more could have been done to ‘help the plan realise its message of achieving better outcomes for all stakeholders by helping sectors translate savings from corporate efficiencies into improved services and outcomes’ (OECD, 2017, p. 1).

Our public service 2020

Informed by the OECD review, and the learnings and outcomes from the previous two reform plans, *Our public service 2020* (DPENDR, 2017), was the framework for continuing development and innovation in the public service.

The plan had a significantly strengthened focus on the need to achieve tangible change and outcomes, with an ambition to develop indicators that would measure the successful implementation of actions and to create stronger links between the reform programme and public expenditure processes.

Supporting the ongoing reform, a strengthened model of governance for public service reform was introduced. The Public

Service Leadership Board was established in March 2018, with membership from across a range of government departments and public service bodies at Secretary General/Chief Executive Office level, to oversee the implementation of the actions under the framework.

Some of the key achievements under this plan include (DPENDR, 2021a):

- developing an innovation team within DPENDR to coordinate and promote innovation, supported by an *innovation fund* and the development of the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards;
- development of a *public service data strategy*, to deliver a joined-up whole-of-government approach to how data is used and managed within the public service;
- promoting the development of digital service delivery, including establishing gov.ie as the central portal for government services and information, developing online passport applications and promoting new methodologies such as robotic process automation;
- a renewed focus on staff, including developing strategic HR as a function and undertaking work in the area of employee engagement, informed by the first civil service employee engagement survey;
- delivering a more coordinated approach to staff training and development within the civil service through the creation of One Learning (the learning and development service for the civil service).

Better Public Services: Public Service Transformation Framework to 2030

Introduction

The current plan for the transformation of the Irish public service is *Better Public Services* (DPENDR, 2023). This new plan represents a step change both in its level of ambition and in terms of where it directs its attention. A clear emphasis is placed on looking outwards to meet the needs and improve the lives of the people of Ireland. A primary focus is placed on the public and reorienting public services around their needs, with the institutional environment evolving to meet these needs as a secondary focus. For this reason, the strategy

uses a deliberate shift in language, referring to ‘transformation’ rather than ‘reform’.

The development of the transformation framework was informed in particular by:

- the achievements of public service initiatives to date, building on the ambition of existing strategies such as *Civil service renewal 2030 strategy* (DPENDR, 2021b) and *Connecting government 2030* (DPENDR, 2022a);
- a review and lessons from *Our public service 2020* (DPENDR, 2021a);
- learnings from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and response (NESC, 2022);
- Ireland’s 2021 survey on the drivers of trust in public institutions, undertaken in partnership with the OECD (2021b), and the OECD-led work on public trust as a foundation;
- a focus on readiness for the challenges and opportunities of the future, including innovative policy approaches such as strategic foresight assessment and methods (DPENDR, 2021c);
- consultation with public service organisations, members of the Public Service Leadership Board and other stakeholders.

In addition, policy coherence was prioritised – in particular, alignment with the wider range of policies that address reform of government, such as sectoral reform programmes led by responsible departments, for example *Sláintecare* (Government of Ireland, 2019) and *Impact 2030: Ireland’s research and innovation strategy* (DPENDR, 2022b). This approach provides a shared framework for transformation across the system for all public service bodies in line with the partnership approach developed under previous reform plans. Public service bodies are working together towards the same vision.

A transformation strategy to deliver for the public and build trust

The strategy lays out a clear vision for ‘inclusive, high quality and integrated public service provision that meets the needs and improves the lives of the people of Ireland’ (DPENDR, 2023, p. 4). It positions public trust as the foundation and objective for reform, and lays out a commitment that public services will be guided by the drivers of public trust that have been identified by the OECD: fairness, integrity, responsiveness, reliability and openness (OECD, 2024a, op cit.).

Better Public Services is designed to provide a direction for transformation that helps the public service to identify and prioritise actions for transformation. It brings coherence while also supporting each sector of the public service to achieve sectoral level reform programmes and help the delivery of Project 2040 (Government of Ireland, 2018), the national development plan (NDP). The strategy provides a framework for the transformation of all public service bodies under three pillars:

- *Digital and innovation at scale:* Here the ambition is to drive change on big issues affecting society by delivering seamless and inclusive user experiences. Public service bodies are prioritising digital delivery, in line with the objective laid out in Europe's Digital Decade (European Commission, 2021) that all key public services will be digitalised by 2030. To accelerate digital innovation, departments, with leadership from DPENDR, are collaborating to deliver a life-events approach where a coordinated approach is taken to managing the public's engagement with public services around key stages such as birth of a child or learning to drive. A key output will be a single government digital wallet that stores electronic credentials and that puts individual members of the public in control of their own data in line with EU regulation (European Commission, 2024a).
- *Workforce and organisation of the future:* This pillar is focused on building the public service as an employer of choice by making it more skilled, diverse, agile and inclusive. To accelerate workforce transformation, some of the key initiatives underway include bringing more diverse skill sets into the public service through initiatives, including apprenticeships and career return programmes. Progressive HR policies are being rolled out in areas such as domestic violence and the menopause. Skills are being supported in a variety of ways, including designating the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) as a centre of excellence for the whole of the public service.
- *Evidence-informed policy and services designed for and with our public:* The third pillar looks to make more effective use of data and to engage more effectively with the public to deliver more effective, human-centred policies and services. The data held by public service bodies is a strategic asset and public service bodies have a duty to ensure this asset is harnessed to benefit the people of Ireland. A range of initiatives are supporting this pillar

including effective use of the national data infrastructure (Eircode, personal public service number, unique business identifier) and the promotion of new policy approaches in service design, systems thinking, behavioural insights and strategic foresight. A new public service data strategy will bring coherence to the work of public service bodies.

Leadership and implementation of Better Public Services

Individual and collective efforts by public service bodies are critical to realising the ambition in this strategy. Public service bodies are identifying and prioritising actions that are contained in the framework and working together to advance shared priorities collectively. In line with its statement of strategy, DPENDR is enhancing governance, building capacity and delivering effectively to enable this work.

The strategy lays out an outcomes-focused approach and commits to the development of shared indicators to underpin the approach to monitoring and evaluating the collective progress and implementation of the strategy. This will include measuring important areas, including customer satisfaction, public trust, employee engagement, improved quality, better government effectiveness and use of digital.

Building on the collaborative approach that supported the earlier reform plans, *Better Public Services* is being implemented through collective action across public service bodies. The Public Service Leadership Board, comprising representatives at the Secretary General/Chief Executive Office level from government departments and a broad range of public service organisations, plays a key role in driving transformation to achieve the ambition of the strategy, in particular, by working together on shared priorities at a strategic level. Below this level, working groups are driving delivery across each of the three pillars.

In the first year of the policy, a strategic communications approach was put in place led by DPENDR and anchored by a central communications platform. This provides a resource for all public service bodies to access supports for transformation and includes information on events, networks, resources, publications, and jobs.

Delivering transformational outcomes

That delivery of quality public services is supported through programmes of reform and transformation is well-evidenced. Seventy-

four per cent of Irish people believe that they will be treated fairly by government organisations (DPENDR, 2024b) and 84 per cent of Irish businesses report satisfaction with their engagement with the civil service (DPENDR, 2022c). Nonetheless, considerable challenges remain in certain areas, including access to housing, healthcare and supports for people with disabilities. These challenges are reflected in decreased satisfaction with healthcare and with widening gaps in satisfaction between men and women, and younger and older people. These results underline the necessity for ongoing transformation of public service provision.

DPENDR advances its mandate to drive that reform and transformation from the centre of government by engaging across the public service and using the full breadth of its role, functions and all policy levers at its disposal. The DPENDR statement of strategy lays out its mandate and approach to enhance governance, build capacity and support effective delivery by:

- ensuring prudent management of the public finances;
- supporting investment policy decisions that balance the needs of current and future generations;
- driving digital, people-centred, evidence-informed public service delivery.

The department's functions span public expenditure management, capital expenditure management, public procurement, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer and a specific mandate to drive public service reform.

Driving reform through improved public expenditure management

In 2024, the government is funding the delivery of public services, infrastructure and supports for living standards with €96.7 billion of investment. This public investment has supported Ireland's recent robust economic performance. In 2023, the economy grew by 3.2 per cent and the general government balance was in surplus by €8.3 billion. Public spending is scheduled to increase by a further 6.9 per cent in 2025 to €105.4 billion. This will include a more than 10 per cent increase in funding to support delivery of the NDP alongside increased current expenditure to meet the needs of a growing population and changing demographic profile. This investment will be provided while maintaining a surplus of just under €6 billion in 2025.

Public investment of this scale is delivering government priorities and engagement by DPENDR with responsible line departments is driving transformation of how these priorities are delivered. Examples include:

- *Child poverty and education*: investment is providing increased access for children to free general practitioner care, free school meals and free school books as well as giving more than 100,000 children access to the Early Childhood Care and Education programme. In schools, the pupil–teacher ratio is at its lowest ever level with 972,000 schoolchildren supported by 77,000 teachers and 20,800 special needs assistants. This investment is delivering improved outcomes with Ireland among the highest performing countries in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, including the world’s second-best results in reading (OECD, 2023a).
- *Healthcare*: Record levels of investment are being provided to the health and social care system to allow for the policy expansion of the Sláintecare reform programme. Since the end of 2019, there has been an increase of approximately 25,000 staff in the health sector (not including disability services), improving access across a wide range of acute and social care services. Since 2020, 1,182 acute inpatient beds have opened, enhancing capacity. Waiting list numbers and waiting times for outpatient, day-care and inpatient care have continued to fall. Life expectancy has increased dramatically in Ireland and at 82.4 years is two years ahead of the OECD average.
- *Housing*: €9.7 billion in capital funding was provided between 2021 and 2023, supporting the delivery of 82,852 new homes. A further €12.4 billion is being provided over the period 2024–6. This unprecedented level of investment is funding the delivery of new social homes, affordable housing, and supports to access home ownership.
- *Social protection*: Ireland’s high level of investment in income supports results in among the lowest income inequality in the OECD after taxes and transfers (Central Statistics Office, 2024). In recent years, government’s cost-of-living supports entailed a combination of base-rate increases and one-off measures. The combined impact of these measures has been shown by the Economic and Social Research Institute to substantially cushion people on low incomes from the effects of inflation during the cost-of-living crisis.

- *Justice*: Expenditure in the justice sector increased by 21 per cent from 2020 to 2023. Recruitment of trainee gardaí was funded for a maximum recruitment of 1,000 in 2023 and 2024. Significant reform has been seen with the Garda Reform Programme, Ireland's connection to the Schengen Information System, and a range of digitally delivered mobile apps. The justice system has seen significant reform aimed at promoting transparency and increasing trust. This has included the establishment of the Office of the Police Ombudsman, Policing and Community Safety Authority, National Office for Community Safety, Office of the Independent Examiner and the Courts Service Modernisation Programme, with an additional twenty-four judges.
- *Defence*: Significant capital investment has been provided for on defensive equipment programmes such as the Land Forces Capability Development and Force Protection Programme, and Naval Service Vessel and Air Corps Aircraft Renewal and Replacement Programme. Implementation is ongoing for the Strategic Framework for the Transformation of the Defence Forces and the Independent Review Group 2023 reports. The government has agreed to progress as a priority the report's thirteen recommendations, including a tribunal of inquiry and an external oversight body to drive cultural change.
- *Climate action and the national development plan*: The current NDP is investing €165 billion in infrastructure over the years to 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2021). Under the NDP in 2023, €815 million was invested in major public transport infrastructure projects, including DART+, BusConnects and MetroLink. Achievements to date include that 81 per cent of all premises in Ireland now have access to high-speed broadband, 512 km of new and renewed water network was provided, and €53.6 million has been invested in communities through the sports capital programme. The delivery of the NDP is being facilitated by a package of reforms, including replacing the public spending code with enhanced infrastructure guidelines and a series of reforms to the contracts for public capital projects. On climate, €379 million was spent in 2023 on active travel projects and greenways. A further €169 million is being invested through the Just Transition Fund and 1.2 million hectares of farmland are being responsibly managed through the ACRES scheme (Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme) and 48,000 homes received home energy upgrades in 2023.

- *Responses to challenging environments:* Temporary payment supports were provided to 465,000 workers when their employment was affected by COVID-19 and new public health services such as the COVID-19 vaccination programme were undertaken efficiently and effectively. Cost-of-living supports helped to mitigate the impact of high inflation and energy costs, with the worst-off households substantially protected from the effects of inflation. Supports have been provided to 100,000 individuals impacted by the conflict in Ukraine. Two funds have been created to support future investment in infrastructure, climate and nature, to provide for sustained investment during future downturns, and to meet the known future requirements of Ireland's ageing population after 2040.

DPENDR works to manage expenditure at sustainable levels while supporting Ireland's economic development and social progress. Significant expenditure reforms to date include:

- modernising the budgetary process by developing a medium-term economic strategy and clarifying the annual budgetary cycle, providing more opportunities for engagement by the Oireachtas, public and stakeholders, including through the National Economic Dialogue, and by introducing performance budgeting, equality budgeting and, more recently, green budgeting and well-being budgeting;
- creating a more robust expenditure framework through the production of a revised public spending code and infrastructure guidelines governing the rules on spending across government while assuring better quality capital projects and value for taxpayers' money through a series of reforms to the management of large capital projects supported by the establishment of a Major Projects Advisory Group;
- reforming public procurement through the development of a unified approach to procurement policy, in particular supporting policy objectives in the areas of engagement with small- and medium-sized enterprises, and green and social procurement; enhancing digital public procurement through the development of the national procurement platform, eTenders. Supporting transparency and value for money through the delivery of shared national procurement arrangements;
- enhancing the state's approach to the management of grants, producing updated rules on government accounting and an

updated the code of governance for state bodies, amongst many other changes designed to safeguard taxpayers' resources.

Public expenditure investment and management is closely aligned with the overall reform programme in terms of driving more effective public service delivery in more efficient ways. DPENDR is driving transformation in line with the priorities laid out in *Better Public Services*, through a full range of available enablers.

Digital and innovation at scale: Championing digital government services

DPENDR has led on the digital transformation of the public service since its establishment and this area is core to the *Better Public Services* strategy. Notable milestones and developments to date have included:

- professionalising the digital government function through the creation of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer supported by specialists across the ICT spectrum;
- provision of the necessary infrastructure to enable the adoption of the public services card and its online equivalent MyGovID, which offers a single, secure way to verify people looking to avail of public services;
- making digital government offerings accessible by consolidating services online via gov.ie, which was instrumental during the COVID-19 pandemic in information-sharing and enabling citizens to obtain services such as their digital COVID certificates;
- delivering reusable applications across government through the 'build-to-share' initiative, thereby reducing waste and duplication and enhancing the possibility of more collaborative working;
- achieving efficiencies and faster processing times through new and emerging technologies such as robotic process automation and artificial intelligence;
- enabling an 'ask-me-once' approach through the development of the national data infrastructure (i.e. use of common datasets like Eircodes);
- securing the state's digital security through the delivery of the government data centre in Backweston, Co. Kildare.

The department is now implementing *Connecting government 2030* (DPENDR, 2022a), which will see a user-centred approach to digital

services, accessible irrespective of device, complemented by the promotion of best practice in data-sharing, cloud deployment and cyber security.

Building the workforce and organisation of the future

Workforce policy has been at the centre of the department's approach since its establishment. The early focus on managing the size and cost of the public service in this context has since developed to support planned and strategic growth to aid in the delivery of improved services to the public. Maximising efficiency, productivity and skills has always been, and remains, key to the department's work. Key initiatives that have been undertaken include:

- maintaining industrial peace, managing the public service pay bill, promoting efficiency and driving reform through a series of public service deals from Croke Park and Haddington Road through to Building Momentum and the Public Service Agreement 2024;
- realising savings through changes to the public service sick leave scheme that significantly reduced costs associated with sickness absence (valued at €156 million in savings between 2013 and 2018);
- reducing future costs through the introduction of the single pension scheme in 2013; the scheme is projected to reduce expenditure on public service pensions by 35 per cent via later retirement ages, a career averaging method of calculating benefits and the application of the consumer price index for indexation;
- professionalising public services through recruitment reforms such as the creation of professional streams (including economics, law, HR and tax);
- improving the senior appointments process through reforms to the Top Levels Appointment Committee as well as substantially reforming the terms for the most senior officials, including reviewing term lengths; the department also introduced new measures to provide greater transparency to the state boards appointments process;
- increasing staff mobility through a mobility scheme for staff in the civil service and improving the people-management process through the introduction of a new disciplinary code and a simplified performance management system;

- developing a public service apprenticeship programme that expands access opportunities across a range of disciplines, including ICT, HR and digital marketing;
- progressing a suite of progressive civil service HR policies in areas, including domestic violence and the menopause and expanding the range of people who can apply to include career returners and holders of stamp 4 visas.

Evidence-informed policy and services designed for and with our public: Increasing openness across government through a programme of legislative reforms and associated transparency initiatives

The department has been at the forefront of driving institutional change through a wide-ranging programme of legislative reform and other measures, intended to increase trust and transparency across government. It has also led on the development of capacity for evidence-informed, user-centred policy-making. Some landmark items include:

- the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015; to be further updated by the Regulation of Lobbying (Amendment) Bill, the general scheme of which was published in February 2024, which will build on the existing strong legislative framework;
- the Protected Disclosures Act 2014; now being updated further through the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Bill currently before the Oireachtas to provide stronger protections for whistle-blowers and transpose the EU Whistleblowing Directive;
- further legislation, including a number of Statute Law Revision Acts, the Freedom of Information Act 2014, the Houses of the Oireachtas Inquiries, Privileges and Procedures Act 2013, and the Ombudsman Amendment Act 2012;
- the development of IGEES to improve approaches to policy-making and policy evaluation through an enhanced status for economics; IGEES policy analysts and experts are now based within the full range of government departments;
- the development and implementation of the design principles and design action plan; The department has also led policy development on Open Data in Ireland and coordinated Ireland's participation in the Open Government Partnership, as well as the development of consultation principles and guidance, which provide guidance for public bodies who are seeking the views of the public relating to their work programmes.

Better Public Services: delivering impact

The success of *Better Public Services* in delivering for the public will be measured in terms of the outcomes achieved by public service bodies working collectively and in partnership with the public. The ultimate outcomes that the policy intends to achieve are laid out in the vision of inclusive, high-quality and integrated public service provision that meets the needs and improves the lives of people in Ireland.

The delivery of key outcomes up to 2030 will be assessed, incorporating existing and new metrics from across the public service. The framework will build on the work of IGEES which plays an important role in the reform and strengthening of the civil service through the development of economic and evaluation capacity (DPENDR, 2022d).

First introduced in 2012 in Ireland, the overall performance budgeting framework, developed by DPENDR, has evolved to include a number of strategic budgeting initiatives, including equality, climate and well-being budgeting. At its core is the public service performance report which is an annual review of the delivery of public services. The eighth annual report (DPENDR, 2024c) for 2023 provides a breakdown of public expenditure by sector and highlights the performance of investment in terms of activities undertaken (outputs) and their impacts (outcomes). Highlights of the 2023 report include that 1.6 million people were covered by medical cards, that 970,000 students were attending primary and secondary schools and that 25,000 home energy retrofits had been supported.

DPENDR has a central leadership role in the strategic direction of the Performance Budgeting Framework. The department is now working with all other government departments to build capability to return good quality metrics to further inform decision-making and support this progress across the areas of equality, climate and well-being.

The Well-being Framework, developed in partnership with the Departments of Finance and the Taoiseach measures Ireland's performance at a high level across outcomes beyond economic performance, including health, access to housing, social connectedness and environmental quality. The framework captures metrics which are comparable at EU level. In Ireland, 30 per cent of people rate their overall life satisfaction as 'high', higher than the EU average. Ireland had the fifth lowest rate of chronic depression in the EU and net household wealth in Ireland is the fifth highest in the EU.

Other international metrics and rankings provide us with critical insights by assessing and benchmarking the performance of Ireland's public service. For example:

- In the OECD 2023 Trust in Public Institutions Survey (DPENDR, 2024b):
 - Forty-seven per cent of respondents reported high or moderately high trust in the national government. This compares well with the 39 per cent OECD average across the thirty countries that participated in the survey.
 - With regard to satisfaction with public services there was a range. Twenty-six per cent of participants were satisfied with the health service compared to an OECD average of 52 per cent. Sixty-eight per cent were satisfied with education services compared to an OECD average of 60 per cent.
 - Sixty-six per cent of respondents were satisfied with the civil service compared with an OECD average of 45 per cent.
- Ireland ranked fifth in the most recent Digital Economy and Society Index (European Commission, 2022) which measures human capital, connectivity, integration of digital technology, and digital public services (Ireland ranked sixth on the measure of digital public services in particular).
- In the 2023 Open Data Maturity Survey (European Union, 2023), Ireland ranked eighth in the EU and has been labelled as a 'fast tracker'. This means that the country shows a good level of maturity in all dimensions.
- Ireland ranked sixth overall and was placed in the 'leading performance' cluster – the top category on the 2023 Open, Useful and Re-usable data Index (OECD, 2023b).
- In 2022, Ireland ranked 9.13 out of 10 on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, ranking eighth globally and seventh regionally in Western Europe and being classified as a full democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023),
- In 2022, Ireland ranked 10 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index conducted by Transparency International (2024).

This benchmarking of transformation is aligned with and supported by international engagement. This includes engagement with the OECD through the Public Governance Committee (OECD, 2024b), and

Ireland's participation in the OECD biannual Trust in Public Institutions Survey. There is also close collaboration and engagement with the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support within the European Commission, which provides support through measures, including the Technical Support Instrument. DPENDR participates along with other member states in the Expert Group on Public Administration and Good Governance led by the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (European Commission, 2024b). These along with other international engagements are important resources for ensuring that Ireland's reform programme benefits from and is aligned with international learning and best practice.

Looking forward

This article has set out a brief history of the reform and transformation efforts and achievements across the Irish public service, and provided an insight into the role of DPENDR in driving transformation from the centre of government since the department's establishment in 2011.

These changes have included developments in process and structure, but have been ultimately focused on delivering for the public. The collaborative efforts of public service bodies to drive transformation have resulted in significant change – from economic crisis to a full employment economy and a healthy government balance sheet that delivers better public services and provides the flexibility to respond promptly and robustly when challenges arise.

The delivery of a series of reform programmes has had a direct, personal effect on outcomes for people living in this country. Academic performance has improved as a result of investments in education (OECD, 2023a). Support for the health service has extended life expectancy (Macrotrends, 2024). Income supports provide for a system of wealth transfers that makes Ireland one of the most equal countries in the world (Central Statistics Office, 2024). More services are delivered more efficiently, in particular through the increase of digitalisation of public services, enabled by the work of the government's Office of the Chief Information Officer, and driven by public service providers for example, the high-quality experience associated with online passport renewals is being expanded to other areas of the public service.

Looking forward, *Better Public Services* paints a picture of a transformed public service. Services will be delivered by a workforce

that is more diverse, agile and inclusive, supported by upskilling and reskilling as well as by progressive HR policies. This workforce will harness the immense potential of public service data to engage with the public to design evidence-informed policies and services that work. Services will be designed around the needs of the person, crossing organisational boundaries to create a seamless experience in which most services are delivered digitally with a single login that puts the service user in control.

In moving towards this vision, there are also, of course, current and future challenges facing the country, and the public service contribution to addressing those challenges is critical as we saw directly through the COVID-19 pandemic and response. The challenges are complex. Trends in population growth and associated demographics have implications for the delivery of public services. Ireland's economy is highly globalised and this carries with it risks during times of global uncertainty and geopolitical developments. Economic uncertainty around the world also poses risks to our open economy. It is critical that Ireland continues to remain attractive for international and domestic investment and provides an excellent environment for business. The public service has an important role in addressing these trends, supporting the plans for a green and digital economy and maintaining Ireland's attractiveness for investment.

There could be a temptation, when faced with the scale of these challenges, to wonder about the capacity of the public service to respond, much less to anticipate and to address them proactively. And, yet, this anxiety is not rooted in evidence. In fact, the experience of the past fifteen years has shown that Ireland's public service has an appetite to deliver, driven by shared public service values. The public service has a capacity to respond to change and crisis, so far from challenging these efforts, it can often be their spur.

The current public service transformation programme is an effort to proactively address the challenges of the future. It is building an ever more unified, cohesive and agile public service. A public service that harnesses data to anticipate the coming challenges and uses evidence to identify the best policy response. And a public service that builds the trust of the public by delivering inclusive, high-quality and integrated public service provision that meets the needs and improves the lives of the people of Ireland.

Acknowledgements

This special edition of *Administration* marks the retirement of Dr Michael Mulreany from the IPA, where he currently serves as Assistant Director General and Registrar having pursued a distinguished career during which he became known to many across the public service. Many of the initiatives described in this paper bear parallels to Dr Mulreany's considerable contribution to the change, development and growth of the public service. A core pillar of the current transformation strategy, *Better Public Services*, is the focus on evidence-informed policy that harnesses data to drive change. This builds on previous initiatives such as the development of the IGEES. Dr Mulreany's work in developing capacity in this area is notable including his success in developing the IPA programme in statistics in collaboration with the Central Statistics Office and the Masters in economic science. Perhaps the greatest recognition of Dr Mulreany's legacy to the IPA is that he leaves it at a time when it has been recognised as the future centre for excellence for skills for the public service and in a position where it is primed for further growth and success. The authors offer Dr Mulreany every best wish on his retirement.

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¹ The Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPENDR) has existed under various names (e.g. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). For ease, within the references, the department will be referred to consistently under its current moniker, the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Deliver and Reform or DPENDR.

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