

PRESS RELEASE



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**‘Organisational Capacity in the Irish Civil Service: An Examination of the Organisation Review Programme’
by Joanna O’Riordan**

In the third report in a series titled ‘State of the Public Service’ by the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), Joanna O’Riordan examines organisational capacity in the Irish civil service. Organisational capacity concerns the ability of departments and other agencies to get things done, to follow through on commitments and ultimately to achieve valued outcomes for the citizen. A decision to undertake capacity reviews of individual organisations was announced by the then Taoiseach in June 2006. However, progress has been slow. By the end of 2010 only seven reviews had been published. This contrasts with a similar initiative in the UK, where all seventeen government departments were reviewed over an eighteen-month period. Irish departments reviewed to date include the Department of Transport, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Health and Children. Capacity weaknesses identified across organisations include issues in human resource management, leadership, the governance of agencies and the capacity of Irish officials at EU level.

A decision to undertake capacity reviews of individual departments and offices was announced by the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in June 2006. This initiative placed Ireland among a small group of countries progressing the issue of capacity in the civil service. The model developed, the Organisation Review Programme (ORP) was approved by government in March 2007 and three departments volunteered to

participate in pilot reviews. Subsequently four more departments and offices were selected for review in 2009/10. But what lessons can be learned both for individual organisations and the civil service as a whole from experience to date in assessing capacity?

In a *State of the Public Service* report published today by the IPA, we find that while the ORP initiative is a worthwhile one, there are a number of areas of concern. Some of the positive findings identified by ORP reviews in respect of all departments include a good level of commitment among staff, a helpful attitude to direct customers and a collaborative approach to working with state agencies. But with the exception of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners and the Property Registration Authority, which are regarded as well-placed to meet future challenges, ORP reviews identified important weaknesses in all other organisations reviewed, which if left un-addressed would hamper their capacity to deliver on their objectives.

A major challenge for the ORP programme is its timeliness. From the announcement of the initiative in 2006 to end 2010 only seven reviews have been published. Delay in completing reviews of government departments and offices reduces the possibility of making comparisons across organisations. The dramatically changed economic and financial environment since the commencement of the initiative is a further consideration. Taoiseach Brian Cowen in the foreword to the Second Report of the ORP indicated that all remaining reviews would be completed by the end of 2012. It is important for the credibility of the programme to stick to this timetable.

A strength of a comparable UK programme has been the inclusion of systematic follow-up assessments to determine progress by departments in addressing weaknesses identified in reviews. In Ireland, there is no initiative in place to ensure that organisations actually follow up on commitments made in action plans prepared in response to review findings. It is critical to the credibility of the ORP that some follow-up mechanism is put in place. It was indicated that a new entity, the Public Service Board, announced in June 2010, would develop proposals to revisit those organisations already reviewed to assess progress. However, as the Board has not been established to date, this plan has not been acted on.

While management in each department/office can and should take responsibility for all capacity weaknesses identified for their organisation, a number of issues emerge in the reviews where input, support and direction from the 'centre' (the departments of the Taoiseach and Finance) is desirable. Key areas of concern are the governance of state agencies, performance measurement, the capacity of Irish officials at EU level and a wide-range of human resource management issues, including the need to improve leadership skills, tackle underperformance and greatly improve productivity. While a number of avenues have been identified for advancing these issues (the Public Service (Croke Park) Agreement 2010 and the Public Service Board), overall progress remains slow. These ongoing weaknesses are undermining the overall effectiveness of the Irish civil service and need to be addressed promptly.

Organisational Capacity in the Irish Civil Service: An Examination of the Organisation Review Programme is Report No.3 of the 'State of the Public Service' series published by the Institute of Public Administration. It is available at www.ipa.ie/research or by hard copy on request. Contact Carolyn Gormley, Tel: (01) 2403765 or email cgormley@ipa.ie.

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