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

Supplementary Grade Analysis

Prepared by DCU Business School in collaboration with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
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### FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

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1.1 Context of the Research: The Civil Service Renewal Plan

The Civil Service Renewal Plan, published in 2014, set out a vision for the Civil Service “to achieve the best possible results for Government, a better service for customers and a better place to work for staff”. It built on the strengths of the Civil Service to ensure it has the capacity and capability it needs to meet challenges and to deliver an excellent service to the State. The programme of reform was developed to create a more unified, professional, responsive, open and accountable Civil Service and is overseen by the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB). Significant progress has been made in delivering this ambitious programme of reform. Achievements include:

- The establishment of the Civil Service Management Board which has collective responsibility for delivering the actions in the Civil Service Renewal Plan;
- Further implementation of the Shared Services Programme; the Public Service ICT Strategy and Government Communications Programme;
- The People Strategy for the Civil Service was launched in October 2017, setting the strategic direction for Human Resource Management across the Civil Service while also recognising that each organisation is unique and has its own challenges;
- Open recruitment competitions have been held for a wide range of general service, professional and technical grades;
- A wide range of initiatives to improve gender balance across the Civil Service have been developed and are being implemented within Departments and Offices. These include an action plan to improve gender balance at senior levels;
- ‘OneLearning’ has been established to centrally operate and maintain the new Learning & Development (L&D) model and to manage delivery of the new common suite of L&D programmes;
- The introduction of structured and transparent talent management programmes to develop future leaders;
- A new scheme for recognising innovation and excellence across the Civil Service was introduced in 2015 through the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards. The awards celebrate the significant contributions that civil servants make to the Civil Service and recognise innovations in policy and service delivery across the service;
- An approach to professionalisation has been agreed in the areas of HR, ICT and Finance, with most progress made in the HR area;
• A new Civil Service-wide mobility scheme has been introduced for Clerical Officers and Executive Officers which will be extended to other grades up to Assistant Principal level in due course;

• A standardised project management approach has been introduced and supported with the establishment of a Project Managers’ Network and training from OneLearning;

• A new system of Organisational Capability Reviews to assess and strengthen performance and capacity across Departments is being implemented;

• Publication of a Guidelines and Best Practice Handbook to guide the establishment of new Departments and/or restructuring of existing Departments; and

• Significant progress in relation to the development of a National Data Infrastructure.

A further key development was the inaugural Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey (CSEES) which was launched in 2015 as a key aspect of the Civil Service Renewal Plan. The survey was repeated in 2017, with over 21,300 civil servants taking part. 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. Thus, while the results of the survey have largely been positively received as an indication of the improvements associated with the Civil Service Renewal Plan, the Civil Service Management Board 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. To gain a

**Figure 1. Summary of achievements of the Civil Service Renewal Plan**
better understanding of grade differences in these areas, supplementary qualitative research was undertaken which was guided by the following central research question:

To what extent do perceptions of the work of Civil Service employees differ within and across grades in terms of the following: involvement climate, innovative climate, performance management and perceptions of the public?

While the overall findings indicate that civil servants continue to feel highly engaged in their work, 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.

1.2 Overview of the Report

The report commences with a brief introduction to the four themes at the centre of this study. It illustrates how the four areas of involvement, innovation, performance management and public perception are inextricably linked, and emphasises the need not to consider the findings in each of the areas as a single entity. Thus, while the themes are presented sequentially, they should be considered as interconnected. The report then proceeds with an overview of the methodology employed in the study, followed by a summary of the supplementary quantitative analysis that focused on differences between grades. Moving on to the qualitative findings, a section on ‘Life as a … [grade title]’ is provided which considers what it is like to work at the various different grades within the Civil Service. The main section of the report presents our in-depth qualitative findings on each of the four core areas, with a strong emphasis on including the voices of our participants through illustrative quotes. Finally, the report concludes with a set of recommendations to further guide the Civil Service Renewal Plan and better support the mission of ‘One Civil Service’.

1.3 Summary of Key Findings

The ‘headline’ findings from the study are reported in Figure 2.

Our findings provide strong evidence to indicate that the civil service is playing an important and positive role in transforming public services. These developments have been described as “a sea change”, where traditional assumptions about “how things should be done” are being challenged. While there is certainly some evidence of a lack of openness to new ideas, and a moderate to high level of risk aversion, there is even stronger evidence to suggest that change is happening and that there is a willingness to embrace new ways of working. This is supported by some very good examples of manager behaviour and employee involvement but could be further enhanced through greater consistency in leadership and tighter integration with the performance management system. These actions will help to shape a civil service that exudes innovative approaches and more clearly demonstrates that performance is being managed effectively, which will ultimately lead to the organisation being perceived more positively externally.

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. These 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.
### Finding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Detail</th>
<th>Key Recommendation</th>
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<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>
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### Figure 2. Key Findings from the Research

In addition to the key messages presented above, overall, there are both positive and negative findings across the four areas. There are pockets of very effective practice in some areas of the Civil Service that enhance the working experiences of employees in those areas. However, if anything, good practice is very inconsistent, not only varying across departments but within departments and this is most often down to individual management effectiveness in departments and sections. While some of the findings summarised in this section may not be surprising, it is the richness of the experiences that are the focus of this report and it is these that point to valuable recommendations for future interventions and on-going practice. We encourage readers to engage fully with what civil servants at all grades have to say about working in the Civil Service and, to that end, include multiple quotes that represent their experiences.
Overall, the findings point to an urgent need to overhaul little to signal the value of PMDS to the wider strategy. Leaders are seen as doing PMDS process to nothing more than a ‘tick the box’, pointless task for the majority. Communication across grades and evidence of silos is also an issue; the Civil Service lacks a unifying internal communication strategy and this is significantly curtailing the renewal mission of ‘One Civil Service’.

**Involvement** increases with seniority; junior grades find it difficult to have a voice, to be listened to and to share ideas for change. While involvement is accepted by some, it is often interpreted as being undervalued and many report a desire to at least learn about and engage with the decision-making process. Some managers in some units excel at involving individuals, to at least some extent, and this is highly valued by their staff. Communication across grades is problematic. From the perspective of those in higher grades, there is the difficulty of defining the precise functions of employee behaviour that might be labelled as underperformance, and which might be handled through the performance management system. Leaders and managers play a critical role in effective roll out of the PMDS and the wider management of performance more generally. When introduced first, managers were trained in the delivery of performance management conversations and since 2017 some 12,900 managers across the civil service were trained in managing conversations and since 2017 some 12,900 managers trained in the delivery of performance management.

Leadership styles play a very influential role, acting as the key differentiator between areas with strong versus weak innovative climates. Developments in recruitment and management of performance as part of their wider remit in enhancing employee involvement and engagement.

**Innovation** The findings point to 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 departments and sections. Leadership styles play a very influential role, acting as the key differentiator between areas with strong versus weak innovative climates. Developments in recruitment in recent times have clearly brought fresh thinking about ‘how things are done’. However, this is somewhat curtailed by resistance to change. Our findings clearly point to the need for an agreed vision and goals for innovation across the Civil Service. These are simply not well articulated currently. Innovation comes in many forms and this is not fully appreciated. The focus on innovation needs to be directed at common-place but effective initiatives that can be transformative, resulting in greater productivity and impact.

**Performance Management** There is significant dissatisfaction with the current Performance Management and Development System (PMDS). The rationale for moving to a two-point system to shift a focus to developmental conversations can largely be seen as a failure. There is a widely held view amongst all grades that the management of underperformance is problematic. From the perspective of those in higher grades, there is the difficulty of defining the precise nature of employee behaviour that might be labelled as underperformance, and which might be handled through the performance management system. Leaders and managers play a critical role in effective roll out of the PMDS and the wider management of performance more generally. When introduced first, managers were trained in the delivery of performance management conversations and since 2017 some 12,900 managers across the civil service were trained in managing underperformance. However despite this, there was a perception among those who participated in the focus groups that training is non-existent relegating the annual PMDS process to nothing more than a ‘tick the box’, pointless task for the majority. Leaders are seen as doing little to signal the value of PMDS to the wider strategy. Overall, the findings point to an urgent need to overhaul the PMDS system; not only to better discriminate between good and poor performance but also to be more effective at signalling the values within the Civil Service – involvement and innovation – and, in so doing, presenting a better image to the citizens it serves. The findings also point to the need for managers to view the management of performance as part of their wider remit in enhancing employee involvement and engagement.

**Public Perception** The findings suggest that low public perception scores can be attributed to four key areas. Unsurprisingly, the influence of the media’s tendency to focus only on the negative stories emerging from the government and the wider Civil Service is readily identified. However, participants are quick to point to a failure on the part of the Civil Service to respond to or counteract such stories. Beyond this, participants report that a major gap exists between the actual work contributions of civil servants and the public’s awareness about such key activities. This reduces the sense of impact and meaning of their work. The findings also point to a need to capture the work contributions and value that departments and individuals create for customers, as well as the need to share these stories both within their departments and across the wider Civil Service. To better support this, appropriate staff should be placed in customer facing roles.

**1.4 Conclusion**

An overarching conclusion from the research is the extent to which the four themes intersect, suggesting that they are far from independent. Any initiatives targeting one aspect will have, to differing extents, knock on impacts on the other three areas (see Figures 2 and 3 below). Our overall conclusion is that the dominant culture within the Civil Service at present is one of ‘conflict avoidance’. This includes an avoidance to:

(a) engage with staff to facilitate wider communication and involvement;
(b) challenge the status quo with regard to ‘how things are done’;
(c) tackle underperformance among the disengaged, and;
(d) be fully accountable to the public funders and users of the services provided.

This deep-seated avoidance of conflict explains the negative scores for these themes arising from the CSEES survey findings to date and the consequent remit for this research that we were commissioned to undertake. The evidence that we have gathered demonstrates that these avoidance behaviours are deep-seated and learned, at least among longer-serving civil servants, and that among this cohort at least, changing them will require significant effort. Our findings point to a number of key recommendations, the implementation of which will require some funding investment in order to positively impact on the problematic areas identified. Without such investment in resources, these problems will continue to give rise to inefficiencies in the service provided and a poor public perception.
2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Background

The aim of the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey (CSEES) was to inform initiatives aimed at improving the work experiences of civil servants. The survey was first undertaken in 2015 and more recently in 2017, and its findings consistently identified lower perceptions of key variables at lower grades. This led the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB) to call for further exploration of these issues. The aim of this supplementary analysis is therefore to explore in more detail why levels of satisfaction are varied between higher and lower grades. This report documents this analysis aimed at understanding better the different experiences of employees across the different grades within the Civil Service.

Overall, the research was guided by the following central research question:

To what extent do perceptions of the work of Civil Service employees differ within and across grades in terms of the following: involvement climate, innovative climate, performance management and perceptions of the public?

As noted, the published 2017 CSEES findings identified that there were notably low perceptions of involvement, innovation, performance management and public perception at the lower grades. These warranted further analysis to identify whether there were different explanations of these issues across the various grades. Qualitative analysis was identified as essential to develop a deeper understanding of these differences.

2.2 Study Approach

The research team worked closely with senior management in the Civil Service in the design and roll-out of the 2015 and 2017 employee engagement surveys. Our continuing aim is to work with them to identify initiatives that will improve the quality of Civil Service employees’ working lives. This supplementary research investigation involved two phases. The first phase involved an analysis of both within and between group (grade) differences in the CSEES findings.
This analysis captured the following:

Patterns within grades to establish what features of work drive perceptions of (a) an involvement climate, (b) an innovative climate, (c) performance management, and (d) how the Civil Service is perceived by the public;

Patterns between grades to establish differences in these outcomes while controlling for other variables such as gender, education and region;

These patterns then formed themes that guided a subsequent series of follow-up interviews and focus groups with grade incumbents.

The second phase involved in-depth follow-up interviews and focus groups with representatives from various grades. This phase of the analysis set out to capture the reasons for differences between grades in both the 2015 and 2017 surveys. It focussed in particular on why and how certain factors (drivers) are important in influencing the four relevant work outcomes at particular grades.

2.3 Study Sample

Employees from the Civil Service at various grades and across various locations nationally received a communication from the Civil Service Renewal Programme Management Office within the Department of Expenditure and Reform inviting them to participate in either a focus group or interview. Voluntary participation was emphasised.

Figure 4 presents an overview of the sample according to grade, department and location.

The Study Sample

29 one-to-one interviews
- 4 Director ASG and Above
- 4 AP
- 2 AO
- 4 HEO
- 7 EO /SO
- 8 CO, SVO, and Industrial

16 focus groups (125 participants in total)
- 2 Director ASG and Above
- 2 AP
- 3 HEO
- 3 EO /SO
- 6 CO, SVO, and Industrial

6 Locations
- Cork
- Dublin
- Kildare
- Sligo
- Trim
- Wexford

9 Departments
- Central Statistics Office
- Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
- Department of Justice and Equality
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
- Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation
- Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment
- Department of Culture, Heritage & Gaeltacht
- Office of Public Works
- Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

Figure 3. Study Sample according to Grade, Department and Location

All interviews and focus groups were recorded electronically and transcribed. Thematic analysis was then undertaken with the data.
2.4 Limitations

It should be noted that there were a number of limitations in the study. Ideally, more departments would have been involved. However, it was challenging to get departments to volunteer staff, some citing on-going research within their own departments. Another limiting factor is that focus groups could have included individuals from different departments, as contrasts between departments are then more likely to come to light. While these limitations stand, the data that emerged through the interviews and focus groups was rich, identified consistent themes, and provided valuable contributions for furthering the understanding of employee attitudes at each grade, and for supporting the recommendations detailed at the end of the report. Arising from our research, we identify some areas for future research at the end of this report. These include the need to undertake a comprehensive review of the current grading structure, performance management system and promotion processes in order to optimise job-skills match, which in turn will enhance levels of performance and engagement across the organisation.
3.0 LIFE AS A...

3.1 Introduction
This section of the report provides an overview of the ways in which participants at each grade within the Civil Service described their work roles and highlights the unique features and qualities of each grade. The section teases out what is particular about working in a particular grade that is not clearly discernible from the more universal views of participants that emerged with regard to each of the four themes of interest to the supplementary study.
3.2 Life as a Clerical Officer (CO)

As part of their roles, clerical officers (COs) are required to demonstrate competencies in teamwork, information processing, delivering results, customer service and communication skills, specialist knowledge and expertise and to be committed and driven.

The overarching theme for those in the CO grade is the desire to be treated as individuals, not as belonging to a particular grade. The CO grade seems to come with a perceptual bias or stigma attached to it when compared to other grades. While some department cultures might be better than others, employees consistently hinted towards the need to be recognised by higher grades for their individual skills and capabilities and for opportunities to show their unique value and contributions.

Individuals at this level appear to find it difficult to utilise their full potential:

.. my current duties would have been just your very basic organise meetings, organise teas and coffees for things, things like that, and I was really bored when I started (CO).

Civil Service Grade Statistics (CO)

The findings suggest that work conditions can be extremely negative or positive depending on the culture of the section or department and this appears to be contingent on the leadership and communication style of higher-level grades. Negative work experiences can be created by managers who demand a “sense of extreme urgency when extreme urgency is not called for” or who discriminate against some individuals by providing access to work-life balance opportunities for some rather than all of their staff.
3.3 Life as an Executive Officer (EO)

Executive Officers (EOs) are required to be competent in people management, analysis and decision-making, delivering results, interpersonal and communication skills, specialist knowledge and expertise, and to be committed to public service values.

The overarching theme for those in the EO grade is the requirement for opportunities for growth and development and career mobility. The findings suggest that EOs are adaptable and enjoy solving problems and achieving results.

The nature of the work also seems to be important to EOs, who appear grateful when provided with opportunities to perform work that is unique and different as described in the following two quotes: “I am lucky that I have got the opportunity to do a little bit outside my box ...”; “everything is new and a load of new people have joined over the last 6 months and we’re all learning and yes ... flexibility, adaptability and learning is every day and part of the goal because we’re all learning as we go” (EO). Finally, there is a sense that EOs do not necessarily appreciate that they have responsibility for managing other people and this can lead to difficulties for their subordinates.

At times, the fast-paced nature of the work environment can be quite extreme and can cause stress for the EO:

You constantly have a heavy workload but at the same time, I suppose, it’s like everyone helps each other out, so you are never stuck on your own in a quandary (EO).
3.4 Life as a Higher Executive Officer (HEO)

Higher Executive Officers (HEOs) are required to demonstrate competency in team leadership, judgement analysis and decision-making, managing and delivering results, interpersonal and communication skills, and be driven and committed to public service values.

HEOs used adjectives such as ‘eclectic’, ‘facilitator’ and ‘tutorial’ when describing their function. New roles can see HEOs working across a broad spectrum of activities to support sections, thereby providing them with opportunities to learn and contribute to the wider goals of the organisation.

Divisions that have functions or roles that require a more varied / flexible service can make HEOs feel a bit “pulled between different areas” (HEO) and feeling that operations are disorganised. Daily “on the fly” demands that preclude addressing core work requirements can make HEOs feel frustrated and overwhelmed. Senior managers appear to have significant influence on the level of stress experienced by employees at the HEO level. POs who just want the work done or who allow staff to get snowed under, can cause HEOs to feel a sense of powerlessness. In contrast, POs who are willing to advocate for their HEOs and take an active interest in creating a positive environment can create a much more positive working experience. Leadership visibility and interaction appear to be very important, especially when HEOs feel that their senior leaders are trying their best to be visible. In environments with limited leadership visibility, HEOs claim that it leads to a loss of purpose and a feeling of “Why am I killing myself to get this over the line if they don’t even care” (HEO). Similar to the findings with EOs, some HEOs do not recognise the role they have as people managers. They may be often too caught up with the demands of their own roles to take the time to effectively manage and develop their line employees.

Civil Service Grade Statistics (HEO)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40-42</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43-46</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average Age: 49
3.5 Life as an Administrative Officer (AO)

Administrative Officers (AOs) are required to demonstrate leadership potential, be competent in analysis and decision-making, deliver results, have good interpersonal and communication skills, have specialist knowledge and expertise, and be driven and committed to public service values.

AOs appear ambitious and keen to advance within the Civil Service and are willing to learn and take on work activities that are outside the scope of their role. They also appear to appreciate unique learning opportunities that may be offered to them. One AO stated: “I get to do some really interesting international work. I get to travel ... I get a chance to work with very talented and driven and motivated and admirable people ... I would say is the big positive”. While AOs have access to very diverse types of work and the opportunity to work within “a great team mostly” (AO), they have also claimed that “work pressure can be quite intense” (AO).

The overarching need of this group appears to be for leadership to prioritise the workload strategically. AOs have a wish for management to “reduce the extreme pressure that comes with the workload... to stop treating the team as a firefighting outfit... to stop throwing all the really hot urgent stuff at them all the time... to reduce the amount of extreme pressure [they] are under constantly ... The problem is, I suppose, that everything is top priority... everything is expected to be done perfectly and on time and it is at the price of exacting a huge amount of pressure on the staff” (AO). The other issue for AOs, as external and entry-level recruits, is their lack of opportunity to gain management experience. This barrier to progression causes frustration and limits their future development and earning potential.
3.6 Life as an Assistant Principal (AP)

Assistant Principals (APs) are required to demonstrate competencies in leadership, judgement, analysis and decision-making, management and delivery of results, interpersonal and communication skills, specialist knowledge and skills and are expected to be driven and committed to public service values.

On the whole, the AP role was described as ‘positive’, ‘professional’, ‘easy going’, ‘flexible’ and ‘helpful’. APs appear to love their work, have a keen sense of and commitment to customers and a general desire to make things better for the Civil Service. Some APs feel that they act as specialists or ‘go to’ persons for employees, solving challenges and problems and providing a ‘workaround’. They also seem to have the latitude and power to mobilise action and solutions. They are well connected upwards and see themselves as "collegially connected" to those lower down the line. As one AP states: “I would have enormous power to change … I can do whatever I want as long as I deliver the results”.

APs used adjectives such as “varied”, “quite lively”, “a live show”, “collaborative”, “collegial” and “friendly” when asked to describe their work environment despite it also being “highly localised”, “noisy” and “quite busy”. Team collegiality and solidarity seem to be important for the AP:

We are given impossible challenges on a day-to-day basis. That, I think, is the nature of the public sector. It’s an impossible challenge … it’s actually not possible to do what I am asked to do, but on the plus side, everybody is in the same position and everybody recognises that (AP).

In terms of their desire for future change, APs recognise the need for a strategic approach and would like to see more data-driven decision-making, including the use of data and targets to generate change.

Civil Service Grade Statistics (AP)
### 3.7 Life as a PO and above

Principal Officers (POs) and higher grades are required to demonstrate competence in leadership and strategic direction, judgement and decision-making, managing and delivering results, building relationships and communication, have specialist knowledge and expertise and be driven and committed to public service values.

Individuals at this level appear positive and very professional. They have a lot of internal power and “know they have a lot of discretion and leeway to direct and organise things” the way they choose to (PO and above). They describe a safe, nice working environment but one PO suggests: “I am not going to say it’s cutting edge” (PO and above). They acknowledge that hierarchy and rules which create certainty are “tripping people up” when it comes to innovation. There is a strong willingness on the part of these grades of senior civil servant to do things better and a sense that incremental changes that lead to slight improvements do not require a “big pat on the back” but rather that operating effectively should be just a normal way of working.

When describing their work environment, senior grades used adjectives such as “collegiate”, “collaborative”, “supportive”, and “constructive”. However, some identified a need for better communication. Work environments can be quite siloed as a result of being composed of people who work across quite a broad range of disciplines. There are also challenges with people communication and alignment and ensuring they are “fully aware of the breadth and range of the department’s activities and its priorities” (PO and above). Overall, senior civil servants have a strong motivation to deliver results and to bring about improvements to their departments.
Figure 5 presents a ‘snapshot’ of both positive and negative work experiences across each of the various grades.
Involvement Climate

This measures the extent to which civil servants feel that they are involved openly in decision-making in their organisation.

4.1 Introduction

Involvement includes both participation and communication (Patterson et al., 2005) and relates to the extent to which employees feel that they are involved openly in the decision-making of their organisation. It encompasses both top-down communication as well as opportunities for upward employee voice. Academic research has long established that involvement in decision-making, or at least a sense that one is aware of how decisions are reached within the organisation, is a critical factor in driving positive employee and organisational outcomes (Ruck and Welch, 2012). Satisfaction with employee voice, characterised by a sense of the organisation being receptive to upward feedback, is recognised as a key driver of employee engagement (Ruck and Welch, 2012; Truss et al., 2006).

The benefits that organisations can reap through voice mechanisms and healthy systems of employee involvement have been well established. Indeed, within the public sector, a growing body of research highlights the significant relationship between a sense of involvement and a number of important employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Lee, Cayer, and Lan 2006; Park and Rainey 2007; Wright and Kim 2004), organisational commitment (Park and Rainey 2007), innovation (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2013; Fernandez and Pitts, 2011; Somech, 2006) and performance (Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2011; Lee et al., 2006). Involvement has this positive impact because employees gain more control of their own work through participating in decision-making and through increasing access to information but it also
allows their own ideas and suggestions to be heard and potentially allows them to have an impact on how they go about their work (Wang and Yang, 2015). Employee voice recognises the benefits organisations accrue from robust systems of employee involvement and participation. In a recent study, Ruck, Welch and Menara (2017) found that there were two critical factors that determined how involvement led to engagement for employees (approx. 50% of whom were in the public sector): upward employee voice and senior manager receptiveness. Authentic receptiveness on the part of managers means that they are open to ideas from their subordinates and that they are, at least sometimes, willing to put those ideas into practice (Ruck et al., 2017). This points to the necessary conditions for positive employee involvement and is particularly relevant to the findings of this study. Finally, given the Civil Service Renewal Plan, it is noteworthy that involvement is also seen as critical to the successful implementation of change within the public sector (Fernandez and Rainey, 2017).

### 4.2 Involvement Climate in the Civil Service: The Research Context

Involvement climate was one of the two lowest scoring variables in the 2017 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey. 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.

The results for the involvement climate index across each grade for both the 2015 and 2017 surveys are presented in Figure 6. The involvement climate indicators are presented in Table 1.

### Involvement Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DIRECTOR, ASG, PO AND ABOVE</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEO</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EO &amp; SO</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO, SVO AND INDUSTRIAL</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 5. Involvement Climate Index Scores across each Grade](image)
Involvement Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Grades (average)</th>
<th>Director, ASG and above</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>AO</th>
<th>HEO</th>
<th>EO / SO</th>
<th>CO, SVO, Industrial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changes are made without talking to the people involved in them.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People don’t have a say in decisions which affect their work.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People feel decisions are frequently made over their heads.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information is widely shared.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are often breakdowns in communication here.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Indicators of Involvement Climate

4.3 How Involvement Climate Relates to the other Themes

As the first theme under consideration, Figure 6 emphasises how involvement is related to the other three themes under investigation.

- **Innovation**: The link between involvement and encouragement to innovate has been signalled to be particularly important in the public sector, where goal ambiguity, high levels of formalisation, and restrictions on the ability to reward extrinsically might dampen or even neutralise the effects of empowerment efforts (see Rainey, 2009). More broadly, involvement supports organisational change within the public sector (Fernandez and Rainey, 2017).

- **Performance Management**: There is a significant link between involvement and performance management primarily related to communication up and down the hierarchy and lack of opportunities for upward employee voice. Instead of ongoing performance management, it is relegated to a ‘tick the box’ exercise that may or may not be accompanied by a ‘career chat’. Managers are not giving the time to communicate with their staff about their performance and development.

- **Public Perception**: The link between involvement and public perception is perhaps the weakest amongst the four variables, certainly in the data we collected. Nevertheless, internal communication is a significant factor in influencing external communication, some even going so far as to argue there is no distinction between the two (Cheney and Christensen, 2001). As a result, publically held attitudes towards the Civil Service are impacted by the involvement climate where a strong sense of shared identity presents a stronger, more effective brand externally (Welch and Jackson, 2007).

Figure 6. How Involvement Climate relates to the other Themes
4.4 Findings from the Interviews and Focus Groups

Openness and transparency is a core pillar of the Civil Service Renewal Plan. Overall, almost universally across the grades, the importance of an involvement climate was recognised and there is a motivation to ensure that it happens: “you want to be fair to everybody and get everybody informed at the same time in an open and transparent way” (AP). There is also evidence that there is an increased awareness of the importance of involvement, as one senior civil servant (PO and above) notes: “I suppose I have become more conscious of trying to relay, and I am sure that has cascaded down through the broader team of people that I have responsibility for”. Involving people across the board is seen by some managers as invaluable.

Participants also noted that innovation is more likely to be encouraged when there is a positive climate for involvement. This manifests in leaders including lower level staff in the decision-making process and there were some good examples of staff working and collaborating for the overall good of their section, as elaborated on below. There were, however, different experiences of involvement, not only across the grades but also across different departments. There was also evidence of an acceptance among managers that the experience of involvement is likely to differ across grades.

That said, there is a caveat to the value of involvement, where involving too many senior people in a decision can slow progress, a symptom of risk aversion:

They are afraid to do things that are away from the herd. There is a thing of, we need to get a big group of ten people together to agree on a way forward, which can take 18 months, two years, whereas in a more agile organisation, in the private sector, it might be one, two, three people and something is developed, even if it was just a pilot and best practice shared (PO and above).

As outlined above, involvement includes opportunities for employee voice, participation in decision-making and general communication. All of these were noted to varying degrees by participants and the enablers and barriers to these forms of involvement are now discussed below.

4.4.1 Enablers and Barriers to Involvement

On the positive side, there appear to be some units that excel at involvement, through supportive participation, effective communication and giving a voice to more junior grades:

The people are really just friendly, open, ready to do their work, but at the same time ready to accept you and be able to bring you into the work a bit more (CO).

Managers in some cases understand the importance of being visible and available to support involvement:

So I have an open door policy and as I say, I work with about 100 people so there is usually a chair in every section for me to sit down in and so I spend a lot of time there (PO and above).
There were other snapshots of good practice. For instance, one AP spoke about the need for communication to be authentic in order to support involvement, while another PO talked about carving blocks of time out to provide staff with a road plan.

...every two weeks as well, we do what is called a whiteboard meeting and we discuss amongst the whole 25 [staff members] stuff that might be appearing and issues. So I would find that’s a good way of actioning things and it’s a way of getting involvement kind of naturally without making something fake (AP).

Indeed, some units appear to have very consistent approaches to open communication where there is a clear endeavour to keep everyone in the loop, especially when it comes to change.

On the negative side, a number of barriers to effective involvement were identified. These ranged from fundamental, systemic issues, to practical factors like the physical infrastructure. For instance, it was suggested that ‘old, archaic buildings’ do not foster an involvement climate, while some departments are structured with only the same grades located together:

...you might not see someone for months and it’s not healthy. This isn’t unique to here. I have worked in two other government departments as well and they have similar challenges (PO and above).

Many grades reported difficulties with communication, identifying it as an issue even at more senior grades to their own.

There is evidence of some people simply not being listened to and where their voice was ignored. One example relates to an attempt to deal with performance concerns: “Little incidences that I have brought to attention have been sort of dismissed and fudged a little bit” (Industrial). For newcomers to the organisation, barriers to involvement related to both poor induction and poor support from line managers:

I was left to fend for myself for the first three months, which really was something that really upset me...because my HEO hadn’t the time to train me and there were no EOs in our department at the time. When problems came up, I felt that I wasn’t given the training enough to know how to overcome the problem (CO).

To support involvement, employees need to feel competent and a lack of induction to familiarise newcomers with systems and processes means that it takes them longer to connect and actively participate in the organisation. On a more ongoing basis, involvement can be impeded by a lack of communication across grades and this is something keenly observed by lower grades in particular. Recent initiatives in response to the recent Civil Service Employee Engagement Surveys have sought to further embed a culture of involvement through grade fora which may alleviate these issues in the future.

Some participants noted that there are simply no channels to provide upward feedback. Indeed, hierarchy is recognised by many at the lower grades as preventing greater participation. Grades essentially define communication and dictate how information is passed (or not) from one person to another.

While it is recognised that lower grades often cannot be part of the decision-making, frustration can creep in when they are not provided with feedback on how decisions are reached:

The only disconnect would be us not having the information they have when they are making the decisions (CO).
Related to enablers and barriers, a number of the participants pointed to concrete suggestions for improvements, many of which would seem to be easy to implement. One CO suggested: “A Monday morning meeting, five, ten minutes, exactly what our agenda is for this week, what do we need to achieve, what our targets are and what we can do to motivate each other”, while another also commented on meetings as being important for lower grades to get exposure to the inner workings of the organisation: “Maybe bringing people in at a different level, so COs into kind of HEO meetings and then you get kind of an overview and then you can develop more of them personally rather than just being stuck in your own job” (CO).

Finally, the dominance of the grade system is not the only barrier to involvement. Some participants pointed to differences between long tenured employees versus ‘new blood’, where deep-seated cultural norms among the former can inhibit newer employees from thriving. Longstanding employees can actively challenge ideas from newer employees, described as a culture clash between the two:

“We have a clash of cultures here ... We have new staff who are highly educated, probably more educated than senior management, who want to be inclusive in the decision-making process even though they don’t have to be... Going back in the Civil Service ... 5, 10, 15, 20 years ago. You weren’t part of the decision-making process, you were just told not to be questioning and you just got on with it (HEO).”

Internal communication was also recognised as in need of attention by more senior grades:

“We would need to do more of a PR on ourselves. Now, they are starting to do more of those kinds of things like trying to have lunch and learn (AP).”

However, the same individual recognised that the sheer volume of work disrupts the intention to proactively get involved in such events.

4.4.2 Outcomes of Poor Involvement Climate

Ultimately, the current involvement climate operates against the creation of ‘One’ Civil Service. As suggested in the survey report, hierarchy plays a significant role in curtailing a strong involvement climate. This is not helped where there is a reduced visibility of senior leaders, resulting not only in a lower sense of involvement but an increased burden on middle managers. As one AP put it, involvement is “very dependent on the leadership in the areas” while an AO noted “I have only had two managers in my time here and they were very different styles and, yeah, certainly, with my second manager, I felt more included in the actual decisions that we have made”. Where internal communication is weak, the purpose, mission and vision of departments is diluted and poorly understood. In some units, where upward voice is limited or non-existent, there is a view that management simply does not care about employees nor do they value their ideas. This latter point can significantly stifle creativity and innovation. ‘ Disconnect’ is a word used to describe the relationships between leaders and the people they are leading and managing. Despite evidence of best practice, where lower grades are included and given opportunities to see high grades in action, employee ‘face time’ and active involvement in strategic areas is limited. As a result, the Civil Service is not making the best use of its knowledge (creating, sharing, using and managing it) to achieve organisational goals and objectives. Silos mean that information sharing is not being fully utilised as a strategic tool to support learning, alignment and inclusivity.
4.5 Spotlight on Grade Perspectives: Involvement Climate

Figure 7 provides a summary of grade perspectives regarding the climate for involvement.

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].

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.

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.

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.

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.
4.6 Conclusion

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. COs noted the overemphasis on grades: “people see grades as the be all and end all”. What is interesting to note is that grade incumbents recognise that communication between grades is easier between ‘closer grades’. There is a sense that senior grades are kept informed of goals on an ongoing basis and understand the rationale for change. However, this information does not cascade down through the departments, though it varies across departments and even varies across sections within departments. 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. Some managers recognise the intrinsic value of involving their staff and make every effort to include them, whether through explicit open-door policies or by allowing lower grades to participate or observe decision-making in action. There is a sense that involvement is associated with employees feeling that they are valued. While there is to some extent a sense of resignation among employees in lower grades that they cannot influence decision-making, perceptions of involvement could be significantly increased if these grades were able to observe decision-making in action or at least receive feedback on the outcomes of decisions. The more experience individuals have, the more they get frustrated when their voices are ignored.
Innovative Climate

Innovative Climate
This measures the extent to which civil servants feel the organisation supports and encourages them to be innovative.

5.1 Introduction

In a public sector context, innovation is commonly defined as ‘an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption’ (Rogers, 2003, p. 12) or as ‘a process that results in an outcome that is new to an organisational population’ (Damanpour and Schneider 2009, p. 497). Bloch (2011, p. 14) suggests that public sector innovations ‘comprise new or significant changes to services and goods, operational processes, organisational methods, or the way [an] organisation communicates with users’. Bloch suggests that while innovations must be new to a particular organisation, they can have been developed and implemented by others previously. The various types of innovation that can exist in public sector contexts are summarised in Figure 8.

Innovations can be both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’. Top-down innovations in a Civil Service context are often ‘enforced’ i.e. they are instigated by politicians to enact new political mandates due to a change in government. They can also reflect large-scale policy initiatives and ideas that are driven by senior management to improve the delivery of public services. While New Public Management (NPM) emerged in response to concerns that political and management priorities may conflict, thereby limiting managerial autonomy in implementing innovations to enhance efficiency, Hartley, Sorenson and Torfing (2013) argue that NPM has in fact discouraged knowledge sharing and consequently has acted as a barrier to some types of innovations.
Bottom-up innovations usually emanate from individual work units and tend to rely on initiatives from individuals to identify and pursue new ideas. The main drivers of bottom-up innovations relate to employee competencies, how middle managers foster and encourage innovation and the extent to which innovations diffuse to other organisations. There is some evidence to suggest that initiatives to encourage bottom-up innovation lead to better outcomes than traditional policy-driven innovation (Arundel, Casali and Hollanders., 2015), indicating that the context of innovation matters. The main drivers of innovation can come from a variety of sources as identified in Figure 9.

**Figure 8. Types of Innovation in Public Sector Contexts (adapted from De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers, 2016)**

**Figure 9. Main Drivers of innovation (adapted from De Vries et al., 2016).**
It has been suggested that a lack of top-down championing of change can ‘depress’ innovation, leading to only minor and incremental improvements (Osborne and Brown, 2011). Yet, there is increasing pressure on governments to move beyond incremental process innovations towards new ways of framing problems and solutions (OECD, 2017a). This would suggest that governments need to engage in more of the conceptual innovations as described in Figure 8.

### 5.2 Defining a Culture of Innovation in a Public Service Context

Rules and regulations are of critical importance in a Civil Service context, because they promote, for example, the fair treatment of citizens, a strong national security, and a robust justice system. Government departments internationally are known to be both rule-driven and risk-averse (Albury, 2005). Resistance to change can occur when individuals find it difficult to deviate from established ‘norms’ i.e. the ways in which tasks are normally completed. These norms provide clarity; people know what their job entails and they perform their roles guided by the rules, regulations and legislation, which clearly define the limits of what can and cannot be done (Mullan and Albury, 2003). A strong tradition of rules also provides ‘psychological safety’ for individuals because they offer protection against so-called ‘gotcha’ journalism, an almost ‘zero tolerance’ for public service interruption or failure, and the fear of public exposure regarding failed risk taking. For these reasons, resistance to innovation is in many respects understandable because it involves deviating from these established rules and norms and challenging the status quo; it presents uncertainty for individuals who are used to high levels of routine and predictability. Activities in a Civil Service context can be further complicated by ministerial, cabinet and broader political and public pressures. Departmental actions and mistakes, for example, can be scrutinised by opposition parties and parliamentary committees, while excellent and efficient service is rarely acknowledged. For these reasons, the idea of innovation in a Civil Service context is something that is very much ‘easier said than done’. Yet, most public servants demonstrate a high level of what is labelled ‘public service motivation’ i.e. an ‘orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society’ (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008, vii), where having a positive impact on the lives of others is paramount.

An ‘innovation culture’ is one in which ‘a group of people’s shared values, customs and assumptions are conducive to new ideas and organisational change’ (Bason, 2010, p. 120). Evidence suggests that a culture of innovation is an important factor in supporting (or hindering) public sector innovation (e.g. Laegreid, Roness and Verhoest, 2011). A culture of innovation also needs to facilitate innovative behaviour by allowing employees to generate and share new ideas (Bysted and Hansen 2015) and by giving employees latitude and capacity to make decisions, to exercise discretion and to learn and grow (Damanpour and Schneider, 2009). Indicators of an innovation culture include: the level of support for innovation, leadership and experience of senior managers in innovation and the attitudes of both management and other personnel towards risk and change. The creation of such a culture requires mechanisms to manage the risk of innovation failure. These risks may relate to technology (Pärna and von Tunzelmann, 2007), possible backlash from potential users, or insufficient resources and capacity to develop and implement innovations (Kay and Goldspink, 2012).

While very little research has examined differences in innovative behaviour between the public and private sectors, it is suggested that innovation in the public sector is lower due to a number of ‘hindrances’ including: (a) a lack of market pressures/competition (Hartley et al., 2013); (b) weaker leadership and administrative authority (Rainey 1999); (c) bureaucracy and red tape (Hartley et al., 2013; Rainey 1999); and (d) formalisation, centralisation and top-down decision-making (Vigoda-Gadot et al. 2005). Yet, it is suggested that these issues represent barriers to innovation regardless of sector (Damanpour, 1991). One study of 8310 employees in a Scandinavian context shows that employees in the public sector are not less innovative compared to private sector employees (Bysted and Hansen, 2015). This study found that autonomy, room for innovation (i.e. fewer restrictions and boundaries and more time to think radically differently) and a risk culture were positively related to innovative behaviour. Other recent research suggests that leadership quality and a climate for inclusivity are key determinants of innovative behaviour in a public setting (Brimhall, 2019).

### 5.3 Innovative Climate in the Civil Service: The Research Context

The recent Civil Service Employee Engagement Surveys (2015, 2017) provide insights with regard to the climate for innovation across the Civil Service. Figure 10 details the index score for innovation across grades.
The figure shows that, across most grades, perceptions of the climate for 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%.

Table 2 presents more detailed findings based on responses to questions about innovation from the CSEES (2015, 2017). It shows that perceptions are low regarding the extent to which departments search for new ways of looking at problems, or the degree to which new ideas are regularly accepted. In addition, the findings suggest that there is a lack of agility and responsiveness and a lack of openness to innovation among managers.

### Innovative Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Grades (average)</th>
<th>Director, ASG and above</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>AO</th>
<th>HEO</th>
<th>EO / SO</th>
<th>CO, SVO, Industrial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New ideas are readily accepted here.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The department is quick to respond when changes need to be made.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management here are quick to spot the need to do things differently.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The department is very flexible; it can quickly change procedures to meet new conditions and solve problems as they arise.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in the department are always searching for new ways of looking at problems.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 10. Innovative Climate Index Scores across each Grade

**Table 2. Indicators of Innovative Climate**
5.4 Findings from the Interviews and Focus Groups

The research did not get a clear sense from participants that innovation is clearly understood or that the expectations around the objectives for innovation are clear.

There were a number of examples of either recently introduced or planned initiatives around innovation. Many of these initiatives operate separately to the larger scale innovative projects such as those considered in the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards programme. In this regard, they are very much examples of the smaller scale incremental innovations that were previously described. The types of initiatives in evidence ranged from individuals taking the lead on mentoring and training of new hires, personalising formulaic/standard communications to reduce queries, drawing up standard operating procedures to facilitate cover during leave and replacement following mobility and establishing new initiatives relating to CSR and GDPR.

A further example at the CO level was given which involved making quite a simple change to the wording of a letter so that it would be more sensitive to recipients’ circumstances and easier for them to understand. This prevented the section having to deal with subsequent unnecessary queries from the public, thereby making the service more efficient.

One interpretation of innovation in the Civil Service from a senior management perspective was as follows:

What I was really surprised about working within the Civil Service is the number of good and sharp people ... I found that there was a lot of great people who are really trying to do some stuff, but they are very hamstrung ... they can't take anything offline ever ... as in, things have to happen. If you were possibly in the private sector, you would make a business decision, “Well, you know, we need to fundamentally change this. We will stop this for a while and then we will ...“. [Here] we have to keep rolling and we keep putting more and more sticking plaster (HEO).

5.4.1 Enablers of and Barriers to Innovation

The follow-up interviews and focus groups identified both enablers of and barriers to the pursuit of innovation. There were a number of enablers of innovation identified in the research. These included: an openness to new ideas, manager support and accessibility to senior management, the inflow of ‘new blood’ into the organisation, and the leveraging of grade networks as a platform for knowledge sharing. Across all grades, there were references to a “sea change” taking place. It was suggested in some departments and sections that “there is openness to new ideas everywhere” and “we have all internalised (innovation) a little bit just because it’s in the air around the building” (CO). Where there were reports by lower grades of openness to new ideas on the part of management, this was coupled with reports of a much more positive working environment.

We spoke with internal audit to see, is there any particular way that we could streamline this process. That one little thing freed up so much time, just streamlining something to that extent, so there is scope ... But just that one thing alone freed up so much time and it definitely did streamline that whole process. It was perfect (EO).
There is, therefore, evidence that innovations are happening but, in most cases, these innovations occur by employees ‘working within the rules’ to try to figure out how things can be done in new and better ways. In this regard, innovations ‘on the ground’ tend to be incremental in nature.

... we’re going to have kind of an internal competition and recognition event for projects, ... with a view to getting more people involved. I think we also need to supplement that [innovation awards] with something like a ‘good ideas scheme’ where we can encourage maybe people to put in ideas for small you know incremental things... (PO and above).

A key enabler of innovation identified among lower grades was the perceived level of accessibility to higher grades. As suggested by one Assistant Principal: “the sharing of ideas can be different in a lot of different areas and very dependent on the leadership in the areas”. It was suggested that the “PO and AP kind of dictate what the culture is” (CO) and leadership was regarded as a critical lever for innovation among many participants across a variety of grades:

A high level of accessibility was evidenced on the part of one Principal Officer, who emphasised the need for lower level managers to do the same.

[I try to] persuade the people I work most closely with, which are the next level below, to actually have meaningful meetings with people ... that it’s important and ... “Look, I meet you and so your staff have a right to expect you to meet them” (PO and above).

This Principal Officer spoke of the importance of Assistant Secretaries and other management board members getting out of their offices “at least once every two months” to meet people. It “goes down well” and gives people the opportunity to speak about their work in front of colleagues rather than the management board “going around offices and just saying ‘Hello’ to people”.

Several references were made to the inflow of new staff in general following the lifting of the recruitment embargo. This was universally regarded as a positive development, giving rise to new ideas and greater questioning around current work practices and processes. While there was certainly evidence of open leadership styles among some of the more longer serving management, the infiltration of individuals with management experience from the private sector was particularly noted.

The Principal Officer that I have now has come in from the private sector so they have a different approach ... style and that to dealing with things ... I think somebody from the private sector is more kind of ... receptive to more and has kind of brought in ideas as well [about] how we can be more innovative and that, and in how we even communicate and that as well (HEO).

And this whole idea of silos, maybe that will eventually change when people who have a new way of thinking and new entrants who now have this way of thinking now about being inclusive and moving up the ladder ... maybe that’s where we will see the change. It may not be a change that’s across the board but it’s just a general clear out of the Civil Service across the last 5 years (HEO).

The existence of networks was identified as a very positive development and a powerful catalyst for new learning. Some individuals initiated the setting up of these networks within their own grades, building on from their establishment at more senior levels. Regarding their involvement with a HEO network, one participant commented:

So it’s good, receiving updates on what’s happening across the department. We have been to, say, [division] and people were amazed at the work they were doing and weren’t aware of the projects that they were involved in and the roles (HEO).
The main barriers to innovation related to the following: resistance to change, lack of openness to new ideas, inaction and lack of transparency in decision-making, lack of resources and a poor IT and digital infrastructure.

The findings from the interviews and focus groups suggest that, across all grades, resistance to change is regarded as a key barrier to innovation. It was suggested that this resistance can be due to perceived threat, caution and fear. This reflects the viewpoint that the work of the Civil Service is “inherently conservative and cautious”, with “no big steps” (AP), which was regarded as an impediment to larger-scale, organisation-wide changes.

I feel that the people that are there a long time are very threatened by it. They are very threatened by change... I can see that they are trying to change it but people are nervous of change. That kind of stops me from encouraging it to be honest with you because you get snapped at or whatever (CO).

It was suggested that many people, particularly those who have been in the Civil Service for many years, have a deep-seated resistance to change. Others felt threatened that they might not be able to meet the expectations that innovation would require.

Maybe the innovation word is a bit, it puts people off a little bit. It does make you feel kind of, "Oh my God. That means that I have to come up with an idea by the end of six months’ time and if I don’t, it’s not going to look good" (AP).

The rules that exist within the system were regarded as a further impediment to innovation.

As still a relative newcomer to the Civil Service I find it’s very... rule intensive and regulations and you have to be very careful that you understand the operating system that you’re within, because... it’s too easy to go off in a direction only to be pulled back because, there are circulars, and there are rules and regulations which aren’t necessarily all kept in one place (PO and above).

Another fear was that innovation carries risk that may have wider political consequences. This was reflected in the view that "people care a lot more about how things are portrayed rather than how they actually are sometimes" (AO).

Innovation is great if someone comes up with a new idea. That part is fun and you can talk about that new idea: “here’s what we came up with”. But the other side of innovation is that it’s a risk and if something goes wrong, then somebody is going to get blamed and there’s going to be a parliamentary question ... and then they’re going to find out who made that mistake. So I think there’s a reluctance to innovate too much. You can do things a little bit differently, but people get too nervous when you start doing things a bit too differently (AP).

It was also suggested that there can be a ‘collective power’ among institutionalised groups and that the culture in offices or units can, as a result, give rise to strong opposition to new ideas and practices. In particular, where there are changes that involve more than one area or department, “it [the other department] might reject it because of the mentality and nothing else” (Assistant Principal). This form of resistance can also come from an attitude that individuals are the ‘expert decision makers’ because of their tenure, grade or seniority.
In general, within the Civil Service and innovation, I think the attitude is a huge thing. We liaise with other departments on certain issues and people’s attitude change is the biggest thing, I think. We are quite like, “OK, that’s not working. Let’s move on or let’s try something different” and then we have just finished something with another department and, “No.” “This is the way we have always done it.” “No. We can’t do that.” (EO).

Sometimes I hear stories that … in some departments you can’t even say hello to an AP if you’re an EO and stuff like that. Then my PO welcomes everyone in, you can question him all the time. The hierarchy is still there (EO).

There was also some indication that there was an element of resistance to change at very senior levels.

PO and/or APs are not speaking about the bigger items and are being told, “Oh, there is your box and stick within it” (AP).

Many individuals at lower grades feel that the grade structure “keeps them down … it’s archaic” and that because of their lower grade they feel “they should leave their ideas at the door”. A general perception is that, in many sections and departments, the hierarchy is too rigid and that it should be possible to interact with the most senior grades.

He (EO) is quite inexperienced and I don’t want to be talking [over his head] if you understand … as I do say to myself, “I am only the CO” but I have a huge amount of experience and I have already been suggesting things to him and I don’t want to feel that I am … I don’t want to be “overstepping my mark” (CO).

One senior manager questioned why people are reluctant to ‘push forward’ on ideas:

People are saying “aw, I think it should be online” and “oh well, I’ve an idea” and I’m like “well why didn’t you come in with the idea?” … you know people sometimes people feel they have ideas that could have worked better but … they don’t push them forward, you know? (PO and above).

A number of reasons for this lack of receptiveness to ideas were suggested by participants. It was suggested that there is sometimes no follow through “out of fear that there would be a high risk to tax payer’s money”, or that ideas “fall down … because there is an initial cost [and then] obviously it is going to take a lot more resources whereas [otherwise, without the change] you can keep tipping along”. Other reasons related to simply “bad timing” or just “no appetite for change”.

It was also suggested that while ideas might not be entirely rejected “out of hand”, many senior management often initially signal openness and support for new ideas, but then this is followed by no further action. This finding, which links back to the culture of rules and resistance that was previously described, can give rise to high levels of frustration across grades because there is often no further acknowledgement of the idea having been proposed and no follow-up to explain why initiatives are not being pursued.
A number of constraints to innovation were identified that related to inadequate staffing and financial resources to facilitate new ideas. In particular, a high level of frustration was expressed due to excessive work pressures. It is apparent that some sections are currently under-resourced and additional job demands and time pressures are regarded as a major barrier to innovation. There were several references to staff ‘drowning’ in work due to a lack of staffing resources. This was often, though not exclusively, because individuals availing of mobility opportunities in certain sections and departments had yet to be replaced. Some participants had noted that additional staff were promised several months previously, but that these resources were not forthcoming. In one instance, a very distressed HEO staff member was told by her manager: ‘the only way you will [avoid this pressured situation] is promotion’.

Participants also noted the constant pressure caused by “crisis situations” including, for example, responses to ministerial questions and press releases which was also identified as stressful.

Another AO suggested that attempts to communicate concerns about work pressures can be communicated back as a “personal weakness” or a “failing”, reflecting a “culture that stems … from, in some cases the manager [being] under a huge amount of pressure … so then they put staff under pressure … because that is just the culture that they [management] have absorbed” (AO).

While budgetary considerations did not emerge as a significant impediment to innovation, it was suggested:

[Senior levels] need to stop treating the team as a firefighting outfit, give us time to maybe focus on more strategic stuff and also just to reduce the amount of extreme pressure we are under constantly … have a system where you could more accurately distribute work and also maybe where things coming in weren’t always such blazing hot issues (AO).

In certain departments and sections, it was suggested that there can be openness to new ideas if people “have evidence to back up changes” proposed (HEO) or if there is no significant cost to implementing the idea (EO).
I suppose, I guess it depends on what’s being proposed, you know? So I would have proposed something recently ... but that didn’t necessarily have to go through hoops. I just, I went directly to the PO who would end up ... making the decision ... and made a suggestion and they are acting on that so ... (EO).

There were several references to the poor IT infrastructure and the reluctance to adopt advanced digital processing and communication methods, which were regarded as major impediments to innovation.

Accounts still look for the originals ... So basically, say for instance, if you are out in the “big bad world”, and a company sends you an invoice electronically, it’s a digital signature, print it off, you get two signatories on it, send it away and it should be paid. But they [Accounts] look for the original. In this day and age, that really, really irks me to be quite honest with you (EO).

Methods of communication, including information detailed on websites and other databases, were also regarded as out-dated. One HEO group spoke of a training course that was organised to operate a new IT system, which was subsequently cancelled due to technical problems. In response, an alternative videoconferencing training session was arranged some weeks later but, on that occasion, the conference was inaudible. At another consultation forum, staff communicated that they wanted better use of technology and better messaging:

We wanted modern communications ... The response was “OK, we have listened to your requests for new technology so now we are having a video blog.” That’s not anything ... [what] the Sec Gen was talking about was not any different from [them] writing an email ... There is no over and back’ (HEO).

PeoplePoint was also a source of much discontent. There were other frustrations noted across the various grades with regard to antiquated technology and processes, as well as delays in getting IT upgrades.

We have been trying to get a new IT system for, I think, four or five years. We have made our business case, it was accepted, but for various reasons it hasn’t happened and well, that’s demoralising and that’s the kind of innovation that is relatively straightforward (PO and above).

It’s one of the difficulties that I have with the likes of the Civil Service Renewal, the Civil Service is not like a private sector organisation ... It’s probably more conservative but that’s partly because of the nature of what we do. So I do think people are open to ideas but it has to be within the context of ... There are certain sensitivities ... That doesn’t mean you won’t do it [make changes] but you have to at least be aware of that. Obviously, that’s politically sensitive for the Minister as well, so you have to take all of those things into account ... my own view is if an idea is good, great. But you have to set out the pros and cons and then it’s a balancing act as to whether that’s going to work or not (PO and above).

All in all, the current IT and digital infrastructure of the organisation was noted as a significant barrier to innovation.
5.5 Spotlight of Grade Perspectives: Innovative Climate

Figure 11 presents a summary of views on the innovative climate across the various grades.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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".

**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.
5.6 Conclusion

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 departments and sections. The strong influence of varying leadership styles is perhaps the key differentiator in explaining these contrasting findings. The easing of recruitment restrictions has clearly brought fresh thinking about ‘how things are done’, but there is also evidence of resistance to change.

Our findings suggest that the vision or goals for innovation across the Civil Service are not clearly articulated. It may not be a good idea to get too hung up on the notion of innovation but rather, as one Principal Officer put it, focusing on the notion of “something that is possible and adds value”. The focus on innovation should be on the more common-place but effective initiatives that can be effective in transforming everyday activities and therefore introduce new and more effective and efficient ways of working.
6.0 THE MANAGEMENT OF PERFORMANCE

6.1 Introduction

The issue of measuring and managing performance is one that is of ongoing concern to organisations in both the private and public sectors. This is evidenced by the very large numbers of publications and reports aiming to both understand and improve performance at both individual and organisational levels. At the same time, performance is notoriously difficult to measure, particularly as the outcomes of initiatives intended to improve performance are nearly impossible to interpret given the very large numbers of other factors that might influence the impact of such initiatives (March and Sutton, 1997). However, these difficulties have not prevented researchers and consultants from trying to understand the nature of performance management in the public sector (Arnaboldi, Lapsley and Steccolini, 2015; Radnor and Maguire, 2004; Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan, 2015).

In considering the nature of performance management, it is useful to differentiate between performance measurement and performance management. Performance measurement includes measures such as those based on critical success factors, those used to track past achievements and measures of input and outputs. In contrast, performance management is a much broader concept that includes training, teamwork, employee involvement, incentives, rewards, the building of trust, the creation of conditions of empowerment, the management of team learning and the creation of linkages between performance and employee engagement (Mone and London, 2018; OECD, 2017b; OCED, 2019). Many consultancy firms are also heavily engaged in determining the ways in which performance might be managed and these also emphasise a wider understanding of performance and its interlinkages (see, for example, https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/focus/human-capital-trends/2017/redesigning-performance-management.html).

Following a brief look at the findings of the survey, this section first of all considers performance management in its broadest sense as the leadership and management of people, including the management of underperformance. The analysis then examines employee views on the performance management system and the ideas put forward as to how performance might be improved.
6.2 Performance Management in the Civil Service: The Research Context

Figure 12 provides an overview of the CSEES survey findings in regard to performance standards. It is useful 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 their department had high performance standards, just less than a half considered that their department was measuring performance in order to ensure that staff are achieving results.

**Performance Standards**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor performance is effectively addressed throughout the department.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior managers in the department are held accountable for achieving results.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The department has high performance standards.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in the department are held accountable for achieving goals and meeting expectations</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The department measures job performance to ensure all staff are achieving results.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
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Table 3. Indicators of Performance Management
6.3 Findings From the Interviews and Focus Groups

The management of civil servants is complex. This complexity is not simply due to the fact that Civil Service departments are very large entities with correspondingly large numbers of staff, but it is also the case that the types of staff they need to employ encompass so many different technical, administrative, clerical, professional and managerial positions. This is further complicated by the fact that promotion systems cut across these roles with the structuring of grades, and their concomitant promotion opportunities, encouraging a generalist approach to an individual’s career expectations. Yet, in common with private sector organisations, the Civil Service is relying more and more on specialists in order to undertake its core activities. This specialist/generalist challenge creates challenges for all levels of management.

There is also this fixation, I would say, that a lot of staff have about mobility, that your career development prospects, your promotional prospects are almost entirely dependent on having had a broad range of opportunities and moved from here to there ... I think as leaders, as senior managers, we need to think about other ways in which we show people what they do, and particularly if they are specialists in an area, that what they do is really valuable to the organisation (PO and above).

6.4 Enablers and Barriers of Performance Management

A number of enablers and barriers were identified with regard to the effective management of performance. The main barriers related to the inadequacy of the current Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) and its implementation by managers, the failure to tackle underperformance, the size, complexity and rigidity of the promotion system, and the distinction between generalist and specialist roles. Management styles were identified as either an enabler or a barrier depending on whether these styles were participative or autocratic.

Many of the barriers raised by participants related to manager and leadership culture and appetite to deal with performance and disciplinary issues. Effective people manager behaviour as a key enabler of performance is prioritised in the Civil Service People Strategy 2017-2020 and work is ongoing on a range of initiatives aimed at building, supporting and valuing people managers. Initiatives include policy reformulation; expert advice through central Communities of Expertise; information/data; and clarity of the role and performance accountability of people managers.

6.4.1 Leadership Styles in Managing

There was general agreement that management/leadership styles vary immensely throughout the Civil Service. While some areas are managed along the lines of participative management, other areas still rely on traditional, bureaucratic approaches which are at odds with the team-based structures that are now central to the way in which much work is organised. Some senior managers were perceived as distancing themselves from lower grades and as maintaining a hierarchical stance. In addition, in some areas there appears to be the potential for the automation of certain types of activities which might resolve some of the difficulties in supervising the completion of more mundane, repetitive tasks. Many HEOs expressed frustration with their capacity to manage, indicating that they had no control over decisions and that “the worst policy decisions are made at times when there was no proactivity and inclusivity in the decision-making process” (HEO). They also felt that they had to replicate the leadership and decision-making style adopted by their more senior managers, even if they considered this inappropriate. Some HEOs spoke of the fact that they were excluded from certain meetings or warned not to speak at other meetings. Worryingly, none of the HEOs could describe his/her leadership style, nor were any of them able to identify a leadership style appropriate to and valued by the Civil Service.

It does depend on your manager. We are very lucky. Our AP is excellent and ... She wants us to progress and you would know that and she is very inclusive and open. I would consider her to be a good manager (EO).
I would like my managers to get to know me better, to be able to trust me a little bit more, to take more of an interest in me, and I think just to see individuals as they are when they start and to take an interest in staff. I think to build a team, to make a team that you can rely on, that they have your back (CO).

Senior leadership needs to be collaborative, un-constraining in terms of what the work is, and willing and open to listen to feedback from lower levels (AP).

The above quotes highlight the tensions that grade divisions can create, where leadership styles embedded in a lack of inclusivity and a constrained capacity to make decisions can be stifling for wider employee engagement and development.

6.4.2 The Management of Underperformance

There was a widely held view amongst all grades that the management of underperformance is problematic. From the perspective of those in higher grades, there is the difficulty of defining the precise nature of employee behaviour that might be labelled as ‘underperformance’ and handled through the performance management system and differentiating this from employee behaviour that might be labelled as disruptive or mischievous, which might be better handled through disciplinary procedures (PO and above). In addition, there was the potential problem of counter-accusations of bullying if underperformance was tackled (AP) as well as the taking of sick leave or a grievance case (HEO). In addition, at AP level there was the view that performance management was not prioritised by the management board and therefore was unlikely to be prioritised by lower-level managers. From the perspective of lower grades, a view put forward among HEOs was that there was no appetite for tackling the underperformance of senior managers so that there was inequity and imbalance in the management of underperformance - underperformance was relegated to the realm of lower grades. Senior managers were also perceived by the HEO grade as not providing support to more junior managers in their tackling of underperformance. In addition, it was not seen by HEOs as in their best interests in terms of their own promotion in taking on the challenge of dealing with underperformance.

Well, is it underperformance or is this something which is essentially disciplinary in nature? You know, is this just unacceptable behaviour? (PO and above).

In certain places, people don’t want to address issues of non-performance and … They [under-performers] are moved on, they are moved around, they are given different options (EO).

One particular element of underperformance that was noted across grades is the impact that this has on individuals who are performing and the sense of unfairness that this creates.

6.4.3 The Impact of Underperformance

Not surprisingly, when managers were faced with delegating a particular task or project they were inclined to delegate to those whom they felt confident would deliver. However, this overburdens staff who are performing well in their roles and allows underperformers to continue to underperform.

Unfortunately, in my view on this as well is that within the Civil Service, within every organisation, you will have good people and you have people who will just come in, do the bare minimum and go back out again, but the people who do the bare minimum, they can keep below the radar … Say, for instance, a project came up and it needs to be done very, very quick, you want somebody reliable, somebody dependable, somebody up to the task that can do that body of work and deliver it back to you on time. So you are not going to go to these people and it’s the same, it’s the Civil Service wide over and over again. The good people get dumped on (EO).
I think the thing that annoys me the most is just the lack of discipline basically. People get away with a lot of stuff and it’s just, it’s very annoying, especially for people who actually come in and do a lot of work and do it well (CO).

It’s easy for everybody to have kind of favourites or deviate towards the one who will be the less difficult and will do it …. I think that’s always been a big thing in the Civil Service, the classic quote “the more you do, the more you get” … so it’s trying to be as fair as possible in that regard. It’s a difficult one really (AP).

6.4.4 The Performance Management and Development System (PMDS)

There were mixed views on the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS). This was viewed positively by some as providing a clearly defined system and therefore a paper trail that could be called on if required (PO and above). It was also viewed as encouraging individuals to improve so that any potential conflict was removed (PO and above) as well as providing the opportunity for individuals to both detail their work achievements, to review their workload and make it publicly available for everyone to see as well as providing an occasion for an individual to speak with his or her manager (AP). There were also positive comments from lower grades who viewed it as useful for addressing various problems, for identifying what was required in the job, and for identifying training needs and opportunities (CO).

The recently revised system allows for only a satisfactory or unsatisfactory rating and this was considered unfair and as providing no incentive to perform (EOs, COs) as all those receiving a satisfactory rating receive the same increment, no matter how well they are performing. Thus it fails to distinguish high performers as these are treated in exactly the same way as those just meeting minimal requirements (HEOs, EOs, COs). Some individuals use the PMDS simply as a means of ensuring they receive their annual increment, but once they reach the top of the scale there is no further financial incentive to perform (HEO). However, one HEO did point out that this did remove ambiguity from the assessment system and enable underperformance to be dealt with more easily.

Any positive comments about performance management were, however, far outweighed by the negative and these were much more common among those in HEO and lower grades. Here the PMDS was criticised as being merely a “paper” or “box ticking exercise”, that is a “waste of time” and “narrow rather than strategic in focus” (HEOs, EOs); or as not capturing the nuances of performance within a job i.e. the tasks that people are good at and those with which they might need developmental support (COs).

In addition, the fact that individuals can decide against having a meaningful conversation surrounding the performance management process creates difficulties for managers in managing staff performance (HEOs).

The current two-point performance management system was the target of particular criticism. It was regarded as demotivating and ineffectual in the management of either underperformance or high performance. Participants commented:

I don’t think it’s effective, because it’s just a two-point system. I think I preferred the five-point system to be honest. I feel that there is a grading opportunity there in a five-point system whereas in the two-point system I think most people are going to say “satisfactory” and how you interpret that word is very subjective, I think. If someone tells me I had a “satisfactory” performance, it’s not a fabulous performance. It’s just like, it’s just ticking a box. To me, it acts as a demotivator (EO).

You have to fill it out. Nobody looks at it, nobody reads it. There is no feedback from it. Your manager signs off on it (EO).
The failure of the current system to differentiate between high and low performers was also noted:

So I have somebody reporting to me who I think should get an Oscar every year and I just have to give him... All I can do is say, “You were absolutely fantastic and your performance was satisfactory”, you know, and there is nothing I can do to make, to shine a light on that person (EO).

I’m a bit useless trying to account how they did in the last six months so I find it doesn’t work very well for me to sit down and have this conversation once or twice a year (AP).

The intended operation of the system also seems to be at odds with how it operates in practice and is poorly understood. This includes a lack of understanding of how individuals’ objectives and activities link to overall strategic objectives.

In addition, the fact that a perception exists that individuals can decide against having a feedback conversation was the subject of some criticism.

We have this underperformance training, and we have all this management training. And it says to you that good management is about communication. It’s about talking to people face to face. And then for PMDS, they give us a portal. That means you don’t even have to sit face to face and speak to someone if you don’t want to... You can tick the box and say I don’t want any feedback (AP).

All in all, the findings point to the need for a review of the existing PMDS system to clarify if the process is fundamentally flawed or if the problem lies with how it is utilised as a management tool - or if it is a combination of both. Any such review should be aligned with work which is underway in the the context of the Civil Service People Strategy aimed at strengthening and supporting managers in the people management aspect of their roles.

6.5 Improving performance

Comments from individuals provided insights into various aspects of performance which provide clues as to how this might be improved. These indicate the need for individuals to understand how their contribution fits into the overall plan for their particular section; for individuals to be fully utilised and given responsibilities to stretch them; for there to be a fit between the individuals’ knowledge, skills and abilities and those needed in the job; and to try and capture the behaviours of high performing individuals so that such behaviours might be encouraged elsewhere.

I just feel like I am stagnating now. I mean, I am unfortunate that I was in one unit, done that, moved to a new unit, involved in the whole process of setting it up, other areas. I have a lot more freedom than most and even then I still like, “It’s just not enough” because I am not being engaged (EO).

There should be more of a focus of, “Well, what goals were set for them?” If they are clearly not doing their goals in the first quarter or two of the year, then it’s a performance issue, and there is a performance improvement plan. So I just think that culturally it has been left kind of sit, that “We will take the laissez faire approach” and that’s just not good enough (AP).
6.6 Spotlight on Grade Perspectives: Performance Management

Figure 13 presents a summary of views on performance management across the various grades.

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.

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.

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.

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.
6.7 Conclusion

The complex and multi-faceted nature of performance is evidenced by the comments and viewpoints captured in the interviews and focus groups. 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. It is evident that there are problems with the PMDS system and it seems neither to encourage nor reward high performing individuals or deal with those who are underperforming.

However, as pointed out above, performance management is a complex challenge and PMDS is a tool to support managers in this aspect of their role. Work which is underway in the context of the Civil Service People Strategy to strengthen and support the people role of managers is focused on addressing the performance management challenges which have been identified in this report.
Public Perception
This measures how Civil Servants feel valued and perceived by the general public.

7.1 Introduction
The social phenomenon of public perception has received recent attention by governance experts, economists and sociologists, with the aim of determining the causes and activities that help promote positive relations with citizens (OECD, 2011). While citizens may associate their opinion on the quality of services that they receive and on the positive or negative emotional reactions that they may feel when dealing with public services (Vigoda-Gadot, 2000), the social influence and opinion dynamics also bear significance. The image of the public sector has also been found to be related to democratic norms (Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi, 2007) and citizens who demonstrate more affirmation of public services have been associated with increases in public law-abiding behaviours (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). Citizens’ perceptions of public services has also been found to lead to trust in government (Christensen and Lægreid, 2005; Van Ryzin, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007).
Moreover, researchers argue that perception of the public sector has the potential to affect the ability of the Civil Services to compete with private firms for the most skilled workers (Ariely, 2011; Bilmes and Gould 2009).
7.2. Research on Poor Public Perception

7.2.1 Media Engagement

Mass media, ‘the organised means of communicating openly, at a distance, and to many in a short space of time’ (McQuail, 2005, p. 4) serve as highly influential interpreters of a crisis and are very effective for starting a public discussion on a critical issue (Korn and Einwiller, 2013). Unfortunately for the Civil Service, bad news sells much better than good news (Coombs, 2007) and given people’s tendency to pay more attention to and focus their mental energy on content when they hear messages that affect them in important ways (Perse, 2001). It is understandable why negative media attention can intensify both the situation and the effects for the staff (Pearson and Clair, 1998; Fearn-Banks, 2001). As the importance or relevance of the situation increases for the employee, so does the intensity of the emotional reaction.

Researchers argue that negative media coverage affects employees more than any other stakeholder or media audience (Korn and Einwiller 2013) not only because each big media story poses a threat to operations (Coombs, 2007, p. 164), but also from employees’ high level of involvement (Korn and Einwiller 2013), increased attention and mental energy towards considering message content (Perse, 2001, p. 88).

Moreover, employees’ appraisal of a situation or event causes an emotional response (Smith and Kirby, 2009) which tends to be greater for individuals with a higher level of organisational identification (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Johansen, Aggerholm and Frandsen, 2012) making employees with longer tenure with the organisation more susceptible. A quantitative survey among 237 communication managers responsible for crisis preparedness in Danish companies, observed a higher level of frustration among employees, more insecurity and the need for information when the company fell under media’s criticism (Johansen et al., 2012). Negative public perception can also impact an individual’s orientation toward their job as another study on police officers in the United States found that officers were less motivated and had reduced confidence in performing their role as a result of negative publicity (Nix and Wolfe, 2017). Research also suggests that members’ beliefs about how others view an organisation play an important role in how the members themselves view and respond to the organisation (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn 1995; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994; Hatch and Schultz, 1997; 2002). Managers have been found to make decisions and take actions with respect to communicating the intended image to the customer based on their perceptions of how others view the organisation (Brown et al., 2006). In short, the media and public perception have influence on how employees view and respond to their organisation.

7.2.2 Public Engagement

‘Corporate image’ - what external stakeholders believe or feel about the company (Bernstein, 1984) and ‘Construed image’ - what the organisation’s members believe outsiders think about their organisation (Brown et al., 2006; Lievens, Van Hove and Anseel, 2007), play an important role in the customer/ employee relationship as well as how the members themselves view and respond to the organisation (Hatch and Schultz 2002). For example, when an individual believes that their organisation is valued or held in high esteem by others outside that organisation, this can lead to stronger feelings of identification to, and attachment with, the focal organisation (Bankins and Waterhouse, 2019). It also has an impact on extra-role behaviour (Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen, 2005).

Citizens also develop perceptions of public services by relying on dialogue and their personal experiences (James and Moseley, 2014), which have been argued to offer a ‘largely untravelled pathway leading to new business knowledge’ because it facilitates learning (Ballantyne, 2004). One of these benefits is the strengthening of the customer / civil servant relationship in the form of trust (Christensen and Lægreid, 2005). While literature on public engagement to improve public perception is scant, co-creation and participative design between public sector organisations and the public are on the rise (OECD, 2011; Horne and Shirley, 2009), which researchers argue can enhance democratic participation and legitimacy of the public sector (Warren, 2002), enhance trust in government (Torfing and Sørensen and Raiseland, 2019) and improve service delivery via innovative solutions that outperform existing practices (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). Finally, civil servants can act as brand ambassadors thereby making their interaction with external stakeholders paramount in shaping the external view of the brand (de Chernatony, 2006; Wallace and de Chernatony, 2008) which is particularly relevant to customer-facing employees for their power to influence the impression that customers form of the organisation (Whelan et al., 2010).
7.3 The Impact of Public Perception on the Civil Service

Citizens seem to automatically and unconsciously associate public sector organisations with inefficiency and inflexibility, and these automatic associations are argued to colour their assessments of the public sector (Marvel, 2016). Not only do citizens tend to base their performance assessment of public services on image (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2007), negativity bias can result in harsh assessment of public services where citizens (unconsciously) fail to objectively recognise good performance (Christensen, 2018; Marvel, 2016; Van Slyke and Roch, 2004). Relatively well-functioning public services can also be perceived to fail because of association: the reputation clouds the actual experience (Goodsell, 2003), which has also been shown to persist even after a positive experience (Del Pino et al., 2016; Goodsell, 2003). Findings also suggest that a negative image of public administration or civil servants persists even after positive encounters and experiences (Del Pino et al., 2016).

Individuals’ implicit attitudes about the public sector are argued to be influenced by the messages they receive from their socio-political cultural environments and that these messages are frequent and frequently negative (Marvel, 2016). Granted that a negative public image does not necessarily mean it will have an impact on the performance of administrative services, research has demonstrated links between customer orientation and positive organisational outcomes at both the individual and corporate level (Whelan et al., 2010). Studies also indicate that employee perceptions of societal respect and support can have a positive and independent impact on individuals’ job satisfaction (Steel et al., 2017).

7.4 Public Perception in the Civil Service: The Research Context

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. Public perception ratings are uniquely different across employee groups which are rated more favourably as employee ranks (grade groups) increase as shown in the Figure 14.

![Public Perception Index Scores Across Each Grade](image-url)
Table 4 provides the average score for each question encompassed within the public perception theme for 2015 and 2017. Ratings for each grade are also provided.

### Public Perception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Perception</th>
<th>All Grades (average)</th>
<th>Director, ASG and above</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>AO</th>
<th>HEO</th>
<th>EO / SO</th>
<th>CO, SVO, Industrial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel that the public value the work the Civil Service does.</td>
<td>35 40 39 45</td>
<td>35 42 36 40</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel the public respect the Civil Service for its work.</td>
<td>32 37 37 43</td>
<td>33 40 33 37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel the public appreciate the work of the Civil Service.</td>
<td>32 37 36 42</td>
<td>32 39 33 36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32 36</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Indicators of Public Perception

### 7.5 Findings from the Interviews and Focus Groups

For the civil servant, a key motivator in work relates to the need to act in the best interests of the customer and to make a positive impact in citizens’ lives:

> ... I don’t think there is any job that has better job satisfaction than in the public sector. So if it’s a situation where you are not serving the best interests of the public sector, it’s just awful (AP).

The importance of public opinion and feedback around the quality of the services being offered is important to civil servants, even in roles where there is little or no direct contact with the end customer. Our findings suggest that employees take pride in being helpful, accountable and being able to provide high quality customer service: “people generally like to be helpful” (HEO). In this regard, public perception is concerned with having “a certain responsibility for the organisation and the work” and “doing the right thing for and on behalf of the Irish public … whether they are grateful or not” (PO and above).

While public perception does affect individuals across the various grades on an emotional level, this is particularly stronger for individuals who identify with their jobs.

However, our findings suggest that others learn to live with the public backlash, as one HEO stated: “That’s 18 years of people telling me they are paying my wages and whatever it is. So be it. It doesn’t bother me in the slightest now” (HEO). Another commented:

> I don’t think that the public’s perception of them would impact on how they would deal with it to be honest. I think maybe civil servants are kind of thick-skinned (HEO).

Participants in the research generally had a realistic understanding about the political landscape within which they operate and the associated environmental constraints for engaging and interacting with the public. As such, there was some sense that a certain degree of ridicule from time to time is generally accepted and ‘par for the course’.
7.6 Enablers and Barriers of Public Perception

The findings from the research suggest that there are some key enablers for public perception. These are summarised in Figure 15.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental Level</th>
<th>Media attention (positive), Media Advisories providing strong support and direction, Political Support / Minister support (resources, autonomy, authority, etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Organisational Level | • Media savviness of the departments.  
• Strong Leadership of creating a clear customer-focused vision.  
• Operational Efficiency (Policies, systems & measures to improve service delivery).  
• Continuous improvement to alignment policies and practices.  
• Enabling technologies for service quality.  
• Communicating impact. |
| Individual/Employee Level | • Service orientation alignment of organizational goals and employee values.  
• Realistic understanding about working in the political landscape, Collegial support (Social Support).  
• Standards and capabilities for service delivery within each role. |

Figure 15. Enablers of Public Perception

An employee’s ability to make good decisions and follow through on them appears to be of utmost importance in driving a positive public perception. As one EO noted: “We take pride in our work and we want to make correct decisions” (EO). Client facing roles also seem to provide opportunities for feedback that supports role satisfaction: “I am on the phone bank and talking to people and dealing with their claims and being helpful, they will give you good feedback” (CO).

Some environmental qualities also appear to mitigate the impact of negative public perception for employees. For example: one senior manager indicated that public perception has less impact on staff than it could have due to staff being “a bit more informed, even about what one area is doing compared to others” thus providing testament to the power of knowledge sharing and transparency of operations (PO and above). Another stated that a “collegial atmosphere between civil servants in here is the most important, so at least the inside are supporting each other” (PO and above), which seems to help alleviate some of the negative impact of public perception.

Compared to recent years, employees are observing positive changes in terms of interventions that support them better in customer facing roles:

It’s nice dealing with people. It’s difficult because you have to be kind of on the ball all the time and really and dealing with people all the time. We had a staff meeting one time back kind of near when I started .... I put my hand up and I said, “Is it possible for us to not have to be on the hatch every day?” Sometimes, you are actually just not able. A couple of years later, a new AP came in. She said, “We are going to change this because it’s not healthy (EO).”

There is also an indication that operations are becoming better aligned to better service the needs of the customer:

They are still changing how they do business ...it has become a lot more customer-focused... they are trying to help people, so people aren’t being sent from one place to another.
There has been a very concerted effort over the last few years to improve on our customer relations ... so, I think we have improved (PO and above).

In terms of key barriers to a positive public perception, the lack of recognition and credit for good work within the Civil Service emerged as an important issue.

We are very slow to give ourselves credit. That was a huge undertaking and it worked well (EO).

Customers responded to how they felt our services were delivered ... and it was really good. But that wasn't publicised ... senior management weren't aware of those surveys ... They should have been pushing that out there and making a big deal of it (HEO).

I wish that that was something that could be addressed, that we would start appreciating ourselves a little bit more (PO and above).

7.7 Outcomes of Public Perception

On a personal level, individuals in the most senior grades of the organisation (PO and above) appear to be more immune to negative public perception. Their views were predominantly centred on how staff might be affected by public perception. They openly acknowledged a key barrier as the potential emotional and behavioural impact that negative public perception might have on lower grades. One senior leader noted: “People are affected or impacted by this kind of, this constant narrative, you know, about private good, public bad” (PO and above).

Another stated that “it was quite dark during the dark times [The whole private vs public] and some people have embodied that” (PO and above). Some tactical examples of leadership behaviour modelling were provided illustrating that there are some good practices of leadership around this topic within the Civil Service. For example: “They say to me, ‘So you mean we can’t just impose the decision on the person?’ ‘No, no, we can’t.’ Those days are gone” (PO and above). In short, public perception does not appear to be a “burning platform” for senior leadership, which is evidenced by the fact that no ideas were presented to indicate that some sort of plan or strategy was in place to address it for lower level staff.

As with senior leaders, observations at the AP grade indicate that public perception has limited impact on a personal level. The focus of most dialogue was on how lower level staff might be affected by public perception and what the Civil Service could do to improve it. APs appear to be poised to mobilise solutions to improve this area as indicated by the use of positive language such as “huge scope”, “boast”, “proactive”. This lack of publicity about the work that civil servants do was not unique at senior grades.

We want to showcase ourselves and what we do. We want to showcase actually what achievements the departments have had. A big organisation in the private sector would have an annual report and put it up there and boast about it (AP).

Individuals at the HEO level were consistent in terms of their openness to discussing problems and highlighting the negative emotional impact that public perception has on them, which appears to be greater than those at higher levels. This was indicated in the strength and tone of the language in statements such as, “the department is its own worst enemy” (HEO). Feedback from one HEO focus group highlights frustrations with not only how employees feel they are treated by the Civil Service when faced with negative publicity, but mostly with their lack of voice.

HEOs consistently raised the need for senior management to show leadership and ownership in responding to public backlashes and to support staff to alleviate issues around public perception. One HEO stated for example:
Employees at the AO level appear to be a bit removed from the impact of public perception and gave no indication that it had any emotional impact on them. This might be due to their apparent distance from the customer and possibly as a result of lower tenure with the organisation. That said, AOs are acutely aware of the reputation of the Civil Service among the public and most dialogue was centred around creating awareness about what civil servants are doing and communicating this value to the customer. One AO claimed that “the Civil Service is very optics-driven ... people care a lot more about how things are portrayed than how they actually are sometimes” (AO), thus indicating a disconnect between leadership and the needs of staff that are mobilising service delivery. Public perception has a slightly negative emotional effect on EOs, however most dialogue around the issue centred around the media’s influence on operations and its power to disrupt daily work life.

For the CO and Industrial grade, public perception appears to be all about the customer in terms of connection and dedication to providing service in the most effective way. Issues and challenges raised by this grade stem from this value and the need to operationalise initiatives effectively and ensure that public money is well spent. The following quotes highlight these needs:

I assumed I would have more contact with the external customers or whatever, and that would have been good. I really want to be helpful (CO).

I think in our department, we are very much aware that it’s public money and we are not to be seen to be squandering or wasting it (CO).

Operational challenges and concerns around public engagement appear to be the focus of challenges for the CO grade in relation to public perception. For example, dealing with the public can at times come across as cold and detached, as described by one CO’s desire to connect with the customer in a more personalised manner:

I think sometimes the templates are a little bit not personal enough, you know, and I think to show empathy ... (CO).

Challenging situations in which COs do not have responsibility, decision-making authority and control over, also appear to negatively impact their confidence and thus their capability to respond and support the customer:

It can be disheartening for people on the ground because we were fielding information, “This has to happen” and then suddenly it has changed and the people end up feeling stupid then because they are like, “Well, I was told to tell people this, that and the other and now the whole thing is cancelled” (Industrial).

Finally, the manner in which initiatives are executed is of key importance to this grade. There is a belief that many problems and issues could potentially be circumvented if the Civil Service provided better execution plans and communications with the customer.
7.8 Spotlight on Grade Perspectives: Public Perception

Figure 16 presents a 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.

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.

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.

7.9 Conclusion

Our findings draw attention to the mixed reactions that civil servants have regarding negative media attention and poor public perception. 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. Linked to this sense of frustration, is the lack of credit that is given for what is generally regarded as a very efficient and customer-focused service. The impact of this negative perception can give rise to feelings of emotional distress and frustration thus reinforcing the importance of good leadership, communication and people management practices.
8.0 SUGGESTED RESPONSES TO THE FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

8.1 Introduction

Our findings provide strong evidence to indicate that the Civil Service is playing an important and positive role in transforming public services. These developments have been described as “a sea change”, where traditional assumptions about “how things should be done” are being challenged. While there is certainly some evidence of a lack of openness to new ideas, and a moderate to high level of risk aversion, there is even stronger evidence to suggest that change is happening and that there is a willingness to embrace new ways of working. This is supported by some very good examples of employee involvement but could be further enhanced through greater consistency in leadership and tighter integration with the performance management system. These actions will help to shape a civil service that exudes innovative approaches and more clearly demonstrates that performance is being managed effectively, which will ultimately lead to the organisation being perceived more positively externally. As we have stressed throughout the report, to improve any one of the four areas requires initiatives that speak to more than one area, for instance, enhancing the climate for innovation starts by improving the climate for involvement. We now elaborate on a number of critical recommendations and we signal where recommendations within each theme intersect with the other themes that form part of our investigation.

Our overall conclusion is that there is strong evidence to suggest that a range of positive changes are taking place in the civil service, which are both cultural and, to some extent, transformational. Our findings do point to a range of areas that require attention with regard to the four themes addressed. These reflect to a large degree the tensions apparent in the current ‘hybrid’ culture that currently exists in the civil service. A good deal of inconsistency in styles of leadership is in evidence and this is closely linked to the range of issues identified across the four themes. The issues, however, are highly interrelated, which suggests that improvements within any one theme will have ‘knock-on’ effects on others. The future of work in the civil service is promising, with strong evidence of a highly engaged, talented and committed workforce. While a range of supports are already in place to foster further transformative changes throughout the service, the recommendations arising from this support should go a significant way towards addressing those areas that require further improvement.
8.2 Suggested responses to the findings of the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement Climate</th>
<th>Innovative Climate</th>
<th>Performance Management</th>
<th>Public Perception</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Short Term</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>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).</td>
<td>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 these barriers (Fund established 2019, Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards, Interdepartmental Innovation recognition ceremonies).</td>
<td>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’).</td>
<td>Identify a formal mechanism to capture and disseminate ‘good news’ and initiatives that are having a positive impact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium Term</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reorientate and re-emphasise 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.</td>
<td>Create and cultivate an innovation network to encourage and facilitate knowledge sharing on innovation. (Civil Service/Public Service Innovation Network has been established. Our Public Service 2020 website was launched in October 2019).</td>
<td>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)</td>
<td>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)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Long Term</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Periodically review levels of involvement climate via employee engagement surveys to ensure a culture of involvement is being fostered across the Civil Service.</td>
<td>Invest in IT solutions that can radically accelerate a culture of innovation. Exploit technological opportunities to further develop innovation in the Civil Service.</td>
<td>Investigate future trends, both domestically and internationally, in relation to performance management and related systems. Develop a system to periodically review the performance management process.</td>
<td>Enhance digital communications through digital platforms to reach the wider public.</td>
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</table>

(Content in italics indicates initiatives currently underway related to this area)
FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research that focuses exclusively on the grading structure is a necessary prerequisite to any changes to the hierarchical structure of the Civil Service. Specific questions that need a deeper investigation include:

- Is the narrow grading system fit for purpose or would a broader system better serve productivity, Civil Service careers, and, significantly, the greater public good?
- How do promotion processes, which focus on vertical movement through the grades, change to accommodate better job-skills match?
- Would a Civil Service Career Framework enhance people’s experiences with the current grading system? How would this framework encompass lateral as well as traditional vertical moves?
- What are the wider implications for bureaucracy and productivity of changes to the current grading system?
- What are the main barriers to changing the Civil Service Grading System and associated processes (e.g. recruitment, promotion etc.)?

Finally, the report has emphasised the need for a review of the current performance management system to ascertain if the process itself is fundamentally flawed or if the difficulties reported lie in the manner in which the process is being used as a management tool, or indeed if it is a combination of both. This system may require a complete overhaul and rebranding.

Any major project like this must involve a pre-post evaluation, establishing a baseline of key performance metrics and leveraging data analytics to determine the effectiveness of the change.

Any review should be aligned with work currently underway in the context of the Civil Service People Strategy aimed at strengthening and supporting the people manager role. This includes work on defining the people manager role and performance metrics and the use of data analytics to determine manager effectiveness and changes over time.
REFERENCES


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Yseult Freeney
Natasha McDowell