Research Paper Nº3

Organisational Capacity in the Irish Civil Service

An Examination of the Organisation Review Programme

Joanna O'Riordan

IPA
INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION

State of the Public Service Series

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Contents

Foreword

In the *State of the Public Service* research series, we seek to provide evidence-informed research and commentary on key aspects of contemporary Irish public administration, including its organisational form, systems, people and processes. The authors of these reports bring their considerable expertise and practical knowledge to the topics selected so as to provide evidence, insights and recommendations to support future development. Our aim is that these reports will not only inform, but also challenge current thinking about how the Irish public service performs. It is intended that these short research reports will be of relevance and use not only to public servants, but also to policy-makers and the wider public.

This report examines capacity in the Irish civil service and assesses the impact of the Organisational Review Programme (ORP). In 2006 the government announced that a formal programme for assessing the capacity of departments and offices, the Organisation Review Programme, was to be implemented

Organisation capacity relates to the ability of departments and other agencies to get things done, to address challenges, follow through on commitments and ultimately to achieve valued outcomes for the citizen. In an economic and political context where there is increasing pressure on the civil service to improve performance and productivity, regard for organisation capacity is particularly important. Despite the pressures of what might be perceived to be more immediate concerns, it is critical that the development of organisation capacity remains a central concern of public managers. We hope that this review of the ORP supports departments in their implementation of the recommended actions, but also supports the further development of the ORP process and capacity-building in central government.

Brian Cawley

Director General
Institute of Public Administration

Acknowledgment

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the interest and support of the late Professor John Murray of Trinity College Dublin for this research study. Reform in the public sector was an ongoing interest of Professor Murray's and his reflections on the Organisation Review Programme are cited throughout this report.

I am also grateful to the Public Service Modernisation Division in the Department of the Taoiseach for their interest in this research.

Executive Summary

The Organisation Review Programme: Background and context

The capacity of the Irish civil service relates to the ability of departments and organisations to get things done, to address challenges, follow through on commitments and ultimately to achieve valued outcomes for the citizen.

A decision to undertake capacity reviews of individual departments was announced by the then Taoiseach in June 2006. This initiative places Ireland among a small number of countries at the forefront in progressing the vital issue of capacity in the civil service. Three departments participated in a pilot: the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation (DETI – formerly the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment) and the Department of Transport (DOT).

ORP reviews and the related action plans prepared by the departments in response to the reviews were published in November 2008. Subsequently, four more departments were selected for review in 2009: the Department of Health and Children (DOHC), the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Property Registration Authority (PRA) and the Office or the Revenue Commissioners (Revenue). Reports and action plans in respect of these reviews were published in September 2010.

The purpose of the ORP is to examine the ability of the Irish civil service to respond effectively to challenges, and lead and deliver focused public services into the future. Reviews are not an assessment of performance in terms of how effective an organisation is in developing and delivering government policy. However, reviews do represent a systematic and thorough assessment of the capacity of government departments to address current and future challenges. In departments where ORP findings are fully accepted and acted on, reviews have the potential to be a significant driver of reform, enhanced capacity and improved performance.

Organisation Review Programme findings

Some of the positive findings identified by ORP reviews in respect of all departments include a good level of knowledge and commitment among staff, a good attitude to customer service and a collaborative approach to working with agencies of the departments. However, with the exception of Revenue and the Property Registration Authority, which are regarded as well-placed to meet future challenges, ORP reviews identified serious issues unique to each of the departments, which if left unaddressed would hamper the capacity of departments to deliver on their objectives.

In addition to challenges unique to departments, both the pilot and second round reviews also identified capacity weaknesses experienced by departments in common. Leadership emerges as a particularly pertinent issue as reviews found in the case of the Department of Transport, Department of Health and Children and the Central Statistics Office that there is a need for their top management committees to be more effective in mapping out the strategic direction of the organisation. Furthermore, in all organisations reviewed to date there are concerns about the quality of leadership at levels below top management.

A further dominant theme to emerge across the reviews is shortcomings in the organisations in respect of human resource management. A range of issues are alluded to that lead to frustration among staff and which result in the organisations operating sub-optimally. These include a very mixed approach to people management, failure to tackle underperformance, very limited workforce planning, and issues around succession planning and mobility.

Under the evaluation heading, performance measurement is identified as an area where each of the departments/offices appears to have difficulties. In particular moving along the spectrum from measuring activity to assessing outputs and outcomes presents challenges for departments.

UK experience of capacity reviews

Departmental capability reviews were launched in the UK in October 2005 to assess how well equipped departments are to meet their delivery challenges and to make recommendations in respect of specific areas for improvement. To some extent the approach adopted in the UK provided a template for the ORP. However, in a number of critical ways the two initiatives have also differed.

While a decision was made to run the UK capability review programme from within government, it was deemed essential from a public accountability perspective to include non civil servants on each review team. Notwithstanding some criticism that reviews should be completely independent evaluations, this approach of combining senior civil servants with knowledge of the system, with independent outsiders has been maintained.

A review of the capability review programme carried out in 2009 by the National Audit Office found that departments were taking action in relation to their reviews and that buy-in was taking place. A number of factors were seen to influence this. In particular, permanent secretaries have a personal interest in taking reviews seriously as a result of their accountability to the cabinet secretary and through their individual performance assessments.

In 2009, the Cabinet Office introduced a new model of capability. A key feature of the new model is that it explicitly links capability to results and outcomes. In future reviews, judgments about delivery will be informed by actual delivery according to a consistent set of delivery metrics. Reviews will also include a new section on the performance of departments against stated targets.

Analysis and conclusions

Capacity matters greatly to any organisation. Without the capacity to make good decisions and to implement them, organisations fail. From this perspective, the ORP can be seen as an important and perhaps essential initiative, through

supporting organisations to assess their capacity. The programme also reflects a more general international trend towards evaluation and review across the public sector.

The review process has been much slower in Ireland than in the UK. In the UK, seventeen departments were reviewed over an eighteen month period. In Ireland, from the announcement of the initiative in June 2006 to the end of 2010, only seven reviews have been published. There appear to be particular delays associated with the finalising and publication of reviews and plans. In the foreword to the Second Report of the Organisation Review Programme, the Taoiseach and Secretary General to the Government indicate that all remaining reviews will be completed by end 2012. It is important for the credibility of the programme to stick to this timetable.

The experience of the pilot reviews appears to have been a positive and instructive one for all parties involved in the second round as, while following the same template, overall the quality and presentation of second round reviews is stronger. In relation to action plans, the approach adopted by DOHC and Revenue in putting together action points/commitments is to be recommended. Both link action points to related objectives, expected outcomes, timescale and person or area of responsibility.

An ongoing issue in respect of action plans is that departments have in part seen their plan as an opportunity to defend themselves or 'state their side of the story' in respect of review findings. This detracts from what should be the main focus of action plans – to set out concretely the changes a department is going to make in order to address capacity challenges. There are also examples of weaknesses identified in reviews either being omitted entirely from action plans or under-addressed. Where this arises, as was the case in the three pilot departments, notwithstanding progress in some areas, overall reform efforts will be undermined.

The pilot departments also raised the issue of the changed economic environment and cuts in funding impacting on certain commitments they had hoped to follow through on.

While clearly a different budgetary environment pertains now compared to two years ago when pilot reviews and plans were written, capacity challenges remain precisely that, a hindrance to the effective delivery of the departments' services and objectives. It therefore remains pertinent, perhaps even more so given a context where areas of the civil service are particularly stretched, that management teams continue to make every endeavour to address issues specifically identified as inhibiting their effectiveness.

A strength of UK reviews has been the inclusion of systematic follow-up assessments to determine progress. In Ireland, in the absence of follow-up assessments, it would seem that there is no mechanism for accountability in relation to the implementation of the findings of ORP reviews. In the Irish system, unlike in the UK, there is no formal reporting relationship between individual secretaries general and the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach. Secretaries general are accountable to their minister and the government.

It is critical to the credibility of the ORP that some mechanism is put in place to ensure that organisations actually follow up on commitments made in action plans. The Taoiseach has indicated that the Public Service Board (PSB), announced in June 2010 though not yet established, will be asked to develop proposals to revisit those organisations already reviewed to assess the implementation of their action plans. This should be an early area of focus for the PSB.

While management in each department/office can and should take responsibility for all capacity weaknesses identified in their organisations, a number of issues emerge in both the pilot and the second round of reviews where input, support and direction from the centre is desirable (HR issues, governance of agencies, performance measurement, the capacity of Irish officials at EU level). Some research, for example on governance of agencies, has been carried out in relation to these long-standing civil service wide capacity challenges and a number of avenues have been identified for bringing about reform in these areas (the Public Service (Croke Park) Agreement 2010-2014 and

the Public Service Board). However, overall progress remains slow. These ongoing issues are undermining the overall effectiveness of the Irish civil service and need to be addressed promptly.

Recommendations

· Developing capacity is critically important to the future success of organisations, but it takes time. Civil service organisations must make a concentrated effort to allocate time to developing capacity even in a pressurised environment.

· The ORP framework of ten attributes grouped under three components should be reviewed. At present there is overlap across elements and components and it makes the process of assessment, presentation and interpretation of findings somewhat complex.

· From a methodological perspective, consideration should also be given to the general research approach which is primarily based around a very large number of interviews with key stakeholders of a department/office. Care needs to be taken to ensure that all reviewers receive training in interview techniques, for example the development of an interview schedule and the recording and analysis of findings, to ensure the ongoing consistency and integrity of the methodology.

· Consideration should be given to the inclusion of non civil servants on future review teams in order to ensure public accountability and also to provide independence, balance and fresh ideas.

· If progress is to be made, departments need to be open and willing to accept the substantive point in findings, even where they believe themselves that they have made progress in an area. Furthermore, commitments made in action plans need to directly relate to weaknesses identified in reviews and be clear, concrete and measurable.

· In an effort to preempt some of the apparent differences in respect of review findings, consideration should be given to putting in place a formal system of moderation panels, as in the UK, where organisations and review teams can meet on a once-off basis to discuss differences in respect of findings and have these differences moderated independently.

· Many of the capacity challenges experienced in common by the organisations reviewed require the support and direction of the centre in order to be addressed. It is essential that the service-wide challenges identified in reviews are progressed at a faster rate than has been the case to date.

· The ORP needs to be progressed in a more timely manner. Possibilities in this regard include the allocation of more staff to the reviews. However, delays in relation to the finalisation of action plans and the clearance for publication of reports should also be examined. It is important that the deadline of end-2012 for the completion of all reviews is met.

· Some form of follow up assessment needs to be built into the programme if real progress and consequently value for money is to be achieved. It is important that the Public Service Board regard the ORP as an urgent area of focus.

· As a further mechanism of accountability, the relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee could hold debates in respect of published ORP reviews and action plans, with a particular focus on the follow-up being taken by departments.

Introduction

The capacity of the Irish civil service relates to the ability of departments and organisations to get things done, to address challenges, follow through on commitments and ultimately to achieve valued outcomes for the citizen. Murray (2007), in a paper to the Institute of Public Administration national conference, makes the point that public discussion of capacity most commonly focuses on the ability to deliver services. However, he also highlights two further aspects of civil service capacity:

· *Capacity to give effective advice.* This reflects the ability of civil servants to give well judged, independent, evidence based and timely counsel.

· *Capacity to deploy and renew basic values of good public management.* This relates to the ability of the civil service to preserve and assert its independence, to never fail in its commitment to probity and in its skill in 'speaking truth to power'.

Given this context for any discussion of capacity – the need to deliver services to customers in a manner that meets their expectations, to advise wisely and to act consistently on the basis of public service values – it is, as Murray (2007) concludes, 'obvious that the stewardship of capacity is therefore a central responsibility of management at all levels' and 'public managers must be bothered and should devote effort , as a priority, to understanding, building and deploying the capacity to perform effectively.'

Background to the Organisation Review Programme

A decision to undertake capacity reviews of individual departments was announced by the then Taoiseach in June 2006 at the IPA national conference (Government Press Office, 2006). These reviews were to be instigated at the same time as the OECD was conducting a review of how the public service as a whole performed relative to its international peers (OECD, 2008). This initiative places Ireland among a small number of countries progressing the issue of capacity in the civil service. A programme of capability reviews was launched in the UK in 2005 and there are similar developments in Australia and New Zealand (Murray, 2007).

The precise format of the capacity reviews was developed by the implementation group of secretaries general. The model developed, the Organisation Review Programme (ORP), was approved by government in March 2007 and three departments volunteered to participate in pilot reviews: the departments of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and Transport. The research and analysis in relation to the three reviews was carried out in the first half of 2008. ORP reviews and the related action plans, prepared by the departments in response to the reviews, were published in November 2008.

Subsequently four more departments and offices were selected for review in 2009. These were the Department of Health and Children, the Central Statistics Office, the Property Registration Authority and the Office or the Revenue Commissioners. Reports and action plans in respect of these reviews were published in September 2010. Meanwhile, research has commenced for the third round of reviews in the departments of the Taoiseach, Education, Environment and Foreign Affairs.

Rationale for the programme

The purpose of the ORP is to examine the ability of the Irish civil service to respond effectively to challenges, and lead and deliver focused public services into the future. For each organisation, the aim is to identify strengths and weaknesses, complement existing audit and expenditure review processes and provide an agenda and platform for improvement.

Reviews are not an assessment of performance, in terms of how effective an organisation is in developing and delivering government policy. The reason typically cited for this approach is that to address performance would require a high level of knowledge and competence in respect of the business of a department and, furthermore, research of this nature would inevitably veer into the political sphere, as policy is decided

by government. Thus, reviews are only seeking to assess organisation capacity. In other words, is an organisation well placed to meet current and future objectives and challenges.

With reference to Murray's (2007, p.2) three aspects of capacity – capacity to deliver services, capacity to give effective advice and capacity to 'deploy and renew basic values of good public management'- it is primarily with regard to the first that ORP reviews are engaged. However, tangentially, comments in relation to a department's leadership, ability to reflect customer and stakeholder feedback, approach to continuous improvement and innovation, do allow for conclusions to be drawn in relation to the quality of advice being given to the government.

The ORP Methodology

The ORP methodology is comprehensively set out in the *Report of the Organisational Review Programme (Pilot Phase)* (2008).

http://www.orp.ie/files/English_Version/Report_of_the_Organisational_Review_Programme_Pilot_Phase_pdf.pdf

It notes that, while government departments are very diverse in their functions, responsibilities and size, it was important that a common approach was developed so that the reviews could be standardised.

The steering committee for the pilot programme adopted a framework of ten attributes which were grouped under three headings, strategy, managing delivery and evaluation. Figure 1 shows the three components and ten attributes of capacity in the ORP model.

The appendix of the report of the ORP pilot phase (p.77) also lists a number of 'constituents' of each of the elements. This template forms the basis for all consultation in each of the departments. An example of the template in respect of Strategy - Providing leadership is given in Figure 2.

Figure 1 The three components and ten attributes in the ORP model of capacity

Strategy	Managing Delivery	Evaluation
Setting strategic direction	Customer service and delivery	Performance measurement
Providing leadership	Continuous improvement and innovation	Customer and stakeholder feedback
Creating shared understanding	Managing resources	Input into policy and strategy
	Governance	

Figure 2 Strategy - Providing leadership

Constituents of giving leadership	How strength can be established
Conveys a clear sense of strategic direction to staff and other stakeholders. Displays a strong commitment to strategic objectives	Questions to: management committee, staff, agency management and stakeholders
Maintains and promotes high standards of behaviour (including ethical standards)	Scrutiny of departmental code of conduct and any other relevant documentation. Questions to management committee, partnership committee, staff.
Management, at all levels, behave in such a way as to reinforce high standards throughout the department	Questions to management committee, partnership committee, staff, stakeholders
Recognises and encourages high standards of behaviour. Takes appropriate action in cases where behaviour does not meet acceptable standards	Questions to management committee, partnership committee, Department of the Taoiseach, Department of Finance, Ombudsman's office.
Projects department's voice in key fora, promotes consensus around key challenges in its policy domain and attracts support for policy responses.	Questions to: minister, advisers, management committee, staff, agency management and stakeholders.

In each of the participating departments, a survey with questions built around the ten elements is issued to departmental staff and in some cases, agency staff and other stakeholders. Workshops are also held with staff to validate and further analyse the quantitative findings from the survey. Extensive stakeholder consultation is a further important feature of the research. Interviews are held with ministers and where available members of the Joint Oireachtas Committees, senior managers within the organisation, senior managers in other departments with a high level of interaction with the department under review, chief executives of state agencies under the auspice of the department, other stakeholders and where relevant EU officials.

The Pilot Organisation Review Programme

The ORP commenced with a pilot phase of reviews covering three government departments:

· Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

· Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (now Enterprise, Trade and Innovation)

· Department of Transport.

A steering group was established to oversee the process. It included senior managers from the departments of the Taoiseach and Finance, two private sector representatives, an academic and the secretaries general from each of the departments participating in the pilot. The actual reviews were carried out by a team of seven, led by four principal officers (POs) seconded from their parent department to work on the ORP. In practice, one PO led on each of the reviews, while the fourth was responsible for addressing cross-cutting issues. There were no non-civil servants on the review teams. External consultants were commissioned to conduct the staff surveys.

In response to reviews, all departments prepared action plans to indicate how capacity challenges identified in their review were to be addressed. While the steering group did consider developing a template for action plans, ultimately it was decided to leave departments to formulate their own approach.

Costs of the programme primarily relate to the salaries of the four principal officers (now three) on secondment from their parent department, time dedicated to the programme by Department of the Taoiseach staff, consultancy fees of approximately €40,000 for the staff surveys and some initial training on facilitation. The Department of the Taoiseach's Annual Report for 2008 indicates that expenditure on the ORP in that year was €745,000.

The following sections summarise the key findings of ORP reviews in the three pilots and also provide an analysis of the reviews, action plans and the follow-up implementation by departments. On occasions the ORP reviews are referred to simply as the 'review', while the department's action plan is referred to as the 'action plan' or the 'plan'.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

The Irish agriculture sector has gone through a series of major changes over the last ten years. One of the biggest challenges facing the department is to manage this altered environment, primarily caused by reforms arising from EU and World Trade Organisation negotiations. Related to this is the necessity of reviewing the department's structures to reflect changing priorities and an ongoing reduction in staff numbers.

Overall, the review praises the department as having a sound understanding of the traditional agri-food sector and to be strong at developing strategy within this area. In terms of managing delivery, the department has a good focus on customer service and has approached some delivery areas with the innovative use of information and communication technology.

Key areas of challenge in respect of the department's capacity noted in the review are:

· Develop its skills at dealing with cross-cutting issues and new stakeholder groups

· Place a far greater focus on efficiency in managing staff resources and on improving HR practices, as well as developing internal leadership

· Develop a stronger focus on metrics, in particular on output and outcome measures which would assist it in addressing efficiency issues

· Maintain capacity at EU level; in particular adjust to an increasingly powerful European Parliament.

A summary of all challenges and strengths identified in the ORP review with respect to DAFF can be found at www.orp.ie/eng/publications (First Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.13).

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation (formerly Enterprise, Trade and Employment)

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation (DETI) focus on enterprise, regulation and employment rights issues. At the time of the review the department also had responsibility for labour force development and redundancy and insolvency payments, but in spring 2010 these were transferred to the Departments of Education and Skills and Social Protection respectively. The review indicates that the department has eight executive offices and fourteen agencies that support its policy development and delivery functions. A summary of all challenges and strengths identified by the ORP at DETI is available at www.orp.ie/eng/publications (First Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.27).

The main recommendations in respect of the department's capacity are listed as:

·   Strengthen its knowledge base (in order) to deepen in its capacity for comprehensive understanding across all policy areas

·   Take clear ownership of policy positions and agendas and project ministerial and government policy in these areas

·   Further develop its policy analysis, evaluation and development capacity in relation to proposals from its offices and agencies

·   Review and implement a strong and consistent policy in regard to the governance of its offices and agencies with a view to ensuring greater accountability and performance management and an enhanced performance dialogue.

However, the review also recognises that the department has strengths in these areas.

For example, the conclusions that the department needs to strengthen its knowledge base, deepen its understanding across all areas and take clear ownership of policy positions

and agendas could be read as quite a serious indictment. But, in other areas of the review these conclusions are balanced by statements like: 'staff display strong commitment and a general 'can do' attitude', 'the department has a good sense of strategic direction and reasonable capacity to deliver and provide advice' and 'its external leadership is seen by many stakeholders outside the department as strong'.

It would seem that rather than be deeply critical, the review team was seeking to move the department into a stronger position whereby staff in all areas of the department would have a deep level of knowledge and awareness of their brief, including in respect of those areas where policy is formulated, or a service delivered, by an agency or office working under the auspices of the department. However, the review also acknowledges that this can represent a dilemma for any department where a separate organisation has been established to carry out a function on its behalf.

Department of Transport

The Department of Transport (DOT) was formed in 2002 when the transport elements of the former Department of Public Enterprise were combined with the roads division and the traffic and road safety functions of the then Department of Environment and Local Government (DELG) (road safety in 2006 became the responsibility of the newly formed Road Safety Authority). Subsequent mergers included maritime matters with the exception of fisheries in 2006 and responsibility for regional and local roads in 2008.

In the main, the implementation of policy is vested in a number of agencies under the auspices of the department. The ORP review identifies 37 of these agencies with varying commercial, executive or regulatory functions. These bodies vary quite considerably in terms of their budgets and numbers employed. A summary of all challenges and strengths identified by the ORP in respect of the department is available at www.orp.ie/eng/publications (First Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.51).

The main recommendations in respect of the department's capacity are:

· The demands on the department to focus on immediate issues means that the capacity of staff is not being sufficiently deployed on setting direction

· There is a need for the department to provide enhanced leadership across the transport sector

· The department needs to give priority to enhancing the areas of HR management, ICT development and accommodation

· There is a requirement for significant further action in relation to the oversight of agencies under the department's remit.

One of the over-riding conclusions to emerge in respect of capacity at DOT is that the 'urgent drives out the important'. The capacity of senior staff in the department for strategic thinking is widely recognised by external stakeholders. However, the demands on the department to focus on immediate issues means that managers do not get sufficient time to focus on long-term issues. In particular, the department needs to improve its leadership capacity in setting and clarifying strategy across the transport sector. The need for such leadership, and the fact that it is not at present being adequately provided by the department in a number of critical areas, was raised by several agencies involved in the transport sector.

In respect of the management of DOT's relationship with its agencies, the review acknowledges that this is a complex area. However, it adds that working relations between the department and its agencies vary significantly, in some cases being perceived as quite effective and in other cases as poor. While it is noted that this in large part reflects the governance style in the various departments that came together to form the Department of Transport, there is now a need for the department to put in place a more consistent and pro-active approach to management arrangements.

Analysis of ORP pilot reviews

The pilot reviews represent a comprehensive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the three departments in relation to strategy, managing delivery and evaluation. As such they represent a good overview of the departments' capacity to deliver on their objectives and address future challenges.

A number of issues are evident in respect of the reviews. The first is that in some cases the rigidity of the review framework does not lend itself to easy presentation of the findings. For example, comments in relation to customer service are dealt with under the managing delivery component (element: 'customer service and delivery'), but they also arise under the evaluation component (element: 'customer and stakeholder feedback'). Similarly, issues relevant to HR or governance arise under several headings. These difficulties in respect of the ORP framework at times result in somewhat muddled reading, with the reader needing to track between a number of sections in order to develop a complete picture of a department's capacity in a certain area.

In terms of the review findings, strengths held in common across the three pilot departments primarily relate to the quality and commitment of staff, often in the face of a challenging agenda. A good attitude to direct customers and a collaborative approach to agencies and other stakeholders also emerge consistently.

Common challenges include the need for significant improvements in the governance of agencies, which is identified in all three reviews. The importance of securing greater accountability and a more standardised approach to the performance management and measurement of agencies is particularly emphasised. In the area of human resource management, the failure to consistently implement the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS)[1] and tackle underperformance are highlighted, in

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[1] The civil service wide system for performance management. All staff hold annual review meetings to discuss their role, objectives and development needs. Staff should also now receive an annual rank (1-5) which will be taken into consideration in determining whether annual increments should be awarded and in promotion competitions.

addition to the requirement for better allocation of resources. Finally, the need for enhancements in evaluation capacity is identified in respect of the three departments.

While the reviews are stand-alone documents, comparison between them is inevitable. It would appear that some weaknesses, which are consistent across all the departments, are highlighted to a greater extent in certain of the reviews.

In the case of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, one of its three main challenges is listed as the need to develop a stronger focus on metrics, in particular output and outcome measures. In the summary of challenges and strengths, the department is called on 'to take immediate action' in this area. While the department has a good reputation in the area of performance measurement due to its annual output statements and value for money reviews, the review concludes that more follow-up monitoring is required in respect of a number of reports on staffing and structure, and also that a greater use of metrics (i.e. business intelligence) would facilitate the department in making best use of its resources.

However, the issue of performance measurement is not given the same emphasis in the reviews of either of the other two departments. Despite having similar limitations to DAFF, there is no reference in either review to using business intelligence to enhance workforce planning and outcome evaluations are only briefly referred to in the DETI review.

Likewise, there are differences in respect of assessments of customer service across the three departments. For example, while DETI's approach to customer service and delivery is broadly commended, the review concludes that 'overall, there is a strong case for the Department to put in place an objective review and monitoring process of customer service in respect of itself and each body under its aegis'. Other recommendations were, 'the need for a systematic and structured approach to allow customer service to be measured and monitored across all communication channels, the need to track customer satisfaction over time, and the need to make more extensive use of the possibilities of e-government'.

Similar recommendations are not made for the other two departments. The DOT review states that 'the Department needs to adopt a clearer stance in respect of customer service by its agencies'. However, the specific recommendations made to DETI are not identified. Meanwhile the capacity of DAFF to address the challenges of customer service into the future is praised, though there is no evidence that they have adopted any of the initiatives recommended in respect of DETI.

Analysis of ORP pilot action plans

The first point for consideration in analysing the departments' action plans is the extent and thoroughness with which the findings of the reviews have been addressed. In this regard, each of the plans is open to criticism. Important review findings remain under-addressed or even omitted. In other instances, where they are discussed, the action points are vague and there is no indication of timelines or outcomes. Examples include, for DAFF, issues around HRM, governance of external agencies, and management of a changed EU landscape. For DETI, how it will seek to make clearer the degree of leadership/ownership taken by department staff in developing its policy agenda and, related to this, how it will develop its analysis, evaluation and development capacity in respect of proposals coming from its agencies. In the case of DOT, key findings including the importance of providing leadership across the transport sector and determining long-term strategy are not addressed in a sufficiently concrete way.

In some cases it may be that departments envisaged addressing findings more fully in a different context - there are references to business plans, HR strategies, communications strategies and, in the case of DAFF a long-term strategy, *Strategy 2020*. However, the appropriate approach to the action plans would have been to address all findings systematically with precise action points and procedures and timelines in respect of follow up.

A further difficulty with the plans is that assessing the response of departments to the findings is made more difficult in the case of DETI and DOT by the headings in

the plans not reflecting the ORP headings set out in the reviews. While this is in part justified on the basis of the overlap across the attributes of capability, discussed above, it should still have been possible to more closely match the responses and commitments of the department to the findings of the review.

While all departments welcomed the experience of participating in the ORP, to varying degrees they would appear not to have accepted the totality of findings. Departments therefore viewed their action plan as a vehicle for defending their reputation, for example through setting out all recent developments and initiatives in relation to an area identified in their review as a weakness. While this is understandable, it detracts from the intended focus of action plans, to set out how the department will address capacity challenges. While departments may feel that progress in certain areas is under-acknowledged in their review, it remains the case that if the weight of evidence (i.e. not just isolated comments) points to a certain issue as a weakness, the substantive point should be accepted and addressed in the action plan.

Difficulty with certain review findings appears to have been particularly strongly felt in the case of DETI and was explicitly stated by the department. Their rejection of some of the findings of the review appears to be based on two main grounds. Firstly, that the review team as 'outsiders' didn't fully appreciate the complexity of the department's working relationships, in particular with its agencies, and secondly, that the findings were based on opinion and not objective evidence.

However, all reviewers were established, senior civil servants with varied experience in different organisations and used to analysing workplace issues. In addition, the extent of consultation engaged in by the review team and the mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods all add to the validity of findings. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the scale of consultation does not in itself guarantee that all findings are evidence based. It is essential that all research data is recorded and analysed in a rigorous and objective manner.

Follow-up on ORP pilot action plans

Departments put in place a number of concrete measures to ensure follow-up on their action plans. Commitments made in action plans were factored into annual business plans and both DETI and DOT established specific internal groups chaired by members of the management committee to oversee progress. The DOT committee no longer meets but the ORP still features intermittently at management committee meetings.

Each of the three departments has made considerable effort to address the findings in their reviews. DAFF and DOT have made improvements in the area of internal and external communications. DETI and DOT have also focused on the issue of staff relations, identified in their reviews as areas of frustration for staff. All three departments have actively sought to improve in terms of the performance management of their agencies.

However, certain key findings of reviews remain under-addressed in each of the three departments. In some cases these are issues, as noted above, that were not sufficiently addressed in the action plan, raising concern that these findings are in effect 'lost'. In other instances, for example DAFF's follow through on commitments to address capacity challenges at EU level, there is a sense that the department could do more. For example, while some positional changes have been made in order to strengthen the department's Brussels office, there appear to be no formal initiatives around mentoring or on-the-job coaching to ensure that knowledge and experience of the EU and EU negotiating is transferred and delegated to younger or more junior staff.

All departments raised the issue of the changed economic environment and cuts in funding impacting on certain commitments they had hoped to follow through on. While clearly a different budgetary environment pertains now compared to two years ago when pilot reviews and plans were written, capacity challenges remain precisely that, a hindrance to the effective delivery of a department's services and objectives. It therefore remains pertinent, perhaps even more so given a context where areas of the civil service are

particularly stretched, that management teams continue to make every endeavour to address issues specifically identified as inhibiting their effectiveness.

Service-wide challenges

The published report of the pilot review includes a chapter addressing capacity weaknesses experienced in common by the departments reviewed. Some of these need to be addressed by departments individually, however, in respect of others, in order to drive them forward, it is important that the departments of the Taoiseach and Finance ('the centre') play a pro-active role. In addition to establishing procedures, the centre can play a role in sharing knowledge and experience from departments and other organisations with strong capacity in an area to those with capacity weaknesses.

Key areas for the centre to address are identified as:

· *The Need for Specialists within the Civil Service (economists, HR professionals, financial managers and ICT specialists)*
At present, even though allowed for to a limited degree under the terms of the Towards 2016 social partnership agreement, recruitment embargoes mean that it will be very difficult to recruit staff with these specialist skills from outside the service. Therefore it is essential that coaching, mentoring, the transfer of knowledge and, where possible, training takes place in respect of these areas. In the long-term it would also be desirable to put in place career paths which would enable staff who have developed an expertise in an area to stay in that area.

· *Managing Performance*
It could reasonably be argued by the centre that all appropriate systems and legislation are in place to allow managers to manage performance and address under-performance and that it is the responsibility of departments to ensure that this happens. However, the failure across the three departments to implement on a consistent basis the civil service performance management and development system (PMDS) and concerns of

staff in relation to the consistency of ranking and the manner in which underperformance is addressed, does merit attention by the centre. Also, it is necessary to promote the idea across the civil service that managers at all levels need to see performance management as something that should take place on a day-to-day basis and can not be left to annual meetings.

· *Relationship with Agencies*
There are a wide variety and extensive number of agencies and offices working under the auspices of government departments. These have generally been established to take on a specific role. While many do an excellent job, it is a cause for concern that in the three departments to participate in the pilot, there was no overall consistency to the governance arrangements, in particular the setting of performance targets and reporting on these in a regular and structured way.

· *The EU Dimension*
Historically Ireland's officials have been regarded as effective negotiators and constructive problem-solvers in the EU arena. However, some concerns emerge following the pilot reviews that 'departments may be drifting down the scale of effectiveness at EU level' (Report of the ORP Pilot Phase, p.74). The EU has an important input into policy and strategy developments for all member states and as a result it is essential that departments are in tune with what is happening in Brussels and are able to exert influence when it counts. It is important that the centre recognises the importance of this issue and works with line departments to put in place a concrete plan to ensure that the contribution of Irish officials remains robust and that skills in this area are transferred to new recruits.

· *Performance Measurement*
Performance measurement has improved across the civil service. However, identifying appropriate indicators and moving from measuring activity to outcomes remain ongoing areas of challenge for departments. The centre can play an important role in providing guidance in relation to performance measurement and in sharing good practice.

The Second Round of the Organisational Review Programme

A second round of ORP reviews were researched in 2009 and published in September 2010, together with the related department action plans. The four organisations to be reviewed in the second round were:

· The Department of Health and Children

· The Office of the Revenue Commissioners

· The Central Statistics Office

· The Property Registration Authority.

The approach undertaken in carrying out the reviews was broadly similar to that employed for the pilot reviews, with the exception that there was no steering committee. Liaising with a steering committee that included the secretaries general of the departments under review had been found to be time consuming in the pilot round due to excessive amounts of negotiation in respect of findings. In place of the steering committee which had included three non civil servants, external comment is provided in a paper by Professor John Murray of Trinity College, Dublin. A further chapter reflecting information and communication technology best practice guidelines for government departments is also included.

The methodology from the pilot review was maintained for the second round, thus departments are reviewed in respect of ten attributes of capacity divided across three components, strategy, managing delivery and evaluation. In order to ensure continuity, two of the seconded principal officers involved in the pilot review remained on the second round review team.

The Department of Health and Children

The principal responsibility of the Department of Health and Children (DOHC) is to develop policy across the full spectrum of health and personal social services, with a focus on quality, equity, access based on need, consistency, and, outcomes; and to support the implementation of government policy. With the establishment of the health board structure in 1970, the department moved away from

involvement in service delivery. However, it was only with the establishment of the Health Service Executive (HSE) in 2005 as a single national entity responsible for the management of the operational aspects of the health service, that a complete break was made by the department in respect of delivery issues. The main finding of the department's ORP review is that the department is still adjusting to this new working environment. The fact that the department frequently has to deal with crises that attract significant political and media attention further adds to the sense of pressure felt within the organisation.

While noting that there was general acknowledgment among the department's stakeholders that DOHC staff are knowledgeable, able and committed in dealing with a difficult agenda, the review highlights a number of important capacity challenges for the Department of Health and Children, including the need to:

· Fully clarify its roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis the HSE and to become better at managing the delivery of all its agencies. In order to do this, it needs to become stronger at goal setting, measuring outputs and outcomes, and managing performance so as to ensure the implementation of its policies.

· Define its customer and stakeholder groups clearly and align resources, processes and procedures to service each one in the most appropriate way, and at the same time, strike an optimal balance in the allocation of resources between competing priorities, including serving the needs of the ministers and the Oireachtas.

· Improve its HR capacity in general, and in particular improve its outcomes in terms of morale and analytical capability as well as tackling issues with people management, management of underperformance, staff allocation and the management of staff mobility.

· Address issues in respect of leadership: The review indicates that 'while there are many effective leaders in the Department, the quality of leadership across the Department is uneven'.

· Examine evidence of a degree of discord between management and staff in relation to the strategic direction of the department. Very different attitudes were expressed by the management committee (MAC) and staff in general, in both the survey and in interviews/ workshops, in relation to whether the department is achieving a good balance between the management of long-term strategy and short term issues and also, whether the department responds to new challenges in a flexible and timely manner. The review concludes, 'bridging the gaps between the staff and the MAC is a priority in order to prevent the gaps widening'.

A full summary of challenges and strengths in respect of the Department of Health and Children is available at www.orp. ie/eng/publications (Second Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.13).

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Revenue) is the largest of the government departments/offices with over 6,500 staff dispersed throughout the country. Revenue's primary focus is the collection of taxes and duties and the implementation of customs legislation. In recent years the organisation has gone through very major change. It has integrated customs and excise staff with the rest of the department and has ended grade demarcation based on specialist and generalist skills. In addition, a more streamlined and customer focused approach to the delivery of services has been put in place.

The ORP review concludes that the organisation is very well placed to meet future challenges. There is a clear sense of direction which is widely shared within the organisation and it has strong leadership, evidenced by the success of the enormous change programme carried out in recent years. In terms of managing delivery, customer service is very strong and there is openness to innovation. Financial and ICT resources appear to be well managed, and governance across the organisation is strong. Some aspects of evaluation are very strong, with Revenue having a long history of measuring outputs.

Two significant medium-term challenges emerge for Revenue from the review. These are:

· The challenge of replacing the corporate knowledge that has been lost due to the recent sudden outflow of experienced staff due to voluntary redundancy and incentivised retirement schemes and the difficulty, in the current economic and budgetary environment with recruitment embargoes in place, of replacing the experience and knowledge of staff who have left the organisation.

· Allied to this, is the need for greater knowledge and experience to secure tax intakes in the current economic climate.

A full summary of challenges and strengths in respect of Revenue is available at www.orp.ie/eng/publications (Second Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.35).

The Central Statistics Office

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) is responsible for Ireland's statistical output. The statutory responsibilities of the CSO are reflected in its mission which is 'the efficient and timely provision of high quality information for a changing society'. Increasingly, EU legislation has an important influence on the work of the CSO. There is a substantial body of EU statistical legislation and about 90% of the statistical output of the CSO derives from Eurostat and European Central Bank requirements.

The ORP review of the CSO notes that there are a number of contextual issues that will impact on the CSO over the coming years. Chief among these is the recommendation of the National Statistics Board, the body responsible for the strategic direction of the CSO, that a 'whole system' approach should be used to produce statistics in the future. Thus, in the future the CSO will have a dual role where it will be a producer of statistics itself, while also required to support and facilitate a broader statistical effort involving other areas of the public sector that hold administrative data capable of generating statistics.

Related to this, the government has decided that the administrative burden on Irish business should be reduced by 25% by 2012 in line with EU objectives. The CSO will therefore have to significantly reorient its data collection methods, reducing its reliance on surveys and increasing its use of ICT and administrative data already within the system. Lastly, the CSO needs to address the timeliness of statistics in certain areas and address demand for greater statistical output across topics including the environment, energy, science and technology, health, transport and migration.

The review emphasises that stakeholders readily referred to the professionalism, competence and customer ethos of the CSO's staff. Reference was also made to its independence and a high degree of trust in the reliability and accuracy of its products. The CSO is also well regarded at international level as a result of its membership of European statistical committees, its contribution to statistical standards, and its good record in implementing international statistical regulations.

However, the review concludes that, while doing a lot of things very well, in order to address the new areas of responsibility described above and also to continue to effectively deliver its services in the coming years with a reduced number of employees, the CSO needs to address a number of capacity challenges. These are:

- Information and communication technology (ICT) is particularly critical to an organisation such as the CSO. The organisation needs to strengthen its capacity in ICT to enable it to support business activities and strategic objectives more effectively.

- The need to strengthen leadership capacity internally. While a number of examples of effective leadership to emerge over the course of the review are noted, the report concludes that 'the evidence indicates the internal leadership capacity of all management grades is mixed'. Particular issues around the leadership of ICT and a failure to delegate effectively are cited. In relation to external leadership, while the CSO is well regarded, there is a need for the organisation in the future to be

more effective at mobilising people and resources from across the public service in developing initiatives such as the Irish Statistical System (a cross public service approach to the production of statistics).

- Establish more effective arrangements for dealing with issues that require integrated input from multiple business units.

- Deal more effectively with HR issues, such as the deployment of staff, grade drift arising from poor delegation, the distinction between professional and administrative staff, and the management of field staff.

- Develop a more corporate approach to the documentation of work processes and specialist knowledge.

A full summary of challenges and strengths in respect of the CSO is available at www.orp.ie/eng/publications (Second Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.50).

The Property Registration Authority

The Property Registration Authority (PRA) was established in 2006. It represents an amalgamation of the Land Registry and the Registry of Deeds. It is a statutory body whose members are representative of the main users and consumers of property registration services. The main functions of the authority are to manage and control the registry of deeds and the land registry and to promote and extend the registration of ownership of land.

The period of the property boom in Ireland led to a corresponding significant increase in the casework of the PRA. Between 1999 and 2006, the number of legal transactions or dealings completed by the Land Registry grew by over 125%. There was no increase in staff numbers to meet this increased demand. While the number of new cases has declined, there remains a significant backlog. The use of ICT and a propensity to be innovative and open in respect of its structures and processes has helped the PRA in addressing issues which remain pertinent, particularly in the light of declining staff numbers due to staff departures and the recruitment embargo.

Overall, the ORP team found the PRA extremely well placed to meet this and other future challenges. It is reported as having huge strengths in setting direction, giving leadership and creating shared understanding of its strategies. It is well placed in terms of providing good customer service. Resources are well managed and internal governance is strong. A key factor in this is the strong management team who provide clear and consistent direction.

Two areas noted where the PRA could make improvements are in respect of:

· Internal communication structures, both to improve communications to staff and to ensure a response to staff ideas;

· While maintaining its clear focus on targets, ensure that appropriate attention is maintained on the priority afforded to the processing of older or more complex cases.

A full summary of challenges and strengths in respect of the PRA is available at www.orp.ie/eng/publications (Second Report of the Organisational Review Programme, p.75).

Analysis of ORP second round reviews

The experience of the pilot reviews appears to have been a positive and instructive one for all parties involved in the second round as, while following the same template, overall the quality and presentation of second round reviews is stronger. There is a greater use of sub-headings in the commentaries on the ten attributes and this greatly facilitates the reader in absorbing the material. The use of text boxes in the CSO review to address key areas of challenge (e.g. leading the development of the Irish Statistical System or the development of the Data Management System) or to highlight examples of best international practice (the experience of Statistics Netherlands in minimising the burden on respondents) is a particularly worthwhile initiative. While not replicated in the other reviews, the text boxes help to provide extra information and context and are an effective device for future reviews.

Strengths that appear to be held in common by all of the departments in the second round are broadly similar to strengths identified across departments in the pilot review. Generally, staff are found to be knowledgeable, professional and to have a good customer service ethos.

Two of the organisations reviewed, Revenue and the PRA, both offices involved in service delivery, were found to be very well placed to meet current and future challenges. Factors contributing to their effectiveness were found to include a clear sense of direction which is widely shared within the organisation, an ability to manage change, an openness to innovation, and, in general, good resource management and strong internal governance arrangements. Linking these different elements is strong leadership from the top of the organisation and effective communication of objectives and decisions to staff throughout the organisation.

In general, leadership emerges as a pertinent issue as the reviews conclude in respect of the two other organisations to participate in the second round, DOHC and the CSO, that there is a need for their top management committees to be more effective in mapping out the strategic direction of the organisation. In DOHC it is concluded that, five years after the setting up of the HSE, staff remain unclear in relation to the delineation of respective roles. There are also difficulties in implementing policy and there are significant gaps in the attitudes and views of staff and top level management in relation to fundamental strategic issues. Similar concerns are highlighted in respect of top management in the CSO.

In all four organisations, though particularly emphasised in respect of DOHC and the CSO, the quality of leadership throughout the organisation is identified as a capacity weakness. In these two organisations the quality of leadership is referred to as 'mixed' and in Revenue and the PRA where top level management are praised, it is reported that there is considerable variation in the quality of leadership at other levels. Also in Revenue there is a reference to the need for some managers to strike a better balance between their management responsibilities and operational issues. In the PRA communication appears to be an issue, with middle managers not consistently passing on information to their teams.

A related issue highlighted in the Revenue review is the challenge of developing leaders for the future. This is important given the high level of voluntary redundancies and early retirements in recent times from an already ageing civil service. To address this, Revenue is endeavouring to put in place a succession planning initiative to ensure that future managers and leaders will have the right mix of skills. Allied to this, the review points to the importance of developing more effective knowledge management initiatives. While not highlighted in the other reviews, these concerns must also apply in the other organisations.

A further dominant theme to emerge across the reviews is shortcomings in the organisations in respect of human resource management (HRM). A raft of issues are alluded to in reviews that lead to considerable frustration among staff and which result in the organisations operating sub-optimally. These include a very mixed approach to people management, the failure to tackle underperformance, very limited workforce planning, and issues around succession planning and mobility. Even in Revenue and the PRA which perform strongly in respect of many of the other ORP attributes of capacity, there are issues in relation to HRM, while in DOHC there are particularly pertinent issues in relation to morale and organisation culture and, in the CSO, issues in respect of 'grade drift' due to poor delegation and unresolved issues in relation to the breakdown of work between specialists and generalists.

Under the evaluation heading, performance measurement is a further area where each of the departments/offices appears to have difficulties. While again Revenue and the PRA appear to be grappling better with issues around the evaluation of organisation effectiveness and, along with the CSO, their efforts at benchmarking internationally are praised, there remains potential for improvement among all four departments. Moving from measuring activity to measuring outputs and outcomes appears to be particularly challenging and is an area where greater direction and support from the centre is required.

In addition, the DOHC's review makes special mention of the need to build on initiatives with respect to the HSE, and to systematically measure and manage the performance of all of the department's agencies. The CSO's review also makes particular mention of the need to 'begin the process of evaluating the efficiency of individual business units and developing performance metrics for them'. It is unclear whether this process is in place across the other three organisations and if not, why this point is only made in relation to the CSO.

Lastly, and particularly highlighted in Professor John Murray's paper (Second Report of the Organisation Review Programme, 2010) published with the second round reviews, is the issue of productivity. In an environment of recession, declining staff numbers and budget cuts it is imperative that the 'more for less conundrum' referred to by Professor Murray is dealt with by each organisation. The reviews, in particular Revenue's, refer to the pressures the organisations are likely to feel due to the loss of many experienced employees. However, as noted above, workforce planning and knowledge management initiatives are virtually non existent.

Analysis of ORP second round action plans

The action plans prepared by organisations in response to their ORP reviews are reasonably comprehensive. Approaches vary somewhat with the CSO mirroring the headings in their review, while DOHC and Revenue coordinate their responses around a number of aspects of organisation performance. The PRA focus on the two principal findings of their review.

Similar to the action plans in the pilot ORP, there is a tendency across the organisations to see the action plan as an opportunity to present their 'side of the story' and thus at times they read as quite defensive. For example, the PRA's action plan sets out in considerable detail initiatives in place in the authority to ensure good internal communication, identified as a shortcoming in its review. Similarly, the CSO's

action plan sets out in detail the process the office engages in with respect to strategy formulation, an issue which its review identified as an area for improvement.

In other instances, departments respond vigorously in their action plans to review findings that they would appear not to entirely accept. For example, in DOHC's action plan there is an explanation of why, from the department's perspective, it will continue to dedicate a large proportion of its resources to supporting its ministers, even if perhaps at the expense of other stakeholders, which according to the review is a source of frustration among staff. Similarly, the action plan of the PRA takes issue with a review finding that 'staff who are training new staff and checking their work are expected to meet their usual targets and have been reprimanded for not doing so'. It would seem desirable that these issues are teased out definitively between review teams and departments prior to the finalisation of reviews.

Different approaches are adopted in the four plans to the presentation of commitments to address capacity issues. The PRA and CSO provide a series of bulleted action points in respect of different findings. The approach adopted by DOHC and Revenue is more to be recommended. Both link action points to related objectives, expected outcomes, timescale and person or area of responsibility.

Similar to the commitments made by departments in the pilot programme, while some findings are addressed robustly, in other instances action points err on the side of vagueness and need to be made a lot more specific if they are to satisfactorily address a capacity weakness. This is particularly the case in relation to some HRM action points, for example with regard to workforce planning. It also arises for some of the organisations in relation to commitments made to improve performance measurement.

Follow up on ORP second round action plans

Each of the organisations to participate in the second round indicated that they found engagement with the ORP process useful and welcomed the reviews. As second round reviews and action plans were only published in September 2010, it remains too early to assess organisations in respect of progress being made in addressing commitments.

In terms of managing the implementation of action plans, the DOHC plan would appear to have a robust approach. The final section of their plan indicates that responsibility for delivery of each action has been assigned to a named member of the management committee. A project group will subsequently be established to ensure delivery of the required outputs. Progress reports are to be issued every two months to the head of corporate services. The department also commit to engaging an appropriate person from outside the department to review progress on the actions after 12 months and prepare a report for the secretary general.

UK experience of capacity reviews

Departmental capability reviews were launched in the UK in October 2005 to assess how well equipped departments were to meet their objectives and to make recommendations in respect of specific areas for improvement. Explaining their rationale, the head of the UK civil service, Sir Gus O'Donnell commented that 'the civil service needs to position itself to meet the challenges of rapidly changing international and domestic circumstances, as well as rising public expectations…we must have the right skills to deliver the priorities of any elected government.' Highlighting the emphasis on capacity, he added that 'the focus of the reviews is on future needs rather than auditing the past' (Cabinet Office, 2006).

Capability reviews

The Cabinet Office directs and manages the programme, and the cabinet secretary, as head of the civil service, is closely involved. Senior civil servants and external experts helped to design a model that focuses on three key themes of capability: leadership, strategy and delivery. A series of ten elements of capability which link into the three key themes were also identified (Figure 3). An assessment is carried out using a standard list of questions that explore capability in respect of all ten elements. Reviews focus in particular on the capabilities of the top management team. It is stated that this is because a key first step in a programme of transformation is to have in place a top management team committed to change.

An assessment is made against each of the ten elements and departments are given a grading as follows (Cabinet Office, 2009):

Strong (4) – good capability for future delivery in place

Well placed (3) – well placed to address any gaps in capability for future delivery through practical actions that are planned or underway

Development area (2) – the department should be capable of addressing some significant weaknesses in capability for future delivery by talking remedial action

Urgent delivery area (1) – significant weaknesses in capability for future delivery that require urgent action

Serious concerns (0) - serious concerns about current capability.

A full list of questions for each element can be found at: http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/improving/capability/mod-cap-tools/the-model.aspx

On completion of reviews there is typically a four week period for reflection prior to their publication. A system of moderation panels is in place to ensure quality control. These are chaired by the head of the civil service and afford the permanent secretary of the reviewed department an opportunity to present the department's perspective in respect of findings. A member of the review team is also present. On occasions the wording used in the review and scores have been revised.

Figure 3 The three themes and ten elements of capability in the UK capability model

Strategy	Delivery	Leadership
Focus on outcomes	Plan, resource and prioritise	Set direction
Base choices on evidence	Develop clear roles, responsibilities and role models	Ignite passion, pace and drive
Build common purpose	Manage performance	Take responsibility for leading delivery and change
		Build capability

While a decision was made to run the capability review programme from within government, a level of independence and insight was seen to be important and was incorporated through recruiting senior external experts to the team. Each five member review team typically included two members from the private or voluntary sector and one from local government.

All 17 major government departments were reviewed in five tranches between July 2006 and December 2007. Following on from initial reviews, follow up assessments took place at three, six and twelve months, followed by second round reviews after 24 months. By the end of 2009, all departments had completed their second round reviews.

Overall the first round reviews found wide-ranging need to enhance capability. Two thirds of the 170 capability assessments (10 elements were assessed in each of the 17 departments) rated a department less than 'well placed' (i.e. a score of less than 2 on a scale of 0 to 4). A quarter of the assessments revealed 'urgent development areas'. Two departments, the Home Office and the Department of Health, raised 'serious concerns' (a score of 0) about their capability in respect of one or two elements. Only one department, the Department of International Development was assessed as 'strong' or 'well placed' (a score of 4 or 3) in more than half of its ratings. Common areas of weakness were leadership from departments' boards, understanding and using different delivery models, and a range of issues around the delivery of services and the skills of staff at all levels (NAO, 2009).

The first-round of reviews including follow-up assessments cost the Cabinet Office just under €6 million, equivalent to about €388,000 for each department covered. Second round reviews cost an average of €270,000 per department. Individual departments were unable to provide detailed information in relation to the cost of their participation in the reviews due to the difficulty of isolating expenditure related to capability reviews from other work or to consider opportunity costs (NAO, 2009).

Impact of reviews

In 2009 the Cabinet Office asked the UK National Audit Office (NAO) to conduct an assessment of the capability review programme, with a particular focus on how departments have responded to reviews and what impact their actions have had on capacity and performance outcomes, an examination of the costs of the programme and suggestions in relation to future directions.

Areas where actions taken appear to be strongest relate to leadership and governance. Every department has designated a senior manager as 'change director', with responsibility for coordinating the department's response. Departmental management boards also regularly review progress and roles and areas of responsibility have been made clearer. Two-thirds of departments had moved senior staff to ensure that priority projects are led by those considered to have the appropriate skills. The training of staff at all levels has also been given priority and a majority of departments are seeking to improve workforce planning. However, problems are seen to persist in relation to organisation culture including insularity and the need for staff to feel able to 'speak up and challenge'.

A report by the Cabinet Office (2009b) includes a number of commentaries showing how departments have responded to the capability review programme. The Home Office was the department that scored lowest in the initial round of review, receiving an assessment of 'serious concern' in relation to two elements of capability and most other elements classified as 'development areas'. Its average capability score in 2006 was 1.4. This rose to 2.5 by 2008. The permanent secretary appointed in January 2006 describes in the report actions taken to enhance capability:

David Normington, permanent secretary, Home Office: Building capability in the Home Office

The first step towards building capability after the crisis of summer 2006 was to move fast to produce an action plan for reform. This was rough and ready. But it put some stakes in the ground. It was an unequivocal statement by the leadership of the Home Office that we were intent on fundamentally changing the Department. It was an essential step in convincing our ministers, the public and the media that we were determined to change. We said from the outset that we would never take our eye off the front line delivery of services to the public. We said that we would reduce our head office staff so that we could redirect resources to front-line services at the border – and we did.

Strong leadership is crucial to an organisation; to meet the challenges ahead we completely changed our top team. In our summer 2006 plan we said we would change 20 directors by Christmas 2006 – and this too was achieved. But more important has been the work to invest in the skills of our leaders to improve performance and to give them the skills to coach their staff to higher standards. In the first two years of our reform, we focused deliberately on our top 200 leaders because we needed that team to be united in purpose and to have the leadership and people management skills to lead. We have now widened our ambition to focus on the leadership and management of our middle managers.

We promised from the start - and I have constantly repeated that promise – that we would fix the basic defects in systems and processes which lie at the root of the Home Office's long

term problems. I sometimes think that change programmes focus only on the big leadership issues of strategy, direction and motivation and ignore the need to underpin this with fixes to the basic wiring of the organisation. No reform of the Home Office which is going to work can ignore the fixing of all these systems and more. And so we are engaged in a long, determined programme – not yet completed – to fix the basics.

We are preparing now for the next Capability Review, when the bar will be raised again. We know we will be judged on the realities of our performance: the Home Office has improved dramatically, but we now have to be the best, no other ambition will do.

Source: Cabinet Office (2009b)

The NAO evaluation provides evidence that departments were taking action in relation to their reviews and that buy-in was taking place. A number of factors were seen to influence this:

· Permanent secretaries have a personal interest in taking reviews seriously through their accountability to the cabinet secretary and through their individual performance assessments.

· Departmental boards[2] are involved and review progress following on from each assessment. Boards have also designated a member to lead the response to the capability review.

· The publication of the reviews as well as departments' responses puts pressure on departments to respond positively.

· Departments appear to respect and value review teams' experience and insights. Having an external assessment of your weaknesses can provide impetus and focus for action.

· Departments regard capability reviews as adding value. 13 out of the 17 departments reviewed by NAO described the initiative as effective or very effective.

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[2] Management boards for UK departments are broadly similar to management committees or MACs in Ireland.

NAO found that among departments that had done second full capability reviews, scores had improved. In the second round reviews no element of capability was considered to be of 'serious concern' (a score of 0) and the number of elements described as 'strong' and 'well placed' had risen from 2 to 7 and 16 to 24 respectively. All departments that had completed second-round reviews had better overall results. The National Audit Office therefore concluded that capability reviews 'are beginning to provide evidence of improvement in capability'.

The big caveat that they add to this statement is that it is not yet clear whether this improvement in capability has resulted in improved performance. They suggest that 'the lack of a link between Capability Review scores and reported performance will appear increasingly anomalous and could undermine the credibility of both' (2009, p.10).

However, the NAO assessment also acknowledges that departments found it difficult to separate the impact of capability reviews from other programmes and other stimuli for change, such as the arrival of a new permanent secretary, external media criticism or an increase in budget. Moreover they add, it is difficult to demonstrate cause and effect when state agencies, that deliver many central government services are covered only indirectly by capability reviews.

The report proposes that in future capability reviews the links between actions and outputs and data demonstrating improved performance should be provided. However, they also concede that departments struggle to identify metrics that would give assurance that their actions are leading to desired outcomes. It is suggested that there is an important role for the centre (the Cabinet Office, National Treasury and National School for Government) in supporting departments in this regard.

Further recommendations for the centre were the need to compare performance with organisations outside the civil service, suggesting that such benchmarking would help maintain momentum for continuous improvement and would challenge departments to do better than simply maintain scores against other departments. It was also noted that departments found it hard to identify the best sources of good practice and that the Cabinet Office and National School of Government needed to reflect on how the findings of reviews would drive their work in this regard.

Other concerns raised in relation to capability reviews include questions around the methodology. An external member of the Home Office review team has argued (Mercer, 2006) that review teams would 'benefit from a better understanding of their precise role'. It is also suggested that the initiative's purpose 'is a bit blurred' and a better understanding is required as to whether reviews are 'an independent external inspection, or whether they are more like an internal development programme, or peer assessment.'

It has also been suggested that even greater use of external assessors should be made. According to Lodge (2005), in order to build trust and confidence in government, capability reviews 'must become a fully fledged external audit. Otherwise it will be hard to claim that this isn't Whitehall marking its own exams.' However, the Cabinet Office maintains that the combination of independent external reviewers and civil servants with knowledge of the system remains the most appropriate format for review teams (interview October 2010).

A revised capability review model

Following the publication of the NAO *Assessment of the Capability Review Programme* and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, the Cabinet Office introduced a new model of capability (2009a). The key features of the new model are:

· *Linking capability to results and outcomes.* In future reviews, judgments about delivery will be informed by actual delivery according to a consistent set of delivery metrics. Reviews will also include a new section on the performance of departments against Public Service Agreement targets and departmental strategic objectives[3]

· *Sharpening the focus on delivery.* While the key enablers of capability, leadership, strategy and delivery remain, the balance was adjusted to place greater emphasis on delivery

· *Challenging departments to innovate.* A new element in the delivery segment – innovate and improve delivery – challenges departments to develop a culture of innovation and continuous improvement

· *Raising the bar on collaboration.* A greater emphasis is placed on engaging with citizens and stakeholders

· *Emphasising the importance of achieving value for money.* Reviews will in future challenge departments more rigorously that the need to achieve value for money underpins everything that they do.

However, during 2010 while follow up progress reviews have occurred, no new reviews have commenced in line with the revised model. In May 2010 there was a change of government in the UK and this has resulted in some uncertainty in relation to the future of the capability review programme.[3]

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[3] Public Service Agreements have been disbanded by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government. However, it is likely that they will be replaced by something similar.

Analysis and recommendations

Capacity matters greatly to any organisation. Without the capacity to make good decisions and to implement them well, organisations fail. But while capacity matters greatly, developing it is not an easy task. As noted by Murray (2007, p.3), it firstly requires 'concentrated effort to allocate time towards assessing future needs and to shaping capacity to respond, when more immediate pressures demand a response'. Secondly, managing capacity is 'not stewardship of a settled resource' and 'future capacity needs are, in part, ambiguous and uncertain'. This latter point is of course strikingly evident in the dramatically changed economic and financial landscape of Ireland over the three years from the commencement of the Organisation Review Programme in 2007 to 2010.

On the basis that developing capacity is important, some vehicle for assisting organisations in assessing their capacity and in making progress in developing it is therefore desirable. From this perspective, the ORP can be seen as a constructive initiative. The programme also reflects a more general international trend towards evaluation and review across the public sector.

Analysing the operation and impact of the Organisation Review Programme needs to be done on several levels – the methodology and general approach, the actual reviews, departments' action plans and follow-up in respect of commitments, civil service-wide challenges and the political interface.

Analysis of ORP methodology and general approach

Resourcing the programme

The ORP methodology borrowed from the UK model of capability reviews. However, the two programmes differ in terms of the scale of the approach taken and consequently the timeliness with which the initiative has progressed. In the UK first round reviews, five people were allocated to and conducted each review, with in every case two of these being drawn from the private and voluntary sector and one from local government. In Ireland, a small number of principal officers (POs) have been seconded from their parent departments to lead on the reviews. The POs have been supported by a team drawn from the Department of the Taoiseach's public service modernisation division.

The lower level of resourcing of the Irish programme has contributed to the far longer timescale for the review programme in Ireland. In the UK, 17 departments were reviewed over a period of 18 months. In addition, several follow-up 'stock-taking' assessments took place to review progress in addressing challenges. In Ireland, seven reviews have been published by end 2010, four years since the inception of the programme. It has been announced that the remaining ORP reviews will be completed by the end of 2012. It is important for the credibility of the programme to stick to this timetable.

External involvement and moderation

A further distinction with the UK approach is the extent of external and independent representation on UK review teams. While there are advantages in using civil service reviewers, particularly their knowledge of and reputation within the system, from a public accountability perspective, it can be argued that participation by non civil servants is desirable. Furthermore, with external reviewers there is the opportunity of bringing expert insights from senior people running comparatively complex organisations to bear on the analysis. In the Irish reviews to date, there have been no non-civil servant reviewers.

In the pilot programme, in order to incorporate an outside perspective, a steering group was set up including two senior private sector managers and an academic. The secretaries general from the departments being reviewed and senior managers from the Departments of the Taoiseach and Finance were also on the committee. However, this approach was abandoned in the second round of reviews as it had resulted in quite protracted negotiations in respect of reviews. Instead more informal discussions in relation to findings take place between the review team and the department.

In contrast the UK has maintained a formal system of moderation panels, chaired by the head of the civil service, which allows reviewed departments to make

representations in respect of findings. Representatives of the review team also have the opportunity to justify their conclusions. Discussions may result in some changes in respect of wording and scores. This more formal mediation process, which is once-off to safeguard against protracted debate, should be considered in Ireland as it might help to more effectively resolve differences between review teams and departments in respect of findings prior to the preparation of action plans.

Consultation

The Irish reviews are based on far more extensive consultation than those in the UK. Widespread consultation particularly within departments has merit in achieving good will and support for an initiative. Members of review teams also emphasised that extensive and varied consultation means that findings are drawn from a range of sources and enables the programme to defend itself against possible criticisms of bias or subjectivity. However, it needs also to be borne in mind that the scale of consultation is not sufficient in itself to guarantee that findings are evidence based. Regard needs also to be had on an ongoing basis for the training of reviewers, for example in the development of interview schedules and the recording and analysis of findings, in order to safeguard the consistency and integrity of the process.

In the UK, there are no general staff questionnaires and focus groups. In part the more limited level of consultation is possible because UK reviews are primarily aimed at examining the capability of senior management. One advantage of the reduced level of consultation afforded by UK reviews is that the bulk of the fieldwork is concentrated into a two-week period and thus reviews are finalised in a very timely manner.

The framework

Also in the area of methodology, the Irish framework of ten attributes of capacity, which are grouped under the three components of strategy, managing delivery and evaluation, is perhaps too rigid. For example, an element like leadership, included under the strategy heading, clearly also impinges on managing delivery and evaluation. Particularly

in the pilot review, the overlap between components and attributes in the model would appear to have resulted in some difficulty both for reviewers and departments in presenting and responding to findings.

In addition, the elements of capacity would in some cases appear to be too general and focus on activities or areas of responsibility (e.g. governance, performance measurement) rather than 'attributes of capacity'. In the UK model, the ten elements of capability are clearly linked to behaviours (e.g. focus on outcomes; base choice on evidence; develop clear roles, responsibilities and role models; ignite passion, pace and drive). While overall this may not impact significantly on findings, it would seem to make assessment and the drawing of conclusions in relation to capacity somewhat more complex.

Follow-up

A strength of UK reviews has been the systematic follow up to determine progress and the possibility of holding permanent secretaries to account in respect of progress made in addressing challenges. In the ORP, no form of follow-up assessment was originally prescribed. However given that the programme was initiated in order to improve capacity and consequently performance, at some point departments should be able to provide evidence that their performance has improved as a result of actions taken in response to the findings of their ORP review.

This has been recognised by the Government and in the foreword to the Second Report of the ORP; the Taoiseach indicates that the Public Service Board, announced in June 2010, will be asked to develop proposals to revisit those organisations already reviewed to assess the implementation of their action plans. This initiative is to be welcomed, both from the perspective of the individual organisations reviewed and also for the ORP. That the programme is resulting in improvements in capacity and performance will be a central focus of a value for money evaluation of the ORP by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which they have indicated will take place in the future.

Analysis of ORP reviews

All organisations to participate in the ORP to date indicate that the experience was informative and the process useful. In general, all parties would appear to have learnt from the experience of the pilot reviews and the general presentation, accessibility and clarity of analysis of the second round reviews is stronger. Two organisations to participate in the second round, Revenue and the PRA, emerge as having strong capacity and as being well placed to address future challenges.

While the reviews are stand-alone documents, and there is unique learning for each organisation from the findings, comparison between them is inevitable. Two key conclusions emerge from such an assessment. Firstly, it would seem that some weaknesses, which are consistent across many of the organisations, are highlighted to a greater extent and with more specific recommendations in relation to how they should be addressed, in certain of the reviews. While this may come down to a question of prioritisation, it can appear somewhat anomalous that a capacity challenge is highlighted for one organisation but not in another despite similar circumstances appearing to pertain.

Secondly, there are a number of important weaknesses experienced in common by departments that participated in both the pilot and second round reviews. Leadership emerges as a significant issue as several of the reviews conclude that there is a need for top management committees to be more effective in mapping out the strategic direction of their organisation. In all organisations there are concerns about the quality of leadership at levels below top management.

A further dominant theme to emerge across the reviews is shortcomings in the organisations in respect of human resource management. A range of issues are raised that lead to considerable frustration among staff and which result in the organisations operating sub-optimally. These include a very mixed approach to people management, failure to tackle underperformance, very limited workforce planning, and issues around succession planning and mobility.

Under the evaluation heading, performance measurement is identified as an area where each of the departments/offices appears to have difficulties. Explicit measurement of performance appears to be limited, with particular problems in respect of the measurement of outputs and outcomes.

The consistent monitoring of the performance of agencies while emphasised particularly in the pilot reviews also emerges in relation to the Department of Health and Children, the only organisation in the second round to have agencies working under its auspices. Also, the question of the Irish civil service's capacity at EU level and in particular its response to a changed EU landscape, brought about by events such as the enlargement of the Union to 27 members and the increased power of the European Parliament, highlighted in the pilot reviews, remains a cause for concern.

Lastly, in an assessment of the second round reviews, Professor John Murray of Trinity College particularly highlights the issue of public sector productivity (Second Report of the Organisation Review Programme, 2010). In an environment of recession, declining staff numbers and budget cuts it is essential that the 'more for less conundrum' referred to by Professor Murray is dealt with by each organisation. The stark concluding comments of Professor Murray in relation to 'a revolution in public sector productivity' being the only answer, need to be taken to heart by both individual organisations and by the centre.

Analysis of ORP action plans and follow up

The quality of action plans is mixed. All organisations, both in the pilot programme and the second report, to varying degrees use plans for context setting, to provide background information, to indicate progress made since the review and to debate findings. Again to varying degrees this takes from the focus on future commitments and actions to address capacity challenges.

A further issue with many of the plans is the tendency to under-address certain key capacity challenges, with commitments either not likely to address the substantive issue or being too vague to result in any meaningful action. The danger of insufficiently robust action plans is evident in the experience of the pilot departments where it was found that issues unsatisfactorily covered in action plans were ultimately not given the attention they deserved.

The approach in the action plans of Revenue and DOHC, whereby action points are linked to related objectives, expected outcomes, timescale and a person or area of responsibility, represents best practice. Also, the procedures put in place unilaterally by DOHC to ensure that commitments to address capacity challenges are followed up on, including independent assessment after a year, are to be recommended.

Departments that participated in the pilot review have had two years to implement their action plans. While some progress has been made, departments also cited the changed economic environment and cuts in funding impacting on certain commitments they had hoped to follow through on. While clearly a different budgetary environment pertains now compared to two years ago when pilot reviews and plans were written, capacity challenges remain precisely that, a hindrance to the effective delivery of the departments services and objectives. It therefore remains pertinent, perhaps even more so in a context where areas of the civil service are particularly stretched that management teams continue to make every effort to address issues specifically identified as inhibiting their effectiveness.

Civil service wide challenges

While management in each department/office can and should take responsibility for all capacity weaknesses identified for their organisation, the pilot ORP highlighted that in respect of some areas - HR issues, relationships with agencies, performance measurement and the EU dimension - that there is a need for the centre (the Departments of the Taoiseach and Finance) to provide support and direction.

The identification of similar capacity weaknesses among organisations in the second round provides further evidence of the need for a service-wide response to these issues. However, overall progress remains slow.

Enforced productivity improvements are occurring due to a decline in civil service numbers and pay levels. Also, research (e.g. on governance of agencies) has been carried out in relation to some of these long-standing civil service wide capacity challenges. However, there appears to be little progress on the performance measurement issue and the capacity of Irish officials in EU negotiations, particularly identified in the Report of the ORP Pilot Phase, no longer appears to be a particular focus of attention.

On HR issues, progress has also been particularly slow. Issues in relation to PMDS, the need for more robust approaches to workforce planning and very uneven management skills were highlighted in pilot reviews. Two years later commenting on the second round of reviews, Murray (Second Report of the Organisation Review Programme, P.91) concludes that 'the challenges of changing the institutional aspects of human resource management, development, practices and procedures at organisational and especially whole system levels require focused and urgent interrogation'. While a number of avenues (the Public Service (Croke Park) Agreement 2010-2014 and the Public Service Board) for progressing HR reform are identified in the introduction to the Second Report of the Organisation Review Programme, it remains to be seen how quickly this will happen.

The objective of the ORP is to identify capacity weaknesses that are undermining the ability of government departments and offices to deliver services effectively. Where challenges are experienced across seven very diverse departments/offices, including two perceived in other respects to be well placed to address capacity challenges, it is imperative that the Departments of the Taoiseach and Finance take responsibility for addressing these issues.

Political interface

There has been little political engagement with the ORP. While review teams do seek to engage with ministers and junior ministers in respect of the capacity of their department, it remains the case that the voice of the minister/s in reviews is muted. As noted by Murray (Second Report of the Organisation Review Programme, P.88), 'politicians at ministerial level bear much of the public pressure with regard to the service delivery activity and performance of a department or office and it would be helpful to understand more about their assessment of capacity and future challenges'.

Furthermore, while all reviews and action plans are reviewed by government prior to publication, there has been little discussion of the programme in Dáil debates. Some references have been made by the Taoiseach to the ORP in the context of general public service reform and a small number of parliamentary questions in respect of reviews have been posed to the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Health. There have been no Joint Oireachtas Committee debates in respect of department reviews and action plans. A Seanad debate on second round reviews was held in October 2010.

Summary of recommendations

· Developing capacity is critically important to the future success of organisations, but it takes time. Civil service organisations must make a concentrated effort to allocate time to developing capacity even in a pressurised environment.

· The ORP framework of ten attributes grouped under three components should be reviewed. At present there is overlap across elements and components and it makes the process of assessment, presentation and interpretation of findings somewhat complex.

· From a methodological perspective, consideration should also be given to the general research approach which is primarily based around a very large number of

interviews with key stakeholders of a department/office. Care needs to be taken to ensure that all reviewers receive training in interview techniques, for example the development of an interview schedule and the recording and analysis of findings, to ensure the ongoing consistency and integrity of the methodology.

· Consideration should be given to the inclusion of non civil servants on future review teams in order to ensure public accountability and also to provide independence, balance and fresh ideas.

· If progress is to be made, departments need to be open and willing to accept the substantive point in findings, even where they believe themselves that they have made progress in an area. Furthermore, commitments made in action plans need to directly relate to weaknesses identified in reviews and be clear, concrete and measurable.

· In an effort to preempt some of the apparent differences in respect of review findings, consideration should be given to putting in place a formal system of moderation panels, as in the UK, where organisations and review teams can meet on a once-off basis to discuss differences in respect of findings and have these differences moderated independently.

· Many of the capacity challenges experienced in common by the organisations reviewed require the support and direction of the centre in order to be addressed. It is essential that the service-wide challenges identified in reviews are progressed at a faster rate than has been the case to date.

· The ORP needs to be progressed in a timelier manner. Possibilities in this regard include the allocation of more staff to the reviews. However, delays in relation to the finalisation of action plans and the clearance for publication of reports should also be examined. It is important that the deadline of end-2012 for the completion of all reviews is met.

- Some form of follow up assessment needs to be built into the programme if real progress and consequently value for money is to be achieved. It is important that the Public Service Board regard the ORP as an urgent area of focus.

- As a further mechanism of accountability, the relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee could hold debates in respect of published ORP reviews and action plans, with a particular focus on the follow-up being taken by departments.

Concluding comments

A criticism often levelled at organisation reviews is whether they generate any new findings, whether anything emerges that wasn't known about already. Findings in the ORP reviews in respect of issues that have long been identified as problematic for the civil service – deficiencies in the management of cross-cutting issues, problems around performance measurement, the absence of a professional approach to HRM – would appear to lend some credence to this claim. However, highlighting once more those issues that the civil service has failed to meaningfully address does have merit, particularly if the Public Service (Croke Park) Agreement and new entities such as the Public Service Board are to be used as vehicles for addressing these issues.

ORP reviews are also of value for individual organisations. They represent a systematic, evidence-informed assessment of the capacity of government departments to address current and future challenges. From this perspective, the ORP can be seen as an important, perhaps essential, initiative, by supporting organisations in assessing their capacity. In departments where ORP findings are fully accepted and acted on, reviews have the potential to be a significant driver of reform, enhanced capacity and improved performance.

While the ORP was born in a very different economic and budgetary environment, the Government remains committed to the initiative and department reviews will continue. Indeed it can readily be argued that the development of

capacity is even more critical in an environment where the pressure to improve productivity and performance is significant. However, it is essential that some mechanism is put in place to ensure that departments address review findings and commitments in action plans. In the absence of demonstrable follow-up, the credibility of the ORP will be questioned.

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