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Public Service 2022 in Ireland

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Purpose

By 2022, Ireland will be celebrating 100 years of self-government. The *Public Service 2022* project was launched to consider what kind of Ireland could exist by then, and what kind of public service might emerge. The idea behind the project was to identify and examine trends and drivers of change both for Ireland and for the public services over the coming years. It was intended to present some of the options and choices which exist in improving the capacity of the public service to help design, respond to and implement policies that are determined by government.

Public Service in Critical Condition

The impetus for the project came from a group of senior public servants who felt that the public service in Ireland was losing its capacity to critically analyse the implications of long-term trends. Ireland has undergone rapid demographic, social, economic and technological change in the past 15-20 years, and to some extent, government has been playing 'catch-up' in terms of coping with some of the changes that have taken place.

Major new challenges and opportunities are expected to emerge for the public service in the coming years in a range of areas, including those posed by technological developments.

New Challenges Posed to the Public Sector

Drawing on analysis of possible or likely developments in Irish society, as well as international developments over the next fifteen years or so, the project objectives involved:

- Drawing up a range of scenarios that would challenge the public sector.
- Analysing the state of readiness of the public sector to meet the different challenges within these scenarios.

- Assisting the public sector to identify changes that are needed to meet emerging challenges.
- Assisting the public sector in exploring new arrangements – including organisational arrangements across the whole public sector – for service delivery.

Ultimately, the project was designed to stimulate creative and imaginative thinking, and to develop the capacity of public servants in considering long-term trends and policy analysis.

Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches to Identify Core Drivers

The project sought to identify a number of 'core drivers' affecting change in Ireland and abroad, both from existing material and data, but also from a wide range of actors through an extensive participatory approach. There are very few examples of such a foresight project being developed focusing specifically on the public services. It was decided that the best approach in this context would be the preparation of scenarios involving a large number of stakeholders.



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Scenario Workshops

A series of fifteen workshops, some involving over 200 people, were held in early 2006. Each group was asked to ‘think aloud’ in identifying and discussing different trends and their likely impact on the public service. Each workshop contained a mix of individuals, which included senior, middle and junior level personnel drawn from central government, state agencies, local authorities, healthcare, the police force, primary, secondary and third-level education, private sector companies, and voluntary sector organizations.

The next step was to examine the key uncertainties within the trends identified. This was done through a survey questionnaire where respondents were asked to identify trends that could evolve in numerous different ways and that would be liable to have the greatest impact on the future. Respondents were asked to rank the trends according to their level of ‘uncertainty’ and level of ‘impact’ – those trends that scored the highest on these two dimensions were then regarded as ‘critical uncertainties’.

Face to Face with the Uncertainties

The results of the questionnaire were then used at a specially convened workshop to create four outline scenarios. The sce-

narios were constructed on the basis of the ‘critical uncertainties’ as they pose the highest level of uncertainty in terms of how they might pan out. These uncertainties served as the foundations or building blocks from which the scenarios were eventually fleshed out. The initial scenario outlines were drafted and redrafted in the light of the existing data by threading together a number of ‘core drivers’ and trends to ensure each scenario was internally consistent. The draft scenarios were screened by a number of actors, including some of those attending the workshops.

Economic Forecasting

As part of the project, an economic forecasting exercise was also undertaken to examine economic trends, possible government revenue projections, and future demands in key areas of public expenditure, such as healthcare, education and social provision in the light of demographic projections.

Commentators for Additional Advice

As part of the follow-up and process of analysis, a number of commentators (both outside and inside the public service) then took this research to highlight implications for the public service, identifying what preparations need to be made to meet emerging challenges and seize emerging opportunities.

Role of Project Advisory Board

The project was overseen by a Project Advisory Board, consisting of a number of high-level representatives drawn from political life, the public services, the social partners (business, trade unions, etc.), and academia.

Public Service to Cope With Immigration, Economic Growth and Environmental Sustainability

A key finding of the project was that there is a ‘window of opportunity’ for Ireland to prepare for demographic change (such as the ‘agequake’), which will not hit Ireland until 2030s, far later than most EU countries.

Other socio-economic trends identified include: immigration (a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland); changing lifestyles and societal values; individualism; globalisation, competitiveness and economic growth; energy supply; and management of environmental resources. All of these will affect the way public services are delivered, and different eventualities in each of these areas are tracked, including their impact on the public services, in different scenarios.

Emerging Technologies and ICT

Some of the technological trends identified as being of importance to the public sector include:

- Emerging growth industries such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, as well as new developments in these fields;
- Developments in information and communication technologies;
- Advances in biotechnology and healthier lifestyles leading to life expectancy of well beyond 100 not long after 2022.



Government Might Face more Single Issues and Sensationalist Media Coverage

Some of the opportunities and challenges that might arise from some of the technological changes referred to above include:

- The need to target the development of certain growth industries such as biotechnology, nanotechnology in terms of economic development agencies and third and fourth level education.
- Developments in fields such as biotechnology and nanotechnology, as well as decentralised energy generation (based on nanobio and nanomaterial approaches) may allow for reduced energy consumption and a reduced impact on the environment in certain areas.
- Developments in ICTs will lead to an increasingly complicated media environment, with fewer people reading newspapers or watching domestic television. Government is thus faced with an increasingly fragmented media, where increased competition between sources of information has led to a temptation to sensationalise.

- With ICT developments also making communication ever more easy and cheap, there could be an explosion in the number of single-issue pressure groups, usually focussed on campaigning on very specific or localised issues.
- Technology will be both an ‘enabler’ and a challenge in dealing with the ageing population, and in terms of the healthcare system generally. Technologies already exist to allow independent living for the elderly, and many new technologies will be developed in the healthcare sector. However the cost of some of these may be prohibitive, and society will need to start a debate on whether the considerable cost of some technologies or pharmaceuticals will really be worth the sometimes marginal impact they can have.

Generally, technology will be an important engine (though not the only engine) of productivity in the public sector – it will be necessary to maximise the potential of new technologies in this regard given the expectation that citizens will continue to demand that government does more but with less taxation revenue.

How Can Public Service Keep Addressing Certain Norms?

Key issues raised that are of relevance for policymaking include challenging and addressing certain norms that are strongly held within the public service. This will require a fundamental rethink in a number of areas. Some of the key issues raised in this respect are:

- That central decision-making, while necessary in many areas such as macroeconomic decisions, is poorly equipped to handle other challenges for the future, particularly in a more diverse society and as people come to expect customised services tailored to the needs of individuals or particular localities.
- That every problem does not require its own agency to address it as public tasks become more multi-faceted.
- That public servants must become more relevant as a means of supporting policy-development.
- That politicians cannot be responsible for everything in a more complicated world.

Empowering Public Services

Some of the choices and options open to policy-makers in making the public service better equipped to handle future challenges include:

- Empowering the ‘front-line’ – more responsibility needs to be given to those providing services, as they are best equipped to know what works and what will not work.
- Bringing greater accountability to public servants for both successes and failures.
- Ensuring real experience in service delivery is fed into the policy-making system.

All of the above will require fundamental changes in practice and in culture, building on existing reforms to date.

Finding the Balance between Public Service and Private Sector

As noted above, critical factors include continuing economic growth, changes in societal values, demographic change, environmental developments, and technological change. In addition to these of course, a critical factor will be political deci-

sions regarding the balance between services that are provided through the state, and services that can be provided through the private or non-profit sectors.

Key actors therefore include both politicians and public servants. If politicians do not drive future reforms, they are unlikely to have far-reaching effects. A key set of relationships is likely to further evolve, and this will also affect change into the future. This includes:

- the relationship between politician and citizen,

- the relationship between politician and public servant,
- the relationship between public servant and citizen.

In addition to citizens, politicians, and public servants, the media will be important players in shaping trends into the future.

Sources and References

Project Website – www.publicservice2022.ie

The Project website contains further details on the project, including the scenarios themselves, as well as a number of working papers looking at: past critical junctures, survey data and international benchmarks of public perceptions of public

services, and future drivers of change for the ‘Ireland of the Future’.

A publication containing all papers and analysis for the project, including the above as well as the economic forecast and analysis and commentary on the trends and identifying preparations that need to be made for the future, will be published in November 2007.

About the EFMN: Policy Professionals dealing with RTD, Innovation and Economic Development increasingly recognize a need to base decisions on broadly based participative processes of deliberation and consultation with stakeholders. One of the most important tools they apply is FORESIGHT. The EFMN or European Foresight Monitoring Network supports policy professionals by monitoring and analyzing Foresight activities in the European Union, its neighbours and the world. The EFMN helps those involved in policy development to stay up to date on current practice in Foresight. It helps them to tap into a network of know-how and experience on issues related to the day to day design, management and execution of Foresight and Foresight related processes.