

Civil Service more innovative, but significant 'challenges' remain - survey

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Civil servants feel the civil service is becoming a more innovative place to work, but a majority remain concerned about a lack of employee involvement and how performance management is handled, according to the latest internal Civil Service engagement survey.

Launched late last week by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, the '2020 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey Report' - conducted in September 2020 - is the third in a series carried out in 2015, 2017 and 2020.

The surveys fulfil a commitment in the Civil Service Renewal Plan to a series of three biennial surveys, developed and run by the Central Statistics Office.

DPER presented the findings of the 2020 survey under two headings: "positive" and "challenging".

Despite being conducted in September-October 2020, when approximately 50% of the Civil Service was working remotely, staff reported feeling the same levels of competence as in 2017 (2015: 80%, 2017: 79%, 2020: 79%).

An "Innovative Climate" at 55% is "no longer in the top 5 most challenging results and has improved 10 points since 2015 (2015: 45%, 2017: 49%)", according to the survey report.

Meanwhile, just under half (49%) of civil servants feel that their organisation is quick to make changes when they are necessary. But this is up from 33% in 2017.

Measuring levels of engagement, the survey finds that across the service, these continue to be high (2015: 70%, 2017: 72%, 2020: 75%) and "show that civil servants have a strong sense of connection with their work".

The increase in response rates from 56% in 2017 to 65% in 2020 - the highest response rate so far - is in itself seen as an indicator of increase in engagement by civil servants and an appreciation of the value of consultation and action.

The overall theme score for 'Citizen Impact' has improved again (2015: 68%, 2017: 70%, 2020: 73%). The widely-publicised continuity of service delivery during the pandemic may have contributed to this.

LEADERSHIP – POSITIVE FINDING

Themes which were lowest in 2017 have all experienced positive increases. For example, staff are becoming more positive about Senior Leadership in their organisation (2015: 50%, 2017: 55%, 2020: 59%) and while staff have reported that social supports have “slightly regressed” since 2017 (2015: 70%, 2017: 72%, 2020: 71%), this remains one of the more positive results in the survey.

“The slight decrease is most likely a result of not being able to work from the office during the COVID-19 pandemic which could potentially hamper relationship building”, the report says.

Although perceptions of the “involvement culture” have improved by 5 points since the 2015 survey, only a minority of civil servants (41%) feel openly involved in decision-making.

A majority also continue to feel that the public does not value their contribution; however, this theme improved by 11 points since 2015 (2015: 33%, 2017: 38%, 2020: 44%). “This challenging finding stands in contrast to the results of the Civil Service Customer Service Survey 2019 and previous iterations which have consistently shown that citizens are highly satisfied with the work of the Civil Service.”

PROMOTION - FRUSTRATION

Only 42% of staff believe that they will have the opportunity to be promoted if they perform well, while only 36% believe that their Department has a “clear and fair promotion process”.

More experienced staff are less positive about the transparency of the promotion process. Senior managers are generally more positive than colleagues at lower grades, with less than 40% of EOs and COs (39% and 38% respectively) agreeing that they have all the opportunities they need for promotion.

They also continue to feel unhappy with how performance is managed, though scores under this theme have improved by 9 points since 2015. “Only 20% of respondents agreed that poor performance is effectively addressed ... with just 46% agreeing that people in their Department are held accountable for achieving goals and meeting expectations”, the report concludes.