

Consultation Paper on Strengthening Civil Service Accountability and Performance

Focus of the Consultation Paper

- The consultation paper was prepared so as to initiate an extensive public consultation process with the aim of bringing about change and reform to the current accountability arrangements. The Programme for Government highlight these critical issues as stronger accountability goes hand in hand with improved performance.
- The focus of the paper is:-
 - To explore where the appropriate balance lies in holding ministers and officials to account while supporting effective public administration?
 - To develop clearer accountability frameworks to:
 - Support performance improvement;
 - Foster a culture of accountability;
 - Provide for clearer delineation of responsibilities
 - Support stronger systems for transparent performance measurement

Key Points of the Consultation Paper

- The paper examines five broad areas:
 1. Current arrangements for Ministerial and Secretary General accountability;
 2. The Legal framework underpinning the current arrangements;
 3. Previous reform initiatives;
 4. The international experience, and
 5. Reform options for further consultation and consideration.
- The paper highlights that robust and effective accountability systems are confirmed as an essential characteristic of high-performing and high-reputation organisations. Accountability arrangements make a significant contribution to the achievement of wider organisational goals, and also reinforce civil service values of integrity, impartiality and fairness.
- Accountability is a complex concept embedded in the constitutional and existing legislative frameworks. Detailed formal accountability mechanisms, in particular for Secretaries General, including in their role as Accounting Officers, are a long established and central feature of the operation of the Irish civil service. These mechanisms are outlined in the consultation paper as well as their legislative underpinning. The Programme for Government commitments are essentially designed to strengthen accountability obligations currently applying to all senior civil service personnel within the constitutional principle of ministerial responsibility.
- Other Westminster type parliamentary democracies have all grappled with the challenge of in establishing clear accountability in a political/parliamentary environment defined by the doctrine of ministerial responsibility. Reform projects in other jurisdictions have focused on promoting sharper and more transparent accountability for departmental heads, in having a delegation of responsibilities, and a sharper division of roles between ministers

and the civil service, and performance assessment systems for senior civil servants. However, it is evident from their efforts that no one single, comprehensive and all-embracing solution can be applied to resolve this issue in a categorical way.

- The paper identifies a number of reform options for consideration. These options are not exhaustive, and it is intended that they will be augmented by contributions received as part of the public consultation process. The reform options include:-

- Ensuring that legislation enables the effective assigning of responsibilities. **Reform of the legislative framework** could provide greater clarity and certainty as to the roles and responsibilities of ministers and civil servants including accountability to parliament
- Consider what are the **optimal governance arrangements for the Civil Service** as a whole and for individual Government Departments. This could include the development of a governing entity for the civil service such as a Head of the Civil Service which would e.g. establish the overall strategic direction of the Civil Service, setting standards, supervise the division of responsibilities between the political and the administrative level. A detailed and comprehensive governance framework for Civil Service departments could be developed and put into operation in each department. This framework could scope out and specify more precisely the appropriate roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of civil servants.
- **More effective accountability of senior civil service management** in line with the Haddington Road Agreement. This could include the publication of specific objectives. [Haddington Road Commitment = '*Measures will be introduced to further develop and enhance a culture of performance across the management cohort of the Public Service. These measures will include the introduction of management performance agreements.*']
- Ensure that **recruitment and promotion practices meet the needs of the Civil Service**. This could build on progress to date and involve reviewing HR practices including contractual arrangements for senior officials (i.e. replace permanent tenure with fixed term performance related contracts), eliminate remaining restrictive recruitment and promotion practices etc.
- **Reaffirming and reinforcing the values and ethos of the civil service**. It is important that the process of reform is anchored in a complete and accurate picture of the current set of values that underpin the actions and behaviours of civil servants.
- **Addressing complex cross cutting issues by breaking down the "silo" approach** between Departments. This may involve building structures to underpin effective horizontal governance. Institutional and organisational changes may also be required to secure a much closer alignment between civil service organisational structures and the key outcomes in many different areas of social and economic policy that the system is charged with delivering.

Ends