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RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION IN THE IRISH CIVIL SERVICE

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Background

Since the foundation of the State all recruitment to the Civil Service and to senior positions within the Local Government and the Health sectors has been handled by a central and independent Commission. The Civil Service and Local Appointments Commissioners were established by legislation in the 1920s to ensure that appointments were made in an open and fair system that was free from political interference and patronage. The recruitment system is based on the merit principle whereby the candidate placed highest in order of merit through a competitive selection process is appointed to the vacant post. Probity, merit, fairness and independence in the way appointments are made have remained as the key principles underpinning the Irish Civil Service recruitment system of today.

Legislative Context

The main legislation underpinning this area had remained unchanged for many years but came under review as part of the civil service modernisation process. The principal legislative framework was formed by the Civil Service Commissioners Act 1956 which covered the recruitment process and the Civil Service Regulation Act 1956 which covered conditions of service for civil servants. Both of these pieces of legislation will have been replaced by the end of this year.

Civil service recruitment is conducted against a background where we are required to comply with a number of other significant pieces of legislation covering the rights employees and candidates. These would include the Employment Equality Acts 1998 and 2004, Disabilities Act 2005, Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003 and the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003.

Recent Legislative Changes

In 2004 the Public Service Management Act made provisions for some fundamental changes in civil service recruitment. As part of the Civil Service modernisation programme it was agreed that more devolution of Human Resource Management from the centre was required and that we needed to be more flexible and more efficient in our approach to recruitment in order to compete more effectively for talent in the labour market. Under this legislation the Civil Service and Local Appointments Commission was replaced by two new independent organisations namely The Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) and the Public Appointments Service (PAS). The CPSA is now the regulation body responsible for producing new Codes of Practice and introducing a system of licensing permits that allow civil service departments and offices to undertake their own recruitment. The CPSA now monitors, through auditing, recruitment campaigns and ensures that the principles of equity, fairness and merit are still enshrined in the system.

The PAS, on the other hand, is now the central recruitment, selection and assessment organisation for the public service and while its client base has increased it no longer enjoys the monopoly position it once held in relation to civil service recruitment. The PAS is now a centre of excellence and a promoter of best practice. The organisation is now more competitive and client focused than previously and more professional in terms of the range of services and supports it now delivers.

New legislation will also be enacted this year to replace the Civil Service Regulation Act 1956 and this will bring about changes in relation to the conditions under which civil servants are employed and the grounds and process under which they can be dismissed. This legislation introduces underperformance for the first time as a specific ground on which dismissal action can be taken. The power of dismissal up to Principal Officer will now be vested in the Secretary General whereas up to now dismissal could only take place with the agreement of the Minister.

Recruitment Grades and Open Competitions

The principal administrative recruiting grades to the Civil Service are at Clerical Officer, Executive Officer and graduate levels (See Appendix on Grading Structure).

Under the modernisation programme some limited open recruitment is now taking place at middle and senior management levels but the number of posts filled as a result remains quite small. Professional and technical posts are filled through graduate entry and at middle management level where both qualifications and experience are a requirement.

Trade union membership is very high across all grade levels up to and including the Principal Officer within the civil service encompassing both the administrative and the professional and technical grades. The issue of open recruitment above the junior and graduate entry grades is resisted on the basis that it would restrict career advancement and block promotion outlets to senior level posts. The system is based on the career civil servant and senior level posts are filled through promotions made from within.

Recent negotiations under the modernisation programme have secured agreement that when managers above the entry grades leave to join the private sector their positions can be filled through open competition. In view of the fact that we do not have a retention issue within the Irish civil service this agreement has resulted in very few posts being filled through this mechanism. The restrictive approach that has existed to date has, in addition, increased the reluctance of people from the private sector to attempt to move into the system in mid career. New negotiations are underway to seek a new approach to increasing the number of posts falling to be filled from open competition.

Internal Promotions

The Irish system is based on the generalist civil servant and posts at the junior grades are filled by a combination of open recruitment and internal promotions. At the junior grades of Staff Officer, Executive Officer and Administrative Officer these posts are filled through internal promotion processes, which are becoming increasingly competitive and merit based, and through external open competition. Appointments to the grade of Higher Executive officer are made exclusively through internal promotion processes and there is no open entry to this grade.

Appointments to grades above the Executive Officer, with the exception of graduate recruitment to Administrative Officer and Diplomatic Service posts, takes place through internal promotions. Cross departmental or inter-ministry promotion competitions are conducted by the Public Appointments Service and panels are formed from which vacant positions are filled in order of merit. The promotion appointment process, up to and including Assistant Principal, consists of assessment through work related/psychometric tests and interviews. Positions at Principal and Assistant Secretary General are filled through the use of the interview technique only.

Senior Level Appointments

Appointments at Assistant Secretary General level and at Secretary General level are handled by the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC). The membership of this committee consists of the Secretary to the Government, Secretary General Finance Ministry, two other serving Secretaries General and a management expert from the private sector.

Some positions at Assistant Secretary General level are filled by open competition if TLAC decide that the skills or expertise cannot be found internally. Open competitions at this level are conducted by the Public Appointments Service with involvement from TLAC on the interview panel.

Vacant positions at Secretary General and Assistant Secretary General are advertised internally to serving Principal Officers and interviews are conducted by TLAC. Following the selection process at Assistant Secretary General, one name is submitted by TLAC to the

Minister for appointment. At the Secretary General level, following the competitive process, three names are submitted to the Minister from which an appointment is made.

Some senior level positions, such as the Ombudsman who is a servant of the State rather than a civil servant, are filled by the Government without necessarily conducting a competitive process.

Developments in Recruitment Methodologies

Recruitment and selection processes are now almost without exception competency based and a job analysis study or job/person specification is normally undertaken as a prerequisite to the recruitment campaign. At the junior and entry levels we are faced with handling large volumes of applications and applying shortlisting and assessment processes that can reliably reduce the numbers to manageable proportions for interview.

Through www.publicjobs.ie all applications are now handled on-line and this has resulted in greater efficiencies particularly in relation to large volume campaigns. We have reduced significantly our reliance on the postal system and now through e-mail messaging and SMS messaging we are in contact with applicants at all stages throughout the recruitment process. On-line questionnaires have been used more recently as an efficient and effective sifting method and we are further exploring the scope for on-line testing. Cognitive tests and work simulation tests are used widely at this level and a computer-based testing centre has been run on a pilot basis and is currently under review. The use of video as a means of producing and administering work simulation tests has proved very effective in the recruitment of trainees for the police force and firefighters for the Dublin Fire Service.

At the graduate entry level we have moved to the use of assessment centres for the Diplomatic Service. The most recent campaign at this level followed a job analysis study and we recruited a very high calibre of applicant following a very intense but focused selection process. Client organisations are increasingly concerned about the quality of new recruits and on this campaign feedback has been extremely positive.

Challenges Today

We are operating in a very tight labour market and the challenge for the civil service today and into the future is to attract its fair share of the available talent. Research conducted recently would indicate that some work is required to improve the image of the civil service particularly among the younger and the graduate population. Recent findings would describe the civil service on the one hand as “boring” and “bureaucratic” and on the other as reasonably well paid with a good pension scheme.

The variety of challenges, opportunities for career progression and the chance to make a difference for society and the country needs to be marketed more strongly in order to attract good quality people to the civil service.

In relation to skill shortages we have already witnessed the need to look abroad for new recruits in the areas of nursing and planning and demographic projections would indicate that this trend is likely to continue into the future across all areas. Some of the skill shortages need to be greater aligned through better forward planning with the outputs of third and fourth level education. While we are not currently experiencing a definite trend in relation to the more generalist administrative skills at the entry levels there is little room for complacency and we need to be conscious of the need to market the benefits of a career in the civil service more strongly than may have been the case in the past.

Attracting good quality middle to senior level people to the civil and the wider public service is increasingly becoming a challenge and traditional channels of advertising vacancies (newspapers, etc) are no longer effective. Candidates at this level can be regarded as “passive” candidates in that they are not actively seeking a career change. We have been researching new approaches e.g. executive search as a means of improving the quality of the applicant pool for senior positions.

We must increase our efforts to introduce more open recruitment at the senior levels in order to deal with skill shortages and to avail of the opportunity to introduce some new thinking and a more challenging mindset into the senior grades. In the present system we are placing great emphasis on the concept of the “generalist” civil servant and our ability to attract the right calibre at junior levels and then to grow from within the leaders for tomorrow.

In relation to the recruitment process we need to increase our efforts to maximise the use of new and emerging technologies. On-line recruitment through www.publicjobs.ie has provided a 24/7 service and has given us an international presence and we are in the process of developing the capability of this application further. The use of on-line testing for example offers greater efficiencies for both ourselves and from the candidates perspective and displays a more efficient and modern civil service in the eyes of potential new recruits. The use of candidate database through registration has proved to be a very effective means marketing new posts as they occur. The current phase of our on-line development will provide applicant tracking, client self service and online test and interview booking for candidates.

We are increasingly subjected to appeals and legal challenge on grounds of fairness from unsuccessful or unhappy candidates and we need to ensure that our systems withstand these challenges. The tests and assessments we use must be valid and reliable measures of the identified competency areas and our scoring mechanisms must be accurate. Interview board members must be trained and must score and assess candidates against a published competency framework. All candidates are entitled to scores and feedback in relation to any part of the process and all statistics and data in relation to each campaign are available through requests under Freedom of Information. Our processes are scrutinised at every stage and we need to ensure that all people working as part of the recruitment process are properly trained and have the requisite skills.

Ultimately the civil service has a significant role to play in the future development of the social and economic well being of this country. It is critical that we continue to attract people of the right calibre and that we recruit, promote and develop the senior managers that we require into the future. Our ability to deliver efficient and effective services, projects and successful outcomes in a professional manner will depend critically on the calibre and skills of the people we recruit and develop. Our image and our credibility with the politicians and with the general public will be determined by our capability to deliver on this agenda.

GRADING STRUCTURE– IRISH CIVIL SERVICE

Post	Method of filling post (open Competition or internal promotion)
SECRETARY GENERAL	Internal
DEPUTY SECRETARY	Internal
ASSISTANT SECRETARY	Internal (limited open)
PRINCIPAL OFFICER (Internal)	Internal
PRINCIPAL	Internal
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL	Internal
{ ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER THIRD SECRETARY (Diplomatic Service)	Open (graduate entry) & Internal }
HIGHER EXECUTIVE OFFICER	Internal
EXECUTIVE OFFICER	Open & Internal
CLERICAL OFFICER	Open
SERVICE OFFICER	Internal