



Benchlearning Initiative External Assessment

Summary report 2nd cycle – Ireland



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1. Introduction

This report outlines the results of the second Benchlearning (BL) external assessment of the Irish PES (Department for Employment Affairs and Social Protection – DEASP), conducted between October 24th and 26th, 2017. The team of six external assessors had two peer PES staff (from the Croatian and Lithuanian PES), two representatives from the European Commission and two experts from ICON-Institute (the supporting contractor). The programme of the three-day visit included meetings in DEASP's head office with senior management/directorates, and a visit to two local offices (in Balbriggan and Tallaght). The time and resources invested in the preparation for the Benchlearning visit by the DEASP, and in particular the internal self-assessment, were crucial to its success. The team gratefully acknowledges these efforts.

The Irish PES is the result of the 2012 reform of public services in Ireland which led to the merger of three different services¹ that were formerly running labour market and social affairs. The PES operates as a division within the DEASP, and the Head of PES reports directly to the Deputy Secretary of the Department. In addition to headquarter offices located throughout the country, a regional structure consisting of two Regions and currently 10 Divisional areas. INTREO is the name of the new agency, set up in 2012 to support jobseekers. It works within the DEASP's regional structure, providing services to customers and integrating the delivery of employment services and benefit payment services. This service is available countrywide through the INTREO Office network. All recipients of unemployment benefits are obliged to register with the PES. The PES is also responsible for the actual payment of unemployment benefits, and a wide range of other social allowances.

The Head Office coordinates and supports the work of the Divisions. It offers technical, administrative and financial support for the regional offices and it defines guidelines that frame the activities of the local units. Furthermore, it is in charge of monitoring and follow-up activities, as well as the distribution of information within the organisation. The divisional offices offer technical, administrative and financial support for the provision of service delivery in the local units. Divisional offices and local units are in charge of service provision to customers.

Social partners are represented in the DEASP's Labour Market Council, which is composed of representatives of trade unions, employers' organisations, industry leaders and labour market specialists. The main tasks of the Council are monitoring and advising on the implementation of the Irish Labour Market Strategy and the *Pathways to Work* (PTW) Strategy which was launched in 2012 and has been updated since then.

2. SHORT SUMMARY OF THE CHANGE AGENDA

During the first BL visit, the DEASP had already demonstrated that it has a clear and concise plan to build up organisational capacity and reform customer services to achieve the objectives of the employment services. This plan is accompanied by a strong governance and control framework. Consequently, the reform process within the DEASP in the recent past has strongly focused on process and organisational change, service and product innovations, and increasing case

¹ These were (1) the services previously delivered by the DSP at its local offices, (2) the Community Welfare Service formerly administered on behalf of the DSP by the Health Service Executive and (3) the Public Employment Services managed and delivered by FÁS, the former National Training and Employment Authority.

officer capacity (through the redeployment of staff within the DEASP and through contracted partners such as JobPath, Local Employment Services and JobClubs). These major reform elements were implemented relatively quickly in response to the economic crisis.

As a result, these reform elements were partly implemented in advance of IT support, staff development, programme evaluation and employer relations development. The ongoing change agenda of the DEASP therefore foresees substantial efforts in relation to the development and implementation of

- IT systems development,
- a programme of quantitative and qualitative studies to evaluate the impact of the changes made so far and to inform future policy,
- a more professional approach of engaging with employers, and
- staff training and development to improve the quality of the services offered to both jobseekers and employers.

The change agenda of the DEASP aims to maintain and build on the progress made so far. Specifically, in order to consolidate the changes made to date, the DEASP plans, or has already initialised projects, to -

- complete the establishment of a professional account management capability with employers;
- continue to implement an accredited professional development programme for its case officers;
- design, develop and implement a quality management approach to improve the quality of the services offered to all of its clients;
- complete the development and implementation of IT systems to
 - offer online services to jobseekers and employers,
 - support staff to provide an efficient and effective service to their clients,
 - support the end-to-end reporting of performance across all elements of service provision;
- undertake a rolling programme of evaluation studies, including customer satisfaction surveys, and incorporate the lessons learnt into future process and policy changes.

3. RELEVANCE, COHERENCE AND CONSISTENCY OF THE REFORM AGENDA

The DEASP clearly stands out for its highly strategic way of addressing the organisation's future based on the PTW 2016-2020 strategy. This contains a clear and convincing mission, strategic objectives with quantitative performance targets and a set of values guiding the organisation. At the heart of this strategy lies the provision of efficient and effective services and the further development of staff, structures and processes. Its core objective is summarised as "activation in a time of recovery and growth" by continuing and consolidating the progress

made so far, and extending all efforts “to other unemployed cohorts that have the potential and the desire to play a more active role in the labour force”.

There is a significant commitment to change both at top management level and at all the other levels in the organisation. Furthermore, the DEASP has a high degree of awareness of the constituent elements of a future-oriented public administration. This means that its change agenda is highly relevant, and that all its elements are coherent and consistent. The DEASP also demonstrates considerable open-mindedness through its responses to a number of recommendations/suggestions from the first BL visit in 2015 (such as the strengthening of the “work first” approach or the initialisation of customer satisfaction surveys).

Finally, it is worth noting that considerable achievements have been made by the DEASP during the last two years. These include

- the development, testing and roll-out of the IT-based Activation and Case Management (ACM) system which was accompanied by a comprehensive training programme for relevant staff,
- an update of Employer Relationship Management Strategy,
- the commissioning of a large-scale evaluation programme, including counterfactual impact evaluations,
- the strengthening of the “work first” approach through different initiatives from the ACM Unit,
- several staff mobilisation and information efforts, such as the activation and case officer conference, and the ACM Unit’s roadshow,
- the initialisation of a large-scale jobseeker satisfaction survey,
- the draft of a Digital Service Strategy and the update of the JobsIreland.ie website which allows skills-based matching, and
- plans to introduce systematic back office support and to identify the skills needs of employers.

On balance, the DEASP is not only on the right track, but it has in fact already covered a considerable distance. Its change agenda deserves full support and the assessors strongly encourage the DEASP to proceed with its organisational reform path, and they are convinced that the DEASP is able to make it a success.

4. ASSESSMENT OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

In general, change is a well-managed and systematic process within the DEASP. The DEASP has developed a clear and convincing reform strategy that outlines the overall vision and the long-term objectives for PES development in a very sophisticated manner. Complementing the “high level” political targets outlined in the PTW strategy, the DEASP has analysed the recommendations of the last BL visit and has, to a large extent, integrated them into its change agenda. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement in how decisions are made and the DEASP is cognisant of this. Evidence-based methods could be used more systematically and frequently to thoroughly examine different change options. Furthermore, the PTW strategy was drafted by the DEASP in consultation with a range of stakeholders and presented to Government for agreement. It, thus,

contains political as well as operational targets and, in some cases, the "steps on the way" in relation to the existing business processes and business interfaces could be more strongly reflected. Getting staff at different levels of the organisation to more systematically give their reflections and feedback on the design of the reforms at an earlier stage could help to reinforce the operational perspective on the design of the change agenda in the future.

The implementation of the reform programme is a structured top-down approach, with a strong commitment of top management and senior executives. It includes a sophisticated steering and monitoring system that builds on individual responsibility for specific components of the reform agenda. The value and importance of staff input and participation in service design and development is acknowledged and encouraged through the DEASP's Staff Engagement and Innovation Programme as well as management requests to staff for input into important policy documents like the strategy statements. Nevertheless, strengthening the flow of communication could help giving a compelling vision to front-line staff and making them aware of "the bigger picture". Apart from that, the implementation phase is well-structured, and staff are provided with well-received training to meet the new requirements. However, more space for feedback loops and corrective action, as well as for testing and experimenting with innovation, could further enhance the "acting" phase of change implantation in the future. In addition, refining existing communication practice to intensify staff (and public) information on the intention of the reform plans might further assist the mobilisation phase. The existing programme of continuous improvement is a good tool for encouraging staff to participate in the development of services, and for creating commitment and "buy-in" to the ongoing reforms.

Finally, the DEASP is clearly aware of the importance of reinforcing change. That said, there is potential for a more systematic transfer of good practices between regional/local offices. Establishing regular dialogue formats (not only "upwards", but also horizontally) could foster a continuous discourse on changes, improvements and results throughout the organisation. The use of customer satisfaction surveys can generate feedback for ongoing reform and it can help set up action to further improve the impact of reforms.

5. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purpose of making the specific achievements and challenges of the DEASP as comprehensible as possible, the assessor team decided to visualise them using the picture of a tree. The current state of organisational development at the DEASP can be compared to a well grown and deeply-rooted tree with a solid trunk, several branches and a crown with a lot of foliage. This tree has obviously been planted and cultivated using the concerted efforts of a group of gifted gardeners.

Its roots are formed by the well-managed merger of three organisations into a single organisation, which now has a common organisational culture. That said, there remain pronounced traditions that make staff aware of where they come from. Healthy self-esteem, the awareness of the need for further organisational change, strong and well-kept partnerships, a general open-mindedness, as well as a dedicated and committed staff, make up the other parts of the root system and they are complemented by a systematic change management. The tree trunk is formed by the high-level PTW strategy together with the "One DEASP" programme for capacity building. The DEASP contributed to the PTW strategy, and it feels strong sense of ownership.

One of the strongest branches of the DEASP tree is the “training and staff education branch”. Internal training has always been a strength of the organisation, and it has recently been expanded with the introduction of a modular education programme for case officers together with the National College of Ireland as a ‘blended learning’ scheme. Another branch is formed by the DEASP’s systematic jobseeker support process based on statistical profiling which follows a “triage” approach to service provision. Furthermore, there is a strong “(IT) support branch” which enables case officers to perform their tasks efficiently and managers to monitor this comprehensively. The advanced and well-developed approach to generating evidence, demonstrated by the large-scale evaluation programme of the Department, is another well-developed branch of the DEASP tree.

Not all branches are, however, equally strong. The least developed is the “employer engagement branch”. The DEASP is aware of the fact that it has to increase its efforts to make employers important strategic partners, as well as extending and refining its services for them. With the update of the Employer Relationship Management Strategy and the redevelopment of the JobsIreland.ie service, the first steps in this direction have already been taken.

On all branches, the DEASP tree contains several dark-green leaves which have grown over the last year and which represent the strengths of the organisation that were previously identified in the course of the first BL visit in 2015. These include for instance and to name just a few, the well-developed profiling system based on a statistical profiling model, the advanced approach to conducting pilot projects, the pro-active and comprehensive way of partnership building, and well-developed human resources management. In addition, many new light green leaves have grown since the last visit. These leaves represent the different achievements and successfully implemented projects such as the IT-based ACM system mentioned in section 3 above.

The DEASP tree also has a “birdhouse” – equipped with a working interface to the internet – representing the INTREO office system. This birdhouse is stuck to the “integrated services branch”. It signifies to Irish jobseekers how the DEASP’s “customer charter” promise is now an intrinsic part of the organisation.

In the following, the external assessor team offers food for thought for further organisational refinements with the aim of exploiting the unique chances of growing labour demand resulting from the economic recovery. Referring to the DEASP logo (which is a bird flying from an open hand), the suggestions of the external assessors can be summarised by the slogan “let the birds fly to good jobs (sustainable and high-quality employment)”.

To achieve this, the assessors believe that a new “sales strategy” would help. This strategy has two central elements. The first element is the consequent implementation of strength-orientation vis-a-vis jobseekers and case officers, the second is re-establishing a strong reputation with employers.

Strength-orientation refers to the fact that everybody has specific abilities, talents and skills, not necessarily acquired formally and documented on paper. Finding out people’s assets (“what they can do”), rather than identifying their shortcomings (“what they cannot do”), is essential, especially for jobseekers with a high risk of becoming long-term unemployed due to their “hard fact” labour market characteristics (such as old age, their lack of a vocational qualification etc.). For this, case officers need to systematically use their own expertise (expert knowledge, methodical skills and social competences such as empathy) to empower clients to make the most out of their assets. In the same way, case

officers also have specific talents, abilities and skills and some of them are, therefore, better suited for some specific jobseeker groups than for others. Mapping case officers and jobseekers according to their strengths can substantially help identify solutions for sustainable labour market integration. The Swedish PES has a strong tradition of focusing on a client's strengths rather than his/her problems, and it could therefore be a valuable partner for an exchange on this. The same holds true for the Flemish PES, especially their perspective on seeing the long-term unemployed as "superheroes". Finally, it is certainly worth thinking about adding a headline along the lines of "we offer solutions based on your strengths to help you find a good job as quickly as possible" to the customer charter to emphasise this part of the sales strategy.

The second critical element of the new sales strategy is re-establishing a strong reputation with employers. As JobsIreland.ie is supposed to be the central matching tool, dramatically increasing the market share of vacancies on JobsIreland.ie is critical to the success of the strategy. To achieve this, the implementation of a marketing campaign using innovative elements such as "employer after work parties" (as in the German PES) or success stories in the form of "personas" (as in the Austrian PES) might be helpful. Further inspiration on actively addressing employers can also be found in the Danish and Slovenian PES. Finally, developing a "customer charter for employers" with concrete service promises would also help.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the external assessors, the new sales strategy needs to be embedded in a results-oriented performance management system, which puts a clear focus on outcomes rather than process indicators. The introduction of key performance indicators that reflect sustainable and high-quality employment helps to signal to staff clearly what the expected outcome of their efforts is and what needs to be achieved, rather than giving them an activity that has to be done and saying how frequently it needs doing. These outcome indicators could be broken down to the local office level, and possibly further on to the team level. From the visit to the two local offices, it became apparent that staff would appreciate this. Inspiration and orientation in this regard is offered by the approaches of the Dutch, Estonian, French and German PES.

A holistic quality and risk management system with a clear focus on customer and service orientation (as in the Austrian or Flemish PES) could give considerable support to the implementation of the new sales strategy. The provision of high-quality services becomes a natural part of the organisation's "language" and becomes embedded in the reality of everyday work when, firstly, comprehensive quality objectives are defined by involving all levels of the organisation in a structured process, secondly, through breaking them down into targets and measurable indicators, and thirdly by communicating them clearly to all staff and ensuring that staff are aware of them. This could be complemented by involving customer groups more actively and systematically in continuous improvement processes on the (re-)design of services (e.g. by using focus groups, accompanied customer journeys, story-telling etc.). The Austrian and Flemish PES have ample experience in this and would therefore be valuable exchange partners on these issues.

Furthermore, more systematic involvement and empowerment of staff would help take the intellectual and emotional power of the PTW strategy to the front-end employee. To achieve this, regular self-assessments involving all levels of the organisations should support a process of regular and systematic reflection on what is done, why it is done, the way it is done, and how it could be done better. Such self-assessments are used by the Austrian, Estonian and Flemish PES so these organisations could offer orientation and inspiration in this regard. These endeavours could be complemented by the introduction of systematic talent

management that offers promising employees a pathway through the organisation, and therefore aspiration for their individual development. The approaches used by the British and German PES appear to be worth studying in this context. Finally, the DEASP could support the further refinement of organisational change, as well as anchoring change in the organisation, by regularly acknowledging and celebrating success (as is done in the Austrian and Slovenian PES), and by implementing systematic formats for peer learning and horizontal exchanges, also across divisions. The Estonian and Lithuanian PES can serve as partners for an exchange on approaches in this regard.

As mentioned above, the external assessor team is convinced that the DEASP's tree provides an excellent basis for the chosen reform path and for making it a success. We are, therefore, highly confident that we will soon be able to see a colourful flock of birds start out from this tree and fly off to a promising future.

