National Centre for
Partnership :: Performance

# Civil Service Modernisation using a Partnership Approach

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# Foreword

Ireland's economy succeeded in increasing its levels of innovation and organisational performance in recent years, with very positive effects on our society as a whole. The public service, through its policy development and service delivery, contributed to Ireland's achievements in no small way. However, the country is now in a critical period of transition and once again, employees, managers and trade unions across the public sector are facing into a significant period of change. This must lead to increased productivity across the sectors generally, and to the completion of the next phase of the modernisation agenda in the civil service.

Change in the civil service is often driven by the need to reduce overall operating costs. In addition, the application of information and communication technologies, the increasingly complex needs of clients, and the urgent need to improve the delivery of public services are also key change drivers. A major challenge for the civil service is how to operate efficiently in a reduced cost environment and deliver effective public services, while at the same time motivating staff to embrace change for the future.

There are opportunities now to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the civil service by linking current financial, technical and human resources to organisational objectives, and to meet the needs of a changing workforce by modernising how the department or office is managed and organised.

Above all, the civil service has the opportunity to fully embrace its dual role: in assisting the development of the knowledge economy and the knowledge society, and in the sector's ability to manifest its key characteristics. To achieve this, it needs to recognise that innovation, dynamism, adaptability and openness to change are the keys to organisational success and improved services in the 21st century.

However, these are not characteristics that are innate to most organisations. They are traits that need to be deliberately developed and encouraged through changes in thinking, structures and work practices. This new paradigm in workplace relations is based on the idea of a new relationship where employer, trade union and employee work together to create the organisation of the future, one that thrives on change instead of shying away from it, one where old dogmas take a back seat, one where flexibility replaces rigidity.

This new paradigm will ultimately benefit workers, in terms of rewards, work satisfaction and lifestyle. It will benefit employers in terms of creating a new way of working designated to deal with a new way of doing business. Ultimately, it will benefit the Irish economy by enhancing long term competitiveness, profitability and survival in organisations that are innovative and highly adaptive to change.

While there are many factors that affect this country's future prosperity that are outside our control, future prosperity does, to a large extent, depend on the development of highly skilled, productive, flexible managers and workers in modern, adaptable public service organisations.

It is, therefore, very much up to us to make it happen by adopting a more radical approach to workplace change.

*Lucy Fallon-Byrne*

**Lucy Fallon-Byrne**
Director
National Centre for Partnership and Performance

# Introduction

Partnership approaches to change and modernisation were formally introduced in the civil service in March 1998. At the time, the primary focus of the guidelines issued by the parties to civil service organisations was to promote balanced representation from managers, employees and their trade union representatives. In addition, the parties offered guidance on suitable issues for discussion at partnership committee meetings. They ranged from input into Strategy Statements, to improvements to customer services and the work environment.

## Background/Context

From these beginnings, a broad variety of partnership approaches to change and modernisation developed in civil service organisations. The organisational structure and culture of a department often influenced its application of partnership approaches to change. For example, the decentralised, localised structure of the Department of Social and Family Affairs shaped its partnership committee structure. As a result, the five case studies contained in this document describe varied experiences of partnership. Although the organisations enjoy different benefits from their joint problem-solving efforts, the Centre has identified commonality in the outcomes from these good examples of practice.

The case studies show that successful partnership approaches to organisational change improve organisational performance. This in turn helps to meet client expectations and improves the quality of life for all citizens. In addition, involvement in partnership approaches has increased employees' involvement in and ownership of change and has reconfigured staff, management and trade union attitudes to major organisational change. Finally, effective partnership approaches to change has increased and improved employee voice.

## Improved organisational performance

One of the common outcomes of the case studies was the fact that all five organisations are functioning more efficiently in a number of areas as a result of partnership approaches to change being introduced. Staff involvement, improved communication and joint problem-solving resulted in more effective decision-making and improved performance.

All of the case studies manifest senior management commitment to building a high involvement, participative management culture. For example, the Courts Service appointed a worker director to its board and offers staff opportunities to make an input into key policy-making committees. The Department of Transport linked or 'threaded' individual roles to the organisation's objectives in its Strategy Statement,

and offered each staff member the opportunity to examine their 'thread' and ensure it was deliverable.

Effective participative management requires the ability to manage varying levels of involvement in organisational decision-making. In general, the case studies managed the relationship between participative management and decision-making well. Although the Department of Transport used consultation and dialogue to include staff in the development of a Strategy Statement, the final decisions were made by the senior management team. The Office of the Civil Service and Local Authority Commissioners (the Commission) partnership committee initiated and implemented many policy decisions concerning the work environment, but undertook a monitoring role when dealing with the PMDS issue.

Each of the case studies cited an improvement in information-sharing and communications as one of the benefits of their use of partnership approaches to change. One of the outcomes of improved communications is better-informed decision-making. For example, the strategy development process in the Department of Transport enabled input from every level of the organisation. This ensured that those who implemented

policy influenced key decision-makers. They in turn were more confident that the organisation's objectives were achievable.

### Reconfigured attitudes to organisational change

One of the key characteristics shared by many of the partnership approaches described in this report is a commitment to putting major change issues on the partnership committee agenda. For example, the Commission used its partnership structures and processes to involve staff and trade unions in repositioning the organisation to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive labour market. The Department of Transport used a participative approach to develop the Strategy Statement for a new organisation. The Department of Social and Family Affairs rolled out a new approach to human resource management (the PMDS system) with a joint management-union information and consultation strategy.

In many of the case studies, a key outcome of the partnership approaches has been a shift in attitudes towards major organisational change. In the Commission, the inclusion of staff ideas and opinions in a major organisational shift created a sense of excitement and enthusiasm, as well as ownership. The staff input into their new headquarters and the Careers Store ensured

that their knowledge and experience was utilised to ensure that the Commission met both customer and staff needs. In the Courts Service, partnership 'successes' have increased trust between the parties and influenced the way in which industrial relations are undertaken in the organisation.

### Increased and improved employee voice

For partnership approaches to operate effectively they must offer mutual gains to managers, to employees and to trade unions. As well as improvements in the working environment and increased involvement in joint problem solving and decision-making, one of the key outcomes of effective partnership approaches to change is improved employee voice in the case study organisations. For example, in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Project Board for the implementation of PMDS created a Workplace Impact Assessment Group, which enabled employee voice to be heard on an issue of major importance to all staff. The Group educated senior management about staff concerns before the information campaign was planned. As a result, the campaign was designed to respond to those concerns and was more staff-centred.

## The challenge facing partnership approaches to change

Partnership's role in the implementation of the modernisation agenda has developed steadily and partnership committees now play an important role in the verification of the changes being introduced as part of the public service benchmarking process. However, there is a danger that over-emphasis on the verification role will isolate the partnership committee (and therefore partnership approaches to change) from other change processes, including participative management and industrial relations processes. Key individuals and organisations have expressed concern that the benefits of a partnership approach to change have not been communicated effectively to the wider civil service staff. This gap between partnership activists and other staff is contributing to a sense that the momentum towards adopting a partnership approach to change is stalling.

The challenge now is to create a visible and sustainable link between the verification work of the departmental partnership committee and the organisation's ongoing response to the challenges of the modernisation agenda.

## Overview and methodology

This publication presents the partnership experiences of five civil service organisations. The Centre chose to undertake these case studies to ensure that a wide range of workplace partnership experiences was presented in this publication. Their selection was the outcome of consultation with key managers, trade union representatives and partnership activists in the civil service. The five organisations were chosen to provide an accurate cross-section of the diversity of the Irish civil service.

The case studies represent a number of characteristics of civil service organisations. For example, many departments are large organisations, with a strong focus on delivering services to the Irish public. These organisations are represented by the experiences of the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Revenue Commissioners. Other civil service organisations, such as the Courts Service and the Commission, meet both general public and public service customer needs. In addition to customer service, civil service organisations often have a strong policy focus. The partnership experience in relation to policy development is represented by the Department of Transport case study. In addition,

the case studies were chosen to ensure that small and large organisations, new and well-established organisations were all represented.

Each of the five organisations utilised a partnership approach to change across a wide range of activities. It was not possible to describe the full range of partnership activity that has taken place in each organisation. Therefore, the Centre identified and highlighted good examples of practice in each case study, in the knowledge that they will provide relevant advice and inspiration to the wider civil service.

Each case study was undertaken using a blend of strategic interviews and critical incident interviews with a cross-section of department managers, staff and trade union representatives. The Centre would like to thank the individuals who underwent interviews, senior managers and trade union leaders for facilitating the interview process, and particularly, those civil servants who assisted in scheduling interviews within a short time frame.

# The Office of the Civil Service and Local Appointments Commissioners

The role of the Office of the Civil Service and Local Appointments Commissioners (the Commission) is to provide recruitment, assessment and selection services for client organisations within the Civil Service, Local Authority and Health Services. The Commission also provides selection and testing services to other agencies, such as An Garda Siochána and the Nurses Career Centre. In 2001, the Commission handled approximately 50,000 applications for 6,000 positions across eighty public service organisations. In addition, the Commission provides broader HR consultancy and research services.

The Commission is regulated by a legislative framework drawn up in 1956 to ensure a centralised, independent, public service recruitment regime, seen to be committed to a high degree of probity. This resulted in an organisational culture characterised by a high degree of integrity and independence, but also resulted in overly centralised, inflexible service delivery in an increasingly complex and changing environment.

## Key change drivers

The Commission has been influenced by a number of change drivers in recent years. The two most influential are the need to compete in an increasingly competitive labour market, particularly in clerical grades, and to meet the objectives of the civil service Strategic Management Initiative (SMI).

### Increasingly competitive labour market

The economic growth enjoyed by Ireland during the 1990s was associated with total employment expanding by 539,000 between 1993 and 2000 and the country's unemployment rate falling from 14 to 3.8 per cent in the same period. This ensured that the public service, through the Commission, recruited from a highly competitive labour market. Simultaneously, there was a significant increase in the demand for staff from the Commission's client departments, as sustained economic buoyancy fuelled an expansion of public sector employment. As the public service dealt with more complex issues, such as telecommunications or regulatory issues, client needs became more differentiated and specialised. This exerted further pressure for change on the centralised, generalist service provided by the Commission.

The recruitment of clerical staff to civil service departments was particularly problematic due to a decline in the number of applicants. In addition, there were high attrition rates during the selection process, due to lengthy procedures and delays. Although the Commission maintained its reputation for probity, it became associated with inflexible and inefficient service delivery. Client departments complained about the service, which sapped employee confidence and morale, although interviewees stated that staff loyalty to the organisation remained high during this period.

**The civil service modernisation agenda**

The objectives of the civil service modernisation agenda include a more strategic approach to human resource, information technology and financial management practices in the civil service. The changes that emerged from the implementation of the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) impacted on the way in which the Commission's client departments operated and, therefore, on their recruitment needs. This impacted on the Commission's service delivery.

As with other departments, the SMI had an impact on the structure and management of the Commission itself. In particular, the increased use of information technology presented an opportunity to refocus the organisation's resources and increase its flexibility and speed of service delivery.

## Transformation to a new business ethos

The quality customer service objectives outlined in the SMI and *Delivering Better Government*, combined with the change drivers outlined above, necessitated the development of a new business ethos in the Commission. This ethos encompassed a customer-focused, competitive and flexible service delivery model, while retaining the probity traditionally associated with the Commission. It represented a fundamental change in organisational culture and necessitated significant change in work practices, employee relations and work organisation to ensure it was embedded in the organisation. The key changes undertaken by the Commission were:

**Renewed emphasis on customer focus**

Central to the fostering of the new business ethos was the development of a strong customer-centred approach to the Commission's core recruitment and selection activity. A Client Relations Management (CRM) unit was established to provide a single point of contact for clients.

**Staff-led business process improvements**

A number of business process improvement projects were initiated to streamline processes across a range of recruitment areas, including general recruitment and appointments to professional/senior management positions. An intensive system of business process mapping was introduced to all staff. The Commission provided training for staff and stressed the need for individuals and teams to analyse and challenge their existing work processes and job content and suggest improvements. The emphasis on employee involvement helped to 'tap into' employee's expertise, encourage fresh thinking and promote a sense of ownership of the change process.

### Investment in information and communications technology

The Commission invested in IT systems to improve its service delivery. The centrepiece of the investment was the development of the SMART Centre, which enables applicants for clerical positions to sit a selection test and to undertake assignment procedures on the same day. The SMART Centre is also utilised for recruitment in other disciplines, such as tax officers. The Commission 's web-site was substantially redeveloped to provide a range of interactive facilities and services to client organisations and job seekers. The recently launched Careers Store uses multi-media technologies to provide an information brokerage service to client organisations and job seekers.

### Training and organisational redesign

The Commission invested heavily in staff training to ensure the new business ethos was embedded in the organisation. Training included business process improvement skills and the roll out of a Recruitment and Assessment Management development pro-gramme. The Commission undertook an ongoing process of organisational redesign to facilitate a more customer focused, com-petitive and flexible service delivery model.

## Achieving organisational change through partnership

Although a partnership committee was established in the Commission in 1998, by the time the current Chief Executive was appointed in 2000 it had become largely moribund. The new CEO had been involved in developing a formal partnership process in the Department of Social and Family Affairs and advocated the potential of the partnership process as a change driver and enabler.

He suggested that formal partnership processes and more general employee involvement activities were appropriate mechanisms for achieving the scale of organisational change associated with the shift towards a business ethos. Senior management secured commitment to a fundamental shift in focus by demonstrating ongoing support for both the formalised partnership process and higher levels of employee involvement in the change process and in the running of the organisation's business. This led to the development of a more dynamic partnership process and a visible commitment to a participatory and consultative management culture by all stakeholders. A significant feature of the

role partnership approaches play in the Commission's change processes is the range of issues discussed at partnership committee level (see Table 1).

| Table 1 Key partnership Issues |
| --- |
| The design and layout of Chapter House, the new headquarters |
| Organisational Strategy Statement and Business Plan |
| Human Resources Strategy and introduction of PMDS |
| Excellence through People Award |
| Exceptional Performance Awards |
| No smoking policy in Chapter House |
| Car parking allocation in Chapter House |

When, after a number of false starts, it was finally confirmed that the Commission would be relocating to a new, purpose-built building, it was decided that decisions relating to layout, interior design, size and design of workstations and other aspects of the working environment would be taken using a partnership approach.

Specifically, the partnership committee was charged with co-ordinating the activities of a number of sub-groups established to progress different issues. The activities of these sub-groups varied by issue, but included conducting research on best practice, canvassing staff opinion, organising employee ballots, initiating consultation and formulating various policy options. Sub-committees reported to the partnership committee on each issue, providing the basis for further consultation both within the committee itself and with senior management.

The partnership committee primarily focused on the technical design and operational aspects of the process. These were critical issues that the Commission had to get right. If an unsuitable working environment was created it was felt, in the words of one senior manager that *'no amount of strategising will be able to resolve this problem'*.

**The Careers Store**

The development of the Careers Store was a major innovation. The aim of the Careers Store was to engage with the labour market through a high profile one-stop-shop for job seekers. The Careers Store, aside from providing services to jobseekers, was the public face of both the Commission and the public service in general. Its city centre location ensured it would enjoy high visibility and as such it had to be a success. Once again all the functional, design and artistic elements of the concept were generated through staff involvement and consultation. Importantly the team responsible for the Careers Store also consulted with client organisations and job seekers to ascertain what they wanted from such an initiative.

**No smoking policy**

The partnership committee also engaged with the problematic issue of formulating a no smoking policy for the new headquarters.

The committee succeeded in overcoming entrenched positions through an intensive process of discussion and consultation, which involved surveying staff attitudes, initiating a health awareness programme and developing supports to assist individuals in quitting smoking. The Commission has now implemented a policy accepted by all staff.

**Car parking**

As a result of the relocation to its new headquarters, the Commission lost ninety per cent of its allocated car parking spaces. Given the traditional association in the service between car parking spaces and an individual's grade and function this had the potential to become an industrial relations issue. Again, however, the partnership committee approached this problem in a proactive manner and developed an integrated approach that combined rotas, pooled spaces and promoted public transport alternatives. Consequently, the committee once again succeeded in framing an acceptable solution to a potentially contentious issue.

## Characteristics of a successful partnership approach

The success of partnership as a change enabler in the Commission is based on a number of critical success factors, or characteristics, that complemented each other to create a positive change environment.

The support and ongoing commitment of the senior management and union officials was crucial, particularly the leadership and advocacy of the Chief Executive:

> "He encouraged us to be proactive and also take responsibility for formulating policies, solving problems and taking ownership of the process and the outcomes."
>
> Partnership committee member

The Chief Executive also undertook an important 'influencing' task in terms of making a convincing case to the senior management team that a partnership-style approach was the most appropriate and viable mechanism for managing change. This level of support was crucial in securing an opportunity for a partnership approach to change to prove itself. However, other factors contributed to its success as a change enabler, including:

### Innovation in enabling participation

An integral part of the successful development of the partnership committee within the Commission was the emphasis on developing innovative methods for facilitating and stimulating employee involvement in the partnership process. In accordance with the civil service norm, the Commission's partnership committee has a tripartite representative structure – management, unions and staff. While complying with this format the Commission ensured that there is also a balanced representation in terms of gender, grade, and operational focus. It is also recognised that the core business of the Commission should have a voice on the committee. The partnership committee meets formally every four to five weeks and is chaired by the Chief Executive. In order to facilitate and support attendance, the date on which the meetings are scheduled is designated '*Partnership Day*' and committee members may not schedule other meetings on that day.

Prior to meetings, an email is circulated to staff asking them to submit issues of concern to them. This ensures staff can make a direct input into the meeting. The second item on the agenda of each meeting is the Members' Forum, where committee members raise issues on behalf of staff. Its position high on the agenda indicates its importance and ensures adequate time is given to the issues raised. In practice, the *Members' Forum* has proven to be a highly innovative mechanism for engaging with staff and providing them with a 'voice' within the partnership process. In addition, the committee introduced *Spare Seats* to allow staff members to attend partnership meetings. This initiative addressed some of the cynicism or uncertainties that staff had in relation to *what goes on* at committee meetings.

In addition to establishing a committee, civil service organisations can establish *Sub-Groups* to address specific issues. The Commission ensures that approximately fifty per cent of the members of each sub-group are from the wider staff complement. This approach familiarises staff with the methodology and dynamics of a partnership-style approach to resolving problems. It widens the pool of expertise, experience and knowledge available to the committee. The Commission believes that to date, at least one in five staff members has engaged with partnership approaches to change in this way.

### A high involvement, participative management culture

Senior management championed the need for a partnership-style approach to management, arguing that employee involvement and participation should be a feature of everyday organisational activity. The organisation's business planning process was enhanced by this approach. The senior management team are happy that high quality, innovative business plans have been the result of managers becoming more proficient at involving and consulting with their staff.

The key objective of participative management approaches is to ensure that, when decisions are made, they are well-informed and more acceptable because they are premised on consultation and employee involvement. However, the process-orientated nature of much of the work in the Commission can create obstacles for managers hoping to embrace a participatory approach. Although progress has been made at all levels, it is recognised that there is considerable scope for improvement.

### A positive relationship between partnership and industrial relations

According to one senior manager, industrial relations in the Commission is characterised by:

*"A de facto partnership ethos with, in particular, a strong emphasis on informal dialogue and interaction as a means of building understanding and addressing problems early on."*

Any issue that relates to the well-being of the staff and general working conditions can be aired for discussion, if not ultimate resolution, within the partnership forum. This willingness to discuss an issue can reduce tensions and help to establish a shared understanding of different positions and perspectives before the issue is resolved using IR procedures.

The Commission has managed the potentially difficult interface between partnership and IR successfully. This is in part a testament to the style and characteristics of the partnership committee. Equally it is indicative of the co-operative industrial relations environment that exists in the Commission.

A mutually supportive and complementary relationship has developed between the formal partnership process and industrial relations processes. Union officials value partnership, stating:

*"Partnership supports and complements my work as a union representative, as in practice industrial relations and partnership arenas are linked but not directly joined."*

Trade Union Official

### Employee commitment through a mutual gains approach

Summit player (senior managers and trade union representatives) support for partnership approaches was mirrored by high levels of employee commitment to, and enthusiasm for, the process. Building and sustaining high commitment among stakeholders was dependent on the partnership process delivering mutual gains. The skills and experience of the committee members, staff training and exposure to the process assisted in developing a set of competencies that shaped and influenced the development of partnership within the Commission. The relatively small size of the organisation facilitated a reliance on highly personalised and informal relationships, which is a

feature of the manner in which partnership developed within the Commission.

## Varying levels of involvement

The broad range of issues addressed using participative approaches was facilitated by the fact that the committee's level of involvement in policy-making and implementation varies between the following functions:

- Strategic
- Participative/ operational
- Consultative
- Progressive/ leadership
- Monitoring/ evaluation.

For example, on a number of issues (e.g. no smoking, car-parking, and Excellence through People), the partnership committee both initiated the idea (*strategic*) and took full responsibility for the final policy decisions (*operational*). With regard to the relocation to Chapter House however, its role was *consultative* and co-ordinating. The committee undertook a *monitoring* role in relation to the rollout of PMDS and the Staff Attitude Survey. The committee provides advice to improve the quality of decision-making and assist in policy implementation. Finally, the Commission's proposed HR

strategy will see the committee take on a role that *progresses* a policy initiative that is the ultimate responsibility of a specialised division.

Varying levels of involvement facilitate experimental and developmental partnership approaches and facilitate a participative approach to key operational and strategic areas without diminishing the speed or quality of policy output. The approach also enables the partnership committee to link up with the organisation's decision-making forums without too much formality.

## Effective communication processes

At present all staff receive an electronic copy of the minutes of each meeting of the partnership committee. Committee members have a responsibility to provide feedback to their respective constituencies and minutes support regular briefings. Staff representatives, without assuming a formal representative role, hold briefings with colleagues. Committee members experimented with a number of measures in order to enhance communications. A trade union member of the committee indicated that:

*"Immediately after each meeting I hold a small briefing session with the unit I represent and then in addition*

*I circulate both the minutes and a one-page briefing note."*

This type of immediate face-to-face contact is considered particularly important as it affords staff an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on specific issues. Given the demands on employee time, managers have had to allocate time to briefings.

## Equality and collective ownership of outcomes

The partnership committee has developed into a forum in which there is a strong emphasis on an open, robust, but non-confrontational exchange of views. Central to this has been the principle that what is important are the views that are articulated rather than the status of the individual in question. The group dynamic of the committee has been shaped by the qualities that the participants themselves have developed and displayed over the last few years.

The committee recognised the need to assume collective ownership for its decisions. This also leads to robust debate, as members will have to defend outcomes presented to the wider staff. The emphasis on frank exchanges and collective ownership is indicative of the committee's problem-solving approach to its work. It succeeded

in fostering a co-operative mode of working based on trust, respect and mutual understanding. These tacit qualities, allied to the experience and knowledge of individual members, have been key factors in the development of a robust partnership process.

**Innovation and Learning by Monitoring**

The partnership committee is characterised by a considerable degree of innovation. This necessitates a strong commitment to internal monitoring and review in order to identify what is working, what is not and what steps are necessary to ensure continuous improvement. For example, internal monitoring highlighted deficiencies in communication practices and the committee worked to improve its performance in this regard.

## The benefits of partnership in the Office of the Civil Service and Local Appointment Commissioners

As a result of the actions described above, the Commission has succeeded in developing a more customer-focused, efficient service while retaining its reputation for probity. For example, in the area of clerical recruitment, a radical improvement in service delivery and turnaround has been achieved. Improvements in this and other core areas of recruitment and selection have enhanced its reputation with both client organisations and job-seekers. This has contributed to an improvement in organisational confidence and staff morale.

Importantly, staff willingness to engage with a significant change agenda was facilitated by the fact that change generated benefits in terms of increased job satisfaction, better scheduling of work load, a reduction in the frequency of monotonous tasks, increased employee involvement and new skills development. Consequently the success that the Commission has achieved to date, in facilitating organisational change and development, has been premised on change delivering tangible gains and benefits to all the relevant stakeholders – management, employees, unions, clients and job-seekers.

In particular, the involvement of staff through partnership facilitated the quick resolution of various issues, associated with major change, which had the potential to become problematic and affect staff morale, commitment and the general working environment. The high level of participation in the change process kept staff informed of progress and generated both a sense of enthusiasm and ownership of the project which was pivotal to its successful completion.

*"The commitment and adaptability of the staff was critical in the move for they managed not only to maintain but actually improve service delivery while undertaking a lock stock and barrel relocation and redesign of the Commission."*

Senior manager

A critical factor in the development of the partnership process and the sustained high-level of commitment displayed by the various stakeholders has been the fact that it has delivered mutual gains to management, unions and employees, including:

**Effective problem solving, leading to well-informed decision-making**

Good practice partnership approaches link people with the relevant knowledge and expertise to problem-solving processes. The partnership committee successfully resolved a number of potentially 'complex issues' during a period of substantial change and as a result, enhanced the problem-solving capacity of the organisation. This was particularly important with regard to workplace issues such as no smoking or parking.

The fact that the decisions taken were consultative and consensus-based gave them a high degree of credibility and facilitated their acceptance by employees. The innovative and effective nature of partnership outputs on various issues such as no smoking has also contributed to their acceptance by staff and management alike.

**Improved industrial relations and increased levels of trust**

The successful development of the partnership process has fostered a high degree of trust between the actors in the IR arena and encouraged an even stronger commitment to problem-solving dialogue in dealing with issues. Partnership in general has demonstrated a capacity to 'take the heat' out of issues and in this sense has been an important space for 'resolving work-related' tensions.

**Increased employee voice and improved working environment**

Partnership processes increased the level and quality of employee involvement and participation within the organisation. This was pivotal in fostering employee voice, which assisted organisational development and contributed to a working environment in which employees are valued and committed. According to one trade union representative, the Commission is characterised by a "*participatory and inclusive working environment*" in which "*employee involvement is both encouraged and valued*". This improvement in the working

environment boosted staff morale and reinforced employee commitment to the organisation. Partnership, by stimulating employee involvement in organisational decision-making was a key factor in reconfiguring employee attitudes towards the change and modernisation agenda.

**Improved communications and information sharing**

The partnership process played a role in improving internal communication and information sharing practices. Improved internal communications, allied to effective business planning and staff involvement, ensured that staff are more aware of the organisation's strategic goals and objectives. Significantly, the nature and range of the gains described above ensured that the partnership processes have made an important contribution to both organisational change and improved organisational performance.

# The Department of Social and Family Affairs

Founded in 1947 as the Department of Social Welfare, the organisation's mission is "to promote a caring society through ensuring access to income support and related services, enabling active participation, promoting social inclusion and supporting families". Several factors influenced how participative approaches were introduced and applied in the department.

## Key change drivers

In addition to the demands of the civil service modernisation agenda, which necessitated the development of a business planning system, a number of specific change drivers influenced the department's structures and culture in recent years. They also influenced the nature of partnership approaches to change introduced to the department. Some of the specific change drivers include:

### Decentralisation and localisation policies

The department's multi-layered organisational structure emerged over time. An overall government strategy to locate key offices outside the capital resulted in a decentralisation initiative being implemented in the mid-eighties. A major modernisation programme led to the department's organisational structure being reorganised into policy and social welfare services.

In particular, a localisation strategy, which resulted in dozens of new Social Welfare Local Offices and the establishment of regional offices, increased the percentage of the department's staff having daily contact with clients. This is unusual in the civil service, where just three departments deal with over eighty per cent of all civil service general public contacts. This resulted in the development of a customer-focused organisational culture.

### The changing needs of the department's client base

The changing needs of the department's client base are a key driver of change. Because the department makes regular payments to its clients, it is a public service leader in harnessing technology to enable efficient service delivery and, more recently, integrated service provision. This results in major changes in work organisation on an ongoing basis, particularly for staff in clerical grades.

In addition, as client needs become more complex, the department manages increasingly sophisticated interactions with them (e.g. moving from the 'hatch' to case management). This has increased the responsibility levels of many staff members,

who make decisions regarding clients on a daily basis. This, in turn, has increased staff expectations of consultation with managers. As one senior manager stated:

*"You would be pulled up fairly quickly if you didn't use a consultative approach."*

**Public finance pressures on a big spending department**

As one of the biggest spending departments in the civil service, changes in the states finances are a key driver of organisational change.

## Creating a truly participative approach to change

When introducing early partnership structures, the department had three objectives:

- To create partnership structures that would enable the *participation of all concerned*, namely, the organisation's 4,400 staff and their trade union representatives

- To identify, put in place and support the consultation and communication processes necessary to *encourage common ownership* of the modernisation agenda

- To encourage the development of a partnership culture that could *address strategic issues and other challenges*.

The department met the first of these challenges by designing and introducing a partnership structure to take account of the organisation's complexity and geographical spread. In November 1998, the department inaugurated its partnership Steering Committee, which has 21 members, selected to represent grade, gender, regions and sections. The role of the Steering Committee is to promote and foster the development of partnership in the department. A number of sub-groups were established to deal with the Performance Management Development System (PMDS); Employee Recognition Awards scheme, and the Internal Customer Service Plan Monitoring Group.

The department's declared policy is "to bring partnership to the local level, where its benefits can be most apparent to staff". In March 1999, the Steering Committee established five Regional Committees to promote and foster the development of partnership at regional, headquarter, and local level. Regional committees also respond to major change issues by addressing how they impact on the organisation at regional level. *People, Policies, Services*, the department's Strategy Statement 2001 – 2004 reiterated the importance of localisation, stating that:

*The localisation of partnership will continue, with the aim of embedding the process in all areas of the organisation.*

Each region implemented its own strategy to promote local partnership initiatives. Currently, there are over 35 local committees operating in the department. The term local has a very flexible interpretation and can mean any of the following:

- Social Welfare Local Offices

- Functional or sectional areas such as Human Resources or Social Welfare Appeals Office

- A single building, such as Aras Mhic Dhiarmada, the department's headquarters

- The department's decentralised offices, such as the Pension Services Office in Sligo.

The role of local committees is to address problems or challenges arising in the workplace. This level of localisation is unusual in the civil service. However, as a case study interviewee stated:

*"It (partnership) becomes most tangible and becomes most real when it's done at local level. Localisation creates champions at management, union and staff level, and helps to embed partnership at local level."*

## Example of good practice: Meeting the PMDS communications challenge

The Department of Social and Family Affairs introduced the Performance Management Development System in 2000. Although the Management Committee (MAC) was responsible for the successful rollout of the system through the organisation, it decided to meet that challenge using a partnership approach.

The Partnership Steering Committee established a PMDS Project Board. Project Boards have traditionally been established to deliver change in the organisation, but this Board was unusual in that it featured union and staff representatives as well as management and 'expert' representatives. In addition, a visually impaired staff member was co-opted to ensure that the Board took the communication and training needs of visually impaired staff into consideration. The Project Board identified training and communications as the two key drivers of a successful rollout and established a sub-group to deal with each issue. In addition, a full-time project manager was assigned to PMDS rollout.

### Using partnership to build effective communications

The communications strategy focused on developing and rolling out an information campaign to educate management and staff about the rationale for and processes around PMDS. The communications sub-group was delighted when the department decided to recruit sixteen in-house trainers as part of the training programme. Five of the trainers took up their positions in September 2001, a few months before training programmes began. The Project Board involved them in implementing the first element of the PMDS communications strategy — educating staff and managers about the system. The five trainers travelled around the country, educating and persuading staff and managers of the benefits of PMDS. The relationships built during this time, and during the training programmes, facilitate valuable communications channels for issues concerning PMDS that are still open today.

In January 2001, the Project Board established a Workplace Impact Assessment Group, made up of a representative sample of department staff. The group's remit was to identify issues of concern to staff and how they might be tackled. Issues raised included the time it would take to implement PMDS (for managers and staff members); concerns about suitable spaces in which to hold PMDS meetings, and issues concerning reporting structures for PMDS (particularly when a large group of staff reported to the same manager). The group, which was made up of members of the Project Board, interested staff members and 'experts' in key issues, helped to educate the Project Board about the principal staff concerns before the information campaign began.

From February 2001, the department conveyed written and verbal information clearly and concisely, using different organisational communication channels. Channels included a roadshow, which showed a video[1], circulated a PMDS information pack, and facilitated a Q&A session with local management. In addition, important issues were dealt with using articles in the department newsletter *Social Affairs*. Leaflets on key issues were written and circulated to people. Different communications methods were tailored to meet the needs of the department's widely dispersed staff.

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1. *The roles in the video were played by members of Parnassus, the department's dramatic society.*

**Communicating through training**

Once training programmes started, they were used to ensure ongoing, effective communication. Every member of staff was invited and encouraged to contribute his or her views, and to ask questions. On the first day of training, the senior manager of the group being trained took questions on the system. The next afternoon, the manager returned with the answers to those questions. If the same issue came up regularly, the Project Board would design and issue a leaflet outlining the facts. In this way, the Project Board used active listening to create a dialogue with staff, and to create a shared understanding of the key issues.

Finally, the linkages between PMDS and the corporate planning system were a critical element of the education programme. Each member of staff had to bring a copy of the business plan to their PMDS training programme and complete a questionnaire on it. At the end of the training programme, the questionnaire had to be filled in again, to check whether the information conveyed was fully understood. The department recorded improved levels of staff understanding of the key elements of the business plan.

**Linking into local partnership structures**

Each of the in-house trainers was mandated to link into the local partnership groups in their region or office. This resulted in a number of outcomes. Local needs were identified and met using a partnership approach. The resulting sense of ownership meant that attendance at communications and training events was generally very high. In addition, the trainers found the level of questioning and debate they encountered at partnership meetings challenging and rewarding.

Discussion of PMDS gave local and regional partnership committees an opportunity to comment on a strategic issue for the organisation. The feedback, travelling through the trainers to the Project Board and up to the Steering Committee, was useful to managers who were trying to ensure that PMDS was successfully implemented. The fact that their views were being listened to made local partnership activists more committed to PMDS.

**Conclusions**

The Performance Management Development System represents a major change in HR policy throughout the civil service and represents enormous change in the way people decide and manage work. Despite that, the system was implemented reasonably quickly, in one of the biggest departments (4,400 staff), with just one industrial relations issue arising. That issue has been settled and the full complement of staff has now undergone some or all of its PMDS training. Some of the factors that enabled the smooth transfer to PMDS include:

- The use of partnership as the vehicle to roll out the PMDS system

- The establishment of a widely representative Project Board that adopted a consensus-based approach to decision-making

- The inclusion of a wider sample of staff in the project, through the work of the Communications, Training and Workplace Impact Assessment Groups

- The decision to select in-house trainers who 'sold' the idea of PMDS to staff and managers across the country

- Senior management support for the process and their commitment to the communications strategy

- The decision to create strong linkages between trainers and local and regional partnership committees, which created a sense of local ownership of the process.

## Characteristics of a successful partnership approach

The department developed and resourced the consultation and communications processes necessary to encourage common ownership of the modernisation agenda in a number of ways:

### Developing partnership activists and champions

Senior management, trade union and staff commitment to the successful introduction of partnership in the department played a huge role in getting partnership activities off the ground. In addition, the department allocated staff and financial resources from its Corporate Development Unit, traditionally linked to the modernisation agenda, to support the work of partnership activists. Corporate Development staff and local or regional managers made themselves available to staff, partnership committee meetings and information events on partnership. Training was provided to all partnership committee members.

### Putting change issues on the partnership agenda

The literature produced to promote partnership and a consultative approach reiterated the link between partnership and the modernisation agenda whenever possible. The partnership guidelines produced by the department's Corporate Development Unit outlined the type of items that could be raised at partnership meetings:

- Input into the development of strategy statements and related business plans
- Development and implementation of new forms of work organisation
- Performance Management and Development System
- Arrangements to facilitate adaptability, flexibility and innovation.

An evolving relationship between partnership and the industrial relations function has been maintained in the department. A wide range of issues can be discussed, but not necessarily agreed, in a partnership setting. The introduction of partnership has not reduced industrial relations activity and industrial relations processes are still the fora for agreement on major change issues.

### Addressing strategic issues and other challenges

As well as issues relating to change and modernisation, partnership committees were encouraged to deal with other issues, including:

- Verification of progress on action programmes or other initiatives
- Training and development
- Equality and development issues, including measures to reconcile work and family responsibilities
- The work environment
- Improvements to customer service.

A recent audit of partnership activity in the department identified the most commonly discussed topics (see Table 2). The table shows that modernisation and change issues and other challenges appear in equal number on committee agendas.

| Table 2 | Issues discussed at regional and local partnership committees in the Department of Social and Family Affairs | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Issues discussed by the committee** | | **Regional committee**<br>% committees | **Local committee**<br>% committees |
| Involving staff in the partnership process | | 100 | 50 |
| Training and development issues | | 80 | 69 |
| Improving internal & external customer service | | 60 | 53 |
| Introducing PMDS | | 60 | 19 |
| SMI / Modernisation issues | | 60 | 12.5 |
| Improving the work environment | | 40 | 91 |
| Disability Issues | | 20 | 19 |

## The benefits of partnership in the Department of Social and Family Affairs

The Centre undertook a series of interviews with staff, union and management representatives throughout the department. Analysis of the data collected points to three key benefits of partnership experienced by the department to date:

- Partnership has enhanced communications in the organisation

- Partnership has improved organisational performance in a number of ways

- Partnership has reconfigured attitudes to change.

**Enhanced organisational communication**

*"The strength of partnership is that you have hundreds of people who are continually informed, and who work with other staff and management towards pushing out the bigger picture."*

The above quote is one individual's view of the gains accrued in the communications arena upon adopting a partnership approach. Case study interviewees noted the following improvements in departmental communications, when asked about the benefits of partnership to date:

- Levels of information and consultation with staff on strategic and operational issues increased. Staff have an increased expectation of information and consultation, and managers are more conscious of the need to inform and consult.

- Consultative approaches are being mainstreamed to a wider range of business activities, particularly in smaller offices. Many local offices have mainstreamed a partnership approach to change and work organisation.

- The discussion of emotive issues such as flexible working in a partnership setting helps to develop a shared understanding between stakeholders even if the issue is eventually resolved in an industrial relations setting.

- Partnership structures provide a communications network within the department – with a visible link from the Secretary General to local offices. Consequently, there is an improved flow of information up, down and around the organisation.

- Levels of business awareness have improved among staff at all grades and there is increasing interest in 'the bigger picture' of the organisation.

**Improved organisational performance**

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that partnership has had a positive impact on a number of key indicators of high performance, i.e. good leadership, accountability, innovation and creativity, organisational learning. It was generally agreed by interviewees that partnership encourages or legitimises good or improved leadership at a number of levels in the organisation. One manager stated:

*"If you were to map the location of what I would call managers who are open and participative, and to map partnership activities, they are the same."*

The development of a consultative approach has led to the introduction of joint problem-solving in some areas of the department. This has in turn led to increased levels of innovation and creativity at function and unit level in the department. This is particularly evident at local partnership level. In addition, the presence of partnership committees added an additional layer to managerial accountability, particularly in issues relating to the work environment, as managers have to report back to partnership committees on issues such as car parking, flexible working, and office accommodation.

### Reconfigured attitudes to change

One of the key benefits of partnership in the department has been the reconfiguration of attitudes to change. As one interviewee stated:

*"Partnership played a role in making the department more open to change, making people think beyond their normal duties, informing people about the scope of the organisation and the scope of the job we all have to do, and got people talking with their colleagues and recognising, to some degree, that we're all in this together."*

Reconfigured attitudes to change have also resulted in a number of benefits to individuals and the organisation, including:

- Staff members have more access to strategic and operational planning and decision-making. There are increased levels of awareness of the nature and rationale for change in the organisation

- Interviewees state that there are increased levels of trust between stakeholders at all levels of the organisation

- Some challenging issues, normally dealt with in an industrial relations setting (e.g. the introduction of PMDS) have also been tackled using a partnership approach

- Many of those interviewed stated that the introduction of partnership committees has enabled smaller issues (concerning the work environment, in particular) to be dealt with successfully in a non-confrontational setting.

### Conclusions

Partnership in the department to date has been concerned with developing a framework to ensure widespread involvement in formal processes. In this it has succeeded, as partnership approaches to change exist across the organisation. This achievement was driven primarily by a group of partnership 'champions'. These champions and their colleagues now face an even greater challenge – that of mainstreaming participative approaches to change and modernisation. The communications and influencing framework necessary to promote mainstreaming exists. The key to this challenge will be the development of an approach that provides 'top down support for bottom up change'. It is a challenge that cannot be tackled solely by the members of the partnership committee. They can reform unwieldy partnership structures, but cultural change is also necessary. The further promotion of participative approaches to unit or office management at local level will contribute hugely to the development of second generation (mainstreamed) partnership in the department.

# The Courts Service

The Courts Service was established by statute in 1999, as an independent and permanent state agency charged with managing a unified court system. Prior to this, it was an integral part of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

The main functions of the Courts Service are:

- To manage the courts system
- To provide support services to judges
- To provide information on the courts system to the public
- To provide, manage and maintain court buildings
- To provide facilities for users of the courts.

The core activity of the Service is the administration of the various courts that constitute the Irish courts system[2]. The Courts Service provides a framework to support and facilitate the administration of the justice by the judiciary and staff of the 77 court offices

2. *The Irish Courts System consists of Supreme Court, High Court, Central Criminal Court, Court of Criminal Appeal, Special Criminal Court, Circuit Court and District Court.*

located throughout the state. Approximately 93 per cent of the 1,002 staff are directly involved in operational areas.

## Key change drivers

The Courts Service operates in a dynamic and ever changing environment and is currently undergoing shifts which are unprecedented in their pace.

### Changes in agency status

The establishment of the Courts Service as an independent agency, with a unified organisation and structure to manage the courts, represented the most radical reorganisation of the courts services since the 1920s. Under this legislation, responsibility for the management and

development of the courts in Ireland was transferred from the parent department to the new Courts Service. This fundamental change has been the primary driver of organisational change and development within the Courts Service since 1999.

### The modernisation agenda

The modernisation programme initiated by the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) has continued to shape the development of the Courts Service. It addresses a number of specific areas such as strategic and corporate planning, staff development, customer service, and performance management systems.

## Legislative developments and social change

New legislative initiatives continue to impact on the range and type of criminal proceedings and civil actions that come before the courts. The Courts Service, in common with other public agencies, has also experienced a discernible increase in consumer demand for a higher quality, more customised and efficient service. The public's increased awareness of their legal rights, allied to a greater recourse to litigation, clearly affects how services must be delivered. These developments, in conjunction with ongoing social, demographic and economic changes, have ensured that the workload of the courts has escalated both in volume and complexity.

## Technological change

The rapid pace of technological change and the government's emphasis on a greater usage of ICT is increasingly changing the environment in which the courts function and how the Courts Service seeks to deliver services to its staff, the judiciary and end users.

## Towards a modern structure using a problem solving approach

The establishment of a new organisation with new structures and functions necessitated the introduction of a wide range of change initiatives. The Courts Service now manages the courts under the direction of a board whose functions are to consider and determine policy for the service and to oversee the implementation of that policy by the Chief Executive. Aside from determining policy, the Courts Service participates in the broader legislative/policy process in order to achieve strategic aims. Under the old regime, the Courts Service would have primarily reacted to environmental factors, whereas now it seeks to anticipate and create opportunities for inputs regarding the administrative processes contained in new legislation.

## Staffing structure

A Chief Executive was appointed to the new agency, with responsibility for the day-to-day management of the staff, administration and business of the Courts Service. A new senior management structure was also put in place. This management structure was organised to enhance the level of support for the operational units involved in discharging the administration of the courts.

In seeking to establish a unified organisational structure, senior management addressed a number of difficult employee relations issues, including the creation of a unified staffing structure, the introduction of uniform arrangements for promotion and the introduction of new administrative structures. This was particularly challenging given that the former organisational culture was characterised by considerable administrative fragmentation. Equally, there was limited interaction between staff across the different court areas. Although the legislation ensured that the various parties would have to reach some agreement, it was critical that senior management and union officials approach the negotiations in a proactive and constructive manner. Both sides adopted a joint problem-solving approach that generated innovative solutions. This, allied with extensive consultation with staff, equipped the new arrangements with a high degree of legitimacy. Consequently, the new arrangements were in place by the establishment date and were implemented very smoothly.

### Regional and local structures

Although it has 67 Circuit and District Court offices outside of Dublin, the Courts Service was characterised by a highly centralised decision-making structure. Consequently, through the establishment of six new regional offices, the Courts Service has sought to devolve responsibility and increase local managerial accountability. The Courts Service oversaw the reorganisation of District Court areas, districts and venues to facilitate a greater degree of functional and geographic alignment.

### Investment programmes

The Courts Service has undertaken a major building and refurbishment programme throughout the state with a view to substantially improving the physical environment for staff, judiciary, and clients. A five-year information and technology programme, designed to substantially upgrade the usage of modern technology in internal and external service delivery, is also being rolled out. Finally the Courts Service has undertaken considerable investment in staff training and development and ensured that staff training is given a high priority by managers within the organisation.

### Employee involvement and consultation

These changes occurred without any disruption in service delivery, which was critical for such an operationally focused organisation. This achievement reflected both the flexibility offered by staff during the transition and their positive engagement with the change process. Although the generation of additional promotional opportunities and the considerable investment in capital, technological and human resources were important in facilitating staff acceptance of change, the general commitment placed on promoting employee involvement and participation was also highly significant in reconfiguring attitudes to change. Senior management's promotion of an inclusive approach to managing change was highlighted by the following developments:

- The extensive and proactive consultation with unions and staff in establishing the Courts Service

- The appointment to the Board of a Worker Director, with equal voice to other members

- Staff input into the various committees that are concerned with future developments in the Courts Service

- The implementation of a consultation protocol for staff, judges and users in relation to the building/refurbishment programme

- The enhancement of internal procedures for informing and communicating with staff

- Employee consultation in formulating the Strategic Plan and the emphasis on teamworking in Business Plans and PMDS

- Strong support for the formal partnership process.

## Promoting change through partnership

The Courts Service's Central Partnership Committee was established in March 2000. Since October 2003, it comprises representatives from each of the five staff unions, staff representatives, the Chief Executive, who chairs the committee, four management representatives, including the Director of Human Resources and representatives from the newly formed regional partnership committees. The HR unit is formally responsible for the Central Partnership Committee and a representative from the unit serves as a designated partnership co-ordinator. During the course of 2003 the Courts Service established eight new regional partnership committees, with one in each of the regions outside Dublin and a separate committee for the Dublin offices.

A key aspect of the development of the new Courts Service was the emphasis on a participatory approach to managing change and modernisation. The development of a more robust, formalised partnership process was central to this and the key stakeholders went beyond compliance with a centrally negotiated industrial relations agreement. Importantly, the development of partnership

| Table 3 Topics dealt with by the Courts Service Partnership Committee | |
|---|---|
| Introduction of worksharing and term-time working | Exceptional Performance Awards |
| Internal communications | Health and safety issues |
| Training and development, including 3rd level education link | Performance Management Development System (PMDS) |
| Identity cards and security issues | Customer Service Action Plan |
| Staff transfers | Organisational business plans |
| Crèche facilities | Relocation issues, including parking |
| Work experience | |

within the Courts Service was characterised by a willingness to incorporate a broad policy remit, as well as its capacity to produce effective policy outputs on key issues.

### Developing a broad policy remit

A distinct feature of the partnership process in the Courts Service was a steady broadening of the range of issues that it dealt with (see Table 3). As partnership processes developed in the Courts Service, they dealt with functional, operational and strategic issues. In this way, partnership approaches are linked with ongoing organisational development and modernisation.

This was facilitated by the fact that from the outset, the HR unit did not place any restrictions on the partnership agenda. In consultation with other stakeholders, particularly the trade unions, the HR unit broadened the range of issues that fell within the ambit of the organisation's partnership framework. The recent widening of central committee's membership now also facilitates regional issues being discussed in this forum.

One outcome of this approach is that the Director of Human Resources is examining the organisation's Customer Service Action

Plan and its Strategy Statement with a view to identifying which organisational objectives and/or associated actions can be implemented using a partnership approach. In seeking to broaden the application of a partnership approach to change, the organisation feels it is important not to overburden the process. Therefore, only those issues considered appropriate for a partnership approach are included. For example, issues relating to working practices are always introduced in an industrial relations setting, although a partnership approach can subsequently be utilised to progress the resolution of the issue.

The organisation's proactive approach highlights the parties' support for partnership processes and their recognition of their potential as an enabler of organisational change within the Courts Service. It is also reflective of the fact that, from the outset, the organisation's human resources team has, according to one senior trade union official:

*"Adopted a very expansive and sophisticated approach to how it addressed not just Human Resource issues but the practice of Industrial Relations in general."*

Senior Trade Union Official

**Promoting involvement at varying levels**

To facilitate the broadening of a partnership approach to change, the Central Partnership committee established eight sub-groups to progress specific issues (see Table 4). Some of the sub-groups were temporary, task-oriented groups (for example, Worksharing Initiatives), while others are permanent groups that implement initiatives in areas such as training and development.

| Table 4   The Courts Service Partnership Committee Sub-groups |
| --- |
| Customer Service Action Plan |
| Training and development |
| Legal training |
| Refund of fees and 3rd level links |
| The Worksharing Scheme |
| Introduction of identity cards |
| Exceptional Performance Awards |
| Internal communications |

While the range of issues that have been addressed using a partnership approach is impressive, it is important to note that the level of involvement of the parties in decision-making has varied considerably. In some instances, issues are raised at partnership committee meetings for information purposes only. In other instances, the Committee has full responsibility for formulating a policy response and ensuring its implementation. Therefore, a partnership approach can mean many things – information, consultation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This flexibility has enabled the organisation to adopt a partnership approach to change without losing the momentum necessary for effective change.

**Example of good practice:  Introducing the Worksharing Scheme**

The introduction of the civil service Worksharing Scheme represented an attempt to extend existing family friendly policies within the service.  It aimed to offer staff a substantially expanded range of flexible working patterns. Management and trade unions at central civil service level negotiated the terms of a Worksharing Scheme, and it was agreed that the initiative would be rolled out on a departmental basis, to take consideration of organisational staffing needs.

Given its origin, worksharing was designated an industrial relations issue, and introduced using the organisation's industrial relations processes.  In that forum, it was suggested it might be appropriate for the issue to be agreed using a partnership approach. Although there was a general consensus among the parties that this was a positive development, some union officials expressed concern that a partnership approach could be a way of 'parking' a potentially problematic issue, i.e. creating an inappropriate delay in implementing an agreed initiative. In addition, the impact of a significant take up of worksharing on the operational ability of the Courts Service was enormous.

Therefore, it was important that a partnership approach to this issue would engage in joint problem-solving.

A small, intensive subgroup was established to examine the issue and bring forward recommendations as to how worksharing would be implemented.  Although there was a general consensus within the group that worksharing was a positive development in the organisation, members tried not to start out with any set views on the issue. Rather, the group adopted a pragmatic, problem-solving approach with the objective of agreeing an effective, acceptable and feasible approach to worksharing.

The subgroup conducted a staff survey in order to ascertain, on the basis of grade and location, both the overall level of demand for worksharing and the most favoured flexible working options.  The HR unit co-ordinated the consultation process, and undertook a desk-based review of how the issue was being approached in other departments.

Using the data collected, the sub-group formulated a strategy for 'rolling out' the worksharing scheme. It was hoped that the strategy would meet staff demands for

family-friendly working arrangements, as well as maintain appropriate levels of service delivery.  The sub-group's recommendations were initially ratified using industrial relations mechanisms and then formally endorsed and implemented in full by the senior management team.

The use of a partnership approach to this issue succeeded in producing what one interviewee characterised as a '*credible, high quality strategy*', which resolved a potentially problematic issue satisfactorily for management, unions and employees. The success fostered confidence in the capacity of a partnership approach to deliver change in the Courts Service.  It also increased the profile of the partnership committee. Interestingly, the approach used by the Courts Service has been replicated by other civil service departments.

## Characteristics of a successful partnership approach

The capacity of the partnership process to contribute to ongoing organisational change and development within the Courts Service was dependent on a number of complementary factors that have combined to both create a supportive environment and a robust partnership process.

### Support from summit players

From the outset, the strong support and commitment of summit players—senior management and trade union officials—was vital for the relatively successful development of partnership approaches to change. The Chief Executive performed a key leadership role by developing a constructive engagement with trade unions during the establishment of the Courts Service. This engagement continued during the organisational development phase. This level of support from senior management was important in positioning partnership as a credible approach to engaging with the modernisation agenda.

The HR Director and his staff have acted as advocates for partnership processes and played a key influencing role within the organisation—building consensus and confidence in the capacity of partnership to enable organisational change. The HR unit emphasised an approach in which discussion and associated support activity is focused on achieving a positive result. The commitment to undertaking research and consultation in support of partnership activities contributed to the generation of well-informed policy outcomes. Importantly the HR unit has a similar approach to industrial relations and to management practices in general, increasing the inter-connectedness of all three approaches to change.

### Building a high involvement, high commitment organisation

From the establishment of the agency the senior management team have tried to foster a high involvement, high commitment organisation. They made a commitment to a participatory management style in the Courts Service. The organisation appointed a worker director, there are opportunities for staff input into key policy committees, and there is an emphasis on teamwork and staff involvement in the business and strategic planning process. Business units are instructed to provide guidance on how to achieve business goals, with a strong emphasis on partnership and teamwork. In addition, the Courts Service customised the civil service PMDS framework to ensure an appropriate emphasis and focus on teamwork.

### Positive relationship between partnership and industrial relations

The constructive relationships that characterised the establishment of the Courts Service, in conjunction with the proactive approach adopted by the HR unit, facilitated the development of highly co-operative, trust-based and personalised relationships between senior management and union representatives. In addition, unions and staff representatives engaged positively with the lengthy and complex change process in the Courts Service. This facilitated the emergence of a mutually supportive relationship between partnership and IR processes, which enables issue such as worksharing to be transferred between processes as necessary. Similarly the success of partnership approaches to change encouraged a problem-solving or partnership ethos in addressing issues in the formal IR arena. An example of this has been the proactive discussions within Conciliation and Arbitration (C&A) regarding the issue of teleworking in the Courts Service.

### Pragmatism in problem-solving and deliberation

In addressing key issues, the partnership committee emphasises the importance of frank and open debate with a view to achieving a consensus-based and credible outcome. This often intensive deliberation is driven by a pragmatic problem-solving approach. As one committee member suggested, it ensures there is *"a real emphasis on getting things done, rather than just simply restating our positions on issues"*.

The individuals involved in the process are important; they should display the competencies necessary to make the process work. In particular, they should be capable of addressing change issues using a partnership approach. The importance of having 'partnership-orientated' individuals within the organisation was recognised by one committee member who indicated that *"partnership in part worked because we had the right type of people in place both in the committee and in other key areas."*

### Putting change issues on the agenda

As indicated earlier in the case study, the policy agenda of the partnership committee has broadened to incorporate key strategic and operational issues, directly linked to the modernisation and change agenda. This has raised the profile of a partnership approach in the organisation and ensured it is directly and indirectly linked into the key decision-making processes. The successful and innovative resolution of the worksharing initiative was crucial, as it served to build senior management confidence in the capacity of partnership processes to contribute to the modernisation and change agenda. The positive relationship with trade union representatives in partnership and industrial relations settings has also ensured that senior union officials are more willing to use partnership approaches to progress issues related to organisational change.

*"There is no sense in which union officials feel that widening the agenda of partnership represents an attempt to bypass the IR structures…. indeed they have supported moves to put key change issues into partnership".*

HR Manager

## The benefits of partnership in the Courts Service

Central to the ongoing development of the partnership process and the maintenance of support for this approach was the fact that it delivered change and demonstrated a capacity to provide mutual gains for management, unions and employees. The key benefits of a partnership approach are:

### Improved problem-solving capacity

Within the Courts Service, the partnership process has demonstrated its capacity to resolve potentially complex problems such as worksharing through the generation of innovative and credible policy outputs. The emphasis on open deliberation, staff consultation and the adoption of pragmatic approaches was particularly important in enhancing the organisation's problem-solving capacity. In particular, a partnership approach provides opportunities to 'tap' into staff knowledge and experience thereby facilitating better-informed decisions.

### Increased employee voice and involvement

The use of partnership processes increases the level and quality of employee involvement and participation within the organistion. The formal partnership process provides an important mechanism for fostering 'employee voice'. This is reinforced by the fact the partnership process is now viewed as an integral part of the organisation's decision-making processes. According to one staff representative who was not directly involved in the partnership process:

> *"The partnership forum is an important and easily identifiable forum for employees to air their views...we now know we have a place to go to if we want issues raised or problems addressed."*
>
> Staff representative

Increased participation on sub-committees and consultation with staff on key issues has further reinforced the level and quality of employee voice and involvement. There is a general consensus among managers and staff representatives that partnership has made an important contribution to creating a work environment in which *"people feel they are being listened to"*.

> Staff representative

### Positive employee relations and an improved industrial relations environment

The strong emphasis on promoting staff involvement and participation has fostered positive employee relations throughout the organisation. Involvement in partnership processes has encouraged a high degree of trust, co-operation and mutual understanding between senior managers and trade union representatives that shapes their ongoing work in other areas. The embedding of partnership within the organisation has enhanced the quality and effectiveness of the organisation's IR practices. One senior trade union official, not directly involved in partnership, commented that the HR Director has adopted a partnership-style ethos to

industrial relations, which in conjunction with the positive approach of the unions has ensured that:

*"The atmosphere has changed at the C&A … people are less entrenched, more willing to understand different perspectives and prepared to engage in problem-solving".*

Senior Trade Union Official

The establishment of the Courts Service as an independent body with a unified staffing structure, along with extensive investment in capital and human resources and the availability of additional career opportunities, has played an important role in improving the work environment and culture. Maintaining standards of service delivery, while simultaneously undertaking the scale of change that the Courts Service has experienced in recent years, necessitated a high level of employee commitment to, and engagement with, the process of organisational change.

## Conclusions

Since its establishment in 1998, there has been a notable improvement in the working environment, culture and staff morale within the Courts Service. Certainly it is a less fragmented, insular and hierarchical organisation. Evidence of a more positive work environment can be found in the increased co-operation within and between grades, improvements in organisational and employee confidence, the fostering of a degree of organisational loyalty and enhancement in the quality of employee involvement and participation.

Although the Central Partnership Committee has functioned relatively effectively and progress has been made on the organisational change agenda, the committee recognises that it has only begun to tap the potential of the partnership approach to change and modernisation. In particular, there is considerable work to be done to

embed partnership within the organisation and to ensure that a partnership ethos informs and shapes everyday activities and relationships. In this regard the partnership committee identified a number of themes and issues to be addressed to develop an organisational culture premised on high participation and high involvement. These issues included:

- Substantially widening involvement in the partnership process

- Developing effective local and regional partnership structures

- Avoiding complacency and sustaining the initial momentum

- Continuing to generate credible policy outcomes and mutual gains

- Assisting managers in becoming advocates of the partnership approach to managing change.

Significantly, the Central Partnership Committee in conjunction with the HR unit have already begun to implement changes to address the aforementioned issues.

# The Office of the Revenue Commissioners

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Revenue) has responsibility for the collection and administration of taxes and duties in Ireland.  Revenue also administers the Customs regime, co-operates with other state agencies in the fight against organised crime, undertakes work for other departments, e.g. collecting PRSI for the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and assists in the formulation of tax policy.  During the period of its current corporate plan (2003–2005) Revenue will collect in excess of €50 billion.  The organisation employs over 6,500 staff in 130 locations, making it the largest single organisation in the civil service.

## Key change drivers

### Highly operational organisation

Revenue operates in a dynamic economic, social and political environment. For example, the civil service modernisation agenda is a key change driver, particularly in relation to the use of technology to improve customer service.  Revenue's highly operational remit (it deals directly with nearly every Irish citizen) also influences its structures and processes. Public opinion regarding tax compliance has led to demands for higher levels of accountability and transparency in Revenue activities.

### The impact of technology

Revenue's strategic decision to use information and communications technologies to deliver its services has led to fundamental change in key areas of the organisation. Revenue has reconfigured its relationship with its clients, leading to changes in job design, skill content and work organisation.

### Public finances

As the agency with responsibility for collecting tax revenues the changing nature of state finances remains a key driver of organisational change for Revenue.

## Building a more effective, customer-focused organisation

In order to reposition itself to meet the needs of the public, of Government and of staff, Revenue underwent major changes in its structure, strategy, business processes and in staff grades and job design.

### Enabling voluntary compliance

Revenue developed policies to promote and facilitate voluntary compliance by the taxpayer, while at the same time strengthening its capacity to target and sanction tax avoidance. Customer-orientated services such as LoCall numbers were introduced to facilitate easy access to Revenue staff. Allied to this, an internal emphasis on effective service delivery was driven by the development of a Customer Charter.

### Business process re-engineering

Revenue's strategy to provide top quality customer services and facilitate easy and inexpensive compliance led to a dramatic increase in the application of information and communication technologies to business processes. In particular, the development of Revenue-online-Services (ROS) fundamentally changed traditional approaches to work practices, job design and service delivery. Substantial progress towards a modern workplace has been made in these areas. However, the full impact of ROS on working practices and job design will not be felt until approximately 50 per cent of Revenue's clients deal with the office online. Revenue hopes to reach this target by 2005.

### Organisational restructuring and staff grade integration

Revenue has undertaken a fundamental restructuring and moved from a product or functional structure (e.g. Income Tax, Customs and Excise) to a customer-orientated organisational structure.

Consequently, Revenue established a number of Regional Divisions and a new Large Cases Division. The restructuring will provide a more streamlined and integrated service for its customers.

Within the new structure, the ethos of voluntary tax compliance will be promoted. In addition, there will be an emphasis on the development of cross-functional teams, focused on integrated case management. This will improve customer service and enable Revenue to target evasion with greater speed and accuracy.

A key element of the restructuring process was the successful integration of tax and general service grades, which hitherto had distinct operational, promotional and reporting characteristics. In practice, grade integration has proven problematic, and has been the subject of protracted IR negotiations. To some degree, the overall pace of organisational restructuring was dictated by progress on the integration issue. Agreements are now in place for the integration of all general services and taxes grades.

## Characteristics of an effective partnership approach

Revenue's Central Partnership Committee comprises eight union representatives, five staff members and five management representatives, including the three Revenue Commissioners. Since its inception, one of the three Commissioners has chaired the committee. While union and management self-select representatives, the committee selects staff members on the basis of responses to periodic open invitations, and tries to ensure an appropriate balance in terms of location, gender and grade.

The Central Committee reserves to itself key corporate or strategic issues and also functions as a steering group by providing an overall framework for the partnership process. It also discusses, ratifies or rejects recommendations from Intensive Groups. The issues dealt with using a partnership approach are outlined in Table 5.

| Table 5   Partnership topics in Revenue | |
| --- | --- |
| PMDS | Strategy statement |
| Internal customer standards | HR policy |
| Exceptional Performance Awards | Workplace charter |
| Working practices in PAYE Unit | Internal communications |
| Training | Shadow economy |
| IT developments (ITP & ROS) | Social partnership agreement issues |

The work of the committee is supported by *Intensive Groups* dealing with Human Resources, ITP and ROS, Customer Service and the Shadow Economy. The Committee also uses short-lived groups to deal with specific issues such as the organisation's Strategy Statement. Revenue has also experimented with devolving the partnership process through the establishment of three local Partnership Groups: one is based on a divisional structure (the Collectors General office), one is regionally based (the South East), and the third is office based (branch in Dundalk). More local groups will be established in future.

Input into the committee's work programme is open to all participants. However, as in many other civil service organisations, management has taken the lead in setting the agenda. Interviewees felt that, in part, this was a result of union failure to put forward issues for discussion in the partnership arena. The degree of success that partnership processes have enjoyed in handling issues has varied. In some instances the impact of a partnership approach to developing a HR policy did not meet initial staff and union expectations. In another example, the implementation of Performance Management Development System (PMDS) using a partnership approach was viewed as contributing to a more effective policy change.

Relationships under the umbrella of the organisation's partnership activities did experience a certain level of strain in Revenue. This is primarily due to the extent of change being experienced by management and staff in the organisation and the impact of that change on employee relations. However, the joint problem-solving activities undertaken to date do display some characteristics synonymous with effective partnership approaches to change and organisational development.

### Senior management and trade union leader support

Senior management and trade union representative support for a partnership approach to change has been important for the continued evolution of the partnership process within Revenue. A number of interviewees indicated a growing sense that senior management is more committed than ever to progressing change programmes in a way that emphasises employee involvement and participation. However, the converse of this increased commitment is increased responsibility to deliver results.

The organisation's 'summit players' are under pressure to demonstrate that partnership is a viable mechanism for addressing organisational change.

Despite the constraints and pressures under which formalised partnership structures operate, the concept of a joint problem-solving approach remains intact in Revenue. The commitment and advocacy work of partnership activists in management, staff and unions has been critical to making progress, albeit at a slower pace than envisaged. Certainly, given the manner in which issues concerning the organisation's restructuring impacted on working relationships and the organisation's industrial relations environment, partnership needed managers and trade union representatives to undertake an active advocacy role.

### Encouraging employee voice

Since 1998, the committee has worked to improve the scope and quality of organisational communication practices and procedures. Primarily, this is achieved through the use of email and the organisation's intranet, though the latter is only in its embryonic stages. Committee meeting minutes are published and form the backbone of periodic information briefings and articles about partnership in Revenue's in-house magazine.

In addition, or perhaps because of, this information strategy, there has been an increased emphasis on improving overall communications between managers, staff and unions in Revenue. Managers are now expected to provide communication fora for staff. A very positive outcome of this new openness happened during the major organisational restructuring process necessary to reposition Revenue's operations. In order to increase understanding and awareness of the rationale behind the proposed restructuring, the senior management team engaged in an extensive and unprecedented countrywide consultation process with staff. At operational level, managers were encouraged to promote staff participation in the change process, in recognition of the fact that staff engagement is necessary for effective organisational change.

### Enabling innovation in joint problem solving

Several of the interviewees suggested that partnership processes worked best in circumstances where a group or committee knew what output or final product was expected of them, and were given the freedom to experiment with the joint problem-solving process. Participants recognised that partnership represents a new way of solving problems and were open to a degree of experimentation and risk taking.

This adoption of proactive problem-solving approaches was considered particularly pivotal by many interviewees. In particular, participants engaging in rigorous and open debate designed to resolve a particular set of problems was considered useful, as it succeeded in fostering consensus on issues and developing innovative outcomes.

A number of core operational groups, in particular the Taxes Training Group and the PAYE Steering Group, have adopted a partnership-style approach to their work without being formally linked to the organisation's partnership process. In order to promote a more collaborative approach to addressing problems in mainstream activities, Revenue has branded these as '*partnership style*' groups in recognition of the fact that they are characterised by a commitment to employee involvement, consultation and problem solving. Each group comprises staff, management and trade union representatives.

**Workplace Charter Initiative**

The Workplace Charter Initiative, undertaken by the HR Intensive Group and others, established a '*charter of rights*' for staff, to mirror the organisation's emphasis on customer rights. It was considered essential that this project be undertaken using a partnership approach. In the opinion of one participant:

*"Attempting to progress this issue through a traditional adversarial IR approach would have produced a less innovative product...you would have ended up with a lowest common denominator resolution rather than something which was positive and proactive".*

The group adopted a problem-solving approach, characterised by intensive deliberation. Although the Workplace Charter did not confer any new rights *per se*, it collated existing employee rights within an overarching strategic framework, and served to highlight core organisational values and principles for both existing and new employees.

**PAYE Steering Group**

The PAYE Steering Group, comprising management, staff and unions, was established to improve work practices, enhance customer service and progress a number of specific recommendations relating to the work of the PAYE Unit. This predated the formal establishment of partnership in the organisation, and represented a formalisation of the open and co-operative relationship that had developed between management and local union representatives. The initial outputs of the steering group saw the establishment of the national LoCall service and a substantial revision and streamlining of the existing body of tax instructions in the PAYE area.

From the outset, the parties agreed that issues relating to compensation for changes in work practices would be dealt with through existing industrial relations machinery and were therefore out of bounds for discussion by the steering group. The parties also agreed that group recommendations would be implemented in full when IR negotiations were successfully completed. This twin track, mutually supportive working model was developed to successfully steer issues between an IR approach to change and a partnership-style approach to change.

Over the years, the PAYE Steering Group has evolved into a key consultative forum. Any issue or initiative in the PAYE area of Revenue's work is thoroughly debated and discussed in the group. The success of the group has been achieved by addressing an open and inclusive agenda and through the adoption of a proactive problem-solving approach. This group has also fostered a greater understanding and openness to change among staff. One senior manager stated that "*the impact of this forum has surpassed its original objectives*".

## The benefits of partnership in the Office of the revenue Commissioners

There was a feeling amongst interviewees that partnership activities have not made the impact expected on their introduction. This is in part due to the employee relations difficulties surrounding restructuring and integration in the organisation. However, Revenue managers, employees and trade union representatives were able to identify a number of benefits accruing from adopting a partnership approach to change (see Table 6).

| Table 6 Benefits of a partnership approach to change in the Office of the Revenue Commissioners | |
| --- | --- |
| Improved communication | Greater awareness of the need for change |
| Increased employee voice | More effective problem-solving |
| Improved levels of trust and shared understanding | Better information and consultation practices |
| Increased employee involvement in problem-solving | Better informed decisions |

### Improved decision-making through consultative approaches

Addressing issues using a partnership-style approach has improved the organisation's capacity for problem-solving. In particular, consultation with unions and employees results in better-informed decisions and more effective outcomes.

There was a general consensus that, on a number of issues, the final outcome was more effective than if it had been secured through either industrial relations bargaining or managerial decision-making without prior consultation. In addition, a partnership approach to these issues helped to create a new and positive dynamic and fostered more positive relationships between the parties engaged in the process. Importantly, these decisions were reached without diluting the principle of managerial accountability – in other words, the final decision-making responsibility continues to reside with managers.

### Improved trust leads to increased levels of joint problem-solving

The experience of engaging in partnership activities has improved the level of trust between participants and fostered a stronger shared understanding of the potential benefits of joint problem-solving. Participants are now more at ease with the process and are prepared to engage more openly with issues. This improved level of trust and shared understanding was important in coping with and moving beyond the difficulties generated by the restructuring and integration process. It was also recognised that if partnership is to retain its credibility it must increasingly deliver tangible outputs.

### Increased emphasis on good internal communications

Within Revenue, the partnership process has made an important contribution to an organisational-wide emphasis on improving and enhancing communication practices and procedures. As was indicated above, senior managers have signalled their commitment to improving information and consultation practices within the organisation. Partnership in this context has served as an important vehicle for employee voice and provides a forum in which staff can make their views known to senior management on business issues.

This represents a fundamental challenge to traditional organisational culture and some managers have been reluctant to adopt a more participatory approach. Formal partnership activities, in conjunction with more informal participative initiatives, have encouraged (and in some instances forced) managers to improve the level and quality of consultation with staff when addressing change issues. Equally, advocates of increased consultation have had to address a certain degree of employee scepticism in relation to the extent to which they would be 'listened to'.

Although restructuring and integration became the subject of difficult negotiations between management and unions, paradoxically, this same period saw a growing acceptance of the need for change amongst staff and unions. Indeed in specific areas such as the PAYE Sector, employees and unions have proactively engaged with the change process.

### Managing the interface between partnership and industrial relations:

As in all civil service organisations, managing the interface between formalised partnership activities and industrial relations processes was one of the key challenges facing Revenue. Although there is no formal link between partnership and IR processes, a number of managers and union officials provided a personal link, due to their involvement in both groups. This relationship continues to evolve. For example, the PAYE Steering Group is an example of a collaborative approach that works effectively, while maintaining established IR procedures.

Significantly, the majority of interviews stressed that this relationship, and indeed the credibility of partnership itself, was severely tested by the restructuring process and in particular by the question of integrating other taxes grades. Initially, senior management raised these issues for discussion at the partnership committee. The union side considered them inappropriate, given their strong industrial relations dimension, and rejected a partnership approach to the issue.

Consequently, restructuring and integration issues were addressed over a two-year period through intensive negotiations between senior management and union officials. The protracted nature of these negotiations impacted deeply on the relationships between management, unions and employees across the organisation and certainly constrained the evolution of the partnership process. Indeed, in some sections, where partnership-style relationships had been the norm, one interviewee indicated:

*"approaches to working which had never been raised as problems suddenly became problematic."*

Although this highlights the potential fragility of partnership as an approach to change, the fact that it has remained intact and retained the support of the parties is an achievement in itself. Indeed, the experience has fostered recognition that partnership could perform a more proactive and facilitating role in the future. Now that the restructuring process is moving to the implementation phase, there appears to be a role for partnership approaches to embedding change in the organisation. As one senior manager stipulated:

*"the new structure is premised on bringing different areas, individuals and functions together into integrated teams and would appear to lend itself more readily to a partnership-style approach."*

## Conclusions

Revenue's experience reveals that partnership does not function in isolation and is clearly influenced and shaped by its wider organisational environment. In this regard the difficulties generated by the restructuring process and associated issue of grade integration undoubtedly constrained the activities of both formalised and informal partnership processes. Equally, attempts to improve information sharing and employee involvement reinforced and supported a partnership-style approach to the management of change.

Importantly, the experience has served to reinforce the view that a partnership-style approach remains the most effective mechanism for securing effective organisational change. Importantly, the implementation phase of the restructuring process offers an opportunity for a more robust partnership approach to change to emerge. The challenge is to build on the progress secured to date, by ensuring that partnership approaches are the most effective agent of organisational change.

# Department of Transport

The Irish government established a new Department of Transport, with almost 500 staff and an annual budget of approximately €2 billion in June 2002. The Department is charged with implementing an integrated transport policy. Its objective is to overcome existing delays, bottlenecks and congestion and to provide the consumer with greater choice by offering alternative modes of transport and competitive access to transport. Faced with enormous external pressure for action and unique internal challenges, the emerging department successfully relied on partnership and participation. Doing so enabled it to rapidly deliver action and results.

Challenges remain. Externally, the pressures continue to grow with new and often unexpected issues arising on a regular basis. Internally, the process of integration, physical as well as cultural, must continue to deepen. Cross-cutting is at a very early stage of development. However, at the time of this research it was clear that there was a real commitment at all levels to use partnership and participation to work through the challenges.

## Key change drivers

The newly created Department of Transport faced a number of unique and complex challenges — some internal and some external. Staff from four government departments — Public Enterprise, Environment and Local Government, Communications, Marine and Natural Resources and Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht — joined forces in the new department. However, the staff were and remain in many different locations. The ability to create a sense of shared mission and shared identity among all of the staff is a key priority.

The development of an integrated approach to transport further complicates the internal challenge. It creates the need for cross-cutting activities at all levels in the new Department. Cross-cutting arises when an issue falls within the remit of more than one department, division or group. For example, regulatory reform, public private partnerships or procurement are difficult to neatly pigeonhole in a given area. This means that increasingly, staff must work with individuals from other divisions. Further, the Department must ensure that growing demand for mobility and choice does not

override other important policy concerns, such as sustainable development, balanced regional development, social inclusion and coherent land use development. This creates a need to work in a cross-cutting way with other departments.

The public interest in transport means that the new Department operates as if under a microscope: changes are eagerly analysed and anticipated. There was and is a need for immediate action.

## Characteristics of a successful partnership approach

Senior management at the Department have considerable experience in working through partnership and are committed to tackling these challenges in a participative and consultative manner. The need to develop a Strategy Statement that defined its mission and goals was identified as a key priority. It would require detailed assessment of several potentially overlapping or even conflicting considerations, such as cost, risk, safety, timeliness, investment, need for mobility, and deliverability. The need to do it quickly resulted in a very deliberate drive to involve staff. The need for staff involvement, for partnership, was seen as vital if the new Strategy was to be effective in underpinning and sustaining change at the Department.

Partnership at the Department of Transport is about involvement and participation. It involves an innovative mixture of progressive participative management styles, emerging and growing partnership structures and positive industrial relations. As Transport is a new department this is very much a work in progress. Nonetheless, considerable achievements have occurred. This case study focuses on one aspect — the development of the Department's Statement of Strategy.

Following its creation in June 2002, the Department engaged in an extensive process of consultation with all staff. The result was an agreed mission statement:

*"The Department of Transport will underpin economic growth and competitiveness and contribute to social development through the efficient and effective delivery of a sustainable, appropriately regulated, safe and integrated transport system."*

Strategy Statement

The organisation's mission statement was developed with a focus on five broad themes. Senior management worked in teams to develop position papers, for example on specific issues like investment. These themes provided the foundation for initial discussion within senior management, for example within the MAC. An outline strategy document was produced and circulated to staff. Consultation occurred through an extensive process of staff group sessions. Initial presentations by senior management to staff members emphasised the importance and openness of this

process.  For example, it was made clear that position papers were working drafts, that comments could be made and that suggestions would affect the final shape of these papers and ultimately the Strategy Statement.

The partnership committee was consulted in relation to the Strategy Statement. However, the committee was at an early stage of development and as such its role and impact was limited. The committee is examining its role and contribution to decision-making within the Department. There is a clear commitment in the Department to the idea that the formal committee can play an important role.  It can have a real impact on the development of partnership as way of approaching change. There is agreement that partnership processes should be part of what people do. They should be relevant to people's work and concerns on a daily basis.  Senior managers should not be afraid to tackle difficult organisational change issues in an innovative and open way.

The existence of the partnership committee and/or those with experience of partnership committees is linked by staff in the

department to the broader approach to participation in the Department. There is a constructive and positive relationship between management and unions.  There is a sense that partnership is facilitating union and management tasks.  The partnership process is helping to build trust and understanding of the challenges faced by both management and employees.

For individual staff, the development of the strategy represented a real opportunity to engage in discussion about the shape and role of the Department. The challenge laid down in the initial draft of the strategy was for individual staff members to find a 'thread' linking their day-to-day job to specific deliverables.  This placed the burden of responsibility on staff and their unions to make sure that their views were incorporated.  The search to find these threads produced a large number of very detailed insights.  For example, staff in one area amended the type of performance indicators and in particular their level of specificity. This had important implications as it re-opened debate at a central level about the relationship between the Department and state bodies.

The final version of the strategy statement agreed five high level goals: investment, safety, competition and regulation, integration and delivery.  Importantly, it also lists deliverables in terms of outputs and performance indicators. Key deliverables outlined in the report are very specific. For example:

- Safety: Roll-out of penalty points system by end of 2003

- Competition: Introduce service level agreements within Bus Eireann

- Integration: National Strategy on Total Supply Chain Management.

Having worked on the strategy and provided feedback, individuals then amend their role profiles accordingly. Similarly, business plans will reflect the contents of the Strategy Statement.  This means that, within the Department, there is a sense that staff share ownership of these challenges, a sense in one interviewee's words that a:

*"pooled approach was taken to structuring".*

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## The benefits of partnership in the Department of Transport

Partnership and participation at the department has delivered significant benefits. For the Department, this is evident in terms of speed, flexibility and innovative problem-solving capabilities. It also means a more positive workplace as trust, openness and fairness become important characteristics. Change is understood and, increasingly, it is accepted as a fact of life at the Department.

The involvement of staff has improved the development of strategy. It has led to very tangible and specific improvements in the quality of planning and decision-making. Both senior management and employees acknowledge that the final Strategy Statement is more informed and more practical. The real benefits in terms of outcomes are likely to arise as this agreed Strategy Statement is implemented. However, even during this research, in February 2003, the benefits of participation were evident. These benefits include:

### Faster decision-making

Working in a participative manner the new Department, starting from scratch, was one of the first departments to agree its Statement of Strategy after the formation of the Government in 2002. Further, the participative process means that follow on activities like Business Plans and individual role profiles are expected to occur much more quickly than would normally be the case. This is because there was such a strong focus on concrete action and visible links to individual work in the Strategy process.

### Making work easier

The sense that staff are involved and that partnership is now an important part of how work is carried out is a strong feature in the Department of Transport. There is a focus on sharing and on interaction and this is making work easier. Staff at all levels talk openly of how they can depend on others in their team; how they can consult with others in different areas, of coming together as colleagues to discuss issues. For example, a Clerical Officer in the department discussed the value she derives from weekly team meetings. It is an efficient way to stay in touch with developments across areas. It enables her to understand what other people are trying to do, the difficulties they face and ways that they might help each other and save time and effort. Employees feel that they can approach central management with ideas. For example, a group of driver testers suggested that their premises needed to be re-designed in order to make the testing service more accessible to immigrants. Their ideas were taken on board and the necessary changes made to the premises.

In general there is an air of common sense about how the Department approaches problems:

- When considering their roles, individuals are asked to find the 'thread' to link themselves to the wider strategy

- Divisional meetings are held at variable intervals, for example, five or six week intervals, to cater for those who job share

- Weekly team meetings are used because they are a quick and efficient way to share information and make everyone's job a little easier

- A staff magazine, produced by the partnership committee, provides very accessible summaries and overviews of issues, such as the Strategy Statement, presented in ways that everybody can understand

- A partnership roadshow outlined the activities and role of partnership to all staff and sought feedback and initiatives

- The department includes information-sharing as an element of staff role profiles.

### Shared responsibility

In general, team meetings are an integral part of how the Secretary General, each Assistant Secretary, Principal Officers, Asst. Principal Officers and HEOs interact with staff. Traditional lines of accountability and responsibility remain intact. However, individual responsibility is now supported by a team culture. Communication, team meetings and ongoing interaction are designed to ensure that staff are neither uncomfortable nor isolated in relation to decisions they make. For example, all major decisions will be discussed in meetings where colleagues have ample opportunity to raise concerns. There is a sense that responsibility is shared by teams – notwithstanding that ultimate responsibility remains with senior management and the Secretary General.

### High levels of commitment

There is a high level of commitment as the overall strategy and mission of the Department is tightly linked to the roles of individuals. It is clear that the level of consultation has increased the ownership people feel towards the new Strategy and to the new Department. Problems remain but working in this manner has certainly created a basis to discuss and tackle outstanding issues. There is at the very least a positive and optimistic attitude.

### Open climate of information sharing

The importance of two-way communication is recognised and demanded by senior management, staff at other levels and unions. The extensive use of meetings, team-based problem-solving, the partnership magazine, *The Inside Track*, and email has created an open climate. Efforts to develop the communication system and management information system are continuing. In particular, the need to broaden awareness among staff about the developing role and relevance of partnership is seen as an important challenge.

### New supportive roles and relationships

There is evidence of a mutually supportive relationship between management and other staff. Management remain responsible for leadership. However, this is interpreted in the department as a task of nurturing and encouraging rather than solely one of directing. Figure 1 characterises the approach to working. It suggests that the emphasis is on learning. Themes set by management are refined and altered by individuals and teams who give the ideas careful consideration. In the case of a broad issue like the Strategy Statement this feedback was based on extensive consultation and discussion with staff and teams across the whole department. Staff have now seen that this feedback was taken seriously and that many of the suggestions and contributions appeared in the Strategy Statement. This provides a solid foundation for continuing employee involvement.

**Figure 1  Working through problems at the Department of Transport**

Theme setting

Theme working

Theme setting

Theme working

Theme setting

Theme working
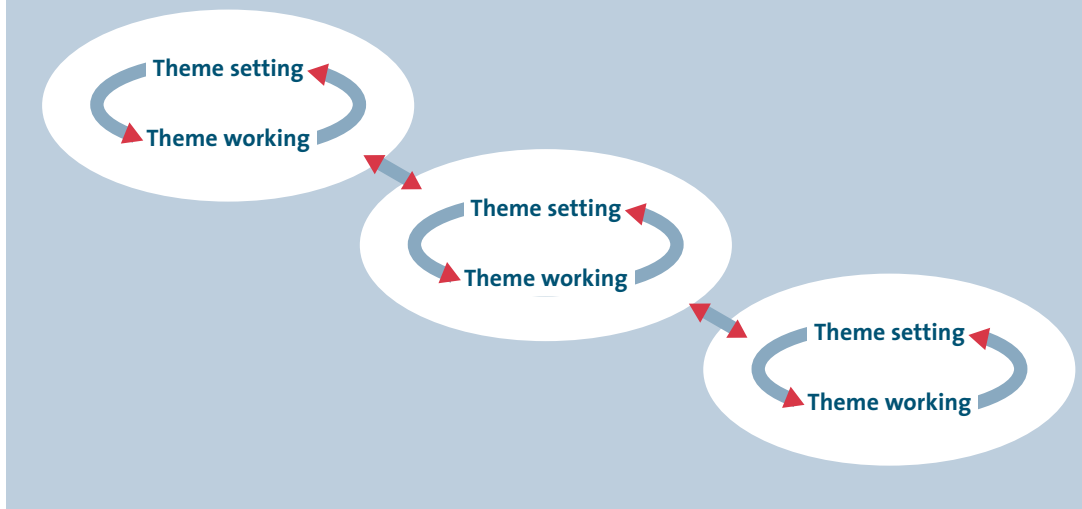
## Conclusions

This case study shows that partnership offers an effective way to deliver action on major change programmes in the civil service.  Using informal and formal participatory approaches, the newly formed Department of Transport is positioning the partnership process as a catalyst for improvement.  As a way of doing things, partnership in the Department of Transport is adding value: it is improving operating efficiency and innovation in a climate of better working conditions, employee learning and well-being.  Strategy, change, workloads and responsibility are tackled in

an open and transparent manner across the Department.  Initial outcomes suggest that working in a partnership way can deliver impressive results.

The challenge for the Department of Transport is to continue to mould an approach to work that allows things to happen.  It is recognised and agreed among senior management and the partnership committee that partnership can create a basis for effective change.  There is a desire to build on the culture of information sharing and openness. However, formal partnership is still evolving and growing at the Department.  It is at a critical point in

its development. However, there is an acute sense that the partnership committee could be confined to a rather peripheral role within the organisation.  There is little evidence that the partnership committee is seen as a forum for discussion of serious issues. Nonetheless, all members express a desire to see partnership work and realise its value.

*"We all know and agree that the reality of the partnership approach results in a better work situation all round. We know that an embedded partnership approach gets results for all sides."*

Senior Manager

There is pressure for results and for evidence that partnership can become further embedded as a part of how business happens across the Department.  There is an acceptance that developing partnership now requires a very basic rethink in relation to:

- Its role and functions

- The role of formal structures

- The relationship with staff

- The relationship with management decision-making

- The relationship with unions.

# Partnership in the Civil Service — key lessons and learnings

## Partnership's relationship with other organisational change processes

The five case studies discussed in the preceding chapters demonstrate that partnership approaches in the civil service have engaged with key strategic and functional issues and have operated as a key enabler of organisational change and development. They also demonstrate that, for partnership to function as an effective organisational change driver, it should develop an evolving and supportive working relationship with other processes concerned with organisational change, i.e. industrial relations and management processes (see Figure 2). Failure to do so will result in partnership becoming isolated from the organisation's change and modernisation agenda.



**Figure 2  The three elements of organisational development**

- Partnership approaches
- Participative management style
- Industrial relations processes
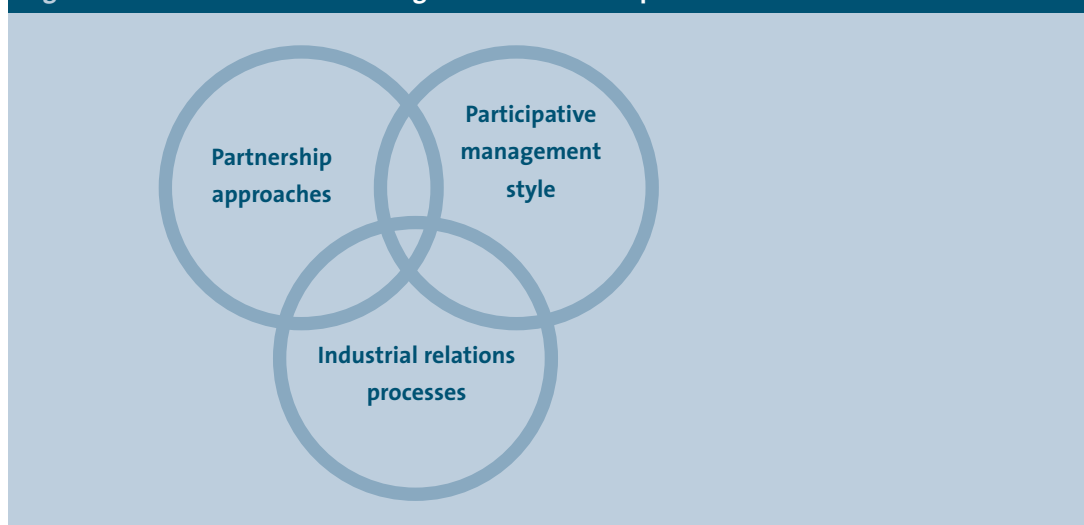
The case studies indicate that robust partnership approaches have contributed to the development of a co-operative industrial relations environment and a high involvement, participatory managerial culture. Equally, the development of improved industrial relations and management processes support the development of partnership as a robust change enabler. As suggested in Figure 2, the examples of good practice demonstrate a dynamic and mutually supportive relationship between the three processes concerned with civil service modernisation and change.

In managing the interface between these processes, it is important to note that the boundaries between the different arenas are respected and upheld by stakeholders. In practice, however, when seeking to resolve problems and/or address issues, the boundaries become increasingly blurred. The recognition of this overlapping and evolving relationship facilitates issues being transferred from one arena to another with a view to making positive progress. As such, attention shifts from a narrow debate about which issues belong in which forum, to a focus on how and in what way the different elements of an issue can be more effectively progressed by each of the change management processes.

In seeking to understand and explore further the nature of this evolving relationship between partnership, industrial relations and managerial style, the following key lessons and learnings are of interest.

## Key lessons and learnings

### Partnership engages...

#### ...with leaders

The development of robust and effective partnership processes provides opportunities for leaders to engage with the change agenda. Commitment from and proactive engagement of top management and senior trade union officials was critical to the successful development of partnership in each case study. In particular, partnership processes offered Chief Executives or Secretaries General an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to an inclusive approach to change. Active support from the head of the organisation was pivotal to identifying partnership's role in the change and modernisation process. Members of the senior management team and senior trade union officials also play important roles as influencers in building employee confidence in partnership's ability to deal with change issues.

Partnership offered trade unions an opportunity to play a more proactive role in driving organisational change. Significantly, a positive engagement with partnership approaches supported and complemented the work of many union representatives. However, the researchers also spoke to trade union representatives who expressed a sense of disconnectedness from the partnership process in their respective organisations.

#### ...with industrial relations processes

For partnership to drive organisational change both management and unions had to be willing to promote an open and inclusive agenda, which included placing change issues within the ambit of partnership (e.g. Department of Social and Family Affairs). In this regard, the development of a positive relationship between partnership approaches and industrial relations machinery was essential as it facilitated issues that had an IR dimension being discussed in a partnership forum (e.g. Department of Social and Family Affairs, Department of Transport, the Commission and the Courts Service). In some instances, the solutions to such issues were effectively

framed within the partnership arena and agreed in an industrial relations setting. An innovation such as the Members Forum in the Commission ensured that partnership engaged with an open and inclusive agenda. Some interviewees did suggest, however, that partnership processes suffered from a lack of staff and/or union input in terms of framing the agenda and this is an issue that the parties should address.

### ...with employees

Despite this, the case studies demonstrate that the partnership process is an effective mechanism for promoting employee voice (e.g. the Courts Service and Revenue). In particular it offered greater potential and scope for staff views concerning organisational change to emerge and be taken seriously (e.g. Department of Transport). Similarly it provided an identifiable and effective forum for staff to raise issues for discussion and, in some instances, resolution (e.g. Courts and the Commission). The majority of the case studies stated that "*staff now feel that they are being listened to*" and that their contribution to the modernisation agenda is valued.

### Partnership drives...

### ...improved communications

At the very least partnership processes enhanced the level and quality of intra-organisational communications in each of the case studies. In the Department of Social and Family Affairs, increased staff expectation of information and consultation was often met as managers became more conscious of the need to inform and consult on strategic and operational issues. Despite progress in communication and information sharing, the case studies identified considerable scope for improvement. In some instances, staff awareness of partnership's role as a change driver remains limited.

### ...participative management

The partnership process functioned most effectively in examples where it was complemented by a commitment from senior management to fostering a management style based on employee involvement and participation. As was highlighted in the case of the Department of Social and Family Affairs:

*"If you were to map the location of managers who are open and participative and also map partnership activities they are the same."*

Manager, DSFA

In a similar fashion, the Department of Transport partnership committee is linked to employee participation in departmental decision-making. This emphasis on a high involvement and participatory management style creates a fertile environment for partnership to develop into an enabler of the organisation's change agenda. Equally, it encourages the development of the skills and behaviours necessary to manage change using partnership approaches. A commitment to employee involvement and participation clearly necessitates a cultural shift in managerial style, which not all managers have been willing to embrace. The case studies identified evidence of managers who continue to adopt a more traditional, hierarchical approach to staff relations. A key challenge for civil service organisations is to develop appropriate and viable strategies to mainstream partnership approaches.

### ...policy-making

For partnership to function as a key enabler of change it should address a broad range of issues linked to the modernisation agenda. In successful examples this was facilitated by the fact that the nature of partnership's involvement with the policy-making process varied considerably, depending on the issue in question. For example, in the Commission, the partnership committee adopted the following policy roles on different issues:

- Strategic / Formulation

- Participative / Operational

- Consultative

- Progressive / Leadership

- Evaluation and Monitoring.

Importantly, adopting different policy roles assisted the development of a participative approach to key operational and strategic areas without diminishing the speed or quality of output. This approach also ensured that partnership processes linked into decision-making forums without too much formality or duplication of existing structures.

### Partnership innovates...

### ...organisational development

As a relatively new process within the civil service, the partnership approach has had to strive to clarify its appropriate role and position within individual organisations. At times this proved problematic. In particular, there was often a lack of clarity regarding the nature of partnership's relationship with industrial relations and management processes. As already suggested, the more effective examples of partnership in action occurred when there was an evolving, dynamic relationship between all three organisational change processes. A willingness to experiment and innovate made an important and positive contribution to the positioning of partnership approaches in a number of ways:

- Experimenting with and customising different communication methods to meet staff needs – e.g. Department of Social and Family Affairs

- Innovative approaches to implementing key aspects of the SMI – e.g. the approach to the Strategy Statement in the Department of Transport and PMDS in the Department of Social and Family Affairs

- The development of innovative measures to enable wider participation in the partnership process – e.g. the Commission

- Innovative solutions to complex problems – e.g. The policy on Worksharing in the Courts Service; The No Smoking policy in the Commission and the work of the PAYE Steering Group in Revenue.

- Integrated strategies for stimulating information sharing and dialogue between staff – e.g. the Department of Transport

- Engagement with issues not normally associated with the partnership process – e.g. Exceptional Performance Awards in the Courts Service and the Commission

- An innovative and flexible approach to the development of devolved partnership structures in accordance with a department's multi-layered organisational structure – e.g. different types of local committees in the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

### ...approaches to problem-solving

In part, the partnership process' capacity to generate innovative solutions to potentially complex problems was underpinned by the adoption of a pragmatic problem-solving approach to issues. This was facilitated by the parties' strong commitment to engaging in frank, robust, but non-confrontational exchanges in which the discussion was focused on achieving a positive and credible outcome. In certain instances this has generated a working environment in which "*there is a real emphasis on getting things done rather than just simply restating set positions*" (e.g. Courts Service). Central to this process was the principle that what is important are the views articulated rather than the grade or representational status of the individual in question (e.g. the Commission). This pragmatic problem-solving approach produced innovative solutions and generated consensus around issues. In the case of the Department of Transport and the Courts Service, for example, a partnership-style approach enhanced the organisation's problem-solving capacity.

### Partnership improves...

### ...policy implementation

As suggested above, partnership processes have displayed their potential to improve an organisation's problem-solving capacity. This reflects the fact that a partnership approach to problem solving links people with the relevant knowledge and expertise to the process used to solve the problem. The emphasis on facilitating broader staff consultation brings a wider pool of expertise and experience to bear on the decision-making process. Even though 'managers must manage', partnership approaches provide opportunities to consult with staff with knowledge and experience and therefore, make better-informed decisions. The fact that consensus building and consultation underpins such decisions increase their credibility and facilitates their acceptance by employees. This increases the prospects for the effective and efficient implementation of policy decisions and strategies.

### ...monitoring and review

In organisations such as the Commission there is ongoing commitment to internal monitoring and review to identify what is working, what is not and what should be done to ensure continuous improvement. One of the features of the work of the Courts Service HR unit in supporting partnership activity was to identify good practice in other civil service organisations. In the Department of Social and Family Affairs, partnership is undergoing a major review to identify its future strategic direction and role. Self-reflection represents an opportunity to renew the parties' commitment to the process, sustain initial momentum and build on examples of good practice.

## Managing change through partnership: the benefits

From a managerial perspective the partnership process has contributed to organisational change and improved performance due to its capacity to resolve problems, improve business awareness, foster a shared understanding of common goals and reconfigure attitudes to change. Increases in the level and quality of staff involvement and participation, improved working environments and more constructive staff-management relations benefit employees. Although some union representatives are ambivalent about engaging with partnership approaches, trade unions have benefited from improvements in the industrial relations environment and from opportunities to play a more strategic role in driving organisational change.

As was indicated above, the five case studies have demonstrated that partnership in the civil service engages with key strategic, functional and operational issues. In this context, the partnership process demonstrates its capacity to function as an enabler of organisational change and modernisation. Addressing organisational change in this manner secured effective and efficient change and delivered a range of mutual gains for management, unions and employees. Table 7 lists the benefits generated by partnership processes identified by representatives of the five case study organisations. Some of these gains applied to all of the organisations while others occurred in one or two organisations.

The different organisational contexts and the fact that partnership was at a different stage of development in each organisation ensured that the benefits of partnership varied, as did the degree to which partnership had functioned as an enabler of organisational change. Even with these qualifications in mind the list of gains outlined in Table 7 is impressive. In addition, there was a common acceptance that organisations were just beginning to tap the potential of managing change through partnership.

| Table 7 | The benefits of managing civil service change through partnership |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|

- Improved organisational performance

- Enhanced intra-organisational communications

- Enhanced employee commitment

- Better working environment and improved staff morale

- Increased staff involvement and participation

- Greater use of team working

- Reconfigured attitudes to change

- Better awareness of organisational goals

- Shared understanding of common goals

- Improved customer focus

- Enhanced problem-solving capacity

- Better informed decisions

- More constructive and co-operative IR environment

- Increase in employee voice mechanisms

- Expanded and more strategic role for trade unions

- Increased dialogue, consultation and information sharing

- More participative managerial style

- Improved staff-management relations