

Department of Social Protection - Productivity achievements since 2008/2009

(How the demand for its services, and those of its agencies, and available staff resources in key operational/front line areas have evolved from before the Public Service Agreement (i.e. 2008/2009) to the present.)

1. Demand for Services

Over the period from the end of 2008 to the end of September 2011¹, the demand for the Department's services have increased substantially. The number of recipients of primary weekly welfare payments has increased by 240,000 or 20%, from 1.21 million to 1.45 million. There has also been a resultant increase in claim maintenance activity in this period. The increased workload has been addressed through a combination of increased staff numbers, higher productivity, streamlining of activities and driving out of efficiencies through business process improvements and also enhanced ICT systems across the organisation, including claim processing systems.

2. Staff Numbers and Ratios

The staff numbers in the Department increased by 8.9% during the period in question.

Integration of Community Welfare Services and FÁS Employment Services

The Department has successfully delivered on the commitment in the Programme for Government to the transfer of 1,033 staff from the Community Welfare Service of the HSE and 758 staff from FÁS Employment Services and related functions. This represents the biggest single transfer of staff and functions from the public sector to the civil service. These staff have been integrated into the organisation and restructuring is underway.

Support Staff

Greater numbers of staff are being serviced by central support areas without proportional increases in staff numbers:

- a. The ratio of HR Management staff to overall staff numbers has changed from 1:66 in 2010 to 1:76;
- b. The ratio of IT Support staff to overall staff numbers has changed from 1:23 in 2010 to 1:32 at a time when the technical environment is growing ever more complex and is central to the Department's ability to deliver a widening range of services;
- c. The ratio of Accounts Branch, including Salaries, staff to overall staff numbers has changed from 1:62 in 2010 to 1:80.

3. Claim Processing Productivity

Despite the substantial increases in claim volumes and claim maintenance, claim processing has continued efficiently and services to customers have continued to be delivered to a high standard.

- Processing volumes increased by 13% in 2011. 2.35 million claims were cleared.
- Backlogs have been reduced by a higher percentage - reduced by 9% in 2011 compared to 6.4% in 2010. The number of claims awaiting decision has reduced overall by 60% by the end of 2011 compared to peak levels at the end of 2009.
- Average processing times for all schemes are down by 11% since 2009. This is in spite of the more time consuming means tested Jobseekers Allowance accounting for 50% of claims in 2011, compared to 40% in 2009.
- For the high volume schemes, processing times improved for Jobseekers Allowance, State Pension Contributory, Household Benefits and Maternity Benefits. Jobseekers Benefit, Supplementary Welfare Allowance, Treatment Benefits and Illness Benefits processing times were maintained at the 2010 level. These schemes cover 89% of processed claims.

¹ CSW Staff transferred to DSP from 1 October 2011 and FAS staff transferred from 1 January 2012 have been excluded so as achieve consistency in comparing years.

4. Control Reviews and savings achieved

Control reviews of claims increased from 568,000 in 2008 to 982,000 in 2011. The resultant savings increased from €458m in 2008 to €645m in 2011.

5. ICT Enhancements

- The Local Office Process Modernisation (LOPM) ICT project was set up to reduce footfall in the Local Offices to provide time and space to enable staff to interact with customers in a more focused manner. Work completed under LOPM included the development of a range of signing options for customers (electronic signature capture, automated certificate pattern creation for casuals, online signing capabilities). Other features delivered included the ability to generate bulk communications to customers and facilities to deal with customers working in the education sector.
- The introduction of streamlined procedures for dealing with applications for Jobseekers Allowance from clients who have just completed their maximum time on a Jobseekers Benefit claim created significant administrative savings in clerical administration. There were also significant advantages from a customer service viewpoint. The principle advantage was the need to complete a full jobseeker application form was eliminated and the processing surrounding the application process was reduced. The savings made allowed offices to cope with the additional workloads arising from the increase in Jobseeker claims over the past few years.
- The introduction of automated communications for Jobseeker clients also created significant savings in clerical administration and delivered significant benefits from a customer service perspective. Once again, the savings from this initiative created capacity to deal with the increase in the Jobseeker claim load.
- The numbers of casual workers on Jobseeker payments has doubled in recent years. This increase created a huge increase in the administrative burden on local offices. The introduction of improved ICT facilities to assist the casual certification process enabled offices to handle the increase in administration without additional resources.
- The **Office Systems Desktop Modernisation** project commenced in 2009 and also involves the roll-out of a new standardised desktop to all staff. This project is due for completion by June 2013. The new desktops provide staff with the latest Microsoft desktop technology including enhanced email functionality while also providing a consistent desktop architecture across the organisation. Consistent architecture provides a more stable infrastructure and significant increases in the capabilities and agility of ICT service staff to manage these environments into the future.
- The Medical Referral and Case Management (MRCM) system was introduced in 2010 to implement organisational and technical improvements in both the administrative and medical streams of the Department's Medical Review and Assessment Service. The MRCM project implemented strategic process improvements which increased the medical examination capacity of the Medical Assessors (MAs), especially in relation to Desk Assessments, by 30%. Customer service improvements included the implementation of on-line referral scheduling, by-text notifications to customers and improved information support to better handle customer phone queries. Administrative benefits included the implementation of standardised & consistent approaches to reviews, improved visibility and organisation of the MA workload, enabling flexible distribution of case work across multiple locations without the requirement to transfer papers, reduced documentation storage requirements and improved controls in relation to GP payments.
- A process re-organisation and ICT development was undertaken in the PRSI Refunds area which has led to improved customer service with faster claim processing times, increased level of information provision and query handling process.
- A project was undertaken in 2011 to develop and implement an ICT application for the issue of PRSI records to customers. The work was done using internal resources and has facilitated the automated issue of some 80% of customer requests. A further 15% are issued through the system after manual modification.

A number of scanning and intelligent document recognition projects have been undertaken:

- Registration documents for Public Services Cards are now scanned, providing a more efficient use of resources in SWLOs:

- Saving on time taken to manually search and retrieve papers;
 - Instant access to view papers for reference and control purposes;
 - Additional storage space available in SWLOs who previously retained and stored these papers;
 - Improved control mechanisms by ability to compare photo ID immediately if a question is raised on customer identity.
- Over 90,000 means assessment documents for One Parent Family Payment claims have been scanned to date, leading to administrative savings in SWLO's and Sligo HQ.
 - In 2011, Salaries Section scanned some 7,300 employee files, containing an average of approx. 35 pages per file. Since then an additional 11,750 instructions have been scanned affecting nearly 5,500 employee files. Queries are now dealt with in a timelier manner as files can now be accessed from the PCs of Salaries staff. The file scanning also freed up filing space for use as accommodation. In addition the section is now well placed for the anticipated move to a shared service as files can be transferred electronically rather than by hard copy file.

Corporate Portal – The Department's corporate portal (intranet) provides a single point of access to the information, systems and functions used daily by the department's staff. It provides a knowledge repository, collaboration facilities, content management functionality and line of business applications. The capability to manage information strategically and to process documents, records and information quickly and efficiently is critical to the Department's overall effectiveness. The corporate portal has been successfully supporting the work of the department's staff since its launch in 2009 and has become a central communication and collaboration tool within the department as well as supporting the integration of new staff and functions (e.g. transfer of functions from HSE 2011 and former FÁS 2012).

The development of line of business applications and collaboration sites on the strategic portal platform has been on-going since 2010 and includes the following:

- **Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) team site** - Given the pressure, under which the SWAO is now working, an examination of all process and procedures was undertaken in 2010 to establish ways in which to improve procedures and maximise resources. Using the portal technology and functionality a team site for the SWAO was developed which now provides a central repository for all Appeals decisions and reports. This greatly enhances the ability to access, retrieve and report on decisions aiding consistency of decision making. Cases are also readily available for training purposes for new AO's. The new system also allows for the automatic extraction of decisions for correspondence to appellants obviating the need for manually re-typing the decision. This process has improved customer service and resulted in the saving of one full-time clerical officer who was re-assigned to other duties within the office.
- **Customer Comments and Complaints Application** was implemented in 2010 to replace a legacy comments and complaints system. The new system provides a more efficient method of registering comments and complaints made by the public in relation to the Department's services. The system provides automated distribution of comments and complaints to designated officers across the organisation and more enhanced reporting features. This has led to an improved customer service as comments and complaints are now dealt with in a more timely and efficient manner. Since its implementation in 2010 over 4,000 comments and complaints have been registered and distributed on the system.
- **Project Governance Committee Reporting Application** - The Project Governance Process is the mechanism by which all project proposals and initiatives are prioritised and budgets and resources assigned. A PGC reporting application was developed and implemented in 2010 to provide senior management with an online oversight of all major projects which require certain funding. The application replaced the time consuming manual process by which Project Managers recorded project details, milestones and expenditure. It provides PMs with an online monthly reporting facility which automatically gives the management board accurate and timely information in respect of all major projects in the Department.
- **Business Planning and Risk Management (BPRM) Application**
This system has made improvements in the completeness, accuracy, timeliness and standardisation of business plans and risk management across the organisation.

- **A Parliamentary Question Application** was implemented to improve the efficiency and quality of processing of parliamentary questions. Some 7,622 PQs have been processed on the system from April 2011 to April 2012. Savings are from a reduction in manual and paper based processes and easier overall management. Indicative savings based on an assessment in one area show a saving of 3 minutes per PQ in the first stage of answer i.e. the PQ is formatted and no need for re-filing in their file share. This would equate to 54.5 FTE days saved across the organisation.

6. Additional Schemes and services introduced

A range of additional services have been introduced without proportionate staff number increases.

- The Domiciliary Care Allowance scheme was transferred to the Department from the HSE in April 2009.
- The Employer Job PRSI Incentive Scheme was launched in June 2010. Under the scheme, if an employer takes on an additional member of staff, who had been unemployed for 6 months or more, they are exempted from paying employers' PRSI for 12 months.
- TÚS, a community work placement scheme, was introduced in December 2010.
- JobBridge, the National Internship Scheme, was launched in July 2011.
- Group engagement referrals, under the Employment Action Plan, were introduced gradually from early 2011 as a means of engaging with more unemployed clients with a given level of resources. Approximately 13,000 individuals were referred to Group Engagement in 2011.
- New administrative arrangements were introduced in 2011 for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance scheme which had previously been administered by the Community Welfare Service. Administrative savings of approximately €1 million were achieved.
- Partial Capacity Benefit, which allows a person with a disability or some reduced capacity to return to work and continue to receive benefit, was introduced in February 2012.

7. Bank Time

'Bank time' has been discontinued with effect from January 2011 – increasing productivity by the equivalent of approximately 50 full-time staff.

8. Longer Opening Times

The Social Welfare Local Office network is opening from 9am – 4pm each day, including lunchtime, and open over Easter and Christmas periods. Discussions are underway with the unions to extend office opening hours to 5.00pm.

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