

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Note on productivity achievements in the 12 Month Period 1 April 2011 to
31 March 2012

Staffing

By the end of the grace period on 29 February, Departmental staff numbers had dropped by approximately 180, or almost 11%, since the introduction of the moratorium in March 2009.

By end 2015 we are required to reduce staffing levels by some further 44 posts. Overall this will represent a **decrease by approximately one in every seven posts**.

In order to try to alleviate the impact of this the Department has implemented the most far-reaching **reorganisation of its Headquarters structures** in more than a generation, following a root and branch reappraisal of the Department's operations at home and abroad by the Management Advisory Committee led by the Secretary General. This also involved a consolidation of functions and a flattening of reporting lines across the system.

Furthermore, we are maximising the use of available resources through internal redeployment of personnel, both structural, and on a temporary basis to meet immediate short-term needs including in responding to external accidents, emergencies and major catastrophes affecting Irish citizens.

The Department is, of course, still required by the Government to provide the same range and quality of services with a similar global reach. In that regard, the scale of the ongoing exodus of staff will outstrip what can be absorbed by structural rationalisation or contingency planning. For some time now we have been actively seeking to draw on all of the available options, including redeployment and decentralisation panels, to fill critical staffing gaps not least of all in our Development Cooperation Division in Limerick. To date, this has yielded minimal returns - two Accountants, two POs and an ICT specialist.

The far-reaching measures taken will cover most, but by no means all, of our key emerging gaps. In the very near future we will, therefore, also be sending a detailed staffing submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with a request for approval to fill a small number of critical vacancies within our Employment Control Framework ceilings.

Missions

The Government last year decided to make some adjustments to the overseas Missions network, involving the **closure of three offices abroad** following a fundamental review of the capacity required to deliver on the frontline foreign policy tasks conferred by the Government on the Department, including promotion of external economic interests and reputational rebuild. **This involves annualised savings of some €1.175m**. The network now consists of 73 offices overseas and the Joint Secretariats in Belfast and Armagh.

The already modest staffing levels of Irish Missions have also been further reduced.

- Well over half the Missions have two, or fewer diplomats
- Seven (soon to be eight including Bratislava) operate with only one
- Only nine have more than three
- Nineteen Head of Mission level posts, more than a quarter of the total, have been downgraded, including fourteen formerly filled by Assistant Secretaries or higher grades
- Overall, almost two-thirds of Head of Mission posts are now filled by officers below the rank of Assistant Secretary and thirteen offices abroad are led at First Secretary/AP level.

Savings on Single diplomat Missions

In 2010, as part of such a cost-saving exercise, Riga, Tallinn, Luxembourg and Edinburgh, become one-diplomat or “lighter model” Missions, along with Nicosia and Valetta which had operated on that basis for some time. The consulate in Atlanta which opened that same year did so on a similar basis. In mid-2012, one further Mission, Bratislava, will also become a one-diplomat Mission.

The rationale for the change was to:

- Reduce staffing levels from two diplomatic officers to one
- Regrade the level at which Ambassadors were assigned
- Downsize residence accommodation for Heads of Mission as soon as contractual lease arrangements permitted
- and where consistent with business needs and local operating conditions, no longer provide them with official cars or drivers

Total projected annual full year savings from these measures when fully rolled out are estimated at €750,000.

Other savings on staffing and administration of other Missions

The overall **administrative running cost of the Department has been reduced by over €45m (almost 21%) over the past three years.** This is as a result of a combination of factors and measures including reductions in staffing; localising posts; rental reductions achieved; reductions in expenditure on representation and car purchase.

Passport Service

The Passport service is the Department’s principal interface with the general public. Although there has been a reduction in its permanent staff allocation, the service has managed - through judicious use of Temporary Clerical Officers, recruited early in the year

on six month contracts - to reduce the amount of overtime required and therefore achieve a **reduction in overall costs of an estimated €150,000.**

At the same time, the early deployment of these staff has improved the turnaround time for the production of passports. Despite an increase of about 3% in applications in 2012, unlike last year and in 2011 no substantial backlog has arisen in the system and this year and *Passport Express* applications, which we strive to process within 10 days, are currently being produced by **day 9.**

The Passport Service also increased its revenues by €3.1m in 2011 due to the introduction of a new fees structure and this, combined with tighter control of overtime and other costs resulted in the service returning to profitability. This is expected to continue for 2012.

Consideration is being given to introducing an on-line renewal system for adult passport with a view to improving the service while also securing staffing efficiencies.

Video conferencing

More use of Video Conferencing technology has also aided productivity. With 73 missions abroad as well as a decentralised structure at HQ level in Ireland – including staff in five buildings in Dublin city centre as well as a substantial presence in Balbriggan, Cork and Limerick - the Department has benefited greatly from its extensive use of video conferencing. As well as the substantial cost savings involved, productivity improvements have also occurred with travel times greatly reduced and the opportunity for staff to participate efficiently in meetings, seminars and training events in other locations.

Video conferencing was used, for example, to conduct all interviews in the 2012 Counsellor competition; in total 114 candidates, of whom 62 were stationed abroad, were interviewed using VC technology which was found to be fully satisfactory by boards and candidates alike and disruption to Missions was dramatically reduced; **savings on candidate travel and subsistence have been estimated at €80,000.** A second very large competition is due to be held in May/June 2012 and again all interviews will be conducted using our VC systems.

DFAT system also now routinely made available to Enterprise Ireland staff in relevant Missions for interaction with their colleagues at HQ and elsewhere and for other contacts

May 2012