



2019 - 2021

# Strategic Plan

**Office of the Ombudsman**

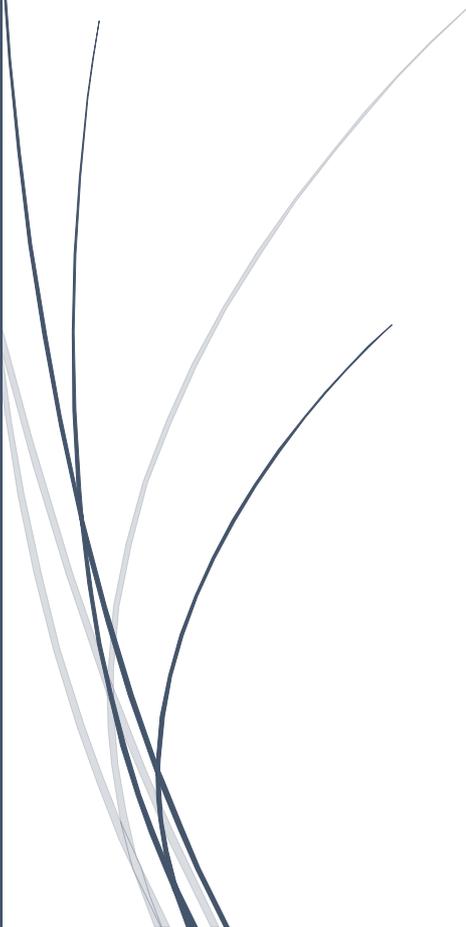
**Office of the Information Commissioner**

**Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Information**

**Secretariat to the Standards in Public Office Commission**

**Secretariat to the Commission for Public Service Appointments**

**Secretariat to the Referendum Commission**



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## 1. Foreword

I am pleased to publish my second statement of strategy as Ombudsman and Information Commissioner, which sets out the direction of the Office for the next three years. The Office comprises of the Office of the Ombudsman, the Office of the Information Commissioner(OIC), the Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Information (OCEI) and the secretariats to the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPOC), the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) and the Referendum Commission (when established).

The different Offices each carry out separate and distinct statutory functions. Nonetheless they function as a single amalgamated agency, which is funded by one Vote and overseen by an Accounting Officer (Director General) and a Management Team, who protect and preserve the statutory independence and functions of each of the constituent parts. Each Office has its own staff complement but the financial, human resources, legal, and information technology functions are shared between all five Offices. In light of the sharing of staff and other resources across the Offices, this plan extends to the Secretariats to SIPOC and the CPSA. However, separate strategic plans will be agreed by the members of the respective Commissions.

The plan sets out our key objectives for 2019 - 2021 and were developed in consultation with staff from each of the Offices. In the last three years we invested significant time and resources into transforming the way that we work in order to optimise the use of our resources. This plan builds upon our achievements and will help us to deliver a number of significant projects that are scheduled for the next three years.

The plan has a clear vision for the Office and a number of strategic objectives, underpinned by core values that we developed for the previous strategic cycle and that remain highly relevant today. It will be supported by detailed annual business plans for each of the different Offices. It will also be sufficiently flexible to allow us to deal with any organisational changes arising. As such, we intend to review and update the plan on an annual basis.



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Peter Tyndall

## 2. Role, Vision and Values

### **Role of the Ombudsman**

Established under the Ombudsman Act, 1980, the core activity of the Office of the Ombudsman is the examination and investigation of complaints about administrative actions, delays, or inaction adversely affecting persons or bodies in their dealings with public service providers under remit. The Office also investigates complaints relating to certain functions of public bodies covered by the Disability Act, 2005.

If the Ombudsman finds in any given case that the complainant has been treated unfairly or improperly and has been adversely affected as a result, then he will suggest an appropriate redress to remedy, mitigate or alter the adverse effect suffered. In dealing with and resolving individual complaints the Ombudsman works to bring about improvements in administration based on lessons learned from individual complaints or from own initiative investigations.

### **Role of the Information Commissioner**

Originally established under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, 1997 and continued under the FOI Act 2014, the role of the Commissioner is to review decisions made by public bodies in relation to FOI requests and to make binding new decisions.

His role is also to keep the operation of the Act under review with a view to ensuring maximum compliance among public bodies and to prepare and publish commentaries on the practical operation of the Act.

Typically, the objectives of a well-functioning FOI regime include:

- bringing transparency to Government decision making and discouraging corruption
- helping to hold government to account
- informing the public about government
- improving the quality of decision making by public bodies
- acting as a check on the exercise of power by government and its agencies
- promoting citizen participation

The European Communities (Re-use of Public Sector Information) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 (S.I. No. 525 of 2015) provide that the Information Commissioner is designated as the Appeal Commissioner. As such, my Office can review decisions taken by public bodies in relation to requests made under the Regulations to re-use public sector information, including decisions on fees and conditions imposed on re-use of such information.

### **Role of the Commissioner for Environmental Information**

The European Communities (Access to Information on the Environment) Regulations 2007 to 2014 provide an additional means of access for people to environmental information. The right of access under the AIE Regulations applies to environmental information held by or for a public authority. The primary role of the Commissioner for Environmental Information is to review decisions taken by public authorities on requests for environmental information.

Both access regimes are legally independent of each other, as are the roles of Information Commissioner and Commissioner for Environmental Information.

## **Role of the Standards in Public Office Commission**

The focus of the SIPOC secretariat is to support the Commission in its oversight of ethics, electoral, and lobbying legislation, the spirit of which is to ensure accountability and high standards in Irish public life.

The Commission has a supervisory role under four pieces of legislation, as follows:

- The Ethics in Public Office Act 1995 and the Standards in Public Office Act 2001 (together known as the Ethics Acts), which set out standards of conduct for public officials, elected and appointed;
- The Electoral Act 1997, which regulates political financing, including political donations and election expenses;
- The Oireachtas (Ministerial and Parliamentary Activities) (Amendment) Act 2014, which regulates expenditure of public funds to political parties and independents; and
- The Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015, which makes transparent lobbying of public officials.

Under the legislation, the Commission:

- provides guidance and advice to stakeholders;
- oversees compliance, including receiving statutory returns from individuals and organisations subject to the Acts;
- processes complaints and examines possible wrongdoing under the Acts; and
  - undertakes outreach activities to ensure that those with obligations under the Acts (including members of the Oireachtas, election candidates and lobbyists) understand and are able to comply with the Act's requirements.

## **Role of the Commission for Public Service Appointments**

The Commission for Public Service Appointments is responsible for regulating recruitment and appointment processes in the public sector. Appointments to professional and senior management positions in local authorities and VECs are also within the remit of the Commission. The Commission was established by the Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointments) Act 2004 and is bound by law to ensure that recruitment and selection is carried out by fair, open and merit-based means.

The key responsibilities of the Commission are:

- Setting standards for recruitment and selection and publishing these standards as Codes of Practice
- Safeguarding these standards by monitoring and auditing appointment processes
- Publishing procedures for persons to make a complaint about an appointment process
- Examining complaints alleging breaches of the Code of Practice
- Granting licences to public bodies to carry out recruitment
- Maintaining order in the public service recruitment market

## **Role of the Referendum Commission**

The Office also provides a secretariat to the Referendum Commission, when established. The Commission communicates factual information about referendums in a neutral and impartial manner. Its role is to:

- prepare one or more statements explaining the referendum proposal, the text in the relevant Bill and any other related information the Commission considers appropriate
- publish and distribute those statements via television, radio and other media the Commission considers most likely to bring them to public attention. This includes ensuring as far as practicable that those with a sight or hearing disability can read or hear the statements concerned
- promote public awareness of the referendum and encourage those eligible to register and to vote

### 3. Vision

Our vision is to promote fairness, transparency, accountability, and excellent public services

### 4. Values

We identified organisational values for the first time in the previous strategic planning cycle and we remain committed to these values for the next three years. Our values are:

**Independence** - We will examine complaints, conduct reviews, and make decisions in a fair, objective, and impartial manner.

**Customer Focus** - We aim for excellence and professionalism in the delivery of our services. We will meet defined quality standards and continuously review our performance to ensure that the customer remains at the heart of everything we do.

**Fairness** – We will treat all people with respect, dignity and fairness. This is fundamental to our relationships with all of our stakeholders. It also contributes to a healthy work environment that promotes engagement, openness and transparency.

**Empathy** – We understand that our customers often come to us having exhausted all other avenues open to them. We will listen carefully to our customers with a view to understanding and being sensitive to their concerns.

**Innovation** – We will deliver continuous performance improvements and avail of best practice methods for delivering a first class service and in doing so enhance confidence in public service delivery.

## 5. Strategic Objectives

We held consultation sessions with staff in order to inform and shape the direction of both the strategic plan and the high level objectives. The following objectives for the Office were identified as primary enablers in the achievement of our vision.

1. Drive and influence improvements in the public service
2. Enable and support the public service in achieving and maintaining best practice standards
3. Reinforce organisational capacity to provide an effective and efficient service to all of our stakeholders
4. Enhance public awareness of our roles and how to access our services in order to optimise our impact on the public service

We have identified the following key actions, through which we will achieve the above objectives.

### **Drive and influence improvements in the public service**

- Actively engage with our key stakeholders to improve the standards of public services.
- Embed a culture of good governance at every level in the organisation.
- Promote a culture where learning and improvement from service users is embedded in practice, governance and organisational systems.
- Lead by example in the delivery of our various services.
- Benchmark our regulatory legislation, standards and processes against best practice internationally.

## **Enable and support the public service in achieving and maintaining best practice standards**

- Enable and support the public sector through a combination of sharing learning from our work, monitoring, providing guidance, and appropriate collaboration.
- Identify appropriate opportunities and channels for enhancing the awareness and understanding of the roles of the various Offices.
- Ensure that our communications with our stakeholders reflect our core values.
- Collaborate with our stakeholders to improve how public service providers interact with service users and deal with issues effectively.

## **Reinforce organisational capacity to provide an effective and efficient service to all of our stakeholders**

- Utilise workforce planning and skill matching to optimise resources and ensure that development opportunities align with our strategic goals.
- Continue to develop our staff by providing ongoing learning and development opportunities that align with our business activities.
- Simplify options available to our customers for interacting with our Office, including improved online access.
- Foster flexibility across the Offices to ensure optimum efficiency.
- Utilise management information to verify that our structures and processes are returning expected efficiencies and enhancing capacity.
- Develop and implement reporting and knowledge management functionality that provide up to date and accurate information to facilitate decision making.
- Continue to support our staff in carrying out their work in a challenging and ever changing environment.

## **Increase awareness of our roles and how to access our services in order to optimise our impact on public services**

- Continue to engage with customers, NGOs and the public service through increased outreach programme.
- Offer our perspective to public service providers through shared learning with a view to raising standards of service.
- Extend knowledge of, and access to, our services through further development of our websites and the use of social media.
- Ensure that public services are signposting appropriately to our Offices.

## **6. Projects and goals for 2019-2021**

During the previous strategic planning cycle we harnessed digital technology to improve the efficiency of our daily activities whilst also making our services more accessible to our customers. We invested significant resources in order to modernise our approach. The development of this strategic plan was heavily influenced by existing commitments and the required resources associated with those tasks. Each of those tasks will be used as an opportunity to achieve our agreed strategic objectives.

We expect to achieve further efficiencies from the continued ICT enhancements as the roll out of new management information systems is completed. The improved knowledge management functionality will support reporting and decision making and redesigned websites will improve online access thereby reinforcing organisational capacity. More details about the various projects to which we are already committed are set out over the next pages.

## **Office Relocation**

As the remit of the Office continues to increase so too do the required resources and for this reason, coupled with the timing of our lease renewal, we identified the need to relocate with the support of the Office of Public Works (OPW). We acknowledge the work of both the Management Team and, in particular, the Shared Services area in identifying a suitable central location that ensures that we remain accessible to all of our stakeholders.

We are due to move office in the fourth quarter of 2019 and have established a project team, who are charged with planning for the required procurement and the appropriate fit out in conjunction with the OPW. In planning for the new building the project team is committed to identifying opportunities to reduce environmental impact. This will be reflected in our Resource Efficiency Action Plan, which we are producing as part of the 'Green Government' programme in conjunction with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

## **ICT developments**

Over the course of the previous strategic plan, we introduced a new document management (DMS) and case management system (CMS) in order to:

- provide enhanced management information with detailed reporting including trend analysis thereby supporting operate more efficiently
- manage documentation, processes, workflow and reporting requirements for varying types of cases in order to deliver better throughput
- automate routine tasks therefore minimising staff data entry time.

The roll out of the new systems across the organisation is in the final stages and the ICT unit is currently reviewing a supporting knowledge management tool.

Revised websites are also under construction that will provide online application facilities to improve and simplify processes for our stakeholders. Work is also underway on the development and delivery of enhanced management information systems to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our processes. We will formally evaluate the work to date to inform the continuing implementation and ensure that the planned benefits are being delivered.

## **Outreach**

This Strategic Plan will see the continued implementation of outreach and engagement initiatives across the Offices in order to further raise awareness of our various services. We will identify and utilise diverse methods of communication and engagement to increase awareness of our service delivery amongst our stakeholders in order to achieve both our vision and strategic objectives.

## **12<sup>th</sup> International Ombudsman Institute World Conference**

The Ombudsman, as elected President of the IOI, will be hosting the 12<sup>th</sup> IOI World Conference in Dublin in 2020. The IOI is the only global organisation for the cooperation of more than 190 independent Ombudsman institutions from more than 90 countries worldwide. It is an incredibly diverse and inclusive organisation with strong regional networks.

The developing role of the Ombudsman has itself led to greater diversity. Ombudsman offices now deal with a wide range of mandates. Some are national human rights institutions, some have a role in anti-corruption, some deal with freedom of information while some scrutinise and propose legislation. The World Conference is viewed as an important occasion at which ombudsmen meet and share their experience and expertise, to learn from each other and to inform and strengthen their daily work in protecting and promoting human rights, fighting maladministration, improving public services, and upholding good governance and the rule of law.

The event, which we will be hosting in May 2020, will be attended by over 250 delegates, who will hear and discuss topics of specific interest for the Ombudsman community. The theme “A Voice for the Voiceless” will focus on working with people from disadvantaged groups.

### **Extension of Remit over Prisons**

The Ombudsman continues to press for the extension of remit to all public services in the coming years. Subject to approval by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, we expect that the remit of the Ombudsman will be extended to include complaints about the prison service. In view of this, we have continued our engagement with the Irish Prison Service (IPS) and the Department of Justice and Equality in relation to the reform of the complaint handling system within the IPS. For its part, the IPS has taken a number of measures towards putting in place a revised internal complaints system. This includes the revision of policy and procedures manuals, an updated IT system and the drafting of proposed revisions to the statutory Prison Rules.

### **Referendums**

The Office is responsible for staffing the Referendum Commission when established. In 2017, the Government proposed a timeline for seven referendums to take place in 2018 and 2019. The referendum on the regulation of termination of pregnancy was put to the people on 25 May 2018 and passed. The referendum on blasphemy was also passed on 26 October 2018 and the Commission’s work in this respect was recently finalised. The Government has announced that a referendum will be held in May 2019, concerning the regulation of divorce.

While the Commission is funded by the sponsoring Department(s), it requires a significant resource allocation from the Office, which supports the Commission in all aspects of its activities. Additionally, the Accounting Officer is responsible for the efficiency and economy of providing the service with due regard to government accounting rules and procurement procedures.

## **Electoral Commission**

It is possible that during the term of this strategic plan that an Electoral Commission may be established with a view to reforming the legislative provisions concerning the funding of elections and referendum campaigns. In 2016, an Oireachtas Committee recommended that the new Commission would take charge of key functions such as the oversight of elections and referendums, the register of political parties and the register of electors, as well as functions currently held by SIPOC, namely the monitoring of political donations, election expenditure, and the registration of corporate donors and third parties.

It is possible that the shape and role of SIPOC may change significantly as a result. A public consultation on the proposed electoral commission's structures and responsibilities commenced at the end of 2018, and continued into the first quarter of 2019. Both SIPOC and the Referendum Commission made submissions as part of this consultation which can be viewed on the website of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

## **Financial Management Shared Services (FMSS) Project**

Government approved the centralisation of financial administration in 2016, with the vision that all Departments and Offices would be transferred into one central Government finance team and accounting system. Its objective is to allow financial and accounting transactions to be managed centrally in a standardised manner in order to improve the quality of management information for decision making and service delivery.

The process was scheduled to take place over a three to four year period and this Office was identified as part of the first wave of client offices set to transfer. We are actively engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the National Shared Services Office for the purpose of this project regarding our specific requirements.

There is currently no indication of when the new accounting system will be ready for user acceptance testing or a launch date but we anticipate this may now be in 2020. At the time of drafting this Statement, the National Shared Services Office was carrying out a system design review with external consultants. Consultation with our Office is ongoing and we are actively engaging with the FMSS team to ensure that our requirements will be met by the new system.

### **General Data Protection Regulation**

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came in to force on 25 May 2018. The Office of the Ombudsman is the Data Controller for the shared services area in addition to its statutory function. Each of the other statutory functions are data controllers in their own right.

A lot of work was undertaken to prepare for the introduction of GDPR. Further work will be undertaken in 2019 to embed the process within the organisation, including the updating and further development of our documented procedures.

## 7. Our commitment to Equality and Human Rights

Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights & Equality Commission Act, 2014 places a positive duty on public sector bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality, and protect human rights, in their daily work.

We are committed to complying with our public sector duty. This is reflected in our values, which include empathy, customer focus and fairness. Securing equality of opportunity and respect for human rights is at the heart of our work. People who are discriminated against or whose human rights are under threat are often least able to access those agencies with overseeing public services. Our role is to help to redress the imbalance of power which they experience.

We seek to protect the human rights of all our service-users when investigating their complaints, for example the complaints of asylum-seekers in Direct Provision. We encourage staff to bring a human rights perspective to their consideration of cases and will provide training to our staff on how human rights and equality relate to their work.

We continue to seek a comprehensive jurisdiction to enable us to consider complaints from areas where human rights may be abused, including prisons. We want our Office to be at the forefront of human rights and equalities issues and will strive at all times to take practical and effective steps to move this agenda forward.

We want our Office to be accessible to all our service-users and staff. We will provide clear and accessible written and online communications. We will provide a building and workplace which is physically accessible to everyone. We will provide outreach services which are accessible to all our stakeholders.

We want our workplace to be inclusive and diverse. It will respect the human rights and equality of our staff. We will work with the wider civil service to find ways to achieve a work-force which represents the diverse society we serve.

We continue to prioritise the wellness and mental health of our staff by providing regular training and in-house information sessions, which promote health and well-being.

We have appointed an Equality and Diversity Officer and established a public sector duty committee.

## 8. Next Steps

Each Office will ensure that their business plans align with the Strategic Objectives and related key actions, subject to approval by separate Commissions, where applicable. The business planning process will be supported by individual staff action plans and sectional risk registers, all of which are monitored and reviewed on a regular basis against quantifiable and time-bound performance indicators.

## 9. Reporting on Progress

Reporting on progress on the objectives set out in this Plan will be done at regular intervals both internally and externally through a variety of mechanisms including annual reports, media releases, staff meetings, and minutes of meetings.