

## Report Arising from Focus Groups on Culture

### 1. Context

The Department of Justice and Equality has embarked on a significant Change Programme which is running in parallel with and is aligned to the Civil Service Renewal Plan.

Key to any significant change programme is a process of consultation with staff of the Department both internally within the broader Justice group and with external stakeholders. The Management Board (MB) recognises that it will require all of us, as a collective and as individuals, to change the culture of the Organisation and that real change will only become embedded through harnessing the commitment and energy, the ideas and suggestions, of the staff of the Department and those who engage with the Organisation.

The Department conducted an Employee Survey on *Work, Management and Change* in April 2015, the primary objective of which was to gain an understanding of employee's perspectives on a number of different aspects of work, management and of the Organisation.

Following on from the survey and building on the picture that emerged from that Report, a number of focus groups were held with staff aimed specifically at eliciting the views of staff on the current culture of the Organisation and asking them to articulate their desired future culture. Details of the methodology are at Appendix A.

This Report reflects the outputs from the focus groups but will reference findings from the climate survey where appropriate. The Report is part of a broader examination and discussion of the desired culture of the organisation which will include the Management Board and other stakeholders.

### 2. Overall Conclusion and Key Findings

**2.1** Staff have suggested that there is a strong case for cultural change and those who inputted to the focus groups are clear that they wish to see this change happen.

**2.2** Staff are open to change but want a clearly articulated purpose and direction built upon a common set of values and behaviours, actively led and supported by the Management Board.

**2.3** Staff reflected an understanding of the necessity to change in order to become a more dynamic and effective organisation in a constantly changing environment. As identified in the Climate Survey, there is a sense amongst staff that they are competent and capable and that there are significant levels of knowledge and experience in the Department, often in areas that are both challenging and complex, but there is a belief that skilled staff are under utilised in some areas.

**2.4** Staff indicated that they are willing to continue to develop themselves in the future, as they have done already, but require the support of the Department through their managers and Human Resources.

**2.5** The diversity of functions across the Department was acknowledged as a barrier to having a unified Organisation with one mission and set of objectives. There was a sense of frustration at the apparently haphazard way that various bodies have been added to the organisation over time. The 'political' aspect of many of the decisions to absorb bodies which do not seem to necessarily 'fit' the Department was understood but didn't diminish the frustration revolving around the challenges of then delivering services in a coherent and focused manner.

**2.6** The question as to whether the issue of culture could be addressed without first addressing the structure of the organisation arose at one focus group. Staff however, in many of the other focus groups were not as concerned with the structure but did express the view that they wanted the Department to be stronger and more inclusive of all parts of the Organisation, regardless of what business the different areas are engaged in. Staff suggested that there needed to be stronger leadership by the MB on this issue.

**2.7** Many staff identified the importance, across all areas of the organisation, of the work that they do in the context of ensuring that people who deal with the Department get their entitlements, be they under legislation, conventions etc. and that the services are delivered to a high standard regardless of what area of the Department you are working in. There was a sense that, for a number of staff, their work is about public service and they see public service as meaningful and important. This was expressed by staff from across different areas of the Department.

**2.8** Staff were also comfortable, regardless of the area of the Department that they work in, that they could support a shared set of values and behaviours that are relevant across the Department and build a shared culture around those values and behaviours. The challenge around doing this was acknowledged but considered 'worth the effort'.

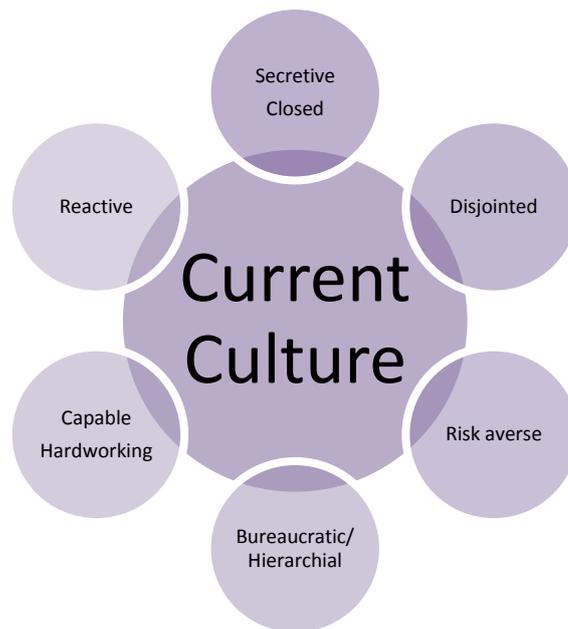
### **3. Key Themes Emerging**

The methodology for the work is set out in detail at Appendix I. In summary, the aim was to elicit from groups of staff (1) their opinions/views on the current culture of the Organisation, (2) their views on what the desired future culture of the Organisation might look like and (3) identify what actions could be taken by the Department which would facilitate a move to the desired culture.

Specific themes emerged under these three headings which are outlined in detail in the following sections of this Report.

### **4. Current culture**

The key themes that emerged from the focus groups in relation to the current culture are illustrated below:-



#### 4.1 Secretive/Closed

This was the most common theme across all focus groups. Staff identified particular aspects of 'secretive' and 'closed'. These included legacy issues associated with the Department's role in protecting the State and its citizens. Staff felt that given the changes in the external environment it was now a case of "the tail wagging the dog". The requirement for security in a small number of areas of the Department is driving the approach across the broader Department where there isn't the same necessity for high levels of secrecy/confidentiality.

There was a very strong sense in some groups that not giving information to the public arose from a lack of confidence about what is appropriate to release. Senior managers were seen as risk averse and unwilling to take even small risks in terms of giving information to the public. Staff, particularly frontline staff, found this disabling and is inhibiting their ability to provide effective services to the public.

A number of groups identified the role of 'power' in relation to information and suggested that holding information both at an organisational and individual level is part of a power play.

Staff identified the inability in the Organisation to communicate effectively as a key factor in perpetuating a sense of a closed Organisation. Staff want the Organisation to communicate effectively to the public and to respond appropriately to the consistently inaccurate media reports around Justice issues. They also want to communicate the very positive aspects of the work they do to the public through an appropriate channel/spokesperson for the Department. Staff see this as different to the requirement for communication from the political system.

Equally, the inability to communicate effectively within the Organisation is seen as impacting very negatively and lends itself to 'conspiracy theories' about what is happening and who is privy to important information or knowledge. Human Resources Division was very strongly criticised in this regard particularly in relation to promotion competitions, mobility, transfers and planning etc.

Senior managers also came in for very strong criticism in terms of their lack of ability or interest in communicating with staff.

#### **4.2 Reactive**

The Department is seen by staff as reactive and the issues that arise as a result of being reactive, staff believe, impact detrimentally on the effectiveness of the Organisation, lead potentially to more mistakes and issues arising with potentially negative consequences for the public. Many staff identified the inability to prioritise as an issue. Despite a reduction in resources since 2008 all work is still given the same level of priority and this, in the opinion of staff, is not feasible or practical.

#### **4.3 Disjointed**

All of the focus groups recognised the challenges associated with the significant number of organisations that sit under the Justice umbrella, not all of whom necessarily have a link with justice/crime.

Agencies/offices feel a disconnect from what was described as the 'core' Department but this disconnect was also felt by Divisions of the Department such as Equality who described themselves in unequivocal terms as 'unwanted' and believed that this attitude emanates from the highest levels of the Department.

This "broken jigsaw" as it was described, needs in the opinion of staff, significantly stronger leadership from the Management Board to engender a sense of one Organisation with clear objectives regardless of the business of the different areas of the Department.

It was also felt very strongly by staff in a number of focus groups, that because some staff are working within what was described as the 'core Department' those closest to that core are perceived by senior managers as 'better performers' which was viewed as totally inaccurate and deeply unfair to the more than capable staff in other parts of the Organisation.

Staff in regional locations believe that they are distinctly disadvantaged by being in a Regional location and that there is a bias against staff in those locations in relation to opportunities for promotion, mobility etc.

#### **4.4 Bureaucratic/Hierarchical**

All focus groups acknowledged that the hierarchical structure is a Civil Service issue not just a Department issue but they felt that it impedes the ability of the Organisation to be more flexible and dynamic. Staff want more project/team working where they can contribute based on their skill sets but the grade structure works against staff who are willing to put themselves forward for different or more stretching roles. There was a sense that there should be less emphasis on grade and more on the knowledge and skills that individuals have for particular roles. Focus should be on functions not grade.

#### 4.5 Risk Averse

All focus groups described the Organisation as risk averse and stated that managers were not making decisions because they are afraid to do so. This permeates down to staff who then do not have confidence to make decisions even where there is no risk to the Organisation.

#### 4.6 Capable and Hard Working

Staff expressed the view that they had contributed a lot to the Department despite the difficulties associated with the period of austerity since 2008. Staff believe that in the main, they and their colleagues are hard working and capable. They did express concern that there are some individuals who are not performing and this issue needs to be dealt with more effectively by line managers and Human Resources as it has negative impacts for colleagues who are carrying the additional workload.

### 5. Characteristics of the Current Culture Articulated by Staff

Staff identified a number of characteristics of the current culture of the Department:-

Closed	Disjointed	Capable	Powerful
Secretive	Can do attitude	Conservative	Not integrated
Bureaucratic	Risk Averse	Supportive colleagues	Reactive
Hard working	Exclusive	Poor communication	Poor systems

### 6. Desired Culture

The key themes that emerged in terms of the desired culture are illustrated and summarised below:-



## **6.1 Open and Transparent**

This came across strongly in every group and encompassed two distinct areas, outward facing to the public and internal across areas of the Department and between grades.

Staff acknowledged that there are areas of the Department where there are valid and legitimate reasons why it would not be appropriate to share or release information to the public but they were very much of the view that in the majority of areas, the Organisation should be more open, transparent and forthcoming with information. It was suggested that the Department should actively provide information, particularly of a statistical nature via websites which in their view would help our customers, for example in INIS, and reduce the number of PQs, FoI requests and general queries.

Internally, staff felt that information should flow between areas, within Divisions and through the grades more effectively which would support staff in carrying out their roles. Once again, staff acknowledged that this should be appropriate information, meaningful to the objectives of the staff and the area of work.

## **6.2 Customer Focused**

The Department is a provider of services to citizens/customers across a number of areas and is now delivering more front line services than it would have in the past. Staff want to deliver excellent services to their customers and want the support of the Department to implement systems and procedures which facilitate that objective.

## **6.3 Proactive**

There was a strong sense that the Department should be more proactive in the development of policies and the delivery of services and that being more proactive would reduce the risk of errors and mistakes which impact negatively on the citizen, the Organisation and the staff. Where staff are proactive and submit work proposals either of a policy or operational nature they want a clearly identified route to the decision maker and a clearly articulated response in relation to the final decision and why the proposal will or will not be brought forward.

## **6.4 Professional**

Staff expressed the view that they wished to be part of a professional organisation but struggled a little to describe what 'professional' would look like. Staff did identify the professional organisation as having good integrated systems including ICT and makes better use of the most current technology, is strong on process and procedures, has accommodation which is fit for purpose and utilises fully its knowledgeable staff in roles which benefit the Organisation.

## **6.5 Trusted and Accountable**

A number of groups expressed the view that the Organisation needed to develop a culture of trust and confidence, one in which people felt comfortable taking decisions and could take measured and appropriate risks. This sense of trust and confidence was linked to individuals being accountable for

their decisions and supported by colleagues and senior managers if an issue were to arise subsequently. When questioned further around individual accountability staff in the main, did not view it as something to fear.

### 6.6 Engaged and Valued Staff

Staff want to be valued and supported by the Organisation through appropriate initiatives in the areas of development, learning, mobility and through effective communication. Staff also want to be included in the decisions which impact on their work areas and to be consulted on how to improve the Organisation and make it more effective. A formal scheme, such as a staff input scheme, was suggested.

### 7. Top 12 Values Articulated by Staff in Relation to the Desired Culture

Staff identified a number of values that they would like to see as part of the future culture of the Department.

<b>Respect</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Inclusive</b>	<b>Equal</b>
<b>Professional</b>	Open	Positive	Trust
<b>Excellence</b>	Supportive	Honest	Accountable

The values identified by staff align with the focussed actions identified in the Civil Service Renewal Plan:- Professional; Responsive; Open and Accountable.

### 8. Actions

All focus groups were asked to identify Actions that would support a move to the desired culture.

The top actions identified are set out in the table below:-

<p><b>Department to Develop a Vision for the Organisation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Horizon planning – 20 years</b></li> <li>• <b>Develop a corporate identity which is the Department’s identity and not a political identity</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Department to develop a culture strategy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>MB to support demonstrably the values and behaviours which will underpin the desired culture</b></li> <li>• <b>Change agents assigned within the Department and in the Offices/Agencies to support and drive culture change</b></li> <li>• <b>Accountability at A.Sec/Head of Agency level – quarterly reporting</b></li> <li>• <b>Review by MB</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Clear Communication Strategy with a strong focus on internal as well as external</b></p>

## **communication**

- **Customer friendly websites and smart use of Facebook, Twitter etc.**
- **Publicise what the Department does externally and internally**
- **Strong emphasis on regular and effective Divisional/Team meetings**
- **Communicate with Staff in relation to issues arising particularly where these impact on their areas of business directly – targeted and appropriate communication**

**Workforce Planning to be used as a more effective planning tool to identify resourcing issues and assign staff based on appropriate criteria include skills, knowledge, fit etc.**

**A structured and properly implemented Mobility Policy linked to the Workforce Plan and which is not subject to veto by senior managers**

- **To include potential for cross Civil Service mobility**

**A more supportive environment for learning and development**

- **Structure Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for all grades**
- **Learning, not just in terms of formal training, but on the job training with line managers taking responsibility for knowledge transfer, enhancing skills and mentoring**
- **Opportunities to learn through working on projects/teams cross Department and agencies**

**Harness the knowledge of staff at all grades**

- **Give staff confidence to suggest changes and give their ideas consideration**
- **Provide a forum/outlet for ideas and acknowledge good ideas**

**Provide information on a proactive basis to the public and customers via websites etc.**

- **Opening position should be that information is releasable**
- **Audit/analysis of information should be conducted which would support a more open approach to releasing information**

**Tackle underperformance in the Organisation**

- **Acknowledge good performance**
- **Recognition through award schemes**

**Greater accountability at every level in the Organisation – recognition that a more open Department will lead to greater accountability**

- **Promote personal accountability**

**Strong emphasis on the development of more integrated and better systems across the entire Organisation**

- **Promote use of current technologies**
- **More focus on better procedures and processes**
- **Be innovative**

## APPENDIX I

### Focus Group Methodology

An invitation was issued to all staff across the Department seeking "...input, from every level in the Department and the Offices/Agencies under its remit...." to define the future vision of culture in the Organisation, see Appendix II.

The staff who participated did so actively, with openness and honesty, which greatly facilitated this work and the facilitation team would like to acknowledge and thank all of the participants for their engagement.

All focus groups were structured and managed in the same way to ensure consistency of delivery and approach and to give every opportunity for active participation by all of those who attended. The objective was to elicit from groups of staff (1) their opinions/views on the current culture of the Organisation, (2) their views on what the desired future culture of the Organisation might look like and (3) identify what actions could be taken by the Department which would facilitate a move to the desired culture.

Based on the response to the invitation, ten focus groups were held, eight in Dublin and two in regional locations, Longford and Tipperary.

Attendance numbers, by grade, are set out in the table below:-

Grade	Number
Principal Officer	16
Assistant Principal	22
Administrative Officer/Higher Executive Officer	21
Executive Officer/Staff Officer	24
Clerical Officer	23
Probation Officer	10
Forensic Scientist	3
Community Service Supervisor	6
TOTAL	125

Outputs from all of the focus groups were collated and the key themes which emerged are outlined in the body of this Report.

## APPENDIX II



### Shaping the Culture of the Department of Justice & Equality

#### Invitation to Attend Focus Groups to Define the Future Vision of Culture

This Department has embarked on a significant Programme of Change.

A crucial step in that Change Programme and the transformation of this Department is an evaluation of the existing culture of our Department and more importantly a plan for what **the future culture of the Department should be**.

Your input, from every level in the Department and the Offices/Agencies under its remit, is crucial in defining the future culture and to that end **we are asking staff to actively engage on this topic by attending one of the Focus Groups scheduled in June and July**.

Focus Groups will be run in Dublin and in Regional venues to facilitate active participation by staff across business areas and location. Managers will work with staff to facilitate their participation.

We would really value your input to the focus groups. Your views on the future of the Department are critical to the success of the Change Programme.

It would be appreciated if you could send your details (as indicated below) by email to [Corporatelearning@justice.ie](mailto:Corporatelearning@justice.ie). On registering your interest, Human Resources will contact you with details, including dates and venues.

**Name :**

**Division :**

**Grade :**

**Indicate your Preferred Location** (Dublin; Killarney; Tipperary Town; Portlaoise; Longford)

:

We look forward to meeting you.