The Government’s *Public Service Performance Report 2019* – A PBO Analysis

**Introduction**

The Revised Estimates for Public Services for the following year (x+1) are published annually – in December. While some elements of performance budgeting have (very imperfectly) been incorporated in them since 2012, the timing of their publication means that they cannot include data on the achievement of performance targets (‘the outturn’) in that year (x). The publication of the Public Service Performance Report (the ‘PSPR’) provides an opportunity to address the data gap left by that timing issue – click [here](#) for the PSPR 2019 (published 13 July). The PSPR is usually published around May (year x + 1) but was delayed this year by the COVID-19 pandemic and the formation of a new government.

The PBO has been critical of previous editions of the Public Service Performance Report. This constructive criticism was merited in that while the PSPR was reporting on how departments and agencies had performed in delivering public services facilitated by Dáil approval of Voted spending (approx. €63 billion in 2018, for example) it did not actually do so. Accordingly, it was more correctly an activity rather than a performance report- see the PBO’s, *Public Service Performance Report 2018 – An activity report; not a performance report*.

While the PSPR 2019 is a lengthy document – running to 121 pages – its format has been completely revised from previous editions. This is an appropriate response by Government to the continual and significant increase in Voted spending and its obligation to present accessible data to the Oireachtas and the public as to what public services are being delivered. As the PSPR 2019 states, “The introduction of Performance Reporting laid the foundation for a more systematic engagement by members of the Oireachtas...on the impact of public policies and on resource allocation decisions.” The PSPR 2019 builds upon that foundation and will be a valuable resource for Dáil sectoral committees when they scrutinise spending on and delivery of public services. It will also be of relevance to the work of the Budgetary Oversight Committee.

The PSPR 2019 is laid out in three parts:

- Part 1: Introduction and Overview of Public Services
- Part 2: Spending and Performance data
- Part 3: Equality Budgeting

The main part of the PSPR which will be of use in parliamentary scrutiny is Part 2. This sets out the Votes/Vote Groups’ spending and performance (Target v. Delivery) in 2019. This data is presented in an accessible, succinct and visually attractive manner. This Note does not address Equality Budgeting – this has not changed substantially since it was reviewed by the PBO in *Briefing Paper 4 of 2018.*
Key Messages

- It often falls to the PBO to attempt to provide an accessible summary, in addition to analysis, of Government documents. That is not the case in respect of the Public Service Performance Report 2019. It is an important and accessible report which is of value to the Oireachtas. It is welcome that the PSPR has been revised and that the performance information for public services delivered in 2019, pre-pandemic, is now available. This will be a valuable resource to the Oireachtas in comparing the public services provided pre- and post-pandemic. Consideration should be given to providing an online, interactive version of the PSPR.

- The PBO was given an opportunity to give feedback directly to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the format of the PSPR and welcomes that constructive engagement.

- The PBO notes the refinement in the impact targets for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection between the overall “% of population at risk of poverty” and the relevant percentages of specific categories of the Department’s clients. Such improvements should be carried forward to the Revised (and Further Revised) Estimates for Votes in autumn 2020.

- The PBO assumes that when the new strategic plans of the Departments are laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, that the linkages between those plans and the performance indicators provided in the Revised Estimates will be clearer than in the past. The PBO also notes that not all the indicators in the Revised Estimates have been included in the PSPR 2019. This is understandable in the context of making the document accessible but highlights the ongoing process of deciding which indicators are of most value and should be reported on.

- Further improvements to the PSPR would have to be based on changes or improvements to the Estimates for Public Services. A lack of clarity remains between the financial allocations and outputs - the financial information presented in the Vote dashboards is at Programme level and cannot be linked to the individual output metrics illustrated. This means that the PSPR cannot be effectively used to scrutinise Vote expenditure if employing the Programme Logic Model as discussed in PBO Note 25 of 2018. Ultimately, effective discussion of the impact of voted expenditure on public services cannot take place without establishing transparency around inputs (funding, staff etc.) and the outputs (the public goods and services) produced.

- Overall, the PBO welcomes where improvements have been made to the quality of the performance information and the very significant improvement made to the accessibility and utility of the Public Service Performance Report. There remains scope for improvement in the Part 2 dashboards – crucially, by illustrating performance multi-annually.

- The PBO hopes that the Government will now re-focus its efforts on improving or fundamentally re-structuring the Estimates for Public Services in the interests of facilitating effective Dáil scrutiny. The role of the Dáil in that scrutiny is shown in this infographic. The PBO’s review of the Estimates scrutiny process is available here.

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1 A ‘strategy statement’ for a Government Department must be submitted to a new Minister within six months of their taking office. Within 60 days of its approval by the Minister, the statement must be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas as per s.5 of the Public Service Management Act, 1997.