

Government Strategic Communications Unit

Baseline research Phase I: Audit
of government communications
& international best practice

February 2018

Introduction

Communications is an essential part of the effectiveness of any modern organisation. This is particularly true of Government departments and public service bodies in all countries, given the impact of their activities on the lives of citizens.

The public has a right to know what their Government is doing on their behalf, and why. That is why communications must be treated as a strategic, whole-of-Government activity which should be conducted to the same level of professionalism as any other activity, such as human resource management or financial management.

The Cabinet recently agreed to establish a central strategic communications unit in the Department of the Taoiseach. Based on international best practice, and with the citizen at the centre of its work, the focus of this unit is to simplify government communications and to increase efficiencies across the public sector when dealing with the Irish public.

The new Strategic Communications Unit aims to achieve that by:

- A. *Streamlining communications for citizens*
- B. *Develop and deliver major cross-Government communication campaigns*
- C. *Improve communications capacity across government*

All three of these main workstreams of the Unit have a whole-of-Government approach.

A. Streamlining communications

The work of the Government is vast - over 200 different government bodies constantly producing and updating policies and services, while initiating and running a variety of separate information campaigns annually.

Despite extensive investment in communications, it can sometimes be difficult for the public to access the appropriate, up-to-date government information they require.

There is a need for greater co-ordination and simplification of government communications, to make it easier for people to understand what is happening, what Government is doing, and the full range of State services - both current and new - that are available.

B. National Campaigns

There have been some notable times recently when the Government has successfully undertaken large-scale communications campaigns such as the Centenary Programme in 2016; and Ireland's holding of the EU Presidency in 2013.

There are a number of upcoming national initiatives where it will be essential for the public to be fully aware of the plans and how they will impact on their lives. In partnership with the relevant Departments, the Strategic Communications Unit will proactively identify, develop, coordinate and deliver cross-Government, citizen-centred communications campaigns such as 10-year Capital Plan, Brexit, and the National Children's Hospital.

C. Capacity Building

To help improve effectiveness, efficiency and cross-Government collaboration, the Strategic Communications Unit will also work to increase the skills capacity of those working in this area across Government. As part of this work, a network of communications officials across Government will be developed to share best practice and develop a continuing professional development (CPD) programme for government communications. This network of communications professionals will comprise the communications personnel within the civil and public service.

The current model of government communications, for the most part, is focused on the traditional 'press office' led model that was established in a particular media environment, at a time when the citizens' ways of accessing and consuming information was limited to traditional media, and face-to-face communications during office hours.

Today, the way in which the public access information about government services, and indeed access those services themselves and expect to access them – has changed considerably. While the system has adapted to the changing communications environment in some ways, it has done so in a localised, reactive manner rather than in a coordinated, systematic way.

A number of Departments such as the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government have established a corporate communications function to coordinate the strategic communications of the Department, while the traditional press office continues to manage the day-to-day media management. However, this has not been done in a systematic, coordinated way across Government.

Internationally, best practice has seen a move to streamlining and simplifying government communications in response to the recognition that Government communications had become fragmented and difficult for citizens to understand. A number of countries have sought to understand how public views government and the information government provide and to develop central strategic systems to deliver that information in a coherent and accessible manner.

International Best Practice

The streamlining and rationalisation of government communications, from the perspective of the citizen, has been a key focus for other Governments, both in Europe and around the world. An initial review of the research done in these countries reveals common factors – that when governments communicate with their citizens in a fragmented, uncoordinated manner it can be confusing for citizens, and more difficult for them to access the information and services they require.

UK Government Communications Services (GCS)

In the UK, a number of reviews of Government communications capability highlighted the need for: Government communicators to be skilled across a range of communication disciplines, including internal communications, digital, campaigns and media management; Greater efficiency, value for money and strengthened central co-ordination; a smaller service, one which is less hierarchical and more innovative.

GCS serves to deliver on these requirements with a focus on coordination of Government communications – ensuring consistency in standards and delivery, and in measurement. The citizen is placed at the centre of communications activity (eg Gov.co.uk) and an assurance procedure is in place to ensure all campaigns adhere to a standard campaign template that emphasises the importance of insight and research to determine the campaign strategy and delivery, and to ensure activities are measured throughout and following a campaign against clear objectives. (https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/6.3172_CO_SB_GCS-Handbook_v8-proofed_web.pdf)

The UK ranks no 1 in the UN for eGovernment and Gov.co.uk is the manifestation of this. In establishing Gov.co.uk, the UK civil service saw 1,182 government websites migrate onto a single website. The information and services presented on the site are those most commonly searched for and requested by users – the citizen determines the most visible content and the site is designed with their needs to the forefront – the site is designed to deliver what the citizen wants to see/access, rather than what government departments want to publish.

Following consultation with the communications teams in the UK civil service (GCS and the Government Digital Service (GDS)) the following key insights were identified:

- Everything is based on hard evidence and data
- Citizen needs are more important than Government needs
- The focus should be on simplicity
- Collaboration is key, as is the technology to support that collaboration
- Part of the civil service structures
- Authority vs Central Control

- A central coordinating communications unit should have a number of simple guidelines to keep standards high and bureaucracy low, and should provide professional assurance for Government communications

Dutch Government – “200 to 1” project

Research by the Dutch Government indicated that there was confusion among the Dutch public in respect of their understanding of what central Government was and how it communicated with them - two commissioned reports demonstrated a gap between Government communications and the citizens' understanding of Government.

The team in the Dutch civil service, basing their own work on the international best practice – in the UK and Canada – engaged upon an extensive streamlining project – with the 200-1 campaign resulting in 200 websites and identities merging to create a single, distinct Government identity and website. Strategic communications was managed centrally from a single ‘shared service’ – as with the case of the UK communications, research underpins the actions taken. Key insights from the Dutch example are:

- The importance of research
- A strong focus on shared services
- All work is citizen/user-led
- All major media buying is done through a centralised ‘shared’ service
- Part of the civil service structures

The Government Strategic Communications Unit, as a central communications service based in the Department of the Taoiseach, is basing its work on the best practice established in these countries and has consulted with the teams in the UK and the Netherlands in order to understand the process, the work undertaken, the potential problems and challenges in delivering this change and the methods to take to ensure optimal results. The examples of communications as practised in Estonia, New Zealand and Denmark are also informing the work of this service as the SCU aims to streamline government communications in Ireland to ensure the citizen can clearly understand when government is communicating with them.

Further research into the international best practice is ongoing, and the team will continue to monitor and study international best practice to ensure Ireland's government communications systems are following best international standards.

Government communications in Ireland

The first step in establishing a system then, while taking advantage of the considerable international research already undertaken, is to establish a baseline of the current system.

It was decided to undertake an audit of the current situation across Government. This will be completed in three phases; the first is an initial overview of the picture in Ireland, the second to examine and interrogate this data in more detail, and thirdly, running concurrently, a large-scale piece of research to gauge the Irish public's view on how government communicates how it provides services and how the public would prefer to access information and services.

Following on from international best practice it is clear that the citizen should be at the centre of Government communications – the needs of the citizen should drive all communications – from the provision of information/content, to the design of the delivery methods of that content (eg web design), to information campaigns (catering for how a citizen would prefer to receive government information – eg on mobile devices, using social media at particular times of the day). A key element of this work is already underway; as part of the Government's eGovernment strategy 2017-2020, the Office of the Chief Information Officer is now working with the SCU on the development of a Digital Service Gateway – a single digital point where citizens can easily access information about government services that are available to them.

This work is consistent and complementary to the ongoing reform of the public service as detailed in the public service reform plan: <http://www.per.gov.ie/en/public-service-reform/>

In addition, it is vital that there is clear oversight of this work and that it is in line with the Department's Strategy Statement - its core values being:

A deep-rooted public service ethos of independence, integrity, impartiality, equal, fairness and respect and a culture of accountability, efficiency and value for money.

These core principles will inform how the Unit will conduct its business. The mechanism for this oversight will be a sub group of the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB), which will act as a high-level working group that is chaired by the Secretary General to the Government.

Initial Research Findings

INITIAL ANALYSIS

(NOTE: Over 185 state entities have been included in this initial analysis, the report does not cover all state entities – for example, the third level sector and all semi-state bodies have not been included. While potential anomalies were queried and further data supplied throughout the project, as information was not uniformly supplied some analytical licence is required until the final data set is clarified.)

Government communications is a vast business, with over €178million being spent annually and around 707 public servants working in this area. Over 240 different upcoming or ongoing 'paid' campaigns are currently planned or underway across Government, supported by well over 350 external contracts, notably in the areas of PR, advertising, media buying, media monitoring and branding.

In general, Government communications is highly-siloed with the focus on individual brands and services, rather than from the Government as a whole. While there are an extensive number of innovative and creative separate campaigns ongoing through the year, and there are some good examples of cross-governmental collaboration on campaigns, generally there are low levels of collaboration, name and visual discipline consistency amongst Departments and Agencies. Furthermore, the analysis showed limited investment in audience identification and insight.

In short, it is difficult for Irish citizens to identify when their 'Government' is communicating with them, despite the extensive state investment in communications across multiple media.

Spending

- Just over €178m has been declared as 'communications spending', with varying definitions of 'communications'.
- Main costs appear to be in advertising and in public relations expertise.
- Low investment in audience identification work, and any major communications skills training for officials bar some limited media training for spokespeople.

Staffing

- Around 707 people working in-house in the area of communications, vast majority in state agencies, with just under 50% working for the areas of Transport, Tourism and Sport or Communications, Climate Action and Energy, Housing, Planning & Local Government or Health.
- 26% of submissions (49 of 185) have stated they have no one working in communications.
- Agencies have much higher staffing numbers than Departments. Highest is HSE (44 staff) and lowest is Attorney General Office (0), who use the services of the Government Information Service.

External contractors

- There are at least 388 external contracts, handling a broad range of expertise notably PR, advertising, media buying, media monitoring and branding.

- 68% of Departments and agencies have external contractors.
- There is significant outsourcing of the PR function, notably in the smaller State agencies - 24% (94) of external contracts are for public relations.
- OGP contracts for media monitoring and media buying are being used.

Campaigns

Just over 240 'paid campaigns' mentioned, all bar a handful are domestic-focussed.

Initial Conclusion

The initial conclusion from this research is that there is a considerable amount of ongoing work communicating with our citizens, attempting to inform citizens of their entitlements and benefits, delivering those entitlements and a host of other services provided by the State, by the Government of Ireland, in one form or another. However, this communication is focused on individual departments/brands/initiatives etc and is not centrally coordinated. There is little evidence of significant research and insight in the case of developing or measuring the impact of government communications in Ireland.

It is also evident that communications capacity is uneven across government departments and agencies, with significant expertise evident in some cases (in particular in agencies) whereas in other cases, all communications work falls under the remit of the press office.

At this initial stage, and based upon international research, it is reasonable to assume citizens in Ireland find the fragmented approach confusing and find it difficult to ascertain when Government is communicating with them. In the work to streamline communications and coordinate and deliver cross-Government campaigns, a core objective must now be to ensure clear, simple citizen-focused communications. It is clearly evidenced that, when the State is communicating, it must do so from the perspective of the citizen. This will lead to more coordinated, focused, cost-effective communications that will generate efficiencies and increased value for money. The enhancement of communications capacity across the public service will ensure an increased professionalism and clearer, more focused messages. A single government digital portal with citizen-driven information, coupled with a single government logo/brand will serve to simplify how we communicate with the people and make it easier for them to access information that impacts upon their lives.

Next steps

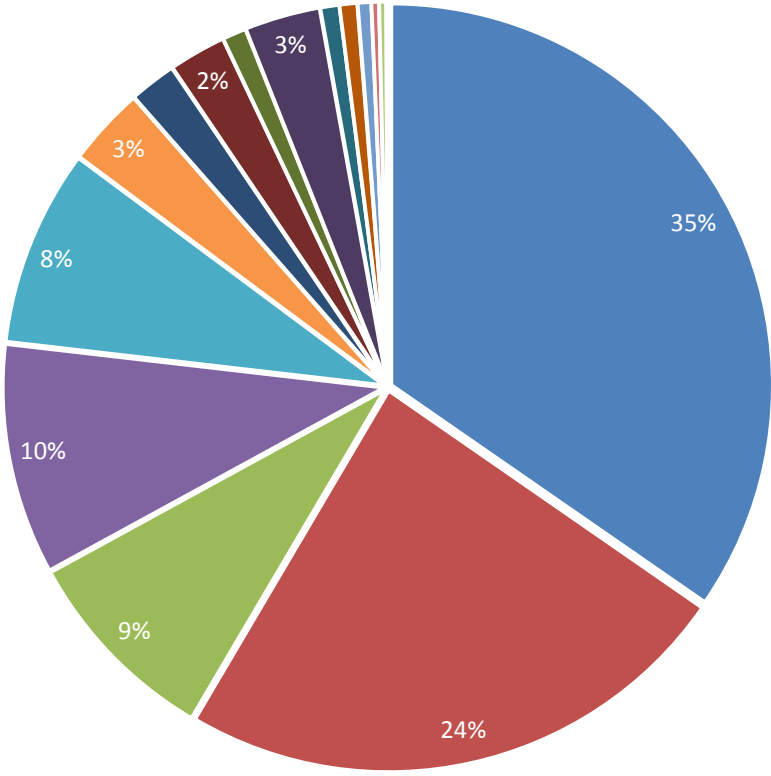
The initial analysis demands two more phases to establish a working baseline data set from which we can improve how Ireland communicates with, and delivers services, policy changes and initiatives to our citizens. A further examination and refinement of the information from Government departments is required and is underway. A coordinated body of research to understand the overall impact of this communications effort and its effectiveness on the public is essential and is being undertaken. These combined elements will form the baseline research from which a structured system of government communications, built around the citizen, can be developed. The research will generate measurable objectives for government communications – be that websites, social media, reports, press releases, policy launches or information campaigns. Communications output will now be measured on a regular ongoing basis, at a national and regional level to determine impact and to amend, adjust and improve as required, while always putting the citizen first and achieving cost efficiencies across government.

SPENDING & STAFFING: DETAILS

Note: These figures are **not** comprehensive. While information was requested on all **Entities Under the Aegis (EUA)** of the parent Department, which are listed by the CSO in their note "2016 Register of Public Sector Bodies in Ireland", not all have been provided at this stage. Costs given fall under the broad categories of PR, Communications Advice, Media Monitoring, Advertising, Media Buying, Events, Merchandising, Design, Printing, Photography, Video Production, Communications research, Training, and Websites. Some bodies provided comprehensive details across all aspects of Communications, while others were not as expansive in their responses. Some work is yet required to gain a complete picture of expenditure by the exchequer on "communications".

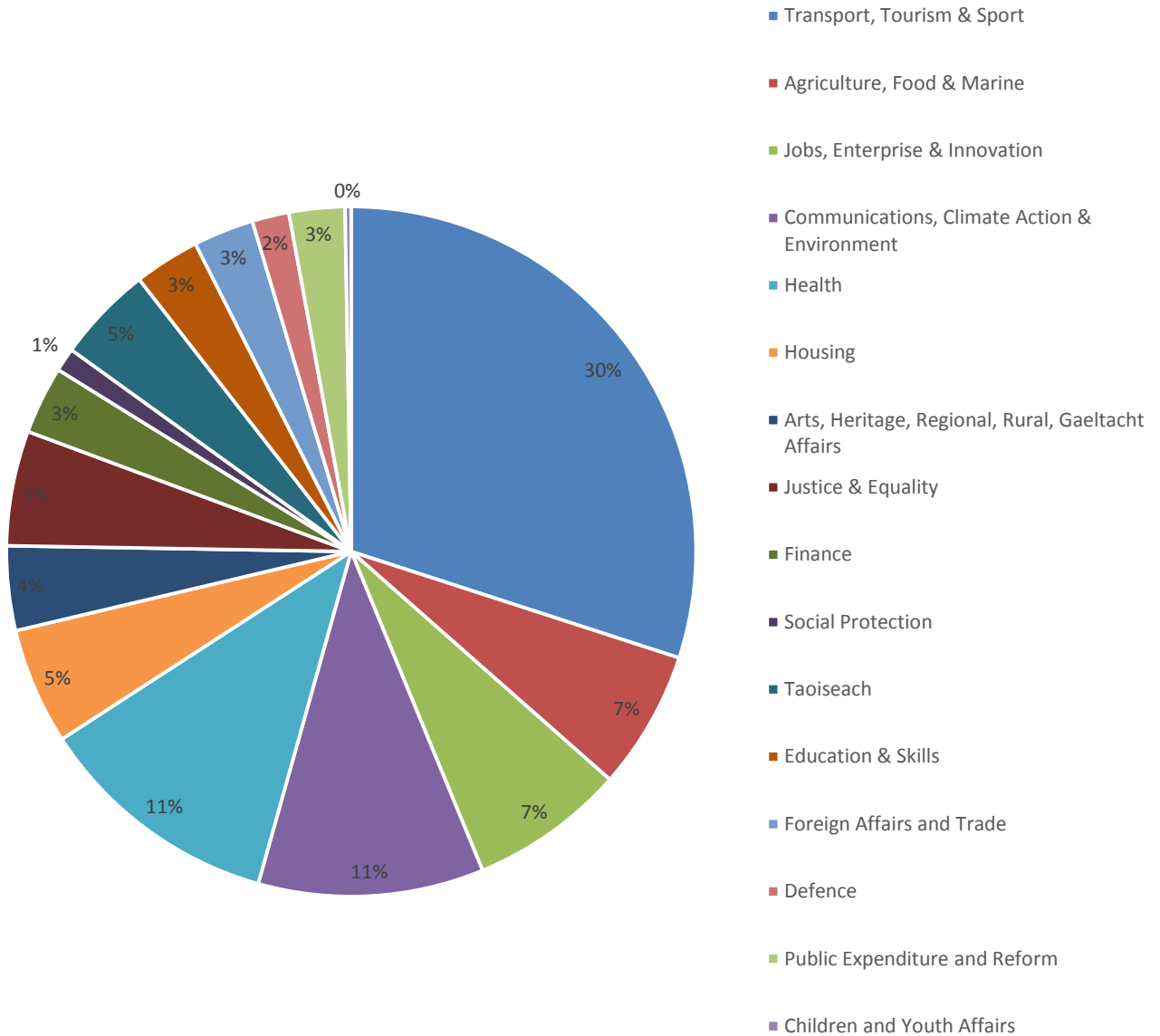
Parent Department/Office	Department spend	Combined EUA Spend	Total spend	Number of Entities	Staffing (Dept and EUA combined)	Number of Campaigns
Transport, Tourism & Sport (TTAS)	€78,294	€61,723,791	€61,802,085	28	212.1	42
Agriculture, Food & the Marine	€330,352	€42,205,793	€42,536,145	13	46	18
Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation (now Business Enterprise and Innovation)	€161,095	€15,124,162	€15,285,258	15	51.5	38
Communications, Climate Action & Environment	€2,361,609	€15,096,641	€17,458,250	13	74.75	32
Health	€284,108	€14,616,499	€14,900,607	20	81.33	36
Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government (now Housing, Planning and Local Government)	€646,873	€5,358,878	€6,005,752	10	38.65	11
Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs (now Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht)	€1,156,727	€2,404,929	€3,561,656	11	28	11
Justice & Equality	€292,471	€4,031,680	€4,324,151	16	38.1	10
Finance	€104,500	€1,702,342	€1,806,842	13	22.5	4
Social Protection (now Employment Affairs and Social Protection)	€1,068,979	€951,877	€5,722,636	5	7.8	16
Cross-Government website infrastructure development costs (one-off and extra to usual budgets)	€3,701,780	-	-	-	-	-
Taoiseach	€191,076	€1,251,877	€1,442,954	6	32	6
Education & Skills	€146,739	€1,080,905	€1,227,644	16	21.75	9
Foreign Affairs & Trade	€1,206,000	-	€1,026,000	1	20	4
Defence	€90,000	€489,000	€579,000	3	12.25	3
Public Expenditure & Reform	€21,300	€513,934	€535,234	7	18.5	4
Children & Youth Affairs	€113,404	(not provided)	€113,404	tbc	2	0
Rural and Community Development (established in 2017)	n/a	n/a	n/a	tbd	tbd	n/a
Total	€11,955,307	€166,552,308	€178,327,619	177	707.23	244

TOTAL COMMUNICATIONS SPEND (INCLUDING ENTITIES UNDER THE AEGIS)



- Transport, Tourism & Sport
- Agriculture, Food & Marine
- Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation
- Communications, Climate Action & Environment
- Health
- Housing
- Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural, Gaeltacht Affairs
- Justice & Equality
- Finance
- Social Protection
- Taoiseach
- Education & Skills
- Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Defence
- Public Expenditure and Reform
- Children and Youth Affairs

TOTAL STAFFING (INCLUDING EUAs)



EXTERNAL CONTRACTORS: DETAILS

Note: as with the table on Spend and Staffing, these figures are not comprehensive.

Area of expertise	Total	% of total contracts
PR	98	24%
Advertising/social media	98	24%
Branding/design/print	61	6%
Website	39	14%
Media monitoring	30	8%
Training	30	7%
Media buying	28	3%
Photography/Video production	24	7%
Events/merchandising	11	6%
Research	6	1%

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EXTERNAL CONTRACTORS, BY AREA OF EXPERTISE (%)

