

Review of the Operation of the Strategic Communications Unit

1. Introduction

In all healthy democracies, the Government must communicate with citizens.

Often, this is completely un-contentious. However, this is not always the case.

The history of Government communications is complex and frequently subject to political controversy, in Ireland and in other democratic countries¹. When the Head of Government is involved, the potential for political conflict is heightened. This presents unique challenges for the Civil Service. The current debate about the Strategic Communications Unit reflects many of these challenges.

Civil servants are involved in press and communications work in all Government Departments, as are public servants in all public bodies.

In Government Departments, it is the duty of officials to serve the Government of the day. These duties are, of course, governed by the Civil Service code and prohibit any involvement in party political activities.

The Department of the Taoiseach is unique in that it houses the Government Press Office and the Government Information Service. This function is often described collectively as the GIS, although that is a somewhat anachronistic term.

¹ The Dáil debate on the introduction of the *merrionstreet.ie* website in October 2010 is a good example of a similar controversy in the past. There have also been controversies about government communications in Belfast, London and elsewhere in recent years.

There was a time when GIS was a small unit reporting to the Government Press Secretary. It served a relatively small number of newspapers who published in print daily or weekly, and a national broadcaster with a limited number of news bulletins.

This has now evolved to a situation where there is a multiplicity of newspapers, broadcasting organisations (radio and TV) and online platforms, both in Ireland and abroad. Publication, especially online, now occurs on an ongoing basis with very tight deadlines.

Effectively, therefore, the Government is required to provide a 24/7 service to media organizations, on all topics of public interest, and with short response times.

It is also required to generate its own online content, including written, audio and video material, as well as live broadcast on occasion.

This has meant that the size and the responsibilities of the central Government press/communications function has expanded dramatically in recent years. At the end of 2016, there were 13 civil servants in press/communications roles in the Department. By March 2018, following the creation of the SCU, this had increased by 8 people to 21.

There have been a number of proposals for modernization over the years. These occurred in the context of the economic crisis - when good communications was a national priority, with very real consequences for citizens – and in the context of public service reform. Recent examples can be found in the proposals by the Global Irish Economic Forum and in the Civil Service Renewal plan. The Department of the Taoiseach is inevitably involved in any such initiatives.

2. Current Government Policy

Following his election, the Taoiseach indicated his wish to see modernization and reform of Government communications.

On September 6th 2017, the Government decided to establish a Strategic Communications Unit as a Public/Civil Service unit in the Department of the Taoiseach. It also approved the guiding principles for the SCU, its key workstreams (streamlining, campaigns and capacity building), and its structure. This was announced in a press release at that time.

The Guiding Principles were:

- All output will be characterized by accuracy, truth and quality
- Priority is to simplify all communications, with the citizen at the centre
- Organizational structure will be built around the work
- Focus will be on incremental delivery of work at speed
- Empowerment of teams across government

The SCU staff were instructed from the outset not to attend meetings of special advisers (who are politically appointed and meet collectively on a weekly basis). As with all other civil servants they do of course engage with special advisers in the course of their work.

They were also instructed on no account to engage with political party officials or activities (or indeed the political activities of non-party Ministers).

On October 10th 2017, the Government decided to allocate a budget of €5m to the SCU programme for 2018. This was announced on Budget Day.

On December 9th 2017, the Government decided to approve a number of specific actions related to the workstreams of the unit, including

- the rollout of a single unified Government of Ireland identity
- the migration of Government Department websites to one portal for government www.gov.ie
- the 2018 priority campaigns
- the creation of a unified international communications programme for Ireland as part of the Doubling the Global Footprint initiative, in partnership with relevant agencies and Departments for launch on St Patrick's Day
- commencement of a Government-wide capacity building professional development programme for officials working in communications.

Among the major communications campaigns to be conducted were:

- National Development Plan
- Healthy Ireland
- National Children's Hospital
- Global Ireland
- Rebuilding Ireland
- Creative Ireland
- Brexit

The SCU also contributed to other communications work across Government, eg the innovation fund, benefits and services for the self-employed, Bliain na Gaeilge, the Rugby World Cup and the Winter Ready campaign, among others.

3. Value for Money

The €5m funding for the SCU was allocated to the Vote of the Department of the Taoiseach. This was in the context of an overall reduction in funding for the Department in 2018.

The objective was set to be cost-neutral over time through the achievement of improvements in all three aspects of Value for Money, ie economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The Government approved the following specific actions to achieve this:

- Cross-Governmental collaboration on major campaigns
- More efficient use of technology platforms
- Consolidated media buying
- Efficient third-party contract management
- Rationalising design projects
- Streamlining participation in national events
- Increased communication capacity within Departments

An implementation structure was put in place involving the Civil Service Management Board and a delivery team of senior officials from all Departments, who were asked to work on ways of measuring, recording and reporting on the savings and benefits of the work of the SCU.

To establish a baseline for the change programme, a review of existing communications was concluded.

The headline findings of the Review in respect of communications activity across Government Departments and State Agencies were:

- Spend of over €178m per annum
- Over 700 people working in-house in communications
- More than 388 external contracts
- 220 paid communications campaigns
- 452 websites in central Government Departments and Agencies

This situation is the result of many decisions in many organisations over many years. These are public resources, so it is important that a whole of government perspective is taken, in order to help maximise both efficiency and effectiveness.

The results of the review show that, by any objective assessment, there is huge room for improvement in value for money and reduction in the cost to the taxpayer by implementing the communications reform programme led by the SCU.

The outcome of that review was released under Freedom of Information following its completion. It will be published on the Department of the Taoiseach website.

In accordance with common practice, the SCU also engaged a company to do some research work involving a public opinion survey, on the strict understanding that it would be published and therefore available to everyone with an interest.

That survey has not yet commenced. Given the concerns expressed by Opposition parties, it would be useful if they received a briefing and gave their views on the content of the survey before it is carried out.

4. Recruitment into the Strategic Communications Unit

The staff of the SCU were recruited in several different ways:

- 2 people (the Director and one other staff member) were transferred from the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, where they had been engaged in communications work, having been originally seconded from Fáilte Ireland
- 9 people were assigned from within existing resources of the Department of the Taoiseach; most of these staff were already working on communications²
- 4 people were appointed on secondment from other Departments following an expression of interest and interview process

The Civil Service has made significant changes in recent years to encourage both mobility and professionalisation in assigning people to roles as part of its reformed HR policy. This allows much greater matching of skills to jobs.

The Department of the Taoiseach has been active in that regard, and that approach was used in the recruitment and assignment of staff to the SCU.

All of the staff were recruited or assigned on the basis of the skills they possessed and they are all suitably qualified for their roles.

The quality of the work produced by the SCU staff is clear evidence of their professional ability and skills.

² In some cases, staff were recruited to fill pre-existing vacancies via an existing PAS panel.

5. Progress to Date

The SCU has made rapid progress across the three main workstreams approved by the Government:

- streamlining communications
- national campaigns
- capacity building

As well as streamlining and improving communications capacity, there has been huge public interest in the campaigns run by the SCU in conjunction with other Departments and agencies.

Metrics are available to demonstrate the level of public interest, while information on progress has been provided through Parliamentary Questions (PQs) and FOI requests. Total spending commitments to date are approximately €2.2m

The SCU, and particularly the Director, has played a very important role in improving cross-Government communications.

For example, the Director was the main contact point with the senior figures across most media outlets in the immediate run-up to Storm Ophelia. While this was an exceptional event, this is one example of why the Civil Service needs to have a capacity to professionally communicate with citizens across all platforms and outlets.

6. Project Ireland 2040

Project Ireland 2040 is the Government's name for two integrated policies, the National Planning Framework to 2040 and the National Development Plan 2018-27.

These are fundamental policies for the future of Ireland. They provide a basis for the future development of the country, as well as building resilience against threats such as Brexit.

The Department of the Taoiseach contributed to the policy formulation underpinning both policies, including the essential concept that a long-term multi-annual capital spending plan be developed alongside the planning framework.

The SCU was tasked by the Government with developing a major national communications plan for Project 2040. This included a national launch, regional events, written material, audio-visual content, advertising, media partnerships and paid advertorials.

The amount allocated to this from within the SCU budget was €1.5m (although not all of that has been spent).

This campaign has given rise to political and public controversy, for a number of reasons, which are on the public record of the Dáil.

Project Ireland 2040 - Process

As with all other communications projects by the SCU, Project Ireland 2040 was bound by the guiding principles approved by Government. It was also bound by the Civil Service Code.

The most serious allegation made about the Project Ireland 2040 campaign was that it breached the Civil Service Code and blurred the lines between Government and party political activity by using taxpayers money to promote the appearance of Fine Gael politicians in advertorials paid for by the Government.

The approach used by the SCU was to book advertorial space in newspapers, to provide relevant factual information about Project Ireland 2040 to newspapers, and to leave editorial control with those newspapers.

In the context of this review, I requested the Assistant Secretary for Corporate Affairs – who had no involvement in the Project Ireland 2040 campaign – to review the process and relevant documentation, including the interactions between the SCU and media organisations.

Her detailed report is attached.

She spoke to all of the staff involved in the SCU, to third-party contractors and to the editors of the relevant newspapers. She also examined all the relevant documentation.

Her report does not find any evidence of a breach of the Civil Service Code by civil servants in the SCU, whether by seeking favourable coverage for Fine Gael candidates or otherwise.

Project Ireland 2040 – Outcome

Although there was no attempt by the SCU to place Fine Gael candidates in advertorials, this did occur in a small minority of newspapers as a result of independent editorial decisions.

Clearly, even if this was not intended, this outcome was unsatisfactory and it has given rise to legitimate concern and criticism.

In light of those concerns, on March 1st the Taoiseach asked that the following directions be made to the Strategic Communications Unit

- (1) Any sponsored or paid-for feature articles should continue to be clearly identifiable. This is best done by including the Government of Ireland (Rialtas na hEireann) logo and they should state clearly that the copy is 'advertorial', 'advertisement', 'sponsored' or a 'commercial feature'
- (2) Where media partnerships or agencies (third parties) are used, final editorial control or 'sign-off' must be by the Department/SCU
- (3) Should anyone be interviewed for an advertorial or infomercial, they should be informed of the purpose and their permission sought

(4) Politicians and public representatives should not feature in any paid-for content by government other than relevant office-holders (Ministers)

(5) That the Secretary General carry out a general review of the unit and report to the Taoiseach with further recommendations for consideration by the Government

Subsequently, Dáil Eireann debated the matter and passed a motion calling for the disbandment of the SCU.

While this motion is not binding on the Government, it is of course an important matter that must be taken into account in considering the future of the unit.

7. Some Broader Reflections

Before outlining my recommendations for the future of the SCU, I would like to add some broader reflections which I believe should have some bearing on the political and public debate about these issues.

Contact Between the Civil Service and the Media

The Civil Service generally has very little interaction with the media, and that is how it should be. There are important constraints on such interactions, for example in the Official Secrets Act and the Civil Service Code.

The vast majority of contact between the media and Government is therefore through elected representatives and their political staff, or through political party officials. The same applies to contact between the media and the Oireachtas.

Engagement with civil servants on non-political matters tends to be rare, and more piecemeal and unstructured.

Recent severe weather events and the 1916 commemorations are a good example of successful engagement which might provide some lessons for the future.

In today's modern world, there needs to be a more structured engagement between media organizations and the civil and public service on non-political matters.

It is also evident from the review of expenditure that there is a very important non-political commercial relationship between public service organisations and the

media, which involves the expenditure of large amounts of public money on communications.

The controversy about the SCU should not be allowed to create a chill factor in that relationship in the future, for example by deterring the public service from using sponsored content. Publication of such content is an essential part of the business model of the Irish media sector. It will become more important in future, as native advertising/sponsored content becomes a central part of media revenue in the digital era.

Separate from issues relating to the SCU, the issue of the financial health of the Irish media should be a matter of national policy debate.

A thriving, independent Irish media – whether in the public or private sector - is essential to a healthy society. In the modern world of global media, online platforms and reduced audiences and readerships, it cannot and should not be taken for granted.

This must not, of course, involve any element of inappropriate influence from the Government.

This whole area involves important and complex policy issues which should be the subject of consideration by the Government, the Oireachtas and in the wider public debate.

The Treatment of Public Servants

The role and operation of the SCU is a legitimate matter for parliamentary scrutiny, media reporting and public debate. That is reflected in numerous Parliamentary Questions and Dáil debates, press queries and FOI requests.

There will no doubt be further scrutiny in the future, including at Oireachtas Committees.

This is reasonable where it involves office holders or senior officials in the context of their constitutional and statutory responsibilities.

Ministers and Accounting Officers are expected to be resilient and capable of dealing with robust public scrutiny. That comes with the territory.

However, it is unfair when it involves other public servants, especially more junior officials, who have no right of reply.

This is particularly so where public commentary – whether under Dáil privilege or otherwise – is partial, misleading or untrue.

In addition, it must be said that some of the public comments made about the SCU have been disproportionate, hurtful and offensive.

The basic principles of fair treatment and natural justice should apply as much to public servants in their workplace as to anyone else. Public servants are entitled to dignity at work, under both the law and the relevant codes and policies.

There are genuine health and wellbeing issues which can affect people, arising from the threat or fact of unfair comment, inaccurate public statements or disproportionate public pressure on individual public servants, including elected representatives.

Those in Irish society who care about the future quality of our Civil and Public Service, about protecting the rights of individuals or about the health and wellbeing of our public servants should give these matters very careful consideration.

Given that public servants cannot defend themselves, the responsibility for addressing this concern must lie with those who have leadership roles, whether in the Oireachtas, the political parties or the media.

It is also a matter that is rightly of concern to the trade union movement, who represent public service workers.

And of course this is an issue that the Civil and Public Service, as an employer, must address more effectively in future.

The Impact on the Quality and Behaviour of the Public Service

Unfortunately, there is sometimes very little room for objective judgment when an issue becomes the subject of heated political debate. This makes it difficult for public servants, who are not allowed to participate in such debate.

There are several recent examples of situations where allegations made against public servants in a political context have not been supported by evidence following a formal inquiry.

It is bad for the quality of our public service, and therefore our citizens, if talented people are deterred from serving in senior positions when they see the potential consequences for their reputations if they take on public service work.

This a well-known and growing problem within the Public Service. It has been borne out, for example, by the research conducted by the Top Level Appointments Committee.

There is also evidence from engagement surveys that civil servants are concerned about the innovation climate and the poor public perception of their work.

In all public administrations, there is a tension between innovation and maintaining the status quo.

The Civil Service has a reputation, in some quarters at least, for being risk-averse and behind the times. I would contend that is undeserved, but that is a debate for another time.

However, it is widely recognised that if there is an excessive blame culture with regard to challenging change or innovation projects, this acts as a disincentive for future innovation.

That is not to say that scrutiny or accountability should be avoided or limited, but merely to observe that if the safest option is for public servants to preserve the

status quo, to avoid change and to keep their heads down, that too has adverse consequences for the future quality of public services.

Innovations in Communications

In the case of communications, the Civil Service has to engage with the modern world in all its dimensions.

This includes the changing nature of media, the multiplicity of outlets, the speed of response, the proliferation of platforms (especially online) and how citizens receive content.

It is no longer sufficient for civil servants engaged in communications to concentrate on the traditional methods of communications, such as a ministerial speech or a press release. They must operate in accordance with best practice and undergo appropriate training and continuous professional development.

Information must be provided to citizens in the manner that they wish to receive it.

If Government Departments do not have the capacity to do that effectively (and impartially), then our society will be the poorer for that.

In addition, the online domain will be left entirely to others. As events in other countries have shown, this will give rise to a very unhealthy situation which could threaten the existence of honest public debate.

In December 2017, Deputy James Lawless brought forward a Bill that sought to regulate online political advertising and address the use of “bots” to cause multiple online presences.

While the Government opposed the Bill for reasons that were set out in the Dáil at the time, it did recognize the very real concerns that it sought to address, for example reports surrounding the manipulation of the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum.

In response to Deputy Lawless’s Bill, the Government established an inter-departmental group to consider the substantive issues arising from recent experiences in other democratic countries with regard to the use of social media by external, anonymous or hidden third parties.

In the event, the Dáil debate on the Bill became focused on the Strategic Communications Unit.

However, more recent revelations clearly show the need for further substantive debate and action on these issues in Ireland.

8. Considerations for the Future of the Strategic Communications Unit

In considering the future of the SCU, I have to consider a number of issues

- what is appropriate for the effective operation of the Department of the Taoiseach, given its central role in Government and our strategic priorities
- what is appropriate for the Civil Service, including having regard to the Civil Service Code
- ensuring that the staff are treated fairly

The Department of the Taoiseach

The Strategy Statement sets out the core functions of the Department, as follows:

- Delivering the Executive functions of the Taoiseach and the Government
- Providing the Government Secretariat
- Supporting the Taoiseach in carrying out his duties as Head of Government, including in relation to the Oireachtas, Constitutional issues, Protocol, the European Council, the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council
- Working with the Office of the President and with the Oireachtas
- Engaging with the formulation and implementation of government policy, mainly through the system of Cabinet Committees, Senior Officials' Groups, the Programme for Government Office and the Parliamentary Liaison Unit
- the Office of the Taoiseach (as well as support for the Tánaiste)
- Support for Independent Ministers in Government
- the Office of the Government Chief Whip (who also has responsibility for the Central Statistics Office)

- Support for the Ministers of State assigned to the Department (with responsibility for Defence; for European Affairs; and for Data Protection)
- the Government Press Office
- the Strategic Communications Unit
- Providing briefing and advice to the Taoiseach on the full range of domestic policy issues and on international affairs (including through the work of the National Economic and Social Council)
- Supporting the Taoiseach and Government in the formulation and implementation of Ireland's EU, Northern Ireland and international policies, including coordination across the whole of Government
- Delivering support services through Corporate Affairs Division (HR, Finance, ICT and other services)

Our Strategic Priorities are:

- support the Taoiseach and Government
- a sustainable economy
- a better and fairer society
- strong relationships in Europe and in the World
- Brexit
- planning for the future

The Department has just over 200 staff and an annual budget of €36m.

By far the biggest expenditure items relate to various inquiries established by the Oireachtas.

As can be seen, the SCU is a relatively small part of the Department's operations and it is not among our strategic priorities.

However, dealing with the intense political and media interest in the work of the SCU has come to dominate much of the time of the staff of the unit and of senior management. By way of illustration, the SCU has been the subject of 203 PQs, 63 FOI requests (of which 24 are completed), as well as a number of other debates, Leaders Questions in the Dáil, and a large number of press queries.

This is now actively damaging our ability to effectively focus on our strategic priorities, such as Brexit, Northern Ireland, the economy and improving public services.

It has also given rise to an inaccurate perception of what the Department's actual role and priorities are within Government.

This is not sustainable for us if we are to successfully discharge our core functions.

The Civil Service

Two principal issues arise for the Civil Service.

On the one hand, the Civil Service must be able to operate as effectively in the area of communications as in any other area of its work. The reforms to improve efficiency and services, to generate savings and to improve capacity and professionalise communications are necessary and must continue.

At the same time, the Civil Service must be seen to preserve its political impartiality at all times.

To do that, it must maintain the trust of elected representatives, in accordance with the Civil Service code. That includes retaining the confidence of any potential future Minister or Government.

In that context, I cannot ignore the strongly expressed views of Opposition leaders who may serve in a future Government, including the recent vote of Dáil Eireann calling for the disbandment of the SCU (even if that vote is not binding on the Government).

9. Recommendations

In light of the above considerations, I recommend:

- that the Strategic Communications Unit should be wound down,
- that the Department should revert to a reformed GIS model, with a smaller budget, less staff and a more limited role than the SCU,
- that measures should be put in place across Government Departments which preserve the valuable and necessary reforms to ensure value for money, professionalization and modernisation in government communications activity,

The recommended next steps are set out in more detail below.

Fair Treatment of the Staff

As outlined above, all of the staff of the SCU took up their positions in good faith and are dedicated public servants.

They have endeavoured to implement Government policy, as set out in several Government Decisions.

They have worked extremely hard and have produced work of a very high quality.

There is no evidence of inappropriate party political activity.

Therefore, each surplus staff member will be given the opportunity to be reassigned to another post, either within the Department of the Taoiseach or elsewhere in the Civil Service. In some cases, their duties will not change as they either predated the establishment of the SCU or their work will continue in a reformed GIS.

These HR issues will be dealt with by the management of the Department, as a confidential HR matter, and in consultation with each individual staff member.

Recommended Next Steps

In light of the above, I recommend the following as next steps:

- the Strategic Communications unit should be wound down
- the traditional Government Information Service should take over some of its functions, while others should be devolved to line Departments as set out below
- there should be a transition period that will end in July 2018
- the budget allocation for 2018 should be reduced by 50% to €2.5m, which reflects existing spending commitments already made
- the overall budget for 2018 for the Department of the Taoiseach should therefore be reduced by €2.5m
- the staffing complement for GIS/Government Press Office should also be reduced to reflect its new role
- surplus staff should be redeployed, either within the Department of the Taoiseach or in other Departments or agencies; these decisions will be made by the management of the Department in consultation with the staff affected

- the civil servants in the Government Information Service/Government Press Office should come under the management of the Assistant Secretary for Corporate Affairs (while respecting the role of the Government Press Secretary and the Deputy and Assistant Government Press Secretaries in day-to-day management of press and communications)
- there should be no new national campaigns run by the SCU
- where expenditure has been committed but not yet spent by the SCU (eg pre-booked local radio slots), it should be redirected to non-contentious campaigns, such as Healthy Ireland or Brexit preparation
- GIS should continue to have a co-ordinating and supporting role for national, cross-Government communications, as has always been the case, but such campaigns should be led and funded by the relevant line Department
- in that context, the communication of Project Ireland 2040 should be the responsibility of the new Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board which will be led by the Departments of Public Expenditure and Reform and Housing, Planning and Local Government
- international communications (eg Global Ireland, Security Council campaign, Diaspora) should be led by the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade
- all other activities should continue within GIS as before, including the digital team/*merrionstreet.ie* , central support services for other Departments, providing services to the media, managing media events and producing communications material across all platforms
- the streamlining communications workstream should continue
- the capacity building workstream should continue
- specific reform projects that should continue include
 - professionalisation/training/continuous professional development
 - the single government identity project
 - the single web portal project GOV.IE

- efficiency measures (better cross-Government collaboration, rationalization projects, consolidated buying etc)
- the research survey should proceed, but only after the Opposition parties have been briefed and given their views on the content of the survey

There should be a managed reversion to the more traditional GIS model, with a transition period until July 2018, to be managed by the Director of the SCU.

Separately, all of the issues raised in this review might usefully be considered by the Oireachtas. The Civil Service would of course be available engage in any such process, if invited to do so.

Martin Fraser

Secretary General

26 March 2018