

**“Delivering the Programme for Government
(Article published in Public Affairs Ireland Journal, Dublin, April/May 2011)**

Getting agreement on the Programme for Government, in a very short timeframe, was quite an achievement. But, the real test will be the extent to which the Coalition Government can successfully deliver the Programme. Tom Ferris¹ looks at the work that Government Departments will have to undertake, including meeting more robust Regulatory Impact Assessments requirements, in rolling-out the Programme for Government.

Introduction: The challenges that the Coalition Government has set itself are quite formidable - “... The challenge facing the new Government is unlike any other [but]... with the right plans, the right people, and with a unified sense of purpose our country can recover”. The full text is available on the website <http://www.taoiseach.ie>. This article looks at the how Government Departments will need to manage the process of delivering the Programme for Government, including having to meet more rigorous requirements in the case of Regulatory Impact Assessments.

Delivery of Programme through Strategy Statements: Government Departments continue to have responsibility for delivering the commitments that are in the Programme for Government. Under the Public Service Management Act 1997, each Government Department has to prepare and publish a Strategy Statement within six months of the appointment of a new Minister. These statements serve as frameworks for action by Departments. A Strategy Statement shall, as defined by the Public Service Management Act, 1997, “comprise the key objectives, outputs and related strategies (including use of resources)” of the Department or Office –see **Box 1**.

**Box 1: Public Services Management Act, 1997
Section 5 – Strategy Statements**

Sub-section (1) A statement referred to in this Act as a “strategy statement” shall—

- (a) comprise the key objectives, outputs and related strategies (including use of resources) of the Department of State or Scheduled Office concerned,
- (b) be prepared in a form and manner in accordance with any directions issued from time to time by the Government, and
- (c) be submitted to and approved by the relevant Minister of the Government with or without amendment.

Sub-section (2) The Minister of the Government shall, not later than 60 days after the strategy statement has been approved, cause a copy thereof to be laid before each House of the Oireachtas.

Source: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie>

The Department of the Taoiseach has a very practical set of Guidelines, for preparing Strategy Statements, on the website <http://www.taoiseach.ie>. They make it clear that all Ministers are required to be involved in the process. Specifically, the Guidelines state that – “...In order to ensure alignment between the Strategic Planning process and the Government’s Programme, it is desirable that Ministers be involved at an early stage in initiating the planning process with Management Advisory Committees (MAC’s) and in setting the high level goals for the Strategy”. This provides an opportunity not only for Ministers to give their input at an early stage, but also facilitates a dialogue in relation to the goals of the Department for the years ahead.

Joined-up Programming: The Guidelines require each Minister to consult with the Taoiseach, prior to the finalisation of the Strategy, and its submission for information to the Government and publication. And that is not the end of the process. Ministers are also required to review progress on the implementation of their Departments’ Strategy Statements in advance of bilateral meetings with the Taoiseach. Such meetings provide an opportunity to ensure that Strategy Statements continue to be fully aligned with the Programme for Government.

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Consultation is a key part of the process. The Guidelines point out that it is important for Departments to engage staff at all levels in the preparation of Strategy Statements. This should help to encourage shared ownership and understanding of goals, objectives and strategies, and of the changes needed in work practices to achieve the key objectives and strategies. In addition, Departments are required to ensure that there is consultation with other organisations involved in dealing with cross-Departmental issues. The details of these issues are required to be explicitly referenced in Strategy Statements. This should help to ensure that cross-departmental issues, across different Strategy Statements, are easily tracked.

The progress of the Government's policies is monitored through annual reports on the Strategy Statements. It should be clear from such reports whether or not objectives and strategies are being achieved. In this regard, performance indicators, as set down in Strategy Statements, should facilitate analysis of performance. The Guidelines state that such performance indicators should be consistent with the indicators used in the Annual Output Statements that are produced separately by Departments. As well as indicating areas of improvement, progress reports should set out reasons for targets not being met as well as listing problems encountered. The reports should also provide an opportunity to highlight changing circumstances and emerging issues and, if necessary, amend Strategy Statements in the light of changing circumstances.

Departments' Competing Demands: Government Departments have to juggle with a number of competing demands. They have to ensure a clear and consistent alignment between the Programme for Government, their Strategy Statements, their resource allocations, Annual Reports and Output Statements, business plans, and individual and team objectives derived through the performance management and development system (PMDS). They are also required, when drawing up strategies, to be mindful of existing commitments in other areas of corporate planning and reporting including, for example, ICT Strategy Statements, and Customer Charters and Action Plans. An additional demand, now coming down the track is the impact that Ireland's Presidency of the EU, during the first half of 2013, will have on the work of individual Departments.

Arising from the Government Programme, there is now a more onerous requirement on Departments to publish Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) *before Government decisions are taken* – see **Box 2**. In fact the Government Programme actually sets down this requirement twice in the Programme. It should be pointed out that there has been a requirement to publish RIAs for a number of years, but without the commitment to have publication before Government decisions are taken. However, the OECD commented, in a recent report, on the fact that the record of publication of RIAs in Ireland was not great. Specifically, it argued that - "*There is concern that there are still low rates of publication*". It makes sense that Departments should now publish RIAs before Government decisions are taken, so as enable the full range of alternatives to be examined. This requirement will no doubt put greater demands on Departmental resources, if the requirement is met in full.

It is important to carry out RIAs at an early stage and, in so far as possible, before actual decisions to regulate are made. Doing RIAs at an early stage provides an opportunity to see if the use of alternatives to regulation, as required by the RIA model, is possible. In this way decision makers can be fully informed about the costs, benefits and impacts of the options available to them. Of course, there will be situations where a commitment to legislate has already been made e.g. in the Programme for Government.

Box 2: Regulatory Impact Assessments

"We will require Departments to publish Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) before Government decisions are taken, thereby offering a further channel to obtain the views of civil society on new rules and regulations."

Source: Programme for Government, 2011.

Challenges for Government: The new Government has signalled a commitment to – “... *modernise, adapt to new financial circumstances and start to deliver better services with scarce resources*”. Nobody is saying that it will be easy. In particular, as Government Departments now have to face a whole range of increasing demands while having much less resources than they previously had. Success will not come easily. The challenge is to make timely decisions, implement them effectively, and act consistently to support the economy in generating growth and jobs. In this regard, the words of Albert Einstein, quoted in the Programme for Government, are very appropriate, namely - “*Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.*”
