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How many civil servants does it take to run a small country like Ireland?

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5–6 minutes

There was a time when the news that the number of civil servants has increased by 50 per cent over the last 10 years would have triggered outrage from the usual suspects: right-leaning politicians, business lobby groups, golf club bores and the rest.

Somewhat surprisingly, then, the revelation that there are now just under 53,000 civil servants – people directly employed by the State rather than via agencies such as the Health Service Executive – pretty much went unnoticed last month. The figure, which was sought by Fianna Fáil TD Malcom Byrne, shows a rebound in numbers across all grades and roles since the Government took its foot off the austerity pedal.

The question as to how many civil servants does it take to run a small country like the Republic is an interesting, if difficult one. But it turns out there is a man for that: Matt Kerlogue, the data scientist who compiles the [Blavatnik Index of Public Administration](#) produced by the eponymous business school at Oxford University.

[[Our top civil servants: Who they are and what they earn](#)Opens in new window]

The most recent version is from 2024 and compared the civil services of more than 120 countries. It reviews four things: strategy and leadership; public policy; national delivery; and people and processes. The State comes joint 24th alongside Israel and Slovenia. The top spots go to Singapore, Norway, Canada, Denmark and Finland.

It appears the Republic is strong on public policy, which measures the ability of the Civil Service to develop and implement policies as well as manage risk. The State came eighth. We were weakest on people and processes, which “seeks to assess what and how it feels to work in or for the public administration”. The Republic ranks 58th

We are sort of middling on strategy and leadership, which looks at “the setting of the strategic direction for a government’s programme of work, the stewardship of public institutions, and the overarching values that guide the behaviours of and approach taken by public officials”. We came 23rd.

The result was similar (28th) when it comes to national delivery, which “seeks to assess the ability of the national government to oversee the delivery of public services, including those services it delivers itself”.

The index paints a picture of a Civil Service that is pretty good at coming up with policies but populated by people who probably want to work somewhere else and who are doing

an average job of implementing said policies. Sound about right? Dublin metro?
Housing crisis?

The question as to whether we are getting a reasonable return from the money spent on the Civil Service is harder to answer. According to Kerlogue, there does not really seem to be any relationship between a country's ranking in the index and its size or how much money it spends on its civil service. There is no correlation between expenditure (as a percentage of gross domestic product) and index ranking, he says. The same holds for population.

If anything, says Kerlogue, the countries that do best are the ones that seem to have some sort of overriding national imperative. Singapore, which tops the index despite spending much less in terms of gross domestic product per capita on its civil service, than other countries tops the survey.

It has focused relentlessly on being a hub for trade since it was expelled from Malaysia in 1965 with little going for it but a strategic location. Estonia, which also outperforms, lives beside a large and relentless threatening neighbour.

It is hard to say what the national imperative of contemporary life in the Republic is other than everyone for themselves. So, how do we judge if we are getting a good bang for our buck when it comes to the Civil Service?

Kerlogue suggests that the best approach is to compare our index score with countries that have a similar political system or are of a similar size. When it comes to the political system our closest peers are the United Kingdom and, more pertinently, other countries that, like ourselves, adopted and modified the British civil service model.

The one that probably ticks the most boxes is New Zealand because it has a similar population, 5.22 million versus 5.3 million. Both countries also have comparably sized civil services. New Zealand has almost 64,000 civil servants versus our 53,000.

The bad news is that New Zealand came joint sixth in the index and wipes our eye on all four measures, particularly in people and processes (they come second and we come 57th). The only area in which we come close is public policy (we come eighth and they come 6th). For the record, they are placed 12th for national delivery and 11th for strategy and leadership.

It's probably a bit simplistic, but both countries seem to be equally good at coming up with policies, although we are much worse at getting them done. Could the fact that New Zealand civil servants seem a much happier bunch than our own be the reason? Could the fact that there are 10,000 more of them explain the difference?