

20 April 2020





Public management and the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic: emerging responses and initial recommendations

Updated 20 April 2020

This note examines how governments across the OECD are managing public servants in response to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. It summarises the principles underpinning the most common measures taken across the OECD and identifies initial opportunities for managing and harnessing change. The content of this note was developed through a Special Session of the Working Party on Public Employment and Management held on 15 April.



1. Public servants rising to the challenge

Public servants across and beyond the OECD are playing a leading role in coordinating a response to the pandemic. They are keeping medical systems functioning and families safe. They are finding novel ways to design and channel unprecedented economic stimulus spending and manage severe spikes in unemployment. The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has transformed the work and workplaces of the public sector almost overnight. Public sector workforces are being asked to work in new ways, juggling new tools with old procedures and processes.

In this context, OECD Public Employment and Management Officials met virtually on April 15, 2020. The meeting provided a platform to share and reflect on the current state of the public service in OECD countries; discuss innovations being developed and deployed to work productively in this context; and raise key challenges faced now and in the future. This note is a synthesis and summary of the broad areas of agreement.

Principles underpinning initial public employment responses:

In the short term, the focus of governments has broadly been on the twin need to protect public servants while maintaining the capacity to deliver on core and quickly-emerging government priorities.

- **Put Health and Safety first:** Public employers are protecting their employees from contracting and spreading coronavirus (COVID-19) through measures such as generalised teleworking, enforced distancing measures if in the office, systematic temperature checks, rotating teams, and the wearing of masks.
- **Pay attention to mental health.** Many public servants are carrying an increased emotional burden linked to their duties and/or personal situation. Governments are increasing mental health support services and using short surveys ('flash-polls') to identify areas for increased support.
- **Switch the 'default' on remote working:** Whereas employees used to need special permission to work from home, today the default is that all employees that can work from home must work from home. Authorisation is in many cases now required to be able to come into the office. Many public services are also recognising that this requires support, and are issuing guidance and support for both public employees and managers.
- **Match workforce supply with demand:** This crisis has forced public service leaders to reprioritise quickly, determine essential positions and areas, and redeploy the workforce to meet changing demand. Some countries are developing online platforms to quickly identify and move staff into the areas that need them.
- **Leverage digital capabilities:** public administrations who had already invested in digital capabilities are better positioned to manage the crisis. Internal network capacity, cloud systems and familiarity with videoconferencing tools also enable more public servants to work productively from home, and to even continue interviewing and training candidates for critical roles.
- **Maximise leave flexibility:** Not all public servants can work from home. In some cases this has given rise to the creation or adjustment of leave arrangements to enable staff to recover from illness or care for a family member.
- **Keep learning:** Most public servants are using new technology and ways of working to carry out their jobs. Online learning tools and coaching can help to up-skill the workforce, including



digital skills. Leadership and management skills are also key to maintaining productivity in transformed work environments and supporting workers to manage the transition.

- **Communicate and check-in:** Public service leaders are using new channels such as video-conferencing and instant messaging services to share fast moving information with staff and unions. These and employee networks generate opportunities to stay in touch with team-mates and colleagues from across the public service.
- **Plan ahead:** The present state of most public administrations is changing so quickly that most public employers are focussed on managing the here and now. But some are also looking forward, in recognition that the future workplace will be different. Many have already established working groups of senior managers to prepare for an eventual return to work, exploring how remote working can be used to facilitate a phased return to the office.

2. Post-pandemic, public administrations have an opportunity to embed lasting change

The immediate focus of public administrations is on protecting public servants and ensuring that essential public services can still be delivered. Managers, teams and staff are adjusting to new working methods and tools. Many are understandably preoccupied with caring for family members and juggling work-life balance. Nevertheless, administrations across the OECD are also considering the longer-term impacts of changes that have been rapidly introduced during the pandemic. Specifically, the post-crisis period will be a unique opportunity to capitalise on changes – such as large-scale remote working – whose implementation was expected to occur only gradually in the future.

Eventually, governments will have to figure out how to manage a return to offices and a resumption and acceleration of non-pandemic related work.

This presents public administrations with challenges and opportunities. The longer-term challenge facing public employers is understanding the degree to which fundamental orthodoxies around managing public servants have been changed. Do all employees need to be present in their offices from 9 to 5 if they have just shown that they can maintain productivity during weeks of working from home? What would this mean for performance management? For recruitment?

Evaluating, adjusting, and formalising aspects of the immediate response can provide public administrations with much-needed flexibility and dynamism to face future challenges.



Opportunities to move toward lasting agility in the public service:

- **Reflect:** Public administrations are undergoing a massive and unplanned experiment in flexible people management, which – despite logistical challenges – is revealing areas of strength and resilience. Reflection on performance and productivity in this time of crisis will be essential to harvest lessons for future reforms.
- **Normalise successful innovations:** Remote working, new communication and information technologies, platforms for agile workforce redeployment, are but a few of the tools that public services are implementing to manage this crisis. These also have many other applications across the public service and would become permanent fixtures of the post-pandemic new normal.
- **Engage:** Across the public service, individuals, units, teams and Ministries are collaborating and exchanging intensively. Post-crisis, administrations can build on these exchanges to move toward a public sector that is increasingly flexible and resilient. A common element in many countries' responses has been early and proactive engagement between employers and employee representatives, highlighting opportunities to engage unions as partners for change.
- **Lead:** Effective public service leaders will harness these opportunities to advance a vision of the public service that is forward-looking, flexible and fulfilling. Actions undertaken now are an opportunity to centre leadership on core public service values, agile delivery, innovation and productivity. The OECD's *Recommendation of Public Service Leadership and Capability* sets out 14 principles to guide leaders in this transition.
- **Celebrate the value of public service:** Public employees are heroes in this crisis. They are keeping medical systems functioning, families safe, finding novel ways to address the unprecedented economic and social impacts, keeping businesses afloat and dealing with incredible spikes in unemployment. This is a unique opportunity to renew the image of public service as an attractive workplace that has impact. Post-crisis, public managers should consider how to showcase the values of a job or career with the public service.

Further reading

OECD, [Recommendation of the Council on Public Service Leadership and Capability](#), OECD/LEGAL/0445

OECD (2017), *Skills for a High Performing Civil Service*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264280724-en>

OECD (2016), *Engaging Public Employees for a High-Performing Civil Service*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264267190-en>



Contact

Daniel GERSON (✉ daniel.gerson@oecd.org)

Dónal MULLIGAN (✉ donal.mulligan@oecd.org)

This paper is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>

