



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

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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

Almost overnight, the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has transformed the work and workplaces of the public sector. Public servants are playing a leading role in the response to the pandemic. Healthcare workers are keeping medical systems functioning and families safe. Civil Servants are finding novel ways to design and channel unprecedented economic stimulus spending and manage severe spikes in unemployment.

To achieve this, public sector workforces are being asked to work in new ways and new contexts. Line Ministries and agencies are learning how to use new technology and tools 'on-the-go', often alongside old procedures and processes. Individual public servants are adapting work and personal time to meet family and caring commitments. The public sector has become 'accidentally agile', with new procedures and protocols governing remote working, accelerated hiring processes, and fast-track mobility programmes developed with unprecedented speed.

Post-pandemic, governments may be in a position to review and capitalise on many of the changes introduced, and place them on a more sustainable footing. In the more immediate term, the task facing public employers will be how to get public servants back to work safely and resume non-pandemic related service delivery.

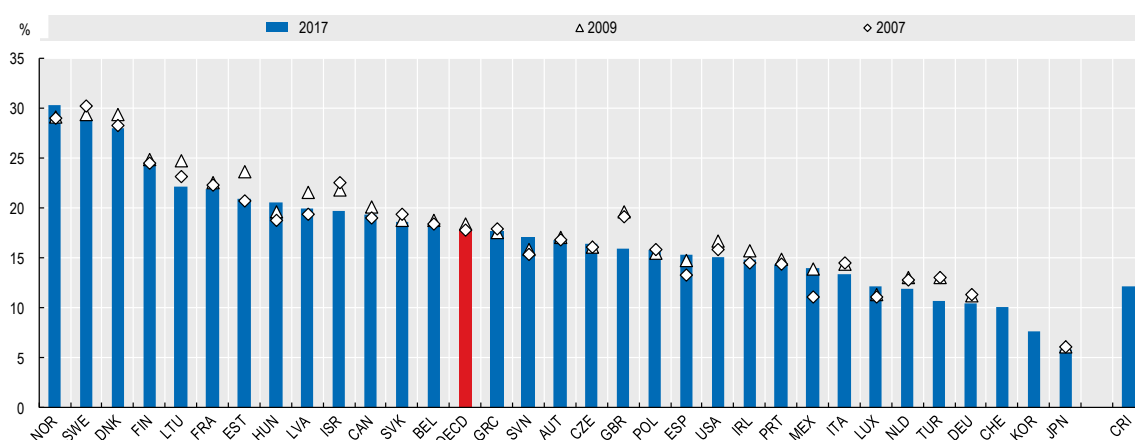
In this context, OECD Public Employment and Management Officials met virtually on April 15, 2020. The meeting provided a platform to share and reflect on the current state of the public service in OECD countries; discuss innovations being developed and deployed to work productively in this context; and raise key challenges faced now and in the future. This note is a synthesis and summary of the broad areas of agreement and of the more detailed public management measures compiled in the compendium: "[Initial Budget and Public Management Responses to the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Pandemic in OECD Countries](#)".

2. A snapshot of public sector employment

Across the OECD, employment in central government administrations amounts to nearly 18% of the workforce (Figure 1). In 2015, an average of 9.5% of GDP was spent in OECD Member countries on general government employee compensation, making this the largest input in the production of government goods and services. These data underscore the scale of the human and financial resources now being mobilised and adapted to combat the pandemic.



Figure 1. Employment in general government as a percentage of total employment, 2007, 2009 and 2017



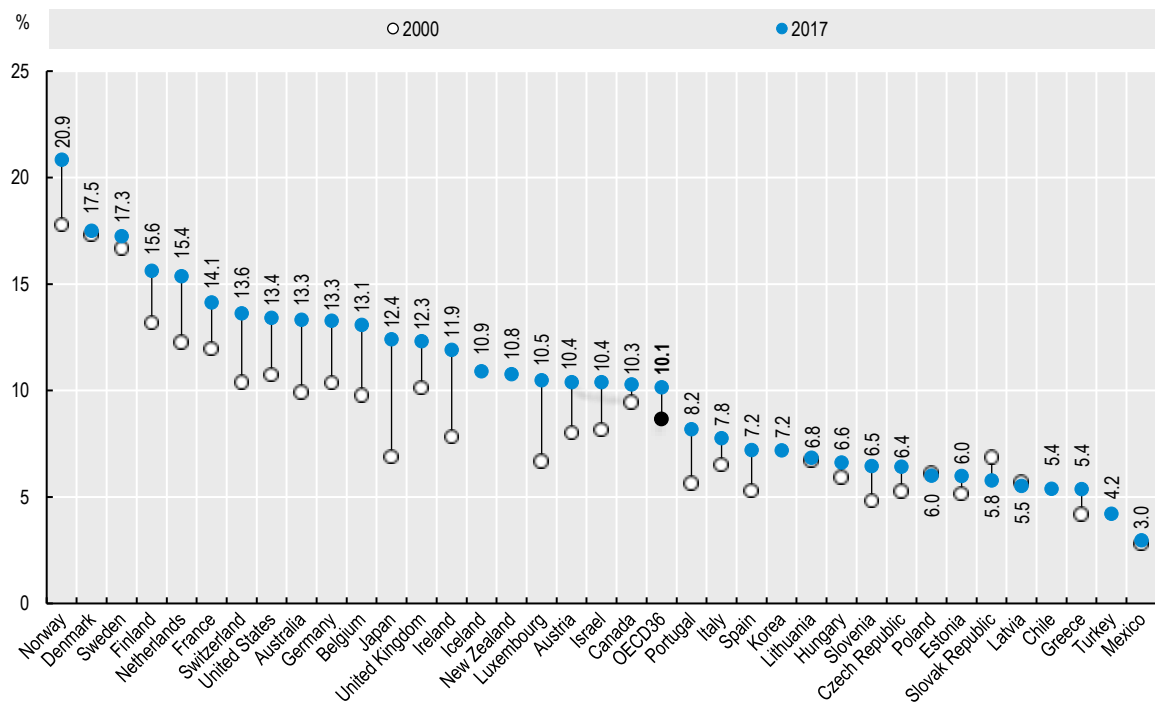
Source: OECD National Accounts Statistics (database). Data for Japan, Korea, Mexico, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States are from the International Labour Organization (ILO), ILOSTAT (database), Public employment by sectors and sub-sectors of national accounts.

Significant employment in healthcare

The healthcare sector is also a significant employer across the OECD (Figure 2). In 2017, about one in every 10 jobs across the OECD was found in health or social care. Key measures taken by governments include the procurement and provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers, the re-hiring of recently retired doctors, nurses and support staff, the acceleration of medical training programmes, and the up-skilling and re-deployment of public servants to assist with non-technical healthcare work, such as contact tracing.



Figure 2. Employment in health and social work as a share of total employment, 2000 and 2017 (or nearest year)



Source: OECD (2019), Health at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4dd50c09-en>.

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. While actions vary considerably across countries, the following principles have underpinned Government action to managing public servants:

Put Health and Safety first: Public employers are protecting their employees from contracting and spreading coronavirus (COVID-19) through a variety of measures such as generalised teleworking and enforced distancing measures if in the office.

- **Korea** has issued compulsory guidelines on remote working for many staff, although some senior managers are in the office with precautions such as staggered lunch hours and physical distancing. Identifying vulnerable groups and using data such as commuting times to implement work rotation and remote working has also been a feature.
- **The Slovak Republic** is providing facemasks to public servants, implementing a rigorous hygiene policy and eliminating/limiting social contact through postponing in-person recruitment and classroom training.



Pay attention to mental health: Governments are increasing mental health support services in recognition that many public servants are carrying an increased emotional burden linked to their duties and/or personal situation.

- In **Latvia**, an employee survey aims to assess the wellbeing of public servants, including causes of anxiety and their expectations of the government and their management. This survey aims to offer targeted psychological help to public servants and has garnered more than 3,000 responses from more than 90 institutions.
- **The Netherlands** has developed an online toolbox for public servants with information and short videos about working from home and maintaining work-life balance.

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.

- **Ireland** developed tools (questionnaire and online portal) to map transferrable skills and facilitate temporary mobility assignments across the public service.
- **The United Kingdom** is adjusting existing infrastructure and coordination mechanisms to re-allocate employees according to need.

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.

- In **Italy**, teleworking is now the default - formal authorisation to work from home is no longer required.
- **The United States** is operating at maximum teleworking capacity and issuing guidance to managers to support this.

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.

- **Estonia** is benefitting from pre-crisis investment in distance learning technologies to up-skill employees.
- **Denmark** has also experienced less strain due to their digitalised working environment, and is using technology to coordinate people management issues through twice-weekly virtual meetings of all heads of HR.

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.

- **Germany** increased special leave provisions for certain groups from three to 20 days.
- **France** developed special leave provisions for staff who need to take care of children.

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.



- **Australia** is providing re-skilling opportunities for public servants to help them carry out crisis-related work.
- **Belgium** expanded its online training offer, adapted in-person training for online access, and fast-tracked certain training programmes.

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.

- **Canada** developed dedicated webpages and resource for employees to provide them with information and resources on working remotely and on improving mental health during the public health crisis.
- **Norway** is exploring the use of targeted ‘pulse’ surveys to check in with employees and uses a portal for public employers with Human Resource information and guidance for managers updated daily.

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. Some 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.

- **Finland** set up two working groups in the Prime Minister’s office to monitor the current situation and prepare an exit strategy.
- **Slovenia** is looking at the leadership, management and digital competencies that will be necessary to strengthen the public administration after the crisis.

Note – these principles refer primarily to the responses across central government administrations

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

In the longer-term this crisis can enable governments to adapt many of the traditional assumptions upon which public employment policies are based. For example, the relationship between employees’ presence in the office, mobile technology and worker productivity will likely be re-examined. 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.

How can public employers manage a gradual and safe return to the office?

The immediate focus of public administrations is on protecting public servants and ensuring that essential public services can still be delivered. Governments will then manage the return to offices and a resumption and acceleration of non-pandemic related work. Solutions being proposed differ across administrations. Nevertheless, early lessons from the pandemic response indicate that flexibility will be key. Some countries are exploring staggered arrival times, adjusting physical workplaces to enable social distancing, and requiring employees to wear masks and other personal protective equipment. Furthermore, most public



employers will likely continue to use teleworking flexibility to limit the number of people in the physical office at any one time. Many governments are actively engaging with public sector unions and employee associations to build consensus on the steps needed return to work safely.

How can public employers secure lasting change in the longer term?

“We took a leap into the fourth industrial revolution in just a matter of weeks” – PEM Working Party delegate

Administrations across the OECD have already begun to consider the longer-term impacts of changes that have been rapidly introduced during the pandemic. The post-crisis period will be a unique opportunity to capitalise on changes whose implementation was expected to occur only gradually in the future. Examples include large-scale remote working, agile tools to reallocate the workforce, and streamlined and technology-enhanced people management processes such as recruitment and training.

The pandemic response has shone a spotlight on the work and worth of public servants. The crisis thus presents a new opportunity to reinforce the attractiveness of the public service as a career of choice for a new generation of skilled workers who are motivated by public values. Governments can emphasise the impact and value of a public service career through communication and outreach strategies, helped by streamlined tools and ways of working, such as online assessment and video screening. Senior civil servants, increasingly in the public eye through management of the crisis, can amplify the message.

The pandemic has also highlighted the duty of care of government to its employees. In many countries, leave and pay arrangements have been adapted to enable staff to recover from illness or care for others. Governments are also taking special measures to protect the mental health of employees, tracked through employee surveys and addressed through access to counselling and peer support. Engaging and motivating healthy public sector employees post-pandemic will be a fundamental success factor for longer-term change and innovation.

The box below outlines steps that countries can take now to make the most of changes.



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.
- **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 (2019), *Health at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4dd50c09-en>.

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