

Executive summary

Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established in 1993 to protect and improve Ireland's environment. Reflecting its reputation for delivering results, the EPA's responsibilities have expanded over time in step with new legislation and EU directives and following the merger with the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland in 2014. The EPA has built up a reputation as a trusted and respected body that stakeholders recognise for its scientific integrity. Its technical and administrative independence are reinforced by a strong internal culture of independence.

The EPA faces an evolving context. Pressures on licensing and enforcement functions are increasing as economic activity picks up; public scrutiny of environmental issues is growing; and a new whole-of-government Climate Action Plan seeks to fundamentally change the way Ireland tackles the climate emergency. Within this context, the EPA must make important strategic decisions about its future role and objectives, ensure its attractiveness as a modern employer and cutting-edge regulator, and demonstrate the impact of its work through clear performance reporting.

Role and objectives of the EPA

The EPA has an expansive mandate for environmental protection and has been innovative within its regulatory powers to achieve its objectives. The EPA does not set government policy but draws on its substantial evidence and expertise to inform the policy-making process, often relying on the strength of relationships with policy makers rather than on formal structures. A recent change in parent department from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has been disruptive for the EPA and the executive. The EPA is able to co-ordinate with a large number of public bodies and its Network for Ireland's Environmental Compliance and Enforcement is seen as a best practice at the European level. The increasing number of actors in the environmental sphere creates a risk of overlapping mandates; in this context, co-ordination is more important than ever.

Key recommendations

- Define the EPA's role and strategy in the changing policy context. While the responsibility for policy making rests with government, there may be opportunities for the EPA to engage more proactively in policy development and evaluation, leveraging its expertise and ensuring its evidence and research is policy relevant.
- Fulfil the function of a knowledge provider with more effective communications.
- Discuss, agree and align expectations with parent departments.

Input

The EPA is mostly funded by government budget, including an Environment Fund that is used for essential expenses but is designed to diminish over time. The remaining income is earned from licencing fees and enforcement, some of which is not set on a cost-recovery basis. As the EPA does not have full autonomy in the allocation of its resources, managing peaks and troughs in workloads across its different areas of activity is challenging. The EPA has developed an ambitious human resources development (HRD) strategy that seeks to foster innovation and manage change.

Key recommendations

- Strengthen co-ordination processes with senior levels in parent departments and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to co-ordinate solutions to budget and human resource related issues.
- Secure the sustainability of financing by advocating for a review of licensing fees, the allocation of essential expenses to more stable income streams, and stronger medium-term budget commitments.
- Ensure the attractiveness of the EPA as an employer with modern HR practices, harnessing the potential of the HRD strategy by attaching measurable targets to its goals. Setting these targets provides an opportunity for the EPA to ensure that skills are fit-for-purpose as the organisation evolves.

Process

A full-time Executive Board manages the EPA, with most Board meetings dedicated to technical decision making. The governance arrangements and wide responsibilities of Board members highlight the importance of reserving sufficient time for discussions on strategy and seeking diverse external perspectives to strengthen decision-making. Some functions and subject areas are split among different EPA offices and locations, creating challenges in terms of efficiency, consistency of approach and messaging.

The EPA demonstrates independence in its regulatory functions. It carries out licensing and permitting through a transparent and detailed process, which could be streamlined further. The new inspections and enforcement strategy focuses on compliance and takes risk into consideration, sometimes using numerical measures that may be susceptible to bias rather than outcome measures to guide decisions. Several stakeholder engagement processes are in place, but early-stage consultation is not systematic.

Key recommendations

- Isolate opportunities to discuss strategic matters and diversify input into decision making by continuing to bring in external perspectives and fresh ideas. Strengthening the links between the Board and its external committees could be one way to achieve this.
- Take stock of the distribution of activities across offices with the goal of bringing together functions (e.g. enforcement) or subject areas (e.g. climate change).
- Fully implement and monitor with performance indicators the new compliance and enforcement policy to adhere to the principles of responsive regulation, focussing more on outcomes.

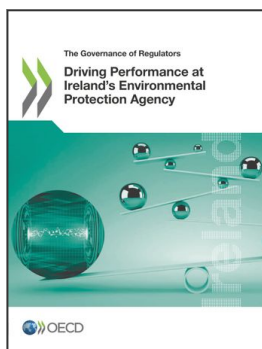
Output and outcome

Recent innovations in the EPA's data collection, management and analysis processes have made significant efficiency gains for both the organisation and the entities it regulates. Building on its data collection functions, the EPA monitors and reports on Ireland's environment and regulated entities. While the EPA carries out this work effectively, the information is often difficult to find and navigate online. There is limited engagement with regulated entities around performance.

The EPA's strategic plan sets out goals and associated outcomes for the organisation, but the lack of measurable targets means that it cannot easily be used to monitor the organisation's performance. Parallel processes for monitoring with several sets of indicators create an unnecessary burden. Furthermore, metrics focus on outputs rather than outcomes, missing an opportunity to use performance monitoring to drive improvement.

Key recommendations

- Redesign the EPA's web presence to ensure that data and information are easier to find, understand and use.
- Better engage with regulated entities around performance, e.g. organise events to identify best practices and recognise 'champions' as a way to build trust and drive compliance.
- Develop a unified, outcome-based system for performance assessment and reporting linked to the strategic plan; complement this with clear, plain language communications to show the impact of EPA activities to its diverse stakeholders.



From:
Driving Performance at Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/009a0785-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2020), "Executive summary", in *Driving Performance at Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/6a5ad2fe-en>

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