

Statement of the Comptroller and Auditor General

Peer Review of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General

My Office is committed to performing all its work to the highest possible standard. Arising from that commitment, we set a strategic objective to commission an independent external assessment of our performance against international standards and good practice, to be carried out by a panel of experts from international peer organisations and completed before the end of 2020.

The peer review was carried out by a group of experts with extensive experience at a senior management level in public sector audit bodies in the UK, the European Union and Canada, using a comprehensive framework for assessing the performance of national audit offices that was developed by the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI). I am indebted to the members of the Peer Review Group for the insightful and courteous approach they brought to the task, and for the rigorous, challenging and professional way in which they carried out the work.

I welcome the findings of the Peer Review Group and am happy to accept all the recommendations they have made. These will be acted upon promptly. The Group has also provided helpful suggestions and inspiring ideas in a number of areas that we will consider as we develop a planned new statement of strategy for the period 2021-2025.

I am pleased and reassured that the Group found that the Office has assiduously implemented international standards for auditing across its financial audit and reporting practices and in its internal governance. They note that the Office is a well-functioning workplace with staff who are professional, qualified, disciplined, motivated and well led. They also report, based on feedback they received in a programme of interviews with external stakeholders, that the Office is held in high regard.

Naturally, the report highlights a number of key opportunities and challenges for the Office and its staff. The Group outline ways in which the Office could add more public value, such as providing more general insight from work carried out across the public service. They suggest that we should aim to become strong advocates for best practice in Irish public administration, without compromising the independence and objectivity that is fundamental to our audit and reporting work. They support our determination to develop our capacity to deliver more, better and highly relevant reporting outputs focused on economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and to ensure more timely financial reporting by public bodies. They challenge us to respond to demands they identified for greater engagement by the Office with client bodies, the Oireachtas, media and the general public. I am eager that we will meet those challenges and make those objectives the central focus of our future strategy.

Delivering on those objectives will, of course, depend on how effectively we manage the resources available to us, and the Review Group recognise that the Office's capacity is already stretched. We have increased our investment in our infrastructure and in the recruitment, training and development of our staff. Modern technology provides opportunities for radically new ways of working which we have been exploring. The risks thrown up by the current pandemic have required us to innovate and to embrace new practices. It now seems inevitable that, for many of us, the old model of centralised office-based working will become impractical and perhaps irrelevant for the medium-term. We are committed to reforms focused on improving our own efficiency and effectiveness so that we can continue to meet our obligations to the bodies we audit, to Dáil Éireann and to Irish citizens.

While most of the Peer Review Group's recommendations focus on matters that are substantially within the Office's control, they also identified a number of aspects of the statutory framework within which I and the Office operate that may place constraints on the independence of the function, and which are out of line with modern international standards. In the main, these are matters that can be addressed only by the Oireachtas. In that regard, it is useful to note that we operate primarily under legislation that is currently almost 30 years old. It may now be appropriate to re-examine the role and structure of the Office in the light of the many changes that have taken place in the public service and in the practice of both private sector and public sector audit since the role was last reviewed. Any such examination should review the extent to which the Comptroller and Auditor General's current legislative mandate meets the public audit and accountability requirements of a modern democratic State.

15 May 2020