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Renewing Defra

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is set for some major changes from next month, says Helen Ghosh



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The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) will look – and feel – radically different from the start of 2008.

All 3,000 staff in the “core” department will be working in a programme and project structure, modelled on professional services organisations. The programmes link everything that we do to our two overarching strategic PSA objectives: tackling climate change internationally and domestically and securing a healthy, resilient, productive and diverse natural environment.

Colleagues in our executive agencies (around 9,000 staff) and in our key non-departmental public bodies – in particular the Environment Agency and Natural England – will be working with these programmes as well as delivering their ‘Licence to Operate’ services to the public.

In the new Defra, all 3,000 core staff will have put their skills profiles and day to day availability online, so that they can be identified by our Flexible Staff Resourcing (FSR) team as new roles and opportunities arise – and so that they themselves can “advertise” and manage any spare capacity they have to take on additional assignments. Although some departments operate this “policy pool” approach to part of their work, this is the first time that a department has done so for the whole of its core policy team.

So that we can become better at talent development and managing performance, all staff have already been allocated a development manager. Development managers have been identified by nomination from peers and people they’re worked with in the past, as well as individuals putting their hands up themselves, and they will be working with groups of up to 10 staff from across the department as an additional corporate role.

Since people may be working on a number of projects, with different SROs at any one time, the development manager will act as a single point of contact for their performance and career development. Development managers will be responsible for pulling together feedback from all the activity managers that staff work with day to day, providing guidance and support on development opportunities and taking an energetic approach to both developing talent and managing poor performance.

All development managers have already been on innovative and very well-received induction training (for example, in giving and receiving feedback through role play and 'active learning' exercises), and will be able to take advantage of further tailored training opportunities over the coming months.

All staff have also been assigned to a career "home" (for example, economists, scientists or policy delivery). Heads of these career homes will be able to take an overall view of all staff within their specialism and work hard to develop talent and specific skills. For example, in the course of 2008 in the policy career home, we will be putting real emphasis on strengthening our policy-making capability and unlocking policy innovation. Involving staff from all career homes as well as our delivery network, we have developed a refreshed and in-depth policy cycle that provides a much stronger framework for policy-making in the new Defra, and we will shortly be launching this through a package of guidance, training and support for staff.

Underpinning the more responsive programme and project structure and flexible resourcing mechanisms is the rigorous and disciplined approach that we have developed to business planning and portfolio management. Having worked hard to establish robust business plans for the CSR07 period, we are in the process of fine-tuning our new system of in-year portfolio management to ensure that the right resources are consistently in the right place at the right time, delivering on our strategic priorities. Defra's chief economist, Richard Price, will take overall responsibility for this process, checking that the balance of activities and resource allocations looks sensible as new programmes, projects and priorities emerge.

Finally, as well as major internal organisational changes, the department is also taking a more outward-facing, customer-orientated perspective. This includes getting greater insight into all of our customers, including business perceptions of Defra's regulatory role and farmers' real experiences of interacting with the department on a day to day basis. The links between the Department and our many delivery agents also continue to be strengthened – for example, through greater clarity on accountability in Defra for making the relationships work, being clear about the outcomes

we are seeking to achieve with the money we provide and the delivery deals that we are developing between Defra and delivery partners like our Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NPDBs).

All this will help to focus on delivery and make sure we have the skills and resources in the right places at the right time. When we published our response to the capability review in Spring 2007, we were already in the process of setting out this ambitious transformation programme – “Renew Defra”. The objectives of the programme were to create a department that is more agile and innovative, where outcomes are developed in partnership and where policy making is effective and consistent. After six months developing the programme plans and doing all of the ground work, the planning has become a reality. 2008 will be an exciting year.

Helen Ghosh is permanent secretary of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs