



Te Kawa Mataaho
Public Service Commission

How the Public Service has changed over time

02 February 2024

The Public Service has played an important role in improving the wellbeing of New Zealanders for over a century.

Established in legislation in 1912, the Public Service continues to evolve and transform to meet our changing world and the needs of the government and New Zealanders in the 21st century.

Here's a potted history from its inception until today.

The early years – a strong foundation

The early legislation set important foundations designed to protect the independence of the Public Service. This independence continues to be vital to the trust people place in public servants and the legitimacy of the service.

In 1912, the New Zealand Public Service was established with the Public Service Act. The 1912 Act included merit-based employment and an independent body to appoint staff (free from political influence) to stop political patronage, cronyism and 'back door' entry into the Public Service. It also established the role of a single Public Service Commissioner.



Government department building in Stratford with employees of the Public Works Department standing outside in 1913. McAllister, James, 1869-1952 :Negatives of Stratford and Taranaki district. Ref: 1/1-009395-G. Credit: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22904136>

1960s – a drive for efficiency and economy

The 1912 Act and subsequent minor amendments stood for 50 years and a Royal Commission of Inquiry reported in 1962 confirmed the 1912 approach.

The resulting Public Service Act 1962 affirmed the characteristics of being loyal and honourable as a requirement of the Public Service. It also had a description of the Public Service in its long title that included the important and unifying concept of 'spirit of service to the community'.

The 1962 Act strengthened the importance of promotion by merit within the Public Service, established a Minister for State Services and introduced the State Services Commission as a department of state responsible to the Minister for State Services.



Transcript

The State Sector Act 1988

By the 1980s, significant reform was on the horizon. The world was changing fast with new communication and information technologies and a drive for greater efficiency. Citizens had rising expectations and a desire for greater transparency in government.

The highly centralised traditional public administration and rules-based approach was not well placed to respond to the demands of modern society. Accordingly, the Public Service went through major changes in the 1980s and 1990s. And New legislative framework was introduced through the State Sector Act 1988 and Public Finance Act 1989 with the aim to reorient the Public Service towards delivering results for people and to increase its efficiency and transparency.

The Public Service transformed from a single organisation with one employer into separate departments, each with their own chief executive responsible for their department's performance.

In the 1990s, the New Public Management approach focused on results, people as customers, stronger business disciplines, and opening government to competition. This resulted in an important shift from inputs to outputs.

These reforms improved performance by making public services more responsive to customers, provided greater transparency around how resources were allocated, and increased accountability.

They also created agencies that were incentivised to work independently as singular agencies rather than collectively across the Public Service.



The State Sector Act 1988 required chief executives in the state services to hold individual employment contracts. John Grant (third from left) was the first to be signed, as director-general of the Social Welfare Department in 1988. Also present are (from left) State Services Chief Commissioner Don Hunn, Deputy Commissioner Margaret Bazley and Commissioner David Swallow. Credit: Alexander Turnbull Library, Dominion Post Collection (PAColl-7327). Photograph by Merv Griffiths.

A need to rebalance

Departments were accountable for what they delivered, and this meant that agencies delivered outputs they had control over. However, not all problems neatly fit into individual agencies and people don't live according to how agencies are organised. Complex problems require agencies to work together to promote better outcomes. Individuals and families with higher needs often benefit from services that involve multiple agencies but interacting with multiple agencies around the same life event can be frustrating, confusing and time consuming.

Agencies needed flexibility, incentives, and accountability to work together to achieve results for the public and to use public resources efficiently and effectively. However, cross-agency platforms proved time consuming to establish and difficult to maintain. Sustained and systemic change needed to be woven into the fabric of the Public Service for the benefit of New Zealanders.

A modern (highly aligned, highly devolved) framework

It became clear a rebalance was needed to unify the Public Service and increase its adaptability to meet present and future challenges. The pendulum had swung from a highly centralised to a highly devolved system. The optimum balance is a system that is both highly aligned and highly devolved.

Highly aligned means leaders working collectively across outcomes, sectors and services, strengthening system leadership and strategically aligning the workforce and core 'back office' functions (such as procurement, property and IT). This provides the leadership and builds the capability and capacity of the Public Service to work as a single system.

Being highly devolved means that agencies and service providers can focus on the things that will make the most difference in communities. This is where organisational flexibility, regional coordination and local decision-making (informed by citizens and service users) can make a positive difference to people's lives.

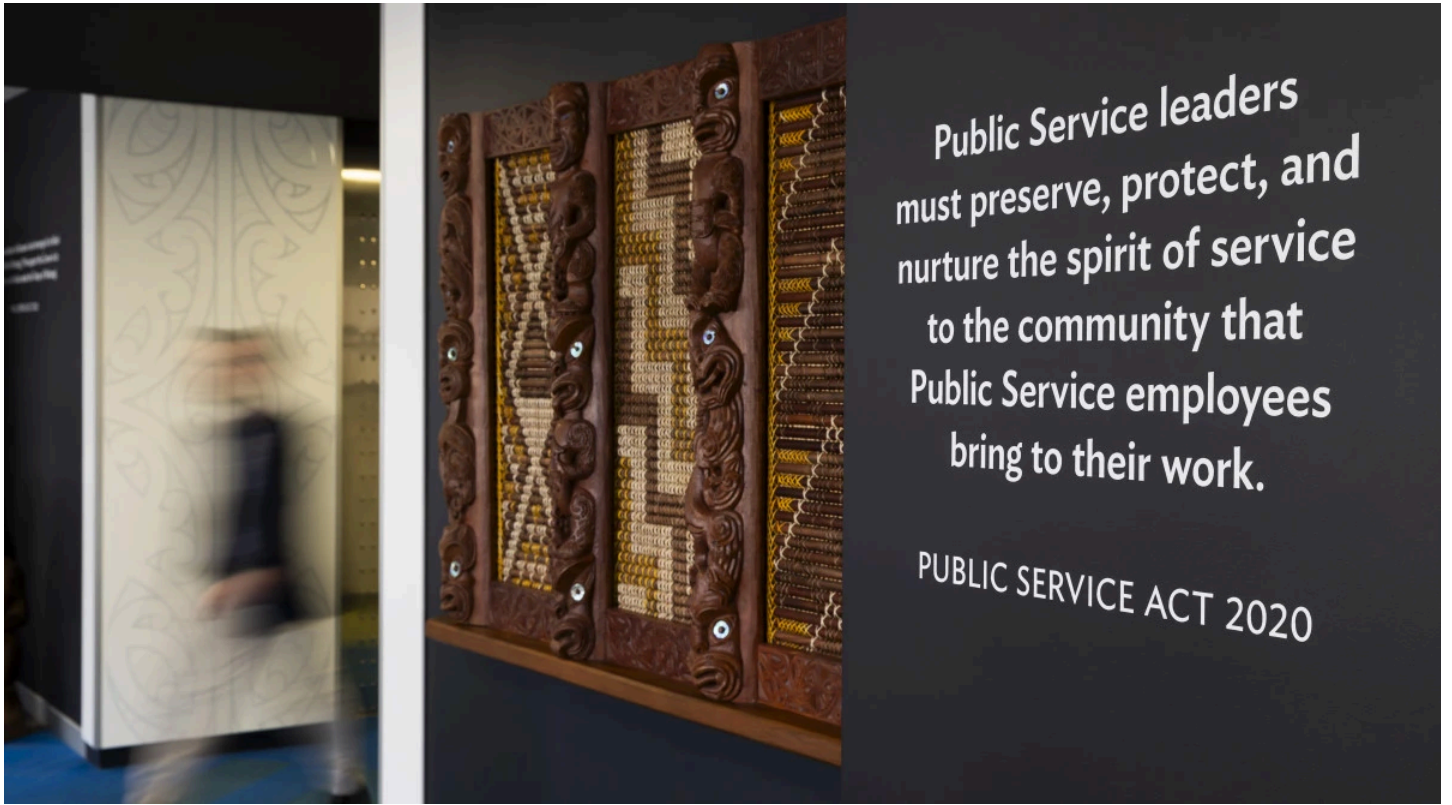
The Public Service Act 2020

The Public Service Act 2020 was developed to achieve this. It strengthens the role of the Public Service as part of the executive government and builds in 'the organisational flexibility and system leadership needed to meet the challenges New Zealand faces'.

The Act codified the principles and reaffirmed the independent role of the Commissioner in the appointment and performance management of chief executives which contributes to preserving public trust and confidence in a politically neutral Public Service. These principles build on the important foundations of Public Service in New Zealand, set in 1912.

The Public Service Act 2020 is an important enabler and signals the journey towards a leading edge, unified, trusted Public Service that serves New Zealand and its people.

Fully achieving the objectives behind the Act will take time but the Public Service is taking important strides forward. For example, work is already underway on improving digital services, Māori-Crown relationships, diversity and inclusion of the Public Service workforce, leadership development, new organisational forms, open government, and reconnecting the Public Service with its core values.



Public Service Act 2020 states that Public Service leaders must preserve, protect, and nurture the spirit of service to the community that Public Service employees bring to their work. Credit: Neil Price Photo.



07 August 2024

Providing prison services that enable healing and support rehabilitation

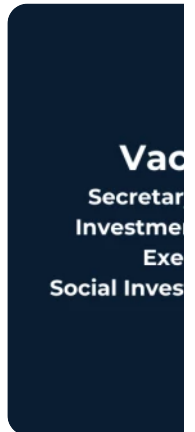
PEOPLE



31 July 2024

Vacancy: Secretary to the Treasury and Chief Executive, The Treasury

APPOINTMENTS



31 July 2024

Vacancy: Investment Executive Agency

APPOINTMENT

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