

TE TAUNAKI

Public Service Census

What changes would help your organisation deliver better results for taxpayers?

Public Service Census Insights Report

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Te Kawa Mataaho
Public Service Commission

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Executive Summary

Te Taunaki Public Service Census ran 3-21 March 2025. All employees of departments and departmental agencies were invited and 68.5% participated, or 44,737 responses. In all 14,430 people answered the final open-ended question: *What changes would help your organisation deliver better results for taxpayers?* This report summarizes those responses, representing the views of 22.1% of all employees (about 1 in 5).

This report highlights the key areas that public servants felt most needed to improve. It illustrates in greater detail topics covered in the quantitative part of the survey. Some ideas shared wide agreement (need to reduce the burden of processes, lack of resources/staff) but also presents conflicting views on some topics.

Public servants expressed a range of ideas for how their organisation could deliver better outcomes, including ways that services could be improved and processes streamlined. There was a desire to deliver the best possible services, including engaging more with the public in the development of policies, improving usability of websites, shortening wait times, and untangling the complexity of services. Access to technology, information about the effectiveness of programmes, and having sufficient staff to meet client needs, were topics raised across multiple organisations.

Staff also raised issues about how their organisations functioned, including the complexity of processes, delegations. They saw opportunities to improve financial management, leader engagement with staff, and how colleagues work together to get the job done. Employment conditions such as the ability to work some days from home, and pay were also discussed.

About the survey

Te Taunaki Public Service Census was run from 3-21 March 2025. All staff of departments and departmental agencies were invited and 68.5% participated. Of the 44,737 responses, 14,430 people answered the final open-ended question: *What changes would help your organisation deliver better results for taxpayers?*

Open-ended comments were coded using an AI programme that is built into the survey platform. The AI used a coding frame developed in collaboration with the Public Service Commission. Codes were checked by our research provider for accuracy, iteratively refined, and finally summarised below by a Public Service Commission analyst.

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Results

Overview of findings

The 14,430 comments summarised in this report represent the views of 22.1% of all employees (about 1 in 5).

In the table below the themes and codes are listed in order of prevalence, showing how many people made a comment about a topic and the percentage of all respondents who made a comment that fit in the theme. Note comments often covered multiple topics thus the totals below far exceed the number of staff who made comments and the totals do not add to 100%.

Theme name	Prevalence of respondents	
	#	%
<i>Processes and systems</i>	7063	49%
<i>Staffing and resourcing</i>	6779	47%
<i>Organisational culture and values</i>	4507	31%
<i>Leadership and management</i>	4342	30%
<i>Strategic direction and governance</i>	4296	30%
<i>Employee engagement and wellbeing</i>	3079	21%
<i>Service delivery and outcomes</i>	2658	18%
<i>Stakeholder engagement</i>	2648	18%
<i>Respectful workplaces</i>	1706	12%

This report summarises the themes and most relevant codes, giving examples to illustrate. To ensure an easy reading flow in this report (e.g. related topics being covered together), the order of topics is *not* ordered by prevalence. Under each theme heading, a table shows the prevalence of codes within the theme.

Service delivery and outcomes

Service delivery and outcomes	# of respondents
Meeting customer needs	1554
Focus on outcomes	1191
Policy changes ¹	309

Focus on outcomes

Public servants shared ideas on how agencies could more effectively measure the outcome of their work. This included ensuring there are clear objectives and regular measurement to ensure quality, as well as stopping programmes/policies that are not effective.

“Replace output measures and annual reporting to government with meaningful results-based measures which cascade from strategy to front line services.”

“It's important ... to evaluate and monitor the effects of funding, policy and law changes.”

“Focus on long term change and outcomes rather than short term 12 month, 18 month timeframes.”

Meeting customer needs

There was a strong desire to listen to the voice of the service users, and to meet their needs. Participants raised issues that demonstrated the complex challenges their service users face and identified that there are needs beyond what the agency can provide.

“Transport and access to a phone with coverage/credit/wifi .../receiving communications is often a barrier to accessing...services, as well as having bigger priorities such as housing/food struggles and struggling to manage all services made available to them at once”

“There is a disconnect and lack of understanding of what would be best for the people in our communities. One size does not fit all. Consult more with the people who work directly with the public.”

“Help individuals learn practical skills like managing money, paying bills, and knowing their rights as tenants, so they can live independently.”

¹ In this report, information on policies/legislation that may be fraudulently exploited have been excluded. Agencies have been provided with their comments to identify areas for potential changes, and the Commission is discussing areas raised with the relevant agency.

Process and systems

Process and systems	# of respondents
Streamline processes	3758
Technology and digital systems	2032
Organisational changes and restructuring	1348
Employee communication	1258
Data-driven decision making	1121
Application of processes and policies	1077

Streamline processes

There were numerous ideas on how services could be made easier for users. Some processes needed to be digitised, or existing technological solutions improved.

“Our unit...is majorly lacking in technology...We have massive files - our work is VERY paper based and very manual. We still have a room full of files and piles of applications that need to be manually scanned in every single day”

“More automated or digital services i.e. for some form submissions...Preferably user friendly for all ages and disabled persons”

“Call centre times need to be brought right down. Long wait times on the phones mean that people are not making contact with us”

“Reduce the amount of work a customer has to do to 'fix' or amend any work they have submitted to our organisation, to allow them to get on with what they are doing.”

“Some processes and rules could really use simplifying...applications are so complicated and take a long time to process because of it, there has to be a way to streamline it a little which would save employee labour and effort on the clients' part.”

Others discussed the burden of reporting requirements.

“As a small agency, reducing the level of external reporting to other agencies that is of little/no value given our size, would be helpful. For example, more effort and resourcing is required to frequently report on procurement than the agency exerts on actual procurement.”

“Reconsider Long-term Insights Briefings as a mechanism for bringing our focus to the future. The current approach of having agencies produce multiple LTIBs is inefficient and ineffective, and costly to the taxpayer.”

Processes within agencies create hurdles for staff to navigate to be effective. Comments included examples of excessive meetings, increasing administrative burdens, and layers of approval out of proportion with risks, all creating an environment where it is difficult to get work done.

“Reduce the number of pointless meetings that achieve nothing nor have any objective & outcome.”

“The number of process[es] that need approval from higher level has increased. Generally the level of bureaucracy for internal processes has gone up a lot in the last year and staffing levels have gone down”

“Administrative tasks can cause delays in getting the work done. e.g., I requested a supplier to be set up in our system - this took three and a half weeks. During this time we could not conduct the work together as we needed them to be officially set-up.”

“Getting approval for funding can take weeks due to the number of people who need to sign off on it versus when we were trusted at site or regional level to be making decisions.”

“Reduce the amount of regular, and sometimes duplicated, compliance reporting to central agencies so that more staff can focus on delivery of services to the taxpayers”

Compliance activities were singled out as being a hindrance.

“Reduction in extra learning or courses/modules that are not relevant to the work or role, or are not selected by each person/relevant to their goals.”

“I must complete external qualifications for my job... These are involved, practical assessments with a qualified trainer. [I’m then required to do] internal assessments for all of these again. A waste of time and money.”

Improving information sharing between agencies was another opportunity raised.

“The ability to be able to provide outside departments and/or ministries with information that is currently held on file (with permission being given by the effected party in questions [service user] as to not breach the Privacy Act) or vice versa and being able to receive said documentation, would cut down the workload tremendously for both parties involved.”

“Open-source data across public service (obviously excluding non-personal/commercial data) - e.g. environmental data. Too many agencies buying same data”

Technology and digital systems

Access to improved technology was a request from many, particularly in relation to automation and the use of AI.

“Effective use of technology to replace excel spreadsheets for reporting and data analysis purposes”

“AI (Copilot or similar/equivalent) made available to my team”

“Outdated technology and under strength software is one of the key time wasters in my role...having to wait for the system to boot up, open, or change applications. The level of IT issues we suffer would never be accepted in the private sector (which is where I came from.)”

Systems used in service delivery are a particular area where investment could create efficiencies and improve user experience both for the public and for staff.

“Create a “click reducer” IT job. This person would overhaul clunky systems...the number of clicks to reach pages we use every day is unnecessary and extremely inefficient”

Data-driven decision making

In the quantitative results from the survey, 64% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they had access to the information needed to make good decisions. The comments explained more about what kind of information was needed, particularly information on the effectiveness of programmes/policies, and a need for more evaluation. There was also an opportunity raised to be more centralised in data collection/increase sharing of data to ensure front-line workers could more easily do their job.

“More budget for resource that improves service delivery and data analytics. Access to data is so limited that decisions are not always evidence based due to a lack of information.”

“Better system conditions for collaboration between agencies. I feel there is a lot of waste in the system due to lack of awareness of capabilities/services, and lack of understanding that most agencies are only 20% different to each other, 80% of the systems, processes, data and technology they need are the same.”

“Conducting regular reviews and audits to ensure that programs and services are achieving their intended outcomes and making necessary adjustments. Data-Driven Decision Making: Leveraging data to make informed decisions and improve outcomes, ensuring that taxpayer funds are directed towards programs with proven effectiveness.”

Application of processes and policies

Public servants' sense of fairness is frustrated by a range of issues in how services are delivered, application of staff policies, and in disparity between agencies. Some people discussed that clearer guidelines between different parts of organisations/regions would help this.

"Stricter criteria and more consistent decision making"

"So many inconsistencies of roles and pay bands"

"Consistent approach and answers across the region/country."

Organisational changes and restructuring

For some respondents, there was a feeling that the restructures in 2024 and subsequent limited hiring has made an impact on the ability of teams to get their work done.

"Last year's restructuring gutted key areas of expertise. Key positions remain vacant and ongoing attritional vacancies are not being filled. The priorities have not changed; the deliverables have not changed. the size and aggregate capability of the workforce tasked with them has significantly reduced."

"The budget cuts have been made at frontline level by not replacing frontline and operational roles but middle managers, advisors, senior advisors etc have been maintained and in some areas increased."

Lack of job security remains ongoing issue, and distraction from getting work done.

"Staff are already doing more than they should and yet a number of them are feel anxious if they will still have a job. Remove the unknown and let us get on with what we need to do."

Employee communication

There were issues raised about communication from leadership and between teams.

"Being able to sit in work units with colleagues working on the same issues for efficient information-sharing/team building/mentoring, rather than disbursed due to lack of desks"

"Institute a ... system that enables feedback to more easily flow in multiple directions ... I have ideas about how we can all improve together, but am not able to spread those efficiently."

"Operations are finding out key information or about changes at the last moment. The day before it takes effect, the day of, or even not told but hearing it from the media or stakeholders."

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement	# of respondents
Communication to/with the public	831
Engagement with Ministers	769
Interagency collaboration	764
Māori Crown relationship and capability	516
Collaboration and relationship building with external stakeholders and organisations	216

Communication to/with the public

There was a desire to be even more transparent with the public, and to make sure that the information published is clear for people to understand and easy to find.

“Increase transparency through establishing clearer communication channels to inform taxpayers about how our funds are being used.”

“Making various funding information clear and ... create a central online hub with easy to read guidance, FAQs and deadlines”

“Provide more advice on government websites. Make websites clearer with directions and information. Offer a live chatbot for online troubleshooting. Make processes simpler to follow for people of all ages and give more information to people who may confuse applying for things they don't need to apply for.”

Some public servants raised ideas about areas that needed further public education.

“Provide clearer and more timely information Online videos and training resources and workshops to help.... Introduce Chat service, allow omnIService that flows into other preferred communication methods.”

“Websites be more interactive and appropriate for our clients. More video content to explain things ... I want to see more decision-making tool options on the website that narrow clients to the ideal information they need.”

Public servants wanted to have more engagement/consultation with the public/service users.

“Public users study group (like a marketing consumer user group) - a facilitator leads a Q&A session with people who have used the agency's service in the immediate past.”

“Public consultation on changes that affect those who use this service. Allowing those who use of services to provide consultation and feedback before changes are made.”

The Official Information Act was discussed as something that is useful but also can be an excessive burden on staff.

“This wastes so much time and resource - we should rightly be charging these entities for our time.”

“OIA for instance is weaponised against agencies, and a significant demand on resource and workflow.”

Engagement with Ministers

There were some comments about agency’s interaction with government Ministers, including free and frank advice.

“Freer and franker conversations with Ministers instead of slavish devotion to not upsetting them.”

“Providing Minister's with proper advice. The whole organisation is set up to respond to the whims of DCEs and the CE. There is no real policy work underway that would give Minister's objective, professional, and free and frank advice.”

Collaboration with external stakeholders/public

Effectiveness hinges on an agency’s ability to work with stakeholders, and participants raised a range of ways that could be improved particularly around how the public could be more involved.

“We never do engagement with the public on our policy work, and I think overtime it will really impact the quality of policy and how much the public trust us”

“Involving citizens more in the decision-making process ensures that taxpayer dollars are spent in ways that reflect the needs and priorities of the people. Tools for feedback and consultation, like surveys or public forums, can help.”

“Mandate more inclusive approaches public participation through ALL phases of the policy design/development lifecycle (problem definition/pain point analysis/solution design and testing/implementation). This would also involve making participation in policy development universally accessible, for example, through Citizen Assemblies.”

Interagency collaboration

Government is a complex network of agencies with overlapping interests and mandates, and a range of ways to improve communication and share more services were proposed.

“Better inter-agency work/communication and track accountability, this means investing in software that talks with each other.”

“A better joined up approach to multi agency challenges. For example, pay roll, finance, asset management, and finance are the same across all govt agencies. I see a lot of churn and expense going on reinventing the same wheel/IT system.”

“Senior leaders working more closely together for the good of the agency/country rather than running their own fiefdoms and not being transparent with their colleagues”

Māori Crown relationship and capability

Some participants encouraged further work to build capability to support the Māori Crown relationship and engage with iwi, including training and workplace practices.

“More in person tikanga and te reo Māori courses enabling stronger connections with iwi to create stronger more informed advice.”

“Compulsory Treaty training and undertaking the in-house cultural course for all Tier 4's and above.”

“Further extend Key elements of a Māori style interview beyond mihimihi and Karakia... Incorporate questions that assess the candidate's understanding of the departments Māori values Treaty of Waitangi”

Some participants expressed resistance to the focus on Māori Crown capability initiatives within their agency.

“We could dial back on matauranga Māori - it's a proportional thing, like most of the public service we've over-cooked it and are out of step with the public outside of Wellington. It's also costly. When we're learning karakia we're not doing our day jobs or learning directly work-relevant skills.”

“Less focus on Treaty and more focus on delivering for the taxpayer!”

Leadership

Leadership	# of respondents
Effectiveness of leadership	2360
Disconnect between leadership and frontline	1408
Performance management	1107
Management structure/delegation	848

Effectiveness of leadership

Some people commented about positive experiences with leaders in the public service.

“I see the leadership team have great values, knowledge and wisdom for our communities throughout NZ. This gives me a great sense that we are caring for our people in Aotearoa from all walks of life.”

“I am lucky to work in a part of the organisation that has very good managers.”

However, many more participants raised concerns about leadership capability in their agency, both at the highest levels and among lower-level managers. Some people expressed frustration with being micro-managed.

“It feels like we have moved to a low trust relationship with Senior management. Management do not trust us, and we are suspicious of them.”

“More effective leadership from the Tier 2 / Senior Leadership Team level. Everything flows down from the top of the organisation. SLT are not walking the talk and some of them are simply not competent at their role. The Chief Executive needs to have a much stronger focus on the development of direct reports - i.e. Tier 2 DCE's.”

“Better decision making at leadership level and ability for them to see big picture rather than focus on silos”

“Leaders do not manage their direct reports (1st-2nd tier) and promotions into 3rd tier and above are not based on leadership capability but on conformity to a risk-averse culture which does not prize evidence-based decisions and options, learning and business improvement”

Lack of people management skills among line managers was raised by some participants.

“Staff wellbeing being needs to be on top of the list for defining the success of management level position. Sadly, KPI's for management at present focus purely on financial and service output in a superficial manner which degrades job satisfaction and kills morale.”

“People leaders taking ownership of their responsibilities; making timely and transparent decisions based on agreed objectives; growing their own capabilities to do their job well; providing appropriate guidance and support for staff; being prepared to advocate for solutions that will resolve identified gaps; taking a proactive approach to identified risks”

Leadership diversity

Some commented on the need for greater diversity in leadership, both in increasing ethnic representation and increasing diversity of thought. There were also comments about the desire for an increased focus on merit rather than diverse groups.

“Increase Māori & Pacific leadership representation.”

“Diversity in the senior leadership teams, in terms of age, experience, race, gender to make smart and innovative decisions”

“I believe that hiring leaders from the private sector will significantly enhance efficiency, reduce waste, eliminate or minimise bureaucracy, and add value to New Zealand. It will also foster a focus on pay-for-performance, meritocracy, encourage innovation, promote a willingness to take calculated risks, and ensure the optimal use of taxpayer funds.”

Disconnection between leadership and frontline

In some agencies there was a pattern of disconnection between leaders and customer-facing workers. Regular interactions would likely help senior leaders’ decision-making be better informed with “ground truths”.

“Really listen to what your employees are saying - in terms of fiscal savings, there are many ideas that exist in the current workforce, and specifically out in the regions that are never sought”

“It is so frustrating when senior leadership bring in a new way of working/procedure/process and you know it is not going to work, have spelt it out to them but they either don't understand what you are trying to tell them or believe they are right, so you have no choice in the matter. Then after 6 months they state to us this new way of working/procedure/process isn't working and now we will do it this way”

“Acknowledgement to ALL, everyone matters even the small people. Presence among the staff, support them, listen and engage. Do not walk past them and please answer them when they attempt to reach out for advice.”

Performance management

In the quantitative results from the survey, 25% said that colleagues/direct reports without the required skills/motivation were a barrier to their ability to work effectively to a great or very great extent. Comments in the survey also raised issues about the limited tools that agencies have available to deal with poor performance.

“It seems like senior leadership has to rely on restructures to remove low-performers.”

“I feel like there are pockets of employees who are no longer effective in their roles however minimal is done to address or correct this. Why is the PIP (performance improvement program) considered to be a non-useful tool?”

“Let staff go who still don’t understand our policies and procedures after years being here and waste clients and other staff members time and money fixing their continuous mistakes. No amount of training and re-training is helping them.”

“Poor performance impacts rest of the teams and their outcomes. I think we need a stronger HR support in such matters and I don’t feel I have enough leavers and supports.”

“Make it easier to sack people, it’s so difficult to get rid of those just clipping the ticket.”

Management structure/delegation

Processes in agencies are slowed by delegations being held at too high a level.

“Currently too many layers of sign off for very little increase in quality. Needs more trust in staff from leaders T1 and T2 and autonomy for T3 and T4 managers.”

Though there were comments about having too many people in management positions and layers of managers, Workforce Data shows that although the number of managers has increased, they have increased in line with the size of the overall workforce. This perception of an increasing number of managers may relate to more people who have people management responsibilities, but are not classified as managers in HR systems, e.g. team leads.

“Cutting down on the number of managers in the Unit. There are too many managers who waste time in meetings and not actually being present to support employees.”

“Removal or consolidation of upper/senior management positions and departments. I don’t think that we need so many General Managers and Directors with some roles and departments having similar responsibilities.”

There was an impression that there are an increasing number of thought leaders not involved directly in providing services (e.g. to service users, people in care, Ministers, the public).

“Trim the fat. For a small organisation we have many higher-end advisors like Principals and Chief Advisors who don't carry weight.”

Strategic direction and governance

Strategic direction and governance	# of respondents
Funding and resources	2213
Strategic vision	1136
Budget/cost management	1089
Governance and oversight	781

Funding and resources

Beyond the technological resources discussed above, participants raised the potential for much more to be achieved if further funding was provided for more services. Some suggested that funds could be channelled into early interventions rather than more expensive solutions that come later. Staffing levels were also raised by many participants.

“More funding for ... equipment/tools.”

“We do not have enough work cars/Fleet cars to properly do our job”

“Lack of budget (staffing, resource, and travel) consistently prevents us from capitalising on opportunities”

Strategic vision

In the quantitative results from the survey, about 6 in 10 public servants agreed that senior leaders clearly articulate the direction and priorities for their organisation. Some people commented further about lack of prioritising and lack of long-term planning.

“Most of the challenges at work are due to competing priorities, unclear direction and average leadership, not helped by insufficient or uncertain funding. I am trying to perform in a system that cannot support performance.”

“Senior leaders should have a clear and long-term vision of how to develop and improve the organisation to evolve and refine the business system to support both staffs and taxpayers. This includes providing clear direction of travel, and avoiding bandaging the problems.”

“The requirement for strategic multi-year plans for all departments to be generated, so that they can inform an overall strategic plan which balances the needs and constraints of each department, and provides clarity for each department on where they likely stand coming into each financial year”

Budget/cost management

Ideas were raised about the system of budget allocation between agencies.

“There should be some form of incentivization for departments to strive to be under budget, rather than having departments spend their budgets in fear that they will get less in the next financial year.”

“When a CE states that there should be no underspend then it becomes clear the 'competitive system of securing budget' (partially based on previous year's performance) is elevated over savings.”

Internal processes around budgets and project management are also areas that could be improved to save money.

“Our organisation needs a better handle on their finances. It's not about cost cutting or scrutiny, but it's about teaching the leaders/managers on how to be financially savvy, literate and overall accountable, and face consequences when not.”

“Quicker sign off to the annual budget each year. For the last couple of years this has not occurred until some months into the financial year. This has caused delays in contracts and stopped actual work ... occurring on the ground in some cases. This uncertainty leads to suppliers and contractors increasing their rates.”

“Better software for managing and approving expenses (i.e. to speed up the process) and different delegations (e.g. bad use of time for tier 2/3 policy leaders to be reviewing hundreds of expenses - this should be done by others in administrative/operational focused roles).”

There were examples of how direct financial savings could be achieved through reduced spending in key areas, particularly travel, accommodation, physical workspace, vehicles, consumables, as well as the use of consulting firms.

“Less travel expense like booking senior leaders hotels and flights because they are not Wellington based. “

“Reduce unnecessary expenditure (e.g. on fancy workplace fitout when previous fitout was adequate)”

“Review of leasing expensive buildings, fleet cars and car parking buildings.”

“Reduce costs on printings and move to a more paperless organization.”

Governance and oversight

Governance processes within agencies, both for business as usual and projects, was also something that could be improved.

“Minimise the number of governance and leadership groups - it only creates more process with no measurable improvement in efficiency and reliability of services and it leads to more meetings and work with less decisions and less clarity of roles and responsibilities. It is the same few people on those groups anyway.”

“Lack of reality testing (ensuring appropriate mandate and Ministerial buy-in for the work undertaken and the establishment of large-scale work programmes)”

“So often projects are started without clear governance, objectives and timelines. Things slip and costs go up, unnecessarily. There will always be unknowns but so often these are self-inflicted issues.”

Organisational culture and values

Organisational culture and values	# of respondents
Organizational effectiveness and innovation	2412
Integrity	1774
Negative workplace culture	767
Employee recognition	557
Positive workplace culture	256

Organisational effectiveness and innovation

There was a desire by many public servants to see more changes that would support improving effectiveness and making space for innovation. Some people expressed that there was little margin to innovate in organisations that are fearful of making mistakes.

“We also need to stop operating from a fear of making mistakes, we are far too risk averse and obsessed with the media which stifles our ability to take risks and do real life changing work.”

“Change current culture of describing everything as a success to recognising improvement opportunities and acting on them.”

“I personally think we need a dramatic increase in efficiency, we've already made epic changes, but I'm wanting to see more.”

Some people discussed resistance to change within their organisation.

“Currently there is no reward or recognition for challenging the norm or innovation. Nor is there a culture of encouragement to improve processes and gain efficiencies. There is a strong preference to continue to do things the way they have always been done rather than ask why things are the way they are when they no longer make sense.”

“Reduction on the volume of changes being made and the speed of which they are expected to be mastered and delivered. Consultation on how these changes will affect people living in different areas e.g.: Metropolitan versus rural.”

Some commented about a need to consider how much overlap in work there is between different teams/agencies.

“I have observed a lot of duplication and a lot of people working very hard but their outputs are not utilised and so they are not delivering any value to NZ.”

“Triage same-discipline teams across different business units”

“Restructure the teams. We have overlapping responsibilities.”

Positive workplace culture

Though the question was about what agencies could do to improve value for taxpayers, some people were keen to let us know that their agency is a great place to work.

“I really enjoy working for the organisation that I do. I am surprised to find that the organisation's ethics agree with mine and it makes for a safe place to work. It's like being wrapped in a large, warm, comfortable blanket.”

“I am enjoying my time at [Agency] and looking to stay long term. My role gives me fulfilment, satisfaction, purpose and the space to really help people.”

Negative workplace culture

Other staff raised concerns about their working environment, particularly with how conflicts were dealt with (or avoided).

“A culture where bad behaviour is permissive either because someone is “so good” that its worth it to put up with, or staff feel too scared to speak up because the person is “highly respected””

“Toxic work culture is rife in this organisation especially in HR. No concern for wellbeing only talking about it... worst culture have ever experienced in my career to date.”

“Manager's need more upskilling especially in how to deal with conflict within the workplace. Alot of the time dramas are just swept under the carpet which is SAD”

Employee recognition

Some felt that recognition and appreciation were lacking, particularly in how leaders speak about staff. This also extended to the desire for more recognition of skills and experience.

“We work hard and have a heavy workload and feel somewhat unappreciated with zero indication of more pay”

“If we are genuine in achieving the outcomes we need to empower all levels to be the best they can be, believe in them, praise the good work and acknowledge when things are getting hard”

“why bother, when good work is not recognised?”

Integrity

There were concerns about merit-based appointment, including a perception of cronyism or nepotism.

“Some people are not appointed on merit, qualifications or skill, but rather they are appointed because they are loyal to a small group of higher tier leaders and above this results in poor decision making, waste and a culture of deference.”

“A return to merit based rather than ethnicity/gender based appointments”

“Ensuring equal career progression and growth for people from all ethnic backgrounds is crucial. It’s concerning that in my department, certain ethnic groups seem to have more opportunities for advancement, while others, despite their hard work and dedication, struggle to progress.”

As discussed above, free and frank advice was sometimes believed to be filtered out before getting to Ministers.

“Protect independent advice by respecting the 'free and frank convention- managers and senior managers must not muddle in ministerial advice in attempt of setting the 'right tone'.”

“While I still think the Public Service still delivers free and frank advice, I think it has been gradually eroded by risk averse senior leaders who don't want to upset their Minister. While it is the Minister's prerogative to make the decisions they make, I think we have an obligation to them and the New Zealand public to provide that advice that may not align with their view, albeit in a constructive way.”

Political neutrality was raised by some participants. There was some belief that the public service should act for the public, and not for the government of the day, which conflicts with [published guidance on political neutrality](#).

“There is a serious misalignment between us -the public service- and our core mandate to act as impartial stewards of the public interest. A concerning number of public servants I've encountered do not understand that we are, first and foremost, accountable to the public's elected officials. We desperately need a renewed emphasis on political neutrality as a foundational value of the public service, with additional training, leadership messaging, and performance expectations, to reinforce this.”

“I believe that Ministries should have greater authority to advocate for the public when ministerial decisions conflict with the public's best interests.”

Conflict of interest was also raised as a concern.

“Conflict of Interest not well-managed or even cared for - the risk of fraudulent behaviours in procurement decisions especially, is elevated and needs to be regularly audited.”

“Have a better system for identifying potential conflict of interests.”

“Also there is a fuzzy line between some of the larger consulting firms in Wellington and upper tier management, this results in a lot of waste and a perception of conflict of interest whether there is or not.”

Staffing and resourcing

Staffing and resourcing	# of respondents
Staffing and workloads	3008
Pay	1644
Skilled and experienced staff	1614
Training and development	1425
Recruitment and retention	1248
Promotion and development processes	957
Physical workspace	403

Staffing and workloads

There was a consistent message of not having enough staff to do the work, resulting in excessive workloads for remaining staff.

*“More staff to assist [service users] via face-to-face, telephone and online with queries would resolve issues more quickly and therefore reduce overall workload
“*

“Having [staff] completing work load of [over 200] clients for months on end then over-300 clients to manage is unrealistic & should never be even requested”

“In order to provide good service there needs to be more [staff] to take on board the consultations we give and then action them. There needs to be more [occupation] employed to deal with the long wait times for service”

In some groups, the work is unevenly distributed.

“Proper prioritisation of budget and FTEs throughout the business, rather than hearing about some business units and teams having 'not enough work' to other business units where staff are dropping like flies due to an increased workload. In these instances, redeployment is the most cost-effective answer, and this is almost never done (from my perspective).”

Skilled and experienced staff

Some teams struggle to get staff with the appropriate skills/experience to do the work.

“More trained staff in the field working directly with the public.”

“I work in data analysis...There is a skills gap within management in our department as well, where there isn't anyone we can go to for guidance regarding data problems. Our colleagues are too busy, and our leaders haven't written a line of code in their life. We have a hiring freeze so we can't fill the gap within the team so we are poorly supported in a technical sense even though I feel emotionally very supported by my team.”

There was an opportunity to save funds currently spent on temporary/contract staff/consultants, who are currently filling those gaps in expertise.

“Investment in in-house technical expertise and centres of excellence to reduce reliance on external consultants and designers.”

“Less expensive consultant firms writing business cases at inflated prices.”

Physical workspace

The use of hot desking was a concern for some participants, particularly when it impacted on the ability of teams to sit together and collaborate.

“Improve office culture and work environment - small things like lack of meeting rooms, quiet work spaces, disability accommodations, excessive distractions, no

spaces for quiet/confidential meetings and calls prevent work being done and are easily fixed”

Pay

In the quantitative results from the survey, just over 1 in 3 public servants (34%) were satisfied with their pay, and the same number believed their pay adequately reflected their performance. There were also comments about how pay, particularly for customer-facing public servants, was inadequate.

“Looking at salary bands of different roles in management/advisory/other back office. Some roles are well overpaid with very little work and/or results being achieved for the wider organisation. Salaries are not well-balanced between frontline staff who are overworked and overloaded.”

Cost of living pressures and the structure of how pay increases are given (e.g. time vs performance) were raised as concerns.

“There is a need to reconsider the step based pay progression system which provides almost zero discretion for recognising high performance.”

“The cost of living crisis appears to mean all goods and services have increased in price by, sometimes up to 15% +. Our salaries need to follow suit”

Disparity in pay between agencies, as well as the private sector, were also discussed.

“Please consider a universal pay remuneration across the public agencies, to make it fair. Other agencies offering the same job for the vastly different pay, with similar work loads.”

“Ensure that pay bands match market rates for the same roles outside the agency”

Training and development

In the quantitative results from the survey, half (51%) of respondents said they were encouraged and supported to apply for developmental opportunities. About 6 in 10 (63%) said they had access to the learning and development they needed to do their job well. For those new to the organisation there was sometimes difficulty accessing training to get them up to speed.

“Better training as I feel it is not thorough enough as I see a lot of errors made, especially by newer staff. This can have serious repercussions & certainly wastes a lot of productive time which is instead spent on correcting errors, rework, escalations etc”

“Stronger focus on staff training and upskilling for foundational skills including ongoing refresher training (Machinery of Government refresher training, regulatory practices training, how government works, keeping safe at work, how to write well for Ministers, developing a good report, how to think differently etc).”

“Provide ongoing training for people leaders to enhance their ability to manage teams and improve performance.”

Promotion and development processes

In the quantitative section of the survey, we found that the common reason to consider leaving a role was lack of career development opportunities (42%). For many, there was a desire to progress within the same organisation, but opportunities were limited.

“Being in administration I am very disappointed there is no progression for me, and it is one of the lowest paid jobs”

“Very few people are able to access promotions without leaving the agency. This is eroding the cohort of experienced analysts / early senior analysts, and I am concerned that this will lead to a skill shortage in the near future.”

“I don't believe the HR structures are effective in promoting people that are working above and beyond their positions, or in incentivising great people to stay. It is easier to move roles and organisations than to progress within teams and develop subject matter expertise ... Many talented, hard working people leave for overseas or other agencies while individuals' content to do the bare minimum remain.”

Recruitment and retention

Most comments about recruitment related to the inability to hire following last year's restructures.

“I find the freeze on replacing staff disheartening when it only goes a short way up the ladder i.e. front line staff are not replaced but new Deputy directors ... and so forth are announced on a regular basis.”

In the quantitative results from the survey, 39% cited dissatisfaction with pay as a reason for considering leaving their role. This idea was also raised in comments, as was lack of career development prospects.

“All the staff that have left our team have cited pay as a primary reason for leaving.”

“My view is that talent and merit should see someone offered further opportunity (whether it be higher remuneration, or opportunities to advance) - My view is that the public service does not foster its talent well. Too many people, including myself, are already looking at moving elsewhere within the next 12-18 months, my organisation should look to develop people and build institutional knowledge”

Some teams struggle with high turnover.

“Need a plan to address ongoing problem of why staff are leaving. The high turnover of staff impacts each site.”

Employee engagement and wellbeing

Employee engagement and wellbeing	# of respondents
Valuing employee wellbeing	1231
Work-life balance/flexible work arrangements	1197
Burnout and work-related stress	810
Employee morale and motivation	659

Valuing employee wellbeing

There were comments about the connection between a motivated and supported workforce and its ability to deliver for taxpayers.

“Having staff wellness as a core priority as part of the business and aligning work with that priority. This would reduce the current demotivation, dissociation, and high rate of staff leaving and vacancies remaining empty. Surely having a constantly underpowered and demotivated workforce is negatively impacting work performance and value delivered to taxpayers.”

“Better hands on support for staff from leadership in managing mental health, workload, and relationships with ours in our kaimahi.”

Work life balance/flexible work arrangements

There was strong support for continuing/restoring the ability to work some days at home.

“I travel 2 hours each way to get to work in a building that is so full... I love my role and organisation the only reason I would leave is due to the reduced option to be flexible. I now need to ask each week to if I can have 1 work from home day, it gives me anxiety needing to ask this each week.”

“Retaining flexible working for staff. In my work there I sometimes am using sensitive information that it is difficult/slow to work with sitting in an open plan office. I can plan my work accordingly so that I can do this work from a private location and not be delayed. It also retains work/life balance and keeps staff happy with the organisation.”

“More working from home and flexibility. Then tax payer's money wouldn't have to be spent on leases, building maintenance, cutlery, milk, tea, coffee, sugar, cleaning contracts, etc. Or simply minimise the size of many corporate buildings.”

Particularly for public servants with caring responsibilities, the option to work some days from home was essential.

“I really value our flexible work policy. As a working mum, the flexible work policy has been a game changer for me... We work best because we know that if the unexpected happens, we can wfh or we can temporarily change our hours so that our work is not negatively impacted.”

Burnout and work-related stress

As discussed above, workload is an issue for many public servants. Comments discussed the issue of workload and lack of job security as causes of stress.

“Uncertainty about future cuts increases work stress and undermines productivity.”

“Removing resources yet expecting us to continue with the same workload and even increasing this workload is ridiculous. I am sick of seeing my colleagues burn out, break down and then leave due to the stress and pressure of work. We are passionate about what we do so we want to provide high standard and good results but it is at the cost of our mental health and well being.”

Employee morale and motivation

Some people were disillusioned with working in the public service.

“I have never seen such low morale yet people continue to work hard, long hours and do their best for the communities.”

“There has been significant loss of support and trust, with consistent cuts of public service staff... The public service is not a good place to work in at the moment and I would not recommend anybody getting into it.”

Respectful workplaces

Respectful workplaces	# of respondents
Equity and inclusion	1558
Bullying and harassment	240

Equity and inclusion

Some participants expressed support for diversity/inclusion activities, and others reacted against it.

“I believe agencies should be working together to build a fully inclusive public service organisation free from biases and inequities.”

“It would help if the organisation was less male dominated and less ageist.”

“There are still multiple active initiatives in place under the "Diversity Equity and Inclusion" umbrella. This has no direct bearing on the delivery of legislated functions we are paid to provide”

Participants from diverse communities raised issues about their experience working in the public service.

“Making the work environment much more neurodivergent-friendly, particularly for those with sensory issues who struggle with excessive noise.”

“Reasonable accommodations should not take as long as 6 months to implement.”

“Being a South Asian professional in New Zealand comes with its own set of challenges—navigating workplace biases, securing career growth opportunities, and proving one’s expertise despite having the same or better qualifications.”

Bullying and harassment

Some commentators discussed experiences with bullying and harassment, as well as frustration with how agencies handle these situations.

“Better processes to ensure poor performance, inappropriate behaviour and bullying are managed”

“The number of people who are distracted from being their best at work by poor management, inappropriate behaviour (including bullying, gaslighting, and sexual harassment), is consistently too high... The most hopeless aspect of it all is that the ones charged with setting the tone, or dealing with the problems, are often the worst offenders.”

“Public Service needs to review how people who demonstrate bullying and poor leadership continue to get appointed into leadership positions. Leadership and basic management skills need to be strengthened and the routes into leadership positions need to be reviewed so that poor behaviours are not rewarded.”

Conclusion

This report summarises the many ideas raised by public servants on what changes could be made to improve the value delivered by agencies. When viewed alongside the quantitative survey results, they offer a valuable insight into ways that the public service can lift performance and have been taken into account as agencies and system leads develop a response.

