

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. REASON FOR CONDUCTING THE INVESTIGATION

In accordance with section 196(4) of the Constitution, 1996, the Public Service Commission is responsible for the following functions:

- To promote the values and principles of public administration as set out in section 195 of the Constitution, throughout the Public Service
- To investigate, monitor and evaluate the organisation and administration, and the personnel practices, of the Public Service
- To propose measures aimed at ensuring effective and efficient performance within the Public Service
- To report to Parliament and, where applicable, to provincial legislatures, in respect of its activities and the performance of its functions.

Against these functions the Public Service Commission considered it appropriate, in terms of section 8 of the Public Service Commission Act, 1997, that an investigation be undertaken into the Management of Probationary Appointments in the Public Service for the following reasons:

- Numerous labour law and common law principles are in place to inform the management of probation. These procedures are being sustained in the Public Service by means of new acts and White Papers
- A perception prevails that these principles have not been comfortably applied or adhered to in the Public Service and may have contributed to dissatisfaction in the work place which could have a negative impact on productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. All in all, this could also have a negative impact on the total process of transformation in the Public Service
- Apart from the foregoing, the importance of focusing on the management of probation becomes significant especially against the backdrop of the Government's policy on a shortened period of probation.

This investigation intended not only to analyse the management of probation but through identifying shortcomings, to inform the amendment and review of national norms and standards as well as departmental policy in respect of probation.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation focused on four important aspects of probation namely planning in respect of probation, capacity-building of probationers, monitoring probation as a process and monitoring the outcome of the probationary period. Each of these represents an important part of the overall management of probation.

3. SCOPE OF THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation was confined to Public Service departments at national level (hereafter referred to as departments) and covered the period 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1998.

Departments of Provincial Administrations were not included since the investigation was undertaken prior to the adoption of the new Public Service Regulations and the appointment of the Public Service Commission on 1 July 1999.

4. METHODOLOGY

Information was obtained from departments by means of a structured questionnaire which had to be completed by the heads of departmental Personnel Offices.

Statistical information on probation was provided by the PERSAL Component in National Treasury on behalf of all departments, who on their part had to certify the correctness of the data.

5. LIMITATIONS EXPERIENCED

A number of limitations were experienced during the execution of the investigation of which the following are considered salient:

- Questionnaires were distributed to all depart-



ments and despite numerous follow-up enquiries, a number of departments did not return their questionnaires.

- Questionnaires were also distributed to all recognised trade unions within the Public Service to obtain their views on the management of probation. Not one of them responded, despite follow-up requests to this effect.
- The information on the Public Service's Computerised Personnel and Salary System (PERSAL) with regard to probation is incomplete and in many instances captured incorrectly and in conflict with existing prescripts. PERSAL provides for information such as the date of appointment, resignations and transfers, information on quarterly reports and date of confirmation. This information was not totally captured with the result that data essential for the investigation were not available. This delayed the investigation and corrective measures were undertaken. Departments, with the assistance of the PERSAL Component, had to update their data on PERSAL.
- Although raw data on probation were captured on PERSAL, albeit in many instances inaccurate, this could not be readily retrieved. A computer subprogram had to be written to retrieve this information. Many departments do not have the skills available to do this. The PERSAL Component assisted all departments by developing a program specifically designed for extracting information from PERSAL in a user-friendly manner. In this regard the investigation had an immediate positive spin-off since this program can now be utilised by departments for monitoring purposes.

6. KEY FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following represent the key findings and proposals in respect of the investigation:

Dual provisions on the duration of probationary appointments

On analysis of the current regulatory framework pertaining to human resource management in the Public Service, it will be observed that there is an anomaly between the White Paper on Human

Resource Management in the Public Service, the Public Service Laws Amendment Act, 1997, and the Public Service Regulations, 1999 in terms of the laid-down probationary periods. Whereas in paragraph 5.4 of the White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service a minimum of three and a maximum of six months of probation is stipulated, the Public Service Laws Amendment Act, 1997, provides for a probationary period that shall not be less than 12 calendar months. The Public Service Regulations on their part are silent on the duration of the probationary period. It is proposed that the Department of Public Service and Administration -

- obtain Cabinet's approval to deviate from the shortened probationary period prescribed by the White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service and stick with the period directed by section 13(2) of the Public Service Laws Amendment Act, 1997, and
- amend the Public Service Regulations, 1999, to also reflect duration of the probationary period.

The management of information on PERSAL needs to be addressed in the majority of departments

The majority of departments do not administer probationary appointments effectively through PERSAL, in the process creating an inaccurate data base. As the accurate capturing of important data impacts directly on a department's ability to monitor adherence to prescribed procedures, to identify limitations and malpractices and simply to manage the process, it is proposed that this be rectified as soon as possible. The expansion of the information framework on PERSAL and the training of staff responsible for administering PERSAL information need to be looked into urgently. It is therefore proposed that the PERSAL Component in National Treasury review the existing information framework on the system as it relates to probation and conduct a training needs survey and address the training of PERSAL users.

Only 8% of departments have developed departmental policy on probation

In the absence of policy, role-players are uncertain about the objectives of the probationary period and their responsibilities in this regard. Managers and supervisors are subsequently also not committed to taking up their responsibilities. Another negative aspect is that training takes place in an unstructured

manner. Since it is essential for giving direction, providing for mentoring and ensuring that important principles are applied in practice, departmental policy is imperative. It is therefore proposed that policy be developed in consultation with organised labour (which is not currently always the case) addressing, amongst other things, the following aspects:

- Objectives with the management of probation
- Fundamental principles laid down by the regulatory framework for the management of probation
- The basic procedures to be adhered to in order to ensure fair and effective management
- Various role-players in the management of probation
- Formally structured orientation and in-service training programmes
- Mentoring techniques
- Monitoring of performance and the management of the probationary period.

More than a third of probationers only receive four week's training or less during the 12 months probationary period and more than 50% of probationers have inadequate job descriptions/ duty sheets

The majority of departments manage in-service training in an informal and *ad hoc* manner, with little evaluation of its effectiveness. If it is accepted that probation is also about learning, about acquiring skills and building confidence and self-esteem, then it is clear from the foregoing that many departments are doing an injustice to their new appointees and the Public Service at large. It is therefore proposed that departments should ensure that -

- job descriptions/duty sheets for all posts in consultation with organised labour are updated,
- minimum standards (quality and quantity) of training are defined in cases where they do not exist and control measures are introduced to ensure adherence to the standards that do exist,
- supervisory personnel are given training in men-

toring skills on the value of a properly managed probationary process,

- managers' and supervisors' perception of probation are brought in line with departmental philosophy and objectives by means of training,
- a process is introduced whereby the effectiveness of capacity-building is evaluated,
- a training needs analysis is embarked upon in respect of in-service training, and that such training needs be addressed, and
- training objectives are defined, orientation and in-service training as well as other forms of training are provided.

As a consequence of the indifferent management of probation, many departments neglect the monitoring of probationers' work performance and the management of probation as a practice

It is important to monitor not only performance but also processes and procedures. Departments need to know whether their objectives are being met and what obstacles are being encountered. To ensure that probation is managed in a professional manner it is proposed that -

- the process is structured and monitored in terms of its main constituent elements and moulded into policy and procedures, and
- managers and supervisors are trained to fulfill their responsibilities.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The importance of the probationary period cannot be overemphasised, nor the importance of ongoing performance assessment and the development of staff.

The legislative framework governing the management of probation not only reflects the reasons for managing the probationary period efficiently, but also represents a guide which, if incorporated into departmental policy and applied conscientiously, will ensure the attainment of the objectives of Government policy regarding human resource management.