

EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING SURVEY

Overview Report

PRESENTED BY

Office of the Public Service
Commissioner

Te Puna Vai Mārama

Summary

The Employee Health and Wellbeing Survey assesses employee satisfaction, work-life balance abilities and challenges, career progression, and conflict resolution. Data collected from this survey informs leadership decisions and helps shape a responsive, inclusive, and high-performing Public Sector. Te Puna Vai Mārama, the Cook Islands Center for Research was contracted to analyze the results of the survey and produce both sector wide and Agency specific reports. This Report is a condensed version of the Public Sector Employee Health and Wellbeing review. It is meant to provide a quick overview of the survey findings; it is not meant to replace the individual Agency Public Sector Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2025 which presents a more in-depth discussion of the survey itself.

Overall, the issues affecting employee wellbeing the most include heavy workloads, high job demands, limited flexibility, and insufficient support from management. These factors are consistent across Agencies. Many respondents reported that their Agencies support wellbeing through flexible working hours, remote work options, and mental health initiatives. While policies for some Agencies exist, their application is inconsistent, and many employees feel undervalued or overburdened. There is a strong push for better workload management, clearer communication, and more equitable remuneration. Plus, several respondents suggested the introduction of mental health leave, a 4-day work week, parental and child support initiatives and structured wellness programs as practical steps forward.

While on the surface the data suggests many public servants are managing their responsibilities with some degree of satisfaction, deeper examination reveals patterns of strain, inconsistency, and institutional inertia. Not all staff are experiencing the same conditions or access to support, and in many cases, wellbeing is made possible by personal effort rather than organizational design.

Job role highlight

As an overview it must be noted that throughout the Ministries, the employees who appear to be more stressed with their work are nurses, police and immigration/airport workers. Their reports of burnout, understaffing, stress, tight deadlines and poor work balance stood out the most. The employees in these roles reported being overworked and underappreciated despite having a passion for their jobs. With the number of issues that were reported in the survey it seems that support and a particular focus are needed for these roles in the Public Sector workforce.

Agency appreciation

The National Environment Service (NES) must be acknowledged for having the most positive reviews out of all the Agencies by its employees. With a 100% response rate, NES employees reported the most satisfaction with their workplace and workforce environment. With praise for their Director and positive team environment, most employees report that despite there being minor improvements that could be made, they are very happy to work at NES.

Coping over change

The efforts of employees to manage wellbeing on their own stand out. Employees describe how they use physical activity, personal routines, and time management to stay balanced. Many public servants are resourceful and committed to protecting their own health. However, the reliance on employees to manage wellbeing on their own can sometimes hide the Agency failings that make coping strategies necessary in the first place. When staff are required to manage chronic stress, unpredictable workloads, or leadership gaps through self-care individually or on their own, it is an indication that organisational systems are not doing their part.

Values without mechanisms

Many respondents also report that their Agencies reflect the values of the Public Service, including honesty, respect, and transparency. While these are encouraging, they are not enough on their own. Values are only meaningful when they shape how decisions are made, how the staff are treated, and how problems are addressed. Without clear action to put these values into practice, such as transparent disciplinary procedures or leadership evaluations based on ethical conduct, the alignment with Public Sector values risks becoming a symbolic gesture. A limitation of the survey is that the data provides little indication of how values are operationalized, especially in contexts of conflict, unequal treatment, or poor leadership. In some cases, values appear to function more as aspirations (things that are nice to have) instead of enforceable standards.

Leadership variability and the risk of arbitrary experiences

The data also reveals significant variation in the quality of leadership across Agencies. Some employees describe their managers as supportive, communicative, and responsive to well-being needs. Others report isolation, lack of visibility, and little engagement from those in charge. Where there is no consistent expectation or monitoring of managerial performance, staff are left to navigate arbitrary conditions. One team may benefit from empathetic, flexible supervision, while another endures chronic neglect. The survey also offers no evidence of structured and dedicated training and development support for leaders/managers in relation to staff care, nor any consequences for failing to meet those standards. When good management becomes a matter of luck rather than design, wellbeing wavers and organizational trust is doubted.

Flexibility is an uneven opportunity

Workplace flexibility is recognized as one of the most valued aspects of the job by many public servants. It enables people to manage family and community obligations, respond to unexpected challenges, and maintain productivity in a way that suits their lives. However, access to flexibility is uneven and often informal. While some Agencies offer glide time or remote work options, others enforce rigid hours or resist requests for adjusted schedules.

Marginalization of mental health

Mental health was raised by several respondents, but it remains noticeably under-addressed compared to physical health. Staff referred to stress, exhaustion, and the need for mental health days, yet few indicated that their Agency actively supported mental wellbeing. Where mental health services were mentioned, they were often framed as something hoped for rather than something experienced. In some cases, the lack of mental health conversation reflects discomfort or fear of judgement. In others, it may stem from limited understanding, a lack of training, or not recognizing the signs of mental distress, especially among leaders who have never been equipped to respond to it. In some situations, it may also reflect misinformation or a lack of access to clear, practical information about mental health. In others, it points to an absence of institutional investment.

Endurance misread as balance

An interesting contradiction in the data is the number of employees who report having a good work-life balance while simultaneously naming excessive workload as a key stressor. This reveals a deeper problem with how balance is defined. In environments where long hours, under-resourcing, and blurred boundaries between work and home have become normal, the concept of balance may be reduced to the ability to function rather than the ability to thrive. Employees may perceive themselves as balanced because they are surviving the demands placed on them, even when those demands are harmful over time.

Conflict resolution in low trust systems

While many respondents reported that conflicts or grievances were resolved within a reasonable timeframe, a significant proportion also indicated that they avoided formal complaint processes altogether. Instead, they managed issues informally or did nothing. This pattern reflects a potential lack of trust in formal grievance mechanisms. In small, interconnected work environments, the fear of retaliation, breaches of confidentiality, or damage to professional relationships can all deter staff from speaking up. Even when policies exist to guide conflict resolution, they are only effective if staff believe those policies will be implemented fairly and without bias. The reliance on self-resolution suggests that many employees view the formal system as inaccessible, unavailable or ineffective. This undermines the purpose of grievance frameworks and allows patterns of poor behaviour to persist unchecked. Conflict resolution must be more than an administrative process; it must be seen as safe, fair, and genuinely independent.

The fragility of policy without practice

Throughout the responses, there is a recurring theme of disconnect between what is written and what is implemented. Policies exist to support wellbeing, guide flexibility, or ensure fairness, but their implementation is inconsistent at best. In some cases, employees are unaware of the policies that should

protect them. In others, policies are selectively applied or disregarded altogether. This fragility reveals a deeper flaw in the governance of the Public Sector: the assumption that policy creation is enough. A policy without monitoring and evaluation, enforcement, and accountability becomes little more than a suggestion. It may look like action is being taken but nothing changes. For employees, this gap between promise and practice breeds frustration, cynicism and apathy. The challenge ahead is not only to draft more policies, but to also give existing ones the weight of consequence and the support of implementation (resourcing and training).

Conclusion

Overall, the survey illustrates the need for a whole-of-Government approach to well-being, one that combines flexible policy, clear leadership, and a supportive culture. By investing in the health and happiness of Public Servants, the Cook Islands can build a more effective, empathetic, and sustainable Public Sector. Agencies with 10+ employees who have achieved a response rate of 25% will receive an individual report summary of their results. This is an opportunity for Agencies to review specifically what is working for them and what changes could be implemented. Simultaneously, OPSC will also be reviewing feedback from the survey regarding suggestions and improvements for OPSC.