

16 December 2003

**To AHCPS Branch Secretaries
Civil and Public Service**

Consultative Council Meeting on Decentralisation

Temple Bar Hotel, Dublin 2 at 4 pm on Thursday 15th January 2004

Dear Branch Secretary

The Executive Committee have decided to convene a Special Meeting of the Consultative Council in the Temple Bar Hotel, Dublin 2 at 4pm on Thursday 15th January 2004 to consider Association policy on decentralisation.

Branches are requested to notify Head Office as soon as possible of the number of branch representatives who will attend the meeting - in view of the importance of this issue for the membership generally, the normal attendance of Branch Chairperson and Branch Secretary may be added to by a small number of additional representatives as considered necessary by Branches. Executive Committee members will also attend.

The Minister for Finance, as you know, announced in his Budget Statement of 3 December 2003 the decentralisation of Government Departments and Agencies and the relocation of 10,300 civil and public service jobs to 53 centres in 25 counties. He also indicated that decisions on locations have yet to be made in relation to over 1,300 (835 IT and 500 Health Sector) of the 10,300 jobs being decentralised and his belief that the final total could be closer to 12,000 jobs and his intention to examine options in this regard once the new programme is well under way. The Minister in his Budget Statement identified the benefits for all which the Government perceive to be flowing from decentralisation and outlined the basis on which the locations had been selected having regard to the National Spatial Strategy and other considerations.

The Minister also indicated that he was establishing an Implementation Committee to drive forward the implementation of the Programme with the Chair of the Committee [Mr Phil Flynn] reporting to a Cabinet Sub-Committee. The Programme involves the transfer of approximately 6,500 civil servants and the relocation of the headquarters of 8 departments and the OPW outside of Dublin leaving 7 departments with Headquarters in Dublin. Ministers with Headquarters outside of Dublin will be provided with a centralised suite of offices close to the Houses of the Oireachtas for a small secretariat so that they can conduct business while in Dublin and while the Dail is in session.

Relevant extracts from the Minister's Budget Statement together with the three Tables on Decentralisation which summarise the proposed arrangements as they potentially affect Government Departments and Agencies, including General Notes outlining the basis used in selecting those Departments and Agencies for decentralisation and in selecting locations for decentralised offices, are attached together with a copy of the official press

release setting out the names of the persons appointed by the Minister to the Decentralisation Implementation Committee.

The intention of Government to decentralise 10,000 civil and public servants was first signalled by the Minister for Finance in his 2000 Budget and Association policy developed in response to this is set out in detail in a letter dated 30 June 2000 [copy attached] which was sent by the General Secretary to Mr Tom Considine, the then Secretary General, Public Service Management and Development, Department of Finance. This policy might be summarised briefly as follows:

- (a) There should be advance consultation with the Civil Service Unions;
- (b) Decentralisation should be voluntary;
- (c) The choice of locations should be on a rational public interest basis;
- (d) Decentralisation should add to rather than take from administrative efficiency;
- (e) Removal expenses and compensation should be paid; and
- (f) Legitimate career aspirations should be protected.

The Association's letter of 30th June 2000 concludes as follows:

The Association, as you know, has no objection whatsoever in principle to decentralisation, but we believe that the combination of the national interest, the requirements of administrative efficiency and a recognition of the legitimate interests of civil servants all point towards the desirability of proceeding on the rational basis which we have proposed. Given the massive scale of decentralisation and its overall national importance, we would see the benefit of publishing a Green Paper Discussion Document to enable the wide range of issues to be publicly debated before final decisions are taken by Government.

The matter was pursued at a Joint Working Group with the Official Side which was established to advise on the development of criteria for the next stage of decentralisation. This, in practice, ran into the sand in November 2000 after four meetings as the Official Side was not prepared to carry out a survey to establish the preferences of civil servants in relation to possible decentralisation. An indication of staff interest in locations was regarded by the unions as of critical importance.

Following the recent Budget Statement by the Minister for Finance the matter was discussed at a meeting of General Council and there was an exchange of views in broad terms between the Official and Staff sides. Attention was drawn by this Association to the AHCPs policy as outlined in our letter of 30 June 2000 and a copy has been given to Mr Eddie Sullivan, the current Secretary General, Public Service Management and Development, Department of Finance who also chairs the Civil Service General Council.

On the last occasion in which it was raised at General Council, on 26th November 2003, the Official Side gave no indication of anything new happening in relation to progress on implementing the decentralisation programme. The Association, in the circumstances, sought clarification on what process might have been followed in the meantime in arriving at a comprehensive decision. We also sought clarification of the basis of choice of the locations having regard to the fact that, apparently, three quarters of those chosen are not either gateways or hubs as set out in the National Spatial Strategy. We indicated that it would be useful to know also the basis on which particular departments were sent to particular locations having regard to the desirability of bringing central Government services closer to the public and to relevant national organisations. Given the absence of any official survey of staff in relation to preferred locations, but intuitively assuming that senior grades would, for valid domestic reasons, be less able to transfer down the country, decentralisation could have a substantial negative impact on the legitimate career aspirations of civil servants remaining in Dublin, and we needed to assure members that the decisions now taken were clearly in the national interest.

The Association, finally, put on the record the widespread anger and dismay created for our members (and, no doubt, across the civil service) by the "**CIVIL SERVANTS Welcome To PARLON COUNTRY**" notice which is publicly taken to imply that civil servants are the property of the Government to be distributed as trophies in advance of local elections.

The other civil service unions also raised very many issues of concern to their members and there was a common union view that, depending on the take up, major problems could arise in relation to surplus staff in Dublin and how their legitimate career entitlements would be addressed.

The Official Side, in responding in broad terms to issues raised, referred to the Minister's Statement and to the accompanying Budget Tables which set out the rationale and basis on which the decision was taken at a political level. They emphasised that the decentralisation was voluntary; that there would be no redundancies and that no removal expenses would be paid. The question of surplus would not be clear until the process was further advanced and, if serious, problems arising would have to be addressed in discussions between the Official Side and the public service unions.

The Official Side also referred to the establishment of the Implementation Group which is to report to the Cabinet Sub Committee by the end of March 2004 and they anticipated the likelihood that general guidelines would be brought forward as to how departments and agencies should proceed with their decentralisation agendas. Progress would be related, into alia, to the availability of office accommodation for Government services in individual locations. Separately, the Official Side will be in touch with Government departments to establish, to the extent it might not be known already, the precise sections and work proposed to be decentralised and the overall numbers involved classified by grade.

The Official Side said that the proposals had the full support of Secretaries General of Government Departments and they were anxious to proceed as soon as possible with the implementation of the programme.

The Official Side, finally, welcomed the proposal of the Staff Side that a Sub Group of General Council be established to deal with industrial relations and other issues that normally arise when decentralisation proposals are being implemented. They understood union and staff anxieties and they hoped that, as on previous occasions, it would be possible to resolve any serious problems that might arise.

The matter was considered by the AHCPS Executive Committee on Thursday 11 December and it was decided to convene a Special General Meeting of the Consultative Council on Thursday 15th January 2004 with a view to considering all the issues arising.

In the meantime, branches are requested, if they have not already done so, to ask local managements to conduct a census across the department or agency to establish the extent to which staff generally might wish to transfer to the locations to which the department or agency involved, in whole or in part, is to be decentralised. Given the industrial relations dimension of the proposal, the matter should also be pursued with other unions at Departmental Council or equivalent industrial relations forum.

Branches are also requested to consult with their own membership with a view to Branch representatives furnishing an informed view on matters arising at the Special Meeting of the Consultative Council on 15th January. Ideally, a written summary should be supplied either at or in advance of the meeting.

Finally, I would appreciate it if this letter and enclosures were brought to the attention of each branch member with a view to informing the debate on the matter. Copies of this letter are also being forwarded to Branch Secretaries by e-mail for onward circulation.

Branch Secretaries should contact either Dave Thomas, Deputy General Secretary, or myself if they require clarification/assistance on any matter in advance of the Special Consultative Council.

Yours sincerely

Sean O Riordain
General Secretary