

## **Statement on Decentralisation by AHCPS General Secretary, Sean O Riordain, to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance and the Public Service**

The AHCPS represents some 3,200 members in senior management positions in the civil service and in state agencies. Like all trade unions we are concerned with the terms and conditions of employment and with the welfare of our members; but we are also hugely concerned with the effective delivery of government services to the public. Indeed we called for strategic change in the coordination and management of government business before SMI was conceived, and our contribution to public service reform has been welcomed and praised by successive Taoisigh.

The proposed decentralisation of 10,300 public servants is the most fundamental change in public administration since the foundation of the State. When it was originally mooted in the Budget 2000 we wrote to the Department of Finance stressing the need for meaningful advance discussions with the unions, the imperative that relocation should be voluntary, that it should add to rather than take from administrative efficiency; the need to ensure that the choice of locations would be on a rational public interest basis, rather than the traditional party political model. We wanted the HR/IR issues addressed and, like the other civil service unions, we wanted a survey of interest before any final decisions were taken.

Finally, we stated our belief that the combination of national interest, the requirements of administrative efficiency, and a recognition of legitimate interests of both public servants and local communities all highlighted the need to proceed on a reflective and consultative basis. We called for the publication of a Green Paper discussion document to enable the wide range of important issues to be debated before any final decision would be taken by Government. A copy of our letter to the Department of Finance is enclosed with this statement.

We were shocked and dismayed at the manner in which the decisions were subsequently announced in the 2004 Budget. Apart from any other consideration, prior consultation and partnership with unions on this key decision had been abandoned.

We engaged in an intensive consultative process with our members and branches in the civil service and in the state agencies affected over a three month period leading to a publication at our Special Delegate Conference on 1 March of a considered assessment of decentralisation under the title *"Public Service Relocation Programme: An opportunity missed and a challenge to meet"*.

Briefly, the Association's assessment contains three messages:

1. It confirms that the AHCPS fully supports a voluntary and rational model of decentralisation which enhances effectiveness in public administration and which

- respects the industrial relations and human resources implications for public servants;
2. It articulates very serious concerns at the affects of forced fragmentation and dispersal of central government functions on policy formulation at departmental, ministerial, national and international levels, on cohesive and coordinated government, on administrative efficiency, and on service delivery to principal client and consumer groups; and
  3. It outlines a rational and reasonable approach to decentralisation which includes a cost and impact analysis, an altered scope and timescale and the adoption of a more consultative and partnership approach with trade unions.

The March Conference unanimously endorsed a resolution by the Executive Committee calling on Government to draw up and publish detailed costings and impact analysis; to reconsider the scope and time frame of decentralisation (we proposed a 10 to 15 year time frame) to make additional resources available; to delay the decentralisation of core IT functions until there was certainty about continued delivery of IT services; and to negotiate a new HR policy which would respect legitimate career aspirations and not create a public service wasteland in Dublin. Conference also called on the Association to publicise our concerns nationwide and to pursue the matter at political level (we sought a meeting with the Taoiseach and with the Minister for Finance) and with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance and the Public Service.

Subsequently at our Annual Delegate Conference in May, Dr Edward Walsh, President Emeritus University of Limerick, articulated additional concerns from his own wide experience and understanding of international practice, and I also quoted conference material which we received under the Freedom of Information Act which showed that there were fundamental reservations expressed by some Heads of Departments, when they were initially consulted, at the possible relocation of core policy functions out of Dublin and at the fragmentation of services.

At the heart of the Strategic Management Initiative is the need to create better cohesive joined up government and policy making across the range of government activities rather than having each department behave as an independent republic. There is, in our view, absolutely no question but that the widespread dispersal of central policy functions throughout the country makes cohesive joined up government more difficult. Nationally and internationally, dispersal also makes policy determination and coordination more difficult for Ministers, for Government, for departments and for civil servants and from experience we do not believe that video conferencing or information technology, as suggested by the Decentralisation Implementation Group, will solve it. The dispersal of policy functions will also fundamentally affect the public in that national organisations, representative groups and members of the public who need to talk to the policy makers - and policy may ultimately decide who gets the money - will have to travel the length and breadth of Ireland to do so. For example, Killybegs fishermen will

now have to travel to Clonakilty if they want to talk about sea fisheries policy to relevant officials in the Department of Communications, Marine & Natural Resources. Community groups from all over the country wishing to meet the relevant officials in Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs will now have to go to Knock Airport; if they want to discuss aspects of the same problem with Environment and Educations, they will have to travel to Wexford and Mullingar.

There are also subsections of departments, individual offices and agencies where, by virtue of location of the principal client groups or consumers, the logic of relocation is at issue. For example, the core client groups of the Equality Tribunal and the Equality Agency are Dublin based and the idea of everybody having to troop down to Portarlinton and Roscrea just does not make sense. Equally, our members are asking what the business case is for moving the Prison Service to Longford where the only adjacent prison is Castlrea and, in Foreign Affairs, the issues arises as to whether it makes sense to move the Development Aid Section of the Department to Limerick, bearing in mind that their principal client groups are the embassies and Non Governmental Organisations in Dublin. And we understand that Dochas, the umbrella organisation for the NGOs, moved recently to Dublin to be near Foreign Affairs.

Turning finally to the people issue, the preliminary results of the CAF very substantially add to the problems as shown in the schedule attached to my statement. On average, only 7.5% of Dublin based civil servants are prepared to move with their 42 organisations to the new locations down the country and the position is worse in the state agencies where only 2% are prepared to move with their 28 organisations down the country. The prospect of replacing between 92.5% and 98% of staff in 70 organisations over a three-year period is mind-boggling and, if effected, would do serious and lasting damage to public service in Ireland. The difficulties created in terms of corporate memory loss, a loss of both administrative and technical skills, even if replacement numbers could be found on the necessary scale, are overwhelming. Senior Management staff engaged in policy are experts in their areas who are not easily replaceable, and the extent to which they should be shifted en masse to other departments and agencies is highly questionable.

There are then the human resources and industrial relations issues. While we would be delighted to see our members who wish to be decentralised facilitated, within a rational decentralisation programme, we must also have regard to the huge concerns of members who put their lives into the service of the state and see their jobs and careers in Dublin disappearing. This has caused huge upset to them and their families which is likely to get substantially worse when the actual churning process begins. The potential for major staff surpluses in Dublin raises an appalling prospect.

The Association called for a review of the scope and timescale of decentralisation last March and everything we have seen and heard since then supports us in this view. There are also major HR and IR issues which need to be addressed.

AHCPS 29 July 2004

