

Remote working plan envisages 400 'hubs'

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The Government plans to create 400 remote working hubs in towns and villages outside of urban centres and plans to have 20% of the public service working remotely.

These were key elements of the Rural Development Plan, 2021 to 2025, announced this week.

While welcomed by ICTU, its general secretary Patricia King warned that remote working cannot be used, as suggested by some employers, for the introduction of casualization and payment for work done and not time spent.

The plan will also introduce legislation this year which will provide employees with the right to request remote working and will also "review the current tax arrangements for remote working for both employers and employees".

While broadly welcomed by both unions and employers, the plan attracted some criticism for being short on detail and funding.

The review of tax arrangements for remote working will be prepared in time for Budget 2022 next October.

Introducing the plan, the Minister for Rural Development, Heather Humphreys, said that it would be a people-led decentralisation and not a building-led plan.

This was an obvious reference to the previous decentralisation plan in 2003, when a number of new Government offices were built or acquired at significant cost in order to house the estimated 10,000 civil servants it hoped would move out of Dublin to locations outside the capital. In the end, around one-third the number of civil servants agreed to move and the plan was formally scrapped in 2011. Several of the buildings were sold off, though some are still in use.

OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The plan was pre-empted back in November by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, when he said in the Dáil, that the Government is considering the establishment of Government office 'hubs' outside of Dublin to facilitate remote working for civil servants, where home-based working is not a real alternative (see [IRN 43/2020](#)).

"Any decision to set up regional hubs requires: careful analysis of the most suitable locations; must meet the operational needs of Government departments; and must be consistent with the National Planning Framework", said the Minister.

However, the current plan has no details of the 400 hubs, specifically as to where or when they will be established, though Minister Humphreys mentioned the possibility of using pubs during the day.

While the plan envisages 20% of public servants engaging in remote or 'blended' working, it does not specify whether private sector workers could use these hubs and, if so, who will pay.

The current plan also includes pilot co-working and hot-desking hubs for civil servants in a number of regional towns.

In addition to reviewing the tax arrangements for remote working for employers and employees, the plan states that it will introduce legislation this year to provide employees with the right to request remote work. However, again, there was no detail added and this had already been signalled by the Tánaiste and Minister Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar, late last year.

While strongly welcoming the plan, the general secretary of Congress, Patricia King, said that remote working must be a voluntary option and should not be imposed on workers.

Ms King was strongly critical of comments by the managing partner of Stratis Consulting, Brendan McGinty, that remote working opens up the possibility of a return to a "modern version piecework". Ms King said that Congress will vigorously resist any move towards pay for work done rather than time.

"The trade union movement is fully committed to ensuring workers' hard-won rights are preserved when working remotely, that protections are fit for purpose and that the post Covid-19 world of remote working does not lead to greater work precarity and casualization", said Ms King.

In the statement following the publication of the Government's plan, Mr McGinty of Stratis Consulting said that some unions have raised the issue of an employee's right to set their working hours which, he said, is "unrealistic".

"However, employers, for some new roles, may want to change the productivity mindset to put an emphasis on the work completed so that reward structures recognise performance delivered rather than paying solely for working time," said Mr McGinty.