

'Return to office' debate kicks off in earnest as pressures mount

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The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has said that precise dates for the initiation of the return to work of workers "have not as yet been proposed by the Government but should be guided as always by public health advice and not business interests only".

ICTU was responding to remarks by Tánaiste Leo Varadkar who spoke of a return to work from August, rather than September as previously planned.

Mr Varadkar said the Government is planning a phased return to offices in September, assuming the vaccination programme continues on course and cases remain under control. But he added that "August makes more sense than September".

However, Taoiseach Micheál Martin, when asked about an August return, said that the Government will look at the situation at the end of this month to see whether "we can move forward in some areas like that".

In May, Ibec, following the publication of a survey of membership on their expectations for return to workplaces said there was an "urgent need for the delivery of a roadmap from Government setting out timelines and guidance for the lifting of lockdown on offices".

The Ibec research found that with the provision of Government guidelines, "it is likely that 78% of respondent organisations could be returning to the workplace by September of this year".

TALKS ON A RETURN

Congress said that it is currently engaged in a consultation process through the Department of the Taoiseach on a safe return to work, including health and safety requirements in the workplace.

"Congress is also of the view that remote and blended working arrangements must continue to be a feature of future working arrangements post restrictions", it said.

Just last week, speaking in the Dáil, Mr Varadkar spoke of a return to offices in September or October. Answering a question from TD, Jennifer Carol MacNeill, Mr Varadkar said "prior to the return to offices, which I hope will be in September or October, I plan to launch a publicity campaign on remote working".

The ICTU statement suggests that the Tánaiste's proposed earlier return to offices was as a result of pressure from business, particularly shops, restaurants and cafes in cities and large towns, that rely heavily on office workers for business. There is also the issue of large office buildings which could fall out of use, and thus value, if there is not a relatively large scale return to office work.

WANT FORMAL AGREEMENT

Two weeks ago, Fórsa called for a formal agreement on remote working to ensure fair access to such arrangements across the civil and public service. The union called for consistent application of agreed guidelines on identifying functions that can be performed remotely, and for selecting staff to be allocated to home working arrangements.

Fórsa said such an agreement is necessary to prevent departments or managers withholding the option of remote working without an objective reason.

The union submitted a formal claim to Public Expenditure and Reform in late March, but said there has been no engagement so far.

"CHANGED FOREVER"

In the Dail last week, Mr Varadkar, said that he has a concern that "we might just drift back to the old normal".

"I believe the pandemic has changed the world of work forever. Many of us will return to work but videoconferences will be more common and travelling for work much less so. While some people will work full time from the office or from home, many of us will be blended workers, working sometimes from the office and other times from home, or perhaps from a hub or on the go", he said.

Mr Varadkar added that the Department of Rural and Community Development has launched a website – connectedhubs.ie – which will provide a shared booking platform for hubs throughout the country.

There are already 66 hubs throughout the country on the site and this will rise to 100 by the end of this year, while the overall target is 400.

The Tánaiste also said that there are 50,000 remote jobs on offer throughout Europe and they can be anywhere in rural Ireland.