

Information released on secretary general pay issue suggests some unease

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Senior officials in the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform did warn Minister Michael McGrath of the “implications” of setting the pay level for the post of Secretary General in Health, at €292,000 - some €80,000 above the top rate for secretaries general.

In a series of letters and e-mails released to the Irish Times under the Freedom of Information Act, DPER officials point out that the proposed pay rate “represents an increase on the current rates that apply to Secretary General posts”. Not all of the information requested was made fully available.

These are listed as: SG Level 1 (€211,742); SG Level II (€201,155); SG Level III (€190,568)

In what is titled ‘submission PER 1384’, the officials go on to say;

“Changes to the rate for the post in D/Health may have implications for the rates that are currently in payment for other SG level II posts as well as the three posts at SG level I (FDPER, DFIN, DoT).”

Minister McGrath has already conceded the possibility of ‘knock-on’ claims from his decision to approve such an increase, but has said that he saw no justification for such claims. (See [IRN 05/21](#))

The new rate for the top civil service job in Health, which was finally approved by Minister McGrath last January, attracted considerable political controversy.

THE RATIONALE

This was complicated by the fact that the secretary general in DPER, Robert Watt, was appointed as interim general secretary in Health, pending a full-time appointment.

The position was advertised publicly on January 8 by the Public Appointments Service. The selection process will be overseen by the Top Level Appointments Commission (TLAC), which following interviews, will present the Minister with three recommended candidates.

The submission from DPER officials also pointed to the booklet accompanying the advertisement for the job. This outlined the roles and responsibilities of the job, emphasising the demands involved, particularly in the midst of the current pandemic, while also pointing out that Health has one of the largest departmental budgets at €21.5 billion for 2021.

This was seen as giving a rationale for smashing the pay ceiling for SG posts. The new rate is almost 40% above that paid to the SG in the Department of the Taoiseach, which was always regarded as the most senior civil service role.

In the submission, DPER officials say that the roles and responsibilities of the SG in health, “may be useful for briefing colleagues at Cabinet as required. Also, the appointment of the successful candidate will fall to be agreed by Government in due course”.

This suggests that some political splash back was foreseen to the new rate which was approved over Christmas, 2020.

The new rate has been heavily criticised at the Public Accounts Committee and the Finance and Public Expenditure Committee and is to be the subject of further scrutiny.

DPER has said that the Cabinet was informed of the decision to set a new, higher rate for the position. It said that the Minister has the statutory authority to set pay for civil servants.

The Departments also said that the then SG in DPER, Robert Watt, was not involved in the discussions about the new rate of pay for the top job in health.