

# New policy foresees structured “blended working” by March, 2022

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**The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, has published a policy statement on blended working in the Civil Service, which the trade union side wants to see extended out to the entire public service, “rather than being confined to Government departments and agencies”.**

The Minister said that since the onset of the Covid-19 emergency, the civil service, like other sectors, “has, in the main, been working in a fully remote environment”.

Subject to changes to public health advice, he said, “some degree of remote working will continue to be a feature for the Civil Service for the remainder of 2021”. But this looks set to continue as the civil service transitions to a more structured system, based in “blended working” by March, 2022.

*The union wants agreement over the use of “any surveillance products or practices”*

Looking beyond the current “exceptional period”, Mr McGrath said the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment earlier this year published ‘*Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy*’.

Now, the Civil Service Management Board has produced a Policy Statement “to provide broad strategic direction to individual organisations in the Civil Service as they consider development of tailored policies on ‘blended working’ that are appropriate to them and their employees, in line with the National Strategy”.

The Minister said this has been informed by the experience of remote working and maintaining service delivery and operations during the pandemic.

“While the pandemic is not yet behind us, it is timely to consider what the future of the workplace looks like. We are committed to implementing models of working for the future that can provide flexibility to both employees and their employers in a manner that supports the continued delivery of high quality services to Government, the public and business,” he said.

**“CHIMED”**

Commenting further, the Minister said there was much detail yet to be worked through. His department was progressing a framework document that “will facilitate a consistent approach to blended working arrangements ... Of course, it will be essential to get the input

of employee representatives to this framework and my officials will take forward this engagement in the coming weeks.”

Issuing a statement to coincide with the Government’s policy document, Fórsa welcomed the statement. General secretary Kevin Callinan said his union was ready to engage immediately to reach agreement on the details.

Mr Callinan said most of the principles and objectives laid out in the Government statement “chimed with Fórsa’s approach, which was set out in a claim submitted to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in March 2021”.

But the union has raised issues that are likely to be of wider concern to employers and workers. For example, Fórsa wants full transparency and agreement over the use of “any surveillance products or practices”, and a guarantee that employees’ rights to privacy and a reasonable work-life balance “will be protected, along with full compliance with the provisions of data protection legislation”.

SIPTU deputy general secretary, John King, said that “for months” the union’s representatives have been engaging with employers in the state and higher education sectors on new and innovative initiatives towards working that are “now at an advanced stage”.

“However, consistency is key. Many employers were waiting for direction from central government and the publication of this ‘Blended Working Policy Statement’ has finally given our representatives the opportunity to follow up on these issues and negotiate blended working policies”, he said.

## **GRADUAL RETURN?**

The Minister said that individual departments / offices will finalise and progressively roll out their long-term blended working policies and implementation plans over the period from September 2021 to March 2022.

“During this period, a gradual return to the office may commence - to be decided on by each individual organisation having regard to their operational requirements. However, the pace of this transition will continue to be dependent on public health advice and the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic”, DPER said.

The following timeline, subject to public health advice, is set out as follows:

September 2021 – finalise detailed policy framework with employee representatives.

September 2021 – March 2022 – Transitional Period – possible gradual return to the office in line with public health advice. In parallel, Departments and Offices will finalise and commence roll-out of their individual Blended Working Policies.

April 2022 onward – all long-term Departmental blended working policies finalised and rolled out.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The key objectives of a Blended Working Policy Framework are to:

1. Ensure the Civil Service will continue to deliver high quality services to Government, the public and business.
2. Deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to move to 20% remote/home working.
3. Enable Departments and Offices to formulate tailored approaches that best meet the needs of individual organisations and their employees, within the overall Framework.
4. Ensure the Civil Service remains an employer of choice by widening talent pools with potential access to blended working options.
5. Support employee engagement, innovation and productivity by providing options for additional flexibility, alongside the suite of other flexible working options the Civil Service currently provides (e.g. Shorter Working Year, Career Breaks, Work-sharing, etc), and by offering options for reduced commutes, more affordable housing choices and improved wellbeing for all employees.
6. Over time, leveraging digital technology in the way we work, alleviating accommodation pressures and potentially reducing the cost of office space for the Civil Service.
7. Support the new Public Sector Decarbonisation Strategy, which has set a public sector decarbonisation target of at least 50% by 2030.
8. Deliver economic benefits by aligning with some of the aims of Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025, and wider Project Ireland 2040 objectives for sustainable regional, rural and urban development.

## **UNION ISSUES**

Kevin Callinan “particularly” welcomed the statement’s commitment to a consistent approach across the civil service, and to transparency and fairness on access to remote working. He said this had emerged as the number one issue for public servants in a large opinion survey conducted by Fórsa last summer.

“We stand ready to engage with the objective of agreeing a clear and consistent public service approach to remote or blended working, based on principles of fair access, adequate employee protections, and robust measures to underpin continued public service quality and productivity,” he said.

Fórsa’s position on remote working was submitted in March 2021, the union seeking agreement under 20 broad headings. Among its concerns was a call for the “consistent application of agreed guidelines for identifying functions that can be performed remotely, and for selecting staff to be allocated to home working arrangements”.

They also sought access and the right to request remote work as well as agreement on the principle that individual employees can decline remote work arrangements. Specific advice on compliance with working time legislation should be part of any scheme, as should the 'right to disconnect'.

SIPTU's John King said that a "fair, transparent and flexible framework" for blended working is the kind of framework that has "the potential to increase productivity, enhance our members work-life balance, reduce traffic congestion and drive a more balanced economic recovery across the country."