

Key civil service unions sign up to BM's reform 'action plan'

MARTIN FRAWLEY

Civil servants of any grade will not have an automatic right to single occupancy office accommodation, according to the civil service action plan arising from the reform agenda agreed under the public service pay agreement, Building Momentum.

Under 'accommodation', which is priority 3 on the list, the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform (DPER) is seeking cooperation from staff with regard to changes in office space resulting from flexible ways of working, particularly with the introduction of blended working.

The plan says this may mean, but is not limited to, "optimising office floor plates through no automatic right to single occupancy office for any grade while having due regard to the effectiveness of blended working".

The plan also will see staff agreed to work toward "the concept of agile, open plan accommodation" for all grades.

The issue of access to separate offices for senior civil servants became an issue when the Department of Health moved from Hawkins House to the Miesian Plaza in 2016. Assistant principals and principal officers, members of the AHCPs, objected to an open plan office and wanted separate offices for more senior grades.

Co-operation with "ongoing workplace change and reform initiatives", are a "prerequisite" for availing of the benefits of the agreement. Civil service unions, Fórsa and AHCPs, have both signed up to the action plan. But it is understood both believe there will also have to be discussions on various aspects of the plan.

GOOD PRACTICE

In a preamble to the plan, DPER says: "In accordance with the agreement, this plan sets out objectives, deliverables and timelines, and will be signed off by the secretary general of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on behalf of the Civil Service Sector," according to the Department.

The timelines set out in the plan range from the first quarter of this year to the last quarter of 2022.

The Department adds that the list of reforms in the plan, “is not exhaustive, and the commitments to cooperation in the Action Plan will apply to any such reforms being implemented in the civil service workplaces over the lifetime of the agreement”.

The plan also seeks cooperation with the “redesign” of all HR policies, including “legislative changes deemed necessary for the move to the WRC e.g. discipline, grievance, and appeals structures”.

The plan also mentions reform of annual leave and bereavement leave policies and processes.

“Policies and procedures will be streamlined in line with good employment law/HR practice, and in particular, will avoid unnecessary layers or additional steps”, according to the plan.

It also includes engagement by staff on amended or extended opening times.

It requires continued cooperation, subject to consultation, with staff re-assignment where required to meet Covid-19 critical demands.

The plan requires agreement on extending and expanding the permanent mobility schemes and where appropriate across the wider public service, on a reciprocal basis.

FLEXIBLE & REMOTE WORKING

Under ‘flexibility’, the plan requires agreement in principle to work with new or revised flexible working arrangements, adding that this will be achieved following consultation and taking into account the current agreement on flexible working.

Given the increase in home or remote working during the pandemic, it’s no surprise that co-operation will be required with the introduction of “blended working”, and enhancement of cross-divisional working arrangements, which, the Department adds, “may include the potential to broaden the scope to include work done by other PSBs (public service bodies)”.

As with previous reform plans, there are a number of reforms covering cooperation with new and emerging technologies in an effort to extend and improve services to the public.

These include co-operation with staff upskilling and retraining as jobs and roles change to ensure better career opportunities. In Social Protection this includes, for example, introduction of online claims and in the Oireachtas, a digital order paper for the Dáil, digitalisation of manual tasks and a memory based translation system.