

No stability if reduced hours deal not “followed through” – public service unions

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The chair of the public services committee of ICTU has warned that “there won’t be stability” in the current Building Momentum agreement unless a commitment to reduce working hours of public servants is “followed through”.

Kevin Callinan was speaking at a briefing for journalists this week on the trade union submission to the independent body examining additional working hours imposed under the Haddington Road Agreement in 2013.

Delivery on this commitment is seen as “an absolute requirement” of the agreement, the public services committee (PSC) submission says, cautioning that “the degree of progress on this matter during the lifetime of the current agreement will set the tone for any negotiations on a successor to it”.

New working hours “baselines” may be the most practical way of making progress

Mr Callinan, who is also general secretary of Forasa, rejected what he described as the “broad calculations” of previous working papers presented by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform in 2017, which arrived at a cost of some €583m with respect to replacing the hours.

However, speaking in the Dail last week, the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform said the hours “are of significant value” to the State and “critical to supporting the delivery of public services”, including in front line services in areas like health, education, Revenue and Social Protection “where they are deeply embedded in their delivery structures”.

This increased capacity was evident over the last year with the “agility, commitment and flexibility” demonstrated by the public service in meeting the challenges of the pandemic.

The Minister added that DPER “will be building on” the previous work performed by IGEES – which carried out the original cost report - in its engagement with the independent body, chaired by Kieran Mulvey.

NEW BASELINES?

IRN reported recently ([IRN 19 – 20-05-2021](#)) that establishing new working hours “baselines” may be the most practical way of making firm progress on reducing working hours under the terms of the agreement, for example, moving to 35 or 37 hour weeks.

A well-placed source suggested that returning various groups to the precise hours they worked in 2013 wouldn’t be practical, given the myriad of different weekly hours worked at the time. Common hours for large grades or categories may be likely as a result.

Mr Callinan said it is the job of the independent body to come up with recommendations. The unions were not assuming that “every hour” in each individual grade would have to be restored; he said it was up to the Body to come with how the matter will be addressed.

€150M - ENOUGH?

Kevin Callinan said this week that the €150m secured by the unions in the public service agreement “should be sufficient to restore most, if not all, of the additional HRA hours without negative impacts on costs or service delivery”.

The PSC chair said that the unpaid working time “introduced as an austerity measure” eight years ago continues to be “a debilitating drain on morale and productivity across the civil and public service”.

The submission also says the additional hours “fall hardest on women” and remains “a deep and primary industrial relations grievance” among public servants. The extra hours “worsened the gender pay and pensions gap”, they claim, as many female workers “were obliged to seek part-time arrangements, retire early, or opt for reduced pay rather than reduced hours”.

DISTINCTION DRAWN

Asked by IRN about the hours issue in the context of broader reforms on sick pay, leave and pensions, and whether a “roll back” of these issues might be next on the agenda, due to pressure from members, Mr Callinan said the “scale of pressure (on the hours) was at a level way beyond what I saw in my thirty years as a trade union official”.

He drew a distinction between policy changes like pensions, sick pay and annual leave and the additional HRA hours.

The PSC claims there has never been a “systematic management attempt to measure any supposed productivity benefit of the additional hours”. The size and shape of the public service, and the technological and work-practice environment in which it operates, “have altered substantially since the unpaid working time was introduced under the 2013 Haddington Road agreement”, it says.

With regard to industrial relations, the PSC says that although “technically introduced by agreement”, the additional hours “are perceived as having been imposed”.

“This is because they were explicitly presented as the sole alternative to a third pay cut for low-paid and middle-income public servants, who had already sustained catastrophic reductions in income”, it says.

The PSC points out that virtually all other HRA measures – including a third temporary pay cut for staff earning over €65,000 a year – have since been rescinded

PRESSURE FROM BELOW

Union sources had, on previously occasions, acknowledged that a demand for restoration of “pre-HRA” hours was something they were unlikely get much traction on. But by mid-2019 this view had shifted.

Kevin Callinan said in July of that year, as pressure to restore the hours mounted, that while it wasn’t an issue he would have run with a few years before, “he now acknowledges it’s a live one for the membership”. ([IRN 29 – 01/08/2019](#)). While he recognised the Government wasn’t prepared to make concessions on hours at that time, he says it was an “absolute prerequisite” that the issue be on the table in the talks leading up to the Building Momentum deal.

This pressure from below built up to such a level by 2019 that it the leadership had to deal with the issue. Discontent over the issue was on public display during union conference season across a variety of public service unions.

“OF SIGNIFICANT VALUE”

Asked by Deputy John McGuinness last week about the most recent estimate for the cost of removing the requirement for staff to work the additional HRA hours, DPER Minister Michael McGrath said the hours “are of significant value to the State and critical to supporting the delivery of public services, including in front line services ... where they are deeply embedded in their delivery structures”.

Setting out the factors that the Body will consider, he said these will include, “any associated costs with reference to possible replacement mechanisms”, as well as “service delivery and administrative implications associated with any reduction” and “the varying application of the additional hours provision”.

The Minister added that it is the role of the independent body to quantify and verify the costs and replacement mechanisms for any removal of the additional hours.

2023 ESTIMATES

The IGEEES paper found that replacing “half the hours” would require the recruitment of 5,826 WTEs at a cost of €311m, while a 75% replacement would require the recruitment of 8,739 staff at a cost of €466m. Other cost factors not included in its assessments, would be a pension liability, “which Eurostat puts at an additional 20% imputed pension contribution”.

In their submission, the unions say that from the beginning of July 2013, “staff in the public service who prior to that point had a working week of 35 hours or less (net of rest breaks) saw this increase to a minimum of 37 hours; those who were working more than 35 but fewer than 39 hours (net of rest breaks) had a new working week of 39 hours while for those who were already working 39 hours the situation remained unchanged”.

The INMO general secretary, Phil Ni Sheaghda, said there would continue to be difficulties in recruiting if the working week remained longer than in neighbouring jurisdictions.

Nurses, having lost the gains made when securing a 37.5 hour week prior to the extra HRA hours, will look to return to their almost achieved goal of 37 hours of almost a decade and half ago.

John King, the SIPTU deputy general secretary, said many staff viewed the additional hours as a “punishment” imposed upon them for being public servants.

With regard to any outstanding recommendations from the independent body that have not been met by the time the agreement expires, the text of Building Momentum says: “In the context of the 2023 estimates, having regard to available resources, on publication of the Report, the parties to this Agreement will engage proactively in relation to such provisions as are necessary to roll out any remaining recommendations.”