

# DPER looks to address shortage of Irish-based applicants for top EU posts

**MARTIN FRAWLEY**

**The Department of Public Expenditure & Reform is funding trainee programmes to help Irish candidates to apply for top jobs in the EU, amidst concerns that the number of upcoming retirements and a drop off in applications will see Ireland's representation in Europe's institutions drop below the expected level.**

Addressing an informal meeting of Public Administration Ministers on June 22, Minister Michael McGrath said part of the strategy to increase Ireland's representation in the EU is the creation within the Irish civil service of a special stream for EU specialists, who will be supported in applying for posts in the institutions.

The Minister said that Ireland is facing a "demographic cliff", as many Irish officials who joined EU institutions in 1973, when Ireland joined the EEC, are due to retire. They are not being replaced in the same numbers.

"Without corrective measures we face being underrepresented for over 60 years – not just for one generation, but for two", said Minister McGrath. Central to maintaining an appropriate balance must be setting targets for recruiting staff from significantly under-represented Member States, he said.

"I recognise that is a sensitive issue. We all agree that recruitment to the Institutions should be based on merit and that no posts can be reserved for the nationals of any one Member State", he said.

But the Minister said that Ireland is now seeking nationality-based competitions for the short-term, "while fully respecting the principles of transparency and merit-based recruitment".

## **FALLEN SHORT**

A report by the Department of Foreign Affairs on Ireland's representation in EU institutions found that 50 Irish people work in policy posts in the EU Commission. But according to geographical balance, we should have 69 people working at this senior grade. (Since the departure of the UK, Ireland represents 1.1% of the EU population).

It also found that 78 Irish people are forecast to depart/retire from EU institutions between 2021 and 2025.

The report finds that Ireland is “adequately represented across the EU institutions staffing body, but have fewer officials at the entry and mid-management levels than should otherwise be the case”.

It says that the number of Irish people applying for posts and traineeships has fallen steadily since 2013. The report puts this down to the growth in the economy here as it emerged from the financial crash, so that people found more suitable, highly-paid employment than before.

“Member States with the highest proportional number of applicants have tended to have high levels of youth unemployment, while local salaries in some members states are proportionately lower than is the case for Ireland, which makes employment in the Institutions more attractive for job seekers there”, says the report.

## **THE LANGUAGES DEFICIT**

Another factor depressing the number of Irish applicants for jobs in the EU is language skills.

The European Selection Personnel Office (EPSO) recruitment competitions require that applicants must be fluent in two EU languages. The second phase of the interview process is held in the applicant’s second language.

“Irish candidates struggle with this aspect of the competition in comparison to their EU counterparts, as the general level of second-language attainment in Ireland is low”, notes the DFA report.

The report also notes that just 10% of applicants pass the first round of computer-based tests. This, says the report, means applicants must spend a lot of time studying and so there is “a low return on applicants’ investment of time in studying and preparing for ESPO test”.

It also notes that the recruitment process is lengthy and it can take two to three years to be assigned to a position.

“Candidates are very likely to have found that alternative employment in this time”, says the report.

## **IRISH SPEAKERS**

Addressing the issue of the Irish language in the EU, the report notes that Irish became an official language of the EU in 2007, and after a derogation period, will have full official status as an EU language from 2022.

It is expected that as an official EU language from next year, the amount of documents requiring translation into Irish will double.

In preparation for the end of the derogation period in 2022, the report notes that the number of Irish language staff in EU institutions language services rose from 58 at the end of 2015 to 138 at the end of last year.