

Secondment decisions are between public service body and “parent Department”

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The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, has said that while secondments in the civil service generally need to be sanctioned by the Department prior to being advertised by the Public Appointments Service, there are exceptions.

Answering a question from Sinn Féin’s David Cullinane in the Dáil last week about the now-abandoned secondment of Dr Tony Holohan to TCD, Minister McGrath said that the exceptions to the guidelines typically include “specialist skill placements”, various EU programmes, diplomatic missions abroad and “arrangements between a parent department and a non-civil service body within its sector”.

“This Secondment Policy also provides that the same principles and guidance may be applied to secondment arrangements between a parent Department and a non-civil service body within its sector”, said Minister McGrath.

The Minister continued: “It is not a requirement for Public Service bodies, as distinct from Civil Service organisations, to seek sanction from my Department to fill a position through secondment. This is a matter between the Public Service body and its parent Department”.

Earlier this year, the Department told IRN that there had been no request to DPER to sanction Dr Holohan’s secondment to TCD.

This week, the Secretary General of the Department of Health, Robert Watt, defended his handling of the Dr Holohan’s secondment.

Mr Watt said that he did not want it to come out that Dr Holohan was leaving his position as Chief Medical Officer in the Department while Covid-19 was still an issue.

However, the proposed secondment was leaked before all details of were made known to the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly and other parties.

The proposed secondment to a TCD research position would have involved Mr Holohan’s salary of €187,000 being paid by the Department of Health through the Health Research Board, who said however that they were unaware of such an arrangement.

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The secondment was also reported to be open-ended, in that Mr Holohan had already said that he had no intention of returning to the role of CMO and that the arrangement would allow him to work in the private sector.

Critically, according to a letter from Mr Watt to TCD, the secondment came with €2m a year funding to TCD for 10 years.

It was this latter funding arrangement, which saw the Government call a halt to the secondment, arguing that such a decision was the preserve of Government and not a civil servant.

Dr Holohan has since said he will retire from the role of CMO in July.

Addressing the Joint Oireachtas Committee on health this week, Mr Watt said the proposed secondment did not sanction the spending of public money and that this would be done later by Minister Donnelly during the estimates process. However, Mr Watt admitted that things could have been handled differently.

Also at the Committee, Dr Holohan said that retiring in July is the right decision but was one he did not want to make, as he wanted to stay in the public sector. Asked whether he could be persuaded to take up the TCD position again if asked, Dr Holohan said that nobody has asked him.