



CENTRAL STAFF COMMITTEE

11/05/2021

CCP-AK/CD

Note for the attention of Ms Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission

Subject: Moving of Commission staff to open space/ hotdesking

All Trade Unions and staff associations (OSPs) together with the Central Staff Committee wish to share with you their serious concerns about the implementation of the new open space/hotdesking working environment at the European Commission.

During the 2368th meeting of the Commission on 24 February 2021 (PV2021)2368, you stressed *“the importance of anticipating changes in working arrangements and of assessing far enough in advance the advantages and disadvantages of potentially reorganising workspaces, with a view to providing appropriate structural solutions and lending support during the ensuing change.”*

On the same occasion, Commissioner Hahn stated that in the future, the Commission *“would need to anticipate the new working arrangements arising from the COVID-19 pandemic while modernising, digitizing and greening them”*. This would provide *“a work environment that meets staff needs, with the human dimension at the heart of the Commission’s concerns.”* Moreover, on many occasions, Commissioner Hahn has underlined the importance of leading by example and establishing a culture of trust at the Commission.

While we agree with your declaration above and with the vision and values put forward by Commissioner Hahn, we notice that the actual implementation of the new Commission’s building policy is premature, and not in line with existing regulations and principles of staff consultation and health risk prevention.

The unprecedented staff move towards open dynamic space in buildings like “Loi 107-The One”, “Loi 51” and “CSM1” has put in distress thousands of colleagues faced with decisions taken unilaterally by the administration on their working environment. The putting into place during this difficult period of the crisis, when most of the staff is isolated in front of their computers without being able to adequately share their questions/concerns with the administration and other colleagues in the same situation does not ensure that service needs rather than building economies are leading. Furthermore, an evaluation period of reportedly just 100 days (June – early September 2021) covering both summer holidays and an only gradual return to the office, cannot be deemed representative to assess a project of this magnitude.

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As described and documented in detail in annex to this note, these unilateral decisions constitute:

- Breach of Commission rules
- Threat to the Physical and mental health of the staff
- Current total denial of the Social dialogue and the urgent need to restore it

In this context, we ask you to ensure that DG HR and OIB rigorously respect the principles of the Commission's Communication ([Communication C\(2019\) 7450 "The future working environment in the European Commission"](#))!

We urge Commissioner Hahn to impose on all services of our institution, starting of course with those directly under his political control, the application of the principles of the above-mentioned Commission Communication and to restore the confidence of the staff by:

- Re-establishing a true and fair dialogue with the staff and its representatives;
- Enabling the CPPT (Committee for Prevention and Protection at work) of the Commission in Brussels to carry out its missions, by receiving well-prepared files with sufficient time to study them properly, while having the opportunity to discuss them;
- Ensuring that the DG HR stops to be visibly overwhelmed by events by ensuring a real governance role in these procedures;
- Ensuring that the OIB stays in its role as an implementation office, simply responsible for the implementation of Commission decisions, no longer pretending to impose its "vision", and disguising itself as a sales agent for open space / collaborative office... only for "regular staff".

Finally, we welcome the initiatives of the DGs who have clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with the current management of the workspace dossier, reminding us that proper consultation and involvement of staff is essential because staff are the Commission's main asset. In addition, they rightly reminded DG HR and OIB of the academic research on the flaws of the dynamic office.

This is by far the best way to provide credible leadership and restore staff confidence.

We remain confident that you will make sure that your political leadership and vision will be translated into concrete actions by all the Commission services and DGs involved, and we ask you to meet you as soon as possible to discuss this sensitive issue for all staff.

Enclosure: 1

Signed

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In support of the above note, this annex is intended to **describe and document in detail how** the current unilateral decisions by Commissioner Hahn services constitutes a:

- Breach of Commission rules
- Threat to the Physical and mental health of the staff
- Current total denial of the Social dialogue and the urgent need to restore it

Breach of the Commission rules

Staff was not consulted on the move to a working environment combining open space and hotdesking, in breach of the rules and principles established in the [Communication C\(2019\) 7450 "The future working environment in the European Commission"](#). E.g.:

- RECOMMENDATION 7. Establish a Workplace Steering Committee and an integrated Workplace Service to provide more coordinated steering and support to Directorate-13 Generals, departments and teams.
- RECOMMENDATION 8. Carry out benchmarking on the working conditions and working environment specific to different work profiles (professions) in the Member States. This will serve as a basis for making the workplace in the Commission more attractive.
- RECOMMENDATION 9. The Housing Conditions Manual for Commission Directorate Generals and Services applicable to buildings of the European Commission in Brussels and Luxembourg (Part 1 and 2) and other relevant policy and guidance documents should be aligned with the principles and recommendations included in this Communication.

In the information sessions held in different DGs, our colleagues were merely presented with a *"fait accompli"*, in a take-it-or-leave-it approach, totally at odds with the principle of dialogue and trust.

It is obvious that colleagues who must move to open space or flexi-space without having anything to say will certainly ask for more teleworking days and refuse this new environment.

The result is a total confusion among colleagues - those who want to telework, those who want to come back to the office and those who are completely lost as changes come from all sides. Teleworking regime should be flexible and voluntary but not imposed.

Therefore, we question the method and implementation of issues such as working arrangements and working environment. Silos between teleworking guidelines, working environment and work content should be broken down to build a holistic approach understood by everyone.

To separate these different files in their implementation would be simplistic and lead us to what we are experiencing today: misunderstanding, discontent, frustration and demotivation.

The OSPs, the staff committees, the relevant joint committees (the Committee for prevention and protection at work in Brussels (CPPT-BXL) and the Health and Safety Committee in Luxemburg (CSHT)) should be not only consulted but they should also give their approval before establishing any new policy in their jurisdiction. Such a consultation is foreseen by the Housing Conditions Manual part 2 (MCH2) in particular point 3.3.1, *"Mandatory prior study of the functional needs by the applicant DG" for space planning, setting out that "as early as the preliminary study stage, the applicant departments must involve the staff concerned in defining the project (layout of premises and workstations) in consultation with the Office of the place of employment. This is part of the dual objective of encouraging the appropriation and personalisation of the space....."*;

For the record, the CPPT in Brussels was only consulted – with an incomplete file – after a significant number of staff had already been moved into the new L107 building "The One".

We have questions about the legal basis used for establishing a hot-desking working environment at the Commission, given that the draft Housing Conditions Manual part 3 (MCH3) is still being drafted since 2015 in particular point 2.3, setting out that staff should be properly consulted and involved in any changes that affect them through a balanced approach, e.g. by carrying out a preliminary study on functional needs and different types of jobs (MCH3). Therefore, an impact assessment followed by an ex-ante analysis of a reasonable pilot phase should be carried out to evaluate the possible risks for staff in terms of health and safety, with particular reference to psychosocial risks and the suitability of this type of environment in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Additionally, this manual is outdated in the light of developments in working methods brought by the pandemic and is in the process of being updated by CPPT.

As already mentioned in the note of the CPPT on the draft MCH3 of 9 June 2015 (Ref. Ares(2015)2831199) indicating the need to run a pilot project before the establishment of a

hot-desking environment. The committee also reserved its right to give an opinion on the final version of MCH3 after analysing the results of the pilot project. Clearly, the ongoing staff move in two buildings housing a proportion of +/- 12 % of all EC staff - more than 1500 workplaces for the L-107 and more than 1000 workplaces for the L-51 - cannot be considered as a pilot project given the number of staff involved and its impact

Therefore, we call on you, Ms President, to make sure that the administration applies its own rules and regulations.

You stressed yourself in the Collège meeting of 24 February 2021; *“the importance of anticipating changes in working arrangements and of assessing far enough in advance the advantages and disadvantages of potentially reorganising work spaces, with a view to providing appropriate structural solutions and lending support during the ensuing change.”*

Threat to the Physical and mental health of the staff

Commissioner Hahn stressed that protecting the mental health and the well-being of staff is a key priority for the Commission. However, we are concerned about the mental and physical health of the staff who will be, or are already, transferred to this new environment in the middle of the COVID health crisis. The difficulties they face should not be minimized, even though the Commission’s staff has shown an impressive resilience and capacity for adaptation and maintained a high productivity despite the context.

As regards to risk management, we would like to alert the administration on the risks of increased propagation of this virus and its variants in a dynamic open plan offices’ distribution.

In particular, if we have unvaccinated staff present in office at the same time as vaccinated staff, vaccination is not mandatory. These situations could create major outbreaks of contamination and thus be a very costly health hazard for our Institution

Concerning the ergonomic solutions, there is a total absence of proposal by the administration about the use of furniture by different people with different body types. We underline the importance of ensuring staff buy-in and urge the administration to provide adequate incentives, reinvesting potential savings in measures to support staff well-being.

On mental health, it is an evidence that the consequences of COVID isolation in terms of lack of social contacts at the workplace affected the large majority of the population. The new working environment will even increase this feeling and will affect even more staff health conditions.

Although we are in favour of energy-efficient buildings (that seems not being the case for the L-107 which it is not green building at all) and make every square metre greener to reduce the Commission's carbon footprint, but not to the detriment of staff's psychosocial well-being. In addition, a preliminary analysis addressing the right questions such as: how to manage teamwork, knowledge sharing, communication; how to develop corporate culture and collective intelligence; how to ensure the integration of newcomers and mobile staff; how to properly manage daily exchanges with external stakeholders; must be considered for a proper implementation of the working environment policy.

Current total denial of the Social dialogue and the urgent need to restore it

The new working environment policy that the administration is outlining should be implemented gradually over the next years for a change of culture in line with the Commission's policy priorities. We attach utmost importance to the credibility, trust, transparency and accountability of this policy.

Its implementation in the medium and long term should be a holistic process inclusive of all parties involved. This process should also be gradual and balanced, taking into account the specificities of the DGs and the diverse needs of staff.

Nevertheless, this is not the case as this policy is already a reality for a large part of colleagues.

For this reason, we ask that the social dialogue with the staff committees and the OSPs on the new working environment should start as a matter of urgency, before any further moves of staff into hot-desking.

Moreover, as the new working arrangements are regulated in the Housing Conditions Manuel 3, we urge the administration to review and adopt this important document prior to carrying out the office moves, so as to ensure the best conditions for the staff. This work must rely on a strong collaboration between the administration and both Joint committees, the Committee for prevention and protection at work in Brussels ([CPPT-BXL](#)) and Health and Safety Committee in Luxembourg ([CSHT](#)).

Therefore, we should wait for the end of the work of these committees and follow the recommendations and process they will put forward in this manual and once validated then only move the colleagues in this new environment.