

Workers shun Greens' bike bid

A green cycle to work scheme has failed to get on the road

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Two months after its introduction, not a single government department has taken advantage of the Green party's tax-incentive scheme to promote cycling to work. The private sector response has been just as poor.

Calls to seven of the 10 companies voted "Best places to work in Ireland" revealed that only one has introduced the programme. Two said they were unlikely to do so, because of a lack of demand.

The plan, which allows employers and employees to claim back tax on the purchase of a cycle and equipment, has been available since January 1.

Ciaran Cuffe, a Green party TD, has discovered that no government department has made the scheme available to staff. Mary Coughlan, the enterprise minister, said her department had not made any plans to introduce the scheme and was awaiting instructions from the Department of Finance. The majority of other departments said they were "considering the detailed arrangements required to implement the scheme".

The departments of environment and transport are the only two with plans to make the programme available to staff within a few weeks.

"I'm just conscious that this is something that could fall by the wayside if we don't watch out," said Cuffe. "We recently wrote to the Department of Finance and urged it to publicise the scheme. Now we've been told that it is going to issue a memo to all government departments to encourage them to sign up to it."

The lack of publicity for the plan is one reason for the muted response, according to Eamon Marrey, of Marrey Bikes and Gizmos, in Ballinrobe, Co Mayo.

When it was first announced in October's budget, Marrey put together "cycle-to-work" packages, in anticipation of consumer demand.

"We've sold the packages to just six people so far, considerably less than we had expected," he said. "People don't know anything about it. For example, there is one big employer in this area and we would have expected a lot of business from them. But their workers are asking us for information because their employer doesn't know anything about it."

Marrey said the economic climate was also a factor in the low take-up. “People just don’t have the money,” he said. “We thought we’d have some people buying new wheels for their old bikes, and trying to write it off under the scheme, but we haven’t even seen that.”

Lack of interest among employees is the reason cited for not introducing the programme in Sigmar Recruitment and Euro Car Parks, two of the top companies in the “best places to work” survey.

“We did a survey, and only one in 20 people was interested,” said Robert Mac Giolla Phadraig, the associate director of Sigmar. “People were saying the weather was too bad, the traffic was too dangerous and there was nowhere to store the bike. A lot of this stuff is taking second place to companies just trying to survive.”

Dave Cullen, chief executive of Euro Car Parks, said the company had tried to introduce a similar scheme two years ago, but that it received “zero response” from employees. “I think it’s a great idea in theory, but I’m not sure about the practicalities,” he said. “Ultimately, people are reluctant to give up their cars.”

Deloitte, another of the companies in the top-10 list, has introduced the scheme for its workers, while Microsoft Ireland hopes to have it operational within weeks. PricewaterhouseCoopers, Jones Lang LaSalle and Quintiles and Innovex all said that they were considering the details of the scheme. There was no response from the remaining three companies in the list.

Under the programme, an employer can purchase a bicycle and cycling accessories for an employee, up to the value of €1,000, and then claim back a percentage of this through pay related social insurance. Alternatively, workers can pay their employer for the bike by making contributions from their salary. The employee then benefits from tax relief.

The Revenue Commissioners said it would have to wait until tax returns had been filed for this year before estimating the take-up. According to the 2006 census, 1.9% of adults cycle to work.