

PENSIONS & RETIREMENT PLANS

Ireland



Pensions & Retirement Plans

Consulting editors

Penny Cogher

Irwin Mitchell LLP

Quick reference guide enabling side-by-side comparison of local insights, including into the statutory and regulatory framework; state pension provision; occupational pension schemes; compliance and enforcement; plan changes and termination; fiduciary responsibilities; legal challenges; future prospects; and current hot topics.

Generated 08 December 2022

The information contained in this report is indicative only. Law Business Research is not responsible for any actions (or lack thereof) taken as a result of relying on or in any way using information contained in this report and in no event shall be liable for any damages resulting from reliance on or use of this information. © Copyright 2006 - 2022 Law Business Research

Table of contents

STATUTORY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Primary laws and regulations

Regulatory authorities

Pension taxation

STATE PENSION PROVISIONS

Framework

Pension calculation

Aims

Current fiscal climate

OCCUPATIONAL PENSION SCHEMES

Types

Restrictions

Overseas employees

Funding

Level of benefits

Pension escalation

Death benefits

Retirement

Early distribution and loans

Change of employer or pension scheme

Investment management

Reduction in force

Executive-only plans

Unionised employees

ENFORCEMENT

Examination for compliance

Penalties

Rectification

Disclosure obligations

Enforcement mechanisms

PLAN CHANGES AND TERMINATION

Rules and restrictions

Insolvency protection

Business transfer

Surplus

FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITIES

Applicable fiduciaries

Fiduciary duties

Breach of duties

LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS

Legal challenges

Future prospects

UPDATE AND TRENDS

Hot topics

Contributors

Ireland



Eleanor Cunningham

Eleanor.Cunningham@mccannfitzgerald.com

McCann FitzGerald LLP

MCCANN FITZGERALD

STATUTORY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Primary laws and regulations

What are the main statutes and regulations relating to pensions and retirement plans?

The Pensions Act 1990 (as amended) (Pensions Act) and the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (as amended) (TCA) are the principal legislative provisions governing pensions and retirement plans in Ireland. The Pensions Act was recently amended to reflect Directive 2016/2341 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2016 on the activities and supervision of institutions for occupational retirement provision (IORP II), which were signed into Irish law on 22 April 2021 by virtue of the European Union (Occupational Pension Schemes) Regulations. IORP II imposed significantly higher standards of governance and additional requirements on pension schemes in Ireland.

Numerous regulations have been made under the Pensions Act. The most important regulations govern preservation of benefits, the funding standard, disclosure of information, revaluation and investment rules. Statutory guidance has been issued by the Pensions Authority and prescribed by the Minister for Social Protection under regulation. Statutory guidance has the force of law and has been applied to reductions in accrued benefits, funding proposal certification, contingent assets, unsecured undertakings and transfer payments. The TCA regulates the tax treatment of occupational pension schemes and pension products. Family law provisions also affect pension provision.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Regulatory authorities

What are the primary regulatory authorities and how do they enforce the governing laws?

The Pensions Authority

The Pensions Authority:

- supervises compliance with the requirements of the Pensions Act by trustees of occupational pension schemes and trust retirement annuity contracts (RACs), personal retirement savings accounts providers, registered administrators and employers;
- investigates suspected breaches of the Pensions Act;
- conducts on-site inspections and compliance audits;
- instigates prosecutions and other sanctions where breaches of the Pensions Act are found to have occurred;
- provides policy advice and technical support to the work of the Minister and Department of Social Protection;
- provides relevant information and guidance to the public and those involved with pensions; and
- deals with inquiries received from scheme members, trustees, employers, the pensions industry, the general public and the media.

The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman

Legislation to amalgamate the Office of the Pensions Ombudsman and the Financial Services Ombudsman came into force on 1 January 2018. Among other things, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman investigates and decides complaints and disputes from individuals about their occupational pension schemes, personal retirement savings accounts and trust RACs where there is maladministration or financial loss.

The Revenue Commissioners

The Revenue Commissioners enforce the TCA through the grant or withdrawal of their approval for occupational pension schemes and pension products. The grant of approval ensures a favourable tax treatment will apply to contributions and investment return. The TCA grants discretionary powers to Revenue in relation to the approval of occupational pension schemes. The Revenue Commissioners publish a Revenue Pensions Manual, which gives general guidance on how its powers are exercised.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Pension taxation

What is the framework for taxation of pensions?

An occupational pension scheme that is approved by the Revenue Commissioners as an exempt approved scheme is tax efficient for several reasons. Employee contributions are allowable as an expense in assessing the member's liability to tax. In any tax year, and depending on age, tax relief will apply to contributions of between 15 per cent and 40 per cent of the employee's remuneration (up to a maximum remuneration of €115,000). An ordinary annual contribution paid by an employer is allowed as a tax deduction. Income derived from investments or scheme deposits is exempt from income tax. Pension payments are subject to income tax and levies when in payment, and commutation of pension for a tax-free lump sum is permitted within certain limits.

The TCA has imposed a maximum allowable retirement pension fund for tax purposes. It has done so by imposing a lifetime limit on the total capital value of pension benefits that an individual can draw in their lifetime from tax-relieved pension products. This applies where those benefits are taken or come into payment for the first time on or after 7 December 2005. The limit is called a standard fund threshold. It is currently €2 million (having gradually reduced from a higher limit). In certain circumstances, individuals may have applied for a higher personal fund threshold from Revenue on or before 1 July 2015. Any excess above the threshold is subject to an upfront income tax charge of 41 per cent.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

STATE PENSION PROVISIONS

Framework

What is the state pension system?

The state pension (contributory) is a social insurance payment made to people aged 66 or over who satisfy certain social insurance contribution conditions. The pension (personal rate) is not means tested or affected by other income.

The state pension (non-contributory) is a means-tested payment for people aged 66 or over who do not qualify for the state pension (contributory) based on their social insurance record.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Pension calculation

How is the state pension calculated and what factors may cause the pension to be enhanced or reduced?

To qualify for a state pension (contributory) a person must be aged 66 or over and have enough Class A, E, F, G, H or S social insurance contributions.

They need to:

- have paid social insurance contributions before a certain age;
- have a certain number of social insurance contributions paid; and
- have a certain average number over the years since they first started to pay.

To qualify for the state pension (contributory), a person must have entered insurable employment before they turned 56 years of age, and paid at least 520 full-rate social insurance (PRSI) contributions since starting insurable employment or, if an individual turned 66 before 6 April 2012, paid at least 260 full-rate contributions. The qualifying conditions are very detailed and described on the website of the Department Social Protection.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Aims

Is the state pension designed to provide a certain level of replacement income to workers who have worked continuously until retirement age?

The state pension will provide a basic level of retirement income, provided a person qualifies for this benefit. The state pension is intended to ensure that everyone receives a basic standard of living in retirement. Some people do not receive a full state pension because they have not been credited with enough social insurance contribution payments. In these cases, lower levels of state pension may be paid.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Current fiscal climate

Is the state pension system under pressure to reduce benefits or otherwise change its current structure in any way on account of current fiscal realities?

Yes, in a number of ways. The state pension age increased on 1 January 2014 from the age of 65 to the age of 66. It had been due to increase to the age of 67 on 1 January 2021 and the age of 68 on 1 January 2028, but these changes have been delayed. Recently the Minister for Social Protection announced a series of landmark reforms to the state pension system which have been approved by Cabinet on Tuesday morning, and are in response to the recommendations from Pensions Commission.

The set of reforms agreed include:

- maintaining the State Pension age at 66 and introducing a new flexible pension age model;
- from January 2024, people will have the option to continue working up until the age of 70 in return for a higher pension;
- as recommended by the Pensions Commission, move fully to a 'Total Contributions Approach' for calculation of individual pensions entitlements on a phased basis over 10 years starting in January 2024;
- there will be enhanced State Pension provision for long-term carers to be introduced from January 2024. This will mean, for the first time, people who have to give up work over a long duration to look after a loved one will have their time spent caring recognised in the pension system';
- the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will introduce measures that allow, but do not compel, an employee to stay in employment until the State Pension age;
- workers will be provided with access to a PRSI contribution statement service each year in a manner that enables them to understand their entitlements;
- the long-term sustainability of the state pension system will be addressed through gradual, incremental increases

in social insurance rates over time;

- the level and rate of increase in social insurance rates will be determined on a structured basis every five years informed by the outcome of a statutory actuarial review; and
- a commitment to explore the design of a scheme that would modify the current Benefit Payment for 65-year-olds to provide a benefit payment for people who, following a long working life, 40 years or more, are not in a position to remain working in their early 60s.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

OCCUPATIONAL PENSION SCHEMES

Types

What are the main types of private pensions and retirement plans that are provided to a broad base of employees?

Defined benefit plans, defined contribution plans (including master trust plans) and hybrid plans are established under trust. Hybrid plans generally combine characteristics of defined benefit and defined contribution and historically have been set up under separate trusts. Many defined benefit plans have become frozen plans under which future accrual has ceased and instead is provided under a new separate defined contribution plan. Therefore, an employee might, at retirement, have benefits paid from two plans.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Restrictions

Are employers required to arrange or contribute to supplementary pension schemes for employees? What restrictions or prohibitions limit an employer's ability to exclude certain employees from participation in broad-based retirement plans?

Under the Pensions Act, an employer must comply with the principle of equal treatment under the Pensions Act in relation to the manner in which it affords its employees access to a scheme. The principle of equal treatment under the Pensions Act means that there will be no direct or indirect discrimination in any scheme rule on any of the discriminatory grounds under the Pensions Act that include gender, age and family status, among other grounds, with exceptions or savings applying to many of them. Otherwise, there are no restrictions.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Can plans require employees to work for a specified period to participate in the plan or become vested in benefits they have accrued?

A maximum service period of six months for eligibility to participate is acceptable before an employer must facilitate an alternative arrangement. If the qualifying service period is longer than six months, then the employer must facilitate the employee with access to a standard Personal Retirement Savings Account (PRSA). This means that the employer must allow its payroll system to deduct contributions from salary if the employee so requests and pass them to the PRSA provider with whom the employer has entered into a PRSA arrangement. There is no statutory obligation on an employer to contribute to a PRSA, though an obligation may arise through the contract of employment.

Under an occupational pension scheme, benefits vest under the Pensions Act when a member leaves service having completed two years' qualifying service (ie, service as a scheme member, service as a member of a scheme of the

same employer and service as a member of a scheme of a different employer from which a transfer payment has been received). It is open to an occupational pension scheme to provide more generous vesting provisions than the minimum prescribed under the Pensions Act.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Overseas employees

What are the considerations regarding employees working permanently and temporarily overseas? Are they eligible to join or remain in a plan regulated in your jurisdiction?

If the employee is working temporarily overseas on secondment from an Irish employer for a limited period and can be deemed to remain on its payroll, the employee may remain or become a member of the Irish employer's Revenue-approved scheme. If an employee is sent abroad other than on secondment to serve with a non-resident company in a group of which the parent company is resident in the state, but the parent company can recall or direct the employee elsewhere, the employee may remain or become a member of the Irish employer's Revenue-approved scheme but this must first be referred to Revenue.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Funding

Do employers and employees share in the financing of the benefits and are the benefits funded in a trust or other secure vehicle?

Employers must contribute as a condition of Revenue approval in some form, but there is flexibility as to the extent of their contributions provided they are meaningful, which could mean operating costs and death in service premiums. It is now unusual that balance of cost (ie, where the employer carries the cost above the employee contributions) defined benefit schemes are non-contributory. Those that were such historically have largely introduced employee contributions or reduced future accrual. Defined contribution schemes may be contributory or non-contributory. Some will have a core ordinary employer and employee contribution and additional matching employer contributions if members contribute some or further contributions. Occupational pension schemes are established under trust so that trustees hold the pension fund assets separate from the employer's assets.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

What rules apply to the level at which benefits are funded and what is the process for an employer to determine how much to fund a defined benefit pension plan annually?

The Pensions Act imposes a statutory minimum funding standard on defined benefit schemes, which increased on 1 January 2016 to include a reserve. The actuary must carry out a valuation of such schemes every three years in order to advise, recommend or set the employer contribution rates (depending on what the deed provides for) and must also complete an annual test. Meeting that standard means that the scheme can buy annuities for pensioners but only provide transfer values for active and deferred members. If a scheme does not satisfy the standard, the trustees must submit a funding proposal to the Pensions Authority to rectify the situation within a specified period. The scheme actuary will also value the fund on an ongoing basis and perhaps on another basis to assess approximately how much of the benefits could actually be secured. For example, in a frozen scheme that is a balance of cost scheme, the actuary might be asked by trustees to value the fund on a self-sufficiency basis to map out a plan as to when the scheme might be able to secure all benefits and what funding arrangement over what time period might achieve that

result. In a balance-of-cost scheme, the balance of power in the scheme's contribution rule may influence the level of additional funding from time to time depending on by whom the rate is set and the strength of the employer covenant.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Level of benefits

What are customary levels of benefits provided to employees participating in private plans?

In a defined benefit plan, benefits are based on a fraction of pensionable remuneration for each year of pensionable service depending on how these terms are defined in the governing trust deed and rules. Generally a fraction of one-sixtieth applies. Very often the formula takes the state pension (contributory) into account when calculating the total benefits accrued (which is known as integration).

In a defined contribution plan, a member builds up a retirement account from the value of employee and employer contributions. The account is used to secure benefits at retirement usually as the member decides from a range of options and subject to Revenue rules (ie, securing members' and dependants' pensions with a life office, paying a tax-free lump sum, paying a taxed lump sum, or making a transfer to an approved retirement fund or approved minimum retirement fund).

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Pension escalation

Are there statutory provisions for the increase of pensions in payment and the revaluation of deferred pensions?

There is no statutory increase to pensions in payment. If a former employee has an entitlement to a deferred pension that has vested under the Pensions Act (ie, become preserved), it will normally be revalued (at the lesser of 4 per cent and the increase in the consumer price index) at the end of each year until payment commences. The Pensions Act provides for an adjustment downwards if the Minister declares a negative revaluation percentage. Whether or not trustees can reduce preserved deferred benefits will depend on the wording in the scheme rules.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Death benefits

What pre-retirement death benefits are customarily provided to employees' beneficiaries and are there any mandatory rules with respect to death benefits?

Dependants' pensions as a percentage of the member's pension may be payable under a defined benefit scheme. A lump sum death in service benefit will usually apply.

A separate lump sum death-in-service benefit is usually insured under a defined contribution plan. In some cases, a spouse's pension as a percentage of salary is also insured. The value of the member's retirement account will also usually be paid. In some cases, the amount of lump sum payment will have regard to the amount of the retirement account or may have regard to death benefits payable under another scheme of the employer where a restructuring of pension arrangements has occurred and the member has an entitlement under that other scheme.

On death in deferment, if a member is entitled to a deferred pension in a defined benefit scheme that is preserved under the Pensions Act, its actuarial value must be paid to the legal personal representatives. Alternatively, the trustees

may pay dependants' pensions in lieu, if the scheme rules allow for dependants' pensions on death in service. If a deferred pensioner in a defined contribution scheme dies in deferment with a preserved benefit, an amount is paid to their legal personal representatives, which is usually equal to the member's retirement account.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Retirement

When can employees retire and receive their full plan benefits? How does early retirement affect benefit calculations?

Members may retire early under Revenue rules on or after their 50th birthday, if the scheme rules permit. Under Revenue rules, but depending on the scheme rules, benefits may be paid immediately regardless of age if retirement is caused by ill health. Under Revenue rules, ill health means physical or mental deterioration that is serious enough to prevent the individual from following their employment or very seriously impairs their earning capacity. Ill health early retirement is usually subject to employer or trustee consent and the qualifying condition under the scheme rules may be more onerous. On ill-health early retirement, benefits under Revenue rules may be the same fraction of remuneration the employee would have received if they remained in service until normal retirement age. Alternatively, they may be the leaving service benefit. The actual benefit will depend on the scheme rules. On normal early retirement, Revenue rules place a restriction on maximum benefits. In a defined benefit scheme, the scheme rules will usually provide for an actuarial discount because the pension will be paid earlier and for longer.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Early distribution and loans

Are plans permitted to allow distributions or loans of all or some of the plan benefits to members that are still employed?

No.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Change of employer or pension scheme

Is the sufficiency of retirement benefits affected greatly if employees change employer while they are accruing benefits?

In terms of moving between defined benefit schemes, members will lose the link to final pensionable salary on completed pensionable service if the formula is based on a final salary calculation. If their deferred benefit is preserved by the Pensions Act, statutory revaluation may apply under the scheme. In the recent economic climate when salary inflation stalled, it has not been unusual for statutory revaluation on deferred pensions to exceed salary inflation for active members. The terms of the new defined benefit scheme will also have an impact here.

In terms of moving between defined contribution schemes, any impact from changing employer will depend on the contribution rates and investments in both schemes. If moving from defined benefit to defined contribution, then the nature of pension provision changes and this may affect the sufficiency of benefits. This may be influenced by whether or not the defined benefit scheme is actually able to pay the benefits when they fall due and the level of contributions to, and their investment in, the defined contribution scheme.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

In what circumstances may members transfer their benefits to another pension scheme?

A transfer may be made from one Revenue-approved scheme to another. Subject to the scheme trust deed and rules, trustees must make and receive a transfer at a member's request if it is a deferred pension preserved by the Pensions Act. Transfers are not permitted by Revenue once benefits come into payment. However, on a scheme wind up, trustees may transfer pensions in payment between schemes pursuant to the Pensions Act. A transfer payment from a scheme should relate to the whole of an employee's benefits under that scheme; split transfers are generally not permitted.

If the transfer is to another EU member state, regulations made under the Pensions Act apply and the overseas scheme must be operated or managed by an Institution for Occupational Retirement Provision within and subject to the IORPs Directive. If the transfer is outside the EU, a transfer may not be made to a country other than one in which the member is currently employed. Revenue rules apply to all such transfers and these should be assessed with advice as to their application to the particular transfer to determine if a submission to Revenue is required.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Investment management

Who is responsible for the investment of plan funds and the sufficiency of investment returns?

Responsibility for investment is usually with the trustees, but the governing trust deed may also provide a role for the employer. In defined contribution plans, the trust deed may provide for members' investment choice from a range of investments selected by the trustees on investment advice. Likewise, for the additional voluntary contributions paid by members to a defined benefit scheme, which are invested on a defined contribution basis. Trustees must comply with investment regulations made under the Pensions Act. This includes investing predominantly on regulated markets (while keeping other investments to a prudent level) and diversifying investments so as to minimise risk of large losses owing to excessive concentration of risk. Trustees must prepare a statement of investment policy principles and ensure their investment powers under their trust deed are adequate.

The Pensions Authority has published guidelines intended to supplement the Trustee Handbook and representing the Authority's view of good practice. The introduction states that the guidelines are 'intended to assist trustees by providing practical guidance on how they set about the day-to-day tasks of managing the current and future financial situation of their scheme'. The guidelines 'set out what practices the Authority expects trustees to follow in order to understand and manage the funding and investment of their defined benefit scheme' but recognise that trustees may have adopted an alternative but equivalent approach to scheme management.

The Pensions Authority has published codes of governance in relation to defined contribution schemes. This includes a code of practice in relation to investment in which it states that trustees are expected to exercise their investment powers in the best interests of scheme beneficiaries and ensure proper investment of scheme assets. The code guides trustees generally in relation to investment and other matters.

The Pensions Authority has also published a code of practice in relation to the implementation of IORP II, which includes details on investment requirements for trustees.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Reduction in force

Can plan benefits be enhanced for certain groups of employees in connection with a voluntary or involuntary reduction in workforce programme?

Enhancement of benefits is generally regulated by the trust deed and requires employers' or trustees' consent. In a defined benefit scheme, there will be funding implications that must be addressed. In defined contribution schemes, enhancement would be by way of the employer paying more contributions into the member's retirement account.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Executive-only plans

Are non-broad-based (eg, executive-only) plans permitted and what types of benefits do they typically provide?

Yes. Historically, they were set up on a defined benefit basis with a more generous pension formula. Alternatively, the executive participated in the broad-based employee scheme but also accrued a top-up under a separate defined benefit scheme. In the context of defined contribution schemes, the governing trust deed and rules will usually provide that employers can pay higher contributions into the retirement account under an augmentation clause without the necessity for a separate scheme. Alternatively, the same defined contribution scheme may have separate sets of rules for different categories of members.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

How do the legal requirements for non-broad-based plans differ from the requirements that apply to broad-based plans?

Historically, one-member schemes were not always subject to the same restrictions and requirements under the Pensions Act and its regulations as schemes with more than one member. This gave more flexibility, for example, with investment rules. However, under Revenue rules, further restrictions do apply and these need to be carefully monitored.

Any one-member scheme set up on or after 22 April 2021 had to meet the requirements of the Pensions Act and the IORP II Directive by 1 July 2022. These requirements impose significantly higher standards and requirements on all pension schemes, including one-man schemes, established on or after 22 April 2021. Since the implementation of IORP II, the Pensions Authority has expressed concerns about governance standards in one-member schemes and implemented a series of on-site inspections in large insurance companies that operate one-member schemes. This has led to a reduction in the number of providers offering new one-member schemes in the market.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Unionised employees

How do retirement benefits provided to employees in a trade union differ from those provided to non-unionised employees?

It is customary to provide the same retirement benefits to union and non-union members with the same employer.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

How do the legal requirements for trade-union-sponsored arrangements differ from the requirements that apply to other broad-based arrangements?

Trade unions do not sponsor schemes other than those they establish as employers for their own employees to which

no difference in legal requirements apply. Disclosure obligations of trustees sometimes extend to a trade union representing scheme members in addition to the disclosure obligations applying to the scheme members.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

ENFORCEMENT

Examination for compliance

What is the process for plan regulators to examine a plan for periodic legal compliance?

All schemes must maintain detailed and up-to-date records in order that information regarding contributions and benefits is available for audit purposes by the Revenue Commissioners.

In 2020, the Pensions Authority announced that it was adopting a forward-looking risk-based approach to supervision. As part of this it undertook an engagement programme to assess how schemes are meeting their governance and risk obligations. The engagement programme comprised:

- the completion of a questionnaire;
- meeting(s) between trustees and the Pensions Authority, based on the completed questionnaire; and
- a findings report including the Pensions Authority's observations and, where appropriate, recommendations for improvement.

As part of the implementation of IORP II, in November 2021 the Pensions Authority published its Code of Practice for trustees of occupational pension schemes and trust retirement annuity contracts issued pursuant to section 10(1)(c)(i) of the Pensions Act (the Code). The Pensions Authority have stated that they will monitor compliance with the requirements set out in the Code as part of its ongoing forward-looking risk-based supervision.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Penalties

What sanctions will employers face if plans are not legally compliant?

Court proceedings may be taken by the Pensions Authority against various parties, including employers and trustees. Fines or imprisonment may result. There is also provision for on-the-spot fines for non-compliance. The Revenue Commissioners can withdraw exempt approval for the scheme.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Rectification

How can employers correct errors in plan documentation or administration in advance of a review by governing agencies?

This will depend on the particular circumstances involved and require advice.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Disclosure obligations

What disclosures must be provided to the authorities in connection with plan administration?

Actuarial funding certificates and funding proposals for pre-funded defined benefit schemes must be submitted to the Pensions Authority. All schemes must submit specified details to the Authority online. The TCA obliges the scheme administrator to furnish information to Revenue and also particulars Revenue considers relevant.

The Pensions Authority may request copies of all scheme governance documentation and evidence of compliance with IORP II and the Code as part of its supervisory role.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

What disclosures must be provided to plan participants?

There are very detailed disclosure of information regulations under the Pensions Act, which require that trustees must provide specified information within specified time scales to scheme beneficiaries in various circumstances (eg, basic information on joining and around changes to that information, individual annual benefit statements and information triggered by events such as leaving).

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Enforcement mechanisms

What means are available to plan participants to enforce their rights under pension and retirement plans?

Either the Pensions Authority or the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman may be available to the member depending on the nature of the complaint. Trustees are required to have an internal disputes resolution procedure (IDR) in place to which complainants can submit certain complaints. Generally, complainants must go through their scheme's IDR procedure before the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman will become involved on appeal from the trustee determination. Participants may be able to enforce their rights through the courts.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

PLAN CHANGES AND TERMINATION

Rules and restrictions

What restrictions and requirements exist with respect to an employer changing the terms of a plan?

The Pensions Act will restrict amendments to accrued benefits in a defined benefit scheme that is not wound up unless carried out through relevant provisions in the Act pursuant to a direction by the Pensions Authority. The trust deed and rules will include restrictions on amendments and generally require trustee consent. All amendments must be submitted to Revenue. Amendments cannot be such as to prejudice Revenue approval of the scheme. Separately, employment law advice would most likely be required in addition to pensions law advice.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

What restrictions and requirements exist with respect to an employer terminating a plan?

The restrictions and requirements will depend on the governing trust deed and rules of the scheme. The balance of power in determining contributions to the plan and any termination notice must be considered. Other influences may be found under the contractual arrangements between the employer and employees, thus requiring employment law advice in addition to pensions law advice.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Insolvency protection

What protections are in place for plan benefits in the event of employer insolvency?

The plan assets are held under trust separate from the employer. If both a defined benefit plan and the employer are insolvent, the state may provide the necessary money to pay some of the benefits subject to criteria set out in legislation. In either a defined contribution scheme or a defined benefit scheme, some outstanding contributions owed to the plan may be paid by the state if not otherwise recoverable from the insolvent employer.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Business transfer

How are retirement benefits affected if the employer is acquired?

In a share acquisition there is not likely to be any effect on the retirement benefits in a single-employer scheme but other considerations will apply in a group scheme with more than one employer. In an asset acquisition, whether or not the retirement benefits are affected will depend on the deal made and transfer of undertaking regulations. The latter includes a pensions exception around the non-transferability of certain pension rights but this has been very narrowly interpreted by the courts.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Surplus

Upon plan termination, how can any surplus amounts be utilised?

This is determined by the governing trust deed and rules and may lead to augmentation of benefits or retirement accounts or refunds to employers (subject to tax) or a combination of such options. Surplus might also be transferred to another scheme of the same employer. It is not likely to occur very often or to any great extent.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITIES

Applicable fiduciaries

Which persons and entities are 'fiduciaries'?

The trustees of the Plan.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Fiduciary duties

What duties apply to fiduciaries?

The trustees' basic duty is to administer the plan in accordance with the law, its terms under the governing trust deed and rules and in the best financial interests of the beneficiaries. The trustees' duties are set out under the trust deed and rules, the Pensions Act, the TCA, other relevant legislation and case law.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Breach of duties

What are the consequences of fiduciaries failing to discharge their duties?

The trustees may be personally liable for breach of trust. Failure to discharge their duties can lead to sanction by the Pensions Authority, the courts, an adverse finding by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman or placing the Revenue-approved status of their plan in jeopardy. Exoneration and indemnity clauses may be available to trustees under the trust deed or under statute.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS

Legal challenges

Have there been legal challenges when certain types of plans are converted to different types of plan?

In an industrial relations context, there have been disputes around replacing defined benefit plans with defined contribution plans.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Have there been legal challenges to other aspects of plan design and administration?

Yes. These are generally taken before the Office of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman having been through the trustees' internal disputes resolution process. There have also been cases where challenges have been taken to the decision to cease accrual or wind-up a defined benefit pension plan.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Future prospects

How will funding shortfalls, changing worker demographics and future legislation be likely to affect private pensions in the future?

Funding shortfalls in defined benefit schemes will continue to influence investment de-risking strategy or their complete replacement by defined contribution schemes.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

UPDATE AND TRENDS

Hot topics









Are there any current developments or trends that should be noted?

The implementation of IORP II in Ireland and the increased compliance and supervision burden placed on pension schemes has led many employers moving, or to consider moving, employees to master trusts for future accrual with a resulting wind-up of stand-alone occupational defined contribution schemes. All master trusts were required to be compliant with the new provisions of the Pensions Act following the transposition of the IORP II and the Code by 1 July 2022.

In March 2022, the Minister for Social Protection announced the details of the Final Design principles for the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System for Ireland. Under the proposals, employees will have access to a workplace pension savings scheme that is co-funded by their employer and the state. A key feature of the system is that, although participation is voluntary, so that people don't have to participate, it operates on an 'opt-out' rather than an 'opt-in' basis. The government aims to have the new auto-enrolment system set up in 2023 for enrolment in 2024, and all employees not already in an occupational pension scheme, aged between 23 and 60 and earning over €20,000 across all of their employments will be automatically enrolled.

Law stated - 29 September 2022

Jurisdictions

	Belgium	Claeys & Engels
	Brazil	Pinheiro Neto Advogados
	China	Zhong Lun Law Firm
	Germany	CMS Germany
	Ireland	McCann FitzGerald LLP
	Netherlands	Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP
	United Kingdom	Irwin Mitchell LLP
	USA	Sullivan & Worcester LLP