

Oifig an Ard-Rúnaí, An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Office of the Secretary General, Department of Social Protection



Ms. Sarah O'Farrell
Clerk to the Committee
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2

15 February 2024

REF S1570 PAC33

Dear Sarah,

Further to your letter of 31 January 2024, please find enclosed the additional information requested by the Committee of Public Accounts following my appearance at the Committee on 18th January 2024.

In addition, we have reviewed the transcript of proceedings and identified some other matters on which the Committee members sought further information. This information is provided in Appendix A.

If you require any further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'John McKeon', is located below the 'Yours sincerely,' text.

John McKeon
Secretary General

Department of Social Protection

Information Requested following the PAC on 18th January 2024

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(1) A note on the Department's progress in reintroducing appointments for public service card applications, and an update on recruitment (pg. 16).

Public Service Card Appointments

Appointments to apply for or renew a PSC are available by directly contacting a customer's local Intreo or Public Service Card Centre.

The possibility of a centralised appointments process is being explored by this Department.

Any appointment process will need to balance giving certainty to an applicant as to when they can obtain an appointment with not allowing customers to book multiple appointments.

This has happened previously and limited the overall availability of appointments to others. Any system introduced will need to provide for this balance.

Recruitment

- The Department is facing a number of challenges in relation to the turnover of staff including loss of experienced staff due to retirement, mobility and promotion, this is experienced across the Civil and Public Service. We are also operating in a difficult recruitment environment with unemployment rates currently at 4.5% resulting in a smaller pool of candidates.
- In 2023, 681 staff (FTE 654.06) left the Department and 895 (FTE 895) joined. In 2022, 651 staff (FTE 617.8) left the Department, and there were 686 (FTE 685.4) new entrants. The Department continues to work closely with the Public Appointments Service and to use its own recruitment license, where appropriate, to manage the ongoing resource demands.

Grade Breakdown of 2022 & 2023 staff joining DSP (Department of Social Protection)

	People
IN 2022	
Administrative Officer	14
Assistant Principal	15
Clerical Officer	425
Executive Officer	149
Higher Executive Officer	58
Principal Officer	7*
Services Officer	18
IN Total	686

	People
IN 2023	
Administrative Officer	9
Assistant Principal	17
Assistant Secretary	2
Clerical Officer	614
Executive Officer	156
Higher Executive Officer	67
Principal Officer	5*
Services Officer	25
IN Total	895

- *Including medical assessors*

These figures reflect staff recruited into the Department to fill newly sanctioned posts or to replace staff who left on promotion, mobility, retirement etc.

In addition to the numbers of staff who joined the Department from external sources, a number of internal promotions, lateral moves etc. took place within the Department during 2022 and 2023 to fill vacancies e.g. 226 Temporary Clerical Officers were appointed as permanent Clerical Officers following an internal DSP TCO to CO competition. This initiative is now going to be rolled out across other Departments.

(2) A timeline for the processing of cases of overpayment of the pandemic unemployment payment (pg. 18).

The Department has cross checked 30 million pandemic unemployment payments against Revenue records. The Department is examining between 50,000 and 60,000 cases where there was an overlap between receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and employment. There is some filtering still to be done, but a cautious estimate is that, if every overpayment was due to be refunded, it would amount to approximately €200 million. However, a number of these overlaps will be legitimate and only arise because of timing issues when a person returned to work during a PUP payment week, so the estimate is not definitive.

The Department has commenced writing to customers whose claims are under review, initially concentrating on a sample of cases to validate its approach. In all cases, a person will be given the opportunity to present all relevant facts.

Where overpayments arise, the Department of Social Protection will seek to recover them in a reasonable manner, having regard to a person's circumstances. This can include making arrangements for repayments over an extended period.

Separately, the Department will engage with the Revenue Commissioners in relation to cases where the Pandemic Unemployment Payment was claimed but where records do not indicate that returns of income in respect of this employment were made to Revenue.

(3) A note on carer's allowance, including the rationale for the means testing of recipients of the allowance (pg. 21).

The conditions attached to payment of Carer's Allowance are consistent with the overall conditions that apply to social assistance payments generally. The means test ensures that support is provided to those most in need and plays a critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of caring. Carer's Allowance does not purport to be a payment for care.

Over the last number of budgets, there were significant improvements to the means test for Carer's Allowance, as well as to other supports for carers.

- In June 2022 the income disregards were increased from €332.50 to €350 for a single person, and from €665 to €750 for carers with a spouse/partner.
- As part of Budget 2024, the weekly income disregard will be further increased from €350 to €450 for a single person, and from €750 to €900 for carers with a spouse/partner.

This amounts to cumulative increases to the disregards of €117.50 for a single carer and €235.00 for a carer who is part of a couple. These are the highest income disregards in the social welfare system. It is also worth noting that the capital and savings disregard for the Carer's Allowance means assessment was also increased in 2022 from €20,000 to €50,000.

Removing the means test for Carer's Allowance would, in effect, create a new universal social protection scheme for those meeting the scheme's basic caring condition. Any such change would have significant cost implications and could only be considered within a wider budgetary context.

At a conservative estimate, the cost of removing the means test for Carer's Allowance would be an additional €600 million per annum. This estimate is based on existing recipients of the Carer's Support Grant (CSG). It does not take account of new applicants or year-on-year increases to the scheme. There are potentially over 153,000 additional carers who might be eligible for Carer's Allowance (CA) if the means test was removed (299,128 carers in Census 2022, minus 146,046 CSG recipients). However, we do not know how many of them would meet the other requirements for the scheme. For each 10,000 additional CA recipients, it would cost at least €129 million per annum.

The Deputy's question was raised in the context of the potential savings on the administration of the means test for CA. In this regard, the savings on staffing would be negligible. For example, the CA New Claims Section currently has 4 Executive Officers and 14 Clerical Officers. Given that decisions on new applications would still require administration in relation to the other eligibility criteria for CA, and the number of new applications could increase substantially, many of those staff would still be required. In addition, there may be a requirement for a higher number of Departmental Medical Assessors in order to examine the medical eligibility of the higher number of new applications.

(4) Confirmation as to which hard copy form to use to apply for the additional needs payment (pg. 45).

There is one application form for SWA /BASI/ANP, which is titled SWA1 form.

(5) The number of recipients of additional needs payments that are:

- not in receipt of other social welfare payments; and/or
- in employment (pg. 46).

The Additional Needs Payment is available to anyone who needs it and qualifies, whether the person is currently receiving a social welfare payment or working on a low income. The income of applicant is recorded by the officer based on the main income

being received. It should be noted that an applicant may have more than one income source, and many social protection schemes allow a customer to work while also in employment. In 2023, there were over 6,600 ANPs made, which have income from employment recorded as an income source on the claim.

(6) A note on the branch offices and Intreo offices in Co. Laois in which a Community Welfare Officer is available, and when (pgs. 48-49).

In County Laois a Community Welfare Officer (CWO) is available to meet with clients;

- In Portlaoise during business hours Monday to Friday at the Community Welfare Services Office, Government Buildings, Old Abbeylax Road, Portlaoise, Co. Laois.
- In Rathdowney on alternative Tuesdays from 9.30am to 12.30pm at the Social Welfare Branch Office, Main Street, Rathdowney, Co Laois.
- By appointment in all areas across the County.

(7) A note on the difference between a branch office and an Intreo office, with regard to the services available in both (pg. 40).

Please find below for the Committee's information a table which details the difference in service offering available in a Branch office and an Intreo office. The key differences are that Intreo offices make decisions relating to claims, whereas Branch offices do not make decisions.

Service model difference outlined below-

Service Provision Comparison		
	Branch Office	Intreo Centre
Triaging claims and assisting customers face to face	✓	✓
Registering claims for Jobseekers and One Parent Families	✓	✓
Maintaining in payment claims for customers	✓	✓
The Provision of accurate clear and comprehensive information relating to all Department Schemes and Services	✓	✓
Referral and access to Community Welfare Service, Employment Services and Social Welfare Inspectors.	✓	✓
In-person signing of Jobseeker Customers and/or control activities.	✓	✓
Identity authentication including processing customer applications for Public Services Cards.	✓	✓
Make Statutory Decisions on Claims	X	✓
Control Checks and general Inspections to ensure compliance	N/A	✓
Decisions on Claims in relation to control and Reduced Rates	X	✓
Provide PPSN Numbers <small>Note 1</small>	X	✓
Staffed By	Contracted Staff	Civil Servants

Note 1 Two Branch Offices provide PPSN Services due to geographic reasons.

Appendix A: Additional Questions from Transcript

(8) How many Ukrainian refugees are being paid by EFT?

A total of 12,894 have their primary payments paid by EFT.

(9) What CWO/ Branch Offices are in Portlaoise

- There is a CWO Office at Government Buildings, Government Buildings, Old Abbeyleix Road, Portlaoise, Co. Laois.
- Social Welfare Branch Offices Laois are located in Portlaoise, Rathdowney and Portarlinton.

(10) A note on CWO offices

For the Committee's information please find included a PDF file which contains information on the CWS Locations.