

**Please Note: The Houses of the Oireachtas are taking a week's break next week. The next report will be sent to you on Friday, 16 June**

## **Westmeath Examiner**

Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

### **Troy expresses concern about future of Athlone Mail Centre**

The future of the An Post network - both the post office network and the mail distribution network - has never been more uncertain, Fianna Fáil Deputy Robert Troy told the Dáil.

He said the Athlone Mail Centre is ideally located in the heart of the Midlands. It has excellent transport links to all parts of the country and is located in the same business park as DPD Ireland, which recently doubled its premises in size to form its national hub.

“That shows how ideally located the area is,” he said. “The mail centre's 183 staff are extremely efficient, having won many awards for their work. Not only that, but they have been flexible. In the face of decreasing volumes of mail in recent years, they have collaborated to achieve significant staff savings.”

He said he understood that consultants have been employed to examine the future of the mail distribution network. “The only centre those consultants have not visited is the mail centre in Athlone,” he said. “I do not think that is fair or right. At the very minimum, I want to receive a guarantee today that those consultants will engage with the management and the unions representing the workers in Athlone's mail distribution unit.”

Replying on behalf of the Minister for Communications, Minister of State Finian McGrath said the Post Office Network Business Development Group was established at the end of 2014 by the then Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to explore the potential for commercial and additional Government services which could be transacted through the post office network.

“Following publication of the final report of this group in January 2016, two working groups were established to progress the recommendations of the report,” he said. “These were the network renewal implementation group, chaired by Bobby Kerr, and the post office hub working group, chaired by the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring. On foot of the reconfiguration of Departments in July last, responsibility for the post office network transferred to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Arrangements are now in hand to transfer responsibility for the post office network back to the Minister, Deputy Naughten's Department, under whose remit the corporate governance of An Post rests.”

An Post is carrying out a fundamental review of the company with a view to identifying the strategic changes and restructuring necessary to maintain the company on a sound financial footing, and that review is nearing completion, he said. “McKinsey is assisting An Post in

this review but, as I stated, any decision in regard to the restructuring of An Post is a matter for the board and management of the company.”

### **Penrose concerned at changes to Community Employment Schemes**

At a recent meeting of a Westmeath Community Employment sponsor network group major concerns were raised by members about the Department of Social Protection's proposed changes to Community Employment schemes, Deputy Willie Penrose told the Dáil. He said they believe the Department might not fully understand the important role community employment schemes play in towns and villages across the country.

“They say the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria and the qualifying length of time will severely limit the pool of people accessing community employment schemes and greatly affect the essential services they are providing in local communities,” he said. “There is not enough support available for the main sponsors of Community Employment Schemes. Can the Department advise on how the position can be improved or whether funding can be made available to the main sponsor who wishes to be trained in the development and running of community employment schemes? There are many changes taking place in community employment schemes and the main sponsor must be up to date with all of the changes made by the Department.”

He told Social Protection Minister Leo Varadkar that people over 55 years of age who are seeking work face ageism in the jobs market. “Qualifications are not a guarantee that one will find work,” he said. “We are an ageing society and there is no proper structure in place to support people over 55 years of age, aside from the Community Employment programme. Forcing this group to attend training, with the use of all sorts of paraphernalia, is unfair. Many of them have literacy or rehabilitation issues. There is no outreach service in rural areas. There are no departmental offices in my area of Ballynacargy. It is all theory.”

In reply Minister Varadkar said the proposal he was making in regard to community employment schemes is to relax the rules and widen the pool of people who can qualify. “If there are supervisors who are opposed to that, it is news to me,” he added.

### **Serious delays in processing medical applications**

Serious delays in the processing of medical cards were raised in the Dáil by Deputy Robert Troy.

Speaking during a debate on health, he said we have reverted back to a situation in which people are waiting up to two months having completed the medical card application perfectly.

“We are going back to a situation whereby it is becoming overly restrictive for people with medical needs who need to get a discretionary medical card,” he said. “The Minister should examine that issue.”

Deputy Troy also said the Government is badly failing people with rare diseases. “The Minister needs to implement his promise in the Programme for Government to ensure that people with rare diseases can get treatment,” he said.