

Liffey Champion

Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

Murphy introduces Bill to regulate gift vouchers

A new Bill to give certainty in relation to expiry dates on gift vouchers with the provision of a five year limit was introduced in the Dáil by Social Democrat Deputy Catherine Murphy.

She said it also seeks to ban charges for issuing gift vouchers. “It seeks to ban charges related to inactive gift vouchers and to ban companies from taking money off the balance if a card is not used by certain dates, which is happening routinely at the moment,” she said.

Deputy Murphy said gift vouchers are a €300 million industry and go right across the spectrum covering toys, DIY, travel, restaurants and everything in between. “Often when people receive gift vouchers they partially use them or they put them away to use at a later date,” she said. “The advantage is very much on the side of the retailer as opposed to the consumer.”

Sometimes gift vouchers are treated as if they are not money but they are very much so, she said. “It is not as if they are coupons cut out of newspapers. They are bought with peoples' hard earned cash and very often it is the recipient who discovers the terms and conditions attached to gift vouchers. We can all imagine situations where people forget about gift vouchers and discover that there is a problem when it is too late. The financial loss of forgotten vouchers to consumers must run into millions.”

In the US, this loss was estimated to be close to \$1 billion, she said. “In 2009, an initiative was introduced in the US which removed annual limits on gift vouchers. A five year limit was put on gift vouchers or cards and evidence shows that the number of unused gift vouchers declined very dramatically as a result.”

The Government did not oppose the Bill at first stage.

Government in breach in assessment of needs for children

The Government is continually in breach of the Disability Act 2005 in regard to the assessment of needs for children, Dublin Mid-West People Before Profit Deputy Gino Kenny told the Dáil.

“Not only is the system broken but many families are broken because they have not had access to simple assessments of need,” he said. “A number of cases taken against the Government are before the High Court. The Taoiseach can expect a tsunami of further cases against the Government for breaking the law. I have a simple question. What will the Taoiseach do about this?”

In response, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said he could not comment on court actions under way. “Perhaps this matter would be best dealt with as a question to the Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for disability,” he said.

Durkan seeks update on gaps in broadband service

An update on the Government's position to provide broadband services to those areas outside the proposed or existing provisions which, in some cases is only by a matter of metres was sought in the Dáil by North Kildare Fine Gael Deputy Bernard Durkan.

He asked Minister Denis Naughten if he would consider a separate contract for such customers to run concurrent with the current programme.

In response, Minister Naughten said to ensure that nobody is left behind, his Department is engaged in an ongoing procurement process to select a bidder or bidders which will roll out the new high-speed broadband network for the State-led intervention phase of the National Broadband Plan.

"My Department's specialist National Broadband Plan team is currently evaluating the detailed solutions received from two bidders last September as part of that competitive procurement process," he said. "This is the last stage of the procurement process before receipt of final tenders and progression to the appointment of a preferred bidder or bidders."

As Ireland's telecommunications market is a liberalised market, decisions by private companies on the roll-out and locations for their infrastructure are a matter for those companies, he said. "I understand the frustration for people who live near, but are not included, in the current roll-out of fibre by commercial companies. eir's decisions as to the areas and premises to be served as part of its 300,000 rural deployment is a matter for the company," he said. "While that is the case, eir has indicated that it will consider including additional premises for areas where low-level designs have yet to be completed."