

Kilkenny Reporter

Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

Department of Social Protection an example to other departments

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is an example to other Departments in terms of the reform they need, Fianna Fáil Deputy John McGuinness told the Dáil. If one tables a question or asks a question of officials in the Department one gets helpful answers, he said. “In addition, people are never transferred to different payments by the Department if those they are on give them the greatest amount of benefit,” he said. “That has always been the case and long may it continue.”

Speaking during a debate on the new Social Welfare Bill, he said in terms of the general output of the Department, one of the greatest difficulties is the length of time people have to wait while their applications are being processed. “That is particularly so in regard to Carer's Allowance, whereby one puts in an application and it seems to be dealt with in an unusually lengthy process. It would be helpful if there were some way to shorten the process while also examining all aspects of the application.”

Domiciliary Care Allowance is another issue that needs to be dealt with, he said. “For many years there was a group based in Carlow that represented a number of people nationwide who had applied for Domiciliary Care Allowance,” said. “It was known as the DCA Warriors and did battle with the Department to try to promote a better way of understanding domiciliary care allowance and dealing with applications. I will always remember looking at the application form for Domiciliary Care Allowance in the United Kingdom. It is far simpler than that used here and an applicant knows exactly what is required and what circumstances need to be explained.”

Deputy McGuinness said he regularly meets constituents who are very upset that they have been refused despite all the professional opinion they have included with their applications. “They are missing the point about setting out what has to be done over and above what one would do in respect, for example, of another child of the same age as the one being cared for,” he said. “This could be overcome by a simple reform to the way in which the application form is structured and the type of information requested from the applicant.”

Concern at change to pre-school year

Fianna Fáil Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor told the Upper House she was shocked to receive several phone calls to her office regarding the Department of Children and Youth Affairs removing the upper age exemption for an extra pre-school year for children who may not be ready to start school. “This was done without consulting practitioners in the sector,” she said. “I am told that the announcement came from out of the blue.”

The Senator called on the Minister, Deputy Zappone, and her Department to explain why this happened. “Why is the age exemption being removed from children in the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme from September 2018 and why was it announced by

Pobal to early years providers without any warning on 24 November?" she asked.

"Practitioners and parents are concerned, as am I. There are many children for whom this is a vital exemption. Some need an extra year before they start school and can still meet the age criteria, but now they will not be allowed to do that because they will have done their two free years."

Children transitioning to national school need to be independent and confident, have good social and emotional skills and be able to communicate, all of which meet the Department's criteria under the Aistear curriculum framework she said. "With this exemption removed some children will not be able to adhere to those criteria."

Planning control being considered in rented accommodation sector

Planning control and regulation is one important element of the broader issues being considered by the Working Group in the Department of Housing on rented accommodation, Minister of State John Paul Phelan told the Upper House.

The group will report before year end on the appropriate regulatory approach for short-term lettings and any necessary amendments to existing legislation, including planning legislation, which may be required, he said. "It is important to note that the Planning Act provides that exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of specific forms of development may be provided for when they are considered to be consistent with proper planning and sustainable development," he said. "This is a key test for any proposed planning exemption. In addition, as required under the Planning Act, any proposed amendments to the existing exempted development regulations require approval from both Houses of the Oireachtas before new regulations can be signed into law and brought into effect. Therefore, we will revert to both Houses with any proposed amendments to the planning code and, specifically, the exempted development provisions that may be required on foot of the Working Group's report."

The Minister of State said any proposed regulation or licensing regime for short term rented accommodation must be easy to use. "The average home owner providing a short-term letting facility will not be doing so on a large scale," he said. "They simply wish to earn some extra money to help with the mortgage or some other expense or perhaps to have their property occupied while they are away themselves. This needs to be encouraged, not impeded. The application process needs to be straightforward, with the administrative burden on both the home-sharer and the State kept to the minimum necessary to ensure compliance and the protection and safety of consumers."