



Minister Outlines Reforms Urgently Needed if Ireland to Meet Future Employment Demands

Brennan Says it is Time to Debunk Misconceptions & Myths About the Majority of Job Seekers

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., today outlined a range of reforms and initiatives that require to be urgently examined in order to ensure that Ireland can meet the major challenge of meeting the projected employment demands of a surging economy over the next decade and further into the future.

Minister Brennan also said that it was time to debunk many of the myths and ill informed pub talk that was distorting the reality of the unemployment situation and resulting in an unfair and sometimes demeaning stereotyping of genuine work seekers as people determined to use the social supports and welfare system to avoid work at all costs.

The Minister was speaking when he launched the report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on "**Profiling the Unemployed: An Analysis of the Galway and Waterford Live-Register Surveys**" which was commissioned by the Department of Social Affairs.

He said the research has identified a range of barriers, or characteristics, which have been found to impact on a persons ability to find work, including age, gender, marital status, number of children, education, urban/rural location, literacy, access to transport, motivational factors, health and active labour market programme history. The research paved the way for the development of a system which could play a pivotal role in calculating the probability of an unemployed person finding work in the short term, or the danger of becoming long-term unemployed. Such a system could deliver an efficient and effective means of identifying, at an early stage, those who are most in need of support and clear the way for earlier and appropriate interventions with this target group through a range of service providers, including FÁS and the VEC's.

Minister Brennan said there are more people in employment in Ireland today than ever before. Since mid 1997, the number of people signing on the Live Register has fallen from almost 255,000 to less than 160,000. At the same time the numbers registered as long-term unemployed has fallen significantly from over 124,000 to just over 45,000.

He said that if Ireland is to adequately meet the scale of emerging employment requirements-assessed by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) at 50,000 immigrant workers a year, in addition to home produced workers, for the next 12 years-then urgent reforms and visionary initiatives were needed. These should include:

- Increased early interventions to identify those on the Live Register who are most at risk of descending into the trap of long-term unemployment. It was intended to build on the valuable work of the ESRI in the current research to conduct a comprehensive national study involving all customers who make new or repeat unemployment claims over a period of time. This will involve



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- approximately 30,000 welfare customers and will involve tracking their progress over a period of 18 months from the commencement of the study with a view to using the findings to shape a National Customer Profiling System.
- An assessment of the UK Jobseeker programme under which all unemployed workers are expected to be engaged in active job search. Regular fortnightly interviews with clients are an important feature of the monitoring system, and reassessments at 13 and 26 weeks, and six-monthly after that, are also undertaken. As the ESRI report points out these contacts can lead to referral for more intensive interventions, such as training, or job search assistance, if they appear warranted.
 - An intensification of efforts to attract back to Ireland more of our exiles who emigrated in the past and who have acquired the skills, business acumen and leadership qualities that could make a valuable contribution to the vibrant Irish economy while at the same time allowing them to fulfil the desire of returning home.
 - Progress on removing the obstacles to employment for those on One-Parent Family Payment (lone parents) and those on disability supports and entitlements who are interested on returning to work. It is estimated that more than half of those on One-Parent Family Payment-about 48,000 people, mainly women-are in low paid employment. About 30,000 earn less than €146.50 per week and so are paid their maximum welfare entitlement while the remaining 18,000 earn between €146.50 and €293.00 per week and received a reduced rate of entitlement. There are almost 200,000 people in receipt of illness and disability payment, encompassing a range of conditions from people with jobs who have short-term illnesses to people with severe disabilities who have no prospect of employment.

Minister Brennan said that there were many misconceptions surrounding those who signed on the Live Register, and it was now time to address the factual position and to debunk the myths that had been allowed to build up and enter the ether of Irish society.

The facts were that there are just under 160,000 people signing on the Live Register at present. About 10% of these people are working part-time and receive welfare supports in respect of one, two or three days unemployment each week. The remaining 144,000 or so are required to be capable of work in order to sign on the Register.

Based on past experience, it is the Department's assessment that less than 50,000 of those who are currently on the Live Register will be signing on in 12 months time. There is considerable movement into and out of the Live Register. For example, a total of 286,000 left the Register over the last 12 months while 277,200 joined. The reality is that 85% of people who sign on leave the Register leave it within one year. Some of the remaining 15% have part time work and are paid only for those days that they are unemployed.

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