



“Helping people of working age get off illness benefits, into employment and to remain in employment”

Minister Hanafin opens OECD Seminar: *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers* - as Ireland participates in OECD review of sickness and disability policies

More people of working age are claiming illness and disability benefit than are claiming unemployment benefit an OECD seminar taking place in Dublin heard today (26th June 2008). Over the two days the policy makers from Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland will explore why there is an increase in the numbers of people claiming benefits such as illness benefit, why the average age for claims is dropping and why there is an increase in the number of women claiming illness or disability benefit across the OECD.

Minister for Social and Family Affairs Mary Hanafin T.D., officially opened the seminar today which is part of a series of in-depth studies being undertaken by the OECD, covering 13 countries in all. **“Improving the social and economic situation for all people with an illness or disability is a priority for Government and consulting with countries across the OECD about their experiences, structures and challenges is vital if we are to improve the quality of life for all our citizens. The challenge for us all is to help and support people of working age, to ensure that they do remain active participants in the workplace and not depend on benefits in the long term”** the Minister told delegates.

Policy makers from the OECD countries will spend two days considering the issues of - ***Sickness Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers***, which was jointly organised by the OECD and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The OECD expect to publish a report outlining the results of their studies in the four countries by the end of this year.



The seminar heard that across the OECD there are some 44 million people of working age on longterm illness benefits compared with 36.5 million on unemployment benefit. In Ireland the numbers on illness benefit has increased over the past number of years, from just under 47,000 in 2000 to over 70,000 in 2007, with the majority of the increase being in women of working age claiming illness benefits.

Minister Hanafin said **“the priority for policy makers is to look at what can be done to ensure that if people are on benefits that they get back into the workplace as quickly as possible, that their confidence in their own abilities does not diminish and they then stay active in the workforce which is in their longer term social and economic advantage.**

As a Government we are also hugely committed to increasing the participation of people with disabilities in education, training and employment. Ireland has done an enormous amount of work in recent years to improve the position of people with disabilities in society with initiatives, such as the Disability Strategy, the Disability Act, Disability Sectoral Plans for the key Departments and the development of an advocacy service under the Citizen’s Information Act. While we have seen very high rates of economic and employment growth in the past decade, it is not been the case that employment rates for people with a disability has increased at the same rate. Tackling this is something that all the countries of the OECD are doing at the moment and we are sharing our experiences with the policy makers of the countries represented at this seminar.
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Participants over the two days will discuss the common issue faced by many OECD member countries of the increasing number of people availing of illness and disability policies and lower employment rates among people with disabilities compared to the rest of the population.



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The main issues that will be discussed by the participants include recent reforms in the participating countries, the role of the State in getting people to leave disability benefits for employment, the role of the employer in recruitment and retention, financial incentives in leaving benefits and moving to employment for people with disabilities and institutional co-ordination and governance between relevant Government Departments and agencies.

ENDS

Note for Editors:

	2007			2003			2000		
Scheme Name	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Illness Benefit	25,038	45,366	70,404	21,378	36,086	57,464	17,767	29,173	46,940

The seminar is being attended by a range of policy makers from Ireland including officials from a number of Government Departments and agencies involved in developing policy to help people with disabilities into employment.

These include

- the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment,
- the Department of Social and Family Affairs,
- the Office for Disability and Mental Health,
- FÁS and
- the National Disability Authority.

These were joined by representatives from employers, trade unions and disability representative organisations, from the other three participating countries and countries that participated in previous phases of the review and officials from the OECD.