



## **SOCIAL WELFARE SPENDING AT AN ALL TIME HIGH**

### **– MINISTER MARY COUGHLAN**

Mary Coughlan, Minister for Social and Family Affairs, today published her Department's Annual Report for 2003, a year when social welfare spending reached an all-time high.

"In 2003 the social welfare budget reached an all time high. This ensured that the value of all rates of payment was maintained or increased, with additional increases being made to people over 66 years of age as well as further increases in Child Benefit," said Minister Coughlan.

"At over €10.4 billion, the Department's spend in 2003 was more than €4.5 billion higher than in 1997, an increase of nearly eighty percent. This year the Department's expenditure will reach €11.3 billion," said Minister Coughlan.

"The 2003 Annual Report of the Department demonstrates our record of implementing policies which make real changes, and improvements, in the lives of people dependent on social welfare," added Minister Coughlan.

The bi-lingual annual report is the first to report on the Department's statement of strategy covering the period 2003 to 2005, "Promoting a Caring Society". This strategy reflects the evolving role of the Department, from providing income support needs to addressing the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion and to supporting families.

#### In 2003 -

Approximately 975,000 people received a weekly social welfare payment, benefiting 1.5 million people.

Over 530,000 families received Child Benefit on behalf of more than one million children.

More than 59 million transactions were processed.

More than 1.5million people were recipients of Free Schemes including electricity, travel and television licence.

One of the most significant achievements last year was the establishment of the Family Support Agency. The agency submitted its first strategic plan last November and this year has seen its initial budget of €17.2m increase to €20.2m. During 2003 the Minister undertook a nationwide public consultation on the future development of family policy. Minister Coughlan said: "The outcome of this consultation will help



## **Department of Social and Family Affairs**

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inform a new integrated family policy which I intend to present before the end of this year.”

During 2003 progress was made towards developing a comprehensive pensions system. The first Personal Retirement Savings Accounts (PRSAs) products were approved and subsequently made available to the public. The Pensions Ombudsman was appointed in April and his office opened for business in September.

The report also shows the significant progress on the modernisation of the Civil Registration Service, a joint initiative between the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Health and Children.

This initiative has led, in conjunction with the Department’s Service Delivery Modernisation (SDM) programme, to the online registration of births, the allocation of a Personal Public Service Number (PPS) to each child at birth registration and the automatic initiation of a child benefit claim for first-born children and automatic payment for second and subsequent children in a family.

The Office for Social Inclusion (OSI) completed its first year of operation in 2003 and prepared Ireland’s 2003-2005 National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, which was submitted to the European Commission in August.

The Department took further steps to improve the delivery of information to its customers. It established a working group to prepare for the implementation of the Official Languages Act and funded a full-time Development Officer, from the National Adult Literacy Agency, to assist in the development of a ‘Plain English’ policy for all Departmental forms and leaflets.

“I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude for all the hard work and commitment shown by the staff of the Department throughout the country,” said Minister Coughlan.

**ENDS**

**2nd August 2004**