



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Better Services For 300,000 Social Welfare Customers - Minister Mary Coughlan

Mary Coughlan, Minister for Social and Family Affairs, today announced improved services for the 300,000 people eligible under her Department's Household Benefits Package Scheme.

"With the liberalisation of the telecommunications, electricity and gas markets, opportunities have arisen to enhance the House Benefits Package Scheme by providing customers with a choice of service provider," said Minister Coughlan.

In addition to Eircom, scheme customers now have the option to choose Smart Telecom to provide their landline telephone service. The Department aims to further expand supplier options by the end of this year.

The Department is also negotiating with the three mobile phone operators (Vodafone, O2 and Meteor) with a view to having at least one operator participating in the Telephone Allowance Scheme by the end of this year. All three mobile operators have signalled interest in participating in the scheme.

The Department has already put procedures in place allowing people to transfer their Natural Gas Allowance to Flogas in areas where Flogas has won the contract for the supply of natural gas. Opportunities are also being examined to facilitate wider participation by new electricity providers in the Electricity Allowance scheme, when the market for electricity supply opens next year.

"These initiatives illustrate our commitment to improve services for our customers. We will continue to negotiate with the service providers to provide enhanced options for the 300,000 people who are eligible under the Household Benefits Package," said Minister Coughlan.

The Household Benefits Package, comprising the Telephone Allowance, Electricity/Natural Gas Allowance and Free TV Licence, is available to people living in the State aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of a social welfare type payment or who satisfy a means test.

It is also available to carers and people with disabilities under the age of 66 who are in receipt of certain welfare type payments and to all people aged 70 years and over, regardless of their income or household composition.

Since August 1st 2004, a person who newly qualifies for the Household Benefits Package will receive an award notification, from the Department of Social and Family Affairs, incorporating their free television licence.

This will serve as a "lifetime" licence for as long as the person remains entitled to the Benefits Package Scheme. For customers already in receipt of a free television licence, a lifetime licence will issue to them once their current licence falls due for renewal.



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Expenditure on the Household Benefits Package will amount to approximately €228m this year and will benefit some 300,000 customers.

Ends – 2nd September 2004