



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Announces Ending Of Almost 40 Years Of Peak-Time Restrictions On Public Transport For Pensioners & Other Free Travel Pass Holders

Seamus Brennan - *"Restrictions Have No Place In 21ST Century Progressive Ireland Where The Role In Society Of Older People & Those With Disabilities Is Changing And Expanding"*

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., today announced that the government, at its recent meeting, decided that all restrictions on travel on public transport services at morning and evening peak-times for holders of Free Travel passes, which have been in existence for almost 40 years, will be lifted from Monday, 25th September 2006.

Minister Brennan said the lifting of the restrictions, which were first introduced in 1967, means that in future there will be no limits placed on the amount of free travel eligible people take or at what time they take it.

More than 600,000 customers are in receipt of the Free Travel scheme, of which 430,000 are aged over 66 years. Some 145,000 are in receipt of an invalidity/disability type payment and a further 25,000 are carers.

The peak time access restrictions have applied up to now on all Dublin Bus services and on Bus Éireann city services in Cork and Limerick. The rules specified that access to these services for Free Travel passholders was restricted on Monday to Friday from 7am to 9am and from 4.30pm to 6.30pm. There have also been restrictions on Friday evening travel from 4pm to 7pm within a 20 mile radius of Dublin, Cork and Limerick.

Minister Brennan said: "The lifting of all travel restrictions at peak times will benefit tens of thousands of people, particularly older people and those with disabilities, who up to now have been severely curtailed in the times they have been allowed to travel in the main cities, and surrounding areas, on public transport services. In a 21st century, progressive and enlightened Ireland, such restrictions are no longer acceptable. For example, the role of older people in society is changing with people living longer and healthier lives. The lifting of these restrictions is designed to reflect that improved longevity and the fact that more and more people of retirement age choose to continue to work or, in other ways, to continue to make a valuable contribution to society.

It is also a recognition that many other eligible Free Travel people, especially those with disabilities, are becoming increasingly more active in the workforce and in availing of other activities that are contributing to creating a more tolerant and more enlightened society. Ending these restrictions also removes the need for people to have to go through the process of having to apply for special passes so that they can attend hospital appointments, or educational, rehabilitative and therapeutic courses



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that are, very often, central to improving their recovery and improving their lifestyles.”

The lifting of all peak-time restrictions follows several months of negotiations by the Department of Social Affairs with CIE. It delivers the first in a series of major new initiatives for those on Free Travel and will be followed within months by the introduction of an All-Ireland free travel scheme - as promised in the Programme for Government - that will allow seamless travel throughout the island of Ireland for free-travel customers, North and South.

Minister Brennan said that negotiations are also advancing, at European level, on an initiative to introduce, for the first time, free travel concessions to Irish pensioners in Europe. This primarily intended to recognise and reward the contribution of older Irish people in Britain by making free travel on public transport services in Ireland available to them when they return home at any time.

The Free Travel Scheme is available to persons aged 66 years or over who are permanently resident in the State, and to all carers in receipt of Carers Allowance. The scheme is also available to certain people with disabilities and people who are in receipt of certain welfare type payments.

Current annual expenditure on the scheme is some €58.3 million, of which the 2006 estimate provides for a total of €48.5million payable to the CIE Group for the travel services it provides.

Under the existing scheme, the Department has, with the agreement of the relevant operators, issued unrestricted passes, permitting free travel at peak times, to certain customers with disabilities primarily for the purposes of attending educational, long-term rehabilitative and therapeutic courses. In addition, in exceptional circumstances, the Department has issued temporary unrestricted passes for a limited period of six to twelve months to facilitate hospital appointments. Some 4,000 unrestricted passes issued during 2005 and there are currently approximately 19,000 such passes in circulation. The need for such special passes will cease from 25th September.

Ends