



**Minister Says Welfare Reforms Will Target Those Most at Risk
of Poverty**

*Brennan-Welfare Support Spend Doubled in Five Years But Reforms
Need to Tackle Social Problems Behind Payments*

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D. today (Wednesday, 15th February 2006) attended the third meeting of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy's Social Inclusion Forum in Dublin, which was attended by almost 400 people.

The Forum provides those who are not directly involved with the social partnership process with an opportunity to contribute their views on, and experiences of, the implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. Those attending represented a wide range of community and voluntary organizations and groups, both national and local, and individuals who are themselves affected by poverty. The Forum is jointly organised and funded by the National Economic and Social Forum and the Office for Social Inclusion, which is based in the Department of Social Affairs.

Minister Brennan said: "Ireland is now making steady progress in tackling the core issues that lead to poverty and leave people vulnerable and marginalised. Investment in welfare supports and entitlements are now at an all time high, with 1 in every 3 Euro the State is spending this year going on welfare. However, the significant social issues we face can be eased, but not solved, by welfare and support payments alone. The easy route is to solve our social conscience by signing the cheques and hoping the problems will go away. The honest route is to go behind the payments and confront the problem. It is vitally important that we do not view welfare as permanent. That is why a one size fits all system will not provide the answers. Welfare support systems must be tailored to the specific needs of individuals and should be seen as stepping stones to achieving a better quality of life".



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The Minister said that to achieve the social change we need to in Ireland will call for courageous reforms. "The window of opportunity is there and we are now shaping reforms that will introduce over the coming months and years enlightened social policies in a number of key areas. There are 80,000 lone parents, caring for 130,000 children, who need help in escaping from welfare traps and encouragement on the paths to training, education and work. The continued existence of child poverty in an Ireland of exceptional wealth is unacceptable and must be banished. There is an impending pensions crisis that brings with it threats of pensioner poverty that must be confronted and addressed. These, and other reforms in the rent supplement scheme and in increased activation measures, will greatly intensify our efforts to eliminate poverty from the Ireland of the 21st century".

Minister Brennan said that he was very keen that the next National Anti-Poverty Action Plan would make a decisive contribution to tackling poverty and social exclusion, a commitment that all EU Member States signed up to in Lisbon in 2000.

"The plan should be ambitious and achievable, and should address the issues and shortcomings identified during the consultation process, including the issues raised here today. We should set targets that can be reached but that at the same time will 'stretch' our capacity to deliver across the wide range of policy areas that impact on poverty and social exclusion. I am anxious that the 'implementation gaps' that have been identified on the ground should be addressed. It is important that service providers work closer together at local level to deliver their services in a more integrated manner".

The Minister said there was now clear evidence of the solid and steady progress being made to reduce poverty in its many areas, and to promote social inclusion. The latest results of the EU-SILC survey on income and living conditions in Ireland show that those at risk of consistent poverty has been reduced from 8.8 per cent in 2003 to 6.8 per cent in 2004. This reflected in part the impact that the record spending on welfare supports and entitlements is having in confronting and tackling poverty. Between 2000 and 2006 direct spending on welfare more than doubled from €6.7



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billion to €13.6 billion. The average payment increase in Budget 2006 was 10.5 per cent, almost four times the projected rate of inflation. The Budget also introduced a range of activation measures designed to ensure that the talents and potential of no individual would be overlooked. The tapering of disregards and thresholds would contribute significantly to smoothing a welfare to work route for many.

Minister Brennan added: 'This is a serious investment of taxpayers' money, which should yield tangible results. The EU-SILC results also showed that the upward trend in the numbers of persons regarded as being 'at risk of poverty' has been halted. The 'at risk of poverty' figure fell slightly from 19.7 per cent in 2003 to 19.4 per cent in 2004. While this figure is still high, these latest results show that we are now at least moving in the right direction, but the reality is that a considerable amount more must be done.

However, I would be the first to agree that we still need to do more to tackle the scourge of poverty, and I am grateful to all who participated here today, who, by giving of their expertise and experience, are helping to develop responses to the problems that still remain. All of us here, including those with responsibility for delivering services on the ground, should see the next plan as a key tool in our efforts to create a poverty-free and socially inclusive society, a society of which this generation can be proud. Today's proceedings will play an important part in moving us in this direction".

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