



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

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### **Over 15,000 People Appeal Social Welfare Decisions - Minister For Social And Family Affairs Mary Coughlan**

Over 15,000 people made appeals on decisions governing social welfare entitlements last year, said Mary Coughlan, Minister for Social and Family Affairs, as she published the annual report of the Social Welfare Appeals Office.

The independent appeals office also reduced the length of time it takes to process an appeal – despite the office processing an average of 436 appeals a week.

Minister Coughlan welcomed the continued commitment of the Office to providing an accessible and independent review mechanism for people who wish to appeal against decisions made by the Department in regard to entitlement to benefit.

“This year my Department will make over 700,000 payments a week to our customers. My Department will spend a record budget of over €11 billion this year – a budget which has doubled in size over the past seven years. The vast majority of customers find no cause to refer to the Appeals Office, however, it is vital that such an independent review body exists and works as effectively as it does.

“I am pleased to read the very positive findings of the Appeals Office’s Report which operates under the auspices of the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The fall in the number of weeks taken to clear an appeal reflects the hard work and customer focus of the Appeals Office. Staff of the Appeals Office are very aware that at the core of their business the focus must be on the service they provide at an individual level to each of the many appellants each year,” said Minister Coughlan

While every effort is made by the Department to deliver entitlements to people in accordance with the legislation it is understandable that not everyone will agree with the decisions made on their claims.

In 2003 just over 15,000 people made appeals to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. 15% of these appeals were subsequently withdrawn and of the remainder, 44% were decided in favour of the appellant while 41% were “disallowed”.

ENDS June 20th 2004

#### NOTE FOR NEWS EDITORS

\* The Social Welfare Appeals Office is an independent office operating under the auspices of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs. It is based in D'Olier House, D'Olier St.

\* The Office deals with appeals on decisions made in regard to entitlement to benefits provided under the Social Welfare Acts and questions regarding the insurability of employment. It also provides an appeals service to the Health Boards in relation to questions pertaining to Supplementary Welfare Allowance.



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\* The broad categories of the illness and unemployment schemes attract the most appeals reflecting the fact that they are the ones with the highest volumes and turnover of claims.

\* Appeals can be decided summarily but of the cases determined by Appeals Officers some 67% were dealt with by way of oral hearing. Such hearings are held at over 70 venues nationwide.

\*The time taken to process appeals is under constant review and during 2003 the number on hand was reduced by 800 during the year, down from 6,100 to 5,300 in the course of the twelve months. The Office is continuing to focus on appeals clearance times.

\* The Office processed nearly 21,000 appeals in 2003 - 15,224 new appeals and a carry-over of 6,156 from the previous year.

\* 2,403 appeals were withdrawn, 3,738 were given the benefit of a revised decision by the Deciding Officers in the Department of Social and Family Affairs and 9,908 were decided by Appeals Officers.

\* Part of the appeals procedure is a review by the Deciding Officer, who made the original decision, prior to making his or her submission to the Appeals Officer in relation to the appeals case. Frequently new evidence becomes available in the course of an appeal and a revised decision is warranted. There were 3,738 such revisions in 2003.

\* 15% of appeals were withdrawn, 23% were revised by Deciding Officers, 21% were allowed, fully or partly, by Appeals Officers who also disallowed the remaining 41%.

\* In 2003 it took an average of almost 21 weeks to dispose of an appeal – down from 23 weeks in 2002. However, many cases require longer times due to legal matters, medical considerations, additional investigations etc. If the 25% of longest cases are disregarded the average falls to 12 weeks. [The appeals system is a quasi-judicial one and due process must be followed. There is very limited scope for fast-tracking cases.]

\* The 2003 Report includes a brief commentary on 17 appeals cases to give an illustration of the type and range of appeals dealt with.