Minister Says Specific Proposals To Tackle Child Poverty And Assist Lone Parents Now At Advanced Stage

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D. today said that practical and targeted proposals to address the issues of poverty - in particular the unacceptable blemish of child poverty - and the lack of opportunity for those on welfare entitlements and in lower paid employment were being urgently advanced on a number of fronts.

Minister Brennan was speaking in Dublin when launching the Combat Poverty Agency's annual report for 2004. The report sets out how the Agency, with funding of €4 million from The Department of Social Affairs, has been to the fore in 2004 in researching and highlighting the issues associated with poverty and social exclusion in Irish society and in advancing proposals for tackling these issues.

The Minister said that while the overall strategies to address child poverty and the measures to give effect to them are set out in the National Children's Strategy and in the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, he was particularly interested in advancing specific proposals and measures that would impact urgently on the problems.

Minister Brennan said: "The national strategies are extremely important and in time they will deliver significant results. But I am also strongly of the opinion that significant strides in social policy reform can be made in the meantime. What I am interested in is selecting specific measures within the strategies that can be extracted and given immediate consideration and decisive action. The identifying of practical, targeted proposals to address the issues has been speeded up.

I have recently received practical proposals that I had requested from the Combat Poverty Agency on addressing child poverty as a matter of urgency. I am also shortly to receive detailed proposals from the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) on the structures needed to introduce a second tier of financial supports, in addition to Child Benefit and other entitlements, that would be aimed specifically at reaching out and helping those children most in need. The real challenge is to find

ways to channel additional resources directly to support these children and their families and to do so without delay".

He said that another area where reforms were under active consideration was that of Lone Parents. "There are some 86,000 Lone parents and their children, numbering up to 150,000, that are particularly vulnerable and at high risk of poverty. Proposals are at an advanced stage that are directed at the breaking down of existing obstacles to employment, increasing access to career enhancing education and training opportunities and the transforming of lives through targeted supports and more enlightened social policies that put the welfare and the future of the child, or children, at the very centre", the Minister said.

Minister Brennan said that the substantial progress that had been achieved in tackling poverty in recent years reflects the impact of a sustained programme of pro-employment and pro-family policies and investment in targeted supports. The Government is well on the way to meeting the 2007 target of a rate of 150 euro per week for the lowest welfare payments and the target of 200 euro per week for State welfare pension rates.

He said that this year his Department was spending over €12.2 billion on welfare entitlements and supports. That meant that for every €3 the State is spending this year, €1 year goes on welfare payments. Every week one million payments were made by the Department to those in need of supports.

"However, in drawing attention to these achievements, I am anything but complacent about the current situation, particularly in relation to those people in our society experiencing poverty" Minister Brennan said. "This includes those in vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the disabled, lone parents and, of course, children. The inescapable reality is that between 60,000 and 120,000 children are affected in some way by poverty that could blight their lives and sow the seeds for a serious lack of later development. Quiet honestly it is a situation that cannot be allowed continue in the Ireland of the 21st century that is awash with the financial gains of economic success".

Minister Brennan said he has committed himself to finding solutions by making sensible decisions that have at their core increased support for those who feel most vulnerable, neglected or apprehensive in our society, while at the same time working to bring about reforms that go behind the payments and aggressively strike at the very heart of the social issues that give rise the need for welfare supports in the first place.

"I anticipate and welcome the continued contribution of the Combat Poverty Agency to the goal of eradicating poverty in Ireland, bringing to the fore its experience, expertise and innovative thinking in this area" Minister Brennan said.

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