

**MINISTER SAYS THE FACT THAT NUMBERS OF OLDER PEOPLE WILL
TREBLE OVER COMING DECADES ILLUSTRATES URGENT NEED TO
FIND SOLUTIONS TO PENSIONS CHALLENGE**

***REPORT PROFILING OLDER PEOPLE FINDS NUMBER IN
CONSISTENT POVERTY HAS DROPPED TO BELOW 4% & THAT
90% OF OVER 65's OWN THEIR OWN HOMES***

The Minister for Social Affairs, Seamus Brennan T.D., said today the fact that the number of people aged 65 and over in Ireland will treble over the coming decades to more than 1.5 million, more than anything, graphically illustrated the urgent need to find solutions to the pensions challenge facing the country.

Minister Brennan said the challenge over the coming years is to make ageing an opportunity and an asset, rather than looking on the increase in the number of people of retirement age as a problem or burden.

Minister Brennan was speaking in Dublin when launching two separate publications on older people.



Prior to launching the reports, Minister Brennan visited the Silver Surfers Computer Club and Wireless project in the Fr. Maloney Community Centre, St. Canices's Road, Ballygall, Finglas to present certificates to a number of the 70 older and retired people who have completed computer and internet training courses.

This is part of an expanding training service to assist older people in communicating with their families, particularly those abroad, friends and support groups and organisations. The Wireless project is to allow those unable to leave the house due to illness to avail of a number of distance education and training opportunities.

The publications launched by Minister Brennan are:

A Social Portrait of Older People in Ireland - the first in a series of social portraits commissioned by the Office for Social Inclusion from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). This report analysis the current position of older people in Ireland and will assist in the designing of better policies to meet the needs of an increasingly ageing population over the coming decades.

Information Age - How to Access Senior Citizen Benefits- a new information and advice booklet and resource pack for older people published by the Citizens Information Board (formerly Comhairle). The booklet will be posted to all social welfare pensioners and distributed to other pensioners through the network of welfare offices, Citizen Information Centres and voluntary organisations. The booklet highlights a range of state and voluntary agencies that offer assistance to older people, and also areas of special interest such as Retirement, Health Services, Income & Support and Safety & Security.



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Speaking at the launch, Minister Brennan said: "The Information Age booklet is will be a valuable guide for older people to their entitlements, source of information and the many other supports that are available. So often clear and concise information is the key to unlocking difficulties and anxieties and clearing away problems and uncertainties that can cause worries for older people. Making this booklet so widely available should help to avoid situations where older people do not avail of their entitlements and other services because they are not aware of them."

The report - ***A Social Portrait of Older People in Ireland*** - shows that there are over 460,000 people aged 65 or over in the country at present.

Minister Brennan commented: "The welcome increase in longevity, and the fact we are now all living longer and healthier lives, means that over the coming 50 years that figure for over 65's will rise dramatically to over 1.5 million men and women. In response, meeting the cost of State pensions, for example, will spiral from the current rate of 4.3% of gross National Product to almost 14%. In that time we will go from the current ration of four people at work for every person over 65 to two workers in 20 years time and then to close to a one to one situation in 50 years.

So the challenge is to make ageing an opportunity instead of looking on it as a problem. To achieve that we need to continue building the structures and supports that will deliver the dignity, security and opportunity everyone growing old is entitled to and, more important, has earned. Over the past decade the Government has made great strides in improving the incomes of older people. The value of the State pension has been increased by over 120% and is now EUR200 a week or more. Some 400,000 people, mainly older people, have free telephone, TV licence, generous electricity and gas allowances and an increased fuel allowance while more than 420,000 are entitled to Free Travel which, from



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April 2nd, will be extended to allow them travel free anywhere on the island, North and South.

So while State incomes and supports for those now in retirement are steadily climbing, the biggest challenge we face right now is convincing almost half of the country's workforce of two million that they should take out personal pensions. In stark terms it means that 900,000, some 500,000 of whom are women, are gradually heading towards retirements in which their main source of income will be the State pension. After layers of research and analysis over the past two years we are now getting close to making the major decisions that will pave the way for solutions. Within weeks the Government will publish a Green Paper that will set out all the options, including directions on whether Ireland needs some type of mandatory system. Then it will be the time for some hard, but fair, decisions to be made."

Minister Brennan stressed that ageing is about more than income alone: "It is about how we cherish the contribution of those who are now growing old. In this fast-paced age we must never forget that our older people still have a wealth of expertise and experience to pass on. Most important of all we must recognise and reward older people in the way they themselves want to be recognised and rewarded. It is all about making sure that our older people have dignity, security, recognition and opportunity in later years. It is about a whole change of mindset. About moving beyond old debates about how to manage dependence and working towards a new world of enabling independence. One example is giving older people the flexibility and choice to work on past their retirement date, if that is what they want. Another is to provide the supports that allow older people embrace the whole area of information technology through computer training and Internet access."

The report findings include-
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- The consistent poverty rate for older people is significantly lower than that for people of working age and for the population overall. (Older People: 3.9%. People of working age: 5.9%. Overall: 6.6%) Reasons for this include the fact that older people:
 - experience lower housing costs;
 - benefit from the value of non cash benefits;
 - are more likely to be able to draw on accumulated resources; and
 - are particularly likely to enjoy support from family members.

Based on population figures from 2005 the figure of 3.9% of older people in consistent poverty equates to about 18,000 people.

- The greater Dublin area has fewer older people than its overall population would suggest, but it still contains just over one quarter of all those aged 65 or over.
- Older people have an above-average share of the population in the Border, Mid-West, South-East, South-West and West regions.
- The report also looks at the type of deprivation experienced by older people and finds that in no case do the older age group report higher levels of enforced deprivation than the working age population. The level of deprivation for older people ranges from a low of 1% in relation to a warm overcoat to a high of 11% in the case of new furniture. The corresponding figures for the working age population are 3% and 12%.
- The portrait finds that older people have a very high dependence on transfer payments. On average, pensioners depend on social welfare pensions and other benefits for up to 60% of their income.



- Access to services plays a crucial role in older people's quality of life and the portrait contains the following findings:
- Housing:
 - Most older people in Ireland own their own homes and very few have an outstanding mortgage. About 90% of those aged 65 or over own their houses, compared with 80% of households in the population as a whole. Housing wealth thus offsets to some degree the inequalities in current income. Older people tend to have low incomes but high housing wealth. Younger adults have higher incomes but bigger mortgages.
- Health
 - While life expectancy is rising and people are staying healthy longer, health-related problems can still be a major issue for older people. Only one in six older people considered their health to be 'very good', compared with over one in two of the working age population. However, nine out of 10 older people considered their health to be 'fair' to 'good', with only 3% saying it was 'very bad'.
 - Older people had a higher number of free GP visits and twice as many older people spent at least one night in hospital compared with those of working age.
- Social contact
 - Social isolation is a particular risk for older people, with potentially serious consequences. Data from the Living in Ireland Surveys shows that about two-thirds of older people talk to their neighbours most days, with most of the rest doing so once or twice a week. Two-thirds of older



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people meet friends and relatives most days, with most of the rest doing so once or twice a week.

- Usage of Information and communication technologies (ICT)

Older people use computers and the internet far less than younger adults do. In a survey carried out by the CSO in 2005, only 14% of people aged 65 to 74 had used a computer, compared with two thirds of those aged 16 to 24 and over half of those aged 16-74. Only 9% of people aged 65-74 had used the internet, compared with 57% of those aged 16-24 and 44% of all those between the ages of 16 and 74

Press Release Ends