



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Coughlan in Belfast Meeting to Progress Free All-Ireland Travel

The introduction of a smart card for rail and bus travel could lead to the extension of the social welfare free travel scheme throughout the 32 counties.

Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Coughlan TD, met with John Spellar MP, Minister for State for Northern Ireland, at Stormont this week to further advance the discussions on introducing free travel on an All Ireland basis.

"This was a positive and productive meeting where we discussed some of the difficulties which would have to be resolved before the proposed scheme could be introduced for free travel pass holders on both sides of the border, " said Minister Coughlan.

At present, Free Travel pass holders who reside in the 26 counties can travel free within the State. Also, people who live in Northern Ireland who hold a Concessionary Travel Pass can travel free within the North. Under the Department of Social and Family Affairs' free cross-border travel scheme both southern and northern pass holders can undertake cross border journeys free of charge.

The introduction of free travel on an all-Ireland basis would extend existing arrangements so that southern pass holders will be able to make free internal journeys within the North. Also, northern pass holders will be able to make free internal journeys within the South. Enhancing the scheme in this way could cost an extra €3 million approximately a year.

"At present the Rail Procurement Agency is working towards introducing a smart card for integrated ticketing in the Greater Dublin Area." said Minister Coughlan. "My Department is working actively with the RPA to ensure that our free travel passholders can participate in that ticketing system using smartcards. Issuing these new smart cards to pensioners and other eligible social welfare client groups is scheduled to commence within the next year."

"The use of this type of smart card may hold the key to resolving many of the administrative difficulties in operating the proposed All-Ireland Free Travel scheme on both sides of the border," said Minister Coughlan. "Minister Spellar and I agreed that it would be useful to ensure that the smartcards used for public transport and concessionary travel purposes are as compatible as possible to facilitate cross-border journeys."

The existing cross-border free travel scheme costs the Department of Social and Family Affairs approximately €2.7million a year. The cost of the northern element of journeys that are undertaken by northern pass holders is met by the Department for Regional Development (NI) under its own concessionary travel scheme.

Nearly 600,000 people qualify for the Department of Social and Family Affairs' free travel pass scheme. These are people who live permanently in the Republic and are aged over 66, or who are under 66 and receive invalidity or blind pension, disability allowance or carer's allowance. Also included are widows or widowers over 60 whose



Department of Social and Family Affairs

late spouses held a free travel pass. The scheme (including the existing cross-border travel arrangement) is expected to cost the Department €52.1 million overall in 2004.

Ends September 27th 2004