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Department of Social Protection**

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Minister Ó Cuív: technological initiatives help to improve customer services

Minister for Social Protection, Éamon Ó Cuív TD, this morning (24th November 2010), met with the Department's Customer Representative Focus Group. This group includes members of approximately 20 organisations representing older people, unemployed people, carers, one parent families and people with disabilities.

Speaking to the group, Minister Ó Cuív said: "As part of my Department's ongoing customer consultation process, the Department's Information Unit holds four customer information fora each year. The purpose of these meetings is to inform the Department's customers (through their various representative bodies) of changes to the Department's schemes and services and they provide an opportunity for customers to give suggestions on how we can improve the service we deliver. This feedback is invaluable in helping us to continue to improve our services and the suggestions from the focus group are generally very practical and useful."

The forum heard presentations on a number of topics including one on the Department's new Public Services Card which is currently being developed. The Public Services Card will act as a key for public services in general. The Card, which will include a photograph and signature, will ensure that people can access services across multiple channels (e.g. at a front desk, online, by phone) with a minimum of duplication and effort while preserving their privacy to the maximum extent possible.



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Minister Ó Cuív explained: "The Public Services Card will, in time, replace cards which are currently in use, such as the Social Services Card and the Free Travel Card. Other departments and agencies will also be in a position to use the card and the infrastructure that will support it. Security features of the card, which will help in authenticating a person – such as a photo, signature and electronic chip authentication - are also expected to minimise the rate of fraud and error in social welfare schemes. Card issue for customers will commence early in 2011."

Minister Ó Cuív also spoke of other recent technological initiatives in the Department to improve services to customers. "As set out in the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No.2) Bill 2010, which was published last week, the Department is exploring the potential for certain people who receive Jobseeker's Allowance and Jobseeker's Benefit to complete their certification ("signing-on") process by electronic means. We will be changing the current signing process in our Local and Branch Offices to collect signatures via a digital signature pad and we are exploring the possibility of using electronic channels for certification such as online through the internet or by using the mobile phone. These measures would free up staff resources to concentrate on client, claim, payment and control issues and would reduce pressure on Local Office facilities and accommodation."

As part of the Department's ongoing programme of improvement, certain customers can now apply online at www.welfare.ie for certain payments. These payments include the State Pension (Contributory), Child Benefit, Widows' and Widowers' (Contributory) Pension. Jobseekers who are returning to the workforce can close their claim or "sign off" online. Customers can also request a statement of benefits they have received from the Department; request a



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copy of their social insurance record and report suspected fraud at www.welfare.ie.

The Department offers a “Form and Statement Request Service” through SMS. The Minister said that this service proved to be particularly effective during the recent application weeks for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. A new Twitter account (welfare_ie) was recently launched and this is used to notify followers of press releases, events and Bank Holiday arrangements.

“We are living in very difficult times and demand on my Department’s resources has never been higher but so too is our commitment to our customers’ needs and expectations,” said Minister Ó Cuív. The Minister concluded by thanking the members of the Customer Representative Group for their attendance and constructive input and feedback.

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