



## **Varadkar publishes Social Welfare Bill 2017 with reforms to Defined Benefit Pensions, Disability issues & Welfare fraud**

Minister for Social Protection Leo Varadkar has announced today that the Government has approved the publication of the General Scheme of the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2017.

**“The Bill contains key measures to increase protections for members of Defined Benefit Occupational Pension schemes, and to make it easier for people with disabilities to take up work. There are also reforms to tackle welfare fraud. I am keen to introduce reforms in these policy areas and I look forward to a fruitful debate in the Oireachtas as the Bill proceeds through the Houses,”** Minister Varadkar said.

**“It is particularly important that the proposals relating to Defined Benefit pension schemes are brought into effect as soon as possible, and we will strive for a constructive debate in the Oireachtas.”**

### **Defined Benefit Pensions**

The Bill also introduces a number of measures which respond to the ongoing difficulties in Defined Benefit (DB) Occupational Pension schemes. Firstly, it requires employers who sponsor DB schemes - whether or not those schemes are in deficit - to give 12 months' notice of their intention to cease contributions. For a scheme in deficit, the employers and trustees are required to enter into discussions to agree a funding proposal before the 12 month period expires.

Secondly, it introduces a time limit of six months, from the date of the actuarial funding certificate, for trustees of a DB scheme which is in deficit to submit a funding proposal to the Pensions Authority.

And thirdly, the Bill provides powers to the Pensions Authority to determine a schedule of contributions that will restore DB pension schemes, which do not satisfy the funding standard or funding standard reserve, to an adequate funding position, in circumstances where a funding proposal has not been agreed.

Minister Varadkar said he hopes for cross-party support of these actions which should offer greater safeguards to people who are members of DB schemes.

### **Relaxing rules for people with disabilities**

The Bill also removes a barrier to employment for people on Disability Allowance and the Blind Pension. It will allow them to keep some or all of their weekly welfare payment if they take up work, which will no longer have to be of a strictly rehabilitative nature.

### **Welfare fraud**

The Bill includes two proposals to deter abuse of the welfare system. The first provides that the Department of Social Protection will publish, on a quarterly basis, a list of the names, addresses and penalties incurred by people who have been convicted of welfare fraud. This will be similar in approach and intent to the list of Tax Defaulters already published by Revenue.

While the outcomes of individual prosecutions for welfare fraud are covered routinely in local and national media, the publication of a list in this way will send a stronger message to that small number of people prepared to risk defrauding the welfare system and their fellow citizens.

The second action provides that where a person has been convicted of fraudulently claiming a social welfare payment, the Department will have the power to reduce, for a limited period, the rate of any weekly social welfare payment. This reinforces the message that defrauding the welfare system will not be rewarded.

### **Public Service Card**

The Bill will allow people to use the Public Services Card for information purposes and to include their date of birth if they wish. This will be of particular benefit to people who may have not a driving licence or a passport.

### **Provisions for same sex couples**

The Bill will seek to ensure that same sex spouses and civil partners of members of occupational pension schemes will be able to obtain, in certain circumstances, a spouse's pension.

This significant equal treatment proposal aims to provide that same-sex couples enjoy the same rights and entitlements in this area as any other married couples do.

The Bill will now be submitted for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection. The Minister stated that he was keen to have the Bill enacted before the Summer Recess.

The Bill is being published today on the Department of Social Protection Website – [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)

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