

To: Tracey Fanning
From: CentreCare, a project of Crosscare
Date: 29 Sept., 2005
Re: Pre-budget submission to Dept. of Social and Family Affairs

Background:

CentreCare is one of 14 programmes of Crosscare, the Social Care Agency of the Dublin Diocese. Established in 1980, CentreCare evolves to meet the diverse and changing information needs of service users. CentreCare is an information service with a particular emphasis on working towards the resolution of housing and social welfare problems. We are constantly updating our service in order to effectively meet the needs of the people who need our service most.

Issue 1 – People barred from access to the Back To Education Allowance due to time spent in receipt of Supplementary Welfare Allowance

Through the course of our work in CentreCare we have identified a particularly marginalized group of people that are effectively barred from access to the Back To Education Allowance due to time spent in receipt of Supplementary Welfare Allowance. These are homeless people who spent periods of time on SWA before becoming eligible for other Social Welfare payments. This time cannot be counted as part of the qualifying time for BTEA.

We would like to outline our rationale for having time spent on SWA recognised as a qualifying time for eligibility for the BTEA:

- The objective of the BTEA is to ‘raise the educational and skills levels among the long term unemployed, in order to help them meet the requirements of the modern labour market’.
- If SWA is not recognised as a qualifying payment then the person continues to remain welfare dependant for a longer period of time. A person in receipt of SWA may spend months on this payment prior to go receiving one of the qualifying payments and then has to wait at least 6 months before they qualify for BTEA, prolonging their time of being welfare dependent.
- The is revenue neutral as the payment the person receives will remain the same, apart from extra allowances during their time in education. This will be quickly balanced out when the person takes up employment, which is the objective of the Department for this scheme.
- We are aware that the Department has included other Payments e.g. Widow’s contributory Pensions, since the scheme began. We believe that those in receipt of SWA are equally, if not more entitled to qualify for this scheme as other payments that have been added on.

Recommendation

We recommend that time spent in receipt of SWA be included as qualifying time for people wishing to return to education through BTEA. We believe that the above rationale proves that this marginalised group should be included in the list of those who qualify for this scheme.

Issue 2 - Need for an increase in Fuel Allowance

This payment was introduced to assist those most vulnerable in our society i.e. *'Those who are dependent on long-term social welfare or Health Service Executive payments and who are unable to provide for 29 weeks from the end of September to mid-April'*.

In recent months spiralling fuel prices have been felt by this group in relation to rises in oil, electricity and gas bills. This has put extreme pressure on an already tight budget for these groups of people. Electricity Bills have risen by approximately 24% in the last two years. Gas Bills have predicted increases of over 25% from the 1st of October 2005. Yet the fuel allowance of €9 per week and has not been increased in the last two years, except to round it into euros with the currency change.

Recommendations

In light of the fact that no increases have been made to fuel allowance in previous budgets, we are calling on the Minister to increase this payment by a minimum of 25%, which is a realistic reflection of current market prices.

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