

# Social Policy Update

## June 2016

*Social Policy Update focuses on the social policy work of CIB and our delivery services throughout the country. It also provides information on national social policy news, activities and resources.*

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## CIB Social Policy and Research News

### Introduction

Welcome to the June edition of CIB's Social Policy Update. In this issue, we summarise the CIPS and MABS Activity Reports for 2015 and highlight some Social Policy issues that arose at the Rent Supplement and HAP training organised by the CIB training team in May. Issues highlighted by the Citizens Information Services (CISs) and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) in their Social Policy Returns (SPRs) for April and May 2016 are covered in this issue, with a focus on Disability, Illness and Carer's SPRs as well as a small piece on the trending issues. This issue of Update looks at responses to Parliamentary Questions (PQ's) on the proposed working family payment, Deaf citizens' rights to a Sign Language Interpreter, Child Benefit for over 18's in full-time education and the DSP's statistics in relation to pending applications for social welfare payments. We also provide an overview of the Sage forum meeting on Long-Term Care, highlight relevant issues from the Social Welfare Appeals Office annual report, provide a summary of the ERSI research into low paid work and look at some of the measures outlined in the DSP Ministerial Brief.

### CIPS and MABS Activity Reports 2015 – key statistics

The National Activity Reports for 2015 for the CIS network, CIPS, MABS, NAS, SLIS outline the level of caller and query activities for each service delivery organisation and provide details of the projects that have been rolled out or progressed in the last year. In the last issue of Social Policy Update we looked at the CIS Activity Report from a statistical perspective, in this issue we focus on the CIPS and MABS reports and their data patterns.

#### CIPS Activity Report 2015

CIPS dealt with 154,441 requests for information and advice from the public in 2015, which represents a nearly 2% increase when compared with queries dealt with in 2014. Most people contacted CIPS by phone (153,136), but there were also 595 email queries and 710 Live Advisor web chats (a service aimed at people with hearing or speech difficulties). The demand for email and Live Advisor interactions has grown steadily since 2013. The average talk time per call has risen steadily since 2012 and now stands at 5 mins 20 seconds per call; it is felt that this increase is the result of more complex queries. At the moment CIPS only record a primary query per call, therefore they cannot electronically register calls with more than one query. It is hoped that something can be developed to capture and analyse this information in 2016.

Social Welfare continued to be the most prevalent query category, with 46% of queries relating to this topic, this is similar to CIS statistics where Social Welfare consistently remains the largest query category. The area of Employment came in next at 15%, this is a contrast to the CIS figures, where even though the Employment category was in the top five it only accounted for 7% of callers to the CISs. Money & Tax was the third highest

query category at 6.6%. The sub-categories in the Social Welfare area were, Social Assistance Payments, Claiming a Social Welfare Payment, Families and Children, Disability and Illness, Other and Unemployed People. Over 80% of the Employment queries related to Employment Rights and Conditions and the majority of Money & Tax queries were about Income Tax, Credits and Reliefs.

CIPS submitted 724 Social Policy Returns in 2015, with over 70% of these policy issues relating to Social Welfare. They also quantitatively tracked a number of topical Social Policy issues during the year using counters (monthly monitors of calls on specific issues), these included topics such as lone parents, fuel and water issues, women, work and pensions, zero hour contracts, housing supports and homelessness, rent supplement and the Christmas bonus. CIPS also undertook research into “barriers to taking up paid employment for one-parent families”, which was based on queries to CIPS on this topic. This research was funded using a CIB Social Policy grant.

CIPS were involved in a job shadowing project in 2015 where CIPS Information Officers shadowed staff at a CIS, an Advocacy Support Worker (ASW), a CIB Social Policy Executive, a staff member at Togetehr-Razem (an Irish-Polish community organisation) and the NASC immigrant support centre. It is hoped that this initiative will be extended into 2016 to create further linkages with other relevant organisations and bodies.

In 2015, there was ongoing work on the development of an over-arching reporting tool for all CIPS data, so that it can be more easily analysed and used to inform business decisions etc. This Business Intelligence (BI) tool will be tested and rolled out in early 2016.

### **MABS Activity Report 2015**

There were 17,302 new MABS clients in 2015, a slight increase on new clients from 2014. A further 2,688 sought information about budgeting and money management from the local services. MABS had 17,773 ‘active clients’ at the end of 2015. MABS also runs a national helpline that received 19,181 calls in 2015. Overall MABS services are dealing with just under 40,000 new clients/callers annually and an average of 3,300 new clients/callers a month, between the face to face service, information only clients, and the National Helpline. New clients had an average recorded debt of €46,000 (an increase on previous years), which amounted to a total of €808 million of debt. This debt was made up of the following debt types: personal loans, credit card debt, mortgage debt, utility bills and other debts – with 78% of the total owed to banks/financial institutions, almost 6% to credit unions and 1.3% to utility companies.

Over half of new clients were aged between 41 and 65; with 39% aged 26 to 40. Nearly two thirds of these clients were in receipt of Social Welfare, while over a third were employed, self-employed or received maintenance or income from other sources. The waiting time to get an appointment with a Money Advisor has reduced over the last couple of years. With clients experiencing a 2.7 week wait for an appointment in 2015 as opposed to 3.1 weeks in 2014 and just under four weeks in 2012. 3,240 emergency clients were seen by services without a waiting period during the year.

In 2015, MABS extended its service offer to include a Dedicated Mortgage Arrears Service and a court mentoring service in addition to the approved intermediary service under the Personal Insolvency Act.

In May 2015 an enhanced role for MABS in mortgage arrears was announced and by the end of 2015, 23.5 Dedicated Mortgage Arrears (DMA) advisors had been selected and appointed to Services. The DMA Advisor’s role is to manage complex and urgent mortgage cases, analyse possible payment options, advocate on the clients behalf and implement payment solutions and resolutions for clients. The court mentoring project involves supporting existing clients and meeting new clients who have come to Court in relation to repossession. This project was piloted in six courts and has now been rolled out nationally. The Approved Intermediary Service was mainstreamed in MABS over 2015. This Service helps clients applying for a Debt Relief Notice (DRN). In 2015 the Service made 346 DRN applications and had meetings with 657 clients to discuss the DRN process.

### **Rent Supplement and HAP Calendar Training**

CIB organised a training event on the Rent Supplement & Housing Assistance Payment schemes on 31 May, in the Hilton Hotel, Kilmainham. The Community Law & Mediation Service presented the training and raised some interesting social policy and legal issues in relation to the two schemes and the legislation governing them. There

were also a range of questions, and issues raised by participants on the course, which were discussed over the day, some of which are outlined below:

- **Obligation to move to HAP**

Issues were raised in relation to the obligation for people to move from Rent Supplement to HAP in areas where HAP has already been rolled out. In section 198(3G) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 it states that a designated person from the local authority can write to a Rent Supplement recipient asking them to apply for social housing support, (HAP). If they do not comply within a set time-frame the Local Authority will contact the DSP to request that the individual's Rent Supplement is stopped. As the individual hasn't engaged with the HAP process they may also be ineligible for HAP for a prescribed period. This means that the individual may be left without any form of housing support, which is very difficult particularly for vulnerable people. Section 198 (3H) of the Act details that Rent Supplement can be stopped if the household "failed to do anything" to engage with the HAP scheme. This has led to cases where people have had their RS cut even though they have tried to engage with the process by asking their landlord to move to HAP, but the landlord refused. Clients should get documentary evidence that the landlord has refused to move to the HAP scheme. This letter should be given to the LA to evidence that their landlord will not move to HAP and to highlight that they have tried to engage with the process.

- **Application of 'discretion' in relation to Rent Supplement – Article 38**

The training noted that Article 38 of the Act, which advised designated persons to use discretionary powers, was very clear and generous. It states that discretion should be used to ensure that people in receipt of Rent Supplement can retain their accommodation in the private rented market and that DSP staff could make payments 'above the maximum rent limits' and in line with the local rental market. This is set out in a circular to DSP staff.

- **Rent Supplement Appeals**

Appeals of negative rent supplement decisions are made to the Social Welfare Appeals Officer. It was noted that Appeals Officers hear these cases 'de novo', which means they are not confined to asking about the grounds of the appeal but can ask anything about the claim, as if dealing with it afresh. It is important to raise this issue with clients as they can be asked about 'topping up' RS payments even if this isn't the issue for review. As topping up is fraud, it is important to advise clients to request a review rather than an appeal in these situations.

- **HAP – difficulty of the triangular relationship between Local Authority, landlord and tenant**

The difficulty of the triangular relationship between the Local Authority, HAP landlord and HAP tenant was highlighted and participants discussed issues arising in relation to this. The fact that the LA pays the landlord but the landlord has the rights and responsibilities of a landlord is proving difficult particularly around enforcing housing standards, dealing with anti-social behaviour and tenants ending tenancies.

- **HAP Appeals process**

Section 48 of the 2014 Act which provides the review mechanism for HAP has not been enacted. This means that a HAP recipient who wishes to appeal a decision has to pursue other routes of appeal such as the Ombudsman or Judicial Review proceedings at the High Court, neither of which are suitable for appealing administrative HAP issues. There are issues with the appeals section of the legislation, which may be the reason for the delay in its enactment. For instance there are issues around the independence of the reviewer, which the legislation states can be another employee in the Local Authority. There are also concerns around the grounds for establishing anti-social behaviour in this section, which can be based on a belief of anti-social behaviour by a member of An Garda Síochána or an officer of a housing authority and the reviewer.

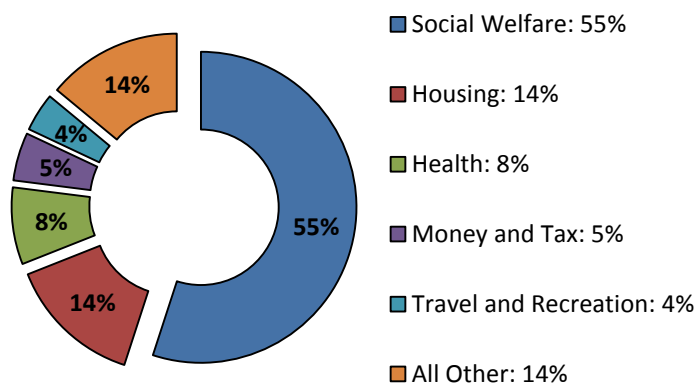
# On the Ground: feedback from CISs & CIPS

This section features an overview of recent social policy returns from Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service.

## Social Policy Returns – April and May 2016

During April and May 2016, CIB received 784 Social Policy Returns (SPRs), 673 from CISs and 111 from CIPS. This represents an 18% increase on the same period in 2015. The majority of returns for April/May (86%) fell into five of the main Oyster categories (an electronic recording system used in CISs to record the nature of queries presenting to services) - Social Welfare, Housing, Health, Money and Tax and Travel and Recreation.

### SPRs by main category



Over half of the returns were categorised as Social Welfare issues, with 60% of these related to the sub-categories of Supplementary Welfare Schemes, Families and Children, Disability and Illness and Unemployed People. The payments or benefits that logged the most SPRs for April and May were Rent Supplement (RS), Family Income Supplement (FIS), Jobseekers Allowance, Medical Card, Carer's Allowance and State Pension (Contributory).

In this issue of Update we focus on issues coming through in the linked areas of Disability and Illness and Carer's. We also briefly highlight trending issues in relation to passports.

The combined areas of Disability & Illness and Carer's accounted for over 14% of all SPRs in this period and 23% of all Social Welfare SPRs. The majority of these SPRs related to issues with Carer's Allowance (CA), Disability Allowance (DA), Illness Benefit (IB) and Invalidity Pension (IP). There were a number of general issues that came up in most of the Disability, Illness and Carer's payments and there were other issues that were payment-specific, both of which are detailed below:

- Difficulties contacting relevant sections about applications and payments
- Delays processing disability, illness and carer's payments applications in particular, CA
- Payments stopped or adjusted without the person being notified in advance
- Applications and supporting documentation lost
- Clients not being told of alternative payments at the point of application if they are not eligible for the one they apply for, or not informed of supplementary payments if they are eligible
- Clients with language and literacy issues having difficulty with application forms
- Difficulties with the CA means-test in cases where the carer has to move in with the person being cared for – the carer's own house is taken into account for the CA means test
- Lack of promotion of CA means that people are missing out on this and other payments
- Cessation of Carer's Benefit when person being cared for is in hospital for an extended period is causing hardship particularly in cases where parents need to be in hospital with a sick child
- Six-day wait to claim IB causing hardship for people who do not get sick pay from their employer

### Passports

Passports became a trending topic in May, with the number of SPRs relating to passports trebling in comparison with previous months. This is a seasonal issue, but it is worthwhile highlighting some of the difficulties being encountered. These include, delays in processing passport applications, difficulties contacting the passport office, difficulties arising due to recent changes that require passport applicants to have a Public Service Card.

# In the Oireachtas

This section looks at policy-related questions and debates in the Oireachtas, with a particular focus on issues currently arising in social policy feedback from Citizens Information Services. The text may be edited. For the full text of any PQs/debates featured here, go to [oireachtas.ie](http://oireachtas.ie) or [kildarestreet.com](http://kildarestreet.com)

## Proposed working family payment [PQ: 14672/16 & 14672/16, 8 June 2016]

**John Brady** (Wicklow, Sinn Féin) asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection “the implications of the proposed new working family payment scheme for the family income supplement scheme, the back-to-work family dividend and the rules governing the permissibility of work and earnings disregards of other working age payment schemes; if it is to replace any or all of these payments and if so, if the total number of recipients of an in-work welfare support will increase or decrease; if so, by how much; and if it is envisaged that the total social protection spend supplementing paid employment will increase or decrease, and if so, by how much.” He asked a second question on this topic looking for “the approximate timeframe within which the Minister envisages introducing the Government's proposed working family payment scheme.”

Minister **Leo Varadkar** (Dublin West, Fine Gael) took both of these questions together stating “I recognise the important role played by the Family Income Supplement (FIS) in providing extra financial supports for 56,000 working families. The FIS scheme provides strong financial incentives for many families in availing of employment opportunities. I have asked my officials to commence work on a proposed Working Family Payment which will seek to ensure that working families always have an incentive to transition from welfare to employment. Considerable work and analysis needs to be done and it is therefore not possible to provide any further detail on the scheme at this stage.”

## Deaf citizens' rights to Sign Language Interpreters [PQ: 12768/16, 31 May 2016]

**Clare Daly** (Dublin Fingal, United Left) asked the Minister for Justice and Equality “the initiatives she proposes to take to ensure that deaf citizens' rights to Irish Sign Language interpreters is protected in order to allow them access essential State services.”

Minister **Frances Fitzgerald** (Dublin Mid-West, Fine Gael) provided this written answer. In 2013 the National Disability Authority (NDA) facilitated consultations with the Deaf Community in Ireland at my Department's request in relation to actions that could make improvements in the lives of deaf people. Submissions received as part of that process informed the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan which was published in July 2013. As part of the follow-up to that initiative, in November 2013 the first special themed meeting of the National Disability Strategy Implementation Group focussed on the issue of Irish Sign Language. This meeting brought together representatives of relevant Departments, the NDA, the Deaf Community and other relevant stakeholders who reviewed the current situation across Government Departments and their Agencies with regard, in particular, to promoting recognition of Irish Sign Language, including in service provision. The Group also examined mechanisms which could promote the further use and recognition of Irish Sign Language and address practical implications for service users. Further to this meeting, the Deaf Community prepared a report to reflect their views on key actions and priorities.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department is currently progressing a three Phase consultation process with a view to putting a new Disability Inclusion Strategy in place. Phase 2, which focused on agreeing high-level objectives for the Strategy, was completed at the end of 2015. Phase 3 will involve agreeing specific actions with timescales to deliver on each of the high-level objectives. This will commence shortly. I expect to have a set of draft actions for the Strategy for publication shortly. The consultations on this draft will include consideration by the National Disability Strategy Steering Group and, as with Phase 2, a series of regional consultation meetings. The Strategy will then be revised as necessary and submitted to Government for final approval. Issues in relation to the Deaf Community have featured strongly in the consultation process to date and I intend that the new Disability Inclusion Strategy will respond credibly to the issues raised, including making a real difference in relation to facilitating the use of Irish Sign Language and ensuring that public bodies provide ISL users with ISL interpretation when availing of their statutory services.

## Child Benefit [PQ: 13567/16, 31 May 2016]

**Frank O'Rourke** (Kildare North, Fianna Fáil) asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection if data was available on the number of students aged 18 to 20 in full-time second level education who are not eligible for child benefit; the cost of extending child benefit to students aged 18 to 20 in full-time second level education; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Minister **Leo Varadkar** (Dublin West, Fine Gael) stated that “the Department does not hold data on children over the age of 18, as this is not required for the administration of the child benefit scheme. Accordingly, the Department does not have details on the number of children aged 18-20 who are in full-time second level education and is not in a position to put a figure on the number of children in this age group who are not eligible for child benefit. In the absence of detail on the number involved it is not possible to estimate the cost of extending child benefit to this age group.”

## DSP – Social Welfare Benefits Data [PQ: 13895/16, 1 June 2016]

**Gerry Adams** (Louth, Sinn Féin) asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection for the number of pending applications for each social protection claim within his Department.

Minister **Leo Varadkar** (Dublin West, Fine Gael) provided the following information on the number of pending applications as of the 30 April 2016.

Scheme	Pending applications
Jobseeker's Benefit	2,053
Jobseeker's Allowance	6,662
One-Parent Family Payment	1,119
State Pension Contributory (Domestic)	4,396
State Pension Transition (Domestic)	16
Widow(er)'s Contributory Pension	343
Widowed or Surviving Civil Partner Grant	15
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	2,239
Household Benefits	2,652
Free Travel	33
Domiciliary Care Allowance	1,876
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	3,499
Child Benefit (Domestic & Formerly Resident Abroad)	1,081
Child Benefit (EU Regulation)	1,746
Treatment Benefit	15,544
Maternity Benefit	4,144
Family Income Supplement (New claims)	2,456
Family Income Supplement (Renewals)	1,252
Carer's Allowance	6,361
Disability Allowance	5,455
Invalidity Pension	2,048
Illness Benefit	3,000
Occupational Injury Benefit	186

# Policy News, Resources and Opinion

This section features developments, resources, events and opinions likely to be of interest to those engaged in policy work. CIB does not endorse or otherwise any of the policy positions featured

## Sage Forum on Long-Term Care

Helen McEntee, Minister for State with responsibility for Mental Health and Older People opened the Support & Advocacy Service for Older People (Sage) forum meeting on Long-Term Care on 15 June 2016 in the Davenport Hotel. She congratulated the organisations for working together on this Forum and stated that government Departments need to work in this fashion to ensure joined up thinking and policies in relation to Long-Term Care.

The findings of the draft report 'Responding to the Support & Care Needs of our Older Population' were presented by the researcher Michael Browne at the meeting. The report looked at existing research and policy documents in the area of long-term care and amalgamated feedback from 54 submissions that came into the Forum during the public consultation phase, including one from CIB, which you can access [here](#).

The draft report highlights that demand for long-term care is growing as our population ages. It notes that the majority of older people would prefer to stay at home as long as possible and that this option is not always available as community and home supports do not have the same legislative basis as the Nursing Home Support Scheme. Mr Browne opened his remarks by defining 'long-term care' and highlighting that it covers a broad continuum of supports including acute care, residential care and independent living with community and family supports. He highlighted the importance of housing, carer's and integrated services to ensure that people's long-term care needs and wishes are met. The report notes that long-term care should be underpinned by the following six core considerations, respecting the rights of older people, quality of life, choice of long-term care and support, equality of access to community and residential care, meeting the needs of people with Dementia and integrated medical nursing and social care provision. It also discusses a number of funding options available to finance long-term care into the future. The report will be finalised and published in the coming weeks.

A number of people working in the area of long-term care responded to the report, including Sabina Brennan from the NEIL Dementia Research Project who shared her experience of the long-term care she encountered when her mother, who had dementia, was in an acute hospital and then a residential setting. She highlighted inadequacies in her mother's care including issues in relation to delays in accessing personal care due to understaffing.

Robert Mooney from Amárach presented the findings of the Amárach online survey on Long-Term Care. This survey used a sample of 1,000 individuals aged over of 18 in Ireland. The sample group was demographically, geographically and socially representative of the population as a whole. They asked participants four key questions about long-term care, including their preference for where they would receive long-term care, who should provide it, who enables care at home and how long-term care should be funded. The results reiterated previous research on this topic with respondents' across all age groups stating their preference for care at home, with residential care coming in second last. There was also a preference for care to be provided by the HSE. Respondents noted that family and relatives living nearby and home help were key to enabling people to continue living at home. General taxation or a PRSI system came through as top preferences for funding long-term care, with the private health insurance and a scheme of down-sizing accommodation to generate income for long-term care polling low for this question. This highlights the public's position on funding, where it seems agreed that 'risk of long-term care' should be pooled across society rather than being a personal burden.

There was agreement from the forum and the panel that we 'don't need to re-invent the wheel' or need more research, but that now is the time for implementing the recommendations highlighted in research and policy documents on long-term care. The next steps for the Forum on Long-Term Care are to:

- Finalise the report and bring to the relevant Departments, committees, organisations and groups for responses

- Facilitate five forum meetings around the country to highlight Long-Term Care issues to local TD's and other local representatives so their attention is refocused on older people
- Initiate a national conversation on Long-Term Care so that it becomes 'the issue' for the public and politicians – target this towards the next programme for government
- Continue the collaborative work between organisations and people at today's forum to build a movement for change for Long-Term Care

## ERSI Research - Low Pay, Minimum Wages and Household Incomes



The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) recently published its research entitled “Low-Pay, Minimum Wages and Household Incomes”. This paper is the ERSI’s third paper in its Budget Perspectives 2017 series. The paper examines changes in wage inequality over the period of boom, bust and early recovery in Ireland. It uses previous research and data to highlight that wage inequality declined significantly from the mid-1990’s to the early 2000’s. It notes that the recent boom rather than the resultant recession brought about greater wage inequality.

The paper looks at the number of low paid employees in Ireland, which has grown from 20% of the work-force in 2005 to 23% in 2013. It notes that most low-paid individuals are found in households with incomes above the poverty income line, as most low paid employees are not the sole earners in the household. Even when low-paid workers are the sole earners, fewer than one in five of them fall below the EU’s “at risk of poverty” threshold. The paper concludes that increases in the minimum wage result in increases in disposable income but should not be expected to have a major impact on household poverty. You can read the full paper on [ersi.ie/pubs](http://ersi.ie/pubs).

## Department of Social Protection Ministerial Brief

The DSP prepared a [Ministerial Brief](#) for the new Minister in May which provides an overview of the Department and its main areas of responsibility. The brief was made up of two parts, Part A, which we will look at here sets out the DSPs high level objectives, the services it delivers, its budget and staff and some of the topical issues that might need attention in the short-term. Part B looks at DSP schemes, compliance, anti-fraud and corporate and central functions. The brief provides background to the Department highlighting that it:

- Administers over 65 separate schemes and services through 353 offices nationwide
- Provides social welfare payments to 1.6 million people (2.1 million with qualified adults & children)
- Spends 92% of its budget on social welfare payments (38% of total government expenditure)
- Processes approximately 1.7 million applications a year (figure for 2015)
- Answers over 8.3 million calls a year (figure for 2015)
- Makes 1.1 million control reviews a year (figure for 2015)
- Finalises 25,400 social welfare appeals (figure for 2015)

The budgetary section of the brief provides an overview of the spending of the Department and the effect of budgetary changes to schemes in 2016. The DSPs budget is spent in the following way – pensions: 36%, working age income supports: 20%, illness, disability and carer’s: 18%, children: 13%, working age employment supports: 6%, supplementary payments: 4% and administration: 3%. The Social Insurance Fund which funds the State Pension (Contributory) and other PRSI related payments has been running at a deficit for the last few years but will be in surplus in 2016. The brief notes that even with this projected surplus, demographic pressures and any increases to the State Pension (Contributory) would cause funding pressure in this area. This is particularly telling given the percentage of the budget that pensions account for. The brief notes the social benefit of recent budget changes and quotes the findings of its Social Impact Assessment of Budget 2016, which found that the average household gained by 1.6% or €14 per week as a result of budget 2016, with higher gains for those in lower income brackets.

The topical issues highlighted to the Minister in the brief are of particular interest as some of these issues are featured regularly in SPRs. These included:



- **Homelessness – Rent Supplement (RS)**

The brief notes that 56,800 are currently supported through RS, 75% of whom have been on the ‘short-term’ payment for more than 18 months. It notes that reduced availability of private rented accommodation particularly in Dublin is the root of the problem in relation to rent limits. It states that increasing RS will just add costs without providing accommodation as there is ‘virtually no new housing available to recipients’. It highlights that a case-by-case approach is used where rents exceed the rent limits, with 7,800 households supported in this way, costing €20.5 million and providing an average monthly up-lift of €220. The DSP expects that this flexibility will cost €23.5 million in 2016. The brief mentions it is supporting the roll-out of HAP and works closely with the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government on this. It notes that of the 8,900 households in receipt of HAP, 36% transferred from RS and 64% are new recipients. The Minister, Leo Varadkar has considered the issue of Rent Supplement and he and Minister for Housing, Planning & Local Government, Simon Coveney have announced that rent limits under the Rent Supplement and Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) schemes will increase from 1 July 2016. Increases reflect local rents in each area, with increases ranging from 29% in Dublin to 15% in Cavan and Donegal. For more information on the new rent limits see [welfare.ie/en/pressoffice](http://welfare.ie/en/pressoffice).

- **Employment/unemployment and the live register**

This section notes that employment has increased by 2.3% over 2015, continuing the upward trend since Q4 2012. It highlights that long-term unemployment and youth unemployment is declining and notes the importance of ensuring that work pays and that disincentives to work and poverty traps are removed. The brief mentions the ERSI report ‘Making Work Pay More: Recent Initiatives’, which states that almost 8 out of 10 people are at least 40% better off in employment than on welfare. The brief notes the commitment made in the Pathways to Work 2016-2020 Strategy, to review reduced rates of Jobseekers Allowance for under 26’s by mid-2016. This review will be overseen by the Labour Market Council but the DSP notes that the task will be complex given how the rates were reduced over eight policy changes from 2009-2014. The positive impact of the Back-to-Work Family Dividend is also noted in this section.

- **Water Conservation Grant (WCG)**

888,892 WCG applications have been processed for 2015, totalling €88.9 million. The DSP hopes that ICT infrastructure put in place to support this project can be reused for the provision of other online services.

- **Paternity Benefit legislation**

The DSP will be responsible for the administration of Paternity Benefit once it is finalised. Legalisation is required to provide a legal under-pinning for the payment and leave, which is due to be enacted by July so it can commence in September. Paternity Benefit will be paid at €230 a week and fathers can take the two weeks leave in the 26 weeks following the child’s birth.

## Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) Annual Report 2015

The SWAO’s Annual Report 2015 was published in April 2016. The report provides information on the appeals process, insurability of employment, statistics on appeals for 2015, as well as some sample case studies. In 2015, the SWAO received 24,475 appeals, which represents a 6% decrease on the figure for 2014. The number of appeals finalised in 2015 was 25,406 and the average processing time for all appeals finalised during 2015 was 20.9 weeks reduced from 24.2 weeks in 2014. Nearly 59% of appeals finalised in 2015 had a favourable outcome for the appellant, with 36% unfavourable and 5% withdrawn. It is worth noting that 64% of oral hearings had a favourable outcome, while only 44% of summary decisions did.

The data shows that the vast majority of appeals relate to the illness, disability and caring and working age income support programmes, with Disability Allowance and Carer’s Allowance being the most appealed payments for the period 2009 to 2015. In 2015, there was an increase in appeals about Disability Allowance (+15.9%) and Carer’s Allowance (+9.7) from figures for 2014. It is worth highlighting that disability and illness payments had some of the highest rate of successful appeals in 2015. Disability payment queries are also one of the highest areas of enquiries to the network. You can read the full report on [socialwelfareappeals.ie](http://socialwelfareappeals.ie).