

# PRIORITIES FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION



**WILLIE O'DEA TD**

SPOKESPERSON ON SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL EQUALITY

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# Introduction

Fianna Fáil has a vision for an inclusive society where every citizen's contribution is valued; one where all work is valued and where those carrying out the socially imperative tasks supported and rewarded, one where those in unemployment or on low incomes are not discouraged from working. It is a vision for an inclusive society where every citizen's contribution is valued and people can enjoy security in their old age.

Over a five year term in government Fianna Fáil wants to develop and enhance our social fabric and build stronger communities. Every budget the current government has introduced has been regressive. It's time for a new progressive approach and in this document we are setting out our priorities in Social Protection over a five year term.



First of all, we outline what we would seek to do in a first year in government. Then we illustrate our priorities over the remaining years of a five year term. Finally then we set out key areas for change and reform.

With regard to costs, we provide estimates for our first year priorities which we believe would involve additional expenditure of €107 million. The implementation of further measures will be contingent on the resources being available. More than two-thirds of the correction in the public finances was put in place while we were in government and we will not place that work in jeopardy.

## **Willie O'Dea TD**

Fianna Fáil Spokesperson on Social Protection.

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# 1 • First Year Priorities

## **Treatment Benefits Packages (€40 million)**

In recent years there have been severe cutbacks to the PRSI funded Treatment Benefit Scheme. Fianna Fáil would provide some restoration of this scheme and allocate €40 million to address this.

## **Rent supplement (€22 million)**

In many areas rents have risen considerably above market levels. This is putting many families in danger of losing their home. We would implement an upward revision of the rent cap of between 5% and 15% in the areas of greatest pressure on the system. This increase will be subject to an on-going rolling review every three months to gauge its impact on the rental market.

## **Free Travel Improvements (€7 million)**

The allocation to this essential scheme has not increased in line with running costs, which are increasing annually. Some of the routes are not profitable or financially viable without additional funding. Fianna Fáil recommends the allocation of an additional €7 million to give added flexibility to the scheme.

## **Ending the Anomaly in Contributory Pensions (€5 million)**

We propose an amendment to the calculation method for Contributory Pensions. The system already disregards time spent working in the home since April 1994 for the purposes of calculating yearly average contributions. There is no logical reason why this cannot be backdated further. Similarly, consideration should be given to allowing actual past payments to be disregarded, thereby altering the date at which the individual is considered to have entered the permanent workforce. We believe that individuals should be allowed to disregard up to 200 pre-1994 A1 PRSI payments for the purpose of calculating their date of entry to the workforce.

## **Application for Carers' and Disability Payments**

The application processes for carer's payments will be changed to enable applicants to provide more information on the level of care being provided. This would give the Department a far clearer picture of the level of care being given in the absence of a face to face assessment and would prevent over 50% of applications being refused at the initial stage.

Eligibility for Disability Allowance depends on capacity to work. However, decisions are made based mainly on a medical assessment. This does not, in itself, give an accurate assessment of a person's capacity to work in many cases. We will give people an opportunity to describe how their disability impacts on their daily life. We will direct the Department to work with the Disability Movement and voluntary disability providers to develop a fair and comprehensive system of assessing people's capacity to work.

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## **One Parent Supports (€33 million)**

Fianna Fáil believes that it is time to support one parent families, not punish them. The cuts to their allowance are unjust and unfair. As a first step we would increase the maximum child age of the one-parent family payment (OFP) scheme from its current threshold of seven years to fourteen. We would set aside €33 million for this.

## **Replace the Three Day Rule for Job Seekers**

The Three Day Rule for the payment of Jobseeker's Benefits should be replaced by a system which better recognises the reality of the modern labour market. Instead of paying €75.20 to individuals working three days per week, it would make much more sense to pay the Benefit on a sliding scale according to hours worked.

## **Change the Family Income Supplement**

The 39 hour threshold for FIS qualification should be replaced by a sliding scale in order to reflect the fact that many people may be working (or wish to work) less than 19 and a half hours per week and may be in just as much need as current FIS recipients. This would also create more of an incentive to work.

# **2 • Priorities for Subsequent Years**

## **Increase in Working Age Benefits**

A gradual increase in working age benefits to bring people above the internationally recognised poverty line.

## **Increase Maternity Leave**

Fianna Fáil recognises the importance of maternity leave and proposes to extend statutory maternity leave from 26 weeks to 30 weeks.

## **Telephone Allowance**

The telephone rental allowance was intended to subsidise the cost of maintaining a telephone in the home of an elderly person for the purposes of providing security and peace of mind, while also helping to combat social isolation. We would not directly restore it. Rather we would give older people the cash value of the telephone allowance and they would then be free to use the cash for their own best needs.

## **Fuel Allowance and Household Benefits**

Of the excess deaths that occur over the winter months, over 90% are people over the age of 65. This same group are seven times more likely to be admitted to hospital as a result of low temperatures as people aged 18 to 44. Reduced Fuel Allowance and Household Benefits Package, including reduced gas and electricity allowances, have led to a significant increase in the number of older people struggling to heat their homes in winter months. We propose reinstating of the Fuel Allowance season at 32 weeks per year, and a reversal of the cut to the Household Benefits Package.

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## **Extend FIS to self employed**

Subject to certain checks, we suggest the extension of the Family Income Supplement to the self-employed.

## **Living Alone Allowance**

Fianna Fáil recognises that those living alone face many of the same costs as a multiple person household. Home heating and the Property Tax are two costs for example that stay the same irrespective of the number of people living in the household. Over the course of five years we would look to increase the Living Alone Allowance to €20 a week.

# **3 • New Reform Proposals**

## **Establish a Commission to Examine a Basic Income**

Fianna Fáil commits to the establishment of a government commission to further investigate the feasibility of establishing a Basic Income system.

## **Social Insurance for Self Employed**

On a phased and voluntary basis we propose to extend a full range of social protection payments including Jobseeker's and Illness Benefits to self-employed PRSI contributors as part of commitment to fostering an entrepreneurial culture as well as enhancing social solidarity.

## **More Flexible Access to Pension Funds**

Many people paying into defined contribution pensions schemes are often being penalised by the manner in which current legislation restricts the ways they can draw down on their fund. There is an argument that people over 55 should have the ability to cash in their pot or to withdraw the money in slices, much like withdrawing funds from a bank account.

## **Protect Private Pension Funds**

We will introduce legislation to allow for a constitutional referendum to prevent government imposing a levy on private pension funds.

## **Legislate for Home Care Packages**

The Home Care Package scheme is not established in legislation; as it is an administrative scheme, there is no automatic right to a HCP. If part of the next government, Fianna Fáil will increase the funding available for the Home Care Package each year, with the aim of creating a statutory entitlement by 2018.

## **Abolition of Compulsory Retirement**

We will legislate so that employees who have the physical and mental capacity to remain in the workplace after the age of 65 would not be forced to retire.

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## **Supports for Jobseekers over 50**

All Intreo offices should have a specific section to support the return to the workforce of people over the age of 50.

## **Overhaul of Social Welfare Appeals System**

The Social Welfare Appeals Office should be placed on a statutorily independent footing to ensure perceived and actual independence from the Department of Social Protection. All actions and decisions taken by Appeals Office should comply with national and international human rights standards. Particular effort should be made to ensure that employees of the Office are aware of their obligations.

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