

Tuesday, August 4, 2009

'Poor Can't Pay' campaign launched

In this section »

- Fire sale could halve property prices, says Parlon
- Alcohol a factor in up to half of youth crimes

ELAINE EDWARDS

TRADE UNIONS and non- governmental organisations (NGOs) have formed a joint campaign group to oppose proposed cuts in social welfare payments or the minimum wage.

The move was prompted by measures outlined in the recent McCarthy group report on potential Government savings, and by indications from senior Ministers that they would consider a cut in the minimum wage rate if it was necessary to protect jobs.

The "Poor Can't Pay" campaign was launched as a joint initiative by Age Action, Barnardos, Cori Justice, European Anti-poverty Network, Focus Ireland, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE), Mandate, the National Women's Council of Ireland, Siptu and St Vincent de Paul (SVP).

Speaking on behalf of the campaign, John Mark McCafferty of SVP said: "We hear all the time from many commentators who say it is inevitable that basic social welfare payments and the minimum wage must be cut.

"This campaign aims to highlight that most people in Ireland do not accept this view and they actually believe that we must do all we can to protect the most vulnerable people in our society."

The campaign group said those earning the minimum wage or living on social welfare "did not cause Ireland's economic crisis and should not be forced to pay the price of the recession".

It said those living on the minimum wage could not afford to take any cut in income. Having a job did not protect those on low incomes from hardship, as 30 per cent of all households at risk of poverty were headed by a person in employment.

"The reality is that cuts to welfare payments will mean people going without food, essential healthcare, children getting no presents at Christmas and pensioners wondering if they can afford to keep the heat on," Mr McCafferty said.

He said his own organisation was seeing new people approaching it for assistance and new needs emerging as a result of the economic crisis.

Since the publication of the McCarthy report, the organisation had become "very worried about our own ability to be able to respond effectively" if such cuts were imposed.

Mr McCafferty said he hoped the campaign would, through the media, send the message to the Government and the public that proposed cuts in welfare would hurt the most vulnerable.

Calls to SVP had "increased substantially" in Dublin, Cork and Limerick in particular. "The scale of need is quite startling," he said.

Mr McCafferty said it was a difficult decision for people to seek assistance. "We are seeing an increase in people

who may not have considered coming to us before. This is something we don't take lightly."

The organisation also called on the Government to reverse its decision not to pay the Christmas "bonus" welfare payment this year. It said some 1.3 million people benefited from the payment in 2008.

The Poor Can't Pay campaign yesterday launched a website (www.thepoorcantpay.ie) in an effort to attract wider support from other NGOs and trade unions.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times