

OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND LAW REFORM
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Mr Dermot Ahern
Minister for Social,
Community and Family Affairs,
Dublin 1



3 May 2000

Dear Dermot

As you know, the Government decided last November that asylum seekers should be dispersed to locations around the country and have their needs met directly rather than through cash means.

Since 10 April persons claiming asylum are being accommodated by the Directorate for Asylum Support Services at initial reception centres in Dublin for a period of 1-2 weeks - to facilitate the provision of information, needs assessment and initial processing of their asylum claims - before being allocated temporary accommodation around the country while their applications for asylum are being processed. This accommodation is provided on a full board basis. In these circumstances, asylum seekers are not paid full social welfare allowances but, as agreed with your Department, are paid a reduced allowance of £15 per adult and £7.50 per child under the Supplementary Welfare Allowances Scheme to take account of the value of food and accommodation provided directly.

Notwithstanding Government policy as outlined above and the issue of circulars by senior management in the health boards to relevant staff, it has been brought to my attention that in quite a number of instances Community Welfare Officers are paying full basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance and rent supplements and deposits to asylum seekers who leave or do not avail of direct provision. This concerns me greatly as it is clearly contrary to Government policy and, if allowed to continue, will totally undermine the systems in place for direct provision and indeed, Government policy.

I fully accept that the most effective way in the long term of dealing with the income maintenance issue would be to remove asylum seekers from the scope of social welfare legislation altogether. However, this cannot be done overnight. In the meantime, in circumstances where asylum seekers leave or do not avail of direct provision, thereby rendering

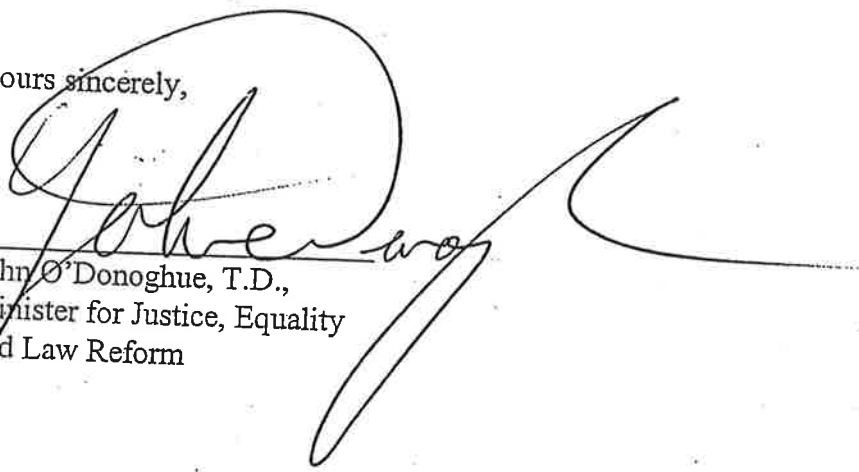
themselves homeless, it is not acceptable that Community Welfare Officers would pay full basic supplementary welfare allowance and assistance towards rent in respect of accommodation in the private-rented sector. I understand that there is adequate scope within the provisions of the Supplementary Welfare Allowances Regulations to adopt this approach. In the interest of equity, it is also important that asylum seekers are treated in a consistent manner by all Community Welfare Officers.

In view of the foregoing, I would ask you to let me know, as a matter of urgency, what steps are being taken to ensure that Community Welfare Officers do not facilitate asylum seekers to leave or evade direct provision. As you know, there is a special Government meeting on 9 May to discuss asylum and immigration issues. I wish to assure the Taoiseach at that meeting that Government policy on dispersal and direct provision is being implemented. In the circumstances a reply before Monday 8 May would be appreciated.

I have also written to our colleague, the Minister for Health and Children, in this matter.

With Best Wishes.

Yours sincerely,



John O'Donoghue, T.D.,
Minister for Justice, Equality
and Law Reform

c.c.

An Taoiseach - for information