

Irish Benefit Breakthrough

After a concerted Irish community campaign, Peter Lilley, the Secretary of State for Social Security has decided to exclude the Irish community from the proposed new Habitual Residence Test which is aimed at combatting "benefit tourism" and came into force on 1st August 1994.

In a letter received from Alistair Burt M.P., the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Social Security, AGIY were informed that *"people from the Republic of Ireland, as well as from the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man are in a special position because of the common travel area which links them with the UK"*. The Minister also stated that *"this maintains the reciprocal access to benefits between the UK and the Irish Republic based upon the common travel area which has existed for many years."*

AGIY along with other community groups were very concerned that the proposed introduction of a 3 year residency test and other tests would have disproportionately hit the Irish community and particularly young Irish emigrants who would have had no recourse to the benefits safety net in Britain.

For more details about the decision and an analysis of the Irish community campaign against the proposals see pages 2 and 3.

New Director for AGIY

The Action Group for Irish Youth are pleased to announce the appointment of Lisa Murphy to the new post of Director of the organisation.

Lisa emigrated in 1988 from New Ross in Co. Wexford. Since then she has worked as a teacher and has been active in a number of voluntary and campaigning activities here. Lisa co-ordinated the Working for Irish Teachers (WIT) campaign which fought to redress the discrimination against Irish teachers practised by London boroughs, applying the (then) Dept. of Education and Science's regulations.

The success of the WIT campaign was recognised when Lisa was given an Irish Post Community Award in 1989, acknowledging the positive contribution of the



Lisa Murphy

campaign to addressing the needs of the Irish community in Britain.

Commenting on her new appointment, Lisa said, "I am very pleased to have this opportunity to work within a *community organisation on the issues I feel strongly about. AGIY has grown into a strong and dynamic organisation over the past 10 years and I look forward to the challenge of contributing to its future achievements."*

Lisa takes up her appointment on 5 September 1994.

AGIY to Host National Benefits Conference

AGIY are organising the first ever national benefits conference for the Irish community which is due to be held on 14th September 1994.

The conference **"Access to Benefits and the Irish Community - Beyond Identity Crisis"** will examine the delivery of benefit services to the community and will include workshops and presentations from senior staff at the Benefits Agency's headquarters in Leeds.

For further information including details of how to attend the conference see the back page of the newsletter.

How the Campaign Unfolded

- **4/2/94** - Peter Lilley, Secretary of State for Social Security publishes proposals for a residence test to halt abuse of the social security system by "benefit tourists".
- **7/2/94** - AGIY receives details of the proposals and alerts the media to the impact of the proposals for the Irish community.
- **15/2/94** - AGIY contacts the Taoiseach and members of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body about the impact of the proposals.
- **19/2/94** - AGIY learn that the Taoiseach raises the issue with John Major at the England-Ireland rugby international at Twickenham!
- **23/2/94** - AGIY alerts the Social Security Select Committee to the potential effects of the proposals for the Irish community.
- **24/2/94** - Representatives from 30 agencies attend a meeting of the London Irish Youth Forum to plan a campaign strategy against the proposals and to determine a community response for consideration by the Social Security Advisory Committee.
- **3/3/94** - Michael Woods, the Irish Government Minister for Social Welfare meets with Peter Lilley in London to discuss the proposals. Michael Woods also meets with representatives of several Irish welfare agencies and informs them that officials from his department will meet with their British counterparts to examine the proposals in more detail.
- **4/3/94** - Deadline for submissions to the Social Security Advisory Committee. 79 submissions are received by the Committee.
- **late March 1994** - Cardinal Hume, The Archbishop of Canterbury and Pádraig Flynn, Commissioner for Social Affairs and Employment agree to make representations to the Secretary of State/Government about the proposals. Members of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body indicate to AGIY that they will raise the Habitual Residence Test at their next Plenary meeting in Dublin.
- **26/4/94** - AGIY meets with representatives of the Inter-Parliamentary Body in Dublin. The residence test proposals are debated and the Body agrees to communicate its concerns about the possible impact of the test for the Irish community with the British Government.
- **27/4/94** - AGIY meets with civil servants from the Department of Social Welfare in Dublin to appraise them of Irish community concerns about the test.
- **3/5/94** - Representatives from AGIY and the Federation of Irish Societies meet with Donald Dewar, the Shadow Secretary of State for Social Security and Kevin MacNamara M.P. to enlist their support against the proposals.
- **5/5/94** - AGIY and FIS representatives meet with Alistair Burt, the Under Secretary of State for Social Security to voice our concerns about the effects of the test for the Irish community.
- **11/5/94** - AGIY staff attend the Benefits Agency annual conference in London which leads to discussion about the Habitual Residence Test and provides an opportunity to lobby staff from the BA on the effects of the proposals.
- **12/5/94** - At a meeting of the London Irish Youth Forum, members discuss plans to organise an Irish community national lobby of Parliament and with the assistance of Forum members AGIY agree to distribute a letter to every M.P. outlining the likely effects that the proposals will have.
- **8/6/94** - AGIY meet with Child Poverty Action Group, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and the Immigration Lawyers Practitioners Association to agree a joint letter of opposition to the proposals.
- **13/6/94** - At a meeting of the Benefits Agency Ethnic Minorities Forum, AGIY are informed by civil servants that the DSS are considering exempting the Irish community from the residence test.
- **11/7/94** - Government proposals are published confirming that the Irish community and refugees are to be exempted from the test which came into effect on 1st August.



AGIY and Federation of Irish Societies' members with Junior Minister, Alistair Burt M.P. (third from left)

Implications of the Benefits Campaign

The introduction of the Habitual Residence Test on 1st August will every year according to the Governments own estimates deny thousands of people from the European Union and British citizens returning to live in in Britain access to Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. This measure can only lead to increased hardship as more people are excluded from the benefit safety net in Britain.

The test which involves questions on length of stay in Britain, family connections, property ownership in the home state, work records abroad and frequency of trips back to the home state are designed to be targeted in the main at non British nationals and as we argued at AGIY are xenophobic and discriminatory in nature. With the Irish exempted from the test it can not be right not to discriminate against the Irish but right to discriminate against other ethnic groups. It is clear therefore that

but as the submissions made by a whole range of Irish groups and agencies working with the Irish community to the Social Security Select Committee demonstrated, it was the Irish community who had the most to fear from the introduction of the test.

It was the Irish community who got its act together in such a way that it represents one of, if not the most significant welfare developments in the Irish community in recent years.

Inclusion of the Irish in the test would have had the most devastating effect on the welfare of our community and in particular the effect on young Irish people newly arrived in Britain who would have had no further recourse to the benefit safety net.

The significance of the campaign and its success was that it was a sustained community campaign which united a broad range of Irish community groups and demonstrated what can be achieved with effective lobbying and working in partnership with groups outside the community.

While a whole range of organisations, individuals and politicians in both Ireland and Britain contributed to the

Database Report Launch

AGIY and the Federation of Irish Societies have invited the Irish Government Minister for Employment and Enterprise, Mr. Ruairi Quinn to launch a joint report commissioned by the two organisations which is based on the common data collection system piloted across Irish welfare agencies in Britain at the end of last year.

The launch will take place at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London. N7 6PA. at 10.00 a.m. on Wednesday 14th September 1994.

"Developing a Community Response - The Service Needs of the Irish Community" - is based on data provided by over 1,000 Irish people who presented themselves to Irish welfare agencies and received over 4,000 services.

The evaluation of the system with agencies who participated in the study indicated that it is a useful monitoring tool for individual agencies and that the collective data offers a better understanding of the service needs of the Irish community and identifies gaps in service provision.

The system has now been refined and AGIY and the Federation now intend to launch the new collection system on a permanent basis across agencies from 1st October 1994.

Subscription to the London Irish Youth Forum and "AGIY-INFO"

Enclosed inside this edition of the newsletter is a subscription form for membership of the London Irish Youth Forum and "AGIY-INFO" for the current financial year. If you would like to continue your membership or become a member for the first time please enclose the appropriate cheque payment as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, due to rising costs we will only be able to send the newsletter to agencies who have paid their subscription fees.

Diary Dates

14th September 1994 - Access to Benefits and the Irish Community - Beyond Identity Crisis

19th September 1994 - Launch of AGIY/FIS Database Report - Invited Speaker Mr. Ruairi Quinn T.D., Minister for Employment and Enterprise

13th October 1994 - London Irish Youth Forum meeting at 2.30 p.m.

All events will be held at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London. N7 6PA.

Access to Benefits and the Irish Community - Beyond Identity Crisis

A one day conference organised by AGIY

At LVS Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA on
Wednesday 14 September 1994.

Identity Crisis was published in July 1993 by AGIY. It highlighted a number of "barriers to benefit" for Irish people, particularly problems with proving identity. This opened up a dialogue with the Benefits Agency and resulted in AGIY providing training for BA staff.

Now a year later AGIY wish to update Irish agencies and others in the welfare rights/advice field of this dialogue and together with BA to look at how this dialogue can be maintained and developed.

Conference Programme

- 10.45 Registration and Coffee
- 11.00 Opening Remarks by Lisa Murphy
Director (AGIY)
- 11.05 Identity Crisis - the background
Dave Murphy (AGIY)
- 11.20 The Benefits Agency Response -
Pat Chandler Head of Customer
Relations (Benefits Agency)
- 12.00 AGIY Training Initiative - Review
Martin Tucker (AGIY)
- 12.30 LUNCH
- 01.30 The Way Forward - Developing the
Dialogue (workshops)
- 02.20 Workshops Feedback
- 02.45 TEA
- 03.00 Plenary - Questions and Answers
with Panel
- 03.30 Close

Senior staff from the Benefits Agency's Customer Relations Branch headquarters in Leeds will address the conference and participate fully including joining the panel for the plenary session.