

"Stay The Course"



The long march: the Waterford Crystal pension endgame finally appears to be in sight. | Photo: Noel Browne

Wait for Waterford Crystal pensions enters home stretch

The long-awaited issuing of pensions for 1700 former Waterford Crystal employees will be delivered 'without undue delay' once members return a second letter issued to them by the Department of Social Protection.

A well-placed source told The Munster Express that the procedures required to ensure the delivery of cheques to pensioners ought to lead to their being issued "within a matter of weeks" of the return of the aforementioned letter to the Department.

This followed a statement which was issued on Thursday last by pension service providers Mercer, which detailed the personal data information requested of it by the Department of Social Protection.

Mercer issued the statement after prominent campaigner and Crystal pensioner Maria O'Grady voiced a concern being expressed by other pensioners regarding the perceived delay in the issuing of their long-awaited pension cheques.

However, a prominent source told this newspaper that the process, which will ultimately lead to the delivery of between €140 million and €187 million remains firmly on course, delivering payments which will be "unparalleled in the history of Irish industrial relations".

Our source added: "This entire process is a letter of the law matter to the 'nth' degree, and Mercer are dealing with our case now and everything it entails.

"The frustration about the payments not being issued as of yet is, of course, frustrating, but we are so, so much closer to the conclusion of this process than we are to what was set in train over six years ago when the factory closed and, ultimately, the sit-in ended. We're almost there."

Speaking to The Munster Express 24 hours after her interview with WLRfm's Billy McCarthy, Maria O'Grady believed that her speaking up on the matter last week had accelerated the process.

"On Monday of last week, I rang Mercer to see where things were at, and I, along with other workers, were told that they were waiting for the 1700 letters to come back in total from the Waterford Crystal workers before they passed anything on to Social [Protection], which is the next step in the process," she said.

"When I asked who had made this decision, I was told that senior management had opted for this method, so I hung up the phone and I was very disappointed with what I was told."

Other former 'Glass' staff had contacted Mercer with the same query, and subsequently touched base with Maria in the middle of last week.

"And given the level of conflicting information that we were getting, I felt I had no option but to go on Billy McCarthy's programme last Thursday morning, and to speak to you as well...I felt the powers that be have left us down again - namely the Government, Mercer, Social Welfare and Revenue. Complacency has set in, in my view, and while I'm aware of the complexity of this and that this was going to take time, we all realised that, we really thought we were only talking about a couple of months, by that I meant around now or maybe next month."

She added: "But when I heard that Mercer weren't going to hold this up until the 1700 letters came in, I felt I had to do something, and Billy McCarthy was very good in giving me 20 minutes of his programme last Thursday to talk about the concerns that I and other pensioners have at the moment."

Within 24 hours, through the issuing of the Mercer statement which we've also printed in full on this page, Maria O'Grady believed another positive outcome had been reached. "People power has worked here...and we've now got an assurance that the Department of Social Protection will now speed up the process as soon as they received the letters from Mercer."

In the statement issued on Thursday last, Mercer committed to sending all letters to the Department by the close of business on Friday last.

We also understand that there will be "no undue delay" in the processing and delivery of the payment once the second letter requested of pensioners is returned to the Department of Social Protection.

A delay, however, may be brought about in the event of a pensioner fielding a further query on their application to an independent Labour Relations Commission (LRC) officer.

Maria O'Grady added: "So when the Department receives our letters of consent to release information in relation to our compensation, within a week of this I would expect to hear from Social Welfare about what I ought to be receiving and, more importantly when. I want this finalised in weeks, not months, which is what [Labour TD] Ciara Conway indicated this (Friday) morning on 'Deise AM'."

It's understood that the majority of the seven per cent of pensioners yet to return forms to Mercer are emigrants, some of whom have had to return home to re-register with the Department of Social Protection to receive an updated social welfare card so that they can receive the pension monies.

While this may be a practical prospect for those living in Britain or the continent, for those pensioners now living further afield, i.e. Australia, a costly return home may not be possible.

Therefore, given the stipulations required by the Department of Social Protection, the prospect that some ex-Glass workers are set to miss out on their long-awaited lump sums and pensions cannot, unfortunately, be discounted.

While the endgame is in sight for the Crystal pensioners still living, the processes involved in finalising the payments for the families of deceased workers are expected to take slightly longer to finalise.

Maria O'Grady, who organised a march which drew over 6,500 people onto the streets of Waterford last August in support of the Waterford Crystal pensioners, added: "I won't believe it until I see it - the cheque stapled to a letter from the Government. But I'm a lot more confident about things now in the light of the Mercer statement.

"There are 34 Waterford Crystal pensioners dead, workers who never saw their money. We do not want to see a 35th buried before this matter is resolved, but I hope and I believe that this will not be the case, so let's get this finalised once and for all."

The UNITE trader union, which diligently took on and won the case for the Waterford Crystal pensioners, is monitoring the process on a daily basis, with any queries from 'Glass' workers being dealt with "as they arrive and are presented".

The first tranche of pension payments will inject €45 million into the city and regional economy; the equivalent of a taxation structured payment of almost €67 million.

This cash injection shall provide a welcome boost for the city economy, with traders in Waterford, Dungarvan, Carrick-on-Suir, New Ross and Kilkenny all expected to benefit in due course.

THE MERCER STATEMENT



Kieran Mulvey of the Labour Relations Commission.

Mercer was requested by the Department of Social Protection to provide it with personal data relating to members of the Waterford Crystal Pension Schemes in order that that the Department could implement the terms of the Agreement brokered by Kieran Mulvey of the LRC.

In order to provide the personal data requested by the Department, the consent of individual members was required in accordance with data protection legislation. Mercer wrote to all members on 29 January 2015 requesting this consent.

The original deadline for response contained in the letter was 10 February 2015. This deadline was set in order to allow the prompt transfer of personal data to the Department and to facilitate the payment by the Department of the relevant amounts due to members.

As at 17 February 2015, 93 per cent of members had responded and provided their consent. At that point Mercer then issued a letter to those members who had not responded, asking them to complete and return the consent form by 25 February 2015.

In relation to the personal data for the 93 per cent of members for whom Mercer received their consent prior to 17 February 2015, Mercer is currently finalising verification of the data. All relevant personal data in respect of these members will be sent to the Department by Mercer by close of business tomorrow, 20 February 2015.

In respect of the personal data for the seven per cent of members who have not yet provided their consent, their data will be transferred to the Department by Mercer promptly upon receipt of their consent and the verification of their data.

Once the Department has received a member's personal data from Mercer, the Department will then oversee the process of payment of the lump sum compensation amounts agreed as part of the Agreement brokered by Kieran Mulvey of the LRC.