

Fianna Fáil spokesperson on Children and Youth Affairs

To whom it may concern,

I am pleased to make this submission on behalf of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party, and to contribute to the important work of the Low Pay Commission. As Minister for Employment and Small Business Pat Breen T.D has highlighted, the rates at which au pairs are reimbursed have not changed since 2000. When one considers that we have seen a number of minimum wage increases, this is an unsustainable situation.

Fianna Fáil is a proud defender of Ireland's long history as a nation that has served as host and home country of au pairs. For au pairs and host families alike, the experience of welcoming an au pair into the home is a much treasured cultural exchange and allows lifelong friendships to be made. For working families, having an au pair often enables parents to return to work, safe in the knowledge that their children are receiving great care. For children, being cared for by an au pair can be a transformative experience, offering unique insight into other cultures. Finally, from an au pair's perspective, being an au pair is a wonderful opportunity to travel, learn a language and experience another culture.

Context

The recent Workplace Relation Committee's ruling on the legal status of au pairs in Ireland has radically changed the relationship between host families and their au pairs, and made au pairs de facto employees of the families with which they are staying. Consequently, families are now bound to register as small employers, provide written contracts, issue pay cheques, pay social insurance, holiday pay and so on.

For the 20,000 families who have relied and continue to rely upon au pairs, this represents a worrying legal precedent, and makes the hosting of au pairs a considerably less attractive option. For many of those wishing to come to Ireland as au pairs, this finding is worrying too; for many au pairs, the cultural aspects of au pairing are its biggest pull, and they do not wish to become domestic workers.

Board and Lodgings

Currently, host families are permitted to deduct €54.13 from their au pair's wages if they are providing board and lodgings. This amount decreases to €32.14 for board only per week and to €21.85 for lodgings only per week. Given the current cost of living in Ireland, these figures are completely inappropriate; for example, the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 cites €247.04 as the figure needed to maintain a balanced and nutritious diet for a single adult of working age. As of February 2017, the average cost of renting a 1-bedroom apartment in Dublin South City, according to Daft.ie, stood at €1,701 per month. While the cost of a room is likely lower, it is certainly more than €87.40 per month.

Clearly, an au pair who is provided board and lodgings by her host family enjoys a far preferable financial situation to one who receives full wages but has to finance her own accommodation and food.

From a host family's perspective, there is little recognition of the value of the board and lodgings that they are offering to their au pairs. As a result, many families ignore the WRC recommendations and pay their au pairs a much smaller sum. To address this issue, we propose increasing the amount that a family may deduct for board and lodgings. This could be anchored to those figures already used to indicate the average cost of living in different regions of Ireland, e.g. the Residential Tenancy Board's rental index.

This would increase adherence to existing legislation, and overall increase the amount that is typically paid to au pairs. It would ensure that au pairs are paid in a more transparent and accountable manner, and ensure that they are paid the minimum wage.

The tradition of au pairs in Ireland is a rich one, and one which must be preserved. Families and au pairs deserve legal clarity, and they moreover deserve a system that recognizes what both parties gain from and give to an au pairing relationship. While the above changes may not represent the entirety of the changes that are needed, they are an excellent start and will hopefully go a long way to ensuring that au pairs can continue to live and work with Irish families.

Best regards,

Anne Rabbitte TD

Fianna Fáil Spokesperson on Children and Youth Affairs