The Garda and the Data Protection Commissioner have been investigating the suspected sale of personal data of welfare claimants by a civil servant.

The employee in question, who is currently suspended, was working for the Department of Social Protection and was questioned after supervisors noticed he was accessing records he had no authority over. It was also discovered that the employee had been in communication with a private investigator.

The department provides unemployment benefits and social services to approximately one million people every week. It will have to contact those welfare recipients, potentially hundreds, whose data might have been breached. It is expected that a file will be sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions shortly.

A spokeswoman for Social Protection Minister Eamon O’Cuiv confirmed the investigation, but added: “Obviously, the department would like to be in a position to provide more information in the matter, but is anxious not to disclose anything that may hinder the ongoing investigation or may in any way jeopardise actions that might be taken by the department, the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner or the Director of Public Prosecutions.”

Colin Rooney, Associate at Arthur Cox told Data Protection Ireland: “The Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003 contain provisions to address the threat to privacy posed by unauthorised access to, and subsequent disclosure of, personal information.

“The misuse of customer personal information by staff is treated seriously by the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner and unauthorised access and disclosure of personal information may,”

(Continued on page 15)