

Citizens **Information** Board  
*information · advice · advocacy*



**GUIDELINES**  
**ON**  
**LOCAL SOCIAL POLICY WORK**  
**FOR**  
**CITIZENS INFORMATION CENTRES**

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## INTRODUCTION

Social policy work is about bringing issues to the attention of public policy makers and those who have responsibility for the administration of services. Citizens Information Centres (CICs), because they are involved in the provision of information and advice on social services or on civil and social rights, can contribute to the improvement of these services by feeding back to policy makers and service providers evidence gathered over time on the impact of policies and practices on people. This feedback can be done at national or at local level. Social policy work is thus an integral part of the work of Citizens Information Centres.

CIB as a statutory body with a social policy remit contributes to the development of social policy through its resourcing role to CICs and using the feedback from the users and providers of information and advice services. This approach is based on the premise that CICs and other independent information providers are well placed because of their direct and regular contact with the public to identify instances where social services are not meeting the needs of citizens adequately or equitably. CIB promotes social policy work through the provision of support and training to personnel in CICs, co-ordinating feedback, developing policy recording instruments and compiling social policy reports and submissions to policy makers.

Social policy work involves undertaking projects, either locally or nationally, alone or in co-operation with others. This work involves articulating problems that are identified from almost a million queries from the public which are dealt with annually by CICs. Social policy work is related to the advocacy work carried out by CICs. Advocacy involves negotiating or making representations on behalf of individuals or groups on a specific issue; social policy work is broader, in that it is an attempt more generally to change, improve or adapt the existing systems of delivery of social services and civil and social rights. Advocacy work could be regarded as a prelude to social policy work, as the process of advocacy may lead to the identification of a social policy issue that needs to be progressed through social policy work.

These guidelines are intended to provide a framework for CICs wishing to initiate, conduct, network around and assess local social policy work. They are not a detailed blueprint on how to engage in social policy work, but a set of pointers that need to be considered in engaging such work. A list of useful literature is provided in the appendix.

✓ ***Social policy work should be seen as an integral part of the service, and planned accordingly.***

The guidelines outline tasks that could be regarded as essential to good organisational practice when engaging in social policy work. The importance of these will vary according to the kind of work being undertaken, but it is likely that any social policy initiative will involve all of these to some degree.

## 1. ORGANISING SOCIAL POLICY WORK

Ideas for local social policy work may come from management committees, development managers, organisers, or other personnel within a Centre. Each Centre should have a procedure in place for delegating responsibility for social policy initiatives under the guidance of the management committee. Responsibility for progressing social policy initiatives, once agreed, may be devolved by the management committee to the Development Manager, or another person with a specific brief for developing social policy.

A clear framework for developing social policy initiatives within a Centre should provide

- a definition of the Citizens Information Centre's role in social policy work
- its plan or strategy to implement the task including the person responsible
- the procedures and resources to enable it to happen.

Points to consider when developing a framework to put policy into practice include

- the ethos and culture of the centre/service
- defining lines of communication and responsibility
- mechanisms for the identification of social policy issues
- choosing people for joint working with other groups
- procedures for recording and retrieving information
- report writing
- appropriate training
- assessing and communicating outcomes – both positive and negative

- ✓ *Social policy initiatives are more effective when the policies and procedures underlying them are clear and known to all in the Centre.*

## 2. NETWORKING

Effective networking can be very important in undertaking local social policy work. A well-established pattern of communication or contact with other organisations can enhance such initiatives and, perhaps, result in them being more effective. Networking involves identifying, making contact and co-operating with other relevant organisations, locally, regionally and nationally. Networking is a two-way process which

- facilitates focused information exchange
- promotes dialogue
- makes effective use of scarce resources
- allows for a collaborative approach on issues of mutual interest
- strengthens the lobby

It can

- be ongoing or short term, structured or informal
- occur around a single issue or focus on an area of interest
- be broadly based and include regular contact on a wide range of topics of mutual concern

- include working with voluntary and community organisations and statutory bodies
- be developed or tapped into at a local, regional or national level.

### 3. IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM AND VERIFYING THE EVIDENCE

Those who seek information about, or access to, their rights and entitlements can experience problems.

- there may be gaps identified in the provision of services for groups or categories of people, either at national or at local level
- inaccurate or inadequate information can sometimes be provided
- citizens may be treated with less courtesy than they deserve
- there can be undue delays in the provision of services

Any attempt to achieve change or influence policy must be based on an accurate and coherent account of the existing position, a definition of the perceived problem, and some rationale for any proposals made. It is therefore worth investing time, energy and other resources in making sure that any description of the situation is absolutely correct.

This means:

- stating the problem clearly
- stating accurately any relevant rules, procedures or legislation
- gathering and setting out clearly all relevant data
- reviewing relevant research
- using case studies where appropriate

Where case studies are used, the information in them must be accurate and the anonymity of individuals must be protected. Being accurate and objective is crucial to the credibility of social policy initiatives taken, to any future social policy work, and to the organisation generally.

✓ *Getting the facts right is essential for effective and credible social policy work*

### 4. STATING THE CASE

Once the problem has been identified and the evidence gathered, it is important to set it down clearly in written format (see the recording instrument provided by CIB to CICs). This could involve:

- identifying the background
- setting out the problem
- providing the evidence in an organised fashion
- proposing a solution

The resulting document does not have to be very long – quality rather than quantity is what counts.

- ✓ *The better the report, the greater the chance of effective social policy work*

## 5. TAKING INITIATIVES

This can involve

- providing direct feedback to the relevant statutory agency, either nationally or locally
- channelling information through the CIB or other national organisations, either statutory, or voluntary/community
- becoming involved in local projects or initiatives, either alone or in co-operation with others, which may include publicising the issue or initiative locally

Choosing issues which could be progressed at local level will be determined by the nature of issues identified and the resources available, including, time, personnel, local knowledge and information. Local social policy initiatives could include:

- identifying gaps in local provision and proposing solutions
- negotiating with local public service officials, e.g. local authorities, HSE personnel, the local office of the Department of Social and Family Affairs
- co-operating with other local organisations
- campaigning around particular problems or perceived needs
- liaising with the CIB and other relevant organisations
- identifying problems with the local administration of social services and proposing solutions

- ✓ *Getting involved in local issues does not always mean taking the lead....sometimes it is more effective to play a supporting role.*

## 6. IDENTIFYING THE RELEVANT AUTHORITY

It is important that social policy initiatives are directed to the appropriate authorities. Centres need a good working knowledge of the local administrative services and the structure through which public services are delivered.

- ✓ *Making sure the social policy initiative reaches the most appropriate destination will enhance its chance of success.*

## 7. MAKING SUBMISSIONS

This will be one of the later stages of social policy work. The identification of the problem, the gathering of evidence to support the case, the writing up of all relevant material in a coherent and suitable format and the identification of an appropriate destination for a submission should all have been done beforehand. Submissions can be either in writing or in person, or both. The nature of the submission will in part be determined by the organisation to which it is directed, and partly by its subject

matter. It should also be remembered that a submission is more likely to be effective if it includes a proposal for the solution of the problem identified, including, if appropriate, the costs of so doing. It may also be useful, if it is appropriate, to seek publicity for a submission. It is important, in preparing a submission that it is clear, coherent, and as short as is consistent with making the point clearly.

## 8. ASSESSING AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS

Some social policy initiatives taken at local level will be successful; some will be partially successful, while others will not succeed at all, at least in the short term. Regardless of outcome, it is important to assess the results of any initiatives taken, and to communicate these to all involved in the process. This will ensure that lessons can be learned, and those involved can be motivated to continue to engage in local social policy work, even in the face of lack of immediate success. The outcome of initiatives taken locally will depend on the nature of the project, and sometimes results may be slow in emerging – patience and persistence is often required!

Progress can occur in a number of ways. For example

- acknowledgement of an issue by policy makers
- resolution of a problem concerning the administration of social services locally
- introduction of new policies or schemes

✓ *Communicating results is very important, and this needs to be done appropriately and clearly. Reviews of the results of social policy initiatives are also required, as these can provide learning points for future social policy work.*

## 9. SKILLS AND RESOURCES

Undertaking social policy initiatives requires the investment of resources if it is to be an effective process. Time and skills can be as important as money in this regard. The ability to research, to write reports, to liaise or negotiate with other bodies and to engage in publicity are all skills which are important in social policy work. It might sometimes be necessary to identify individuals outside the organisation who could provide these on a once off or occasional basis, either in a voluntary or in a paid capacity. It may also be possible to source funds for specific projects from local or national organisations.

## 10. CIB AS A RESOURCE FOR CICs UNDERTAKING LOCAL SOCIAL POLICY INITIATIVES

CIB, as part of its remit with regard to social policy feedback, provides a number of supports to CICs involved in undertaking local social policy initiatives, including

- training in undertaking social policy work
- access to information in researching social policy topics
- co-ordinating social policy feedback from CICs and other information giving organisations
- provision of social policy feedback recording instruments
- compiling social policy reports drawing on data collected

- feedback to the relevant service providers on issues and difficulties experienced by users and providers of independent information services in relation to social services and other state entitlements
- the provision of small grants under the social policy grant scheme to CICs and other organisations wishing to undertake local social policy related projects (further details on this scheme are available from CIB)