



Voice

Influencing Social Policy

The Citizens Information Board aims to 'influence policy developments by highlighting the concerns of service users as to the effectiveness of social and civil services'

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The Right Living Space



Pictured at the launch of "The Right Living Space" were from left: Geraldine Clare (Chair, DFI), John Gormley (TD) Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Martin Naughton (DFI and CIB Board Member), Chris Glennon (Chair, CIB) and Leonie Lunny (CEO, CIB)

A new Social Policy Report, *The Right Living Space*, published by the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and the Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) on the housing and accommodation needs of people with disabilities was launched by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley TD on 15th Jan 2008 in the Mansion House, Dublin. The report stresses that meeting the housing needs of people with disabilities requires a significant shift in focus from viewing people with disabilities primarily as people requiring 'special needs' housing to one which sees their accommodation needs being addressed by a continuum of housing provision to cater for a wide range of individual circumstances.

Many people with a disability are currently living in unsuitable accommodation. These include adults in family homes who do not wish to live there and those in long-stay residential settings who do not need to be there. With adequate supports, more people with a disability could live in the community and not be dependent on their families or on institutional care. Increased investment in social housing is required and more accessible accommodation is needed. But also, depending on the nature of the disability, other supports may be required, including community care, personal assistance, home help or financial support.

To promote independent living, government departments, voluntary organisations and those with a disability need to work together to come up with the right solutions to meet a real housing need. That need often remains hidden in Irish society because those with a disability do not always show up on official housing waiting lists. It is hoped that this report will inform the National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities to be developed by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) by 2009.



Pictured - The Housing and Accommodation Report and Michael Browne, author of the report, at the launch in the Mansion House, Dublin

*"I need to be able to independently use the bathroom and kitchen in my house – this is crucial for living."
(The Right Living Space, p.43)*

CIB's Social Policy Work at National Level

CIB Conference Workshop

There was a workshop on social policy work at the CIB national conference held on 15th Oct 2007 in Tullamore. Short presentations on overcoming blocks and barriers were given by David Stratton, Social Policy Executive, CIB and Connie Gerety, Development Manager, Co. Longford CIS. Among the points raised in the workshop following the presentations was the need to identify the underlying causes of social injustice, to document case evidence, verify content and address the policy issues to the relevant authority. The need for further training in social policy was also highlighted by participants.

CIB Social Policy Quarterly Reports - Case Evidence

One of CIB's functions is to provide information on the effectiveness of current social policies and services and to highlight issues of concern to users of those services. Information providers are well placed to monitor recurrent difficulties with the social services and thereby contribute to the social policy process. The quarterly reports are based on cases submitted by Citizen Information Centres (CICs) and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) and can serve as early warning signals for policy makers on issues arising in relation to social policies and services.

Social welfare issues accounted for 45% of the returns in 2007 while issues in relation to employment (21%) and health (9%) featured prominently. Instances of employers not complying with the law surfaced on a number of occasions, particularly in respect of foreign nationals. Customer service issues were also highlighted in the returns. Not answering phones or inordinate delays in processing claims were among the issues raised.

Case Example taken from the report

B. is a CIS client with mental health difficulties who is in receipt of Disability Allowance and who has been intermittently homeless for 15 years. He is finding it impossible to get any kind of accommodation. Private landlords are reluctant to take him as he has difficulty in proving that he would be a reliable tenant and getting references accordingly. The local authority waiting list in the area is long and gives very low priority to single men. There is no hostel accommodation in the area for people in B's situation. (*The Right Living Space, p.27*)

A number of issues in terms of gaps in service came to light, e.g. the lack of public transport in rural areas, the absence of waiver systems for private refuse collection services, the lack of adequate supports for people who need to move out of the family home because of domestic violence, etc. See Social Policy Quarterly Reports on www.citizensinformationboard.ie/social.

CIB Policy Submissions

Submission to the Review of the Irish Public Service

In 2007, CIB made a submission to the OECD Review of the Irish Public Service on the gaps between policy and service provision. Feedback from CISs and CIPS suggested that access to good quality information varies very much from one statutory agency to another and depends to a great extent on the public official contacted. Difficulties with telephone access to public offices are regularly reported.

Despite the various principles and protocols for improved service delivery introduced during the last decade, feedback from CISs/CIPS raises basic questions about how the service delivery and benefits system deals with individual complex situations where existing provision falls short. The public as users of services sometimes experience a gap between what they perceive as their needs and what is available from the State and how the State engages with the day to day reality of their lives.

Difficulties in accessing public services arise for a number of reasons including lack of clarity about allocation systems, repeat assessments/means tests, having to move between agencies and delays in processing applications for services. It is sometimes the case that a person's needs do not fit easily into existing frameworks or eligibility criteria.

It is expected that the Review will be published in April 2008.

Submission to HIQA

A Submission by CIB was made to the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) on the Draft National Quality Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People. The adoption of uniform

quality standards across all sectors should facilitate and encourage all institutions to improve the quality of both the nursing and the social care services they provide.

Among the recommendations made by CIB was to incorporate into the Standards an explicit commitment to upholding the human rights of older people in residential care and to provide for ongoing training and education for staff in residential care settings. Furthermore, all long-term residential care institutions should be required to produce a quality assurance policy statement and a quality assurance service plan, with complaints procedures clearly set out and made available to residents and their families.

For further details, see Submissions and Policy Recommendations on the CIB website www.citizensinformationboard.ie/social.

Pre-Budget Submission 2008

The CIB pre-budget submission highlighted issues concerned with achieving a basic standard of living for all. A pre-budget forum was held in CIB Hume House where representatives of 15 CISs came together for a morning to reflect on the policy issues they meet on a day to day basis and to put forward suggestions for the submission. The Social Policy Quarterly Reports also served as a basis for the submission.

Income supports for Lone Parents, reform of eligibility criteria for FIS and for Rent Supplement, increased coverage of the Medical Card scheme, the extension of the Bereavement Grant to all recipients of means tested payments, the introduction of a Refuse Allowance, a Cost of Disability payment, an increase in the Living Alone allowance, incentives for returning to work and temporary work permits for asylum seekers, were just some of the ideas put forward in the submission to the Minister of Finance.

For details on the budget, see Budget Pack 2008 on www.citizensinformationboard.ie/publications under Entitlements. While no policy change in regard to the introduction of a new cost of disability payment was announced, it is understood that this is still on the government's agenda and a working group under the Department of Health and Children will report on progress when further details under the assessment of needs are to hand.

Government Policy Initiatives

Towards an Integrated Society

A policy workshop as part of the consultation series *Towards an Integrated Society* was held in Croke Park on 4th December 2007 at which the Minister for Integration Conor Lenihan T.D. was in attendance. This is to be an annual event and in the course of the coming year a Ministerial Council for Integration (MCI) will be set up comprised solely of migrants who will act in an advisory capacity to the Minister. Also a Task Force on Integration composed of experts will work with the Minister on policy issues. A Cross Departmental Group on Integration will publish its report shortly.

The Office for Integration works across three departments: the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

A Research & Social Policy report from the CIB on access to information and services for foreign nationals will be published in 2008 and will address some of the current challenges facing information providers helping foreign nationals integrate into Irish society.

In a two week survey carried out in 21 CICs in 2007, 26% of those using the CICs participating in the data collection exercise were foreign nationals, i.e. 2,207 out of a total of 8,506 callers for the period in question. Half of those were from Eastern Europe. 29% of the queries related to social welfare and 6% related to immigration status. The percentages in other categories were similar to CIS users generally.

N.B. 2008 has been designated the EU Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Pensions

The Government's Green Paper on pensions has recently been published and submissions are invited. For information and to make a submission, see www.pensionsgreenpaper.ie.

Review of Sectoral Plans

In monitoring progress of the National Disability Strategy, the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) invites feedback on its sectoral plan for addressing key disability issues. There are 40 objectives and 145 actions set out in the plan and it is important to establish whether they meet the needs of people with disabilities and which ones are considered most important. See, www.welfare.ie/publications/sectoralplan.

OECD Thematic Review of Sickness & Disability Policies

Ireland is participating in an OECD thematic review on reforming sickness and disability policies with a view to reintegrating the beneficiaries of these payments into the labour market. This is the third round of this international review which will also look at Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands. As part of the review, an OECD delegation visited Ireland in order to meet a broad range of stakeholders which included members of the DSFA's Disability Forum on which the Citizens Information Board is represented.

A comparative four-country report will be published, probably in autumn 2008, which will cover all the main themes involved as well as country specific conclusions and recommendations. A final synthesis report, covering in total 11 countries, will highlight good and bad practices in the countries involved. These reports will contribute to policy-making in Ireland in the area of disability and employment.

Half Rate Carer's Allowance

This payment introduced in Sept '07 is not a new allowance but an extension of the original Carer's Allowance. It does however signal a new policy direction. While certain restrictions apply, the move allows for the first time an entitlement by a carer to retain a full social welfare payment and to receive, in addition, up to a half rate Carer's Allowance. It is also a further acknowledgement of the contribution made by carers in the community. The income and support needs of carers feature regularly in returns from CISs. It is worth noting that the DSFA has taken steps to pro-actively contact those in receipt of a social welfare payment who may be eligible for the allowance.

Activation

'Activation' is a major policy change which has affected social welfare systems all over Europe. Policy makers are concerned that the social welfare system is too 'passive' – i.e. just making payments – and that it should become more 'active' – encouraging and supporting welfare claimants to engage in training, education or work.

One Family, supported by the Combat Poverty Agency, is now undertaking research on lone parents to get a better understanding of the issues lone parents on the One Parent Family Payment and their families face in going out to work. See www.onefamily.ie for more information. The report is due to be published in 2008.

CICs' Social Policy Work at Local Level

- Donegal CIS in conjunction with the HSE and the Donegal Local Development Co. (Partnership Co.) are planning a survey of Ethnic Minorities in Donegal. The aim of the survey is to facilitate service planning for health and other services. Key objectives include: To detail a demographic baseline of Foreign Nationals in the County, to identify and document the "felt health, social care and other needs of ethnic minorities" and to identify and document the key social issues affecting Foreign Nationals. This work, which is supported by a Social Policy Grant from CIB, links in well with the current CIB social policy research project on the information needs of foreign nationals.
- Citizens Information Services (CISs) in Counties Wexford, Wicklow and Carlow launched a quarterly Social Policy & Advocacy Newsletter in October as part of their Advocacy Resource Officer (ARO) project.
- Roscommon CIS held a Social Policy networking event in October with representatives from a number of local agencies in attendance. It is part of a pilot project to raise awareness of policy issues and to work collaboratively to address them.

Advocacy Projects & Social Policy

The CIB grant aids Community & Voluntary organisations to provide advocacy services for people with disabilities and approximately 40 projects are now up and running. Advocacy is a means of empowering people by supporting them to assert their views and claim their entitlements and where necessary representing and negotiating on their behalf. The social policy report on the housing and accommodation needs of people with disabilities drew on the experiences of many of the local groups and organisations involved in these projects. This is just one example where local groups can feed into the policy making process and where CIB can facilitate this exchange to take place.

Research

CSO

A new report from the Central Statistics Office, *Equality in Ireland 2007*, shows a major increase in lone female parents - they rose by 41% to 102,600 between 2002 and 2006. The total number of lone parents in 2006 was 112,900. Employment rates in 2006 for lone parents in the age range between 25 and 44 were 57% compared to 75% for other parents in the same age range. Employment rates among Travellers aged between 25 and 44 were 16% compared to 79% for the wider community, while 45% of people aged 25-44 with a disability were employed. (www.cso.ie)

Centre for Housing Research

A recent study by the Centre for Housing Research on *Improving Standards in the Private Rented Sector* (2007) noted: "It appear the relevant rent limit is simply too low to meet the cost of providing one-bed apartments in any of the HSE regions. In other words, the rent-supplement payment available is less than the applicable average rent; implying that at least some of the recipients of this payment will encounter difficulty in sourcing adequate accommodation." This is an issue that has been frequently highlighted by CISs. (www.housingunit.ie)

The Citizens Information Board is the statutory body which supports the provision of information, advice and advocacy on the broad range of social and civil services to the public. It provides the Citizens Information website and supports the voluntary network of Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service.

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CIB

The Citizens Information Board is currently preparing a Social Policy Report on *Transport and Access to Services*. Areas under consideration include access to free travel, the operation of various health/welfare schemes, access to public transport, transport costs for people with disabilities, etc. If you would like to contribute to this report, please contact Michael Browne, info@ciboard.ie.

Evidence Based Policy

The Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative, Humanities Institute of Ireland, UCD, recently held a roundtable discussion on evidence based policy work. The speaker was Dr Annette Boaz, Senior Research Fellow at the ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice and Associate Editor of the Journal, *Evidence and Policy*.

One of the key points to be borne in mind by researchers when making recommendations to government arising from their research is that the recommendations should be developed in a form that can be effectively used by policy makers. These should provide a clear vision and framework for creating and implementing recommendations and not just be an endless list of needs, gaps and criticisms.

Resources

Social Policy Toolkit

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) has set up a working group involving Citizens Information Services (CISs) to develop a Social Policy Toolkit for information providers. The aim is to improve the quality and quantity of CIS social policy casework material and propose actions for local policy work. Two key areas are currently being examined (i) processes for managing social policy at a local level within CISs and (ii) developing resource materials for social policy work. Other areas being examined include workshops for information providers in social policy and producing an e-bulletin to keep CISs up to date on policy developments.

Publications



The Combat Poverty Agency, in association with CIB and the Wheel, has published a useful guide, *Finding Your Way Around the Community & Voluntary Sector*, authored by Hilary Curley, which is part of the Having Your Say Programme (www.cpa.ie/havingyoursay).

The publication is intended as a resource for public officials

whose day-to-day work involves them engaging with Community & Voluntary groups.



Relate is the Citizens Information Board's monthly journal on policy and legislation relating to social services in Ireland. An *EU Supplement* is published quarterly, providing updates on relevant EU policy developments in the broad areas of citizens'

rights, justice, health, employment, environment and consumer affairs.

The CIB is currently compiling a new *Directory of National Voluntary Organisations and Other Agencies*. It is a comprehensive directory listing over 500 voluntary organisations in Ireland and related public agencies with descriptions, contact details, publications, e-mails and web addresses.

Citizens Information

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