

# 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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### Social Policy Workshops



*Participants at the Social Policy Workshop in CIB, Dublin*

As part of the Citizens Information Board's strategy to influence policy development, workshops on social policy were organised in Cork and Dublin involving Development Managers, Information Officers and Area Executives from Citizen Information Services throughout the country. The workshops examined current practices in relation to social policy and explored new ways of doing social policy work within Citizens Information Centres.

A presentation was given by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP) on its project "From the Ground Up" about how the experiences of those on the ground are captured and fed into social policy reports and submissions. The project relies on a select number of volunteers throughout the country who are contacted by phone by social policy officers to obtain the relevant information. The SVP use the term 'working for justice' rather than the term 'social policy work'.

Maura Mulvey, an Information Officer with Athlone CIC, shared her experiences of doing social policy work with the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) in the UK. Other speakers at the workshops included Cathy Buchanan, Social Inclusion Analyst at Cork City Council, who spoke about Cork's social, economic and cultural strategy focusing on the issues which local people have said are important to them, and Ciarán Lawler of the Department of Social & Family Affairs, who spoke about how policy submissions are received by government departments. Feedback from the discussions will inform future developments of Social Policy within CIB, including the Social Policy Toolkit.

## **Submissions**

### **(a) National Carers' Strategy**

Citizens Information Board (CIB) made a submission to the Department of Social and Family Affairs on the new strategy for carers being prepared as part of the government's commitments under *Towards 2016*. The submission draws on feedback from Citizens Information Services (CISs) and a report published by Comhairle in 2002 entitled *Supporting Carers*.

The submission emphasises the need to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with the twin issues of providing support towards the costs of care and providing income support for carers. It calls on the government to recognise the needs of carers to be addressed in their own right. Services should not be limited to those being cared for because a family carer is present. Adequate publicly-provided respite, home care and day care services should ensure that carers have choices in regard to working, caring, or a combination of the two.

The level of supports available in the community remains a concern for many carers and there are information deficits for carers taking on this responsibility for the first time. Concern is frequently reported about access to and the operation of Home Care Packages. Many of the issues raised by CISs relate to income support, means-testing and other eligibility criteria as well as the basic rates of payment for Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit. Many carers report long delays in gaining access to essential services, such as occupational therapy, home care equipment (e.g. hoists) or home adaptation grants.

The submission proposes that the National Carers' Strategy needs to make provision on a phased basis for a fair system of income support and support services across the life-cycle and across the wide spectrum of carers and their differing financial circumstances. In this regard, there is a need for some 'scenario' analysis of caring situations to underpin the Strategy. Recommendations include the need for respite to be substantially expanded as part of the National Carers' Strategy to include a mix of both residential and in-home respite care.

### **(b) Green Paper on Pensions**

CIB's submission on the Green Paper on Pensions to the Department of Social and Family Affairs is informed by the high percentage of state pension related queries dealt with by Citizens Information Services nationally. A recent survey of CISs shows that 10% of queries in relation to social welfare referred to state pensions (contributory and non-contributory), which equates to 40,000 queries annually.

As the public pension system continues to be a primary source of pensioners' incomes the need to maintain a strong social welfare insurance-based pensions system is advocated. The submission draws attention to a number of policy areas including the need for a continuing policy of increasing social welfare pensions by more than the rate of inflation; substantially increasing the Living Alone Allowance because of the greater risk of poverty among pensioners living alone; examining the feasibility of allowing people who have a reduced number of contributions to retrospectively buy some contributions to social insurance; and the need for equitable tax arrangements for everyone contributing to a pension.

Pro-active information provision by statutory officials is of paramount importance in terms of ensuring that people are fully aware of both their entitlements and of ways of maximising these entitlements. The need for people to be fully informed of the possibility of getting PRSI credits, an issue highlighted in social policy returns, is included in the submission.

### **(c) Commission on Taxation**

This submission on the review of the structure, efficiency and appropriateness of the Irish taxation system focuses on the social impact of taxation measures and draws on feedback from information

providers in relation to particular anomalies within the system. Tax queries account for about 5% of the total queries to CIs, 60% of which relate to PAYE.

The submission draws attention to certain inconsistencies in the taxation system, including tax concessions used as income maintenance measures where only taxpayers benefit. An example of this is the income support for taxpayers who have a child with a disability. Tax relief is worth approximately the same as the direct payment – the Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA). The tax credit is €3,660 a year and the DCA is €299.60 a month. So, a taxpayer who can avail of the full credit can get twice as much support as a person who is not a taxpayer. Also, in relation to the tax relief for nursing home fees, it may be that people who do not qualify for a subvention are getting a greater subsidy towards their care than those who do qualify. The tax relief effectively reduces a €1,000 a week fee to €590 a week – that is, a subsidy of €410 a week when the official maximum subvention is €300 a week. The tax relief is available regardless of the degree of medical dependency.

Full details of all submission by CIB are contained on its website, [www.citizensinformationboard.ie](http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie)

## National Developments

### New Offices within the Department of Health & Children

Two new Offices have been established within the Department of Health and Children (DoHC) to support the work of the Minister for Disability and Mental Health, John Moloney TD, and the Minister for Older People, Máire Hootor TD. The new Offices will put in place structures which will provide for a greater cohesion than currently exists in supporting people with a disability or mental health problem and older people to live a full life and to participate in society. The Offices will forge formal linkages with other government departments.

A key function of the new Office for Older People will be to develop a National Strategy on Positive Ageing. (The National Council on Ageing and Older People will be subsumed into the Department of Health as a National Advisory Council on Older People.) The

Office for Disability and Mental Health will focus on supporting implementation of the Health Sectoral Plan under the Disability Act and driving implementation of the recommendations in *A Vision for Change* (the Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy 2006) and *Reach Out* (the National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention 2005).

### Intercultural Health Strategy

As part of its Social Inclusion Services, aimed at improving access to mainstream services, the Health Service Executive (HSE) has published a *National Intercultural Health Strategy*. The primary objective of the strategy is to provide a framework through which service users and providers are supported in addressing the unique care and support needs of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

One of the issues highlighted in the Strategy is the need for professional interpretation and translation services. Over 10% of the population is comprised of foreign nationals, while 33% of those working in the medical/dental field are from overseas.

The Strategy can be downloaded from the HSE website [www.hse.ie/eng/Publications](http://www.hse.ie/eng/Publications). A separate report summarising the themes and issues arising from the consultations that informed the Strategy is also available online.

CIB will soon publish research on meeting the Information Needs of Foreign Nationals. Over 20% of queries to CIs throughout the country come from foreign nationals.

### NERA

The Employment Law Compliance Bill, published in March 2008, establishing the National Employment Rights Authority (NERA) on a statutory footing gives legislative effect to provisions in the national agreement, *Towards 2016*. Employers who breach employment legislation now face fines of up to €250,000 or three years in prison. Almost €2.5 million owed to employees was recovered after workplace inspections last year and there were 98 prosecutions. The new legislation contains protections for “whistle-blowers” who report breaches of employment law.

All this should come as good news to the many employees who have contacted Citizens Information Centres (CICs) in the last year over breaches of their employment rights. Issues in relation to employment accounted for 21% of social policy returns in 2007, with many of the problems relating to employment rights, including the withholding of P45s or holiday pay on leaving employment and the denial of the minimum wage. One of the issues highlighted by CICs was the reluctance to make a complaint for fear of adverse consequences.

In 2006 CIB published a social policy report, *Employment Rights: from Information to Redress* which raised the issue of the gap between legal protection and the ability of employees to enforce their statutory rights.

### OECD Review

At the end of April 2008, the *OECD Review of the Irish Public Service* was published. This first ever review of the whole of the Public Service looks at how it compares with other OECD countries and makes recommendations for the future direction of the Public Service. (See [www.bettergov.ie](http://www.bettergov.ie))

CIB made a submission to the review in 2007 drawing on evidence from Citizens Information Services to illustrate the gap between policy and actual service provision across a wide range of public services. The submission focused on three main areas of service delivery: access to information; co-ordination and integration of services; and consultation with service users.

The OECD reports points out that while Ireland has engaged in a modernisation process within the public sector, the Public Service remains segmented and needs to have a more external focus on citizens and on targeting delivery of services from their perspective. The government has established a group involving public and private sector figures to oversee follow-up of the OECD proposals and to report back to government by the end of the summer.

### Student Support Bill

A new Student Support Bill, published in February 2008, will pave the way for students under 23 and living away from home to be independently assessed for the purposes of a grant. Under existing regulations, parental

income is used to decide whether a student is entitled to a grant. This has been criticised by CISs for not taking account of the reality that some people are financially independent before they reach 23. The eligibility criteria have still to be agreed and will be published as regulations. The forthcoming legislation will streamline the application and payment for maintenance grants, bringing the process under the umbrella of a single administrative system in place of four different schemes operating at present. The Vocational Education Committee network will be the single administrative agency.

## Local Initiatives

### Clare CIS seminar on housing and disability



(L.-R.) Tom King, Chair Disabled People of Clare; Cllr. Patricia McCarthy, Mayor of Clare; Paul Woulfe, Manager Citizens Information Service & Greg Duff, Independent Advocate for People with Disabilities

The Social Policy Report, *The Right Living Space: Housing and Accommodation Needs of People with Disabilities*, launched in Dublin by the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and the Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI), was presented recently at a seminar in Ennis by Clare Citizens Information Service and Disabled People of Clare. The event was attended by over 100 representatives of community and disability groups, statutory services and local politicians. It allowed participants to engage with the new report at a local level and examine the implications it has for services in their region.



## Cavan Social Policy Network



*Participants at Social Policy Seminar in Cavan*

The findings of a research project undertaken by Cavan Social Policy Network were presented at a seminar in Cavan in June highlighting the need for public service organisations to record social policy issues that arise through their work. A number of statutory and voluntary organisations in Cavan participated in the research which was funded through the CIB and the Cavan County Development Board. Having piloted a social policy recording system, modelled on the one used by Citizens Information Services, the network is now exploring the possibility of generating a more comprehensive county report of local social policy issues.

## Tallaght CIS Report on Information Services

Tallaght CIC has published a research report entitled *2020 Vision: What Tallaght Needs to Know* which examines the satisfaction of clients with information services and the issues pertaining to their needs. The report, funded by CIB, has a particular focus on social policy issues concerning service delivery at local, regional and national levels. As a follow up to the report, a social policy task group from within the Board of the CIC is being formed to identify opportunities at local level for ensuring that the valuable data collated by the CIC continues to be fed into the appropriate decision-making structures.

## Social Policy Feedback

### Form-Filling

Recently the DSFA have made changes to the Illness Benefit application form where applicants are no longer asked to supply information on their spouse or partner if they do not wish to make a claim for a qualified adult. In the past this information was requested for the purpose of establishing if a claimant was entitled

to an additional payment for a dependent, but it wasn't obvious to the claimant why this information was being requested since the benefit is based on personal PRSI contributions and is not in any way dependant on a spouse's/partner's income.

CICs often assist people filling out forms. However, it would be useful if explanations were given on forms about how the information being requested is to be used. It would also be useful if the thresholds for payments were included so that people are more aware of the limits that apply before filling out the forms.

## Payments Delivery Strategy

In line with the Department of Social and Family Affairs strategy to roll out e-payments to welfare recipients, PPO (Personal Payable Order) books are being replaced with Social Services Cards. Customers can choose to be paid by Electronic Fund Transfer (EFT) to their own bank accounts or opt to be paid at a Post Office of their choice. If the customer chooses to be paid at the Post Office they will then be issued with a Social Services Card to collect their payment. The card is swiped at the Post Office on payment day, the customer signs for the payment and a receipt is issued.

In response to a query from the CIB, the Department confirmed that it is progressing the option of payments through the Credit Union. Currently less than 20 Credit Unions who bank with Bank of Ireland and 5 or 6 who have their own National Sort Codes are capable of receiving electronic transfers from the Department.

## Disabled Parking Permits

Disabled Parking Permits (also known as European Parking Cards) are available through the Disabled Drivers Association (DDA) or the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA). Some CICs have asked why the application forms are not available from CICs or on-line and the reason for this according to the IWA is that contact has first to be made with the IWA (or DDA) to establish eligibility in terms of meeting the medical criteria before sending out the form; otherwise people would be going to the trouble of getting doctor's certification, etc. and may not be eligible to apply. An application letter requesting the form, outlining one's disability and how it affects one's mobility, is reviewed by a medical director.

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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## Medical Cards

Under *Towards 2016* there is a commitment to review the eligibility criteria for assessment of medical cards in the context of medical, social and economic/financial need. The review will clarify entitlement to a medical card. For many the potential loss of a medical card could act as a disincentive to taking up employment as income from paid employment is reckonable for the purposes of assessing a person for a medical card. The review will be completed in the autumn.

It should be noted that anyone who has been unemployed and returns to work can retain the medical card for 3 years provided he/she was getting one of the following allowances or benefits for 12 months or more: Jobseeker's Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, One-Parent Family Payment, Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Blind Pension or have been on an employment incentive scheme or educational opportunity scheme.

## Notices

### New Publication from OSI

The Office for Social Inclusion (OSI), which comes within the remit of the DSFA, is the Irish Government Office with overall responsibility for developing, coordinating and driving Ireland's National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. Its latest report, *A Social Portrait of People of Working Age in Ireland*, is the third social portrait in a series, following the publication last year of portraits of children and of older people. These reports provide a statistical description and analysis of people across the life-cycle which underpins the social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016* and the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*. People of working age are the biggest population category in the country. In 2007 the labour force participation rate stood at 63%. This is up from 57% on 1998. Under government activation programmes it is intended that more people of working age will actively engage in the workforce. (See [www.socialinclusion.ie](http://www.socialinclusion.ie))

## Household Budgets

A new website of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) contains details of research undertaken on measuring essential budgets based on the expenditure patterns for different types of households. It highlights that among those dependent on social welfare, lone female pensioners, households with adolescents and single adult male households are the three household types which have incomes that fall far short of what is required to reach a minimum essential standard of living. (See [www.budgeting.ie](http://www.budgeting.ie))

## EU Year of Combating Poverty & Social Exclusion

2010 will be the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. It will mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commitment in Lisbon in 2000 to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010.

## Social Policy Grants

Every year CIB provides a small number of grants to pursue social policy initiatives at local level. The purpose of the grants is to provide support for social policy initiatives being undertaken by CICs, particularly those working in conjunction with statutory or voluntary organisations. Further information on the grants is available from:

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