



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'

In this issue...

- Policy submissions from the Citizens Information Board
 - Green Paper on Local Government
 - Health Information Bill
 - Residential services for people with disabilities
- Policy developments
 - Social housing
 - Homelessness
 - Housing and integration
 - Nursing Homes Support Scheme
- Local initiatives
 - Meath CIS – Integration report
 - Social Justice Seminar
 - Seminar on Customer Service
 - Transport
- Reports and publications
 - Tackling Financial Exclusion
 - Green Paper on Pensions
 - INOU booklet and website
 - Inclusion Ireland publications
- Acknowledging the work of volunteers

Budget 2009

The Citizens Information Board's (CIB's) pre-budget submission, *Supporting People In Need*, emphasised that the priority in Budget 2009 should be on targeting those most in need. Many of the queries to Citizens Information Services (CISs) point to the difficulties and challenges faced by low-income families in meeting the costs of daily living and coping with rising costs, such as heating. The submission, which incorporated the views of CISs, suggested that the life-cycle approach, strongly endorsed in *Towards 2016*, could provide a useful framework for a targeted approach to be taken. The life-cycle approach assesses the risks facing individuals and the supports available to address these risks at key lifecycle stages, focusing on the needs of children, young adults, people of working age, older people and people with disabilities.

The budget on 14 October 2008 made certain choices in relation to the targeting of resources at those in need. General increases in social welfare payments of around 3% were announced which are intended to meet rising costs associated with inflation, projected to be 2.5% in 2009. The Fuel Allowance was increased by €2 and extended by two weeks; new arrangements were put in place to help purchasers get loans for affordable homes; finance was provided for building social housing and to fund the homeless strategy; and incentives were put in place for greener homes. Some of the measures that were seen as more contentious, namely the income tax levy, changes in medical card eligibility for people over 70 and changes to the age limits for the Disability Allowance have since been amended.

Changes to agencies include: the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) will be assigned to the Citizens Information Board while the Combat Poverty Agency will be integrated with the Office for Social Inclusion in the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The Equality Authority and the Human Rights Commission are to fully integrate their facilities, back office and administrative services and access for citizens. The Office of the Minister for Integration will cease funding the National Consultative Committee on

Budget 2009 (continued)

Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI). Its functions will be absorbed into his Office in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

November's edition of *Relate* covers the Budget in more detail and www.citizensinformation.ie carries a detailed Budget summary. (*Relate* is the Citizens Information Board's monthly subscription journal on legislation and developments in social services and social policy.)

Policy submissions from the Citizens Information Board

Green Paper on Local Government

The Citizens Information Board made a submission calling for greater co-ordination and integration of services at local level in response to a consultation document from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on local government reform: *Stronger Local Democracy: Options for Change*.

Feedback from CISs and CIPS indicates that the number of local and regional development bodies leads to problems with the delivery of services. The local government process in Ireland now includes 22 distinct types of agencies (totalling 491 across the country) operating in overlapping areas. Not surprisingly, members of the public sometimes find it very difficult to know where responsibility for different services lies and where their search for information and services should begin. This issue needs to be addressed in order to improve information provision to the public. Greater opportunities for civic participation in decision-making on local issues should also be examined. In the longer-term the reform of local government will need to examine greater devolution of decision-making responsibilities and related budgets to local level.

The submission argues that despite the existence of an extensive local infrastructure, the majority of public expenditure decisions continue to be made at national level. The emphasis at the general policy level on the need to co-ordinate and integrate services at the point of delivery is frequently not translated into actual practice on the ground. The Green Paper refers to the integration of new communities as a challenge. A key consideration, and one which should be given priority

in the short-term, would be to exploit the potential for 'town government' (which allows for greater devolution of local decisions from county to town level, within overall county level strategies), to integrate immigrant populations within the local community.

Health Information Bill

As part of the Health Reform Programme, the Department of Health and Children is preparing new legislation on the collection, use, sharing, storage, disclosure and transfer of personal health information. In response to the proposed Bill, the Citizens Information Board considers that there should be as few restrictions as possible on access to personal health information and that patients should be offered full access to information relating to their care. The submission recommends that there should be a statutory requirement on doctors, community care personnel and hospitals to keep records. In addition, legislation should address the information needs of patients and deal with issues of consent and substitute decision-making. The Bill should be accompanied by education and training measures to ensure that systems are put in place to enhance communication between the various elements of the health service.

Residential services for people with disabilities

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) has published draft National Quality Standards on Residential Services for People with Disabilities (www.hiqa.ie). The Citizens Information Board made a submission to reflect the experiences of those working on the ground, particularly the Community & Voluntary Sector Advocacy Projects funded by the CIB, in relation to issues arising from advocacy work in residential services for people with disabilities. The submission proposes that a primary focus in residential services should be on maximising choice and promoting social inclusion, allowing the individual to exercise the greatest degree of autonomy and control possible. The submission notes that the introduction of standards provides a timely opportunity for service providers to consider how access to independent advocacy services for people in residential services can be strengthened and enhanced to ensure that every person has access to an independent advocate.

The full text of all CIB's submissions can be accessed under Research and Social Policy Services on www.citizensinformationboard.ie

Policy developments

Social housing

In July 2008 a new Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill was presented to the Dáil to give effect to the social housing reform measures outlined in the *Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities* policy document published in February 2007. The Bill provides for a new Incremental Purchase Scheme for households who qualified for social housing and who cannot afford to buy under the affordable housing scheme to become owners of houses newly-built by housing authorities and voluntary and co-operative bodies. (See *Relate*, October 2008, Vol. 36: Issue1.) It was announced in Budget 2009 that the government intends to amend this Bill to provide for a single government equity initiative for people seeking affordable housing. It is not clear when this Bill will become law.

Homelessness

Mr Michael Finneran, TD, Minister for Housing, Urban Renewal and Developing Areas, recently launched the Government's new homeless strategy, *The Way Home – A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness 2008-2013*. The strategy has a vision of minimising homelessness and, where it does occur, that nobody would have to sleep rough or remain longer than six months in emergency accommodation. In 2008, almost €92 million was provided for the running costs of homeless services and the strategy aims to maximise the value

for money and efficiency of these services. A detailed implementation plan is yet to be developed. €3 million was provided in Budget 2009 for the provision of homeless accommodation. CISs have often made the point that an integrated level of services, especially between health services and the local authority, is required to meet the needs of those who are homeless, (see Social Policy Quarterly Reports on www.citizensinformationboard.ie).

Housing and integration

The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) published a report on the role that housing can play in the integration process in Ireland (www.nccri.ie). *Building Integrated Neighbourhoods* seeks to inform housing policy of the need to take cultural diversity into account to avoid problems of segregated and run-down urban neighbourhoods which have been experienced in other countries. Housing policies, according to the reports, should pay particular attention to home ownership for ethnic minorities and the avoidance of overcrowding.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

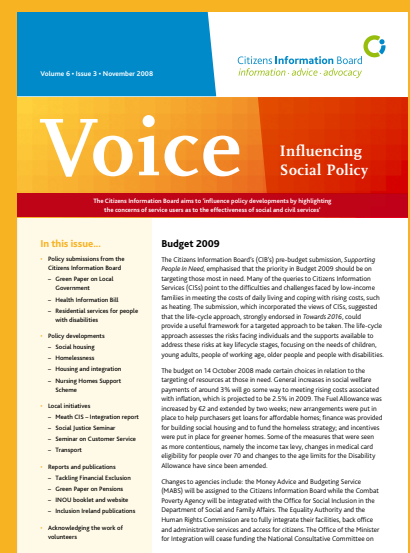
The Nursing Homes Support Scheme Bill 2008 has been published (10 October 2008). It provides the legislative basis for the Nursing Homes Support Scheme – A Fair Deal, which will now go before the Oireachtas. (See *Relate*, January 2007, Vol. 34: No. 4 and May 2007, Vol.34: Issue 8.) The Bill will be covered in the December edition of *Relate*.

Update your details

We are checking our mailing lists for VOICE. We would be grateful if you could e-mail us with any corrections to your mailing details. If you are aware of any other organisations who would like a copy, please e-mail us their details.

If you would like to make suggestions on improving VOICE, we would also like to hear from you.

Send your comments and corrections to info@ciboard.ie and include "VOICE" in the subject line. Thank you.



Local initiatives

Meath CIS – Integration report

A report on the integration of immigrants into the local community in Co Meath has been published by Meath Citizens Information Service and Meath County Development Board. The report assessed the attitudes of immigrants on a range of issues using eight focus groups and interviews with ethnic chaplaincies and service providers. It highlighted exploitative working conditions as a particular concern of immigrants. Other concerns were the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, difficulties accessing English-language training at suitable times and information deficits, particularly in terms of the policy and procedures of Irish public services.

Social Justice Seminar



Martina Cronin, Co. Wicklow CIS; David Stratton, CIB; and Mary O'Carolan, Bray Partnership.

Wicklow CIS and Bray Partnership hosted a seminar on Social Justice on 2 October 2008 as part of Entitlements Awareness Week. The seminar was supported by the Citizens Information Board and David Stratton, Social Policy Executive, gave the keynote address. Volunteers and staff of the Bray Information Givers Network and other statutory and voluntary organisations in the region were in attendance. Presentations included the work of MABS, the Bray Advocacy Project, Bray Travellers Community Development Group, the Carers Association, the INOU and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland. Billy Roche, CIB Advocacy Resource Officer for the South East Region, facilitated a workshop on identifying social policy issues. The underlying policy issue faced by all of the groups working at a local level was how to give

a voice to those who are marginalised. By providing a theoretical framework, practical local examples, case studies and information, the seminar raised awareness on 'how to' make change happen.

Seminar on Customer Service



Gabriel Irwin, Superintendent CWO, HSE Mayo; Marian McGrath, CWO HSE Mayo; Rosemary Doyle, Mayo County Council; Tomas Lally, Mayo CIS; Lily Cunningham, DSFA; Linda Gilroy, CIB.

The Mayo Local Social Policy Group, (made up of representatives from Mayo County Council, HSE West, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Mayo CIS and the Citizens Information Board), hosted a one-day seminar on 'Customer Service: A Social Policy Issue'. The seminar was held in Westport on 9 October 2008 and was supported by a social policy grant from the Citizens Information Board. The Mayo Disability Advocacy Service had found that many of the local social policy issues had started out as customer service issues. Examples included service providers failing to keep people up to date on the status of their applications or lack of clarity on the reasons for refusing service applications.

Dr. Mark Garavan, Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), gave a presentation on research he undertook into the quality and effectiveness of services provided to people with physical and sensory disabilities in the Mayo HSE area. He questioned whether the term 'customer' should be used to describe people who have little choice but to use public services and who have to emphasise their neediness in order to receive those services. The main finding of the research was that the ultimate objective of service users is to use services to increase their personal autonomy whereas in fact services often create dependency.

Transport

A pilot scheme, modelled on a Canadian Cancer Society initiative, to help cancer patients attend hospital appointments has been launched by Professor Tom Keane, Interim Director of the HSE National Cancer Control Programme (www.cancer.ie/caretodrive). The initiative, coordinated by the Irish Cancer Society, involves volunteer drivers using their own cars to transport patients to and from hospital. Currently it operates between south Dublin, Wicklow, north Wexford and St Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin. While providing a valuable service for patients unable to make the journey to the city by themselves, it also plugs a gap in hospital transport services, which is an issue highlighted in a number of social policy reports.

The Citizens Information Board is currently carrying out research on transport and access to services based on evidence from Citizens Information Services and a social policy report on this is due to be published in the near future.

Reports and publications

Tackling Financial Exclusion



The Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) has published a policy statement calling for universal access to banking in Ireland for low-income customers. *Tackling Financial Exclusion in Ireland* recommends that financial institutes should introduce basic bank accounts offering debit card facilities with no

government stamp duty, free transactions and electronic funds transfer facilities. The CPA also called for greater access to credit for low-income customers, many of whom still rely on moneylenders. An example from the UK where the government provides interest-free loans to people claiming social assistance is given in the report.

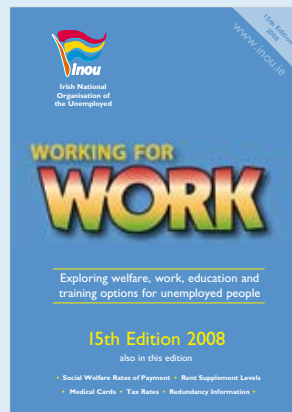
Green Paper on Pensions



The Report on the Consultation Process for the Green Paper on Pensions has been published. It sets out the issues raised in over 380 submissions, including those from the Citizens Information Board and Thurles CIS, and summarises proceedings from a conference held

in Dublin Castle last year and six regional public consultation seminars held earlier this year. While there is very little consensus in the report on the future direction that Ireland's pension policy should take, the Government is committed to producing a long-term pensions framework by the end of this year. The report on the consultation process and the submissions can be accessed at www.pensionsgreenpaper.ie (see also VOICE, July 2008, Vol.6: Issue 2).

INOUE booklet and website



The Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed (INOUE) has launched the 15th edition of its booklet, *Working for Work: A Handbook Exploring Options for Unemployed People* (www.inou.ie). It provides valuable information for those who are unemployed

or distant from the labour market about their entitlements and the supports available to them. With a grant from CIB, the INOU has produced a number of leaflets in foreign languages on *Welfare Rights* and on *Looking for Work in Ireland*. It has also launched a website www.redundancy.ie with information specifically on redundancy.

Inclusion Ireland publications

Two new books launched by Inclusion Ireland, *Making Decisions about Money* and *Making Medical Decisions* are designed for easy access and are useful also for parents and families of people with an intellectual disability (www.inclusionireland.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.

Head Office

Ground Floor
George's Quay House
43 Townsend Street
Dublin 2

t +353 1 605 9000
f +353 1 605 9099
e info@ciboard.ie
w www.citizensinformationboard.ie

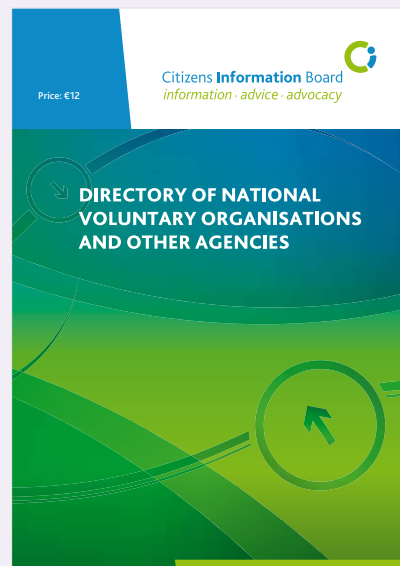


Left to Right: Doreen McInerney, Kay Delamere, Rose O'Neill, Dr Martin McAleese, President Mary McAleese, Noel Standly and Susan Ryan (Development Manager Offaly Citizens Information Service).

Acknowledging the work of volunteers

President McAleese hosted an event to celebrate the work undertaken by community groups throughout Ireland in Áras an Uachtaráin on 10 July 2008. Over 350 guests actively involved in voluntary and community projects, including five representatives from the Offaly Citizens Information Service, attended. The President praised the role of community groups in strengthening civic spirit in Ireland.

The Citizens Information Board has a role in supporting the development of voluntary bodies and provides a number of resources for the sector, a Voluntary and Community Sector website and various publications, including a *Directory of National Voluntary Agencies and Other Agencies*, and *Managing Volunteers: A Good Practice Guide*. The *Directory of National Voluntary Agencies and Other Agencies* has recently been re-published and copies can be ordered or downloaded from www.citizensinformationboard.ie/publications. It is also available as an online database on www.cidb.ie/comhairlevcs.nsf



Citizens Information 

LOG ON

www.citizensinformation.ie

LO-CALL

1890 777 121 Open Mon to Fri, 9am to 9pm

DROP IN

For your local centre see Golden Pages listing