

Voice

Influencing
Social Policy

Comhairle aims to 'influence policy developments by highlighting the concerns of service users as to the effectiveness of social and civil services.'

In this issue

- From the Editor
- Rent Supplement Report
- Back to Education Allowance
- Mental Health – the Cinderella of the Health Service
- Integrating Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- Travellers Must Travel
- CIC Queries
- Persistence and the Freedom of Information Act pay off
- CIC Users Living on the Margins
- Working Together more Effectively
- Putting Care on the Agenda
- Donegal CIS at the hub of new one-stop-shop service
- Income Maintenance
- Entitlements for the Over Sixties
- Waiting too long?
- The Comhairle Development and Social Policy Team
- Social Policy Grants

Rent Supplement in the Private Rented Sector – Issues for Policy and Practice

This Social Policy Report, based on the issues identified by users of Citizens Information Centres and Threshold Housing Advice Offices, published jointly by Comhairle and Threshold was launched in Dublin in April.

Contact us: What are the main social policy issues for you this month? Have you dealt with an issue locally? Would you like to publicise a social policy issue? Get in touch!

Editor: Catherine Brennan. Tel: (01) 605 9003
E-mail: catherine.brennan@comhairle.ie

From the Editor

'Transforming Private Troubles into Public issues'

The daily encounters with people's actual experiences give independent information and advice services an insight into the successes and failures of policies and practices and the reforms most urgently needed. In this way the information service becomes the 'voice' of citizens allowing them to participate in policy change, which can transform 'private troubles' into 'public issues'.

Independent information, advice and advocacy can promote active citizenship by:

- Providing comprehensive information on rights and entitlements;
- Enabling citizens to acquire and use information themselves; and
- Feeding back to Government the experience of those on the receiving end of social services.

Information is a 'two way' street. When people walk into a CIC or other service with a problem, they cross the boundary between private and public domains. That first step towards making a private problem a public issue involves a basic act of citizenship. However the next step depends on the quality of the response. Is it good enough?

The strength of independent information and advice agencies in policy feedback springs from their lack of ties to service providers and their knowledge of a range of sectors. They have the potential to provide a disinterested and complete picture. By carefully documenting the experience of service-users, they can build up a pool of knowledge covering inequities, gaps and anomalies in both entitlements and service delivery. A second strength of information centres is their ability to identify new patterns of unmet need, which policy makers may be unaware of and their ability to identify needs only partially covered by existing services.

Reporting back to government may be more effective if there are several feedback channels. Networking with other NGO's is important here and the Social Policy Team in Comhairle is committed to optimising joint feedback on social policy issues to create more effective responses.

Independent information agencies have the potential to forge the link between private troubles and public issues but this potential has not been fully developed to date. Comhairle is committed to collaborating with other agencies, statutory, voluntary and community in optimising the ways the independent information sector feeds back into policy.

Back to Education Allowance

CICs around the country have been expressing concern at the change in rules governing the Back to Education Allowance and the lack of clarity around how the allowance will be handled at the end of the current academic year.

Up until now students received the allowance for the full duration of a qualifying course. How will the rule change impact on students? This is still unclear. When Comhairle first raised this issue with the DSFA the advice was that students are expected to be available for work over the summer months causing the payment to cease but that if students could 'prove that the work they undertake is integral to their college course' then they could receive 'a payment'.

We have also been informed that students can still sign on for Unemployment Assistance and Benefit and apply for Rent Supplement and that each case will be considered on an individual basis.

The whole issue is presently under consideration by the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Social and Family Affairs and hopefully the present confusion will be cleared in time for student's worries about their accommodation and financial circumstances over the summer months to be eased.

Mental Health

The Cinderella of the health service

In late 2002 Amnesty International organised a Roundtable Discussion inviting representatives from a host of interested agencies, including Comhairle, to discuss its planned advocacy campaign on the rights of people with mental illness in Ireland. A report now published entitled "Mental Illness – The Neglected Quarter" highlights the inadequacy of mental health services in Ireland. According to the World Health Organisation "one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives". Yet "stigma, discrimination and neglect still prevent care and treatment from reaching them". According to the Amnesty International report "Despite some progress, Irish mental health care provision is out of step with best practice worldwide and contravenes Principle 1(5) of the UN Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness".

Better funding, a comprehensive review of services, advocacy, public awareness campaigns and rights based legislation are just some of the recommendations of this disturbing report. Copies of the report are available from Amnesty International at (01) 677 6361.

“stigma, discrimination and neglect still prevent care and treatment from reaching them”

Integrating Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Meetings have been attended in the Reception and Integration Agency to plan a co-ordinated approach to the integration of refugees and asylum seekers at local level. Comhairle is also meeting with the agency to discuss the issues arising for refugees and asylum seekers in CICs and the Refugee Information Agency.

travellers must travel

Northside and Clondalkin Citizens Information Centres have highlighted the fact that travellers in parts of Dublin are obliged to make Supplementary Welfare claims at a special clinic in Castle Street in the city centre. Castle Street was opened in 1984 in response to the perceived problem of welfare fraud amongst the traveller population with no fixed abode and at a time when payment records were not computerised. Today Castle Street largely caters for settled travellers.

From the start a number of Traveller representatives deemed the service a negative development. A spokesperson for the Traveller support agency Pavee Point says the service differentiates between travellers on the basis of their accommodation status and contributes to tensions within the travelling community. The Travellers who called to the Northside and Clondalkin CICs voiced their dissatisfaction with the

current system and expressed their right to use their local Health Centre like everyone else.

Following discussion with Frank Mills of the Eastern Regional Health Authority and Pavee Point representative Lena Joyce, it was discovered that a now disbanded Working Group to review methods of service delivery for travellers and to fast track the closure of Castle Street and the roll out of services to local health centres was established in late 1999. However, according to the Working Group Chair, Frank Mills, the discussion became 'parked' with an industrial relations issue, following opposition from local Community Welfare Officers about increased workloads.

Currently a proposed funding package from the Department of Social and Family Affairs to include the recruitment of additional CWOs is under review and a decision on this is pending. Meanwhile our information is that some travellers are considering taking legal action under equality legislation as a means of asserting their right to avail of welfare services locally.

CIC Queries

The CIC Queries Annual Report for 2002 is now available from Comhairle

Persistence and the Freedom of Information Act pay off

For a long time Athlone Urban District Council's letting priorities for its local authority housing have been a matter of considerable interest to Athlone CIC. In February 1998 they first sought this information from the UDC. For two years Athlone CIC persisted with letters, phone calls and an FOI request. When these proved fruitless they approached the Office of the Freedom of

Information Commissioner and eventually the Department of Finance who have responsibility for ensuring that Local Authorities comply with the Freedom of Information Act. Finally they got their answer. Their action has cleared the ground for others seeking information from Local Authorities and shows how important the FOI Act is in securing citizens' rights to information.

“ the subject of care is everybody's business, as most people will find themselves in the role of carer at some stage in their lives ”

CIC Users, Living on the Margins

Michael Browne has begun a study in which he proposes to provide in-depth analysis of the experiences and concerns of selected users of CIC services, deemed to be living on the margins because of factors such as inadequate income, poor housing or inadequate access to services.

Working together more effectively

People working on policy with a number of national organisations have begun to meet informally to explore the possibilities of information sharing and joint work on policy issues. Organisations like Comhairle, the National Disability Authority, the Conference of Religious in Ireland, Vincent de Paul, Combat Poverty and the Community Development Support Programme were represented at the first meeting.

Putting Care on the Agenda

During February and March Comhairle generated public interest in care issues through a co-ordinated media campaign both locally and nationally. In association with a range of carers support groups, this campaign focussed on the findings and recommendations of the report, 'Supporting Carers.' The overriding message was that 'the subject of care is everybody's business, as most people will find themselves in the role of carer at some stage in their lives. Developing a long term, cohesive social policy that makes appropriate provision for the needs of carers into the future is in all our interests.' The Report has been presented to the members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs, which is reviewing the position of full-time carers as part of its work programme for 2002 – 2003.

Donegal CIS at the hub of new one-stop-shop service



Donegal Citizen Information Services and Comhairle are part of an exciting new departure which brings together information-provision and the delivery of public services in Donegal. 2002 witnessed the opening of a number of one-stop-shops or Integrated Services Centres in Milford, Dunloe, Carndonagh and Letterkenny.

Donegal Citizens Information Service is the key information provider in each Centre and will feedback on issues raised with the relevant agencies in an effort to improve and streamline services. Members of the Comhairle Social Policy Team attended a meeting in Letterkenny Integrated Services Centre to discuss a proposal to establish an Inter-agency Social Policy Committee

with a specific remit to compile and analyse social policy data from the integrated services project underway in Donegal. The meeting was also attended by representatives from a cross section of agencies active in the region including Comhairle's West North West regional team, the Donegal CIS, the Community Development Support Programme, the County Development Board, the North Western Health Board and Meitheal Forbartha na Gaeltachta.

It was widely agreed that the sharing of information that can take place through inter-agency work can prove to be extremely valuable in gaining access to information as well as influence over decision making structures.

Income Maintenance

Comhairle has made a submission to the Review of Income Maintenance Payments for People who are ill and People with Disabilities to the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The submission deals with; income support, simplification, comprehensiveness and consistency, support to work, poverty, social exclusion and alternative approaches.

Entitlements for the Over Sixties

Issues Arising from Queries to Comhairle Information Staff

During the period October to December 2002 some 300 queries were received by Comhairle information staff from individuals, following the publication and circulation of the current edition of Entitlements for the Over Sixties. Of these, approximately 30% were from people seeking clarification about rights and entitlements referred to in the information booklet.

A short report describes the issues which arose. These issues are set out

“ issues arise where the entitlement is arbitrary or unclear ”

under five headings. Access to Information, Housing, Transport and Access, Inadequate Income and Delays in Processing Claims.

The main lessons from drawing up this report from the queries were:

The importance of person-to-person information to supplement written material.

That issues arise where the entitlement is arbitrary or unclear, i.e. it is at the discretion of statutory officials or dependent on budgets or dependent on the particular Health Board area where one lives.

That despite the many initiatives geared towards the provision of comprehensive information, some older people and their carers continue to be unaware of all of their entitlements.

The report has been brought to the attention of Jimmy Duggan in the Department of Health and Children and he has tabled it for discussion at the Interdepartmental Group on Services for Older People.

Waiting too long?

Prompted by a number of queries from CICs relating to the protracted wait times on telephone calls to particular sections of the DSFA Comhairle issued a 'Social Policy Alert' to all CICs requesting that they document their experience in this area. 15 CICs responded. 8 of these sent detailed reports of waiting times and voiced their frustrations on a number of fronts: waiting times of between 10 and 30 minutes for a reply, being cut off, personnel lacking the expertise to handle the queries posed and the cost of long delays being reflected in CIC telephone bills. The longest delays were experienced with Child Benefit, One Parent Family Payments, Disability Benefit and the Treatment Benefits sections.

The Comhairle Social Policy Team have been in contact with the DSFA and forwarded evidence from CICs to a senior member of the department's Corporate Services Division. The DSFA indicated their awareness of the problems, which they say are mainly the result of queries being channelled through what are essentially call centres designed to divert calls away from personnel who are processing claims, thus freeing them up to deal with backlogs in the system.

We have received assurances that the concerns outlined will be raised at the monthly meeting with the department's customer liaison officers. We are awaiting a more comprehensive reply on this matter. Meanwhile, let us know if you experience any improvement in the service.

The Comhairle Development and Social Policy Team



Helen Lahert
– Manager
Development
and Social Policy

Helen Lahert originally trained in Horticulture and worked for many years in Agricultural research. She moved to the community and voluntary sector in 1995 and has worked in Community Arts, in the Parents Alone Resource Centre and as co-ordinator of the National Committee on Volunteering before joining Comhairle in August 2002.



Mairide Woods
–Advocacy Executive
Mairide Woods worked in teaching, writing, research and the home

before joining Comhairle in 2001. Her research work involved disability, education and asylum issues. She was an Information Executive before becoming Comhairle's first Advocacy Executive



Catherine Brennan
–Social Policy
Executive

Catherine Brennan worked in the financial services sector before returning to college to complete a degree in Sociology. She went on to work in the Department of Social Studies in Trinity College Dublin as a Research Associate in 1997. She has undertaken commissioned research work on the role of the voluntary sector in policy formulation, urban regeneration initiatives and structures for local governance. Catherine joined Comhairle in September 2002



Michael Browne
–Research Consultant
Michael Browne works as a research consultant with

Comhairle. He is author of a number of research and social policy reports on a range of topics, including service co-ordination at local level, welfare rights, Community Employment, citizens' information, older people' issues and the policy feedback process. He has been involved in the preparation of numerous social policy reports and submissions for both the National Social Service Board and Comhairle.

A limited number of small social policy grants are available. To apply contact Catherine Brennan at (01) 605 9003 or e-mail: catherine.brennan@comhairle.ie