

Comhairle is the national agency responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice and advocacy to the public on the broad range of social and civil services. Comhairle provides the Oasis website and is the support agency for the network of Citizens Information Centres and Citizens Information Phone Service. Comhairle also supports the development of advocacy services for individuals, particularly those with a disability.

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Credit Union matters

A number of CICs have recently brought to our attention an issue relating to the nomination of next of kin on the application form completed by new members opening a credit union account. Where an individual(s) is nominated s/he will receive the proceeds of the members credit union account on death, which can include shares, loans, deposits and an insurance payment. In the event of death and where a valid Nomination Form has been completed the proceeds of the account up to a maximum of €13,000 go to the nominee(s) on the form and do not form part of the estate of the deceased.

The cases highlighted suggest that members do not seem to be aware of the consequences attaching to nominating a person or persons as next of kin when opening a Credit Union account.

The ILCU are planning to undertake a review of the nomination form later this year taking into account the issues raised by CICs.

Keep an eye out!

Social policy work is about bringing issues to the attention of public policy makers and those who have responsibility for the administration of services. Based on the social policy records recently received from Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service Comhairle is working on a number of discussion papers and reports to government

These include:

- Housing issues for people with disabilities
- The FIS and other income support mechanisms
- Higher / Further Education Supports

We would be grateful if information workers could keep a particularly close eye on the experience of service users in these areas over the coming months. Social Policy Reports can be sent to Comhairle in hard copy form or as an email attachment. Please also feel free to telephone a member of the Development and Social Policy team if you would like to discuss an issue of concern.

Comhairle submission to the NESF on the delivery of quality public services

In this submission Comhairle outlined the key factors that need to be considered in the delivery of quality public services:

1. Accessible and integrated information
2. Mainstreaming of services to ensure easy access for all
3. A need to fully implement stated policy on community care
4. Acknowledge and support the contribution made by family carers to the Exchequer and society in general

5. Acknowledge and adequately support the contribution of the Community and Voluntary Sector to the mixed economy of welfare provision
6. Promote accessible public services for those whose access has been impaired by physical, psychological, educational, linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, geographical or technological factors.

Full text of all submissions made by Comhairle are available on www.comhairle.ie/social/social_submissions.html

Voice

Influencing Social Policy

IN THIS ISSUE

- Exploring grandparents' rights in Ireland
- Enforcement a significant issue says employment rights report
- Proposed reform of One Parent Family Payment
- CIC policy feedback success
- DSFA project to consider benefit take-up
- CIC Social Policy Returns 2005
- Submission on Immigration and Residence Bill
- Credit Union matters
- Keep an eye out!
- Comhairle submission to the NESF on the delivery of quality public services

Exploring grandparents' rights in Ireland

"Supporting Grandparents Caring for their Grandchildren" is a Comhairle Social Policy Report, which explores the position of grandparents who find themselves in the role of full time carers to their grandchildren. This situation can arise for a number of reasons such as the death of one or both parents, parental drug addiction, alcohol abuse, domestic violence or abandonment. The report considers the rights of grandparents under the general headings of financial assistance, access and custody.

The report, which draws on feedback from the network of

Citizens' Information Centres countrywide and other related services, highlights the gap in financial support available to grandparents who have effective but not legal custody of their grandchildren. A key recommendation of the report is that grandparents should be entitled to claim the equivalent of the Fostering Allowance. Grandparents caring full time for grandchildren are entitled to claim the Orphan's Allowance. However, currently there is a disparity of €194 per week between the Orphan's Allowance and the Fostering Allowance for a child over 12 years.

The report also highlights the problem of grandparents gaining access to grandchildren in the event of marital breakdown or separation. This is a particular problem for paternal grandparents. The Children Act 1997 provides that relatives may apply for access to a child but the Act does not confer any right of access. Custodial rights, which enable grandparents to control a child's day-to-day upbringing, are granted only in the case of adoption or where a grandparent is appointed as the child's legal guardian. However, this requires the consent of both parents and can be difficult to acquire. The full report is available on www.comhairle.ie



Helen Lahert, Comhairle, Philip Keegan, Family Support Network, Tony McQuinn, Comhairle and report author Francesca Lundstrom

Enforcement a significant issue says employment rights report

This forthcoming Comhairle Social Policy Report draws on the casework compiled by the network of Citizens' Information Centres and the Citizens' Information Phone Service. CICs dealt with over 700,000 queries from the public in 2005. A recent Survey of Citizens Information Centres found that 11 per cent of queries handled relate to employment rights coming third after social welfare and health queries.

The cases outlined in the report indicate a major gap between the protections outlined in legislation and the ability of employees to enforce their statutory employment rights. Problems behind the lack of enforcement are varied but are attributed mainly to a lack of resources (particularly in the area of workplace inspection), complexity of procedures, insufficient information on the part of employers and employees and the need for increased protection for employees

(particularly those with less than 1 year's service) seeking to enforce rights.

The report refers also to the low level of prosecutions secured by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment. It found that under the entire range of employment legislation in 2001 only 17 cases were successfully prosecuted. The figure for 2002 was 21 cases. The number of Labour Inspectors rose to 31 in October 2005 but this is unlikely to meet the demand for adequate enforcement measures. A significant increase in the number of Labour Inspectors is proposed as part of current partnership talks.

The forthcoming report also highlights the diverse range of agencies responsible for enforcement measures, which can lead to confusion for employees. A key recommendation of the report is that a single point of contact be set up for the Labour Court, the Rights Commissioner Service and all other services of the Labour Relations Commission and the Employment Appeals Tribunal.

Proposed reform of One-Parent Family Payment

The Minister for Social and Family Affairs has recently launched a discussion paper proposing a raft of radical changes to income supports for lone parents. An overview of the proposals can be found on www.welfare.ie/publications/prop_lp.pdf

One of the main proposals being put forward is to abolish the One Parent Family Payment and replace it with a new Parental Allowance (PA) to be paid at the same rate. All parents on low income regardless of whether they live alone, with a partner or are married could claim the PA. The main difference being proposed is that the Parental Allowance would cease at a much earlier age – the current proposal is when the youngest child is eight years.

Currently a OPFP claim continues to be paid until the youngest child is 18 (22 if in full time education). The discussion paper also proposes that where a lone parent moves in with a partner, also in receipt of social welfare, the couple will not receive any less payment than they would if living apart.

Support agencies working in this area have welcomed the Ministers willingness to engage in a process of consultation on the proposals. However, they are anxious to ensure that welfare to work strategies are adequately supported by education, training and childcare supports and do not wish to see one parent families forced into working full time regardless of childcare responsibilities.

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CIC Policy feedback success on Scheme of Community Support for Older People

A number of the recommendations contained in the recent Comhairle report on the Scheme of Community Support for Older People have been wholly or partially adopted in the 2006 Scheme. This report which was based on CIC social policy returns clearly highlights the positive outcomes

that can emanate from CIC policy feedback work. Announcing details of the scheme for 2006 on May 3rd the Minister of State Noel Ahern at the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs specifically mentioned Comhairle in his acknowledgement of policy feedback on the administration of the scheme. In particular, flexibility has been introduced in the timescale for applying for the grant and provision has been made for a subvention towards administration costs.

DSFA project to consider benefit take-up

The Department of Social and Family Affairs is conducting a research project to consider the issue of benefit take up in Ireland. The research currently underway is being undertaken as a project for the DSFA and also as part fulfillment of an M. Econ. Sc. in Policy Analysis at the Institute of Public Administration. Broadly, the project is examining the following three areas:

1. Benefit take-up levels in Ireland
2. The factors, which may deter eligible people from claiming their entitlements
3. Actions to maximise take-up.

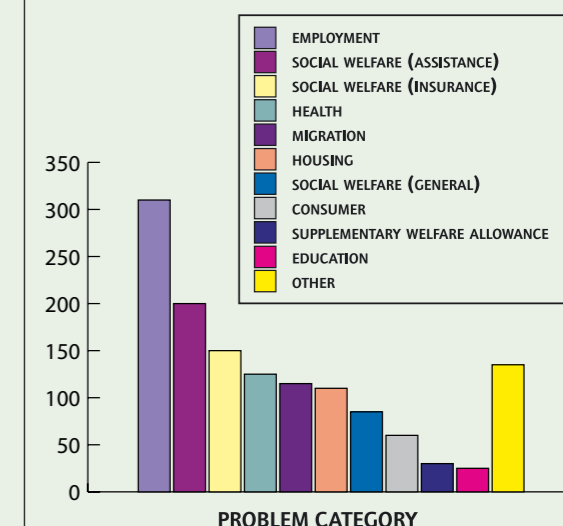
To assist with this project, Comhairle agreed to circulate on behalf of the Department a short questionnaire to all CICs requesting that information providers complete the questionnaire for any client who presents as eligible but has failed to make a claim for benefit to which s/he is reasonably entitled. We look forward to seeing the results of this study and thank you for your cooperation in making it possible.

CIC Social Policy Returns for 2005

In 2005 employment issues continued to dominate as the single category with the largest percentage of queries to CICs having social policy implications. A significant portion of the issues relate to employers non-compliance with employment rights legislation and an inability on the part of employees to enforce these rights. Unfair dismissal, holiday rights/holiday pay, hours of work, non-payment of wages, illegal contracts and lack of documentation are just some of the issues raised serving to further illustrate the need for effective enforcement mechanisms to combat the problem of exploitation and discrimination in the workplace.

Other categories causing concern for service users include social welfare assistance and insurance related issues. Problems include the inadequacy of the fuel allowance, delays in processing applications - in particular the one parent family payment and disincentives to work in the system such as loss of the rent supplement and secondary benefits serving to maintain people in poverty and unemployment traps.

Social Policy Records 2005 by Problem Category



Other category includes records on Family Issues, Taxation and Driving/Transport

All Social Policy Quarterly Reports for 2005 documenting actual case studies received from CICs are available to download on www.comhairle.ie.

Submission on Immigration and Residence Bill scores policy reform on Spousal Work Permits

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment have implemented one of the recommendations of a Comhairle submission from July 2005 on Immigration and Residence in Ireland.

The DETE has recently announced an expansion of the Spousal Work Permits Scheme thereby giving greater ease of access to employment for eligible spouses under specified schemes and facilities.

Working on the basis of CIC/CIS casework Comhairle in its submission highlighted the lack of provision for the right of spouses of legal immigrants to work here as a barrier to family reunification and called for this restriction to be reviewed.

For more details regarding the new spousal work permit arrangements log on to the DETE website www.entemp.ie.