

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'

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From Information to Redress - Comhairle Launches Employment Rights Social Policy Report



Chris Glennon, Comhairle Chair, Leonie Lunny, Chief Executive Comhairle, Michael Browne (report author), and Eileen Fitzgerald, Regional Manager.

Representatives of the Citizens Information Service, ICTU, IBEC, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the media attended the recent launch of the Comhairle Employment Rights Social Policy Report.

The report which refers mostly to the low paid, those working for smaller employers and migrant

workers received considerable press attention. Citizens Information Services dealt with more than 90,000 employment rights queries in 2005. 11% of all queries nationally relate to employment rights. The experiences of workers were highlighted very effectively at the launch through input from Richard Regan (Roscommon CIS Development Manager), Cathy O'Donoghue

(Louth CIS Development Manager) and Angela Morrissey (Newbridge CIC Information Officer) who hear daily accounts from employees who fear dismissal if they attempt to assert their workplace rights.

Areas of concern include; failure to pay the minimum wage, holiday entitlements, confusion as to the rights of part time employees, abuses of the work permit system, illegal deductions from wages and difficulties accessing documentation such as terms and conditions of employment, P60s and P45s from employers.

The need for better employment rights enforcement mechanisms is a key recommendation. The report endorses the proposal to establish a single point of contact for all employment rights bodies. Copies of the report and summary are available on request from Comhairle and can be downloaded from www.comhairle.ie.

Pathways to Information and Services for Foreign Nationals

Comhairle is undertaking research aimed at documenting and evaluating the pathways to information and social services for foreign nationals. Factors, which either assist or hinder this process from the user perspective, will be considered. The study will seek to ascertain the information needs of selected categories of foreign nationals, the barriers to accessing information and the role of statutory and non-statutory agencies in facilitating information provision.

A consultation meeting with a number of NGOs engaged in information provision to foreign nationals (including Immigrant Council of Ireland, MRCl, NCCRI, Refugee Information Service and Emigrant Advice) and representatives of the CIS network took place on 26th September. The meeting discussed how the Comhairle study could be targeted in order to capture the actual day-to-day experiences of foreign nationals trying to access information and services, and target those most disadvantaged. The various initiatives being undertaken by Citizens Information Services around the country to respond to the information needs of foreign nationals will be reflected in the research.

Towards 2016 & Social Policy Issues

A number of the social policy issues consistently raised by CISs are reflected in the Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016*. Employment rights and

enforcement mechanisms received considerable attention in negotiations and Part Two, Section VII of the agreement on *Employment Rights and Compliance* contains a number of commitments in this area. There is a commitment to the establishment of a new statutory Office of the Director for Employment Rights Compliance and to progressively increase the number of Labour Inspectors to 90 by end of 2007.

The agreement outlines a number of priority actions in relation to carers, including a commitment 'to expanding the income limits for the Carer's Allowance so that all those on average industrial earnings can qualify'. The development of a National Carers' Strategy by the end of 2007 is also marked out as a priority for action. This was a specific recommendation of the Comhairle *Supporting Carers Social Policy Report*, which formed the basis for an oral presentation made by Comhairle to the *Joint Oireachtas Committee on The Position of Full Time Carers. Towards 2016*, which will be subject to a formal review in 2008, is available to download from www.taoiseach.gov.ie.

Social Policy Work Tool Kit Project Planned

A project is being initiated within Comhairle to devise a Social Policy Resource Pack/Tool Kit for use by frontline staff and volunteers of the Citizens Information Service. The primary aim of the project will be to assist CISs to develop social policy casework material by providing generic and topic specific aids. It is envisaged that the Tool Kit will also have a section dedicated to local social policy work and will outline proposals for action in this area. Relevant social policy resource material generated by other organisations will also be considered in the context of this project.

It is hoped that this exercise will help us to identify resource and training gaps, develop processes for the management of social policy returns and provide support to CISs in promoting an ethos of social policy work within their organisation.

The project would greatly benefit from the advice and input of representatives of the network of Citizen Information Services and in this regard we would like to hear from anyone interested in participating in a project steering group. For additional information on this please email Catherine.brennan@comhairle.ie.

Comhairle Pre-Budget Consultative Forum & Submission 2007



Attending the Comhairle Pre-Budget Consultative Forum were; Standing: Caitriona Ryan, Breda Gormally, Martina Cronin, Anne McCloskey, GERALYN McGARRY, Teresa Kelly and Andrew McCann. Seated: Michael Browne, Sinead Hyland and Stella O'Brien

As part of the evidence gathering process for Comhairle's 2007 Pre-Budget Submission, Citizen Information Services were invited to attend a Pre-Budget Forum. The aim of the forum was to identify the key issues highlighted in social policy returns over the past 12 months. These issues also set priorities for future social policy reports, research and submissions prepared by Comhairle. The Forum was well attended with a good countrywide representation.

Participants were asked to identify from query records the top three issues coming through their CIC currently and provide case examples. A diverse range of cross cutting policy issues concerning services, rights and resources were presented. Social welfare matters concerning low income families featured prominently in the discussion. Multiple means testing was reported as a problem for people attempting to access different benefits. Problems to do with the administration of schemes and related communication problems featured consistently. These included delays in the processing of claims, protracted wait times when trying to contact statutory services by phone, application forms being lost or mislaid and people not being told of their right to have a matter dealt with privately. Resource issues such as the shortage of Occupational Therapists in the system contributing to long waiting lists and significant service blockages particularly for people with disabilities also featured.

Many of the queries to CISs and the Citizens Information Phone Service focus attention on the complex difficulties faced by low income families.

The Comhairle Pre-Budget Submission 2007 addressed income and service issues as they impact on low income families with children, people with disabilities and older people in low income households. Key policy considerations relating to the experience of low income families in terms of equality of access to income and social services are identified and link in with policy recommendations in *Towards 2016*.

Recommendations included the need for targeted child income supports, FIS improvements, addressing welfare to work traps, community care services (including home care packages), cost of disability payment for people with significant disabilities, payments to full time carers and housing issues in relation to social housing provision, rent supplement and the exclusion of low income earners from support.

Particular thanks goes to centres who participated in the Pre Budget Forum and who made submissions as well as those centres making social policy returns on an on-going basis which provide the material for submissions and social policy reports. The submission has gone into a number of Government Departments. It is also available on the Comhairle website www.comhairle.ie.

Quarterly Social Policy Reports

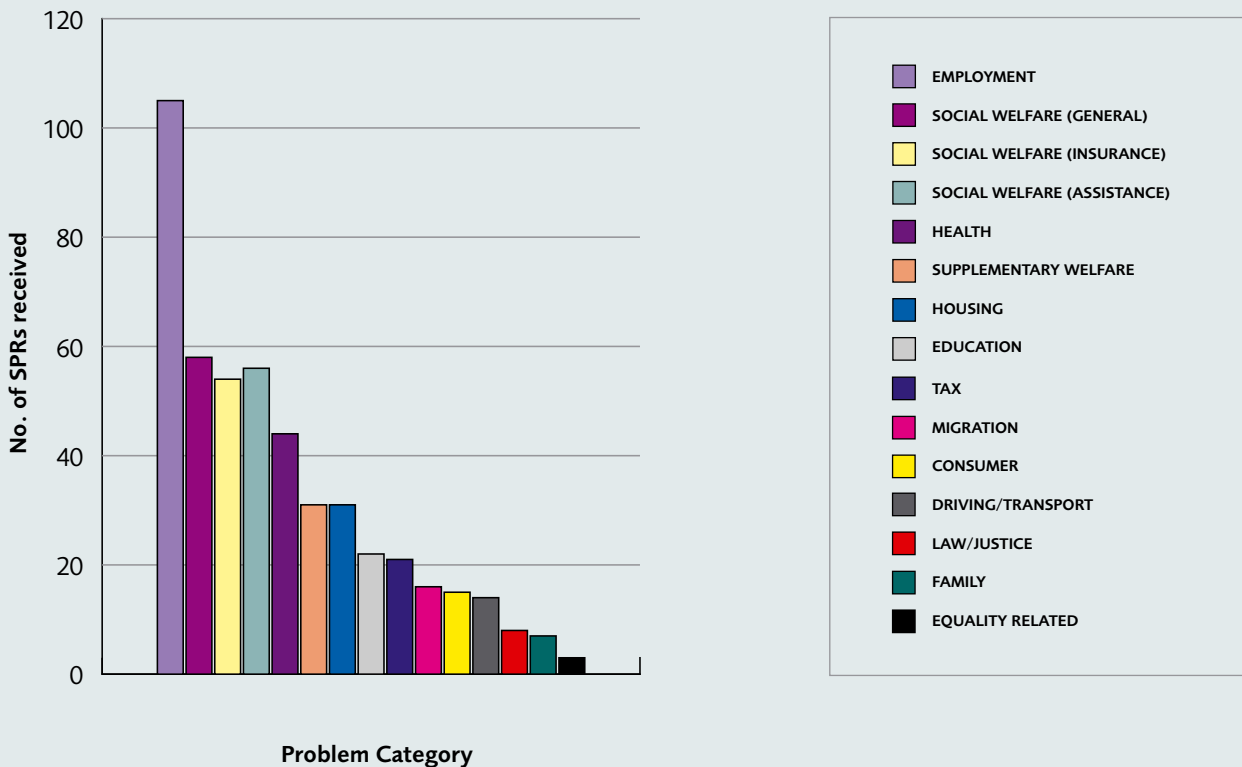
Quarterly reports for the periods April to June and July to September 2006 have been completed and are now available on the Comhairle website www.comhairle.ie. The quarterly reports record and analyse the social policy casework completed by Information Providers throughout the CIS network. The level of social policy returns received from Citizen Information Services in the third quarter of 2006 increased to 482 up 37% on the second quarter when we received 352 social policy records.

Employment rights issues (subject of a recent Comhairle report) continue to dominate the returns closely followed by matters relating to social welfare benefits and entitlements. Overall, the issues identified in the quarterly reports can be categorised in terms of service availability/income supports; administration/communication difficulties; and information deficits.

The varying practice of some local authorities taking FIS into account when assessing differential rent continues to arise. Also reported are the earnings limits for secondary benefits which have not been raised for some time. Returns also suggest that the different earnings disregards for the OPFP and the Rent Supplement create a disincentive to work for lone parents who must factor in the combined costs of childcare and accommodation to their decision to return to work.

Administrative problems and information deficits are documented in relation to the Household Benefits Package and the Living Alone Allowance. People are either unaware of their entitlement to these payments or experience difficulties getting payments transferred to their name in the event of the death of a spouse/partner. The practice of refusing the Living Alone Allowance to those in receipt of an overseas pension is highlighted. The payment period - 29 weeks - under the National Fuel Scheme is regarded as being too short.

Social Policy Records Received by Category: July - September 2006



Housing and Accommodation Needs of People with Disabilities Study

A joint Comhairle and Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) study to explore the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities attempting to access appropriate accommodation is currently underway.

The following areas will be covered in the study:

- Information on housing options and supports for people with different types of disabilities;
- Availability of local authority, social and affordable housing to people with disabilities;
- Availability of sheltered and supported accommodation;
- Access to home ownership;
- Physical access to accommodation;
- Emergency/temporary accommodation;
- Access to grants (including Disabled Persons Grant, Essential Repairs Grant, Special Housing Aid and socially monitored alarms);
- Access to private rented sector (including rent assistance);
- Moving from residential/institutional/sheltered settings to independent living;
- Supports for independent living (including personal assistants, supplements and home care).

Comhairle issued a **Social Policy Alert** on 6th December 2006 asking CIC information workers to pay particular attention to this policy area and to forward all relevant social policy records. Please contact Michael Browne at Comhairle for any additional information required; michael.browne@comhairle.ie.

Administration and Communication Issues - Barriers to Services

Social policy returns from CISs consistently document administrative and communication issues that arise for service users attempting to assert their rights in relation to entitlements and benefits from government departments and agencies. Problems with the integration and co-ordination of local service delivery are evident from the casework feedback. The problems identified can result in difficulties and sometimes considerable hardship for the user of a service. Comhairle plans to undertake a social policy report that will focus on case evidence of barriers to services. These problems can be categorised under the following headings:

- Information deficits leading to loss of services and benefits
- Policy and procedural practices that have unintended consequences for clients
- Approach of frontline staff
- Delays in processing claims and dealing with requests for information
- Poor access to services for vulnerable groups (i.e. people with disabilities, older people)
- The challenge of dealing with cultural diversity
- Lack of transparency in the complaints and appeals process
- Regional variation in discretionary services

The aim of the study will be to document the feedback reported by CICs and to propose practical measures for change. Centres are asked to pay particular attention to the areas listed above over the coming months documenting any relevant cases. Social policy reports can be sent to Comhairle in hard copy form or as an email attachment.

Combat Poverty Agency produces Policy Resource Publications

As part of its **Having Your Say** three year anti-poverty programme the Combat Poverty Agency has produced an online **Policy Resource Pack**, which sets out an action plan for policy work using a step-by-step guide. The online Policy Resource Pack is designed to support and enhance the policy skills of those experiencing poverty as well as the organisations advocating on their behalf. The resource pack, which covers areas such as 'how to do policy analysis', 'how to identify your policy audience' and 'how to write a policy submission', can be downloaded from the following web address www.cpa.ie/havingyoursay.

A further resource *Finding Your Way* is a series of four guides being published under the *Having Your Say* programme and focuses on practical tools to support the community and voluntary sector understand, analyse and influence policy in a number of areas. These include Local Government (now available), the Budget process in Ireland and Northern Ireland, Social Welfare and Family Policy and Health. The guides are being published in partnership with Comhairle and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. Copies of these guides will be made available to CISs through Comhairle.

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 www.citizensinformation.ie 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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Cavan Social Policy Network Seminar

A Comhairle social policy grant to Co Cavan CIS helped fund research to determine the level and extent of social policy activity in the county. A social policy network of statutory and non statutory agencies was set-up and following completion of the research report there is now a plan to establish a pilot project to explore a model for recording social policy issues within the local agencies involved.



Members of the Cavan Social Policy Network (L-R); Marian Duffy, Ita Madden, Joe Byrne, Dr. Emer Coveney and Cecelia Smith.

To get the project underway the network held a seminar on 15th November to raise awareness of social policy work and the benefits of putting in place policy feedback mechanisms. Catherine Brennan from Comhairle made a presentation to representatives of the various agencies engaged in the process to highlight the benefits of gathering 'evidence based' policy feedback. A pilot project to record social policy casework will get underway in the region.

Disputed Tenancy – Local Policy Casework from Crumlin CIS

The case below submitted by Crumlin CIS illustrates the persistent problems that arise for tenants in the private rented sector and the difficulties encountered by tenants seeking to enforce their rights.

A tenant receiving rent supplement approached the centre to take a case to the Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB) concerning an inadequate and invalid notice to quit (this was officially established at the subsequent hearing). Despite the referral of the case to the PRTB and awaiting their ruling on the status of the tenancy, the rent supplement was withdrawn because the landlord informed the CWO that the tenancy had been terminated.

Our appeal to the Superintendent CWO failed because he took the legitimate view that rent supplement could only be paid where a bona fide tenancy agreement existed. However this decision was made on the basis that the landlord's position was correct (until proven otherwise) and no account was taken of the fact that the matter was to be decided by the PRTB.

The problem for the tenant was that she had no way to pay the full rent from her own resources (sole income OPFP) and fell into arrears of two month's rent (€2,200).

The PRTB ruled in favour of the client and she was allowed to remain in her accommodation until the expiration of a newly issued valid notice period. Her rent supplement was restored and backdated to cover the disputed period.

CWOs should be allowed to continue to pay a rent supplement in situations where the question as to whether a bona fide tenancy exists is in the process of being decided by the PRTB. Since a tenant cannot be evicted once a case has been referred to the PRTB for resolution it is reasonable that rent (including rent supplement) should continue to be paid to the landlord for the period it takes the PRTB to make a ruling.

In recent times this centre has dealt with multiple queries (from both landlords and tenants) that, if duplicated nationally, would indicate a high degree of non-compliance by landlords with the new provisions of the Residential Tenancy Act 2004, particularly Part 4 (security of tenure) and Part 5, sections 62 and 66 (concerning valid notice and the required periods of such notice).