

Barriers to Benefit Take-Up in Ireland

In the previous edition of *Voice* we reported that the Department of Social and Family Affairs were undertaking a small-scale study* of benefit take-up levels in Ireland that would specifically focus on factors which deter eligible people from claiming their entitlements. A number of Citizens Information Services in 2006 participated in a survey by recording details of clients who present as eligible but have failed to make a claim for benefit to which they are reasonably entitled. In all a total of 150 responses were received from 21 CICs – eighteen of which were located in Dublin. Information providers completed the survey questionnaires on behalf of CIC clients to preserve confidentiality in the report entitled *Understanding Barriers to Benefit Take-Up in Ireland (2006)*.

The highest proportion of respondents (40.7%) was aged between 25 – 44 years. Those aged between 45 – 64 years accounted for 22.1% and 29% of respondents were aged over 65 years. The difference in gender breakdown was noted with the majority of respondents being female (63.6%). A majority of respondents were already getting a social welfare payment showing that many welfare recipients are unaware that they may be eligible for additional payments. This lack of awareness of additional payments was particularly

prevalent amongst recipients of the One Parent Family Payment (26.2%) and the State Pension Contributory and Non-Contributory (19%). Those in receipt of Disability Allowance and Illness Benefit accounted for 11.9% of eligible non-recipients of additional payments. The reasons for not claiming benefits were pre-coded on the questionnaire and show that 37.9% were unaware of the existence of the payment while 34.5% state that they were aware of the payment but did not think that they would be eligible. A further 4.1% thought that they would automatically receive the payment if deemed eligible for it.

The researcher was interested to find out why respondents did not approach the Department with a query about a social welfare payment opting instead to contact the CIC. 19.5% of respondents stated that they did not know which Department to contact while 7.4% stated that they had contacted the Department but were dissatisfied with the response they received. Significantly 15.4% cited fear of being made to feel they were looking for charity as the reason for not claiming an additional payment. A majority of the CIC respondents (57%) identified visiting a CIC as their preferred method of finding out about entitlements. These were already existing CIC service users. If anyone is interested in getting a copy of this report please contact the report author Dearbhail Nic Giolla Mhicil at the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Áras Mhic Dhiarmada, Store Street, Dublin 1. Tel. (01) 8748444.

* *Policy Analysis Masters Dissertation Study.*

Responding to Homelessness – Local Policy Casework from Co. Donegal CIS

This case submitted by Donegal CIS (Donegal Town CIC) highlights the negative impact that administrative procedures and practice can have on homeless people attempting to access temporary B&B accommodation.

A man came to the Centre and advised us that he had separated from his wife and was homeless. He had presented to the County Council and they had offered him two nights B&B accommodation. However, he was having difficulty accessing a B&B that would accept him on the basis that the Council were paying for the accommodation.

The Centre telephoned a local B&B and made a booking on behalf of the man. However, they were not very comfortable with the arrangement and stated that they did not normally get involved with this type of booking. The Centre also contacted the Council Housing Section about their policy in this regard. The current policy seems to be that the Council are happy to confirm that they will pay for the accommodation if the B&B telephones them but they will not give any written confirmation to the client. This leaves the client in the position where they have to persuade the B&B owner to telephone the Council. We believe that the current

system puts an already vulnerable client in a very difficult position. As soon as they present at a B&B and state that the Council are paying for their accommodation, assumptions are made about them. In this particular case, the man had stayed at the B&B the night before and paid for it himself. Why then was he told that he could not stay there another night at the Council's expense?

Coherent policies are needed to assist those who present as homeless to the Local Authority to facilitate easy access to temporary accommodation.

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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CIB Quarterly Social Policy Report

The Citizens Information Board received a total of 447 social policy returns from the network of Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service in the final quarter of 2006 and 314 in the first quarter of 2007. Social policy feedback based on people's actual experience of state welfare benefits; services and supports can help to highlight gaps and inadequacies in the system. Overall the social policy returns in 2006 were up almost 14% on the returns for 2005 (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1: Comparative Social Policy Returns 2005-2006

The trends identified in the quarterly reports are consistent with previous results, which show that the combined social welfare categories (general, insurance, assistance and supplementary welfare) continue to represent the largest category of social policy returns received. The number of employment returns is up on the previous quarter amounting to almost 25% of the social policy records received in quarter four. The health and housing categories respectively account for 8% and 7% of the total. See Figure 2 below.

The social policy records received in these various categories enable the Citizens Information Board to identify areas where existing state services and supports are failing to meet people's needs. In the area of income support, for example, the additional costs associated with disability and chronic illness continues to be highlighted in social policy records. Items such as drugs, treatment, aids, appliances and transport

are a significant added expenditure for people with a disability and can result in people experiencing a lower standard of living. The rent cap, which is regionally determined by the HSE, is continuing to cause problems for people who have difficulty sourcing accommodation within the rent levels set. Backlogs in the claims administration system are affecting Child Benefit payments in particular where decisions were taking up to several months or more to be processed. The problem of people not being made aware of their entitlement to additional benefits such as the Household Benefits Package or employment supports such as the Revenue Job Assist tax allowances is an ongoing one. Gaps in coverage also continue to arise such as the absence of adequate rural transport for people who are entitled to, but cannot make use of the Free Travel pass.

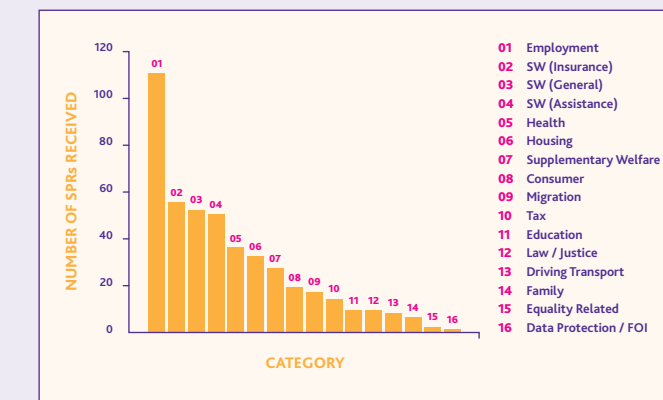


Figure 2: Social Policy Records received by category October to December 2006

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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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Housing and Accommodation for People with Disabilities

A study undertaken by the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and the Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) to examine the housing and accommodation needs of people with disabilities is nearing completion. The study, prompted by reports from Citizens Information Services and DFI member organisations, focuses on the actual experience of people with disabilities seeking appropriate accommodation. The research also explores the supports necessary for independent living.

Postal questionnaires were circulated to DFI member organisations, Citizens Information Services and CIB funded Advocacy Projects around the country. Feedback from the Advocacy Projects identify housing issues as a significant element of the work of advocates.

Informed by the questionnaire findings, focus groups were organised at five locations around the country in March/April. Two focus group meetings were convened in Dublin, with further meetings taking place in Limerick, Kerry and Sligo. In all 65 people from a cross section of disability organisations including staff, service users and members, participated.

Findings from the focus group discussions highlight the scarcity of accessible accommodation for people with disabilities and confirm that some people are forced to live in inappropriate accommodation. Inadequate current provision for housing needs assessment, poor joint working between local health and housing authorities and insufficient supports for independent living are key issues emerging. The expected date for completion of the study is August 2007. It is hoped that the findings will inform the development of the proposed housing strategy for people with disabilities.

Transfer of HSE Income Supports to DSFA

The Citizens Information Board made a submission in May 2007 in relation to the Core Functions Programme established to implement the transfer of Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA), the 'safety net' payment and certain payments for people with disabilities from the HSE to the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The overlap in responsibility between the two departments has long been seen as complicating the delivery of this service and an inefficient use of resources¹.

The Citizens Information Board (formerly Comhairle) has argued for some time that income support payments should be the responsibility of the Department of Social and Family Affairs and welcomes the planned transfer. However, the submission notes that 'the transfer will only be effective if the recommendations of the Working Group on the Review of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme are implemented as part of the programme'. The CIB Submission mainly focuses on two areas; the operation and role of the Community Welfare Officer service and related payments, and issues relating to the provision of transport and access to services for people with disabilities.

The submission includes reference to and case examples of the issues consistently identified by CISs in relation to the operation of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance. These include duplication of means testing, a lack of uniform eligibility criteria and a lack of transparency about

entitlements. The CIB believes that transfer of SWA to the DSFA should provide for more consistent means testing and a more uniform approach to information provision and eligibility criteria. The submission also highlights a number of issues identified in earlier research commissioned by Comhairle, *Pathways to Information: Developing an Integrated Approach at Local Level (2000)*. This report which gives a user perspective on accessing social services documents problems with the operation of SWA including short and varying opening hours, inaccessible premises, unmarked entry points to buildings and absence of information on other schemes. Other matters that frustrated service users were repeated requests for identification and unnecessary visits between other services such as Social Welfare and FÁS.

The CIB submission proposes that the transfer of SWA provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the potential role of the CWO service in the context of a broader government commitment to develop integrated information and service delivery models that are community based. The case management approach recommended by the SWA Review Group needs to be adequately resourced and should contain an element of needs assessment.

In relation to transport and access to services, the submission calls for a more comprehensive package of transport/mobility measures than is currently available to people with disabilities. It proposes a direct payment based on an individual needs assessment, which could include the current free travel scheme, an alternative mobility cash payment and a revamped scheme of tax relief for private car users.

¹ See for example the *Value for Money Examination by the Comptroller and Auditor General (1998)*.

CIB Social Policy Grants Scheme

Tallaght CIS awarded Social Policy Grant

In January of this year the Citizens Information Board awarded Tallaght CIS a social policy grant. The grant, which is supported by CIB Regional Services, will fund a comparative analysis of Tallaght CIS's query returns to identify trends, map emerging information needs and identify social policy issues emerging from query trends. Tallaght has been compiling and analysing query data since 2003. During the period since then the data captured has enabled the CIS to engage in joint working initiatives with other organisations and groups operating locally. For example in 2006 Tallaght CIS generated a short report entitled *What Tallaght Didn't Know*. The findings of this report offer a good indication of the information needs of the population of Tallaght across a range of query categories. The aim of this current research is to build upon this process by engaging in a more thorough analysis of the data captured by Tallaght CIS in the four year period since 2003. The query trends over time will be assessed and the reasons behind any variation in the data recorded will be explored. This will enable the service to build a comprehensive picture of the information gaps that exist in the area and also to highlight the social policy

issues emerging from these queries. The research findings will be shared with local statutory and non-statutory organisations and service providers who are in a position to benefit from the information generated. It is hoped that the identification of local issues will inform the work of the CIS as well as open the way to engaging in partnership with relevant bodies operating locally to ensure better access to information and services.

Integrated plan for isolated rural men in Roscommon

Following an application from the Community and Enterprise Section of Roscommon County Council a social policy grant was awarded to support the evaluation of a project targeting isolated rural men in the county and to assess its mainstreaming potential. This initiative begun under the Social Inclusion Measure working group of Roscommon County Council secured funding through Comhairle (now Citizens Information Board) and the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in early 2006 to recruit a full time rural men's worker to manage the project over a two-year period from 2006-2008.

The focus of the project is as follows:

- 1 To engage with marginalised men in the region
- 2 To encourage men to access information and to identify social policy issues in relation to relevant services for this group
- 3 To promote men's health
- 4 To provide access opportunities

Currently there are approximately 40 participants engaged in the project who can generally be profiled as single and living alone as owners of a small farm holding. Some of the men live in substandard accommodation and some have a substance mis-use problem. Other participants have a physical disability and a few of the men have an intellectual disability. The majority of participants have no access to transport.

Evaluation of the project will entail a review of operational and strategic concerns and an attempt to measure the impact of the project at the level of the individual, the management and the working group. Part of the research objectives will be concerned with identifying the social policy issues that arise for marginalised men in this area and how these issues can be resolved or further researched.

Support for Policy Initiatives at Local Level

The purpose of the CIB Social Policy Grant Scheme is to provide small-scale support for local social policy initiatives being undertaken by Citizens Information Services and other information providers. The Scheme can support networking between a number of local agencies, voluntary and statutory in order to identify common social policy issues

INIS and Integrating Ireland host Conference on Information Provision for Ireland's New Communities

The Irish Nationalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) and Integrating Ireland¹ held a Conference to initiate a process of review and discussion on strategies for information provision for Ireland's new communities. The Conference - *Providing Information for New Communities – Towards a More Strategic Approach* which took place over two days in May adopted four themes which focused on existing arrangements for information provision, the question of how and who should deliver information services and some consideration of future models of information provision. Speakers from agencies such as FÁS, Reach Services, and the Citizens Information Board represented by Tony McQuinn, Senior Manager of Development and Support Services were asked to address these various themes and workshops were convened to discuss in further detail the issues raised. A key issue for the workshop participants was the need to institute a more joined up approach to information provision across the public service. The need for accessible, accurate and consistent information from government agencies that is more responsive to the needs of new and emerging communities was emphasised. It was generally agreed that a crucial part of any such strategy should be to encourage the participation of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in networks and representative fora that seek to develop common policy positions and promote a positive model of integration. A report summarising the Conference findings is being prepared by INIS and Integrating Ireland.

¹Integrating Ireland is an independent network of community and voluntary groups that seek to promote the human rights, equality and full integration in Irish society of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants.

CIB Research on Pathways to Information and Services for Foreign Nationals

In order to meet the growing demands in this area and to explore the information needs of foreign nationals the Citizens Information Board has contracted Goodbody's Economic Consultants to conduct a study on the Pathways to Information and Services for Foreign Nationals. The study looks at where people start their search, the referral processes involved and the interagency communication between statutory and non-statutory organisations involved. It also considers the informal pathways to information and services pursued by foreign nationals. The study will identify the obstacles to accessing information and services and make recommendations as to how these obstacles might be overcome. The report is due to be published in September.

Information Needs of Foreign Nationals Working Group

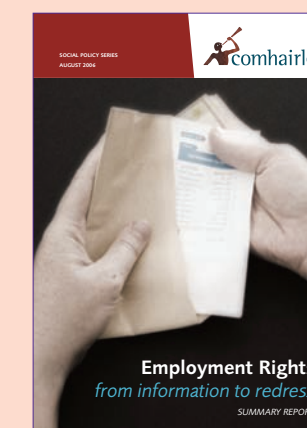
The Citizens Information Board has also established a Working Group with the Citizens Information Network to look at ways of responding in a more systematic way to the new and emerging needs of foreign nationals living in Ireland.

Casework Follow-up on Credit Union Nomination Forms

You may recall in a previous edition of *Voice* (Vol. 4 Issue 1 June 2006) that we reported on casework undertaken by CICs, which found that credit union members were not fully aware of the consequences attaching to nominating a person or persons as next of kin when opening a credit union account.

In the event of death and where a valid Nomination Form has been completed, the proceeds of the account up to a maximum of €23,000 go to the nominee(s) on the form and do not form part of the estate of the deceased. We brought this matter to the attention of the Irish

League of Credit Unions (ILCU) who at the time was planning a review of the Nomination Form. This review is now complete and the ILCU now provides a guidance note for new credit union members which clearly states that savings (shares/deposits), loans and insurances are distributed in accordance with the nomination and not, as would otherwise be the case, pursuant to the Succession Act. The ILCU is currently drafting a document regarding the provision of information to existing credit union members, advising them as to the implications and revocation of nominations.



CIB Social Policy Reports

Copies of these social policy reports are available from the Citizens Information Board, tel: (01) 605 9000, or to download from: www.citizensinformationboard.ie/social