

# Social Policy Update

## April 2017

Social Policy Update focuses on the social policy work of CIB and our delivery services throughout the country. It also provides information on national social policy news and developments.

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## CIB Social Policy and Research News

### CIB submissions

#### Submission on the Working Family Payment

In March 2017, CIB made a submission to the Department of Social Protection consultation on a proposed Working Family Payment, which the Government had committed to introducing in the Programme for Partnership Government in 2016. The CIB submission drew on the queries and concerns raised by people who are accessing information services as they seek to transition from welfare to work. In highlighting the broad range of concerns that arose for CIS clients in the context of this transition (specifically amongst jobseekers, part-time and casual workers, FIS applicants and activation scheme participants), the submission emphasised the importance of the rationale, design and administration of any new payment – and also the prerequisite that it is integrated within the overall taxation and welfare system (including secondary and in-work benefits). The submission also referenced the ongoing barriers and difficulties that arise for people in moving from welfare to work - such as childcare, housing and transport costs – and how these affect households differently when making decisions to take up work.

The submission drew on the feedback received from information services around the structure and administration of the Family Income Supplement, noting some of the scheme difficulties that have had a negative impact on FIS take-up – these included the income limits and working hours threshold, difficulties caused by the 52 week review period, the ineligibility of activation scheme participants (as well as the self-employed) and the presence of administrative delays and access barriers. Feedback from services also highlighted the significant information gaps that seem to exist amongst their clients around the supports that are currently available in making the transition from welfare to work (specifically with regard to Medical Card retention, the Back To Work Family Dividend, or the ability of a couple to combine working hours for FIS eligibility). In making a broad range of recommendations for any new payment, the submission suggested the following:

- The need to make it available for part-time or casual work;
- To exempt it from income assessment for social housing (given that it could be perceived as a short-term activation incentive);

- To ensure that there is a clear gap between combined income from minimum wage work and the new payment;
- To incentivise employers to participate in any new scheme;
- To review the differing treatment between social welfare and income tax provisions for unmarried couples who are moving from welfare to work. The full text of the Submission can be accessed [here](#).

## CIS Activity Report 2016

The 2016 National Activity Report for the CIS network has been presented to the Board of CIB. The Report outlines the level of caller and query activities for each service and also provides details of the projects that have been rolled out or progressed during the last year. The key highlights from 2016 included the following:

- There were 607,913 callers to CISs in 2016 – a slight increase on the previous year;
- There were 1.01 million queries dealt with by services – a 2% increase on 2015;
- Services also dealt with 10,000 ‘once-off’ advocacy queries and over 2,366 advocacy cases;

Social Welfare queries accounted for 46% of all **queries**, with 54% of queries covering all other aspects of public service provision including Health (8%), Employment, Housing and Local (all at 7%), and Money and Tax logging 6% of all queries. Housing queries increased significantly from 2015 (an increase of 27%) with staff in CISs nationwide responding to a range of housing issues in relation to local authority and social housing, renting a home, homelessness or losing your home and the provision of emergency accommodation. There were almost 55,000 Medical Card queries, which was the largest **single query area** recorded in 2016. The State Pension Contributory (34,756 queries) and Jobseekers Allowance (34,179 queries) were the next most-logged single issues.

The Report also provided details on **caller profile**, which showed that 57% of CIS callers are female and 47% are aged between 26 and 45 years. Of callers where country of origin was recorded (which was for 67% of all callers) non-Irish nationals made up 22% and these came from 215 countries. These figures indicate the continued importance of CISs as an information service for migrants. The identification of ‘**Ethnicity**’ as a relatively new data field was recorded for 32,711 callers during 2016 – where-in callers were asked to note their ethnicity in their own words. The majority described their ethnicity in terms of their nationality and others chose religion, colour or minority group from another country. The identity of ‘Traveller’ was logged in 2% of callers where ethnicity was recorded.

In terms of the **level of business**, over half of the services had between 10,000 and 20,000 callers, with nine services logging over 20,000 callers. Almost 80% of callers contacted the CISs in person, with 20% getting in touch by phone. And some 60% of callers to CISs were recorded as making a repeat visit. Services referred over 5% of clients to other agencies, and of these referrals, 20% were to Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC), 7% were to a solicitor, 5% were to a local support group or service provider, and 4% each to MABS, Threshold, the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and the Legal Aid Board. The Oyster system also recorded that CISs submitted 3,729 **Social Policy Returns (SPRs)** to CIB in 2016 – a significant increase of 22% on the previous year. A full analysis of these Returns was provided in the February 2017 issue of Social Policy Update. The CIS Activity Report also outlined developments that took place in services during 2016 in relation to volunteers, quality, advocacy, specialist services, training, outreach, promotion and collaborative projects.

## MABS Activity Report 2016

The 2016 MABS Activity Report was also presented to the CIB Board in March 2017 and included the following main highlights:-

- MABS services nationwide dealt with 17,366 new clients (a similar figure to 2015), with a total ‘active caseload’ of 17,968 at the end of 2016;

- The national average waiting time per service was recorded at 2.35 weeks and services dealt with 2,965 emergency clients without a waiting period;
- There were an additional 2,500 people seeking information about budgeting and money management;
- The MABS National Helpline received 20,832 calls – an increase of over 8% on 2015;

New clients had an average recorded debt of €65,900 and the total amount owed by new clients to creditors was estimated at €1.14 billion (with 80% of this owed to banks or financial institutions). In terms of ‘debt type’, personal loans accounted for 28% of active debts, mortgage debts a further 26% and then credit card debts at 15% and utilities debts at 14%. Other debt types included debts to money lenders, overdrafts and rent arrears. Over 56% of new clients were aged between 41 and 65, 53% were female, and the majority were reliant on social welfare payments (52%) – with nearly half of these in receipt of Jobseekers payments and one quarter in receipt of disability payments.

During 2016, the enhanced role of MABS in the context of mortgage arrears continued - with the expansion of the Dedicated Mortgage Arrears Service, which dealt with 2,872 cases. The Approved Intermediary service as operated through MABS also met with over 600 clients to examine their Debt Relief Notice options (which was on a par with 2015 figures). In addition to these services (and the Court Mentoring service, which is in place since 2015), the *Abhaile: Aid and Voucher Scheme* was launched in August 2016 and had issued over 3,500 vouchers as of December 2016. Locally-based MABS services also produced a number of policy and research papers during the year, with Waterford MABS publishing a Report on the Public PIP and South Mayo MABS also researched the spatial dimension to the mortgage arrears crisis, which looked at borrower demographics and socio-economic profiles. A number of MABS services around the country also continued to profile their community education work with locally-based initiatives.

## DSP Stakeholder Engagement on Brexit

In February 2017, the Department of Social Protection held a Stakeholder Engagement on Brexit, as part of the All-Ireland Civic Dialogue process being hosted by Government. This ‘civic dialogue’ process around Brexit was launched in November 2016 and involved two plenary sessions (attended by over 500 representatives) and a further 14 All-Island sectoral dialogues. The DSP forum focussed on the theme ‘*Ireland and UK: social welfare pensions, rights and entitlements*’ and CIB attended as did representatives of business, trade unions, civil society, academia, and politicians. The aim of the event was to cover a range of issues relating to social welfare including family benefits, unemployment, sickness and maternity benefits and old age and survivor benefits. Minister Leo Varadkar gave the opening address and informed attendees that the Department’s long-term objective is to ensure that the reciprocity of civic rights, specifically social welfare rights and entitlements, remains intact in any negotiations. The contributions from this forum were then considered at the second plenary meeting of the All Island Civic Dialogue which took place on the following day in Dublin Castle. One notable session of interest was the ‘Citizen/People’ breakout meeting, with a key conclusion of this being the importance of “the sharing of information between Citizens Information Services on the islands” and how this could help “to provide reassurance and advice”. The proceedings of this event can be found [here](#) and the Government has also made a Report available on the Civic Dialogue process so far. This Report can be accessed [here](#).

## Social Policy Grants 2017

The CIB Social Policy Grants Scheme continues to be available to services who wish to engage in a small-scale policy initiative at local level. In the past, services have used this funding to conduct a focussed piece of research locally, or have established a policy network with like-minded organisations working within their area. Some services have used the grant to host a policy seminar. Any service that is interested in developing projects such as these (or other initiatives) can contact the Social Policy Executives in CIB - Adrienne Collins ([adrienne.collins@ciboard.ie](mailto:adrienne.collins@ciboard.ie)) or Bernie Kennedy ([bernadette.kennedy@ciboard.ie](mailto:bernadette.kennedy@ciboard.ie)) for further information or support in seeking the grant.

# On the Ground: feedback from CISs and CIPS

This section features an overview of recent social policy returns from CISs and CIPS. The views expressed are those of the individual services.

## Social Policy Returns – January - March 2017

During the first three months of 2017, CIB received a total of 1016 Social Policy Returns (SPRs) from CISs around the country via the Oyster<sup>1</sup> system - which is a 17% increase on the same quarter in 2016. Staff from CIPS also submitted an additional 51 SPRs during January and February via their excel-based recording system. The most often reported general areas of concern were Social Welfare (53%), Housing (15%), Health (9%) and Moving Country (4%). These four broad information categories represented a total of 81% of all Social Policy Returns.



The number of Social Policy Returns submitted under each of the top four broad categories increased significantly when compared with the same period in 2016 – with social welfare-related SPRs increasing by 14%, housing by over 40%, health by over 30% and returns submitted in relation to Moving Country almost doubling.

Across the range of broad query categories, the most reported specific payments or benefits during these three months were *Jobseeker's Allowance* (43 SPRs), *Applying for Local Authority/ Social Housing* (40 SPRs), *Housing Assistance Payment* (37 SPRs), *Rent Supplement* (35 SPRs), and *Family Income Supplement* (33 SPRs).

As has been the situation for some time, the housing issues continue to feature significantly in the Returns from services throughout the country. The SPRs in relation to the broad housing category, when combined with Rent Supplement, accounted for 18% of all Returns during the first quarter of 2017. It is note-worthy that three of the top five categories listed above are directly related to housing issues and this is the first quarter in which the category of 'Applying for Local Authority/ Social Housing' has featured within the top five most-reported issues. The most common concerns in relation to **Applying for Local Authority/Social Housing** are focussed on the following issues:-

- The level at which social housing income thresholds are set - with a number of services specifically noting the difficulties for low-income applicants who are in receipt of FIS;
- the length of time involved in processing applications - with a 12-14 week waiting cited regularly and the associated difficulties that such delays cause for applicants who are trying to secure HAP rental properties;

<sup>1</sup> Oyster is an electronic recording system used in Citizens Information Services to record the nature of queries presenting to services.

- difficulties for clients who were trying to move between different LA housing lists and their understanding of this process;
- Lack of support for clients who are trying to access the Choice Based Letting Scheme (an online service that allows housing applicants to express interest in advertised council properties on a weekly basis). A number of services reported technical difficulties with the website, difficulties for clients who had literacy difficulties, were not computer literate, or who did not have access to a computer or broadband.

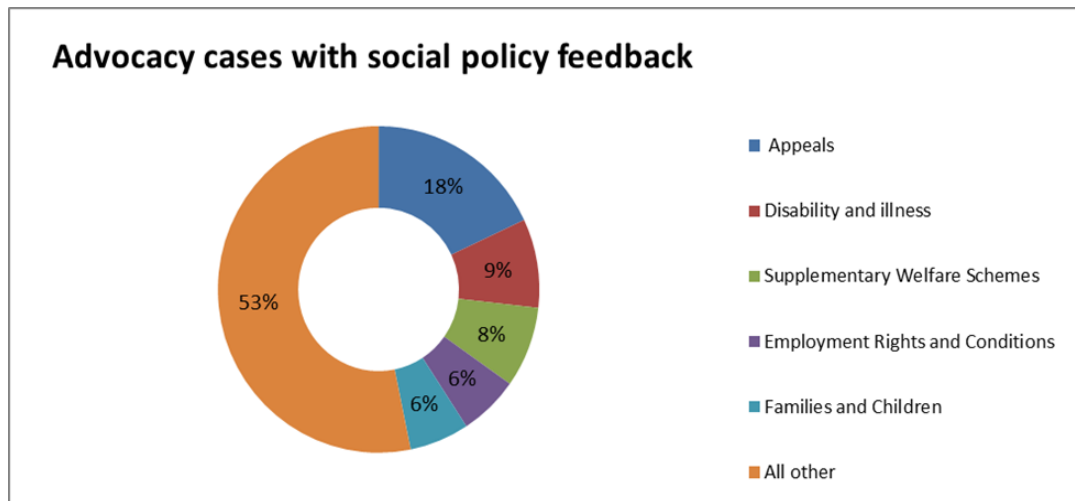
The increasing number of SPRs submitted in relation to **HAP** (and the attendant decrease in SPRs related to Rent Supplement) is reflective of the final phase of the roll-out of the scheme to all Local Authority areas which happened by 1 March 2017. As of mid-March 2017, according to DSP there were over 19,000 “active HAP tenancies”. The difficulties that were reported by services in connection with the scheme were mainly related to the HAP rent limits for properties and the availability of suitable accommodation within these limits (with some services reporting that the 20% flexibility is inadequate in many cases). Other issues raised were a reported reluctance of some landlords to engage with the HAP scheme, and perceived worries and lack of information for HAP tenants about being removed from the LA Housing List if they take up a HAP tenancy (as their housing need is deemed to be met). The roll-out of the HAP scheme to all Local Authority areas, while welcome, has caused some difficulties for **Rent Supplement** recipients, in that a number of services have reported that landlords who are maintaining a Rent Supplement tenant are not willing to transfer to the HAP scheme – and thus, some RS tenants are at risk of losing their accommodation. Other issues noted in relation to Rent Supplement tenants include administrative issues such as delays in processing, and the reported cessation of the payment without notice. It should be noted that CIB commissioned a social policy report on the HAP scheme in 2016, and this is due for publication in the coming months.

## Advocacy in CISs - social policy issues arising during 2016

Over 10,000 queries (or 1% of total queries) were recorded as advocacy queries on Oyster in 2016. Of these queries logged initially as “once off advocacy”, 1,334 case files were subsequently opened by information staff within CISs to record their work as individual cases on the Case Management System. In total, 2,372 individual advocacy cases were dealt with by services during 2016 (which includes cases open from the previous year). The majority of the on-going advocacy cases undertaken by CIS staff during 2016 were focussed on social welfare related issues – that is 61%, which was followed by employment-related cases at 19%, and then housing at 8%. These three categories combined accounted for 88% of all cases. Advocacy cases related to Consumers Affairs and Moving Country logged over 3% each. In over 15% of all cases open in 2016, CISs recorded that advocacy support was provided to people with some type of disability.

When looked at in the context of the general information query figures, the focus on social welfare cases is consistent with the general business of CISs - although at a higher level than is evidenced in general information query figures (46% of all queries made in CISs during 2016 were social welfare related). It would seem that there is also an over-representation of employment issues amongst the advocacy cases at 19%, when compared with the proportion of general employment queries which stood at 7% (or 71,463) during 2016. One element of the advocacy casework that is undertaken in CISs is the recording and reporting of social policy feedback as it relates to the particular advocacy cases being handled by information providers. Given the level of involvement that a CIS advocate has with a client, the information that is detailed by services in their casework records provides useful case material which can illustrate the extent, and the nature, of the blocks that clients experience when trying to access the array of social and public services. In this regard, it can be noted that social policy concerns were recorded for 9% of all advocacy cases undertaken by CISs during 2016. All of the casework that has been analysed for the purposes of social policy feedback is anonymised.

When identifying social policy feedback in these advocacy cases, CIS advocates are asked to choose from a list of possible options which can provide a snapshot of the broad types of policy issues that are affecting their clients. During 2016, three main kinds of issues dominated the policy feedback from advocacy cases that were handled in CISs - policy anomalies or inconsistencies (at 39%), delays in application/ appeals process (at 22%) and inaccurate/ incomplete information (at 20%). Based on this analysis, it seems that a variety of operational matters remain a key concern for people who are trying to access benefits.



Of the advocacy cases taken on by CISs that were noted to have a social policy concern, nearly half were concerned with five main query categories, as illustrated in the chart above – with cases referencing Appeals registering most concern. One quarter of these cases were appealing decisions in relation to Jobseeker’s Allowance, with Invalidity Pension and Carer’s Allowance being the next most-appealed payments in this instance. The vast majority of the appeals detailed in the casework had successful outcomes for the clients and involved sums of money from €400 up to €81,000, in one case, with a number of cases involving amounts of between €10,000 and €15,000. Many of the cases taken were based on appealing social welfare overpayments and the appeals focussed mainly on the application of the HRC rules, the assessment of means and internal Departmental processing issues. Given the level of casework involved with these advocacy cases, we are grateful to advocates for the social policy feedback that is provided through the case management system as many of these cases involve multiple issues and actions.

## In the Oireachtas

This section looks at policy-related questions and debates in the Oireachtas, with a particular focus on issues currently arising in social policy feedback from Citizens Information Services. The text may be edited. For the full text of any PQs/debates featured here, go to [www.oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie)

### Legislation around casualisation of working contracts [PQ 6320/17; 9 February 2017]

**Deputy Niall Collins** (Limerick County, Fianna Fail) asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation when she will publish the heads of the Terms of Employment (Information) (Amendment) and Organisation of Working Time (Amendment) Bill 2016 and proposals regarding protections for workers on insecure, low-hour contracts”.

In a response on behalf of Minister Mitchell O’Connor, **Deputy Pat Breen** (Clare, Fine Gael) noted the intention to “bring forward proposals in this area for consideration by Government. In this respect, work has progressed well on developing a policy response to the Programme for Government commitment to tackle the increased casualisation of work and to strengthen the regulation of precarious employment. I intend to include protections aimed particularly at low-paid, more vulnerable workers. Our proposals will address the issue of

employees on low hour contracts who consistently work more hours each week but whose contracts do not reflect the reality of their hours worked. The proposals will also seek to ensure that employees are better informed about the nature of their employment arrangements and their core terms at an early stage in their employment.

The policy response is being informed by the University of Limerick study on zero hour contracts and low hour contracts as well as the extensive material and practical examples provided by respondents to the public consultation conducted by my Department. Developing policy proposals in this area is a complex matter. A balance needs to be found between protecting the rights of employees and avoiding unintended consequences on business which may negatively affect the competitiveness of the Irish economy. My Department is currently engaged with ICTU and IBEC to secure broad agreement before proposals are finalised. This work is being progressed as expeditiously as possible and is nearing conclusion. The intention is to submit our proposals to Government in Q1 2017 for consideration and approval to draft a Bill giving effect to those proposals”.

### **Review of jobseeker’s reduced rates of payment [PQ 6433/17; 9 February 2017]**

**Deputy John Brady** (Wicklow, Sinn Féin) asked the Minister for Social Protection about “the stage the report on the impact of reduced jobseeker's allowance for under 26s is at”.

**Minister Leo Varadkar** (Dublin West, Fine Gael) responded noting that “the CSO’s latest monthly unemployment figures reports that the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for persons aged 15-24 years (youth unemployment rate) was 13.5% in January 2017, a decrease from 14.4% in December 2016. This is a significant decrease of almost 5 percentage points, from 18.1%, in the past 12 months. The overall unemployment rate has fallen by 1.4 percentage points from 8.5% in January 2016 to 7.1% in January 2017. Reduced rates for younger jobseeker’s allowance recipients were first introduced in 2009 and were further extended in subsequent budgets to apply to jobseekers under 26 years of age. These measures were introduced as they were considered to prevent young people from entering welfare dependency by providing young jobseekers with a strong financial incentive to engage in education or training or to take up employment. Should a young jobseeker on a reduced jobseeker’s allowance payment participate on an education or training programme they will receive a higher weekly payment of €160. This rate will be further increased to €193 per week from September 2017.

The review of jobseeker’s allowance rates for young persons under 26 years of age will examine the effectiveness of the reduced rates in encouraging young jobseekers to avail of education, training, employment programmes and opportunities. As part of a wider effort to encourage and promote research based on the Department’s administrative data, researchers from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth have been provided with data on all JA claims since 2007 for persons aged under 28 years. They intend looking specifically at the impact of changes in rates on the duration of young people’s claims and on their subsequent employment experience after exiting from unemployment. Some preliminary analysis has been done and work is ongoing. I hope that this review will be completed in the coming months, subject to the necessary data being available and the required level of analysis involved being completed. I am committed to ensuring my Department identifies effective measures to incentivise and support young people in finding and securing sustainable jobs. The best way to do this is through engagement processes and by incentivising them to avail of educational and training opportunities, thereby enhancing their employment prospects”.

### **Activation schemes review [PQ 11977/17; 7 March 2017]**

**Deputy Niamh Smyth** (Cavan-Monaghan, Fianna Fail) asked the Minister for Social Protection “if he will confirm or deny recent reports that employment schemes such as Tús and Gateway aimed at getting persons back to work face being cut as part of cost saving measures; the proposals in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

In response, **Minister Leo Varadkar** (Dublin West, Fine Gael) stated that “Community Employment (CE), Tús, Gateway and the Rural Social Scheme are part of the Department’s range of programmes catering for long-term unemployed jobseekers and those most distant from the labour market. The schemes are designed to break the cycle of unemployment and maintain work readiness, thereby improving a person’s opportunities of returning to the labour market. Tús was introduced as a direct response to the growth in the level of unemployment during the financial crisis. As the economic recovery takes hold and the overall level of unemployment continues to fall, my Department recognises the need to adapt these schemes to the changing circumstances, opportunities and the needs of jobseekers. With this in mind, my Department undertook an analysis of the CE programme and while the primary focus was on that scheme, the review also looked at other employment programmes such as Tús and Gateway and made a number of recommendations in relation to the operation of these schemes. I recently brought a Memo to Government and obtained approval to publish the review report and to progress a number of recommendations. I will be publishing the review report shortly. As part of the roll out of any new measures, my Department will be consulting with key stakeholders. The nature and format of the consultation process are being finalised at present.”

### **Carer’s Allowance Waiting Times [PQ 14558/17; 22 March 2017]**

**Deputy Bobby Aylward** (Carlow-Kilkenny, Fianna Fail) asked the Minister for Social Protection “the average waiting time for a decision on a carer’s allowance application; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

**Minister Leo Varadkar** (Dublin West, Fine Gael) stated that “my Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers. This includes ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible. The average waiting time for new carer’s allowance (CA) applications at the end of January 2017 was 11 weeks, compared to 20 weeks in 2016. At the end of January, there were 2,842 CA applications awaiting decision. Applications for CA increased 20% in 2016, compared to 2015. This increase has impacted on the volumes of applications awaiting decision. Furthermore, delays in processing are often caused by the submission of incomplete application forms or the failure to submit required documentation that is requested on the application form. The processing target that is set for the carer’s allowance scheme is 70% awarded within 12 weeks; in January that target was reached with 76% of applications awarded within 12 weeks. Reducing waiting times is a priority for my Department and we are working hard to make this happen”.

## **Policy News, Resources and Opinion**

*This section features developments, resources, events and opinions likely to be of interest to those engaged in policy work.*

*CIB does not endorse or otherwise any of the policy positions featured.*

### **Central Bank Quarterly Report on Residential Mortgage Arrears – Q4 2016**



Banc Ceannais na hÉireann  
Central Bank of Ireland  
Eurosystem

In March 2017, the Central Bank published the Quarterly Report on Residential Mortgage Arrears and Repossessions for the last quarter of 2016. The Report noted the following headline figures with regard to Principal Dwelling Houses:

- Over 77,000 households (with mortgages on private dwellings or Principal Dwelling Houses) are in arrears. This represents 11% of the total of 736,894 mortgages held by private households throughout the state and is a decline of 2.6% on the Q3 2016 figure;
- The number of households in arrears under 90 days (or “early arrears”) was reported at just over 23,000 - a slight increase on the previous quarter, marking the first increase in this category since Q3 2012;
- The number of households in arrears for over 90 days at the end of Q4 stood at 54,269 – which is a 3.7% decline on Q3;
- The number of households in “very long term arrears” (over 720 days) stood at over 32,000 - or 43% of all households in arrears (although this has fallen for the sixth quarter in a row);



- Over 120,000 mortgages were classified as “restructured” and over 87% of these were deemed to be meeting the terms of the arrangement. Typical arrangements included interest-only, reduced payments, temporary deferrals, term extension and arrears capitalisation;
- Legal proceedings were issued against 1,397 households in the fourth quarter of 2016;
- A total of 455 properties were taken into possession by lenders during this quarter – the highest recorded since the series began;

The Report also provides a breakdown of arrears, repossessions and restructures on Buy-To-Let properties (totalling over 130,000 mortgage accounts to a value of €24 billion). The full Report can be accessed [here](#).

## Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service - Annual Review 2016



In March 2016, the Minister for Justice and Equality Frances Fitzgerald TD launched the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) Annual Review of immigration activities for 2016. At the launch, the Minister noted that “Ireland continues to be an attractive destination for migrants to come to work, study and settle here” and pointed to the key development of the continued modernisation of immigration services during 2016 - with responsibility for immigration registrations moving from the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) to INIS and also the move towards the civilianisation of immigration services at Dublin Airport. The Report noted that the number of citizens from non-EU countries legally living here at the end of 2016 rose to over 115,000 (compared to 114,000 at the end of 2015). Further, visa applications rose by 7% to 124,000, when compared to 2015 and over 10,000 people became Irish citizens in 2016.

The Report also referenced the changes that the commencement of the International Protection Act 2015 in 2016 brought to the processing of international protection applications. The Act provides for the introduction of a single application procedure for people seeking international protection, which is now processed by the new International Protection Office (IPO) within the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service. The same Act established the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT), a statutorily independent body which replaced the former Refugee Appeals Tribunal. The Review notes that the new Act “replaces a sequential asylum application system with a single application process, bringing Ireland into line with the processing arrangements of all other EU Member States”. It is hoped that the new single application process will determine certainty of status at an earlier stage for those entitled to seek international protection within the State. The Review also referenced progress on the Report of the Working Group on Direct Provision and noted that over 90% of the recommendations of the Report are now “implemented, partially implemented or in progress”. As of December 2016, there were 4,420 protection applicants residing in Direct Provision Centres and this figure includes approximately 450 with some form of status residing there while they source private accommodation, as well as 269 who have been issued with a Deportation Order. During 2016, over 1,600 persons entered the system of State-provided accommodation and over 1,900 persons left the system. The full INIS Report can be read [here](#).

## DSP Medical Review and Assessment Service

In February 2017, the Irish Medical Times reported that the recently-advertised position of Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of the Department of Social Protection will be required to contribute to a major transformation process in relation to the assessment of entitlement to illness and disability-related payments. The CMO is responsible for the management of the Department’s Medical Review and Assessment Service (MRAS), which provides impartial medical opinion for the guidance of the Department’s deciding officers in determining entitlements to illness-related schemes. The MRAS comprises a multi-disciplinary team of 31 medical assessors (based nationwide) who perform assessments at over 50 locations nationwide. In response to a Parliamentary Question in May 2016, Minister Leo Varadkar stated that “It has become increasingly difficult in recent years to recruit and retain doctors (for MRAS). The Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2015 extended the legal definition of Medical Assessor to include registered nurses (previously MAs had to be registered medical practitioners)..... It is also envisaged that the MRAS could be supplemented by a number of suitably skilled agency Medical Assessors”.

## Make Work Pay – Interdepartmental report on people with disabilities



On 6 April 2017, Ministers Varadkar, Harris and McGrath launched the Report of the Interdepartmental ‘Make Work Pay’ Working Group. This had emerged from the Government’s ten-year Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities which was published in 2016. CIB was represented on the Working Group and also made a formal submission to the consultation process in 2016. The Working Group aimed to establish what works best for people with disabilities

when considering taking up (or returning to) work, in terms of financial supports – specifically it set out to examine “the complex interaction in the benefit system, including the Medical Card, the additional costs of work associated with disability, and the net income gains in employment, with a view to devising workable solutions to difficulties identified”. The Report addressed its findings under three key fundamentals – that raising employment rates of people with disabilities is an international policy goal, that Ireland’s incentives to work are generally in line with those in other countries and that there is positive interest in work among people with disabilities in Ireland. It also noted the main barriers which impede people with disabilities in accessing work – notably, the risk of losing the Medical Card, its interaction with Disability Allowance, the loss of transport supports, the complexity of the current system of supports and concerns about the difficulty of restoring benefits when employment doesn’t work out.

Of the 24 recommendations made in the Report, commitments were made at the launch to bring about immediate changes in a number of areas, including – from the DSP perspective - the retention of the Free Travel Pass for five years when those on a long-term disability payment find work, a ‘Fast-Track’ return to Disability Allowance (or Invalidity Pension) for people if employment doesn’t work out, the development of a ‘Ready Reckoner’ to assess the financial implications of working and the improvement in communications from DSP to people with disabilities around the retention of in-work benefits. Minister Harris also noted his Department’s commitment to addressing concerns around the retention of the Medical Card, which was identified in the Report as the single most significant barrier for people with disabilities entering the work force. In this regard, the HSE and DSP have indicated their intention of “substantially raising” the earning disregards for those on Disability Allowance or Partial Capacity Benefit. The Make Work Pay Report can be accessed [here](#).