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Introduction

Welcome to the October edition of Social Policy Update - our bi-monthly newsletter which aims to keep you informed of the social policy work of CIB and our delivery services throughout the country.

We look briefly at the main provisions within Budget 2019 and review in the context of CIB's Pre-Budget Submission. This month we also highlight another recent CIB policy submission on the State Pension (Contributory) reform proposals and we provide feedback on the outcomes of a CIB submission to ComReg on their review of Non-Geographic Numbers.

We continue to analyse the social policy feedback submitted to us by services throughout the country on a monthly basis, and in this edition, we focus on the Social Policy Returns from Q3/ 2018. This analysis highlights the key issues that staff in services are dealing with in the context of difficulties for clients – specifically in the areas of Illness Benefit, the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, Carer's Allowance and also difficulties with the application and renewal of Irish Residence Permits/ GNIB cards.

Following the summer recess, the Dáil resumed on 18 September and our "*In the Oireachtas*" section looks at some policy-related questions and debates that relate to issues currently arising in social policy feedback from services - we highlight Parliamentary Questions concerning Illness Benefit, Carer's Allowance and social housing income limits.

We conclude with the *National Policy News* section, which looks at a recent ESRI report on childcare costs and low employment amongst mothers and also at the Mercy Law Centre report on legal protections for homeless children and the 2017 Annual Report from FLAC.

CIB Social Policy and Research News

This section provides information about CIB's social policy work - focusing on recent submissions, reports and publications.

In this edition we look at:-

- Budget 2019 and CIB's Pre-Budget Submission
- Submission to State Pension reform proposals
- ComReg Review of Non-Geographic Numbers (NGNs)
- CIB thematic social policy research update
- CIS National Activity Report January – June 2018

Citizens Information Board
**Social Policy &
Research News**



Budget 2019 and CIB Pre-Budget Submission “*Barely Getting By*”

Budget 2019 provisions, as announced on 9 October, contain a number of measures that reflect issues that were raised in the CIB Pre-Budget Submission.

The main social protection elements include a €5 weekly increase across all basic social welfare payments. For those on jobseeker payments, this will bring the full adult rate to €203 – just short of the 2009 rate of €204.30.

There will be an increase of €2.20 weekly for each qualified dependent child under 12 and €5.20 per week in respect of 12 and over, as well as a €25 increase in Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance rates. There will also be an increase (€20) in the earnings disregard for the One Parent Family Payment (and Jobseeker’s Transition Payment) and a new maintenance disregard (of €95) in respect of housing costs for the Working Family Payment. This reflects a focus on more targeted measures as proposed by CIB and should help in the broader context of enabling people to combine welfare supports with work – a key element of our pre-budget submission.

In this context also, there were changes announced to the threshold for families in accessing the Affordable Childcare Scheme which should pull more low-income households into that targeted support measure. Successive CIB submissions have stressed the importance of accessible, affordable childcare in enabling the transition from welfare to work.

The CIB Pre-Budget Submission also highlighted the issue of fuel poverty and, whilst a Cold Weather Payment was not introduced, the extension of the Fuel Allowance season by one week is welcomed. Other welfare measures include the introduction of two weeks’ parental benefit to every parent of a child under one year and the restoration of the Christmas bonus to a full double payment for all long-term social welfare recipients. The Minister also announced the intention to extend Jobseeker’s Benefit to the self-employed in 2019 – CIB has advocated for the extension of social insurance measures to the self-employed.



Over one million queries informed CIB's Pre Budget Submission

Citizens Information Board-funded delivery services dealt with over one million queries and assisted over 700,000 callers to access a wide range of social, public and financial services in 2017. Drawing from those experiences, the CIB pre-budget submission (entitled '*Barely Getting By*') highlighted how a targeted approach by Government in Budget 2019 could more effectively support people with disabilities, low paid workers, lone parents, carers, long-term unemployed and older people. The submission was based on feedback from CISOs, CIPS, NAS and also incorporated issues that were highlighted by MABS in their pre-budget report to CIB.

The submission focused on four key priority areas that have stood out from feedback submitted on a daily basis by delivery services during 2018 – that is, issues in relation to the interaction of the work and welfare systems, problems with benefits and services, the provision of housing and housing supports and also, indebtedness and the continuing impact of mortgage arrears and household debt on low income clients. Within these broad priority areas, the submission evidenced the key difficulties that impact on the lives of people who are using information, advocacy and money advice services – many of whom are considered to be 'barely getting by' and, for whom, supports delivered through public services are essential to their ability to cope with limited means in difficult circumstances.

The Submission set out a series of recommendations (30 in total) based on the evidence of staff working in delivery services. These recommendations focus on specific, targeted measures across a range of areas that could make life easier for people moving from welfare to work, low paid workers, people with disabilities, lone parents, older people and those experiencing unsustainable debt. During 2017, there were 100,000 housing queries to Citizens Information Services. The submission called for greater rent regulation measures and increased supports for vulnerable households to access suitable accommodation. Other recommendations include:-

- The phasing out of the age-differentiated, reduced rate of payment of Jobseeker's Allowance for jobseekers who are under 26;
- The development of a clear policy response and impact assessment with regard to the design and funding of the Total Contributions Approach to the State Pension (Contributory) which is due to be introduced in 2020;
- The provision of an increase in the rate of the Fuel Allowance and the introduction of a Cold Weather Payment Scheme to allow for certainty to FA recipients in the event of extremely cold conditions;
- The introduction of additional rent regulation measures (such as linking rents to the Consumer Price Index);

- The reduction of the supervision period for Debt Relief Notices from three years to one year;
- The provision of broader access to insolvency solutions by funding a Public Personal Insolvency Service and the enhancement of MABS to include PIP services, on a means-tested basis.

The CIB Submission can be accessed on the CIB website [here](#).

Submission on Total Contributions Approach to State Pensions

 Riann na Míreann
Government of Ireland
Total Contributions
Approach
Consultation 2018
May to September 2018

During August 2018, CIB sought feedback from delivery services in order to prepare a response to the DEASP public consultation on the reform of the State Pension (Contributory). The public consultation is intended to inform the design of a Total Contributions Approach (TCA) to pension calculations from 2020 onwards. This approach - in terms of both policy and funding - was adopted by Government in the National Pensions Framework in 2010 and again reiterated in the Roadmap for Pensions Reform 2018-2023, which was published in February 2018.



The CIB submission highlighted the top priorities of any reform – notably, the removal of anomalies (for instance, people with more contributions shouldn't receive lower pensions), the need for greater equality between men and women and the requirement that periods of low PRSI coverage should be recognised in the design of the scheme. These priorities reflect the feedback coming from services for a number of years, which point to key difficulties around the application of the 'average' rule, the 2012 changes to eligibility criteria (which delivered an effective cut in pension income for many pensioners), the limited application of the Homemaker's Scheme and how these complications have disproportionately affected women who took time out of paid work to care in the home, at various intervals in their working lives.

The CIB submission (which took the form of a response to a survey) addressed a range of specific areas that were set out by the consultation in relation to guaranteeing adequacy and delivering a sustainable pension system. It prioritises "as generous a recognition for credited contributions as possible" through an increase in the rate of PRSI paid by current taxpayers (which is relatively low compared to other EU countries) and the reduction of tax relief for pensions. The CIB response also highlighted the need for a transition period between the old (yearly averaging) and new (TCA) contributory pension systems. The requirements as set out in the TCA proposals that eligibility and rate of payment would be assessed on the basis of 40 years of PRSI contributions would prove to be a significant challenge for many. In light of this anticipated difficulty, the submission argued for the need to establish eligibility based on 30 years of contributions.

The CIB response to the DEASP consultation was submitted to the Department in September and is published online [here](#).

Other policy submissions and responses

During August, CIB's Social Policy and Research team also liaised with the National Advocacy Service (NAS) in connection with submissions on the Mental Health Commission Strategy and the HSE Code of Practice for Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults. The proposal submitted with regard to the Mental Health Commission (MHC) strategy is based on NAS's engagement with mental health service users through its representative advocacy work. Key factors identified in the submission that will impact the work of the MHC are the commencement of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, the development of the Decision Support Service (DSS) to ensure that assisted decision-making may be fully implemented and the recent ratification by Ireland of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The submission highlighted other considerations for a strategic focus – including the promotion of best practice in adult safeguarding policy, recognition of the diversity of mental health services users and a more joined-up approach to mental health care planning.

ComReg's review of Non-Geographic Numbers (NGNs) cites CIB feedback



In July 2018, the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) published a report on its review of five categories of "Non-Geographic Number" (NGN) - namely '1800', '1850', '1890', '0818' and '076' telephone numbers (which are used to provide telephone services such as charity helplines, telephone banking and customer services). The report follows up on a public consultation on the issue in 2017, for which CIB prepared a submission which noted that service user attitudes to these numbers were negative and that the lack of transparency around costs seemed to discourage the use of NGN numbers. In this context, the CIB submission was cited throughout the ComReg report regarding issues that were impacting on users. In particular, the report states that:-

“ComReg takes particular note of the views submitted by the Citizens Information Board (CIB). The CIB submits that financially vulnerable people, living on very tight budgets, are particularly disadvantaged by the preponderance of NGNs. This group includes, in particular, those whose only income is a social welfare payment or people experiencing over indebtedness. ComReg is of the view that these social groups are the most likely to require access to certain social services while also having the lowest ability to pay for same”.

Some other extracts are noted below from the ComReg review, as they cite CIB feedback from frontline services:-

- *There is widespread confusion about the specific features and pricing of different NGN ranges and this confusion is reducing consumer utilisation of NGNs. (CIB)*
- *Confusion as to the features and pricing of the different NGN ranges has led to contagion across those ranges (that is, '1800' number range). (CIB)*
- *A significant number of consumers experience 'bill shock' due to high retail charges for NGN calls. (CIB)*
- *Consumers have been unable to contact service providers due to the high price of calls and, in accessing some services, calls have become disconnected due to insufficient credit. (CIB)*
- *Important social services cannot be accessed where certain service providers use NGN ranges that carry high retail charges. (CIB)*
- *Many consumers avoid calling NGNs and will attend a service providers premises in person in order to avoid retail charges of NGN calls, or because they have insufficient funds to make such calls. (CIB)*

The ComReg report included a draft decision on proposed measures to improve the effectiveness of the NGN platform in Ireland - specifically that “the following two measures are justified and proportionate, in order to address the issues outlined....in an effort to eliminate or reduce the resulting consumer harm”:

1. The introduction of a new 'Geo-Linked' retail tariff measure for the 1850, 1890, 0818 and 076 NGNs;
2. The reduction in the number of NGN types from **five** (1800, 1850, 1890, 0818 and 076) to **two** (1800 and 0818);

The full review of the NGN consultation is available on the ComReg website [here](#).

CIB thematic social policy research update

Brexit: In 2017, CIB commissioned research into the likely impact of Brexit on citizens' rights and entitlements to social security benefits and social services and the implications of this for organisations which provide citizens with information on their rights and entitlements.

The report, entitled "*Brexit, Citizens' Rights and Uncertainty: An analysis of the Challenges for Citizens and Citizens Information Services*" has recently been approved by the Board of CIB.



Vulnerable migrants: Researchers from UCD have been engaged by CIB to investigate the challenges faced by migrants in vulnerable situations and to examine the role that Citizens Information Services play in assisting migrants to access social welfare, work and employment opportunities and to resolve legal and technical issues relating to the right to reside in Ireland. This research will involve consultations with services that are centrally involved in delivering information and advocacy to migrant service users.

CIS Activity Report January - June 2018

The National CIS Activity Report for the first six months of 2018 has been prepared. This Report analyses the caller and query data that is routinely captured by CISs throughout the country. Some of the key data highlights from the Report include the following:-

- There were 513,793 queries made to CISs and 44% of these were related to social welfare issues;

Main Category	Queries	% of total queries
Social welfare	513,793	44%
Health	47,625	9%
Housing	47,007	9%
Employment	37,055	7%
Money & Tax	31,082	6%
Local	27,294	5%

- All Housing related queries have increased by 25% over the period of the past three years (from a base of 37,596 in July 2016 to 47,007 in July 2018);
- The top five single query areas are laid out below:-

	Payment/ Benefit	Queries
1	Medical Cards	32,307
2	State Pension (Contrib)	18,634
3	Carer's Allowance	16,279
4	Disability Allowance	15,801
5	Jobseeker's Allowance	14,252

- There were 290,913 callers to CISs nationwide (a 5.7% decrease on the same period in 2017);
- Where nationality was recorded amongst these callers, over 25% (or 50,735) were from outside of Ireland;
- Ethnicity was recorded for under 5% of callers and Travellers represented over 3% of callers where ethnicity was recorded;
- Some 10% of callers were recorded as having access difficulties, with language counting for 36% of these and literacy difficulties recorded in 17% of these;
- Nearly one half (47%) of all callers were in the 26-45 age group and 14% were over 66;
- Just under half (49%) of all queries involved the provision of information, 50% were categorised as requiring advice/assistance and 1% required an advocacy intervention;
- Of the advice/assistance interventions, some 65% related to *exploring options* with callers, followed by *form filling* (12%), *calculating benefit entitlements* (8%) and *making phone calls* to Government Departments on behalf of people (7%). Other actions included carrying out a general benefits check, drafting letters/emails with caller to sign and send, assisting with online applications, making a phone call enquiry to employer, landlord or other (private sector) and advising on appeals processes;
- There were 4,788 queries in the first six months of 2018 that involved short-term advocacy work and, in addition to this, CISs engaged in 1,931 long-term advocacy cases on complex issues such as social welfare or employment appeals and housing;

- Some 2,178 Social Policy Records were submitted by CISs – an analysis of the issues raised by CISs in these SPRs was included in Social Policy Update (July 2018).

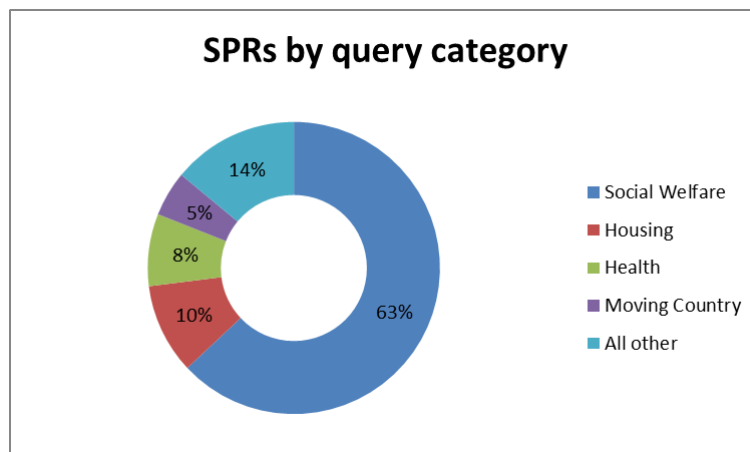
On the Ground: Social policy feedback from delivery services



In this section, we provide an overview and analysis of the recent Social Policy Returns that have been submitted by CISs and CIPS. The key issues highlighted during the third quarter of 2018 include concerns with Illness Benefit, the Back To School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, Carer's Allowance and Irish Residence Permits/ GNIB cards.

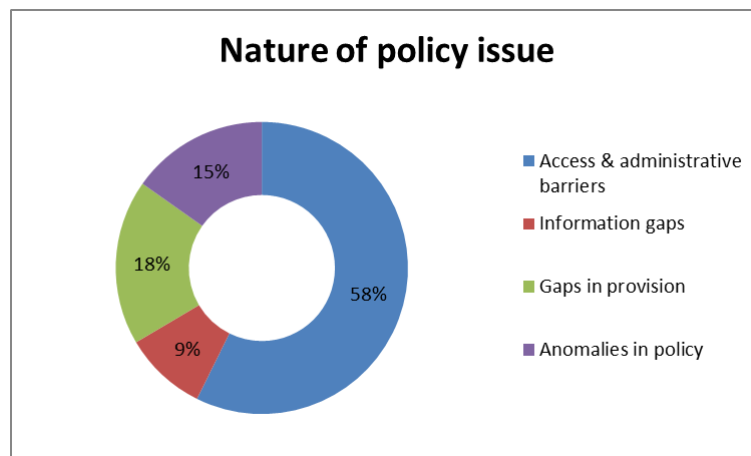
Social Policy Returns: Quarter 3, 2018

During the third quarter of 2017 (July, August and September), CIB received a total of 1,318 Social Policy Returns (SPRs) from CISs and a further 353 from CIPS. This is an overall increase of 9% on the same period in 2017. The most reported general areas of concern were Social Welfare (63%), Housing (10%), Health (8%) and Moving Country (5%). These four broad information query categories accounted for 86% of all Social Policy Returns.



When the broad nature of the policy issues is analysed, 67% of all of the SPRs are regarded as operational issues – that is, cases that are deemed to be indicative of concerns with the operation of services on the ground (and include *access or administrative barriers* and *information gaps*). In the remaining 33% of SPRs this quarter, information providers considered that the cases demonstrated

difficulties caused by policies, legislation or guidelines – that is, either ‘*anomalies in policy*’ or ‘*gaps in provision*’.



Key trends that are emerging in the returns during this Quarter:-

- The number of SPRs concerning **Medical Cards** continues to increase. Over 80% (or 106 SPRs) of all health-related SPRs were detailing concerns with Medical Cards. The main difficulties being experienced by CIS clients in accessing Medical Cards have been highlighted in the previous edition of Social Policy Update (July 2018);
- For the third consecutive quarter, the number of **housing**-related SPRs has decreased when compared with the same period in 2017 – Q3/2018 SPRs were down by almost 10% on Q3/2017;
- There was a significant increase in reports relating to **Moving Country** – specifically in the GNIB Applications and Renewals category, indicating particular difficulties with that process;
- There were significant increases in the Returns relating to certain schemes and payments within the social welfare category, which recorded 63% of all SPRs this quarter – most notably, SPRs relating to *Illness Benefit* increased six-fold, *Carer’s Allowance* returns doubled and, within the category of **Families and Children**, concerns relating to *Child Benefit* and also the *Back To School Clothing and Footwear Allowance* tripled when compared with the same Quarter in 2017;
- The concerns that were reported during the third quarter of 2017 relating to difficulties in accessing PRSI Contribution Statements are no longer evident, and we can assume from this reduction that many of the concerns reported around online-only access to contribution statements have been alleviated by the provision by DEASP of a Customer Service HelpLine for people who have difficulty engaging with the online system.

Moving Country



Whilst the number of Social Policy Returns submitted by services is relatively low within this broad category, there has been a significant increase relative to the 2017 Returns in the area of Irish Residence Permit (formerly GNIB card) Applications and Renewals (from two SPRs in Q3/2017 to 47 in Q3/2018). The cases reported were predominantly focused on difficulties for people in

accessing the appointment service offered through the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service at Burgh Quay Registration Office. The online-only appointment system was introduced in 2016 and allows non-EEA applicants to book an appointment for immigration registration and visa re-entry services up to ten weeks in advance.

Feedback from services during the past few months is indicating that a significant number of clients cannot get an appointment within the timeframe allotted by the website. Many of the reports note that clients are accessing the online system on a daily basis over a number of weeks, but are still unable to secure an appointment in advance of their permit/ GNIB card lapsing. Depending on the timing for individuals, this could have knock-on effects in terms of accessing social welfare payments, employment, education and citizenship opportunities.

Recent newspaper reports have suggested that internet 'bot' programmes were being used to block-book appointments, which were then being re-sold online. Minister for Justice, Charles Flanagan, has noted in response to a Parliamentary Question on the issue on 26 September that "*it recently came to the attention of officials that customers were finding it difficult to get registration appointments due to third party agents block booking appointments. This is entirely against the purposes for which the system was established making it more difficult for customers to secure an appointment. INIS has been working to counteract this using various technical solutions and in this regard an update to the on-line appointment software was introduced on 10 September which has been successful to date in preventing these abuses of the system*".

On a related matter, it should be noted also that from September 2018, the Department of Justice and Equality has removed the option for using the online appointment service for re-entry visas and are advising that people should now send their applications (with their passport) by post to the INIS office. Minister Flanagan has stated that "*as a face to face meeting is not required to issue a re-entry visa, applications are now dealt with by post and these applications are usually processed within 3 to 4 weeks. Customers with urgent travel needs can continue to make an emergency appointment for a re-entry visa and their application will be dealt with within 24 hours with additional appointments are being made available in this regard. It is understood that the online system will remain in place for people renewing their permission to stay in Ireland*"(PQ 38469/18; 25 September 2018).

Illness Benefit



The number of SPRs submitted in relation to Illness Benefit increased six-fold when compared with the same quarter in 2017 and the majority of the cases reported by services were concerned with delays in processing applications, issuing payments and responding to callers. Many of these difficulties can be attributed to the introduction of new illness certification forms and processes (IB1 form and MED1form) in August 2018, with services around the country reporting on cases where applicants were waiting many weeks (and months) for payment, cases where applicants (or CIC staff) could not make contact with the Illness Benefit section of the Department to clarify the status of their claim (or were holding on the telephone for long periods, with many on low incomes using call credit with no response). In addition, there were also reports of longer-term recipients of Illness Benefit whose payment was stopped without notice or explanation.

In some cases, services noted additional difficulties for applicants who were awaiting payment in accessing Basic SWA through the Community Welfare Service at their local office. (*See Parliamentary Question in relation to Illness Benefit delays later in this edition*). Several cases were also reported where recipients were overpaid (substantially in some instances) and, as they were taxed on this overpayment, had less take-home pay. Again, these issues were compounded for people by the difficulties in contacting the Department in order to deal with the overpayment immediately.

Ongoing broader policy issues in relation to Illness Benefit also continue to be reported in the feedback from services – including difficulties for people on low incomes caused by the six day wait for the payment and also difficulties for self-employed people who are ineligible for the payment but are in need of some form of short-term illness supports.

Carer's Allowance

There was also a significant increase in the number of SPRs submitted in relation to Carer's Allowance during this quarter, with Returns more than doubling when compared with the same quarter in 2017. The main issues highlighted were related to the administration of the payment – most notably the delays in processing applications (which according to an answer to a PQ by Minister Doherty in September 2018 currently stands at



18 weeks). Services noted that the frustrations caused by these delays were exacerbated by difficulties that clients (and CIS staff) had in contacting the section within the Department, when they were seeking information or clarity around their application or payment. Many of the cases that were submitted by services evidenced the confusion and stress felt by applicants and recipients due to their inability to speak directly with Department staff about their claim or payment – the on-hold waiting times were frustrating (and costly in some cases) for people, and callers were not advised whilst on hold as to how long to expect a response (and in many cases, clients left the CIC having been unable to speak with a Department representative).

Services have suggested that the issues experienced by some applicants could be relieved if applications were acknowledged in writing on receipt, with an advisory as to processing times being sent to the applicant. It was also suggested that there could also be an improved telephone call management process in place within the Department (for instance, with callers being advised as to current call-queuing times when their call was placed on hold).

These difficulties in making contact with the carer's section are also impacting on the ability of information staff to assist or advocate for their clients – and particularly so in the context of the recently enacted GDPR legislation, with many services now being advised that they must submit a written Authority To Act form in advance of any inquiry - even in cases where the client has confirmed authority to act verbally (by telephone) with DEASP staff. A number of services have suggested the benefit of establishing a dedicated telephone line between CISs and the carer's section within DEASP which would help to overcome some of the frustrations being experienced by CIS clients.

Other issues highlighted by services in relation to Carer's Allowance include difficulties caused by the fact that CA is not a qualifying payment for Increased for Qualified Adult (IQA) or for Fuel Allowance.

Back To School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

During the months of July, August and September 2018 the feedback received from services in relation to the BTSCFA tripled when compared with the same period in 2017. The key issues that services reported were predominantly administrative or operational difficulties with the payment. These included:-



- Delays in processing the payment, with some cases reported where payments were still outstanding in September;
- Confusion amongst recipients who were expecting the Allowance automatically (as had happened in previous years and as had been advised on the Department's website), but who did not receive the payment and then had to reapply;
- Frustration for many applicants and recipients who could not contact the section within the Department by telephone to clarify the status of their application (or get information as to whether they had to reapply, or when the payment would be made);

Information staff in services throughout the country reported that these processing and communications difficulties were felt acutely by many clients who sought assistance in CISs – all of whom would have been dependent on their weekly social welfare payment to cover the considerable expense of returning their children to school.

The cost of keeping children in school was also central to the predominant issue reported in relation to Child Benefit – that is, the difficulties caused when families lose Child Benefit for children when they turn 18 and are still in secondary education.

In the Oireachtas

In this edition, we look at recent policy-related questions and debates in the Oireachtas with a particular focus on the following issues:-

- Illness Benefit applications
- Social and Affordable Housing Eligibility
- Carer's Allowance delays



Illness Benefit Applications [PQ 39077/18; 29 September 2018]

Deputy John Brady (*Wicklow, Sinn Féin*) asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection "when the decision was made to change the forms for illness benefit; the consultations that took place prior to the changeover to new

forms; the status of processing times for the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter”.

Minister Regina Doherty (*Meath East, Fine Gael*) responded that “my Department recently introduced redesigned claim and medical certificate forms for use in the illness and injury benefit schemes. The purpose of the redesign was to facilitate a new process within the Department whereby forms would be scanned rather than manually keyed into the new IT system. Claims received on the new forms and certificates are being processed into the payment system on the same day as they are received. That is a significant improvement on behalf of our clients. The introduction of the redesigned form was discussed with the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, in advance. The IMO advised its members, one month before its introduction, that they should co-operate with the use of the new forms.

The Department subsequently communicated directly with general practitioners, GPs, as is our responsibility, shortly before the introduction of the redesigned forms. Given the confusion that has arisen over the last couple of months, we have to accept that we should probably have communicated directly with the GPs more quickly than we did. We accept that and we apologise. The majority of the certificates in the claim forms that are now being received each day by the Department are the new scannable versions. These claims are being processed without any delay. However, some GPs have continued to use the old forms after the changeover date. To facilitate the continued payment of the illness and injury benefits to our clients, my Department has, to date, considered to accept those old forms. While their continued use causes delays to our processing times, my Department is doing everything possible to ensure that customers are paid as quickly as possible. There is currently a backlog of two days in processing the old forms and certificates.

The introduction of these and other initiatives is the subject of ongoing discussions with the IMO. A framework and timetable have been agreed with the IMO, during which intensive discussions are planned. New processes will not be introduced until these discussions are concluded and advance notice, including details of any changes to payment arrangements, will be provided to the individual GPs directly from my Department. It is important to note that the Department has had a long and positive relationship with GPs for many years. We are committed to working hard to resolve any outstanding issues which cause concerns among our GP partners”.

Social and Affordable Housing Eligibility [PQ 38073/18; 20 September 2018]



Deputy Fergus O'Dowd (*Louth, Fine Gael*) asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, and Local Government "his plans to increase the net income limits for social housing assessments for County Louth to account for the increasing cost of living and the rental demands on persons bordering on the current limits; and if he will make a statement on the matter".

Minister Eoghan Murphy (*Dublin Bay South, Fine Gael*) replied that "the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household's basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced at that time also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing.

As part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports is underway. The Housing Agency is carrying out the detailed statistical work which will underpin this review on behalf of my Department. The review will obviously have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered".

Carer's Allowance delays [PQ 38658/18; 18 September 2018]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue (*Donegal, Fianna Fail*) asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection "the processing times for carer's allowance and carer's benefit applications; the reason for the backlog of applications; her plans to address same; if additional staff will be allocated in order to clear same; and if she will make a statement on the matter".

Minister Regina Doherty (*Meath East, Fine Gael*) responded to the question stating that "...at the end of August 2018 the average waiting time for new CA (Carer's Allowance) application was 18 weeks while it was 11 weeks for a new CARB (Carer's Benefit) application. Before a decision can be made on entitlement carers allowance, evidence must be provided to establish whether the person being cared for has such a disability that they require full-time care and attention, whether the carer

is providing full-time care and attention, whether the carer is habitually resident in the State and, finally, whether the carer satisfies the means test. To qualify for carers benefit a person has to show that they have the required level of PRSI contributions, that they have left full-time employment, that they are providing full-time care and attention and that the person being cared for has such a disability that they require full-time care and attention.

In general, social welfare schemes with a number of complex qualifying conditions can take longer to process. This is compounded if the documentary evidence provided at initial application stage is incomplete or insufficient; this is sometimes the case with carer's applications. The Department recently launched a re-designed carer's allowance application form which will allow carers to provide more information on the type and level of care they provide, with an aim to providing Deciding Officers with the information they need to expedite decisions on entitlement. The carers benefit form is currently being re-designed in a similar way.

Staff have recently been re-assigned within the carers areas to work on claims processing and this should lead to a reduction in processing times. In addition, there are plans to reassign work within the Department to allow for the provision of additional staff to the carer's payments area".

National Policy News and Resources

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In this section, we look at recent developments, events and resources at national level that are likely to be of interest to those engaged in policy work:-

- ESRI report on the cost of childcare and maternal employment
- Mercy Law Resource Centre Report - "Children and Homelessness: A gap in legal protection"
- FLAC Annual Report 2017



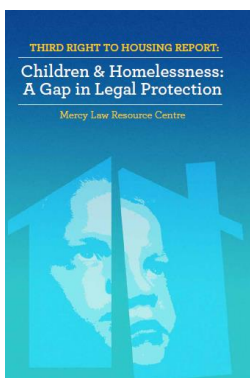
ESRI report on the cost of childcare and maternal employment

In September 2018, the Economic and Social Research Institute (in association with Pobal) published research which examined the impact of childcare costs on maternal employment. The study, which was based on Growing Up in Ireland data, tracked the employment of mothers across the first five years of their

child's life and found that mothers who face high childcare costs work fewer hours. The report also looked at the costs of childcare and found that the financial burden was greatest for lone parents, who spend an average of 16% of their income on childcare and for low income families (who spend 20% of disposable income on care). This figure stands at 12% across all families.

In launching the report, the ESRI noted that the research indicates that childcare costs are a greater barrier to employment for households with lower incomes and suggested that targeted supports are required for low-income families (and lone parents) in order to increase employment amongst mothers. Suggested measures include statutory policies such as parental leave provisions, working hours regulation and employer-level policies such as access to flexible working arrangements. The report also suggests that tax and benefit systems shape the relative costs and benefits of employment of parents with young children.

The full report, entitled "Maternal employment and the cost of childcare in Ireland", can be accessed [here](#).

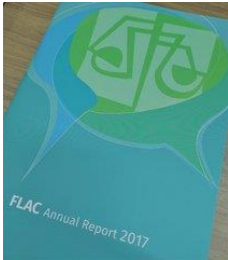


"Children and Homelessness: A gap in legal protection" – Mercy Law Resource Centre

In September 2018, the Mercy Law Resource Centre published a report entitled "Children and Homelessness: A gap in legal protection". The Dublin-based Centre provides free legal advice and representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the areas of social housing and social welfare law.

This is the Centre's third annual 'Right To Housing' report which aims to set out a policy context for establishing a right to housing within the Irish constitution. The 2018 report considers the potential legal protections that are available to children who are homeless, and also the non-judicial forms of redress that are available in such cases (specifically the Children's Ombudsman and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission). It found that attempts to rely on the courts to vindicate the rights of homeless children have proven broadly ineffective and argues that there is currently "a demonstrable gap in legal protection for some of the most vulnerable children in the state". In noting this, the Report concludes that a "legally enforceable right to housing would not "give a key to a home for all", but it would provide "recognition that a home is central to the dignity of each and every person and a foundation of every person's life". Such a right would also mean that the most vulnerable children and families in the state would be better able to vindicate their entitlement to the basic human rights which form the cornerstone of our constitution".

The Report can be accessed on the Mercy Law Resource Centre website [here](#).



FLAC Annual Report 2017

In October 2018, FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres) launched its Annual Report for 2017. The Report provides details on the services offered through FLAC during 2017 – with a particular focus on legal information and advice that is delivered via their telephone helpline and their locally-based legal advice clinics nationwide. In 2017, these clinics (which are offered by volunteer lawyers and are run in conjunction with CICs nationwide and funded by CIB) assisted over 13,800 people in 66 locations. The main query areas that dominated the clinics were in the areas of family law (34% of queries), employment law (16%) and wills and probate (9%).

The FLAC telephone information and referral line answered 12,003 calls from the public, and issues related to family law, employment and housing dominated. In addition to providing basic legal information through the clinics and the helpline, FLAC also takes on cases it perceives to be in the public interest (103 cases in 2017) – with a focus on housing, social welfare and discrimination cases.

The Report acknowledges the staff and management of CISs throughout the country for co-ordinating and facilitating FLAC clinics. The Report can be accessed [here](#).

The "Social Policy Update" is a bi-monthly newsletter produced by CIB's Social Policy and Research Team.

The Citizens Information Board is the national agency responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice and advocacy on social services, and for the provision of the Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

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