

# Social Policy Update

## September 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

#### CIB Pre-Budget Submission and DSP Pre-Budget Forum

The CIB Pre-Budget Submission 2018 has been prepared and submitted to the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection respectively. The submission, entitled “**Supporting People in Transition**” is based on feedback from CIB’s delivery services and also incorporates issues that were highlighted by MABS in their pre-budget report to CIB. The submission focusses on transitions, with a particular emphasis on the issues that are reported by staff within delivery services as they seek to assist their clients who, typically, will be looking for information, advice or advocacy at key transition times in their lives. The main shifts or transitions in peoples’ lives or circumstances are identified as becoming unemployed and moving from welfare to work, retiring or ageing, and becoming ill or acquiring a disability, or taking on a caring role. The submission also looks at the underlying issue of housing in the context of these transitions, and at how finding or keeping a home is a key concern for CIS and MABS clients – particularly for welfare dependent families and low income households.

This Submission aims to be reflective of an evolving policy context, with reference to a number of specific Government initiatives that, if implemented as proposed, will address some of the key policy areas that are identified as problematic by our delivery services – the More Affordable Childcare Scheme, the proposed new Working Family Payment, the further extension of contingency cover for the self-employed, making work pay for people with disabilities, the measures contained in “*Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*”, planning for pension reform and for a new homecare scheme. In the context of money advice and debt issues, it also focusses on the difficulties for clients in finding or keeping a home and the key issues of income adequacy and access to credit for people as they move through various life stages and events.

On 21 July 2017, a member of CIB’s social policy and research team attended the Department of Social Protection’s Pre Budget Forum in Dublin Castle. A NACIS and MABS representative also attended the event. The

Forum is held annually and gives community and voluntary organisations an opportunity to highlight their priorities for DSP spending in the upcoming Budget.

This year there were representatives from over 45 organisations in attendance. Minister for Social Protection, Regina Doherty, and Minister of State (with responsibility for disability) Finian McGrath addressed the Forum and also attended each of the group workshop sessions which focussed on the areas of poverty and social inclusion, housing, retired and older people, children and families, illness, disability and caring and working age supports. These workshop sessions reflected many of the key transition areas as highlighted in the CIB submission.

### **Review of Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness**

In August 2017, CIB made a submission to the Department for Housing, Planning, and Local Government in respect of their review of the Government's *Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, following its first full year of implementation. The aim of the review is to assess the impacts of the new investments, policies and initiatives and to consider where to focus efforts to address the supply and affordability issues that persist within the sector. Given the experiences of CIB-supported services, the CIB submission was mainly focussed on issues of access to social and affordable housing (and people experiencing mortgage arrears) rather than on the broader structural aspects of housing provision. In response to the Review's Consultation Questions, the submission commented on current measures to prevent homelessness, argued for the need to escalate the Local Authority social housing building programme as a matter of urgency, and suggested a number of measures to encourage increased supply of rental accommodation – including the provision of rent regulation and rent certainty, the need to further incentivise small scale landlords, and the exploration of a public/ private partnership model of rental provision.

Beyond these specific questions, the submission also laid out a number of over-arching issues that had been identified in feedback from services – in particular, problems caused by the reliance on the private rented sector, specific difficulties with the HAP payment, and developments following on from the 2016 review of the Mortgage To Rent Scheme. The submission concluded by elaborating on CIB's core areas of concern in relation to the implementation of the Action Plan, with particular reference made to the inadequate provision of social housing generally, the need to enable more people in mortgage arrears to retain and/or remain living in their homes, the unaffordability of rents (and insecurity of tenure) in the private sector, an over-reliance on the HAP to meet social housing needs and the failure of the Government's 'rapid-build' option to meet its targets. The submission can be accessed on CIB's website [here](#).

### **Requesting PRSI Contribution Statements**

In July 2017, CIB received a significant level of feedback from services throughout the country in respect of changes to the processing of requests by DSP from clients for their PRSI contribution statements. The feedback and case evidence from services indicated that the changed procedure was causing difficulties for clients and staff who were trying to assist them to gain access to their records. The CIB social policy team used this feedback to draft a focussed submission on the issue, which was forwarded to the PRSI Section within DSP. In a formal response from DSP, customers were asked to "contact us directly in cases where they have significant difficulties accessing the MyWelfare.ie service on 1890 690 690 and we will assist them by recording a manual request for their contribution history". The full text of the response has been circulated to all services.

### **Consultation on the operations of the Social Welfare Appeals Office**

In July 2017, CIB was approached by research consultants Bearing Point (who had been engaged by the Social Welfare Appeals Office - SWAO) to review the Office's processes and systems. The Chief Appeals Officer had contacted CIB as a key stakeholder to ask for feedback from services working with the SWAO and to capture suggestions for process improvements that would lead to an improved experience for appellants and representatives. In order to best respond to the consultation, CIB sought the views of information services via a

Social Policy Alert and questionnaire and also through voluntary participation at a Roundtable Stakeholder meeting with Bearing Point. Over half of services provided feedback. Based on these inputs, the CIB submission focussed on responding to the review themes and questions, as put forward by the consultants, and also provided some general commentary and observations on the operations of the Office. Overall, the submission noted that the experience of CISs in interacting with the SWAO was mainly positive – but referenced specific difficulties for clients, such as the complex interactions between initial applications, local reviews and the formal appeals system, a lack of clarity in some instances about the type of information required from applicants, the impact of processing delays (and access to minimum income while waiting), and difficulties with the process of medical assessments (with the suggestion that more cognisance needs to be given to the appellants own doctor’s or specialist medical evidence). It also noted repeated instances of the failure of some SWAO staff to fully accept the role of CISs in advocacy representation.

The submission also put forward a range of suggestions for change in respect of the workings of the Office – including placing a legal obligation on DSP to forward requested files within a specified timeframe, the establishment of the SWAO as a separate body, stronger liaison between DSP and medical representative organisations to ensure clearer communications around medical evidence, a more collaborative approach at review stage and uniform recognition by the SWAO of CISs as a valid advocacy service for appellants.

## Social policy and research reports



### Mental Health Reform Report on advocacy

In July 2017, Mental Health Reform (a national coalition of over 50 organisations campaigning for improved services in the sector) published a report which had been funded by CIB’s Social Policy Grant Scheme. The report, entitled “*The Advocacy Needs of Mental Health Service Users Living in the Community: A Pilot Study*”, looked at the need for independent, one-to-one advocacy supports for people who use mental health services and who need help to make decisions or access their rights and entitlements. Based on a survey of 76 users of out-patient mental health services, the report found a high level of awareness and usage of Citizens Information Services around the country. The report also found that respondents were not confident in their ability to advocate for themselves with employers, or with service providers in areas such as housing, health care or social welfare. The report recommended that independent, one-to-one advocacy support should be available as a right to all mental health service users and, in this regard, suggested that the Minister for Social Protection, the Minister of State for Mental Health and the relevant agencies (specifically referencing CIB and the HSE) should consider how they can ensure that the scope and capacity of publicly-funded advocacy services are adequate to provide the necessary support to mental health service users so that they can avail of their rights and entitlements. The report can be accessed on the Mental Health Reform website [here](#).

On a related issue, during June 2017, CIB responded to a public consultation by the Department of Health on establishing a *Patient Safety Complaints and Advocacy Policy*, which is being led by the newly-established National Patient Safety Office (NPSO). The consultation is intended to inform the Department’s work in defining a policy for healthcare complaints and for complaints advocacy/ support services. When preparations for the NPSO were first initiated in 2015, CIB made a presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children regarding the provision of an independent advocacy service for users of health and social care services, which was based on the NAS experience. The CIB response to the current survey questionnaire highlighted positive and negative aspects of the current complaints and advocacy process, made suggestions for improvements and also put forward key elements for a Patient Safety Complaints and Advocacy Policy.



## Making an Impact Report

In July 2017, a report entitled “Making an Impact: The Public Value of Citizens Information Services in Ireland” was launched by Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy and Angela Black. The report was commissioned by the National Development Managers Network and was part-funded under CIB’s Social Policy Grant Scheme. The research was undertaken by Dr. Nat O’Connor, University of Ulster. It aimed to look at the overall public value generated by CIS’s in Ireland and examined the inputs and activities involved with the services and also, crucially, the outcomes for citizens and the impact of the public value of the activities of CISs nationwide. The full report can be accessed [here](#).

# 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 - June 2017

During the first six months of 2017, CIB received 2,144 Social Policy Returns (SPRs) from CISs around the country via the Oyster system – which is an increase of 11% on the same period in 2016. Staff from CIPS also submitted an additional 146 SPRs and recorded 222 ‘social policy counters’ across a range of issues during the first six months of 2017. These counters are an attempt by CIPS to quantify samples of queries around particular issues that are considered to be of concern to a significant number of callers and, in many cases, complement the case evidence provided through the Social Policy Returns. During this period, the most reported general areas of concern were *Social Welfare* (52%), *Housing* (16%), *Health* (9%) and *Money & Tax* (5%). These four broad information categories accounted for 82% of all Social Policy Returns.

In comparative terms, within this broad query categorisation, we can see the following increases in the amount of SPRs over the same period in 2016 amongst the CIS feedback – social welfare SPRs increased by 5%, housing by 47% and health SPRs by 20%. Of the 1,095 SPRs that were submitted in relation to **social welfare** queries, the *Families and Children* sub-category was the most reported with 179 SPRs. Within this, *Family Income Supplement* and *Child Benefit* were the most referenced payments or benefits. Common concerns in relation to these payments included:-

- Difficulties for claimants (and services) in trying to make contact with the FIS section by telephone or email (over 70% of the SPRs related to this issue);
- Difficulties caused by the exclusion of self-employed people from eligible for FIS;
- Difficulties caused for families who are negatively impacted by the rigidity of the annual review of the FIS payment when there has been a decrease in income or working hours;
- Administrative errors or delays in the processing of CB applications;
- Financial difficulties for families caused by the termination of Child Benefit at 18 years, even though their child remains in secondary school.

Within the social welfare category, the most reported payment was Jobseeker’s Allowance, which logged 93 SPRs (although it should be noted that this figure was a reduction of 20% on the same period in 2016). The other key particular payments or schemes that were reported most often were as follows:

Payment or Scheme	SPRs Jan – June 2017
Medical Card	136
Housing Assistance Payment	120
Jobseeker's Allowance	93
Family Income Supplement	80
Carer's Allowance	75

Within the context of the broad **housing** category, the SPRs stood at 354 – as noted previously, this is a 47% increase on the same months in 2016 (which in itself was an increase of 53% on the 2015 figure). The substantial year-on-year increases in case evidence from services is indicative of the underlying difficulties within the Irish housing landscape that persevere, despite a great deal of activity at national policy level. Within the housing category, 'Local Authority and Social Housing' was the focus of the majority of the housing-related concerns (at 58%), with 'Homelessness' being the next most-reported housing issue at 16% and 'Renting a Home' logging 13% of these SPRs. When the *Rent Supplement* figures are combined with the main housing SPRs, then the total for all housing-related SPRs during the first six months of 2017 stands at 19% of the overall amount. During this time, there were 52,583 queries logged on Oyster in relation to housing – just slightly under 10% of the total amount of queries.

As noted above, during this period the medical card was the most queried single issue in Citizens Information Services (68% of all of the health-related SPRs). Despite a reduction in the figures in the past two years, the medical card SPRs from the first six months of 2017 seem to indicate an increase over 2016. Over two thirds of the case evidence submitted was related to administrative difficulties with applications and reviews – this includes cases of lost or mislaid documentation within the NMCU, and cases where card holders have not received review forms and their eligibility has been withdrawn. There also seems to be a low awareness of the Medical Card retention scheme (which does not appear to be highlighted on the medical card review form) and also difficulties for young people living with their parents who are unable to apply for the card as they are deemed to be under the SWA income threshold.

## Focus on social policy work at local level – Co Offaly CIS

In this issue of *Social Policy Update*, we profile the social policy work that is undertaken within Co Offaly CIS. We are grateful to the management and staff of the service for the following input, which we hope will be of relevance and interest for many services around the country.

### Co. Offaly CIS – This is what we do and how we do social policy.

*Co Offaly Citizens Information Service focused on increasing its social policy returns in its 2016 and 2017 work plans. The service felt that our annual social policy returns (SPRs) were low. In 2014 the returns were 48 and then, in 2015, they dropped to 42 for the year. It was clear that staff still were unclear as to how to recognise, write and report a social policy return. Also, the age old problem of time constraints was identified.*



It was agreed, that in 2016 we would focus on training and on ‘how to write’ a social policy return. It was also identified that advocacy and social policy was closely linked. It was decided to run advocacy and social policy training on the same day, so that the connection between both could be utilised. Following this, time was spent with staff, one-on-one, by the Development Manager, on how to write an SPR - that is, setting out the social policy category and setting out the client’s ‘story’ (in other words, the context of the issue which is called ‘query background’). This was followed by summarising the main issues and finally the making of recommendations. We worked on telling the story, the importance of using neutral language, clearly setting out the main issues and ensuring that for each issue there was a clear and corresponding recommendation. By year end, the SPRs increased to 74.

To support this approach, we included social policy as an agenda item on Board meetings so that major or local issues could be drawn to their attention and we included social policy as a staff meeting agenda item. But the issue of time constraints needed to be addressed. After consideration, the Development Manager set up a shared social policy folder on the service’s shared drive, which all staff can access. Everyone saves their SPRs to this folder and is asked to clearly name the policy issue in the document title.

Finally, in 2017, the Development Manager built on the service weekly (sometimes twice weekly) end-of-day meetings. These are informal ‘huddles’ that look at our daily caller and query returns and we talk about the social policies that presented that day. This dealt with the final issue of SP recognition. Each centre has a white board where monthly social policy issues are agreed and posted. We also record here any policy issues that we are targeting at a particular time. Not surprisingly housing has been named for September! Our social policy returns as of 4 September 2017 are 304 returns.

*If your service is engaged in any locally-based social policy work or initiatives that you would like to highlight, please feel free to contact Social Policy Executive, Bernie Kennedy in the Kilkenny office at 0761 07 9624 or at [bernadette.kennedy@ciboard.ie](mailto:bernadette.kennedy@ciboard.ie) as we would like to highlight this important work in our Social Policy Update.*

## 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) \*

### **Make Work Pay progress [PQ 31871/17; 6 July 2017]**

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** (Cavan/Monaghan, Sinn Féin) asked the Minister for Social Protection “if progress has been made on the implementation of the recommendations of the Make Work Pay for People with Disabilities report and the cost associated with its full implementation”;

On the Minister’s behalf, Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection, **Deputy Finian McGrath** (Dublin Bay North, Independent) responded that “the Make Work Pay interdepartmental group report, published on 6 April this year, established under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities considered a range of approaches across relevant Departments to deliver on this commitment and made 24 recommendations under the broad headings of reconfiguring the system of supports to ensure that work pays, promoting early intervention, communicating effectively that work pays and future proofing. My Department has already implemented a number of the report’s recommendations including:

- people with a long-term disability payment who move off the payment to get a job will retain their Free Travel Pass for a period of five years (the report recommended retention for 3 years);
- a fast-track return to Disability Allowance, or Invalidity Pension for people where employment does not work out and development is underway on a new “Ready Reckoner”, to calculate the net benefits and financial implications of working.

Other actions, such as strengthening the capacity of my Department’s Intreo Service to support people with disabilities to get and maintain employment are ongoing and people with disabilities may, on a voluntary basis, make an appointment with a case officer to explore their options and develop a personal progression plan. While the Government has decided to implement some of the recommendations, others require further reflection or a period of consultation with disability groups and other stakeholders. My Department has already started this process of consultation with the disability sector on the recommendations related to extending the principle of “early intervention” to disability allowance and other disability payments. Many of the recommended actions being progressed by Government Departments are at a consultative stage and Departments are not in a position to provide costings until specific proposals are in place.

### **Jobseeker’s Allowance eligibility [PQ 28871/17; 20 June 2017]**

**Deputy Willie O’Dea** (Limerick City, Fianna Fail) asked the Minister for Social Protection “if her Department has examined the feasibility of determining eligibility for jobseeker’s allowance on hours worked rather than days worked; the estimated cost of implementing same; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

**Minister Regina Doherty** (Meath East, Fine Gael) stated that “the jobseeker’s benefit and jobseeker’s allowance schemes provide income support for people who have lost work and are unable to find alternative full-time employment. The 2017 Estimates for the Department provide for expenditure this year on the jobseekers’ schemes of €2.5 billion. The Department does not collect data on the number of hours a jobseeker works as this information is not necessary to make a decision on an application for a jobseeker’s payment. In this context the cost associated with moving the jobseeker’s allowance scheme to an hours-based system, as outlined by the Deputy, cannot be ascertained.

It is recognised that a changing labour market has resulted in a move away from more traditional work patterns, resulting in an increase in the number of persons employed for less than a full week. However, any changes to the current criteria, such as moving to an hours based system, could result in significant numbers of additional individuals becoming eligible for a jobseeker’s payment with substantial corresponding cost implications for the Exchequer. Both the jobseeker’s benefit and the jobseeker’s allowance schemes provide significant support to individuals so that they can work up to 3 days a week and still retain access to a reduced jobseeker’s payment. The current days based system can provide significant income supports to jobseekers who are casually employed. For instance an individual can earn a little over €19,300 per year and still retain a small jobseeker’s allowance payment, while the equivalent threshold for an individual with a qualified adult is almost €33,300 if they are both working.

The ESRI published a paper in June 2015 entitled “Making Work Pay More: Recent Initiatives”. The main findings of the ESRI paper is that the majority of jobseekers have a strong financial incentive to take up employment, with almost 8 out of 10 being at least 40% better off in employment than on welfare. If there was a change from a days based to an hours based system, the design would have to take account of earnings. Furthermore, if an hour’s based system were introduced, existing casual jobseekers could lose out if their current hours worked over three days, exceeded the new hours threshold, thereby creating a disincentive to work longer”.

## Extension of Child Benefit [PQ 29107/17; 20 June 2017]

**Deputy Willie Penrose** (Longford-Westmeath, Labour) asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider making child benefit payable to persons with children over 18 years of age that are enrolled in secondary school reflecting the higher educational costs for persons with adolescents.

In response, **Minister Regina Doherty** (Meath East, Fine Gael) stated that “Child Benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children up to their 18th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. Child Benefit is currently paid to around 626,525 families in respect of over 1.2 million children, with an estimated expenditure of over €2 billion in 2017.

Budget 2009 reduced the age for eligibility for Child Benefit from 19 years to less than 18 years. A value for money review of child income supports, published by the Department of Social Protection in 2010, found that the participation pattern of children in education supports the current age limit for Child Benefit. The current estimated annual cost of extending the upper age limit for payment for those persons who are 18 years and under 19 years of age and in secondary school, based on figures from the Department of Education and Skills, is over €62 million. However, it is not possible to give the full year estimated cost of extending child benefit to all those in secondary school who are over 18 years of age as these figures are not available.

Families on low incomes can already avail of a number of provisions to social welfare schemes that support children in full-time education until the age of 22, including qualified child increases (IQCs) with primary social welfare payments, Family Income Supplement (FIS) for low-paid employees with children and the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance for low income families (paid at the full-time second level education rate). I am satisfied that these schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked with household income and thereby support low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

Given the universal nature of Child Benefit making it payable to persons with children who are 18 years of age and in secondary school would not be a targeted approach. The adoption of such a proposal would also have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context”.

**\* Note: The Houses of the Oireachtas were adjourned for Summer Recess on 14 July 2017 and will resume sitting on 20 September 2017. The Parliamentary Questions selected for this issue are from June and July 2017.**

# 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.*

## Launch of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2020



On 14 July 2017, Minister of State for Disability Finian McGrath launched the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 – 2021. The new Strategy (to which CIB made two submissions in response to a phased consultation during 2015) aims to take a “whole-of-Government approach to improving the lives of people with disabilities” and comprises of eight themes, including equality, choice, joined-up policies and public services, education, employment, health, independent living and transport. Across these broad strategic themes, Minister McGrath



identified “clear priorities, not just because of the potential that they have to transform people’s lives when fully implemented, but because when taken together they have the power to promote a fundamental culture shift in relation to disability”. These priorities include:-

- the extension and further resourcing of the Irish Sign Language remote interpretation service,
- an examination of the recommendations of the Make Work Pay Working Group,
- the implementation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (including an increase in the public service employment target from 3% to 6%),
- a review of transport supports to determine the type of cross departmental transportation options that will best help people with a range of disabilities to get to work,
- an examination of the recommendations of the report of the Personalised Budgets Task Force, with a view to introducing the option of availing of a personal budget as one approach to individualised funding;
- the development of Codes of Practice to support the implementation of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015,
- the full implementation of the Transforming Lives programme, with particular reference to advancing the ‘Time to Move On’ agenda (with regard to de-congregation), the *New Directions* programme (in the context of reforming adult day services), and the move towards person centred planning for residential and day services.

The Strategy has the backing of the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Service Reform and its implementation is being overseen by the National Disability Strategy Steering Group, which will publish an annual report and work plan. The Strategy can be accessed [here](#).

## Workplace Relations Commission – HAP discrimination ruling



In August 2017, the Workplace Relations Commission issued a ruling in relation to discrimination based on the grounds of "housing assistance". This is the first ruling of its kind since this particular measure was introduced into legislation in December 2016 in order to prohibit discrimination in the provision of accommodation - that is, in advertising and offering new tenancies, in ending existing tenancies, and in the treatment of tenants during a tenancy. Tenants in three cases (who were supported by CIS and FLAC representatives) argued that they were being discriminated against by their landlord’s ongoing refusal to accept the HAP scheme as payment toward their rent. The Adjudication Officer found in their favour and awarded compensation of close to €15,000 (the maximum allowable) to each complainant. The Adjudicator noted in the judgement that "having satisfied myself that the Complainant has a *prima facie* case of discrimination, I must satisfy myself whether the Respondent has rebutted same.....the Respondent has not been able to identify any legal defence". Specifically, the judgement noted that "it is difficult to understand the Respondent's reasons for persisting with its refusal of HAP on behalf of its tenants after the Citizens Information Centre clarified the legal position". The issue of the reluctance of some landlords (for a variety of reasons) to sign up to the HAP scheme continues to be reported as an issue by services through their Social Policy Returns. It is also highlighted in CIB’s recent social policy report entitled “An Exploration of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Scheme - The Experience of Citizens Information Services”, which will be published shortly.

## DSP Annual Report 2016 and Ministerial Brief



In July 2017, Minister for Social Protection Regina Doherty launched the Department of Social Protection's Annual Report for 2016. The report provides details of all the major developments within the Department and presents the range of service and policy reforms implemented by the Department during 2016. During the year, expenditure by the Department (which employs 6,500 people) stood at almost €20 billion, which included nearly 80 million scheme payments (via 65 separate schemes). Almost 1.4 million people received some form of social welfare payment from the Department each week, 1.8 million applications were processed in total, and 600,000 Public Service Cards were issued. In his introduction to the Report, Minister Leo Varadkar (outgoing) highlighted a number of key initiatives as being priorities within the Department, including employment, pension reform, developing a Working Family Payment to reduce child poverty and also reforming the PRSI system and reinforcing the contributory principle. The full report is available [here](#).

Further details on the range and scope of the activities of the Department of Social Protection can be found in the Ministerial Brief, which was produced by DSP for the incoming Minister Regina Doherty in June 2017. The briefing paper is a substantial document and provides an overview of the Department and its main areas of responsibility, its high level objectives, the services and schemes it delivers and its corporate and central functions. The 'key current issues' highlighted to the Minister in the briefing paper may be of particular interest to the CIS network – in particular, the operational challenges around Maternity Benefit and Carers Allowance, administrative changes brought about in the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2017, pensions policy and the Action Plan on Pensions Reform 2017 – 2021 and also a view on the implications of Brexit. The full paper can be accessed through the Department's website [here](#).

Since 2 September 2017, the Department of Social Protection has become the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and a number of its functions will transfer from the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

## Threshold Pre-Budget Submission



In August 2017, housing charity Threshold launched its Pre-Budget Submission. The submission calls on government to take strong and targeted measures to deal with the crisis in the housing sector noting that "the private rented sector is the third pillar of a functioning housing market". Some of the measures put forward by Threshold include the introduction of a Deposit Protection Scheme, the further development of measures to incentivise small scale landlords (in the context of tax measures that increase supply and construction quantities), and the provision of additional resources to Local Authorities for the inspection of private rented accommodation and the enforcement of standards. Reflecting the ongoing escalation of rents, Threshold also called for increased limits for the HAP and Rent Supplement schemes. Many of the issues highlighted in the Threshold submission are reflective of the hundreds of queries received in CICs throughout the country on a daily basis. During the first six months of 2017 there were over 45,000 housing-related queries logged on Oyster (a 20% increase on the same period in 2016) and there were also 354 Social Policy Returns submitted as case evidence related to housing difficulties. Funding continues to be provided by CIB to Threshold for a specialist information service to staff who work in CISs and CIPS.